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Q8(b)

How is Durkheim's theory of religion different from Max Weber's theory of religion?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2016 · Sociology GS 1 · 15 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- How is **Durkheim's** theory of religion different from **Max Weber's** theory of religion?
- Keep the difference within a 15-mark length

Revision summary

- **Durkheim**: sacred/profane, totem, effervescence, **church** as moral community; society transfigured.
- **Weber**: meaning, salvation, charisma, **inner-worldly asceticism**, comparative history of rationalisation.
- **Unit and method differ**: social fact versus interpretative action.
- **Modern fate differs**: new cults versus disenchantment.

Both refuse religion as mere individual error.

Introduction

Emile Durkheim and **Max Weber** both refused a simple "error about gods" theory. They differ on the object, the method, and the historical question. **Durkheim** asks what religion does for the group. **Weber** asks what meanings and ethics do in history.

Body

Durkheim's theory

- Religion is a system of beliefs and practices relative to the sacred, uniting a **church**.
- The sacred-profane split, totem as clan emblem, collective representations, and effervescence are the core.
- God is society transfigured. The Elementary Forms uses a simple case to reach general structures.
- **Function**: solidarity and the social origin of categories of thought.

Weber's theory

- **Religion is a complex of meaning**: **theodicy**, salvation, and life-conduct.
- Ideal types of prophet, priest, virtuoso, and mass religion; inner-worldly and other-worldly asceticism and mysticism.
- Comparative history of world religions to explain rationalisation and, in the Protestant ethic, a motive for capitalism.
- Charisma and routinisation organise religious domination, linked to his types of legitimate rule.

Differences, lined up

- **Unit:** moral community versus social action and meaning.
- **Method:** social facts and rates of ritual force versus interpretative historical comparison.
- **History:** elementary structures versus world-historical divergence.
- **Economy:** Durkheim does not centre a capitalist ethic; Weber does.
- **Conflict:** Durkheim underplays class and priestly domination, which Karl Marx stressed and Weber partly restored as status and power.
- **Modern fate:** Durkheim expects new cults, including the individual; Weber expects disenchantment and possible iron cage.

Shared ground

- Both treat religion as eminently social, not as a private fantasy only.

Flow diagram

Durkheim -> Sacred church solidarity
Weber -> Meaning theodicy ethic
Weber -> Comparative rationalisation
Durkheim -> Elementary forms

Conclusion

Durkheim's theory is a sociology of the sacred as group solidarity. Weber's is a sociology of religious meaning, ethics, and organisation in history. Use Durkheim for ritual community; use Weber for theodicy, sect, and economic ethics. They complement; they do not translate into one.

Facts & figures

Church (Durkheim)

A moral community of believers; required in his definition of religion.

Theodicy (Weber)

Religious answers to suffering and fortune that shape life-conduct.

Inner-worldly asceticism

Weber: disciplined worldly work as a religious task, as in Puritanism.

Collective effervescence

Durkheim: assembly that generates the feel of a force beyond the individual.