



Paweł Prüfer

The Jacob of Paradies University, Poland

ORCID 0000-0003-3647-8068

Religion from a sociological perspective – implications for pedagogical research

Religia w socjologicznym oglądzie – implikacje dla badań pedagogicznych

Abstract: The sociology of religion is the part of sociology as the science of society. From the beginning of this discipline, interest in the phenomenon of religion has been very lively. The structure of the article includes four main research problems. These are, in order: religion and society, religious experience, functionalism theory and religion and education, upbringing and religion... The aim of the analysis is to try to articulate some elements that are also conducive to pedagogical research, especially regarding the problem of upbringing. The analysis often suggested educational, shaping and socializing aspects of religion.

Keywords: religion, sociology, society, religious experience, functionalism, upbringing.

Introduction

The basic element in upbringing is the upbringing relationship, and above all the influence of the educator on the pupil. This relationship is also based on reciprocity. It can be understood as appear of a new relational being. The educator as the subject of upbringing is in some way identified with the subject of upbringing, which is the pupil. The analogy that is suggest itself here – if we want to consider religion sociologically – may be as follows: identifying the subject of worship (*worshipping subject*) with the object of religion. According to Joachim Wach, such a mistake was made by Émile

Durkheim. The author of an important work for the sociological research on religion, sought to consider various relationships between religion and social phenomena. In his opinion, this was supposed to contribute to a fuller understanding of the cultural importance of religion. Additionally, the study of these relationships and influences would help to identify and explore the connections between various forms of religious experience and its expression. Religious experience is an internal, subjective and in a certain sense elusive element, which requires from the researcher not only great research insight, but also considerable empathy towards the individual who gains emotional and experiences his or her religious acts (Wach, 1961, p. 38).

In the article, we want to look at religion broadly, universally, although not excluding personal experience that is important for it. This approach will be both functional and substantial. In this sociological undertaking, we want to place religion also on the sociological theory, which is functionalism. In addition, we will formulate some comments on how sociological analysis of the phenomenon of religion can be useful for pedagogical research, both in relation to religion itself, but also in relation to various other issues related to upbringing and socialization. An important reference in our analyses is the extensive volume on the sociology of religion, where religion is considered from a systematic and historical perspective (Cipriani and Prüfer, 2021, p. 11), but also other works, among which the classics of sociological thought occupy an important place. From the very beginnings of the discipline of sociology, religion has been an important subject of its interest, even if its alleged decline or even disappearance has been studied. For some sociologists it was and is something particularly alive, for others, an element disappearing from the panorama of the world, which would happen due to social change or modernization. The sociology of religion is an extremely broad spectrum of problems relating to the phenomenon of religion. It is not possible to present all of them in a short text of the article. There has been no deliberate mention of some – as it might seem – fundamental issues, such as secularization or desecularization, privatization or reprivatization of religions. It also adopted a more static than dynamic perspective of society, without focusing on the local, Polish context. The subject matter and the problems are ultimately the result of some arbitrary choice made by the author.

Religion and Society

Society is a collective, not only a durable and harmonized whole, but also a diverse and heterogeneous being. Religion is similar - it has permanent doctrines, rules, spiritual and moral ideals, and at the same time it manifests

itself in various ways, depending on membership in a group, community and in relation to tradition. Society is a system, an organism, a being in which there is a place for cooperation, the implementation of functions and roles, but also where competition takes place, where tensions, conflicts, interactions, social exchange occur, but also where there is a reflective correction of its imperfections. Religion – it seems – has similar features and helps (especially when taken into account functionalistically and structurally) the strengthening and dynamism of society. Religion is systemic.

If we consider religion also in terms of some individual elements, it is obvious that they are able to mark and trigger various activities of a religious subject. However, the set of religious and moral principles contained in the *Decalogue* as a whole has a different effect than when one specific requirement is taken into account, for example, the principle of “do not steal”. The *Decalogue* shapes individual attitudes in the moral aspect, but determines the specific attitudes in social life. In a word, society benefits from the positive identification of moral attitudes with the requirements of the *Decalogue*. The moral attitudes of individuals add up, accumulate, and their axiomatic potential penetrates into the structure of society, which internally and externally strengthens its cohesion. Religious requirements, which in an individual and peculiar way are internalized and then applied in action, are somehow aggregated, which translates into greater cohesion of society as a whole. Does this rule apply regardless of the context and stage of development of society?

The processes of social modernization certainly have an impact on the area of religion. However, it cannot be clearly assumed and determined that this is only a negative impact. In certain circumstances, the modernization of society and the religiosity of specific individuals establishing society may be in harmony with each other, and certainly not exclude each other (Mariański, 2021b, p. 165).

Religion does not only influence society and individual behaviour. It also has a significant impact – which does not necessarily have to result in a tendency to lack objectivity – also on the status of sociology as a science. For some, this will be a valuable addition and strengthening of its status and mission, but for others it will be an unjustified bias. An important element of the relationship between religion and society is the question of communality, the relational nature of human life. Religious communities can be an alternative to weakening local or environmental communities (Sztompka, 2023, p. 278). Sociology is interested in this social dimension of human life and emphasizes the importance of connections, relationships and bonds

in society. For a sociologist, religion is expressed not only through the relationship with the object of individual worship, but also how and why it marks the relationships between people and social groups (Mariański, 2021a, p. 16). Gerhard Lenski begins his study of the sociology of religion with the following words „God is concerned with the whole of men’s lives: on at least this one point all the churches agree. He is not merely the Lord of the Sabbath, but is equally concerned with men’s activities the other six days of the week: their work, their play, their politics, their family life. But how does this doctrine work in practice?” (Lenski, 1963, s. 1).

The sociology of religion allows us to visualize the extraordinary dynamics of this phenomenon. Religion is not only subject to simple development in its forms of expression and experience. It is close to society and related to it, and since it is constantly dynamising, changing, transforming and, in a sense, maturing, the same is happening with religion itself. It is related to people’s everyday life and, as it changes, it is subject to similar processes. It is part of the life of individuals and communities, although it does not essentially absorb it. It is next to this life, contributing to giving it sense, meaning, directing it towards immediate and ultimate goals. „Religion is already considered the most important and representative aspect, capable of reproducing and expressing with immediacy the shape and essence of the whole: this because the various forms through which religion has been revealed historically has always been in accordance with the degree of progress achieved by different peoples in different ages” (Lacorte, 2012, s. 86).

Religion and religious experience

The sociology of religion strongly emphasizes its social and institutional meanings. They are present and sometimes necessary, but – as eminent scientists also emphasize – without reference to the basic relationship, which is the bond with a supernatural being, religion will be empty and even meaningless. Man’s intimate relationship with his God is the essence of religion, which is expressed in the very name *re-ligare*, i.e. to bind anew (Heller, 2023, pp. 116-117). William James, on the other hand, formulates a completely different and rather arbitrary thesis: “There can be no doubt that as a matter of fact a religious life, exclusively pursued, does tend to make the person exceptional and eccentric” (James, 2009, p. 9).

It is not an easy task to research religious experience. After all, it is subjective, individual, intimate and, in a sense, incomprehensible to a researcher looking at it from the outside. The sociologist of religion is unable to penetrate into the world getting emotional his *sacrum* experience. At most,

he can obtain this knowledge by asking the experiencer to share it. However, there will also be a problem here, because in order for the researcher to make this information available to the recipients of his research, he will have to demonstrate the ability to present the acquired knowledge discursively. A prerequisite for the effectiveness of these activities will be a high level of empathy towards the person gets emotional their religious experience. Joachim Wach defines this requirement as the ability to build bonds of affinity and sympathetic understanding with the subject under study, which in this case is a religious entity (Wach, 1961, p. 41).

The abandonment of standard and widely shared schemes and opinions concerning the same religion, as well as religious personalities, identities and individuals, their motivations and beliefs, is the first and essential task to be performed by the sociologist of religion in relation to himself. Common and stereotypical opinions about religions and religiously sensitive individuals, sometimes even appearing as valid and standard cognitive and hermeneutical matrices, will not lead the researcher even to a superficial understanding of what communion with the *sacred* or the deity is in this particular case. The appearance of authentic and effective cognitive insight into the personality and religious experience of the subject will rather lead astray and will not be a manifestation of an effective diagnosis of the phenomenon. The omission of the above-described requirements will result in a blurred and inadequate picture even in the analysis of external manifestations of religiosity, when various variable religious practices and various forms of such activity are examined. It is hard to disagree with Charles Taylor and his remark in *A Secular Age*: “So it appears that the religious or spiritual identity of masses of people still remains defined by religious forms from which they normally keep themselves at a good distance” (Tylor, 2018, p. 521).

The religious experience is something that an individual experiences in his or her spiritual micro-world. They can also display it outside in some way, but they can also keep it for himself. It will not be the result of some manifestation of selfishness, of not giving up one's own precious and valuable goods, which in this case turned out to be a spiritual experience of something transcendent and peculiar, but rather an inability to express one's own experience in a discursive way. This fact makes it necessary to treat religious experiences and emotions with special esteem, not ascribe to them the status of strangeness, but rather peculiarities. A man of religious experience may send a message to the outside environment in which he lives: “You will not understand me, because it is not given to you to experience what I am experience”.

On the other hand, if a religious subject tastes such an experience of the transcendent element, the mystery of the *sacrum*, he may take action to share this or a similar experience with others. This also expresses the social dimension of religious experience. Much depends on which confession, religion, the process of this inner experience takes place. If a given religion has relational, social potential, the experience taking place here will trigger the process of sharing and mobilizing to make it available to others. Even if we are dealing here with a so-called inner-world religion, the attractiveness of religious experience will emanate from the subject who has become its possessor. Ultimately, contact with the *sacrum* is also the courage and ability to tame it, to face its extraordinary nature. Peter Berger in *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* contended: „The sacred is apprehended as «sticking out» from the normal routines of everyday life, as something extraordinary and potentially dangerous, though its dangers can be domesticated and its potency harnessed to the needs of everyday life” (Berger, 1967, p. 26).

Religion in the perspective of functionalism

Sociological theories not only create the basis for the analysis of the specificity of society, regardless of its historical or cultural conditions, but also become an interpretative horizon for individual social phenomena. Religion is not excluded from this large collection. One might even venture to say that he occupies an honourable place here. It turns out that such research activity was not only the domain of the past, although sociology is – as Piotr Sztompka claims – a new science on an old topic (Sztompka, 2021, p. 23), which means that as a scientific, academic discipline, it does not have a very long history. Even today and in the pages of important scientific journals, researchers are still intrigued by the question of the importance of religion in individual biographies and in the history of societies. It is, for example, for the social individual a specific material for shaping himself, an attempt to save himself in the face of crises and unpredictability of the world, a reaction to the loss of what the individual loses due to undesirable social changes (Spickard, 2023).

From a functionalist perspective, religion plays an important social role. It integrates and harmonizes society. Its contents, especially in the axiomatic layer, are a force that dynamizes, integrates and constitutes the relations and social duties of the members of a given community. Those who identify with a given religion, especially with the dominant one in the community, but also do not identify themselves, but only recognize its

positive role and share the values present in its content, construct a certain moral consensus. They share the value of religion itself in general and the specific contents that flow from it. They confirm their adherence to fundamental social values (Giddens and Sutton, 2012, p. 23). Thanks to this, society strengthens both in its structure and in specific relational references, in the micro-worlds created and owned by religious entities. Much depends on whether integration is understood holistically and in relation to religion in general. What kind of integration is involved? Which religion integrates a specific society and how? And what actions are therefore undertaken in social life to promote, strengthen and propagate this particular religion.

Man as an individual is incomplete, and participation in a community, conscious and subjective, makes him a person (Anzenbacher, 2010, p. 203). Religion can be perceived here as a kind of bond or „cover” that binds and strengthens the social system. Individuals who positively share the value of religion will be an „urgency” for each other, motivating them to make efforts for social, moral and existential integration. Of course, what is most important here is a mature way of perceiving religion and authentic identification with it, which also requires certain competences in the field of: knowledge of the content contained in the religious doctrine, understanding the arguments leading to identification with it, consent to conduct it on one's own and with a sense of personal obligation to be active in promoting it. Each individual of the social system, due to and under the influence of religion, plays its own and often unique role.

Religion equips individuals with responsibilities related to their roles and functions. Society – sharing the value of religion – understands the importance of these duties. It sanctions, confirms, selects and updates them in relation to the everyday practice of an individual's life (professional, family, personal), as well as in terms of his festive experience, in the context of getting emotional the *sacred*, as it confirms one's identification with the values derived from religion and with religious manifestations. This does not mean, however, that the individual - also under the influence of religious pressure - passively submits to fulfilling roles and functions. Sometimes it meets expectations consistent with the requirements of the social system, other times it evades them (Parsons, 2009, p. 26). They want to feel oneness. Moreover, they want to be perceived as such. They want to have a sense of internal integration, and not just engage in making society integrate (Simmel, 1975, p. 75). There is a certain tension and even a conflict between the whole and the part, between society and the individual, between religion, which

would like to integrate individuals with each other, and its action from the inside (in the individual and spiritual sphere of the individual).

Education, pedagogy, religion

Pedagogy, like sociology, provides an opportunity to conduct broad and diverse analyses. The ideas appearing in it are born in specific conditions, but – as Bogusław Śliwerski rightly points out – they are somehow detached from the territory in which they were created and from the creators who created them. This leads to crossing borders and reaching places where there is a need to reflect on the theory and practice related to human life, upbringing, socialization, especially their effects (Śliwerski, 2011, p. 17). In sociological terms, both religion and upbringing can be considered as social phenomena. Florian Znaniecki has already recalled this in relation to upbringing (Znaniecki, 2001, p. 3).

The study of the relationship between religion and society may have important implications of a socializing, educational, or simply pedagogical nature. We are of the view that such practical and beneficial consequences may occur. Much, of course, depends on how this relationship is diagnosed and analyzed. We want to understand this development of science also as the emergence of diverse and interesting effects thanks to research on religion and its relationship with society. Moreover, it seems that sociological reflection on religion provides cognitive and explanatory material that facilitates penetration into other research areas, especially pedagogy and analyzes aimed at exploring the topic of upbringing and socialization.

Religion is primarily an individual experience. This subject enters the world of religious experience, and therefore it depends most on him whether others will be able to know it, understand it, and consequently also make it their own, possibly entering into an analogous context. Religious experience, no matter how individualized it may be, does not remain indifferent to the environment. When an individual unambiguously establishes a relationship with his deity, whether he perceives and experiences transcendent reality as a personal God or merely as a force, space, idea, or energy, he enriches not only himself.

Religion is usually the “carrier” of certain principles and values. And these most often revolve around respect for others, individual dignity, honesty in interpersonal relationships, and peaceful coexistence. The entire educational process - as pedagogy reminds us in various ways - is based on the above goals and values. Man as an individual and man as a subject of society are not two parts of distant beings. His individual and social lifestyle

intertwine with each other and never close as perfectly realized. They are in phases of constant, permanent development, in an unclosed process of improvement. Just like the way of acquiring new experiences, learning strategies or acquiring knowledge, they translate into building the identity, personality and individuality of an individual.

Pedagogy as the science of upbringing can point to values derived from religion, from religious-spiritual experience, from individual internal experience or also from that which takes place in a specific community. An individual who seeks value and meaning not only in rational, useful or utilitarian efficiency and prosperity, but also in what makes him more sensitive and spiritual, becomes a value for society. It is a “carrier” of content and goods that one wants to achieve in the process of upbringing and socialization. Like a sociologist, an educator can point out the value and function of religion in religious experience. The former will primarily identify, analyze and interpret it, while the latter will postulate and promote it. In other words, a sociological interpretation of religion can be “educational” and pedagogically useful.

The effects of sociological analysis as well as the relationship between religion and the peculiarities of social life, as well as the value of the religious and spiritual experience itself, may become a valuable instrument and accumulated capital for pedagogical theory and practice. It is difficult to agree with such a radical statement of the classic of sociology that motivation to act through religion is primarily oriented towards this world (Weber, 2002, p. 318), however, it would also be difficult to deny that religion does not result in practical, life-related, “mundane”, social (including educational and socialization), or simply purely human, benefits and values. It should be stressed that these are only some of the potentially valuable implications contained in the sociology of religion that could become beneficial and enriching pedagogical research. It is not possible to articulate all of them in a short article, let alone develop and interpret them more broadly.

Summary

The sociology of religion, in a descriptive and explanatory way, expresses this timeless dimension of people’s consciousness, which is the need for religious experience and entering into a relational configuration with the supernatural reality. Despite many scenarios about the disappearance of religion and the crisis of the *sacrum*, which would take place both in the community and individual life of individuals, it continues and is often even doing well. Regardless of the condition of religion at a given stage in the development of civilization and society, it is a *panacea* for various complex

and changing moods dominated by uncertainty and anxiety. It is an instance of emotional and existential support, a “carrier” of comfort when individuals experience various life crises, breakdowns, struggles (Sztompka, 2023, p. 277). Roberto Cipriani points out that religion is an extremely rich and capacious sphere filled with many elements. This is so, even if we consider it only in the context of its tendency to diffuse (the concept of *diffused religion*): „Our concept of diffused religion is addressed within a context dealing with rites, gestures, communication, perception, emotions, reference values, the use of prayer, the appeal of symbols, distinctions between good and evil, the meaning of life and death, everyday actions accruing to work and family experiences. Within this vast range of thematic horizons, diffused religion acts, sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly, as a binding thread” (Cipriani, 2017, p. 7).

It is unlikely that researchers who claim that religion is not dead or even shows signs of wilting are wrong (Stark, Bainbridge, 2007, p. 24). The article tried to highlight not only this fact, but also the fact that religion – when it is thoroughly analysed in a sociological way – can also bring a lot of usefulness to such theoretical-practical methods and strategies as are and can be applied, for example, in pedagogical research. And problems related to education, upbringing, learning or socialization today are not so much challenges regarding their implementation, but often result from the loss of awareness of what education really is and whether it really has such a value that it should be pursued with determination (Savagnone, 2010, p. 379).

References:

- Anzenbacher, A (2010). *Wprowadzenie do chrześcijańskiej etyki społecznej*. Kraków: Wydawnictwo WAM.
- Berger, P. L. (1967). *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion*. New York: Doubleday & Company.
- Cipriani, R., Prüfer, P. (2021). *Socjologia religii. Ujęcie systematyczno-historyczne*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Edukacyjne „AKAPIT”.
- Giddens A., współpr. P. W. Sutton (2012). *Socjologia. Wydanie nowe*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Heller, M. (2023). *Teoria względności Mikołaja Kopernika*. Kraków: Copernicus Center Press.
- James, W (2009). *The Varieties of Religious Experience. A Study in Human Nature*. The University of Adelaide Library, University of Adelaide, South Australia 5005, <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/j/james/william/varieties/complete.html>, [23.01.2024].

- Lacorte, C. (2012). *Il primo Hegel*. Lecce: Pensa Multimedia [in: Cipriani, R. (2017). *Diffused Religion. Beyond Secularization*. London: Palgrave Macmillan].
- Lenski, G. (1963). *The Religious Factor a sociologist's inquiry*. New York: Anchor Books Doubleday & Company.
- Mariański, J. (2021a). *Indywidualizacja religijna i moralna jako megatrend społeczno-kulturowy. Studium socjologiczne*. Toruń: Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek.
- Mariański, J. (2021b). *Scenariusze przemian religijności i Kościoła katolickiego w społeczeństwie polskim. Studium diagnostyczno-prognostyczne*. Lublin: Wyższa Szkoła Nauk Społecznych.
- Parsons, T. (2009). *System społeczny*. Kraków: Zakład Wydawniczy NOMOS.
- Savagnone, G. (2010). *L'educazione smarrita*. W: Servizio Nazionale per il Progetto Culturale della CEI (ed.), *L'Emergenza educativa. Persona, intelligenza, libertà, amore* (s. 379-382). Bologna: Centro editoriale dehoniano.
- Simmel, G. (1975). *Socjologia*. Warszawa: Państwowe Wydawnictwo Naukowe.
- Spickard, J. (2023). Sensitizing Blinders: Theorizing Theory in a Post-Colonial Era. *Sociology of Religion, Volume 84, Issue 4, Winter 2023*, 359–382, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socrel/srac038>.
- Stark, R., Bainbridge, W. S. (2007). *Teoria religii*. Kraków: Zakład Wydawniczy NOMOS.
- Sztompka, P. (2021). *Socjologia. Wykłady o społeczeństwie*. Kraków: Znak Horyzont.
- Sztompka, P. (2023). *Wiarygodność. Sekret dobrych relacji*. Kraków: Znak Horyzont.
- Śliwerski, B. (2011). *Współczesna myśl pedagogiczna. Znaczenia, klasyfikacje, badania*. Kraków: Oficyna Wydawnicza IMPULS.
- Taylor, C. (2018). *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Wach, J. (1961). *Socjologia religii*. Warszawa: Książka i Wiedza.
- Weber, M. (2002). *Gospodarka i społeczeństwo. Zarys socjologii rozumiejącej*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.
- Znaniecki, F. (2001). *Socjologia wychowania, Tom 1, Wychowujące społeczeństwo, Tom 2, Urabianie osoby wychowanka*. Warszawa: Wydawnictwo Naukowe PWN.