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The genealogy of the sociology of religion: Theoretical and methodological transformations from the classical to the contemporary era

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A B S T R A K

Sosiologi agama merupakan cabang ilmu sosial yang mengkaji hubungan antara agama dan kehidupan masyarakat secara sistematis. Perkembangan disiplin ini menunjukkan adanya transformasi cara pandang terhadap agama, dari sekadar doktrin spiritual menjadi fenomena sosial yang dapat dianalisis secara ilmiah. Artikel ini bertujuan untuk menganalisis evolusi sosiologi agama dari masa klasik hingga era modern-kontemporer dengan menyoroti kontribusi para tokoh utama serta perubahan fokus kajiannya. Penelitian ini menggunakan metode studi kepustakaan (library research) dengan pendekatan deskriptif-analitis melalui penelaahan berbagai literatur, teori, dan karya ilmiah terkait sosiologi agama. Hasil kajian menunjukkan bahwa Ibnu Khaldun telah meletakkan dasar awal pemikiran sosial tentang agama melalui konsep ashabiyah dan solidaritas sosial. Selanjutnya, Durkheim memandang agama sebagai sarana integrasi sosial, Weber menekankan pengaruh agama terhadap tindakan sosial dan perkembangan kapitalisme, sedangkan Marx melihat agama sebagai produk struktur sosial-ekonomi. Pada era modern, sosiologi agama berkembang dengan munculnya isu sekularisasi, pluralisme, globalisasi, hingga digitalisasi praktik keagamaan. Dengan demikian, agama tetap dipahami sebagai institusi sosial yang dinamis dan terus beradaptasi terhadap perubahan masyarakat modern.

A B S T R A C T

Sociology of religion is a branch of social science that studies the relationship between religion and people's lives in a systematic way. The development of this discipline shows a transformation of the perspective on religion, from a mere spiritual doctrine to a social phenomenon that can be analyzed scientifically. This article aims to analyze the evolution of the sociology of religion from the classical period to the modern-contemporary era by highlighting the contributions of the main figures as well as the change in the focus of its studies. This research uses a library research method with a descriptive-analytical approach through the study of various literature, theories, and scientific works related to the sociology of religion. The results of the study show that Ibn Khaldun has laid the initial foundation of social thinking about religion through the concept of ashabiyah and social solidarity. Furthermore, Durkheim viewed religion as a means of social integration, Weber emphasized the influence of religion on social action and the development of capitalism, while Marx saw religion as a product of socio-economic structure. In the modern era, the sociology of religion has developed with the emergence of issues of secularization, pluralism, globalization, and the digitization of religious practices. Thus, religion is still understood as a dynamic social institution and continues to adapt to changes in modern society.

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Introduction

Religion has been a part of human history since the very beginning of civilization. While many think of religion as just a private, spiritual relationship between a person and God, sociology shows us that it is actually a powerful social force that shapes how we live together. Think of religion as a guide for community life. It creates the values, moral rules, and social structures that tell us how to treat one another. According to Émile Durkheim, religion is a system of beliefs and practices about sacred things that works to strengthen social bonds and community spirit (Durkheim, 1912). In line with this, Sarkowi explains that religion directly shapes how individuals behave and how groups interact because its values direct our social actions (Sarkowi, 2024). Furthermore, Mubaraq states that religion acts like social glue, creating order, stability, and peace in both traditional and modern societies (Mubaraq, 2010). It has always played a massive role in shaping human history, politics, education, and culture. Sociologist Peter L. Berger beautifully described religion as a "sacred canopy." This canopy shields society by helping people make sense of a confusing world and giving authority to the social rules we live by (Berger, 1990). Haryanto strengthens this idea, explaining that religion is a core part of society because it provides moral legitimacy, shapes our social identity, and builds community solidarity (Haryanto, 2015). Ultimately, religion cannot be understood merely as an individual experience. It is a shared social fact that has a massive influence on building and sustaining human collective life.

However, the study of religion was initially more carried out in a theological and philosophical perspective. Religion is understood as a sacred doctrine that is normative and transcendental. Major changes began to occur when the development of modern science gave birth to a scientific approach to understanding society. Since the advent of sociology in the 19th century, religion began to be studied as a social phenomenon that can be analyzed empirically and objectively. Auguste Comte, known as the father of sociology, explained that the development of society takes place through three stages, namely theological, metaphysical, and positive. At the positive stage, humans began to use scientific and rational approaches in understanding social reality, including religion (Comte, 1855). The development of the sociology of religion was then strengthened through the contributions of classical figures such as Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim, and Max Weber. Marx viewed religion as a product of socio-economic conditions that function to maintain the power structure of society (Marx, 1844). Meanwhile, Durkheim saw religion as a means of social integration that strengthened group solidarity (Durkheim, 1912). In contrast to the two, Weber emphasized that religion had an influence on social action and the development of society, especially through the relationship between Protestant ethics and the birth of modern capitalism (Weber, 1915). These various views show that religion is beginning to be understood more broadly as a dynamic social phenomenon and can be analyzed through a scientific approach.

In modern and contemporary developments, the sociology of religion faces new dynamics in the form of secularization, pluralism, globalization, and the development of digital technology. Modernization has led to changes in religious practices and authorities, including the emergence of the phenomenon of religious digitalization

through social media and virtual spaces. However, religion still shows its existence as a source of identity, moral values, and social power in modern society (Haryanto, 2015). This shows that religion has not experienced a complete decline, but continues to transform with the times.

Based on this background, this article aims to map the history of the development of the sociology of religion, explain the theoretical contributions of classical figures, and analyze the transformation of the methodological approach of the sociology of religion from the classical period to the modern-contemporary era. Thus, this study is expected to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the position of religion as a social phenomenon that continues to develop in people's lives.

Discussion

Historical Roots: Social Solidarity in the Perspective of Ibn Khaldun

The development of the sociology of religion cannot be separated from the contribution of Ibn Khaldun's thought through his work, Muqaddimah. Long before the birth of modern sociology in the West, he had seen religion as a social force that shaped the solidarity and stability of society. According to Nasith, Ibn Khaldun views social life as a necessity because humans cannot survive without cooperation and group bonds (Nasith, 2023). The essence of Ibn Khaldun's sociology lies in the concept of ashabiyah, which is group solidarity born from a sense of togetherness and collective identity. Tharaba explained that ashabiyah is a social energy that unites society as well as being the main factor in the birth or collapse of a power (Tharaba, 2016). In this context, religion serves to strengthen ashabiyah by creating stronger moral and spiritual bonds. In line with that, Mubaraq emphasized that from a sociological perspective, religion functions to create social integration, maintain order, and strengthen the legitimacy of power (Mubaraq, 2010). Furthermore, Sarkowi explained that the combination of the power of ashabiyah and religion will give birth to a solid, stable, and able society to build a civilization and a country that lasts for a long time (Sarkowi, 2024). Ibn Khaldun's approach is very empirical because he observes firsthand how religion works in social reality, not just discussing it theologically or normatively. Therefore, Haryanto called Ibn Khaldun a pioneer of the empirical approach in the social sciences because his analysis was based on real observations of the dynamics of society and political change. This thought became the initial embryo of sociology, especially the sociology of religion (Haryanto, 2015).

Ibn Khaldun's thought has a very strong relevance to the development of modern sociological theories of religion, especially in looking at the integrative function of religion. His concept of ashabiyah is in line with the views of Émile Durkheim in The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, who stated that religion functions to strengthen collective consciousness and create a sense of togetherness through symbols, rituals, and shared values (Durkheim, 1912). Apart from Durkheim, Ibn Khaldun's thought also predates the concept of Peter L. Berger in The Sacred Canopy. Berger explains that religion functions as a "*sacred canopy*"—a system of meaning that gives moral

legitimacy to the social order in order to create stability and certainty of life for society (Berger, 1991).

On the other hand, the pioneer of positivism Auguste Comte in The Positive Philosophy explained that society develops through three stages (theological, metaphysical, and positive) (Comte, 1855). Although Comte saw science as replacing theological explanation, he still recognized that religion played a crucial role in creating social order in the early stages of human development. In contrast, Ibn Khaldun's approach differs from Karl Marx who looked at religion more critically. In his Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Marx called religion the "*opium of society*" because it was a tool of legitimizing power to maintain social oppression (Marx, 1844). Despite their differences, both Ibn Khaldun and Marx agree that religion has a very close relationship with the power structure. In the sociology of contemporary religion, this empirical perspective continues to be maintained. Adnan explains that the sociology of religion focuses on the reciprocal relationship between religion and society, including its influence on solidarity and cultural change (Adnan, 2020). Ganie also emphasized that religion should be understood as a social phenomenon that drives collective behavior, not just personal beliefs (Ganie, 1989). Finally, Soehadha emphasized that the sociology of religion has a scientific uniqueness because it examines religion objectively as a social reality without judging its theological truth (Soehadha, 2018b). It was within this objective framework that Ibn Khaldun's early contribution became a very valuable foundation.

Thus, the concept of ashabiyah developed by Ibn Khaldun became the initial foundation for the development of the sociology of religion. Religion is understood as an integrative force that is able to build social solidarity, strengthen political legitimacy, and maintain social stability. This thought then developed in the theories of modern sociology put forward by Durkheim, Berger, Weber, and Marx. Therefore, Ibn Khaldun deserves to be regarded as one of the important figures who laid the foundation for the study of the sociology of religion long before the discipline developed formally in the West.

Theoretical Foundations: The Contributions of Classical Thinkers

Sociology of religion is thriving as a scientific discipline thanks to the conceptual foundations of Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, and Karl Marx. Although their approaches differed, the three agreed to place religion as a major social phenomenon that affected human life, which later gave birth to various multidimensional studies up to the contemporary period. According to Soehadha, the sociology of religion seeks to understand religion objectively as a social reality without judging the truth of a teaching (Soehadha, 2018a). In this regard, the thought of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx became the main foundation because it succeeded in connecting religion with social structures, human actions, and power relations. In line with that, Sarkowi emphasized that these classical figures have provided a theoretical framework that allows religion to be analyzed scientifically through a sociological approach (Sarkowi, 2024).

1. Durkheim: Religion and Social Solidarity

Émile Durkheim viewed religion as a social institution that has the main function of creating solidarity and integration of society. In his monumental work The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Durkheim defined religion as "*an integrated system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred matters that unites its adherents in a moral community*" (Durkheim, 1912). For Durkheim, the essence of religion does not lie in the supernatural element alone, but in its ability to build a *collective consciousness* that is the basis of social order. Durkheim emphasized that societies essentially created sacred symbols to represent their own collective values and identities. In other words, when people worship something that is considered sacred, they are actually glorifying the collective power of society itself. Therefore, religion is understood as a reflection of human social life. Adnan explains that in Durkheim's perspective, religious rituals have an important function to strengthen collective identity and renew social solidarity between members of society. Rituals are not only spiritual activities, but also social mechanisms that maintain community integration (Adnan, 2020).

Furthermore, Durkheim differentiated social solidarity into mechanical solidarity and organic solidarity. Mechanical solidarity flourishes in a relatively homogeneous traditional society, where religion and shared values are the main glue of social life. In such a society, individuals have such a strong collective consciousness that deviations from religious norms are considered a threat to society as a whole. Meanwhile, organic solidarity develops in a modern society characterized by complex division of labor and high social differentiation. Although modern society is more individualistic, Durkheim still considers religion to have the function of maintaining social order and cohesion. Durkheim's views were influenced by Auguste Comte's tradition of positivism which placed society as the object of scientific study. Comte in The Positive Philosophy stated that society develops through certain social laws that can be studied scientifically (Comte, 1855). In this framework, religion is understood as part of a social institution that has the function of maintaining social stability. Durkheim then developed this idea by explaining in more detail the function of religion in forming social solidarity.

In addition, Durkheim's thought has relevance to Peter L. Berger's theory in *The Sacred Canopy*. Berger explained that religion creates a "*kanopi suci*" that gives legitimacy to the social order so that people feel that they live in an orderly and meaningful world (Berger, 1990). In this context, religion not only functions spiritually, but also becomes a system of meaning that sustains social order. Berger's perspective reinforces Durkheim's view that religion is a social necessity born of the collective life of man. Thus, Durkheim placed religion as a functional institution for society. Religion creates norms, social control, solidarity, and stability that allow society to remain integrated. This perspective makes Durkheim the main figure of the functionalist approach in the sociology of religion.

2. Weber: Religion and Social Action

In contrast to Durkheim who emphasized the collective function of religion, Max Weber focused more on the relationship between religion and individual social action. Weber views religion as a force that can influence the orientation of human actions in the economic, cultural, and political spheres. According to him, religious beliefs not only shape the moral system, but also affect the social behavior patterns of the community. Weber's thinking is evident in his analysis of Protestant ethics and the development of modern capitalism. Weber explains that Calvinism's teachings that emphasize hard work, discipline, rationality, and asceticism have given birth to a work ethic that supports the development of capitalism in the West. In Weber's perspective, economic success is seen as a sign of spiritual salvation that encourages individuals to work rationally and productively. Haryanto explained that Weber succeeded in showing the close relationship between religious ethics and the rationalization process of modern society (Haryanto, 2015).

Weber also expanded his studies through The Religion of China and The Religion of India (Weber, 1916). In both works, Weber compares Eastern religions such as Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Buddhism with Western Protestantism. He sought to understand why modern capitalism flourished in Europe but did not develop similarly in Asia. Weber found that the religious orientation of Eastern societies placed more emphasis on spiritual harmony and acceptance of the social order, whereas Western Protestantism encouraged economic rationalization and social change. In Weber's perspective, religion serves as a source of social meaning (meaning system) that influences individual actions. Humans act not only because of economic factors or social pressures, but also because of the subjective meaning they believe. Therefore, religion can be a driving force for social change. This view is different from Durkheim who saw religion as a tool of social integration.

In addition to Weber, Georg Simmel also made an important contribution to seeing the relationship between religion and individual experience. In Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms, Simmel explained that religion is a form of social interaction that is born from human inner experience and then forms social relations in society (Simmel, 1908). Simmel's perspective reinforces Weber's approach which places the subjective dimension of the individual as an essential element in understanding religion.

3. Marx: Religion as an Ideological Instrument

Unlike Durkheim and Weber, Karl Marx had a more critical approach to religion. In his Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right, Marx stated that religion was the "opium of society" (the opium of the people) (Marx, 1844). This statement not only shows a critique of religion, but also illustrates how religion serves to provide pseudo-solace to oppressed people so that they accept social suffering without resisting the oppressive system. According to Marx, religion is born from the material conditions of society and is closely related to the

economic structure. In the theory of historical materialism, economic structure is the basis that determines the form of social consciousness, including religion. Religion is seen as part of a superstructure that serves to maintain the dominance of the ruling class over the working class. By promising happiness in the hereafter, religion is considered to distract people from social injustices that occur in the real world. Ganie explains that Marx's approach helps to understand how religion can function as a tool of legitimization of power and social control in economically unequal societies (Ganie, 1989). Religion is often used to justify an unjust social system so that the oppressed accept their condition as destiny. In this context, religion becomes an ideological instrument that strengthens the hegemony of the dominant class.

However, Marx's criticism also made an important contribution to the development of the sociology of religion because it opened up space for the study of the relationship between religion, ideology, and power. Marx's perspective encourages sociologists to look at religion more critically, especially in relation to social conflict and economic inequality. Marx's views later influenced many modern critical theories that saw religion as an ideological battleground in society. Although sharply different from Durkheim and Weber, Marx's thought remains an important part of the development of the sociology of religion because it shows that religion is not always integrative, but can also be a tool of social domination.

From the three classical figures, it can be seen that religion can be understood through various sociological perspectives. Durkheim saw religion as a social glue that created social solidarity, Weber viewed religion as a source of meaning that influenced social action and societal change, while Marx understood religion as an ideological instrument in power relations and social inequality. This difference in approach enriches the study of the sociology of religion and makes it a multidisciplinary discipline that continues to be relevant in understanding the dynamics of modern society's life.

The Dialectic of Modernity: Secularization, Pluralism, and Digital Space

Entering the modern era, the sociology of religion shifted from the focus on maintaining social order (classical) to how religion deals with modernity, pluralism, and technology. One of the main debates is the theory of secularization, which assumes that modernization will erode the influence of religion because society relies more on rationality and science. The root of this view comes from Auguste Comte's positivism in The Positive Philosophy, which states that at the positive stage, man abandons supernatural explanations and turns to scientific observation (Comte, 1855). However, the reality of modernity turns out to be much more complex. Peter L. Berger in The Sacred Canopy initially explained that modern pluralism weakens the monopoly of religious truth, resulting in privatization where religion becomes a subjective individual choice (Berger, 1991). In line with that, Haryanto explained that the rationalization of the modern era reduces the dominance of traditional authority; Individuals no longer accept religious teachings absolutely, but through rational considerations (Haryanto, 2015). However, the prediction of total secularization is not proven. Berger himself then acknowledged the existence of desecularization—the return of religion to the public sphere. Sarkowi explained that religion survives because modern humans still need a

system of meaning and spiritual identity in the midst of the complexity of life (Sarkowi, 2024). In this context, Émile Durkheim's thought in The Elementary Forms of Religious Life remains relevant: the integrative function of religion is not lost, but transformed to create new solidarity through religious communities, social movements, and digital solidarity (Durkheim, 1912).

In addition, Max Weber also made an important contribution to understanding the relationship between religion and modernity. Weber explains that modernization is characterized by a process of rationalization that changes the way humans understand the world. In his studies of world religions such as *The Religion of China and The Religion of India*, Weber showed that belief systems had a great influence on the social and economic orientation of society (Weber, 1915, 1916). Modern rationalization, according to Weber, does reduce the dominance of religious traditions, but religion still has a role as a source of subjective meaning for human social actions. On the other hand, Karl Marx viewed modernity in relation to capitalism and power relations. In *his Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, Marx saw religion as an ideological instrument that could be used to maintain the dominance of a particular class (Marx, 1844). Marx's perspective became increasingly relevant in the era of digital capitalism when religion was also involved in the logic of the market and the cultural industry. Religion is not only present as a spiritual system, but it is also part of modern social and economic consumption.

The development of postmodernism then shows that religion is undergoing an increasingly complex transformation through digital technology. The presence of the internet and social media has changed the pattern of religious interaction of the community. Religion is no longer limited to formal worship spaces such as mosques, churches, or temples, but is widely present in virtual spaces. Digital da'wah, online studies, religious podcasts, and religious content on social media show how technology is creating new forms of religious practice. Adnan explained that the development of communication technology has expanded the space for the spread of religion while changing the pattern of religious authority (Adnan, 2020).

The phenomenon is also related to Georg Simmel's thinking about modernity and individualization. In *Sociology: Inquiries into the Construction of Social Forms*, Simmel explains that modern society is characterized by increasingly complex and individualistic social relationships (Simmel, 1908). Modern individuals have greater freedom in shaping their social identities, including religious identities. In the digital context, religion often appears as a flexible and dynamic expression of personal expression, no longer merely a tightly bound collective institution. These changes gave rise to the phenomenon of religious commodification. Religion is not only a source of spiritual value, but it is also produced as a cultural and economic commodity. Religious symbols are marketed through the media industry, Muslim fashion, religious tourism, films, music, and digital da'wah content. Soehadha explained that modern society has made religion a part of popular culture influenced by market logic and mass media. In this situation, religion is shifting from normative institutions to widely consumable cultural products (Soehadha, 2018a).

Conclusion

Based on this discussion, it can be concluded in the following ways. *First,* Ibn Khaldun was one of the early pioneers in the study of the sociology of religion through the concept of ashabiyah which emphasized the importance of social solidarity in building society and civilization. Religion is understood not only as a system of spiritual beliefs, but also as a social force capable of creating cohesion, political legitimacy, and social stability. Ibn Khaldun's thought shows that the relationship between religion and society is close and mutually influential. This concept then became an important foundation for the development of modern sociological theories of religion, especially in understanding the integrative function of religion in social life.

Second, from the discussion of classical thinkers, it can be concluded that Durkheim, Weber, and Marx made great contributions in establishing the theoretical basis of the sociology of religion. Durkheim viewed religion as a social glue that creates solidarity and order in society through collective consciousness. Weber sees religion as a source of meaning that influences social actions, work ethics, and changes in modern society. Meanwhile, Marx understood religion as an ideological instrument related to power relations and social inequality. These differences in perspectives show that religion can be understood from various sociological perspectives, both as a tool of social integration, a driver of change, and an instrument of domination. The diversity of this approach makes the sociology of religion develop as a multidisciplinary discipline and continues to be relevant in understanding the dynamics of society.

Third, based on the discussion of modernity, it can be concluded that the development of modern society does not eliminate religion, but rather changes the form and way of human religiosity. Modernization, rationalization, and pluralism have indeed led to the weakening of traditional religious authority and encouraged the privatization of religion. However, the phenomenon of desecularization shows that religion still has a strong influence on the social and political life of modern society. In the digital era, religion is undergoing a transformation through social media and virtual spaces that expand access and religious practices. This development also gave birth to the commodification of religion that made religious symbols and identities part of popular culture and the media industry. Thus, the sociology of contemporary religion shows that religion remains a dynamic, adaptive, and evolving social phenomenon with the changing times and technological advances.

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