

Understanding How Religion Functions Pragmatically

by

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Abstract

Religion is a shared experience amongst humans. It enlightens and transcends individuals as well as guides them between morally right and wrong. While religion is as much personal choice as it is personal belief, many often don't realize why they are choosing religion. In fact, it seems to be that a majority of those that are religious rarely ever question *why* they are religious to begin with. Religion is hard to narrowly define, and it comes in all different shapes and sizes. To better understand why we as humans are religious, this paper draws conclusions from the works of William James, Émile Durkheim, and Maxwell Müller. Within this paper, the goal is to better examine the philosophical, sociological, and psychological aspects of religion, and to better understand how religion functions pragmatically for the individual.

In today's secular society, religion is often looked at in terms of personal choice and personal belief. Whether the individual is aware of it or not, the religion they choose to subscribe to and follow has both a practical, pragmatic effect and an effect on their ideology, or dogmas. The degree to which this pragmatic and dogmatic effect is present is different for each individual, as is the degree to which religion is a guiding force in the individual's decision making. This can begin to explain the reason religion is so attractive to us as humans, as well as why it has maintained its societal relevance for over two millennia. It is still, however, in question as to why we as humans and, more broadly, society choose to subscribe to religion, and further why religion holds such value within our understanding of our world. Philosophers, psychologists, and sociologists have all talked in extensive detail about religion and its function for not only the individual or humans alike, but also for the function it has on our society. William James describes the pragmatic value that religion has for the individual, Max Müller explores the ways in which we define religion and how these definitions can inform our understanding of the function of religion. Émile Durkheim views the importance of religion for society and looks at the impacts that are made societally by religion. These figures and their theories of religion will all be explored in detail to better understand the reason that we as individuals choose to follow and subscribe to religion.

Max Müller: Avenues of Defining Religion

Max Müller warns we must be careful, and we must distinguish between what we consider religion and what we consider theology. Müller was a German philosopher often known as one of the founders of religious studies or the science of religion. He differentiates between the two by explaining religion as the need to "understand the subject itself" and theology is the

“study or science of that subject” (Müller, 1889, p.45). A classic example of this would be a follower of Catholicism is religious for their belief and understanding of God. This understanding translates into the way the individual then practices the religion itself. A Theologian doesn't aim to understand the religion with practice and ritual being the driving force, but instead further understands how these beliefs function as well as understand the histories attached to them. Religion is the practice of dogmas while Theology is the study of them. Müller furthers this distinction of religion to practical and dogmatic religion. For Müller, the way the average man then practices religion is of interest and importance. Practical and dogmatic religion are usually both present for the religious individual, but one is usually more present than the other. For example ‘Do good by thy neighbor’ is a Christian dogma that shapes an individual's moral compass. These convictions or dogmas then influence the individual's practical religion. The dogmatic aspect of religion exists wholly within the religion itself, and the practical aspect of religion is how dogma takes shape within the individual's everyday reality, and how that individual then applies that dogma to their own life or moral compass. The dogmas of a religion shape and form the individual's practical representation of their religion.

Later, William James would make an argument that religion is not successful without this practical, or *pragmatic* element for the individual. If the religion is failing to make an impact on the practical portion of an individual's life, then what good is that dogma, or belief in the first place? This is where Müller indicates theology stands. When one studies the dogmas of a specific religion theologically, one withholds belief in those dogma's and keeps them from shaping one's own religious conviction or practical religion. Even if one is not aware of the observations they are making, they are still in some form studying or learning the religion but in a detached way so that it does not affect their personal beliefs. Müller's main point is that the

way one defines religion is dependent upon the way it is serving one. He writes “Theologian is now always used in the sense of a man who studies religion professionally or who belongs to the faculty of theology it will be best to reserve theology as a name of this study. A mere believer in the dogmas of any religion is not yet a theologian.” (Müller, 1889, p.46). Müller proposes that religion, in its general definition, includes dogmatic and practical religion while theology is merely the scientific study of both. The ideas of dogmatic and practical religion stem from the understanding of how the religion is influencing the individual. Ideology, or dogmas, that are influenced by certain religious ideas or religious text would be *dogmatic*, while physical changes to one’s lifestyle would be *practical*. This is generally understood today, but it is still important to understand and distinguish these modes of interpreting the spiritual and religious realms.

We then must ask ourselves, what qualifications must be met to determine an idea or set of ideas a religion? Müller understands religion as having three definitions: historical, etymological, and dogmatic. The etymological definition examines ancient cultures and languages, such as the Greeks and Latin, to understand the way the word religion was defined and contextualized within their culture. Müller looks at the Latin root of the word and talks about how the word *religio* in Latin had transformed over time to mean quite a few different things. While this examination and in depth look at the root of the word gives us insight into the use of the word religion and the ideas and definitions that have revolved around it for millennium, it doesn’t help us come to a definitive definition of what the word means in today’s present-day.

Müller’s historical definition builds upon the etymological but factors in cultural context. Instead of tracing back the roots of the word to their ancient languages and cultures, Müller describes how examining the cultural contextualization of the word religion allows us to

understand the way in which humanity has understood this word in the past, and when we observe these cultures, we realize their definitions have only altered slightly over time and region, showing some universal understanding of the word throughout history. Müller points out the absence of higher power or divinity in some of the ancient cultures. He talks about the ways in which the Romans used the Latin word *religio*, which would now be most closely translated today to the word religion, to describe anything that caused awe, reverence, or hesitation. It wasn't until the Romans later encountered Greek philosophy that these feelings and emotions were linked to the doing of the Gods. (Müller, 1889, pp.39-40). The historical examination of the word religion allows us to better understand the ways in which the word religion has been understood in the past. It also allows us to observe that while secularism has become exponentially prominent, the ways in which the word has been understood through history and even today across sects only varies slightly, and religion has a core ideology associated with it that is universally understood. That commonality is not always divine, nor is it always easily distinguishable, but at the very least, *religio*, is something that has been present throughout history.

This leads to Müller's last classification of religious definition: dogma. The dogmatic definition that Müller proposes highlights what religion does in the moment and moving forward for an individual. Müller takes the focus away from what religion has done for cultures in the past, and instead focuses on what religion does for the individual in the present. Dogmas, or principles, of a religion are what shapes an individual's perception of the world. Müller writes "We cannot contest the right for everyone to define religion as he understands it." (Müller, 1889, p.44). Müller's acknowledgement of this principle is important when understanding why regions within present day America may have different understandings of the word religion and even

further may not to be religious at all. These contradicting natures within our own country is explainable by our countless dogmatic values that are present within American life due to the melting pot that our culture has become. Müller writes “Religion is said to be knowledge; and it is said to be ignorance. Religion it; said to be freedom and it is said to be dependence. Religion is said to be desire and it is said to be freedom from all desires. Religion is said to be silent contemplation and it is said to be splendid and stately worship of God. People take every kind of liberty with this old word.” (Müller, 1889, p.43) The exposure to these different aspects and qualities of religion is what forms an individual’s religious dogma, and further what causes difficulty in coming to a sole definition of the word. The dogmas that one subscribes to is determined by what they are exposed to. This makes it hard for an individual to understand and subscribe to multiple sets of dogmas. Usually, one is only exposed to one or two sets of dogmas throughout their childhood, which ultimately shapes their perception of what the world *should* be. There is reason that religion is often regional, and Müllers dogmatic understanding of religion can begin to explain that.

Müller discusses the ideas of Friedrich Schleiermacher, a German theologian whose definitions of religion attempted to understand the way that philosophers view religion, or *religiousness*. Müller writes “They deny that religion is either dogmatic or moral; they deny also that a combination of dogma and morality would give us religion. They point out that when we say that a man is without religion, we do not mean simply that he does not believe in Judaism, Christianity or any other form of faith or declines to submit to their moral codes. We mean really that he is without any religious sentiment.” (Müller, 1889, p.48). This idea of religious sentiment, or religious conviction, can be closely understood now to the words religiousness or devotion. The idea of religious sentiment is what makes religion convoluted. Müller quotes Schleiermacher

writing “To seek and find what is infinite and eternal in all that lives and moves in all changes and chances in all doing and suffering in fact by an immediate sentiment to have and know life itself as the infinite and eternal life that, is religion.” (Müller, 1889, p.48). It continues, “If we do not see our own miracles around us if we do not perceive within us our own revelations if our soul does not yearn to draw in the beauty of the whole world and to be pervaded by its spirit; if in the highest moments of our life we do not feel ourselves impelled by the divine spirit and speaking and acting from our own holy inspiration if we do not at least feel all that we feel as an immediate influence of the universe and yet discover in it something that is our own that cannot be imitated but can prove its pure origin within ourselves then we have no religion.” (Müller, 1889, p.48). Schleiermacher is defining religion broadly as the heightened experience when one feels a connection to the universe, or divine spirit. Müller doesn’t disregard this, in fact he embraces these views. He says we must consider these philosophical views when we examine historical iterations of religion. Müller’s discussion around Schleiermacher’s understanding of religion gives us insight into the way ancient cultures related to religion, experienced religion, and understood religion. Müller says that these feelings or notions fit the idea of religion at its highest level or intensity. Müller describes that these concepts could be assigned and better suit the idea of what we now understand as religiousness or devotion, or as the Romans understood it, *religio*, and that to understand these concepts as practical religion, or how they serve the individual pragmatically, is something that could be explored through the examination of extremely devoted religious individuals and peak religious experiences which is what Schleiermacher is describing in his understanding of religion.

Müller discusses the way religion takes on subtle ambiguity within context. He writes “Like many terms of the same character, the word religion can be used either for our own intellectual possession of theoretic dogmas and moral principles or as a name of a body of doctrines and precepts collected by authority chiefly for the purpose of teaching these doctrines and practices.” (Müller, 1889, p.49). He explains that someone who has undergone a change of religion, from Judaism to Christianity for example, has altered their religious convictions. But we also describe and understand external schools of thought as religions too, making a very clear distinction that the understanding of other religions or principles would exercise little to no effect on the individuals own religious convictions. Müller compares this to the way in which we understand logic highlighting the way everyone has their own logic, as well as the ways in which we as society compile doctrines and bodies of work that we also consider forms of logic and study. We must have the same perspective on religion as we do on logic according to Müller. Theology, the study of religion, is significant to our definition and context of the word religion, just as much as our dogmas and practical religion. Müller is highlighting the differences between the ways in which religion serves an individual *pragmatically*, the way in which it forms an individual’s moral compass and integrity through dogmas and experiences, and the ways in which religions serve as greater entities aside from functioning pragmatically, through theology, as larger schools of thought that are often studied and sought to be understood. Both are important in forming our definition of religion as these are the two main modes of understanding the word religion today. When attempting to define religion, this ambiguity between the two modes of the word can’t be avoided according to Müller, so adhering to the terms and ideas established would only benefit our discussion of religion moving forward.

The core of Müllers argument is to understand what we mean when we say religion. Müller highlights that much of our thought is based in awe, reverence, spiritual-ness, and divinity when we think about the word religion. The way in which these aspects are enacted in an individual's life and the ways which these dogmas shape their moral values, is dependent upon the lens that the individual is viewing the religion through in the first place. The bible is considered one of the most *religious* items and aspects of Christianity, but does the physical bible shape the way every Christian lives their life? The dogma's associated with the bible, would arguably hold more value or substance within the Christians everyday moral compass, such as "Do good by thy neighbor". One does not have to read the bible every day to adhere by these principles. Therefore, a theologian may study the bible, but can easily refrain from letting the values of the bible dictate their practical religion or personal belief. This is the heart of Müller's distinction between dogmatic and practical. This is also the heart of William James argument as well. If the religion is not pragmatic, if the belief or religion does not hold any value or substance within an individual's life, the individual is no more than a theologian by Müllers terms. I believe the ways in which these dogmas translate for certain individuals into practical values is what makes some religions more widely followed than others. I also believe this is how countless different sects of religion gain support today. This way of understanding religion, dogmatically and practically, can showcase the reason different religions exist and succeed, as well as understand the way in which religion functions on a small scale, for the individual pragmatically.

William James: The Pragmatic Value of Religion

William James defines religion as “The feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider divine” (James, 1920, p.31). The relation that man creates between him and divine is a large part of James pragmatic argument. James views belief as a way for the individual to make sense of our own reality and reinforce the things we inherently determine to be morally good or bad. This could explain the reason why individuals subscribe to different religions, and the foundational differences between religions, as every individual inherently has different experiences that shape the way they view the world. This can also explain the ways in which religion can *exclusively* shape one’s world view, and it could be argued and largely agreed upon that there is no correct way to believe. The individual, according to James, will subjectively reinforce ideas that the individual wants to be reinforced. James writes “My experience is what I agree to attend to. Only those items which I notice shape my mind; without selective interest, experience is utter chaos” (James, 1890, p402). The point that James makes helps us understand the *need* for religion for some individuals, as it is a way to coherently shape and understand the world around us, as well as reinforce one’s moral values.

“I speak now not of your ordinary religious believer, who follows the conventional observances of his country, whether it be Buddhist, Christian, or Mohammedan. His religion has been made for him by others, communicated to him by tradition, determined to fixed forms by imitation, and retained by habit. It would profit us little to study this second-hand religious life.” (James, 1920, p.6). James argues we must look to originators of religious experiences to better understand the way in which it is functioning now for the individual, something Müller would agree with. James writes “We must make search rather for the original experiences which were

the pattern-setters to all this mass of suggested feeling and imitated conduct. These experiences we can only find in individuals for whom religion exists not as a dull habit, but as an acute fever rather.” (James, 1920, p.6). This isn’t to say that the pragmatic function of a religion only applies to this group of extreme or devoted followers, but it seems that a religion may have more pragmatic value to people who have full belief than to someone who is following tradition and may not feel as connected to the dogmas being presented. This also relates to Müller’s discussion around Schleiermacher’s understanding of religion and the way that Schleiermacher was drawn towards the extreme religious believer as religious emotion seemed more apparent in these individuals.

The “natural life” that James describes is a life that is free of these suggested feelings and imitated conduct that the ordinary religious follower may experience, and instead focuses on life through experience and practicalities. There seems to be a point that James highlights within a religious believer’s journey, where this natural life dissipates. James describes the way that some religious experiences and anomalies convey to individuals that religious experience is something special aside from our everyday life, something unique and distinctive, as well as the emotions and practicalities produced by the religious experience. James writes “and the moment we are willing to treat the term “religious sentiment” as a collective name for the many sentiments which religious objects may arouse in alternation, we see that it probably contains nothing whatever of a psychologically specific nature.” (James, 1920, p.27). James continues on to write “There is religious fear, religious love, religious awe, religious joy, and so forth. But religious love is only man’s natural emotion of love directed to a religious object; religious fear is only the ordinary fear of commerce, so to speak, the common quaking of the human breast, in so far as the notion of divine retribution may arouse it; religious awe is the same organic thrill which we

feel in a forest at twilight... As there thus seems to be no one elementary religious emotion, but only a common storehouse of emotions upon which religious objects may draw.” (James, 1920, p.27). James’ description of religious sentiments also relates to the “starving for natural life” as well as to the Romans and Müllers discussion of *religio*. James highlights that these profound religious experiences that people attribute major life change to is no more than an ordinary profound experience of emotion given religious identity. The hysterical nun, or hysterical believer, James argues, is using these religious sentiments as tools or methods of achieving emotional and profound awe that other individuals may experience in the naturalities of life. Regardless of where these experiences happen for the individual, James is highlighting the value and relevance that these religious sentiments hold for the individual, and the void that is filled by them.

James is interested in understanding the phenomena and pragmatic role that these religious sentiments offer for the individual, but James is also interested in what the successful religious believer looks like, and how successful or unsuccessful religion can be for the individual. James views the religion or religious experience as a scientist would view their hypothesis. A scientist believes a variable will make a difference within an experiment and change a certain property of the test subject for the better or worse. James is applying the same philosophy to the religious experience. James is interested in how religion or the religious experience *changes* the individual and their understanding of the world around them, for better or for worse.

James coins these distinctions “healthy-mindedness” and “the sick soul”, clearly making a stark contrast between the two. In James discussion of “healthy mindedness” he starts by describing the phenomena of the “mind-cure movement” that was taking place during the early 20th century. The mind-cure movement was as James described “A deliberately optimistic scheme of life, with not a speculative nor practical side. In its gradual development during the last quarter of a century, it has taken up into itself a number of contributory elements, and it must now be reckoned with as a genuine religious power.” (James, 1920, 94). The mechanisms at work behind this movement is what’s more interesting to James rather than the belief itself. The pragmatic way the mind cure movement has allowed for the bettering of many people’s lives is what interests James and what holds a strong argument against religious phenomena and the religious miracle. The optimistic outlook on the world shows to be as profound for one as divine intervention may be to another.

“We saw how this temperament may become the basis for a peculiar type of religion, a religion in which good, even the good of this world’s life, is regarded as the essential thing for a rational being to attend to. This religion directs him to settle his scores with the more evil aspects of the universe by systematically declining to lay them to heart or make much of them, by ignoring them in his reflective calculation, or even, on occasion, by denying outright that they exist. Evil is a disease; and worry over disease is itself an additional form of disease, which only adds to the original complaint. Even repentance and remorse, affections which come in the character of ministers of good, may be but sickly and relaxing impulses. The best repentance is to up and act for righteousness and forget that you ever had relations with sin.” (James, 1920, p.127)

What James is highlighting about the mind-cure movement is the complete ignorance to evil and the way evil challenges the individual. James writes “Within the Christian body, for which repentance of sins has from the beginning been the critical religious act, healthy-mindedness has always come forward with its milder interpretation. Repentance according to such healthy-minded Christians means GETTING AWAY FROM the sin, not groaning and writing over its commission. The Catholic practice of confession and absolution is in one of its aspects little more than a systematic method of keeping healthy-mindedness on top.” (James, 1920, p.128). The neglect of evil and priority of healthy mindedness is present in most dominant sects in America, as James displays, and is often reflected in the theism of the religions. James writes “In this latter case God is not necessarily responsible for the existence of evil; he would only be responsible if it were not finally overcome. But on the monistic or pantheistic view, evil, like everything else, must have its foundation in God; and the difficulty is to see how this can possibly be the case if God be absolutely good... It is perfectly fair to say that there is no clear or easy issue, that the only obvious escape from paradox here is to cut loose from the monistic assumption altogether, and to allow the world to have existed from its origin in pluralistic form, as an aggregate or collection of higher and lower things and principles, rather than an absolutely unitary fact.” (James, 1920, pp. 131-132) James describes the way in which evil immediately challenges the belief of a monotheistic god if they choose to acknowledge the existence of good and evil, as most gods are believed to do no evil, yet be the creator of everything. This paradox causes emotional confusion and moral struggle for the religious person.

This leads James into his discussion of *the sick soul*. James segues by saying “Let us now say good-bye for a while to all this way of thinking and turn towards those persons who cannot so swiftly throw off the burden of the consciousness of evil, but are congenitally fated to suffer

from its presence.” (James, 1920, pp. 133-134). James argues that much like the nuances to happiness, and the different forms of happiness that evoke different emotions and have different effects for different individuals, evil or the morbid mind can also evoke similar emotions and effects. James makes a clear distinction between the two types of evil, one being curable by changes in one’s *natural plane* or environment, changes made to themselves, or both. The other type of evil James describes is not curable, and “there is no mere relation of the subject to particular outer things, but something more radical and general, a wrongness or vice in his essential nature, which no alteration of the environment, or any superficial rearrangement of the inner self, can cure, and which requires a supernatural remedy.” (James, 1920, p.134). James views the two forms of evil as either innate, and non-curable, or developed, and curable.

James raises attention to the word threshold and points out the traction the term gained in the field of psychology and how it was being used to explain new concepts. He argues that evil, fear, and misery can also be viewed through this concept of threshold. James compares it to the same idea of a pain-threshold, writing “The sanguine and healthy-minded live habitually on the sunny side of their misery-line, the depressed and melancholy live beyond it, in darkness and apprehension.” (James, 1920, p.135). He continues, raising the question “Does it not appear as if one who lived more habitually on one side of the pain-threshold might need a different sort of religion from one who habitually lived on the other? This question, of the relativity of different types of religion to different types of need, arises naturally at this point, and will become a serious problem ere we have done.” (James, 1920, p.135). Moving forward, James says “let us not simply cry out, in spite of all appearances, “Hurrah for the Universe!” Let us see rather whether pity, pain, and fear, and the sentiment of human helplessness may not open a profounder view and put into our hands a more complicated key to the meaning of the situation.” (James,

1920, p.136). James is right, and this approach, once again, could be compared to the approach of a scientist. James is explaining that we must look at these beliefs and religions as a science, and not a phenomenon. These are active working psychological processes, and we must treat them as so. In doing so, we must not neglect any part of these mechanisms, including the evil and morbid. James quotes a few other philosophers and points out that failure is equally as integral to life as success, and it is only due to the idealization and admiration that we as humans have placed on success that it may feel and appear to be more natural, but as James argues, it's no more and maybe even less natural than failure itself. James believed that acknowledging failure and acting on such failures accordingly in line to better oneself would be more beneficial than masking this natural experience of life and moral conflict with a need and underlying belief in a repentance of sins to one's God or higher figure.

James' argument that evil is rooted in the naturalness of our lives continues. James writes "But this is only the first stage of the world-sickness. Make the human being's sensitiveness a little greater, carry him a little farther over the misery-threshold, and the good quality of the successful moments themselves when they occur is spoiled and vitiated. All-natural goods perish. Riches take wings; fame is a breath; love is a cheat; youth and health and pleasure vanish. Can things whose end is always dust and disappointment be the real goods which our souls require?" (James, 1920, p.139). James points out the negative effects of this sickness. When the belief or religion that the individuals' morals are now founded in begins to view the world cynically and with evil at its roots, the individual starts to suffer, as James describes, and this is where James questions the success of these beliefs. If these religious beliefs aren't allowing the individual to live out a natural life, where one can experience all aspects of life, James argues, then they are simply doing no more than clouding the individual's perception and their "chance

at natural good” (James, 1920, p.140). James even offers to critique the healthy-mindedness approach to solving such problems, using phrases such as “Cheer up, old fellow, you’ll be all right ere long, if you will only drop your morbidness!” (James, 1920, p.139). James acknowledges that “Our troubles lie indeed too deep for THAT cure” (James, 1920, p.140), and that a religion or belief is doing no good unless they acknowledge and guide others with the individual’s natural life in mind. James writes “The fact that we CAN die, that we CAN be ill at all, is what perplexes us; the fact that we now for a moment live and are well is irrelevant to that perplexity. We need a life not correlated with death, a health not liable to illness, a kind of good that will not perish, a good in fact that flies beyond the goods of nature.” (James, 1920, p.140)

James continues to point out the natural sadness’s of life, and no matter how much good surrounds this, sadness and morbidity still exists. He uses old age as an example to highlight this, saying that “Old age has the last word: the purely naturalistic look at life, however enthusiastically it may begin, is sure to end in sadness.” (James, 1920, p.140). And he is not wrong. We as humans don’t handle death in a positive manner, and this is true in almost every circumstance it arises. Even when celebratory, there is still a sadness that is evoked. James continues saying “Let sanguine healthy-mindedness do its best with its strange power of living in the moment and ignoring and forgetting, still the evil background is really there to be thought of, and the skull will grin in at the banquet.” (James, 1920m pp. 140-141). James is highlighting the ways in which the extremes of perceiving life, either happy or morbid, both simply neglect the *natural* states of our beings. We as humans *experience* emotions. These emotions dictate our perception, and the way in which we choose to live. By choosing to neglect any part of this emotional spectrum that we as humans experience, the religion or belief is simply doing a disservice to the individual, and that individual will struggle to ever achieve a *natural life*.

James concludes this section writing “It may indeed be that no religious reconciliation with the absolute totality of things is possible... Provisionally, and as a mere matter of program and method, since the evil facts are as genuine parts of nature as the good ones, the philosophic presumption should be that they have some rational significance, and that systematic healthy-mindedness, failing as it does to accord to sorrow, pain, and death any positive and active attention whatever, is formally less complete than systems that try at least to include these elements in their scope.” (James, 1920, pp.164-165). He continues, “The completest religions would therefore seem to be those in which the pessimistic elements are best developed. Buddhism, of course, and Christianity are best known to us of these. They are essentially religions of deliverance; the man must die to an unreal life before he can be born into the real life.” (James, 1920, p.165).

The way James views beliefs and the way he understands them pragmatically is of value, and much like other science, I believe religion should be treated with this intense process. Müller would maybe argue this is theology, but James makes a careful effort to do more than just observe and study, and instead implies meaning to these religious functions as well as the way he has come to understand religious dogma. The way a religion can function for the individual and to what degree is important for James, and I think a large part of why people become so strongly attached to these dogmas. James acknowledges that not all beliefs do their diligence in allowing the participant to understand and make sense of the life that they are currently living, while some beliefs cloud one’s perception.

Émile Durkheim: The Social Impact of Religion

Émile Durkheim is the father of the academic discipline of sociology and writes “definition is to be sought from reality itself.” (Durkheim, 1912, p.22). This closely relates to

Müller's analysis of Schleiermacher's definition of religion. The importance of how ideas and dogmas impact the individual's life in the present day and future is emphasized over the importance of getting to somewhere spiritually significant by adhering to a strict set of predefined beliefs in Durkheim's writing. Durkheim brings this a step further and states "Religion can be defined only in terms of features that are found wherever religion is found." (Durkheim, 1912, p.22). Durkheim is highlighting the extreme similarities that nearly all religions share, because if certain elements were not present, or not shared amongst all religions, then we would have no way to define and collectively understand religion. This highlights the pragmatic value that underlies every religion, or this attempt at returning to the *natural life* as James phrases it, and without this shared element, religion would most likely cease to exist or mean very different things for every individual.

While it could be argued that religion does mean something different for every individual, we must also look at what's universally agreed upon. Every major religion within the world, Islam, Christianity, Catholicism, Judaism, Buddhism, Hinduism, and more, place major importance on community, worship, and gathering. Without these shared elements, these beliefs wouldn't be as easily classified as religion. Durkheim goes so far to argue that "all religions are instructive, without exception of any kind: Each in its own way expresses man, and thus each can help us understand better that aspect of our nature." (Durkheim, 1912, p.22). Durkheim views religion as a tool to better understand how humans organize, view, and understand ourselves within society. For the theologian, religion is seen as a form of organization broadly, and more specifically a school of thought that individuals choose to shape their morals and life choices around. But before questioning the ways in which religion organizes us or gives us pragmatic value for both the individual and society, Durkheim says we must first free our mind of any

“commonsense notions whose influence can prevent us from seeing things as they are.” (Durkheim, 1912, p.22). This, I believe, is important in truly observing and understanding religion pragmatically, as we must do our best to not let our nonfactual stereotypical beliefs hold value over real, observable actions. For example, we must not discredit certain religions just because they aren’t generally discussed within the mainstream, as these religions and organization of them may in fact offer us more insight into the commonality that Durkheim describes.

Müller has also warned of this and been proactive about it, hence the three different definitions of religion that Müller presents. We must not let prejudgments and conceptions of religion shape our way of universal understanding. On the surface, religions may seem fundamentally different, but a point that Durkheim, Müller, and James all make and agree upon is the driving forces of these religions, and what these religions are *doing* for the individual and furthermore society, is universal. Religion, as an entity, functions similarly if not *identically* for individuals no matter the ideas or dogmas that are associated with a specific religion. The Christian is guided by his ideas or dogmas no more or no less than the Buddhist. These dogmas, ideas, practices, and communities help us not only as individuals, but collectively, as a society to understand and make sense of the world around us and the ways in which religion guides us morally, brings us together as a community, offers explanation to questions that otherwise seem unexplainable, and gives individuals a sense of belonging and identity is exactly why religions have thrived for thousands of years and are appealing to individuals.

Durkheim observes the commonalities between religions and describes why these commonalities are necessary for religion to exist and serve purpose. He starts by identifying the supernatural. Whether it is a belief in God, multiple Gods, the idea of an afterlife, or even simply

just the idea of spirits, most if not all religions have foundations in some form of supernatural or mysticism. James touches on this subject as well, describing how the idea of mysticism leads to the healthy and sick souls, as often individuals are morally guided by the idea of reaching a heaven or afraid of being sent to a hell or punished by a god, and how much one embodies these ideas and the ways in which they are enacted within one's life is a determination of how healthy or sick their soul may be according to James. James would argue that beliefs that cloud an individual's perception and ignore certain aspects of life that are not only unavoidable but hard to conceptualize may make someone's soul sicker. Beliefs that acknowledge all aspects of human life, or acknowledge the *natural life* and attempt to explain these experiences through religion while giving the individual perspective is what James would describe as healthy. Durkheim describes that these forces of mysticism and the supernatural become no more unintelligible than the way modern day physicists understand gravity and electricity. The force of God and the supernatural is just as powerful for some individuals and even some communities and societies collectively as scientific forces are to non-believers, hence the extreme influence that these religions can have on an individual. The force of mysticism is one of the biggest components in the way religion shapes and serves pragmatic value, as well as influences one's perception.

Durkheim writes "To be able to call certain facts supernatural, one must already have an awareness that there is a *natural order of things*, in other words, that the phenomena of the universe are internally linked according to necessary relationships called laws. Once this principle is established, anything that departs from those laws necessarily appears as beyond nature and, thus, beyond reason:" (Durkheim, 1912, p.24). James agrees, and James describes the natural order of things as one's *natural life*. Both James and Durkheim raise a valuable point that

shows the strength of pragmatic value within religion. To understand and conceptualize something beyond our realm, or reason, we must first understand what is natural. This is essential for religion to have any external value for an individual, as well as why Religion becomes such a strong framework for an individual's understanding and perspective of our world. Once one can understand that an idea of a God or spirits is supernatural, our understanding of reality becomes less cluttered with beyond reason questions and thoughts. Why does something unexplainable happen? Because God made it happen or because a supernatural element was involved. This framework of the supernatural, and more specifically God being the creator of everything, allows for individuals who subscribe to this thought process to write off things that cannot be understood within their current framework of reality. Even without a spiritual figure such as God, something as the goal of reaching Nirvana for the Buddhist can substitute this figure of God and provide mental clarity for the individual's reality.

In today's rhetoric when we hear the word supernatural, often we think of things that are beyond our reality or beyond our ability to comprehend. Durkheim points out that the supernatural is a part of nearly every religion, but it isn't for the reasons most people think. As touched on previously, we often use God or other religious conceptions to explain things we don't understand. We often place these concepts aside and accept what information may be available through religion to better understand or explain these concepts that we don't understand. The scientist accepts scientific laws, but sometimes struggles to understand exactly what those laws are defining. The same relationship is present between the religious individual, God, and reality. These supernatural figures help explain the everyday happenings of life and help comprehend what one experiences. Therefore, figures such as God and other important religious figures are often treated with more importance than any other object or individual

within our reality, and we hear people use phrases such as “for our lord” or “for our father” which highlights the conceptual significance of these figures for the individual. It’s of no wrong to have this be reality, but within research and in attempting to define religion we must be aware that the idea of a God or more broadly the presence of the supernatural is largely conceptualized to help make reality more conceivable. Durkheim writes “As indeed we will see, starting with the simplest religions we know, the fundamental task of sacred beings has been to maintain the normal course of life by positive action” (Durkheim, 1912, p.26). This once again links back to James and his explanation on why overly positive religions do some disservice to the individual by lacking to acknowledge the negative and more tragic aspects of life that we all experience.

Durkheim raises issue with basing definitions solely off supernatural existence, as well as Müller and James, as this would exclude a large group of religions that don’t include supernatural elements. Durkheim suggests we base definition on two broader categories, beliefs, and rites. Durkheim writes “The first are states of opinion and consist of representations; the second are particular modes of action. Between these two categories of phenomena lies all that separates thinking from doing.” (Durkheim, 1912, p.34). Durkheim explains that rites are often ways of guiding the way we behave, while beliefs are simply opinions and representations of these rites. Durkheim states “Whether simple or complex, all known religious beliefs display a common feature: They presuppose a classification of the real or ideal things that men conceive of into two classes... *profane* and *sacred*.” (Durkheim, 1912, p.34). Durkheim explains that religion, beliefs, dogmas, all are “representations or systems of representations that express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers attributed to them, their history, and their relationships with one another as well as with profane things.” (Durkheim, 1912, p.34). Durkheim is choosing to view and define religion through two foundational concepts that are

present within not only religion but our everyday experience, and that is sacredness and profaneness. Durkheim explains that the sacred doesn't have to be religious, and many of us view things such as plants, animals, and other inanimate objects as sacred. We attach this meaning and significance to objects or ideas. Further, our rites are also sacred. Phrases and actions that have significance and may only be spoken by individuals of significance are to some degree sacred. Often in the absence of gods, sacredness will be the heart of a religious dogma, much like Buddhism, where the focus is placed on the Four Noble Truths and the practices that come with them, not the idea of a higher power or a belief in God.

Durkheim describes that the *sacred* and *profane* are unique, in that they are truly opposite in their entirety. When we think of being healthy or sick, both relate back to a common theme of health. Good and evil relates back to ones understanding of morals. But it is hard to exactly identify what the commonality is between sacred and profane, besides the fact that one helps us understand the other. These words and ideas associated with them are so diametrically opposite that when one switches between the sacred and profane modes, it is easily recognized, where it is hard to say the same for things such as healthy and sick or good and evil, where the shift between modes is more subtle. Durkheim uses the example of a young boy being initiated into a religion. For the first time in the young boy's life, he is making a clear change from profane life to sacred life. This shift between the sacred and the profane is something that Durkheim argues is unique to not only religion but our experience of life in general, and that "The two genera cannot, at the same time, both come close to one another and remain what they were." (Durkheim, 1912, p.38). Durkheim's focus on the difference between sacred and profane is important for our own definition of religion. Distinguishing between the sacred and profane allows us to observe how sacredness is at the core of every individual's perception of the world, whether it be the

sacredness of nature, family, or God, we all can relate over the idea of sacredness. And the same goes for profane. Its present in all our lives and as Durkheim argues, a way for us to define what dogmas and ideas can qualify as religion. Does it have elements of sacredness and profaneness? Durkheim argues this is a key qualification for an idea to be regarded as religious, and it departs from relying on the presence of the supernatural to be able to qualify as religion. Of course, this is not the sole qualification to be met. We've discussed how Müller and James outline religion in their distinct ways, but this qualification of sacred and profane is undeniably present at the core of most religions, as well as at the core of being human.

By analyzing James, Müller, and Durkheim's literature there should now be a better understanding of some of the ways we can, and have defined religion, and how these past definitions now influence our future ones. This paper doesn't only seek out definitions of religion, but also examined the ways in which religion functions for the individual and even further so society. This was not meant to be a comprehensive review of certain religions or all religions; but more so a broad overview of the way religions gain, sustain, and lose followers, transform their follower's perception as well as function pragmatically for the individual. James's ideas of the healthy vs sick soul, Müller's understanding of dogmatic and practical religion, Durkheim's distinction between sacred and profane, James and Durkheim's reference to the *natural life*, Müller's discussion around Schleiermacher's understanding of religion are all things we must consider when defining and further understanding religion pragmatically. The way religion serves the individual pragmatically and spiritually is what this paper aimed to investigate, and truly what is at the core of James, Müller, and Durkheim's lectures and arguments. How do these dogmas, religions, and beliefs, help or potentially hurt the individual that chooses to subscribe to them? And further, how much of one's perception can be accredited

to the beliefs they have adapted? These are questions that could be further explored outside the scope of this paper, but the literature used, and the topics discussed throughout this paper would be good starting material to begin to answer these questions.

From the literature that was cited, we can conclude that religion serves as a framework for individuals' realities. Specifically, individuals that have been exposed to certain dogmas for longer periods of time or from a young age. The rise of secularism is no coincidence to the growing of our population on earth. A larger population means a larger pool of dogmas to influence the pragmatic aspect of an individual's life and perception. While it is hard to attribute this to be the only reasons for secularism and why one subscribes to a religion, I believe we can conclude it is a major factor none the less. This has been showcased by the literature cited from the work of William James, Émile Durkheim, and Max Müller. Further, this is also why we can conclude the ongoing and seemingly never-ending success of religion for humankind. There are aspects of religion that appeal to humans, such as dogmatic and practical beliefs, the healthy and sick soul, the sacred and profane, and these qualities allow religion to continue to gain traction as well as function successfully for individuals. Secularism is simply religion adapting with the times, dogmas adopting ideology that is popular to better relate to individuals as society collectively advances. Religions will continue to succeed due to the adapting and shifting dynamics that are always present at the core of every religion. They will continue to succeed because of the pragmatic value that religion has for the individual. These topics have been explored in detail throughout this paper, and I am confident they will continue to be explored if humans are alive to write and think about them.

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