Georg Simmel’s Concept of Religion and Religiosity

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Abstract
Religion was a recurrent theme in Georg Simmel’s thought. Despite this fact, and despite the current rediscovery of Simmel’s ideas, his insights into religion remain relatively neglected. The task of integrating Simmel’s legacy into the current study of religion remains a continuing challenge. This paper, based on an on-going study of Simmel’s work (involving a close reading of his writings in the original version), reflects on his conceptualisation of the relationship between religion understood as an objective, social and historical phenomenon and subjective religiosity.

In Simmel’s view, the religious perspective – a “particular spiritual quality” or “attitude of the soul”, a way of looking at the world as a whole – constitutes a kind of pre-stage of religion. This particular perspective of a religion-like (religioid) character makes up an individual foundation for religion, but it can also express itself in other cultural pursuits, like science or art. It only becomes religion after it assumes a specific form in human interaction. Simmel claims that many human relations have a religious character; faith, which is regarded as the substance of religion, is first a relationship between individuals. Out of the subjective faith-process there develops an object for that faith: the idea of God, who is “the absolute object of human faith”. For Simmel, the idea of God (conceived of as the unity of existence, the coincidentia oppositorum) is constitutive for religion.

Keywords: Georg Simmel, religion, religiosity, classical theory of religion, genetic explanation of religion

Słowa kluczowe: Georg Simmel, religia, religijność, klasyczna teoria religii, wyjaśnianie genezy religii

“Religion does not create religiosity but religiosity creates religion”¹ – this statement condenses Georg Simmel’s view on the relationship between religion and religiosity. Despite his eminent position in the history of Western thought, and a current rediscovery of Simmel’s sociology², his work on religion, as Frank J. Lechner noted,

“suffers from relative neglect, especially by comparison with that of Durkheim and Weber”\(^3\). Nevertheless, religion was a recurrent theme in Simmel’s work. His insights into this phenomenon are not only intriguing, but also particularly important for the study of modern religion. The aim of this article is to highlight the theoretical concept of religion developed by Simmel. This short presentation is bound to simplify Simmel’s complex argument, but tries to minimise the risk of misrepresenting his ideas by remaining close to his texts.

Simmel has been described as a founding father of sociology, a philosopher of life, and most commonly as a turn-of-the-century German philosopher of culture. Nevertheless, as Siegfried Kracauer put it, he could quite properly also be described as a philosopher of the soul, of individualism, or of society\(^4\); and, as we may add: a philosopher or, even more generally, theorist of religion. Simmelian scholars divide his intellectual life into three main periods\(^5\). The young Simmel was strongly influenced by pragmatism and evolutionism and, according to his own words, focused on the study of Kant and on epistemological, historical and social research\(^6\). The second phase was marked by the interest in modern society. In 1900 Simmel published *The Philosophy of Money* (*Philosophie des Geldes*) – his main work, which, according to Hans Blumenberg, ranks among the very few books written after Nietzsche that should belong to the Western canon\(^7\). During the first decade of the 20 century Simmel was engaged in shaping the foundations of an emerging discipline of sociology. At the same time he deepened his interest in a sociological analysis of religion. The last stage of his intellectual quest was characterised by the turn to philosophy of life (*Lebensphilosophie*) and to metaphysics.

Although useful, this periodisation is rather simplistic. We can safely say that Simmel pursued all these many and varied interests throughout his life, only with shifting emphasis, which contributes to the complexity of his thought. For instance, Simmel’s serious academic interest in religion lasted for at least twenty years: from 1898 – when he published the first text devoted explicitly to religion: *A Contribution to the Sociology of Religion* (*Zur Soziologie der Religion*) – until his death in 1918. Religion constituted the main subject of several essays written in this period. There is also clear evidence of Simmel’s continued commitment to the study of religion in many other writings, including his seminal *Philosophy of Money*.

In 1906 he published his main work on religion (a revised and enlarged edition appeared in 1912). This relatively small book (especially when compared with his *opus magnum, The Philosophy of Money*) bears the simple title *Religion* (*Die Religion*)

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