Many theories of religion tend toward a naturalistic, sociological, Durkheimian framework. While these theories have pointed out important dimensions of religious experience, they risk reducing the human experience of religion to a purely social or psychological phenomenon, without taking seriously the claims of religious adherents themselves. How can we begin to work toward a unique theory of religion, which incorporates both the social causes of religion (per Durkheim) while allowing for a much more sensitive and ethical hermeneutic of religious experience? This paper expands and revises Durkheim’s theory of religion toward a more malleable approach to the ethnographic study of religious communities and the subjective experiences of individuals within them. My theory is motivated by an attempt to use Durkheim’s theory in the discipline of anthropology to inform the ways in which anthropologists go about fieldwork and ethnographic writing when it pertains to the study of religion.

A “Durk-Hickian” View of Religion

First, Durkheim’s theory of religion posits that religious experience and belief can only be understood as something created by humans themselves. He assumes the preliminary spark of religion to be the “positing of an ‘ideal world’” (Preus 173). This world is on a plane above the believer’s profane existence. On this idealized plane, there exists a “moral power upon which he depends and from which he receives all that is best in himself” (174). This sentiment is borne and sustained through communal worship, wherein individuals succumb to the “obligatory” moral power of the group, setting aside their individualistic motivations (Durkheim 205). In its most elementary form, Durkheim’s hypothesis claims, “The states of perpetual dependence in which we find ourselves in the face of society inspires in us a feeling of religious awe…”[it] originates not in individual feelings but in collective states of mind, and that it varies according to these states” (206). Durkheim only acknowledges the individual in terms of his behavior as a member of a group.

Durkheim, according to Hick’s definition, was a non-realist; Hick understood religious belief and ritual as responses to an ontological Real (Hick 172). Hick provides a critique of Durkheim when he weighs the validity of “The Naturalistic Option” as a view of the universe. However, Hick criticizes

Taking these dimensions of religious experience into account, my revisionary theory of religion is presented in layers as well. The first layer of my theory shows the degree to which religion is built through the community, and religious beliefs are predicated on communal values (per Durkheim). The second layer shows how religious life may embody something highly meaningful to devotees, given individual experiences that are distinct from the social. I argue that the social and ethical principles of communal life are what people celebrate and observe in worship, although feelings generated through this worship can be understood as the manifestation of something Real, felt and affirmed through personal experience. Durkheim’s theory need not finitely label the object of its attention. In fact, cultural anthropology historically has taken issue with Durkheim’s methods including his quantitative, scientific collection of “social facts” through objective techniques.
Durkheim on the basis of Durkheim’s vast generalizations about religion, not on the basis of his “non-realist” perspective. While early in Hick’s book it becomes clear that he is not interested in signing on with a particular naturalistic approach to religion, he claims that, “even when [naturalistic, speculative analyses of religion emerge] unconvincing, they can nevertheless be seen as correctly indicating the presence of elements of human projection and cultural conditioning within the various forms of religious experience” (266). Hick thinks human projection is mostly pervasive within the major post-axial religions.

According to Hick, projection occurs because “all awareness, whether of our more immediate or of our more ultimate environment, is accordingly formed in terms of conceptual systems embodied in the language of particular societies and traditions” (173). To experience the Real as it is means to attain a non-worldly state. Thus, Hick posits that “we can therefore only experience the Real as its presence affects our distinctively human modes of consciousness” (173). The “critical realism” he advocates “takes full account of the subjective contribution to all awareness,” whereas “naive realism” does not fully acknowledge the “interpretive element of sense perception” (173). Hick perfers critical realism because its interpretive aspect allows for the preservation of “cognitive freedom” in understanding the transcendental reality. He contrasts realist theories with those non-realist theories that do not take religious language seriously.

Interestingly, Hick’s critical realist approach does not seem largely incompatible with Durkheim’s non-realist approach. The two approaches could easily be taken together to move toward an understanding of the same basic principles of religious belief. Hick describes how the literal-minded Christian can still achieve a religious view of the universe is present, or vice versa. Let us not ignore these cases, for they are important indicators of what religion means for different people.

Thus, both Hick and Durkheim suggest that conceptions of the transcendent are produced through the worldly imagination.

The Union of Two Religious “Layers” Defines the “Religious”

I have proposed that there exist two layers of religious experience: social and spiritual. Durkheim seems to address only the first of these layers as truly possible. However, his theory might well be expanded to allow for another, second layer of religious experience. One cannot ignore the role of religion as a social institution, or even as an instrument of social reproduction. For example, it is common practice for children to adopt their parents’ religious beliefs and practices without feeling much, if any, religious conviction. But then, what makes religious identity any different from another sort of identity? A soteriological criterion, drawn from Hick, will function as a qualifier for religion. By this explanation, one may be religious by believing in the presence of some transcendent essence and its salvific properties, without having a self-proclaimed, definite religion or religious identity.

Religious world-view and religious identity should be assessed as two different things. On the one hand, a religious view of the universe requires that one has belief in a non-human essence, lying beyond human faculties, the alignment with which will promote salvific transformation. On the other hand, a religious identity, I argue, is an inherited title given at birth, carrying with it a set of common rituals, and a degree of social capital. One may identify with a religion by using its name, practicing its rituals, and coming together with those who share the given identity. One may either chose to accept or reject the identity on the basis of individual experience. While religious identity is, for the most part, a signifier of a person’s religious conviction, there are cases in which the two are incongruent. In such cases, religious identity is absent and a religious view of the universe is present, or vice versa. Let us not ignore these cases, for they are important indicators of what religion means for different people.

On the Existence and Persistence of Religion

Accepting Birth-Given Religion Without Question: A “Paradox of Doxa”

In Masculine Domination, Bourdieu presents the following questions: How can we understand the historical reproduction of order in social relations, especially gender relations? How may we talk materially and symbolically about such relations? And what keeps people from acting out against social norms? To tackle these issues, Bourdieu introduces the concept of a paradox of doxa. Here, doxa refers to a community’s taken-for-granted rules of social relations, or “one-way streets and…no-entry signs” (Bourdieu 1), and the paradox refers to individuals’ consistent compliance with that doxa without question or “transgression” (1). Habitus, then, is what Bourdieu presents as the catalyst for this historical reproduction of social relations; it is a set of bodily enactments, adopted through education and “early upbringing” (27), which actively perpetuate doxa on the individual level—in other words, “The antagonistic principles of [the] identity are…laid down in the form of permanent stances, gaits and postures which are the realization, or rather the ‘naturalization’ of an ethic” (27). In order, then, to discuss the ways in which doxa is signaled within communities, and the potential harm these signals may incur, Bourdieu proposes the concept of symbolic violence, which refers to a class of signals and systems, visible in everyday life, which perpetuate hegemonic constructions, symbolizing the inferiority of a particular group. He describes this violence as “a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims” (11) which may be unconsciously internalized by individuals, further naturalizing the doxa inherent to social order.

It would seem that this theory could well be adapted to fit a theory of religious persistence. Religion may be defined for a community as a standardized system of beliefs, rules, and rituals, the practice of which may determine one’s standing in a religious society. Thus, the pressures of doxa, habitus, and symbolic violence all act on individuals to recapitulate the doxa, making it more and more difficult to transgress an institutionalized religion as time wears on. Birth-given religion becomes a doxa of sorts, the rituals become the habitus, which solidifies the doxa, and symbolic violence becomes the rhetoric of inferiority toward other known faiths, which makes it further difficult to transgress and eventually override the doxa.

On the Ease of Transmission

But then comes the question: Why does
religion transmit through generations as easily as the transmission of, for example, gender roles? First, the early exposure of children to religious stories, myths and rituals may account for the ease of transmitting religious beliefs and identities through generations. Even if the religious ideologies and rituals are not explicit, they can be inherited through continual observation of the religious habitus of others as one is growing up. In this sense, inheriting gender roles, inheriting language, and inheriting religion are all functionally similar processes. Second, it seems that a religious interpretation of the universe stems from an innate human desire to know more than what is given by the five senses, and to bring higher meaning to the human experience. According to Hick, the myth is an exceedingly important element of religion, as it is able to deal with “traditional mysteries” such as “Where do we come from and what are we here for?” (Hick 356). In non-esoteric terms, myths can aid in orientation toward the Real, while “assuaging our anxiety in the face of the deep mystery of our existence” (356). For some, faith in having solved this mystery provides the solidarity necessary to live out their lives. Furthermore, if those around you, especially your social superiors (like parents and grandparents), seem to have the answer, it may be more difficult to question their convictions. Thus, religion flows easily down through generations and persists.

**The Dynamic Nature of Religion: Durkheim as One Half of the Cycle of Perpetuation**

However, within the framework of Bourdieu’s theory as it applies to religion, it is indeed also the case that religions can, and do, change with time. Durkheim offers an interesting perspective on the dynamic nature of religion. In positing this inextricable link between religion and the nature of communal action, Durkheim has given a compelling answer to the question: *What explains the essentially universal persistence of religion among humans?* (Preus). Preus states in the closing of his chapter on Durkheim: “Durkheim has provided a powerful answer to the question of why religion has survived: it is a reality interlocked with society itself. Not only does society generate it, but society depends upon religion for its own renewal” (176). While compelling, the theory also seems somewhat incomplete. Hick is skeptical of the outright and all-pervasive applicability of Durkheim’s theory, for “it presumes a religiously homogenous and unified state of society… [and] presupposes the human condition before the emergence of the autonomous individual exercising a moral and intellectual judgment which may diverge from that of a society as a whole” (117).

While the recurrence of religion appears to be a cyclical process, Durkheim’s theory only considers half of the cycle. One must consider the second layer of religion—the layer in which soteriological, eschatological, experiential and spiritual conceptions of religion, as they enter human consciousness, become a part of the religious experience. Durkheim’s theory does very little to cope with the experiences and claims of the religious adept. Providing Durkheim’s theory with a way to understand individual religious experience within his sociological framework is quite a difficult task indeed, but one that must be grappled with.

If one allows for Durkheim’s half of the cycle (that society creates religion), one is left with a theory which begs to be completed. A more complete view would be one in which religious experiences of “spiritually impressive” individuals (Hick 301), when stated outright (whether predicated on the encounter with, discovery of, or invention of the divine realm) may elicit a band of followers, which again make it their object to worship the moral power of this new communal system. Durkheim’s view, with this revision, is thus uprooted from its severely limited scope. This allows religion, as it is perpetuated throughout history, to look dynamic rather than static. The endless loop that I describe allows for a chicken-or-the-egg effect in which one might imagine a purely sociological initial cause for religion, out of which religious adepts later bloomed—or a singular person first becoming orientated toward a religious understanding of the universe by means of individual experience, into which a community of spiritual followers was later drafted.

**Parnngurr, Western Australia: Considering the Views of Durkheim’s Ethnographic Subjects with Regard to His Theory**

It may, now, be helpful to understand the actual place from which Durkheim drew his theory. Recently I was fortunate to spend time in Parnngurr, Western Australia, which coincidentally happens to be home to some of the Aboriginal groups that constituted the focus of Durkheim’s analyses of totemism. The people with whom I had primary interaction self-identified as “Martu.” The ritual, as well as the mundane, day-to-day activities for Martu—which constitute law, order, “moral imperatives,” kinship obligations and communal solidarity—are understood as “The Dreaming.” In its most basic sense, The Dreaming is a body of mythology, which describes the creation of the landscape and the law by ancestral spirits.

Through the upholding of a common moral code, The Dreaming is perpetuated. In this sense, Bourdieu’s theory of doxa and habitus can be applied. Children grow up understanding what land to burn, how to act appropriately toward others, given their “skin group,” their “Dreaming” or totem, and the ways to forage for food. But it is through a rigorous process of initiation that one earns rights to tell certain myths embodied in The Dreaming. Undergoing this highly ritualized, esoteric process of initiation is simply something that most do not question. Following initiation, a member of society has the responsibility to “hold,” possess ownership of, and maintain certain Dreamings. Maintenance of Dreamings occurs through processes of land maintenance, and through the process of telling one’s own Dreaming stories. There is an inherent expectation within the society that The Dreaming, through maintenance of its many components, will be eternally preserved for coming generations (Myers 53).

**How Durkheim’s Theory Functions for His Subjects of Study**

Even approaching a critical discussion, let alone analysis, of The Dreaming would be nearly impossible without spending a large part of one’s life living with Martu, or being initiated into the totemic system. However, Fred Myers, renowned for his lengthy ethnographic work in this region, may speak with some degree of authority. Here, he comments on the all-pervasive nature of The Dreaming, which makes it exceedingly difficult to define: “Because it touches so many dimensions of [Martu] life, The Dreaming…possesses no single or finite significance…We understand the social meaning of such a construct only when we are able to relate it to the particular circumstances of those who use it” (47). But what can we make of this idea
of construction? The Martu certainly do not believe that they constructed it themselves. They claim that “The Dreaming…is not a product of human subjectivity or will” (53). It is just something that exists, and is to be obeyed as the “Law.”

One could say that The Dreaming and its meaning for individuals is constructed through processes of socialization. Individuals experience The Dreaming as a present reality, through ritual (138). The Dreaming, however, should not be simply understood as a human construction, but may be understood in the critical realist sense as a series of myths predicated on an attempt to understand a transcendent noumenal reality. Given the “cognitive” nature of Martu language with regard to the Real, it is hard to imagine Martu conceding that the stories of The Dreaming are predicated on nothing more than the human-made moral principles of the society, or that the rituals do not correspond to a transcendent reality.

Thus, Durkheim’s subjects of study might have opposed his theoretical claims (given the theory’s non-realist conception of human religious action). However, something like a critical realist theory—in which one posits a connection to a noumenal Real through a set of mundane and sacred rituals taking place in the human realm, and adherence to a set of moral codes in day-to-day life—may provide a more charitable and internally acceptable interpretation of Aboriginal religion. While it is entirely possible for a religious adherent to understand and accept social elements of worship, my multi-layer approach entails the consideration of a second, spiritual layer of understanding. Those who consider themselves religious must hold this second layer, which posits the existence of a noumenal Real through a set of human experiences. In this theorized second layer, profoundly individual spiritual experiences may occur, and religious life may come to embody something highly spiritually meaningful to such devotees. It is in the application of these two layers in various thicknesses to an individual’s understanding of the universe emerges—an interpretation that is different for every individual.

Conclusion: What Positing a Second Layer Adds to a Field Study

My revision of Durkheim’s theory acknowledges an added religious layer of meaning; it allows for a more fruitful and personal discourse between the cultural insider and the outsider. In practice this consequently leads to a more complete and less personally biased, ethnographic representation of religion and religious experiences.

To further emphasize the efficacy for a dual-layer approach, let us now consider what could hypothetically be gained by applying the “second layer” understanding to the aforementioned case and others like it, instead of relying on Durkheim’s purely naturalist approach. This theory of religion may be more practical, more nuanced, and less objective than Durkheim’s in a fieldwork scenario, and would strive to understand the rituals, ceremonies and beliefs from the native’s point of view. It is not simply that the theory will provide a more “charitable” reading of religion to the believer, but that in such a charity, the ethnographic observer may be open to a wider range of ways to understand a particular set of practices and beliefs during fieldwork. This may also result in a more dynamic and nuanced presentation of the ethnographic material when written up. By understanding religion as something both social and possibly transcendent, one may orient oneself toward religious beliefs without falling back on staunch biases, which undermine the very statements of the ethnographic subjects, and limit the potential depth of conversations between cultures.

Additionally, an understanding of the proposed theory of religion would likely garner a more subjective rhetorical style in its presentation than any writing of Durkheim. Thus, an ethnographic exploration which propounds this theory will not only be attentive to cultural religious practices, but will dually attend to questions of individual understandings of religion and testaments of profoundly religious experiences. This is what Durkheim’s writing leaves out. Such a method will take into account the varying levels and types of belief, through sentiments of individuals within the tradition of interest. In *Culture and Truth*, Renato Rosaldo claims that a comprehensive view of a culture cannot be gleaned from a detached perspective; one must remain sensitive to changes in cultures over time, and the internal diversity of cultures. Durkheim, in *The Laws of Sociological Method*, is not interested in collecting personal stories. His aim is to create a map of the social body as objectively as possible. For Durkheim, then, the informant never appears; the subject is turned into a number, a part of the statistical whole. Proposing more focus on particular events, personal narratives, and case histories in anthropological research, Rosaldo pushes us away from detached observation and its corresponding Durkheimian rhetoric.

Thus, the theory I have presented yields a methodology that considers the nuances in its subjects’ understandings of a particular religious tradition, while providing more credible insights for analysis than methods of distanced observation and general, objective cultural reports. Indeed, this theory also recognizes that the two layers of religious construction and meaning function on a gradient for individuals, and cannot be conflated into a single objective truth. A theory of religion must allow the ethnographer to sensitively respond to, and seek to shed light on, the comments of ethnographic subjects, and other cultural aspects of *imponderabilia*. These are the pieces missing from a Durkheimian approach, which does not ask these questions. While Durkheim provides a sound hypothesis for the “first layer” social causes of religion, he concludes that there is no possible second layer. For Durkheim, there is no potential for the existence of a transcendent realm. The theory espoused in this paper is far more malleable than a staunch naturalist approach, in that it takes seriously the religious claims of its human subjects and leaves them open for analysis and discussion, while still allowing the explanations set forth by Durkheim and Bourdieu to help account for the perpetuation and persistence of religion in society.
Notes
1. For example, Hick’s soteriological criterion for religion
2. Term borrowed from John Hick’s An Interpretation of Religion
3. A term coined by Bronislaw Malinowski in his Argonauts of the Western Pacific to refer to the facets of everyday life which defy immediate understanding

References

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