Sociological Approach to Research on Religion: Bangladesh Perspectives

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Abstract. After brief comments on the launching of the Department of World Religions in the University of Dhaka, this paper reviews concisely the contributions of significant sociologists to comparative academic study of religion, in some cases having had foundational impact on how the field or discipline variously called ‘history of religion’ or ‘comparative religion’ or ‘science of religion’ came to define itself in contrast to theology or ‘confessional’ study of religion. The influence of these and other sociologists has also been significant for developing the subfield of sociology of religion. In general sociologists have been rigorous in seeking objectivity in research, although objectivity may include observing the feelings and intentions of human beings which influence their overt actions. The relations of religion to politics as well as to social norms and morality have attracted much attention from sociologists. In anticipation of more and better sociological research on religion in Bangladesh, four main elements may be considered as factors for study: a) faith and belief system, b) rites and rituals leading to common practice and community, c) ethical norms and morality and finally d) spiritual elements, which cover a wide range of epiphenomena impacting on society.

The bewildering variety of religious beliefs, practices and denominations defies any classification. In fact modern study of religion is so fraught with dangers of complex and noxious controversies that to any student of religious studies it remains unfathomable. In 1857 it was Friederich Max Müller who first advocated a ‘scientific study of religion’ with a promise of two kinds of enquiry: a) a factual scientific enquiry which essentially meant for him comparative study of religion or history of religion; and b) a study of significance and credibility of the belief systems enjoined in the theologies of different religions with specific philosophic outlooks. (Lewis and Slater 1969, 12) Thus the initial thrust of scientific study of religion had two main divisions, History of Religion and Philosophy of Religion.

The study of World Religions in this university probably started with this basic idea of two streams when it was first approved in 1999 as a Department of Comparative Religion. Interestingly this nomenclature was initially opposed by some members of the Academic Council who are Hindu by religious denomination. Whatever might have been their motivation, it transpired as if they were apprehensive of misinterpretation of their religion. The founder of the department, Professor Kazi Nurul Islam, after a decade of relentless

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1 The latest edition of Encyclopaedia Britannica lists 22 different religious or non-religious denominations. The percentage of population belonging to major religions and atheists are as follows: Christianity 33% (2.1 billion), Islam (21% (1.56 billion), non-religious 16% (1 billion) Hinduism 14% (.96 billion), Primal Indigenous and African Tradition 6%, Chinese Tradition 6%, Buddhism 6%, Sikhism .36%, Judaism .22%. http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html
effort, succeeded in his mission, but different kinds of threats from the fundamentalist groups of the Muslim community compelled him and his associates to shift to the current title, ‘World Religions’. It may be pointed out here that for very different reasons Comparative Religion had come under criticism for its lack of objectivity in some countries of the European continent. Thus W.B. Kristensen (1960, 1-13) pointed out that ‘Comparative Religion’ has come to mean a comparison to determine the value of different religions…the values which are affirmed by the believers themselves.

The question of objective analysis is also not beyond of criticism. Furthermore, the false obsession with objectivity became a matter of concern for scholars in humanities. For example W.C. Smith sees that “the primary value of humane scholarship is threatened” by the so-called methodological rigour. (I shall come back to this aspect later in this presentation.) The question of objectivity particularly in the study of religion is nowhere so clearly delineated as in sociology. The involvement of sociology with religion is not adventitious; rather it was Auguste Comte, the founder of sociology, who entered into protracted polemic against the ‘theological stage’ of human existence that prompted him to propound his own ‘religion of humanity.’ Thus he recognized, in a way, the universal need for religions. However, it appears that he did never try to bring this concept in line with his fundamental concept of the new science which he named ‘sociology’ in 1822.

However natural is the involvement of sociology with religion, it was for a very different reason that the contours of religion came to be closely analyzed by classical sociologists and anthropologists. It was Karl Marx whose sharp observations on religiosity of human beings in society provoked intense and prolonged discussion on the role of religion in society. Nineteenth-century social thinker Karl Marx, who never considered himself a sociologist, conceived of religion as an epiphenomenon which would disappear ultimately with the disappearance of ‘false consciousness.’ In his opinion it is “the heart of the heartless, the sigh of the oppressed”. It works as the opiate for the masses. What Marx wrote about the disappearance of religion from society found support from anthropologist J.G. Frazer (The Golden Bough, abridged, 1944), who conceived of the intellectual progress of mankind as a passage from the age of magic to the age of religion and then to the age of science.

But, apart from this assumption of epiphenomenon or superstructure, religion in social life has not been so bitterly castigated by any other thinker as by Karl Marx, who felt that the criticism of religion is the beginning of all criticisms. Apart from his belief in materialistic philosophy, his observations on the abuses of religion may be of great importance to religious researchers even in our own country. Thus

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2 Karl Marx, however, in his correspondence with Engels was more liberal in his view on religion. Unlike Engels, he was not at all critical about Islam. Rather, he expressed his eagerness to know more about ‘Mohammadan Religion’, which established a society of a different sort.
when we find hardened criminals with records of dozens of murders going to the ‘pir’ and touching his feet with his forehead asking forgiveness, not from Allah but from the pir, so as to escape from the imminent danger of being caught, what can that be other than the “heart of the heartless and the sigh of the oppressed”? And again when the mazar (burial place of a Muslim religious figure) cult sometimes manifests the wildest kinds of behavior, which are more intoxicant than a drinking orgy, what can it be other than people’s opiate? Orthodox Muslims abhor such practices. Nevertheless, they are so pervasive that to any casual outside observer they may appear to be matters of universal acceptance.\(^3\)

An alternative approach to the study of religion was formulated by Émile Durkheim (French 1912, English tr. 1915) by propounding his theory that all societies make a distinction between sacred and profane. He defined religion as a unified system of beliefs and practices which unite individuals into one single moral community. Thus in his opinion the function of religious rituals is to affirm the moral superiority of the community over individual members so as to maintain the community’s solidarity. In this sense “the god of community is nothing but the community itself.” Thus Durkheim’s rejection of philosophical pretensions and individual or psychological understandings of religious phenomena has led to a new functionalist account of religion. In effect then religiosity is expressed more in group cohesion than in mystical or spiritual experience. Thus we find almost all over the world confrontational situations rising out of adherence to community leading to communal acrimony or even riots where the participants are not necessarily great votaries of religion. It is common experience in the communal riots of this sub-continent that quite a large portion of participants in killing squads are not so religious in practice.\(^4\)

A significantly different approach was taken by Max Weber and L.T. Hobhouse. Taking a position covertly against the Marxist position, Max Weber sought to analyze in his *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* how a religious ethic (Calvinist ethic) can influence economic systems by giving rise to an attitude influencing the economy in its totality. In this sense the Marist concept of ‘superstructure’ is more powerful than the economic base of the Marxists. In this book as well as in all his other volumes on religion\(^5\) Weber’s emphasis was on the normative content with the avowed purpose of finding parallels of Calvinist or Puritan doctrines. In his opinion the ‘spirit of capitalism’ is the product of a rational attitude towards life which is conspicuously absent in all other religions.

\(^3\) I have seen myself amid 1950 riots in Barisal town a person who never practiced any religious rites except the two Eid festivals, bragging with blood-stained knife and blood on his face and shirt about murdering three Hindus, probably all innocent day laborers. Of course, recent suicide bombers in the Middle East are imbued with the community feeling along with a deep religious commitment. That also may be interpreted by the functionalists as community feeling reinforced by a deviationist interpretation of original religion.

The Weberian treatment of religion did not result in a specific theory besides his discovery of an ideal type in the rational ethic of Calvinist Protestant religion. In dealing with a wide variety religious sects and sub-sects Weber showed unusual insight in understanding, but in effect these contributions remained in the form of anecdotes and not theories. Thus his treatment of salvation religions, prophesy, the role of intellectuals and literati and class and caste differences are all excellent expositions of the systems, but they do not add up to any theoretical formulations for religions of India, China or Judaism. In effect then his theoretical formulation hinges on the tenuous link of all the world religions in their deviations from ethical rationalization.

The position of L.T. Hobhouse is somewhat different, though his main concern is with ethics and morality particularly of Christianity. In his book *Morals in Evolution: A Study in Comparative Ethics* (1921) he was concerned with the moral codes primarily of Christianity and then of other major religions. Much in the same manner E. Westermarck in his seminal work, *The Origin and Development of the Moral Ideas* (1906-1908), developed the same theme, i.e., the idea of rational ethics developed through an evolutionary process such that there is a close connection between social evolution and moral ideas. The role of religion in this respect was considered basic or fundamental, but with the development and proliferation of civil religion this view is often challenged. This separation between morality and religion is one of the prominent features in the cultural change in the West but not so in the rest of the world.

In the fitness of things, therefore, it is necessary to distinguish between rituals and morality in the sense that with the steady decline of traditional religious belief it has become necessary to find out a new basis and new contents for moral rules. For the sake of objectivity sociologists are compelled to set aside their personal beliefs to treat religion as a social phenomenon. It may be that through this analytical pursuit their religious and moral values could have an enhanced role in formulating a more rational basis of faith/unfaith and of moral qualities. Thus toward the end of the last century several sociologists sought to find new definitions of religion in line with the views of classical thinkers.\(^6\)

These definitions, however, lay their emphasis on one or another element which appears to them most significant in sociological understanding of religion. But a closer view is taken by some of these to distinguish and enumerate the elements which are fundamental. Thus Johnstone (1975) listed five basic

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\(^6\) Gerhard Lenski (1961): “Religion is a system of beliefs about the nature of the forces shaping man’s destiny and practices associated therewith, shared by the members of the group.” Melford Spiro (1966): [religion as] “an institution consists of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings.” Clifford Geertz (1972): “A religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.” Ronald L. Johnstone (1975): [religion is] “a system of belief and practices by which a group of people interprets and responds to what they feel is supernatural and sacred.” Meredith B. McGuire: (2002) “Religion is both individual and social ... the most intensively subjective mystical experience is given meaning through socially available symbols, ... it is both empirical and objective.”
elements: a) group, b) sacred-miracles, c) creed which defines supernatural, d) rituals and e) norms. Meredith B. McGuire (2002) has classified four aspects of religion which subsume the positive aspects of all religions of the world. These are: a) religious belief, b) religious ritual, c) religious experience and d) religious community.

It appears that a more comprehensive view of the elements which may be suitable for religious research in Bangladesh may be formed by taking both positive and normative aspects simultaneously and trying to focus on the changes in each of these elements in different ages and in different geographical areas. The variations can be seen as impacting upon the general moral standard as well as belief system, depending on the nature of the circumstances. Thus we may find four broad classifications which may not be exclusive but deserve separate treatment. Both classical and modern sociologists as well non-sociologists have laid their emphases on one or the other. For example Marx laid greatest emphasis on corrupt rites and rituals as well as on non-belief. Durkheim’s emphasis was on collective consciousness which is enhanced and enriched by rituals and beliefs. In this way the differential emphases called for differential treatment which in essence gave rise to their respective theories. We may list four elements as factors: a) faith and belief system, b) rites and rituals leading to common practice and community, c) ethical norms and morality and finally d) spiritual elements, which cover a wide range of epiphenomena impacting on society.

In the absence of time and space we will refrain from a fuller explanation of these elements and their interconnections which may be particularly relevant to research on religion in Bangladesh. But one aspect which is very much relevant for research on religions in Bangladesh calls for close scrutiny, though I am not going into detail here. The ethical question, which remains one of the most controversial themes in actual practice of religion, can be seen as being more and more divorced from rites and rituals. While ethics has become more social, it is increasingly becoming a social virtue rather than an individual virtue. In Bangladesh more and more the doctrinal and ritualistic aspects of religion tend to tone down the significance of individual virtuousness. Thus if a person is not found guilty nor penalized for any offense about which there is no dearth of common knowledge, the person, nevertheless, is held in high social esteem. He thus enjoys all kinds of privileges, which has far-reaching effect on the political behavior of the people. Moral questions are also pertinent in terms of the issues that are significant in the modern world. Issues such as social equality, position of women in society and secularization of education are ethical questions which are variously addressed by different sections of people. In fact the resolution of such issues is becoming more and more difficult with the increasing reactionism from the orthodox elements. Karl Mannheim in his Essays on Sociology of Culture defined the problem in the

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7 In a seminar in the Department of Sociology which was a continuation of the seminar in Department of World Religions I presented a sketch of this subject. It requires fuller description and exegesis.
European context, but it may be significantly applied to our situation. He distinguished between orthodoxy and reactionism. While orthodoxy is based on traditionalism, reactionism is positively opposed to change and has a political connotation. Thus we find a recent upsurge against equal rights of women in Bangladesh that is a gross reaction perpetuated by specific political groups. This deserves more attention from the sociologists and this can be viewed in terms of the four-fold classification of religion.

Finally I must express my apprehensions that such formulations as sketched may appear provocative to scholars in humanities as more and more empirical researchers are trying to set their findings to one or another of the theories formulated by sociologists and social thinkers. But I venture to get into this classificatory systematizing of elements of religion since these categories may genuinely encompass religious faith with its expressions in cumulative tradition. It is interesting to note here that while W. C. Smith's criticism of methodological obsession by social scientists is largely true, the latter does not necessarily constitute an all-out crusade against the humanistic, particularly the classical, thinkers. In fact many of the sociologists start the methodology course with a note from French mathematician Henri Poincaré, who once observed that "sociology is the science of most methods and fewest results". (Jha 2002, 22)

Works Cited


