

Does Religion Lead to a Home? Durkheim and the Challenge of Modernity

Yiran Fan

School of Philosophy and Religious Study, Minzu University of China, 100074, Beijing, China

Abstract. In modern society, scientism and technological rationality have deconstructed traditional religions, while the atomization of individuals has progressively weakened the bonds between individuals and society. As religion's ultimate concern and community belonging fade, many people find themselves trapped in spiritual emptiness, with the modern individual's "home" at risk of vanishing. Resolving this crisis of faith requires reconsidering whether religion can fulfill the function of providing a spiritual home. Émile Durkheim's concept of a Divine Society offers a distinctive perspective on this issue. This paper begins by exploring the phenomena of rationalization, individualization, and secularization in modern society, building on Durkheim's assertion that "the essence of religion is society" to examine the relationship between religion and the human spiritual homeland. It first analyzes the formation of the sacred-profane dichotomy in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, highlighting the link between the sacred and authority. Next, it delves into the impact of scientism on religion, presenting a dialogue between Weber's disenchantment and Durkheim's re-enchantment. Using the feasibility and limitations of the divine society as a starting point, this study investigates how religion can guide individuals toward a spiritual home in modern society. The transfer of divinity and the trend of individualization reflect society's capacity for self-repair. Constructing a spiritual home must adapt to contemporary social conditions, enabling individuals' ultimate concerns to reintegrate into communities. This process facilitates a dynamic, balanced symbiosis between society and individuals, moving beyond a unilateral relationship of authority and submission.

Keywords: Émile Durkheim; Sociology of Religion; Modernity; Divine Society.

1. Introduction

During the modernization transition, the rational trend of secularization challenges traditional religion. Against the overall control of instrumental rationality, human beings have been uprooted from the true life state. After the rapid advancement of technical rationality, the drawbacks come into being. Modern people lack spiritual comfort and generally fall into confusion. Thus, religion must face the crisis of faith in modern society. Under this background, scholars at home and abroad have responded mainly from two perspectives: alternative religion and conversion religion.

Many scholars attempt to separate the function of meaning from religion and construct the web of meaning in specific cultural forms such as science and art. The rapid development of science and technology in the nineteenth century strengthened people's confidence in the role of science in all walks of life, which naturally put it into the cultural field as a source of value, represented by Bertrand Russell's *Religion and Science*. Russell criticized religion from the perspective of knowledge and morality, believing that scientific knowledge would eventually overcome religious dogma. [1] However, with the in-depth sense of meaning emptiness in modern people, scientism is reflected. Science adheres to value neutrality in methodology, so it is difficult to use subjectivity to answer the ultimate question. Meanwhile, the efficient functional network constructed by science and technology replaces the community, but aggravates the meaninglessness of people. Scholars such as John Dewey have criticized the excessive expansion of scientism in the humanities, admitting that science is responsible for matters of fact rather than meaning. In Dewey's view, religion is "the emotion of faith", which can help people tackle existential difficulties and establish an ethical value system. [2] Since religion is the cultural form of human beings, some scholars use this analogy to dig into the meaning sources of other humanities that belong to the same cultural form. For example, Cai Yuanpei

examined many fields such as literature, music and painting, and put forward “replacing religion with aesthetic education”, so as to construct meaning through aesthetics and cultivate people’s spiritual world. [3]

Religion has been intertwined with politics since ancient times. If the sacredness of religion is deconstructed and constructed, can the national ideology maintained by the state apparatus become “quasi-religion”? Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger analyzed how nationalism creates a sense of sanctity through “the invention of tradition”. [4] Robert N. Bellah, using the United States as an example, proposed that the combination of state and faith can shape civic religion, providing communities with the ultimate meaning of strong cohesion and purpose of existence. [5] Ideology can render an extremely powerful sense of meaning and belonging. However, when a political ideology tries to provide ultimate care, it can easily demand absolute loyalty from the individual to the collective, suppress the modern subjectivity with the ability to choose independently, and slide into totalitarianism.

Converting religious forms is the second approach. Conforming to the highly individualized trend in modern society, religious privatization has been the consensus of some researchers. Georg Simmel observed the gradual departure of modern religion from public forms, advocating the discovery of religiousness in each person’s life and the pursuit of personal meaning. [6] Grace Davie reflected the trend towards privatization by describing “believing without belonging” when people maintained faith even though they were not involved in religious organizations. [7] The religious privatization guarantees an individual freedom of belief, but gives birth to “spirituality but not religion” (SBNR). [8] SBNR encourages individuals to take the elements that make them feel good at will from various traditions, but avoids any form of community and ethics. As an extension of modern consumerism, it cannot build a real home that needs mutual assistance and responsibility.

Others who approve the conversion of religion abstract the core elements of religion and provide meaning with religious moral ethics and ultimate concern. As Paul Tillich argues in *Cultural Theology*, the essence of religion lies in the ultimate concern that transcends all particular forms. [9] Religion’s deep concern for life and death, as well as the personal experience of being with the other, weave a powerful system of meaning. When religion is re-understood as a homeland chosen and cultivated by people, it may be promising to provide a shelter for every modern man with joint cultural forms such as philosophy, science, and art.

The ideas of Émile Durkheim also belong to the conversion of religion. He believed that as society develops, religion can change form and express the sacred in entirely new ways, which is the blueprint for a “Divine Society” constructed by *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. [10] Although traditional forms of religion may decline, the sanctity itself does not vanish. Religion needs to be converted to create and maintain faith in society. [11] However, the current research on Durkheim’s theory and modernity is still insufficient, and its value needs to be further explored.

In the modern society dominated by scientism, the spiritual emptiness that existed a hundred years ago is still entrenched in people’s minds. Cold technological rationality cannot bring survival meaning, and “homeless” modern people either expect to go home or choose to rebuild their homes. Since the beginning of modernity, scientific reason has constantly attacked religion, which has led religion into continuous retreat and gradually into the personal field. When the crisis appears, the religion, which has tight bonds to the faith, emerges again. Should modern religion abandon the traditional form, conform to the atomic society, and become a personal belief and value choice? Or inherit the consistent collectivity and form a community of faith? This is precisely the tension between religion and modern society.

As modernity keeps rolling forward, how should religion continue to care for the meaning of life in new forms, such as cultural activities and lifestyles, needs in-depth research. If, as Durkheim said, religion will eventually move towards a “divine society”, can it rebuild the homeland of mankind?

2. Social Nature of Religion

Durkheim proposed that primitive religions were able to reveal the essence of religion most clearly. After criticizing spiritualism and nature worship, he proved that totem worship was the origin of religion. When examining the totem worship of Australian clans and the development of totem in American society, he discovered the dual function of totem. Totems are both sacred symbols and symbols of social groups. Its sanctity is not derived from the natural attributes of totem objects, but the product of collective emotion. In the clan society, people live collectively, experience events together, and project emotions and values onto the totem, making it a sacred symbol. Thus, sanctity expresses sociality, and religion reflects not the “supernatural world” [12] but society itself. “If religion produces all the most essential aspects of society, it results from the fact that the concept of society is precisely the soul of religion”. [13]

At the core of religious thinking lies the distinction between the sacred and the mundane. The sacred-profane dichotomy not only constitutes the basic elements of religion, but also lays the foundation of human thinking. In totem worship, sacred objects are distinguished from secular life and given special powers, and profane things are attributed to everyday life. Durkheim proved that such a division comes from society. Society has absolute power over its members, forcing individuals to pursue the common goals of society. As a moral authority, “coercion” stimulates the respect of individuals. Society is made up of countless individuals, and each individual’s feelings for moral authority are also present in the hearts of others, which reinforces the bond of worship. [14] Thus, social authority is the original source of “sacredness”. Durkheim speculated that people in a state of worship and excitement might often see the animals common in the area during clan gatherings. [15] For example, if people usually see rabbits in assembly areas, once sufficient members associate religious experience with the location, the rabbits may be regarded as representatives of the clan, forming a totem. The totem symbolizes the clans of the place and represents social identity, thus making it sacred.

After religious emotions arise, rituals are responsible for consolidating and continuing. The “taboo” of Australian tribes is the typical ritual of guaranteeing the sacred-profane dichotomy. [16] Clan members strictly enforce taboos, reinforce beliefs through periodic repetition, and become consciously united with powerful social forces in their thought and behavior. When holidays and gatherings are held, members of the clan abandon ordinary activities and celebrate worship together to confirm their relationship with the sacred object. Notably, as an observer of foreign cultures, Durkheim preferred to speculate about the behavior of tribal indigenous residents from a Western perspective, rather than adopting the interpretation of the indigenous themselves. Nowadays, academia respects the understanding of local residents more, and gives objective explanations of religious phenomena from local perspectives with local terminology.

Society has not only created religion, but also shaped the way humans think. The second theme discussed in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* is the sociality of the category of thought. Durkheim believed that human beings created categories such as “time”, “space” and “cause and effect” in social life, especially religious practice, which gave birth to philosophy and science. The law of causality sprouted in witchcraft rituals and promoted the formation of logic. Besides, the conflict between good and evil in social life leads to the duality of religious thought, which lays the foundation for ethics. [16] People gather common experiences and values through practice, and create collective consciousness. If collective consciousness is to become the basic framework of understanding the world, it needs to transcend individual experience systematically through repeated rituals and become a universally applicable cognitive form. In primitive religions, the church, as a community of faith, held collective ceremonies, established rules and systems, and integrated members of the society. The organizational form of religion, “church”, guarantees the institutionalization of collective consciousness.

Different from rationalism and empiricism, Durkheim answered the epistemological proposition that has been debated endlessly in philosophy with society—how is human cognition possible? He

discussed the origin of his thinking by society and attached importance to human creative activity, which shares similarities with Marx. However, they vary in attitudes towards religion. Marx adopted the “opium theory” to reveal the role of religion in paralyzing and suffering. In addition, he advocated that the projected divinity should be returned to man, religion should be eliminated, and freedom and liberation should be realized. Affirming the positive role of religion in stabilizing society and maintaining emotion, Durkheim advocated preserving religion for its desirable function.

So far, Durkheim has revealed the social nature of religion: the sacred nature lies in the collective emotion that society elicits. Rituals strengthen social cohesion through collective action. As an organizational form, the church essentially reflects the social structure. Religion concentrates on the expression of collective life, and ideological categories are generated and maintained through religion. Society is not only the foundation of religion, but also the root of human thought and behavior.

3. Where is Road for the Sacred

Religion once played a key role in social integration, reflecting the most essential content of society. However, with instrumental rationality and technical logic, modern scientism deconstructs the transcendence of religion, which gives way to science in cognitive function. Meanwhile, conflict is a turning point. In the new world of rationality and individualism, technological fanaticism obscures the sacred, and people generally suffer from the “modern disease” of spiritual emptiness. Whether religion survives or not depends on whether it can again carry the ultimate care and perpetuate faith in a world dominated by science.

Durkheim and his contemporary sociologist Max Weber were keenly aware of the tension between religion and science. The two acknowledged that scientism weakened traditional religious roots and focused on the meaning of modern society. Durkheim’s “re-sanctification” and Weber’s “de-sanctification” predict the future of religion from both positive and negative perspectives.

3.1. Weber: Rationalism Shapes the “Iron Cage”

According to Weber’s masterpiece Protestant Ethics and the Spirit of Capitalism, he explored the process in which the spirit of capitalism arose from religious (protestant) ethics, based on the phenomenon that most successful businessmen and skilled workers were Protestants, combining with the spirit of Benjamin Franklin’s famous saying that “making money is a moral obligation”. Besides, he speculated that Protestantism and capitalism have connections. Weber traced back to the roots, and finally found the formation of the capitalist spirit in Martin Luther’s vocation view and Calvinist salvation predestination theory, with the religious reform as the node.

Weber remained neutral throughout and did not directly criticize capitalism. But at the end of the article, he reveals the influence of capitalism on modern society. The development of modern society is accompanied by the process of rationalization and de-sanctification. Although the professional ethics of asceticism originated from protestants, as capitalism occupies a dominant position in the social economy, it continuously expands its influence and goes to secularity, which makes the capitalist spirit eventually become a self-discipline mechanism separated from the support of religion. Weber pointed out that the dual ethics of protestant asceticism and tireless work have formed an “iron cage” that surrounds everyone under capitalist society and binds people to the desire to earn more wealth. [17] The refined division of labor restricts the occupational requirements to “specialists” and limits people from exploring their diverse potential. The capitalist spirit, which has withdrawn from the foundation of faith, leaves only a value vacuum for modern people. “The Puritans work for the fulfillment of their vocation, but our labor is forced”. [18]

Weber regards science as a force that triggers “meaninglessness”. De-sanctification has led to a spiritual crisis. Science, while providing instrumental rationality, cannot replace the value rationality that points to the ultimate meaning. He believed, slightly pessimistically, that de-sanctification is the destiny of modern society. With the rise of scientism, the worldview of traditional religion was replaced by natural science and instrumental rationality. The sacred was dissolved in the

rationalization, and religion was no longer responsible for interpreting the meaning of nature, society and life, but retreated to the private sphere. In reality, Webb still expected “pointlessness” to be addressed. He suggested in the last chapter that one day society may burst with creativity, prophets emerge, ancient ideals are renewed, and faith is renewed. [19]

3.2. Durkheim: Society Contains Sacred Power

Durkheim was more optimistic about the conflict between science and religion. Although science replaces religion in empirical cognition, it cannot replace religion from the aspect of meaning. [20] Science can only explain “how”, but it fails to answer “why”. The “why” points to the ultimate concern beyond this place and situation, and religion needs to constantly find answers. Functionally, religion not only represents society, but also meets social needs and maintains the connection between people. Reality has proved that science alone cannot achieve social integration. In addition, since religion and science both originate and depend on society, there is no insurmountable gap between them. Religion will go hand in hand with science, belong to various fields, play their respective functions, and jointly promote the development of human society.

The society is not going towards extinction, but is constantly maintaining itself. In the final analysis, modern society is only one of the stages. At every social stage, the society as a whole has authority over the individual, and such authority is reflected through religion and embodied as sacred in people. Thus, the function of religion is an inevitable demand of social life. Even if modern people try to eliminate the sacred, the “society” composed of people still needs the sacred itself, and it will perpetuate the sacred in new forms of religion. Countless individuals make up society that acquires complete heterogeneity (relative to individuals) when it is formed, that is, authority. Durkheim was probably the only scholar in the 20th century who analyzed the great differences between society and individuals, associating it with the sacred of religion to solve the problem of faith.

Both Weber and Durkheim demonstrated that the new spiritual home of mankind could not be entirely dependent on traditional religion, but it could not be completely arranged by scientific reason. “De-sanctification” reveals the decline of religion in a rationalized society, and scientific rationality creates a meaning vacuum. Such tension makes the construction of a spiritual home full of challenges, and breeds the hope of religious survival. “Re-sanctification” emphasizes the ability of society to create sacred and meet spiritual needs through new forms of religion.

De-sanctification renders modern society more pluralistic and rational, but it also results in dispersion and a lack of value. Re-sanctification reintegrates society by innovating forms of faith. The modern homeland needs to strike a balance between de-sanctification and re-sanctification.

4. Divine Society: Possibility of a Home

The dilemma of modernity is encapsulated by the “Fable of the Swordpig” put forward by Arthur Schopenhauer:

On a cold winter day, a group of swordhogs embraced each other to keep warm. But they quickly hurt each other with their hard pricks. In this way, they were forced to separate. But in order to keep warm, their bodies approached again, and the thorns on their bodies hurt them again. The swordhogs were tormented repeatedly by these suffering until they finally found a distance just enough to tolerate each other. [21]

Modern society brings a new way of existence. People, as independent individuals in the rational system, break away from the regional community of traditional society. The establishment of an expert system makes it difficult for individuals to comprehensively grasp the knowledge in any field, which only has relative autonomy in the personal field. The groups of shared experiences and values in the same region are dissolved, and each person is like an isolated atom in a society of strangers. The swordpig symbolizes the contradiction of modern people: yearning for concrete and intimate interactions, but fearing being overwhelmed by others. As a result, they can only maintain a “polite

distance” without interfering with each other. The rational system needs no friendly mutual assistance of its members, with the insufficient resonance of values, and interpersonal communication becomes indifferent and unbearable. “If you can solve it alone, avoid socializing” became the usual defense.

With the expansion of individual rights and freedoms in modern society, collective consciousness has been weakened, individualization has become a trend, and the voice of individual religion has been increasingly strong. Durkheim believed that religion could not be purely individualized; it was the symbolic expression of social life. Individual religion, which is popular in modern society, still originates from social religion in essence. With a whole religion, there will be various sub-religions differentiated. Society creates religious teachings, rituals, and conveys emotional experiences. Individual religions have these basic elements. Since religion stems from society, the question of religion must be answered in society. The homeland of mankind is always contained in society. Sacred is social power, which has never disappeared. It is only looking for a more reasonable way to display and express it to each individual. This is the meaning of “divine society”. If humanity realizes that its homeland is never far from itself, the solution to the crisis is close.

Durkheim emphasized the social integration of religion and took divine authority as the source of faith, which provided inspiration for building a spiritual home. However, a society where groups have absolute authority over individuals inevitably triggers fear. Modern people are more afraid of being controlled by power and losing themselves than alienation, a fear characterized by the current universal state of atomization. Traditional society promotes individuals to move to collectivity, while modern society pays attention to moving from group to individual. Durkheim’s divine society, which focuses more on the function of the individual “making up society”, needs to reunite with reality and see each concrete and vivid person.

While Durkheim emphasized the logical presence of society to religion, it was necessary to place religion itself at the center of the vision when exploring the possibility of religion becoming a home. The divine society is exciting, but how the sacred manifests and changes in religion indicates the future direction of religion.

Everyone is in society, and our homeland should never have left us. Why do you not feel the comfort and care of your home now? Why has the society to which the homeland should be directed become a cold cage that represses individuals instead? Religion goes towards individualization and becomes the spiritual care of individuals, which not only reflects its division from society, but also proves that religion can exist with homeland. Individual religion is the response of religion to the crisis of belief, getting rid of the rational system and grand narrative, and reconfirming one’s dignity in transcendence. Apart from Durkheim’s group perspective, another thought worth attention comes from Simmel. In Simmel’s direction, religion should be freed from collectivizing authority and return to individual inner experience. Nowadays, religion especially needs to focus on individual life realization and self-transcendence. Individual religion provides an avenue for individuals to confront instrumental rationality and collective homogeneity, helping people to rebuild their homes in increasingly complex and fragmented lives.

This reality does not represent Durkheim’s mistaken conception, but rather is the manifestation of social adaptation and creation. Individual and society are two sides of one body. Sacredness can be the authority of society over individuals or the autonomy of individual reappearance. From the perspective of functionalism, society is an organism that repairs itself and maintains order. If society can continue to develop and run stably in the long run, it is not bad to “transfer” the sacred in a stage. The reappearance of “home” needs to conform to the trend of individualization and tap into the specific and true religious feelings of individuals. When individuals achieve self-satisfaction and build strong spiritual pillars through ultimate care, people reunite into a community out of internal social connection.

5. Religion, Modernity and Home

Religion is not passively accepting modernity, nor is it absolutely subordinate to society. It constantly reacts to modernity in multiple cultural forms, subtly shapes history, value systems and social roles, and constructs ethics and philosophy. “Homeland” is a religious reaction force. Besides, religion planted the seeds of “homeland” in humans, which germinated from modern values and belief systems. People pursue their homeland, which is full of sensibility, value sharing and mutual concern, forming an opposing force with the rational and alienated modern society. It is precisely because human beings are religious in nature that “homeland” will become the way in which man connects with the past, with himself and with others during the individualization and rationalization triggered by modernity. Through self-denial, modernity not only promotes social structural, cultural and technological changes, but also seeks “self-transcendence” and “ultimate meaning” in the spiritual realm. Religion intends to meet these needs, starting from home reconstruction in modernity, and exploring new ways of expression. Despite the many tensions between religion and modernity, they are intertwined and jointly lay the foundation for contemporary culture.

However, building a home is not easy. Community does not represent monocultural identity, but truly respects multiculturalism. Durkheim’s theory needs to accept the plurality of modern society, combine science, culture and public values, and jointly shape a “home” that can meet human concerns. The unity of individual meaning pursuit and collective value should be balanced through cultural education and ethical practice. At present, global cultural blending is often accompanied by conflict, and individualized freedom may excessively weaken the foundations of communities. Although digital technology has promoted the formation of global communities to a certain extent, it has also aggravated human spiritual isolation. How to find universal symbols and meanings in the fragmented modern society is the key to the future construction of a spiritual home. Digitalization provides opportunities for human connectivity, based on the establishment of small communities (e.g. cultural communities, online communities), which explores the possibility of shared global values. The spiritual home of the future should be future-oriented, open and inclusive.

We need to face up to Durkheim’s theoretical limitations. Under the background of the times, he inevitably used the Eurocentric perspective, failing to fully consider the religious understanding of the local population. He emphasized the absolute priority of collective consciousness, which may “obscure diverse individuals”, slightly different from the trend of individualization in modern society. Religion is not necessarily completely dissolved by modernity, but is transformed into new forms in modern society. Such a transformation itself shapes modernity.

Although many studies have shown limitations and enriched the research, it is far harder to construct a universal theory than to stand on the building of predecessors and criticize it. Different from the attitude of European academics who generally questioned religion at the beginning of the 20th century, Durkheim actively described religion and boldly opened up a blank field, claiming that religion reflects society and responds to needs, and is a real social phenomenon based on human existence. According to Durkheim, faith is warmth, life, the burst of the whole spiritual life, and the transcendence of individuals to themselves. He painted a real and warm world. The connection and resonance he showed were not only the foundation of society, but also the hope of home reconstruction.

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