



ALPHABETA INTERNATIONAL CONSULT JOURNAL (AICJ)

Department of Religious Studies
Faculty of Humanities, Imo State University,
P.M.B. 2000, Owerri, Nigeria



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**The Interplay between Religion and Society:
An Appraisal of Emile Durkheim's Study of the Arunta People of
Australia**

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Abstract

Society is a conglomeration of different concepts which entails people, institutions and relations. As social beings, humans cannot live in isolation hence they have to interact with one another which is one of the characteristics of the society. Religion, on the other hand, looking at it from the etymology of the word means something that brings people together or binds people together. The relationship between these two phenomena have been a subject of discourse among scholars for a very long time. Emile Durkheim, a sociologist, is one of those scholars who studied the relationship between religion and society and submitted that both concepts are instrumental to each other. This work examines Durkheim's study of the Arunta people of Australia and his findings. It corroborates this finding by concluding that the society is incomplete without religion and in fact, it will be in a state of anarchy without religion. It also states that without society, there will be nothing like religion. The work adopts a sociological and phenomenological approach.

Keywords: Interplay, Religion, Society, Emile Durkheim, Arunta, Australia.

Introduction

The origin of religion has been traced to the earliest times since man came into this world. The consciousness of a being that exists and is beyond the realm of earthly activities was birthed out of the magnificence of the happenings in man's environment. The changing of the day into night, the succession of seasons, the beauty of nature caused man to perceive a force who he believes to have created all that he sees and he himself. This self-awareness led to an organised form of religion where this being is worshipped and is sought in times of distress. These activities were accompanied by social interactions and the need to come together to achieve set objectives both personal and communal. For continued sustenance and survival, it was mandatory for man to come together in order to provide basic social amenities and also meet their personal needs. The provision of shelter, food, security and among others required cooperation. They organised themselves and broke down tasks into small bits in order to meet their needs. Some became hunters while some others became farmers, they complemented each other to provide food for the society. The relationship between religion and society is a long-standing discourse. Social interactions in any given society are always inclusive of religion and in fact, a fundamental basis of some societies. As societies evolved, so did religion. Some religions of the world today have evolved beyond their social origin and have extended to other societies. The role of this two phenomena is the subject of this discussion. Emile Durkheim in his study of the Arunta people of Australia argued that religion has a social function to play in the society whereas, without it, the society is incomplete. He explains this by citing practical examples among the Arunta people that buttress his position.

Religion

Defining religion has been a task that has been elusive since time immemorial. There is no universally accepted definition of religion. Many scholars have attempted to define the concept but all have failed to harmonise the totality of what religion means when assessed from different standpoints. Each definer tends to define it according to their religious disposition. Hence, different definitions of religion emphasize the formalistic, doctrinal, experiential, volitional or emotive perspective on life.¹ Nonetheless, most definition recognises the existence of a supreme being, sacred scriptures or narratives, moral codes, the system of worship and myths. There are several elements that appear, to an extent, in all religions of the world and these are rituals to perform, formulas to recite, tales to narrate, objects to manipulate, places to frequent or avoid, holy days to keep, prediction of the future through natural phenomena, charismatic leaders to follow, truths to affirm, literature to ponder, and precepts to obey and worship which is a universal element that permeates all religions.² For the purpose of this work, we shall adopt Emile Durkheim's definition who defines religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred; things set apart and forbidden which unite into a single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them.³ Without a doubt, we can conclude that the concept of religion is centred on the supernatural beings which are crucial in the definition of religion.

Society

The term society was derived from the Latin word *societas* which means friendly association with others. The usage of the word emerged in the 16th century as derived from the French word *societe*. The word can be interpreted in different ways. It can be a number of persons constituting a single group or community; it can be the worldwide community made up of all human beings; it can be the totality of an individual's friends or associates; it can be a group of persons organised on the basis of common work or interests; and it can be a group of people living the same way and having the same ideology that binds them together.⁴ It is evident that the society is incomplete without the people. Dzurgba identified certain elements that constitute a society. These elements are; land, population, relationships, institutions and work.⁵ The society can be described as a group of people who share a common culture, occupy a particular territorial area and constitute a distinct entity.⁶

The Interplay between Religion and Society

The place of religion in the society has been established and the elements that constitute the society has also been discussed. It is evident that religion and society have existed since time immemorial. Religion is practised by members of the society in a bid to find answers to questions that bother their minds such as the existence of the supernatural, the meaning and purpose of life, death, life after death, the relationship between the sacred and the mundane. The society incorporates religious beliefs and practices because they cannot exist in a vacuum. The society has rules and regulations which are also religious rules to maintain peace, stability, order and social cohesion. These religious beliefs are practised by members of the society and are a reflection of societal values. The society cannot exist without the people as the population is one of the primary elements of a society. It, therefore, means that the belief system and practices of the people are inseparable from the society.

Furthermore, the society is guided and protected by the supernatural. For example in traditional African society, the supreme being is the cohesive factor in the society. The people believe that the society is by God's ordinance. Every institution in the society is therefore religiously oriented, and religion permeates the whole of man.⁷ This belief makes members of the African society involve the supreme being in all of their activities. There are rewards and punishments from the supernatural beings when laid down rules are obeyed or violated. Societies have

developed on the basis of this law which usually the laws of the society too. As a functional entity in the society, religion ensures morality is maintained in the society, social cohesion by bringing people together in social solidarity occasionally and regularly and so on. The needs of the people are literally the need of the society, religion also meets the people at the point of their needs especially on matters that concerns life, death and the supernatural. It is safe to state that religion is an inevitable part of the society.

Emile Durkheim

Emile Durkheim was a French sociologist who rose to prominence in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. He is referred to as one of the founding father of sociology and is credited with making sociology a science.⁸ His contributions to the field of sociology are remarkable and it has been a springboard for many advancements in the field until today. His focus was on what makes the society work which led him to develop the functionalist perspective within sociology. He was particularly interested in the glue that holds society together, which means he focused on the shared experiences, perspectives, values, beliefs, and behaviours that allow people to feel they are part of a group and that working together to maintain the group is their common interest.⁹ He spent 24 years to study the Arunta people of Australia after which he came up with the conclusion that religion is a social fact. Durkheim defined a social fact as an "a category of facts which present very special characteristics: they consist of manners of acting, thinking, and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him."¹⁰ He submitted that religion plays a functional role in the society and it has to be studied by sociologist the way other scientists like physicists study the physical world.

His Study of the Arunta People

The Arunta people are Australian indigenes also referred to as the *Arrenteor Arrarnta* and live in the Arrente lands, at Mparntwe and surrounding areas of the central Australia region of the Northern Territory.¹¹ When Durkheim set out to study the Arunta people, his goal was to describe and explain the most primitive religion known to man.¹² He noted that in sociology, it is impossible for a human institution to rest on an error or a lie. Any institution that is not based on "the nature of things" is bound to crumble because of nature a resistance that will destroy it eventually. If an institution has therefore survived for ages, it must have a connection with nature. In the expression of this reality, it might be presumed as an absurdity or mere myths, nonetheless, Durkheim maintains that they have intrinsic meanings which can be discovered if properly interpreted and to him, it is the duty of science to discover them.

The sacredness of totemism demonstrated by the Arunta people fascinated Durkheim. He had earlier discarded two theories about the origin of religion which were animism and naturism and brought forth a theory of his own which he called totemism which is a set of beliefs and practices. This informed his thoughts when he started to study the Arunta people as he focused on the beliefs and practices of the people which he considered the best way to understand their religion. He said, "if totemism interests me, that is mainly because through studying it, I hope to discover relationships that will help us understand what religion is."¹³ He chose the Arunta people because of their homogeneity and the fact they fulfilled all the conditions he believed were necessary for a complete study.

At the basis of the Arunta people is a group that has a dominant place in collective life which Durkheim calls "the clan".¹⁴ A fundamental trait that characterised this clan is that every member of the clan consider themselves family not because they are family by blood but because they bear the same name. The species of things that serve to designate each clan

is peculiar to the clan. We can find members scattered across tribal territory but as long as they bear the same name, they belong to the same clan. This name is taken from a determined species of material objects (an animal, less frequently a plant, and in rare cases an inanimate object) with which the clan members are assumed to enjoy the same relations of the kinship. This totem is not simply a name, it is also an emblem.¹⁶ It is therefore forbidden for clan members to eat or kill the totemic animal or plant except at some certain mystical feasts.¹⁷ The people separate the sacred from the mundane and this is infused by the rites that either impose certain actions or prohibit some others. During these rites, members of the clan come together in social solidarity and communality. This type of commensality is believed to create (and re-create) a bond of kinship.¹⁸

These beliefs and practices are clearly religious in nature, for they involve classification of things as sacred and profane.¹⁹ The faithful are commanded to flee from the profane and embrace the sacred. According to him, religion is functional because whatever has the power to bring people together is religion while the totem is the communal order of religion. He explains that his experience with the Arunta people demonstrated the power of religion and its role in the human society. The social solidarity that is common with religion has the capacity to make the society functional.

Recommendations

The place and role of religion have come under serious scrutiny in our contemporary society. We have seen the rise of atheism and other forms of godlessness that disassociate themselves from religion. Religion has been used to commit horrifying crimes against humanity, it has caused discord in many societies and it is one of the causes of continuous wars in some places. Despite these challenges, religion still has a functional role to play in restoring peace, unity and foster progress. The fact that there is no society without one form of religion or the other is an indication that it is still one major factor that can solve these problems. It is therefore important to use religion as a tool to foster peace by first recognising its importance to world peace. Adherents of various religions should promote practices that encourage social solidarity in their religion and embrace the beliefs of others as in a bid to achieve peace. The 21st century is a global village where people across different cultures, societies, race and religion meet often at a global level. This can be an avenue to express the inherent virtues of religion as discovered in Durkheim's study. The same way members of the clans are not necessarily together in terms of geographical location, they are still united regardless of location. This is an important message of members of the global society that regardless of where they come from, once they meet at the societal level, they must come together to foster peace, unity and social cohesion. This will reduce conflicts in our society and ensure progress in all ramifications.

Conclusion

The interaction between religion and society plays an important role in understanding how the society works. The modes of operation and how the two phenomena coexists together for their sustainability have been well discussed in this paper. It established that religion is a social fact as Durkheim puts it because of its function in the society. Whatever brings people together for a common good breed solidarity and social cohesion that ensures the growth of the society. We have also learnt that religion is not a wishful thinking or a delusive believes rather it has the tendency of uniting the society. It is safe to conclude that for the society to be sustained and perpetuate its growth, religion is indispensable. The continued existence of the society is dependent on religion while in the same vein, religion thrives only when the society exists hence, both are inseparable.

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