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What Religions Have in Common

Life After Death

Simmel's approach to religion can be described as closely related to a pragmatist concept of "truth." To Simmel, the truth is not only what works but, more important, the basis on which the believer is prepared to work or, more generally, is prepared to act. In times of deep disappointments and hopelessness, people are inclined to only rely on what they can put their hands on. That attitude of distrust is expected to save the skeptic from becoming the victim of all kinds of false prophets. Catastrophic events like wars, plagues, and famines tend to have radical effects on religions: They make some people give up their faith and cause others to emerge from the tribulations with an even stronger religious orientation. As we will see, Simmel argues that *religions* may lose their credibility, but the individual's need for *religiousness* is there to stay, regardless of what happens to religions.

What all religions have in common is the conviction that death does not end the existence of the person and that the living may experience some personal attention from the beyond. Of course, how this is written into concrete creeds varies greatly from religion to religion, but no religion will teach that there is no life after death. Also, all religions will expect the living to get into contact with a person in the beyond by prayer, sacrifice, meditation, or other ritual. The "person" may be a god, a saint, a deceased ancestor, or a benign or evil spirit. Thus, to the sociologist of religion, who is interested—as a sociologist should be—in what goes on *between* persons, the religious

person can be identified as being in a relationship with an immortal and feeling thus guided, assisted, or threatened from a person in the beyond.

No religious person will believe in anything unless he or she is convinced that it really exists. Humans of all ages seem to have given their religious ideas the status of reality. In the process of doing that, they can only imagine *problems of life and death* in terms of their *experience of life and death*. Those experiences were needed to provide convincing images for the content of faith. Research about religion includes shedding some light on the conditions under which people give certain content of their consciousness the status of reality and thus call it their “unquestionable faith.” This entails the likelihood that the imagination of the sacred will be mistaken for the sacred itself. It also explains, in part, why in the Jewish religion, in Evangelical Christianity, in Islam, and in early Daoism the faithful are not allowed to make an image of God lest the image become an idol.

Similar to Simmel’s distinction between the content as religiosity of the individual and the form it is given as religion in a given society, William James writes about the feelings people have toward the sacred versus the expression this finds in religious philosophy. The former, feelings toward the sacred, supplies the content, which then needs to be given a specific form in order to find expression in a given society. Interestingly, James does not confront emotions and reason as conflicting alternatives, but instead sees reason as an aid in giving form to religiosity: “To redeem religion from unwholesome privacy, and to give public status and universal right of way to its deliverances, has been reason’s task” (James, 1901/1902, p. 284).

Simmel agrees with **pragmatism** that a person considers those ideas upon which he or she will act to be real. Truth and reality are the crucial qualities attributed to contents of faith. Traditional religious dogma that cannot maintain these characteristics will sink down in collective consciousness to the level of fairytales and King Arthur-type lore. The difference between religions and other worldviews is, in addition to the requirements of truth and reality, that religions must be able to establish a living relationship between the believer and an immortal. Unless a personal relationship with some well-known counterpart in the beyond can be established, religion has no chance of acceptance.

The divine person may be a god, a saint, an ancestor, or a spirit of some kind. The common denominator of all these alternatives is a combination of (a) immortality and (b) effectiveness. In other words, the believer must be able to address someone who, for him or her, (a) is real (i.e., truly exists out there), (b) is eternal (i.e., will not suddenly disappear due to death or desertion), and (c) is powerful (i.e., he or she can do something for or against me).

Other worldviews that Simmel would not count among the religions (without thereby making a value judgment of whether they are more or less desirable) suggest faith in impersonal energies that reside in nature or space. They may be powerful, but they cannot be engaged in dialogue because they lack the quality of persons. Faith in a New Age or some iron law in history, for instance, can deeply impact the convictions and actions of people, but it would not be meaningful, in the context of Simmel's approach, to describe belief systems of this type as religions, although, of course, as convictions with other characteristics they deserve everybody's respect.

The dividing line may be very thin: If I worship my ancestors, believing that they can influence my life, help me, and be helped by me, for instance by offering a sacrifice for them, then that condition would qualify as religious. If, on the other hand, my ancestors are simply commemorated in ritual ways without the expectation that they can have an impact on the lives of the living, then that may be an aspect of a religion, but it is itself not a religion because the addressees of the belief are not experienced as having power. Accordingly, if a Christian deposits flowers at the grave of his beloved dead grandparent, that obviously is not ancestor worship.

If all religions share the property of establishing personal contact with one or more immortals, then the sociology of religion ought to establish a typology of the variety of those transcendental contacts. Some immortals are—at least for some mortals—well-known because they lived on this earth at one time. That applies to Christian saints (to some extent, provided their story is still told) and to Chinese ancestors (to a more likely extent, provided their descendants can remember them). In those cases when the human ability of thinking and remembering is not sufficient to reveal the existence of objective truth, it is necessary—and therefore also legitimate—to *define* such truth as given. What today every sociologist knows as the “definition of the situation” owes its foundations to Simmel's theory of knowledge. It arrived, most likely in Chicago, by the intercession of Robert E. Park who, as I mentioned at the end of Chapter 1, was Simmel's student in Berlin.

A Way of Looking at the World

In the history of culture, the definition of what is to be counted as real can largely be studied as the achievement—for better or for worse—of religious belief systems. The study of religious definitions of reality is, then, the primary task of a history-oriented sociology of religion. But what did this branch of sociology achieve so far? Anyone whose interest has led her to look for early literature in that branch will think about Max Weber's

(1904/1920) journal article “The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism.” Other “classics” in sociology also have contributed significantly to the study of religion. Perhaps the best known of them is Émile Durkheim. In his book *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), he presented a pragmatist and functionalist approach to religion.

Weber and Durkheim could both build on what August Comte (1842) wrote about religious consciousness. The “theological stage”—religious consciousness—is the first of the three stages in which Comte believed human thought to have developed. As is well known, Karl Marx (1844/1985) referred to religion as a leftover from the times of superstition and a political sign of a lack of emancipation—as the “opium of the people.” Many students of sociology will mention Comte, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber as important authors who made religion the subject of their research and publications. But only very few are familiar with Georg Simmel as a sociologist of religion.

What was Simmel’s point of departure for his interest in religion as a topic of scholarly activity? Faced with the effects of early industrialism, he expected a cultural crisis resulting from the increasing contradictions between the subjective and the objective. What had been objectified as literature and art, as custom and tradition, became more and more foreign to the person living with it. The worst example for the process Simmel had in mind is described by Max Weber as the unending trend toward bureaucratization from which we are suffering to this day.

But there was and is hope in culture—in art and religion as well as in scholarship—and Simmel turns to the study of these phenomena, and particularly to the sociology of religion, for relief. During the last two decades of his life, from 1898 to 1918, he devoted much of his writing to religion. The scholarly study of religion has been faced with the empirical problem of antagonism between different religions and with the theoretical problem of a bias toward the Judeo-Christian traditions of the West to the disadvantage of Asian religions. Simmel contributed to remedying that defect.

What is the method with which Simmel approached the problems of religion?

1. To him, religion is not a clearly delineated province of reality, like the political organization of the state or the economy; rather, it is a way of looking at the world, like an attitude or a perspective. Simmel does not reduce religion to fleeting emotions that may or may not occur within the individual; to him, religion, like art, is a “third realm” between the subject and the object with the potential of mediating and mitigating the conflict between them.

2. Religion thus contributes to the construction of that bridge between the person and the world that surrounds him or her. It “is always an objectification of the subject and therefore has its place beyond that reality which is attached to the object as such or to the subject as such” (Simmel, 1919, p. 29).

3. A third component of Simmel’s method is the dialectic of form and content. We have dealt with that here before in another context in Chapter 2. Simmel points out that the idea of God as *content* may be expressed in the *form* of either pious meditation or intellectual reflection. Only in the first case would Simmel consider the result a religious phenomenon. If the second applied, however, the form of rational analysis probably would bar it from leading to religiosity. The content, thinking about God, may be derived from religion, but the form it is given deprives it of the quality of religiousness. In order to clarify that distinction even further, Simmel—in his texts from 1902 on—makes the distinction between *religion* and *religiosity*. According to this somewhat surprising approach, much of what goes on as scholarly reflection in theology would *not* qualify as being religious in *form*.

Simmel (1997, pp. 121–133) further illustrates his position in his 1902 essay “Contributions to the Epistemology of Religion” with the prayer for faith. From the perspective of rational argumentation, it is pointless to pray for faith because such a prayer would only make sense if the existence of a deity that can be addressed in the prayer is already assumed as given. Then a prayer for faith would be redundant. The prayer would be asking for confirmation of a reality that, by the fact that praying occurs, is already assumed as given. Simmel, however, defines faith as the individual’s ability to give to religious *content* a *form* derived from personal *religiosity* instead of having been derived from intellectual reflection. To pray for faith is then entirely plausible, either because the individual may feel the need for the deity to intervene on that issue or because the very practice of praying may produce the desired effect: making the *form* of a pious frame of mind become habitual.

4. A fourth tool Simmel uses in the study of religion is another pair of terms: *center* and *periphery*. Humans are free to the extent that the center of their being determines its periphery because the reverse is not possible. What is unique and utterly personal would fill the center; that which many people have in common can be only peripheral to individuals because that will not help them confirm their identity from inside themselves. (Simmel, 1997, p. 195f). Simmel critically observes that Christian churches have tended to concentrate on peripheral qualities that all believers have in common, rather than encouraging each soul to use its unique talents (see Matthew 25: 26–27).

Simmel is convinced that neither he nor anybody else can make any learned statement about what may or may not exist in the beyond. It is simply not the business of philosophy or sociology to try to do that. The eternal truths are beyond the scope of scholarship; they cannot be known empirically. Simmel's approach saves students of religion the embarrassment of either assuming without proof that there is something in the beyond or, by contrast, that there is nothing. The factual existence or nonexistence of sacred persons and objects is neither assumed nor denied; it is plainly left undecided, and thus gives Simmel's method the ideological neutrality that is needed in scholarship.

At the same time, the changing images of the sacred—whether they are simply figments of the imagination or more or less successful attempts at reconstructing an incomprehensible eternal reality—can and must be studied empirically: They are empirically present in this world in the minds of living persons as content that potentially relates the individual to the beyond. What is open and accessible to scholarly research are thus the bridges that humans build in association with each other to come as close as they can to experiencing and understanding the eternal truths and the immortal persons that stand for them, provided those truths and immortal persons do exist.

Therefore, Simmel's writings on religion contain no confrontation between objective transcendental facts that a certain religious community may confess as its creed and the subjective impressions that may become the perspective of a pious mind. The two are independent realities. Religion, as co-created and objectified by interacting believers, has become a *third realm*, like art and scholarship, with the potential to mediate between what may (or may not) actually exist in the beyond and the person puzzled by the question of what he or she ought to believe in.

Simmel combines his heuristic tools with the hypothesis of an evolution of religious ideas throughout human history. The notion of evolution neither deprives man of the dignity of creative freedom nor does it preclude any divine intervention. It is but a heuristic tool to help organize and categorize human concepts about God and the sacred. In order to test how fruitful the method may be, it must be applied also to Asian religions, not only to Judaism and Christianity. In their comparative studies, sociologists of religion can only try to *describe* the religious ideas people have, including what is true and real *to them*. The confrontation between what is believed to be eternally unchanging and what obviously evolves over time is, of course, seen and discussed by Simmel.

In 1909, Simmel (1997, pp. 3–6) published his text “Fundamental Religious Ideas and Modern Science: An Inquiry.” In it we can observe him apply the methodological tools that have been enumerated here above. He points

to the difficulties that religion confronts due to the conflict between “religiousness as an inner state or need of man and all the traditional lore which, as the content of that inner state, is offered as a means to fulfill these needs” (p. 3). Frequently the advance of science has been introduced as a reason for the loss of religious conviction. Religion is then seen as a stopgap needed only until research into the order of nature has advanced far enough to prove that miracles make no sense.

Simmel (1997) rejects this notion as erroneous:

A child born of a virgin, water being transformed into wine, a deceased man ascending to heaven: None of this has become less probable as a result of 19th-century science than it was according to the experience of people living in the 13th century. (p. 3)

Therefore, what makes it increasingly difficult to accept traditional faith has nothing, or very little, to do with the insights arrived at by the advances of modern natural sciences. There must be other reasons. Those can be found, according to Simmel, not so much in what the sciences came up with as the *results* of their research, but rather in the *methods* they used in conducting it. The test of truth has shifted from the testimony of reliable witnesses to what I myself can investigate and prove by way of laboratory research.

It is not the statements about empirical reality promulgated and backed by science that weaken religion; rather, it is “the spirit of science as a whole, by the application of basic scientific attitudes to what is not investigable, and by the tendency to define as believable reality only that which is scientifically probable” (Simmel, 1997, p. 4). So, *it is indeed* the advancement of science that causes the problem for religion, but not in the way that is generally assumed to be the case: The criterion for *what is real* has changed, and as a consequence the quality of truth has become attributed to personal and individual experience in a laboratory. And this is increasingly the case because, as was mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, in times of deep disappointments and hopelessness, people are inclined to only rely on what they can put their hands on. But why should that be the case in the days of Simmel and even at the present time?

Answering this question requires referring to the 20th century. What happened during this time that was so special compared to other periods in history? It was *special* indeed: The emperor in China, the Tsar in Russia, and the emperor in Germany disappeared in revolutions; World War I brought death and destruction to Europe; Japan occupied large parts of China and maltreated millions of noncombatant Chinese citizens; Stalin, Hitler, and Mao Zedong became dictators; the German Nazi regime killed millions of

European Jews; World War II exceeded even the horrors of World War I; America deposited atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in Japan; communist regimes tortured, deported, and killed millions of dissenters in numerous countries; China went through several phases of this madness, culminating in the “cultural revolution”; then there was the Korean war and the war in Vietnam; and this list, alas, is far from complete. How can a humankind with this recent history be self-confident, let alone proud of itself? How can the educated individual today, as participant in the worldwide collective conscience of these events, avert deep-seated fears?

Of course, Simmel could not know about these facts, but he very likely saw something of this nature coming when he died at the end of World War I in 1918. He observed and predicted what in sociology later was referred to as *secularization*, but he also acknowledged that the need of humans for a religious orientation will not disappear even when traditional religions no longer find acceptance as they did over centuries. Simmel frequently makes his point using striking comparisons. He likens a religious person to a person in love:

Just as an erotic person is always erotic in character, whether or not he has created—or ever will create—an object of love, so too is a religious person always religious, whether or not he believes in a god. (Simmel, 1997, p. 5)

Simmel sees in personal religiousness a potential for interpreting life and the world in a certain way. This potential is part of the human condition, and different cultures have responded to it in different ways, but all cultures have developed their peculiar kind of religion as a response. “Religiousness thus can be seen in this light: as a form according to which the human soul experiences life and comprehends its existence” (Simmel, 1997, p. 5). Simmel returns to his initial rejection of the idea that problems people have with religions may be the result of progress in scientific knowledge. This, to him, is completely erroneous. He states that “there clearly can be no conflict whatever between religiosity and science” (Simmel, 1997, p. 5). Such conflict cannot come about because they each—in their own way—are interpretations and representations of life and the world *in its entirety*.

Thus, religion and science do not talk about different subjects, but they report on the same overall conditions in different ways. Therefore, there can be no conflict between any one of the sciences and the humanities, just as there can be no conflict between scientific knowledge and religious knowledge. However, Simmel concedes that the *scientific style* of thinking, the attitude that he refers to as “scientific criticism,” may well destroy certain foundations for religious faith. I mentioned above that the criterion for *what*

is real has changed; the quality of truth has become attributed to personal and individual experience in a laboratory.

How to Restore the Acceptance of Religions

Remarkably, Simmel (1997) does not leave it at a sociological analysis but has the courage to make concrete recommendations for how the acceptance of religions can be restored. In his view, the religious bodies, the churches and similar teaching authorities in charge of propagating whatever faith they represent, should “leave the transcendental world of ideas” that these institutions have created for themselves (p. 6). This is, of course, a highly controversial suggestion. The reason Simmel sees that departure as necessary is this: The *religions* must move closer to the *religious*, even though Simmel himself does not word it this way.

Simmel (1997) does write, however, that he hopes to see the religions

returning to those unique impulses of life itself which are to the religious person the essence of his being, the intrinsic coloring and form of all his inner and outer existence. . . . If religion is not a set of claims but a certain state of being—which is precisely what enables it to interpret and judge empirical phenomena—then it can be no more disproved by science than can any other state of being. It becomes refutable, however, as soon as its representative images become detached from this inner essence and instead become rigidified into a system of knowledge that somehow imitates the thought processes of science and thus is compelled to compete with the latter on its own terms. (p. 6)

This is the view Simmel expressed in 1909.

In 1918, the year of his death, Simmel published a less optimistic account of the condition of religion. It is included in a longer article titled “The Conflict of Modern Culture” (Simmel, 1997, pp. 20–25). The solution he hopes for in 1918 is for religiosity to become a direct process of life, as in mysticism. In the past, Simmel writes, there appeared in history the periodic need to replace outmoded forms of religious belief with new ones. This became necessary because the old forms “gradually stiffen[ed] into superficialities and narrowness” (p. 21). The successive replacement of obsolete forms by renewed ones seemed to have worked in the past. But now it seems doubtful to Simmel whether renewal can continue along that path. Therefore, he hopes for inspiration from a famous mystic: “Angelus Silesius gives us a foretaste by using those remnants of form which mysticism supplies” (p. 22). The objects of religiosity in mysticism are no longer specific, sacred things or

texts or rituals; they are the qualities of life itself. Simmel quotes the mystic's own words: "The saint when he is drinking / Is just as pleasing to God / As if he were praying and singing" (p. 22).

Drinking, eating, working while living the daily life of a religious person in the face of the sacred—such a form of pure being might be the future of religion, rather than the acknowledgment of this or that prescribed action or thing to be worshipped. This vision must not be misunderstood as promoting "secular religion." Rather, the closeness to the beyond is given as "a direct process of life, encompassing every pulse beat" (Simmel, 1997, p. 22). Accordingly, religiosity as mysticism is a form of "being," not of "having"; it is merely *a way of life* because it does not deal with objects (p. 22).

Simmel (1997) summarizes that idea of a possible future of religiosity in a sentence that he calls paradoxical: "The soul wants to keep its faithful quality, although it has lost faith in all determined and predetermined religious content" (p. 22). But Simmel then acknowledges that this is an illusion. Cultural change and intellectual development can steal the clothing in which religiosity is covered but cannot take religion's life (p. 23). And there is no reason to assume that religion can then continue to exist, as it were, naked: New "clothing" will be found and given it.

Therefore a "formless" and naked religiosity can only be a mental interlude because its "nakedness" signifies that it is contained in life itself. But life cannot be a form; it requires form to be lived. This is reminiscent of the tension between charisma and institutionalization in the writings of Max Weber (1920/2013): The admirable and often adored quality of a charismatic person is so vulnerable that it needs the protection that only an institution can grant. On the other hand, any institution entails the danger of leading away from the meaning it was designed to protect and to hand on to the next generation. This contradiction can be illustrated by numerous examples in the history of culture.

Simmel's reflections have led to questions of the philosophy of religion and of the psychology of religion. In order to return to the sociology of religion, we should take a look at what we have already learned from Simmel: Sociology is about relationships, and in the case of religion, what we are dealing with are relationships between a mortal (who knows he or she will die sometime) and an immortal (who is believed to be eternal because there is no death). It is then a necessary quality of religious relationships to have no time limit. This is the requirement of being eternal.

But in modern society there is change, and religions cannot escape the necessity to also change. So, in Simmel's terminology, the content (what we would like to believe) must be eternally unchanged to be credible, but the form in which it is presented and communicated from generation to

generation must be flexible to be current and therefore also credible. This is the contradiction that unavoidably seems to be inherent in the way religion works, if it does, today. Alas, this contradiction besets not only religion but, as we shall see, other areas of social life, like marriage and the family.

Conclusion

The sociology of religion needs a definition of its area of research: Religion is a system of beliefs that defines life after death as real. It is not within the scope and ability of sociology to determine whether religious statements about the beyond are true or not. This question must be left open. However, to the believer and follower of a religion, the statements of faith must be true, must relate to something real, and must be based on personal relationships with one or several immortal persons that are eternal.

The discoveries of modern science cannot be blamed for the weaknesses in religious faith in recent times. But the way of thinking that comes with science leads to defining as *believable reality* only what can be proven in a laboratory experiment. Simmel asks how the acceptance of religion can be restored. He suggests that the established religions leave their respective transcendental worlds of ideas and instead observe the unique impulses of life itself. Simmel thinks intellectual development can rob religion of its clothing but cannot take religion's life. A new form will be found for religiosity as one of life's basic contents.

Simmel's unusual approach to religion raises a number of questions:

- Is it really convincing to define and recognize a belief system as a religion independently of what the content of faith happens to be?
- If relations with a god or other immortal are endowed with the quality of being eternal, then how can any change or development in the context of that religion be justified?
- What does Simmel mean when he writes that religion can be robbed of its clothing but not of its life?
- How can a contemporary religion observe the unique impulses of life itself?