

"Religion" in a Sociological Context: Grounding the Separation

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Abstract

Sociologists of religion widely concur that Sociology of Religion is a marginal discipline within contemporary Sociology. Some of them hope for better future and connected this hope with spreading doubts concerning the secularization theory. These doubts, on the other hand, mean significant theoretical challenges and put under questions foundations of the discipline. Following analysis shows that drawing boundary between religion and non-religion – as an act of setting up the object and an independent agenda of the discipline – might have been a premature act. In its view many contemporary troubles of the discipline might be solved by revising this premature decision and by re-emphasising fundamental issues of Sociology (i.e. dynamics of social ordering) with the Sociology of Religion.

Working with "Religion": Connections and Boundaries

This work was inspired by a lecture of Grace Davie accompanying Czech edition of her book *Europe - The Exceptional Case*. Let's start by a set of pictures imitating the one she used to illustrate growing significance of religion in contemporary society:



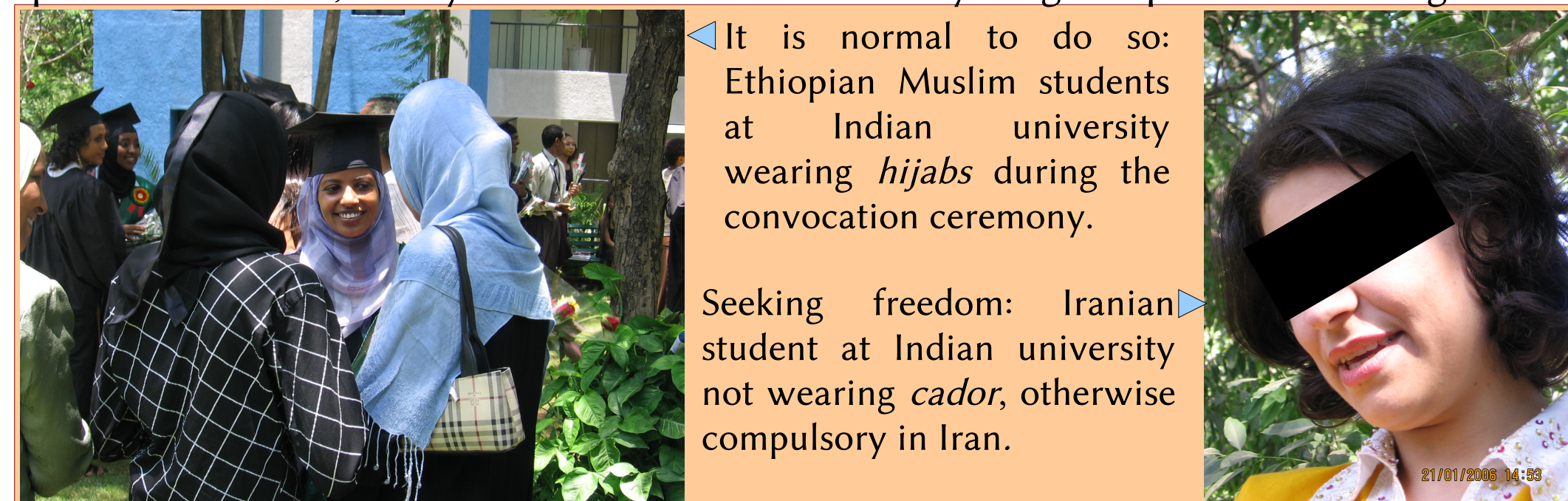
Related trouble: Sociologists endow such assemblage with explanatory power with reference to another issues. Grace Davie presents good examples while exploring reasons for the success of pentecostal movements in Latin America. One of lines of argumentation reads as follows: Pentecostal churches are especially successful among the poor of urban slams. Why? Towards the poor, without assurance, troubled with alcoholism etc. the "chosen" pentecostal community mediates self-esteem, value of responsibility and ascetism and clear ordering of life. Doing that it helps to stabilize family relations by keeping husbands at home and away from drinking. As result family budgets get stabilised and/or financial conditions of family and the feeling of safety improve. Such a change proves to engaged people the salvation work of Christ and supports trust in Christ and the community. So "religion" as a specific factor explains the change in conditions of life. Ability to provide such change further explains, why "religion" prospers in a particular society.

But where have "religion" been mentioned in the chain of the argument before it was simply added in the end?

Being poor in a slum, alcoholism, community, self-esteem, salvation work of Christ, staying home with wife and children instead of drinking outside, sparing money, feeling safe, proving the work of Christ, trust in community of devoted. What added value "religion" brings into this analysis? The chain of agencies which make difference is complete without mentioning it.

But then, why is it there? Because church community or Christ appears in description? But why should clearly identifiable agent in flash be substituted with the shadow presence of "religion" in order to provide explanation?

Let's look once again at pictures. The set below have more in common than the previous one. Yet, I'd say that it does not manifest anything like presence of "religion".



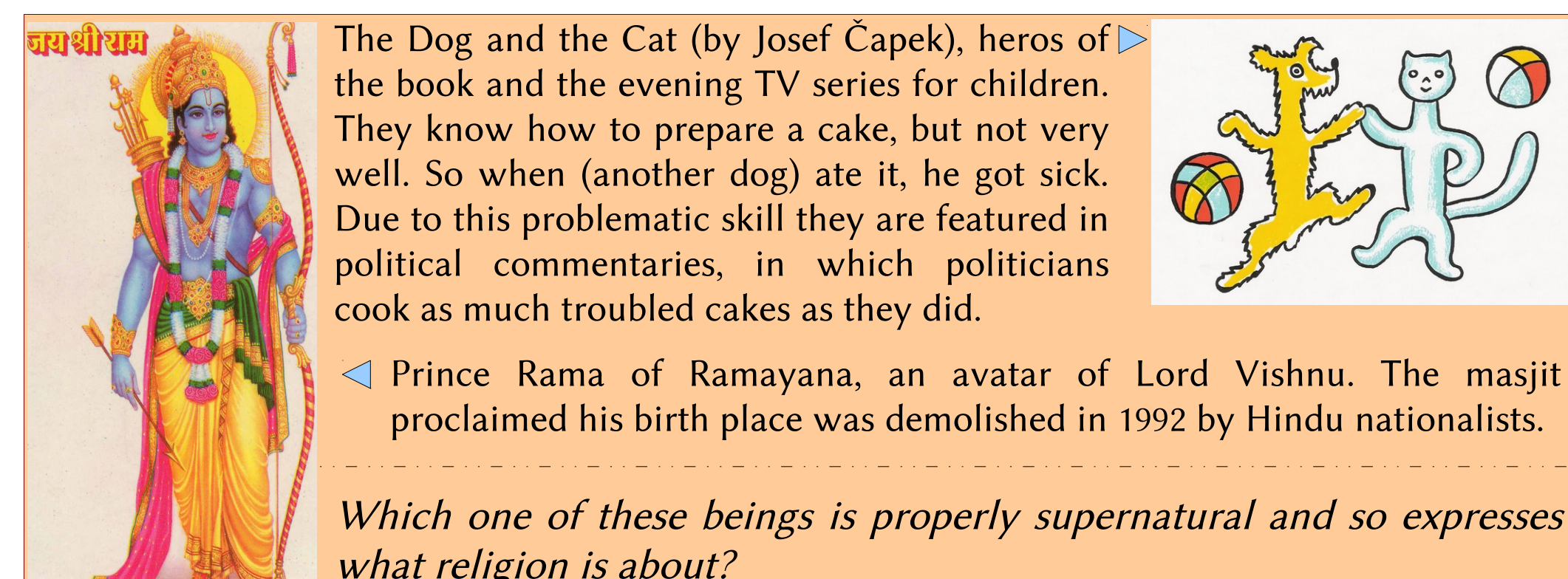
In this case, all the women are Muslims relating themselves to head-covers. If these photos represent religion, does the Iranian student stop being "religious" while getting of the plain in Mumbai? Does the Czech student raised in Muslim family become "religious" by starting to wear hijab? Does the surveillance of the police make Iranian women "religious"? Does the common habit make Ethiopian students "religious"? Then (1) what is the meaning of being "religious" and (2) how this chameleon-like concept helps to analyse whatever?

So there is a tendency to connect and separate things, there is a tendency to attribute to influence of "religion" numerous different things without clear connexions. In a word, there is a tendency to mesh up disconnected things and separate the connected ones simply because of the existence of the category, which is whatever else then transparent. But how did these tendencies came into existence?

Justifying Boundaries: Getting in and out of Sociology

Sociology (of religion) has two immortal classics: Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. The heritage of Max Weber is not so clear with reference to above mentioned issues. The separation between religious and non-religious was not a crucial question for him. His interest seems to be derived form an interest in the modern capitalism. He inspired, nevertheless, the whole tradition of the secularization theory by his idea of progressive rationalization of society and the disenchantment of the world. By that he supports the notion of progressive secularization. But the root of the rational spirit of capitalism for him lied in the Calvinist ethics. Secularization thus was a "religious" development. Even more recent classic of secularization theory P. Berger (1967) supported this claim and pushed the analysis of tendencies towards secularization down to the ancient Jewish invention of the radical transcendence of God. But Berger expresses another relevant tendency. To grasp the religion he used categories developed with Thomas Luckmann, but turned towards substantial definition marks of religion elaborated in R. Otto's (1917) *Das Hailige*. Why?

Like numerous others he needed to supplement Weber's work – in which religion in itself was not a crucial concept – with a substantial definition of religion. Analogous tendency is observable in a work of K. Dobbelaere (2002). He started with the definition by Durkheim but supplied it with a notion of *supernatural* since Durkheim's definition seemed to him all inclusive.



For Durkheim religion is defined through the concepts of (a) *unified system of beliefs and practices*, (b) *things sacred*, i.e. *set apart and forbidden*, and (c) *moral community called church*. Refusal of the notion of *supernatural* is important part of it. Durkheim understood the connection between "supernatural" and the modern notion of "natural law". The belief in supernatural then could not be attributed to "primitive people" he studied. T. Asad (2003) highlighted further the connection of "natural" to "profane" and "supernatural" to "sacred" in modern scientific discourse, and emphasized that no concepts resembling the "profane" and "sacred" can be found in medieval literature. That's trouble since the categories are supposed to be emic. If secularization theorist such as S. Bruce (2002) says that *in modern society the belief in supernatural decreases*, the logical meaning of such statement turns to be: *modern society differs from the traditional by lower measure of belief in reality in which people in traditional could not even believe in*.

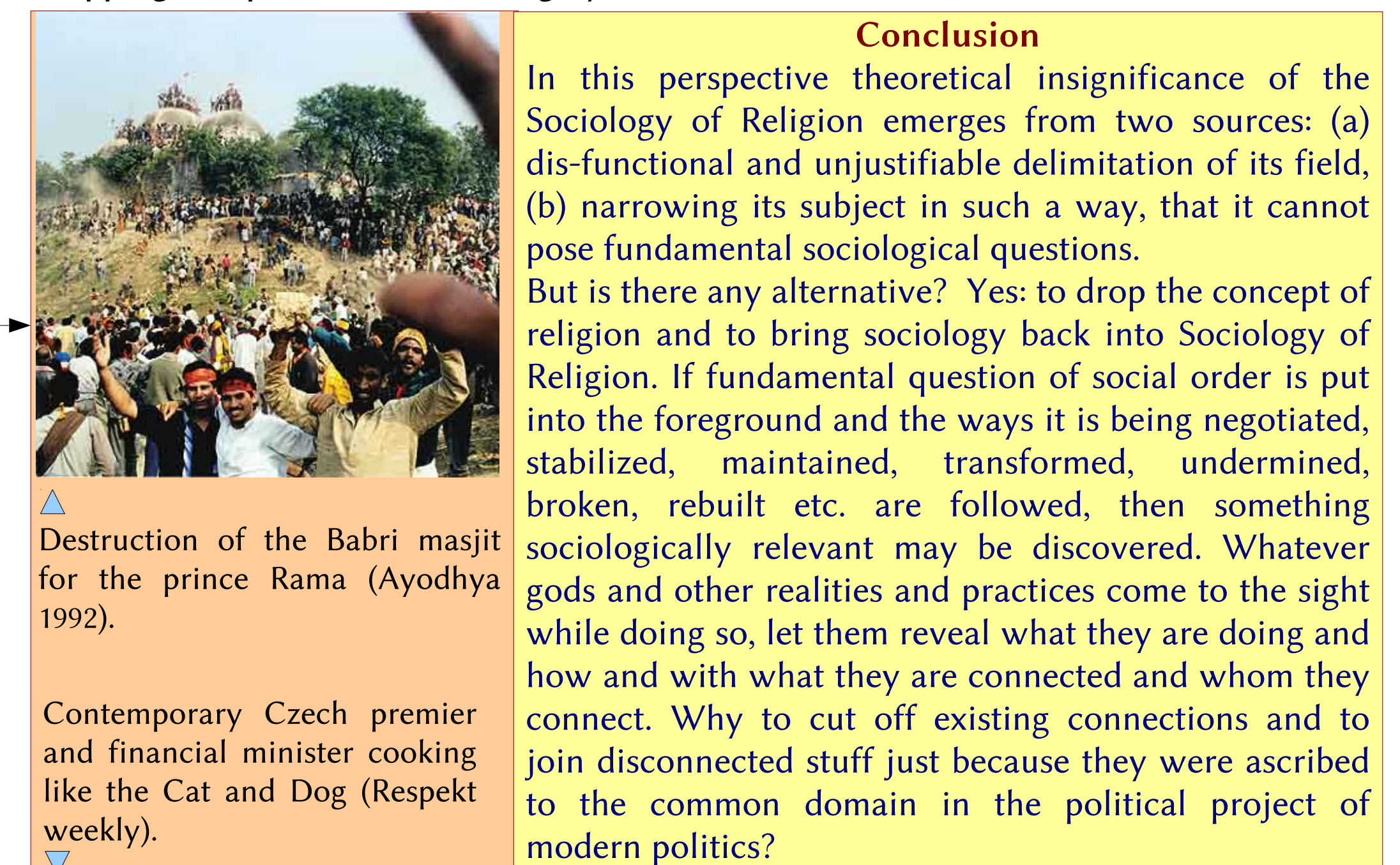
In Durkheim the separation of religious and non-religious might be achieved by the concept of the *sacred*. However, if the *sacred* is equated with *set apart and forbidden*, then all things forbidden, hence all social regulations are sacred. For Durkheim it works, because the totem of his primitives represented the society in general. In that case "social" and "religious" refers to the same thing. How then could sociology formulate questions like "what is the role of religion in society"?

The operation behind is tricky. As Luckmann (1967) had shown sociologists of religion narrowed their interest to churches (bureaucratic organisations and whatever they seemed to represent). This practice equating "religion" and "church organizations", instead with "society" as is indicated in the construction of Durkheim's definition) (a) seemingly follows Durkheim's definition, but (b) significantly diverts from crucial aspects of durkheimian sociology.

It (a) follows Durkheim *seemingly* because "church" for Durkheim did not mean particular organization, but the *moral collective*. It (b) diverts from durkheimian sociology, because it leads to the loss of interest in forming and working of social institutions and formation and transformation of social order. The question of social order survived partly only in the question of the *role of churches in modern society*. If their dominance over people in society decreases, the "religion" decreases. The question what, then, holds society together, gets beyond the reach of the Sociology of Religion. Contemporary sociologists of religion would not study totemism in modern society – as Durkheim did in "primitive" one – because they would not identify it as a church. If they did, they would call it "individualized spirituality". They do not ask, through what things society is assembled and maintained, they ask rather superficial question concerning the role of a particular organization. The question seems even more superficial if one reflects the uniqueness (or anomaly character) of this kind of organization in cultural comparative perspective. So apart from relating modern secularism with not believing in what traditionals could not even believe in, the Sociology of Religion supposes one another paradox: *that the West is more secular than the rest of the world, because the type of organization, which does not have any counterpart (or did not have until colonial era) in the rest of the world, loses its social significance and the monopoly on interpreting shared symbols*. The monopoly, one needs to add, which according to medieval historians it in fact never had.

Implications

If all this is right, then Sociology of Religion supposes the existence of a separate social domain to which it *a priori* limits its subject of study. The only thing which holds the objects from this domain together, and which separates them from the other objects, is a chameleon-like word "religion". If the concept of religion is properly defined so that transparent operations can be done with it, than the boundaries of the domain simply disappear in the overall sphere of the "social". If the boundary limitation is set through the concept of supernatural or even the sacred/profane dichotomy, then the meaningful separation is drawn between societies in which these concepts exist and those where they do not. In that case the common sense knowledge of the Sociology of Religion turns upside down; the modern West is the only place of religion. This implication is logical, but is not practised by sociologists. Instead of that sociologists narrow the meaning of religion to issues related to a particular type of organization called church. With this move, however, it narrows also the meaning (subject) of sociology by skipping the questions concerning dynamics of social order.



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