



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,

¹ G. Simmel, *Religion* [in:] *Essays on Religion*, ed. and transl. by Horst Jürgen Helle, New Haven 1997, p. 150.

² See H.-J. Dahme, *On the Current Rediscovery of Georg Simmel's Sociology – A European Point of View* [in:] M. Kaern, *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, B.S. Phillips, R.S. Cohen (eds.), Dordrecht–Boston–London 1990, p. 13 ff.

„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 society⁴; and, as we may add: a philosopher or, even more generally, theorist of religion. Simmelian scholars divide his intellectual life into three main periods⁵. 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 research⁶. 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 canon⁷. 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)*

³ F.J. Lechner, *Social Differentiation and Modernity* [in:] *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, p. 169.

⁴ S. Kracauer, *Georg Simmel* [in:] *idem, The mass ornament. Weimar essays*, transl. and ed. by T.Y. Levin, Cambridge MA–London 1995, p. 225.

⁵ See for instance: W. Jung, *Georg Simmel zur Einführung*, Hamburg 1990, p. 11 ff.

⁶ G. Simmel, *Anfang einer unvollendeten Selbstdarstellung* [in:] *Buch des Dankes an Georg Simmel. Briefe, Erinnerungen, Bibliographie*, K. Gassen, M. Landmann (eds.), Berlin 1958, p. 9.

⁷ H. Blumenberg, *Geld oder Leben. Eine metaphorologische Studie zur Konsistenz der Philosophie Georg Simmels* [in:] *Ästhetik und Soziologie um die Jahrhundertwende: Georg Simmel*, H. Böhlinger, K. Gründer (eds.), Frankfurt am Main 1976, s. 130.

and stands as a testimony to a shift in Simmel's perspective on religion towards the philosophy of life. Although he by no means completely abandoned a sociological perspective on religion in favour of a philosophical one, his conceptualisation of religiosity contained the germ of an idea developed many years later in *The View of Life* (*Lebensanschauung*). This book, published in 1918, was Simmel's last work, which he himself considered to be his most significant achievement.

The task of integrating Simmel's legacy into the current study of religion is a continuing challenge. One of the reasons for this situation is certainly Simmel's intellectual style, for which Georg Lucács coined the phrase „sociological impressionism”⁸. In Lewis A. Coser's beautifully phrased words: “Simmel, the marginal man, the stranger, presented his academic peers not with a painstakingly elaborated system but with a series of often disorderly insights”⁹. Some of these insights lead to contradictory conclusions, and if we add the hazard of relying on (not always brilliant) translations, we realise why his work “remains ill understood and a source of puzzlement”¹⁰.

A reconstruction of Simmel's notion of religion is not an easy task. The reasons for this are twofold. Firstly, over the course of two decades Simmel's understanding of religion evolved from an initially sociological concept into a definitely philosophical one. Secondly, Simmel uses the word “religion” (*die Religion*) sometimes in the stricter, and sometimes in the wider sense. “Religion in the stricter sense” might be identified with a colloquial meaning of the word, any historical religion or its “content” – transcendent beliefs; it is clearly contrasted with the word „religiosity” (*die Religiösität*). „Religion in the wider sense” refers to a phenomenon which does not necessarily amount to a historical institution. In this wider sense, the word “religion” means *a prioriform* or “world-form” (in contradistinction to religious content) and is used interchangeably with many other expressions, like “a subjective human process” “religious state of the soul”, “religious tone”, “religious mood”, “religious tuning”, “religious quality”, and “religious attitude”.

Simmel's initial notion of religion is based on an equation of God with society. In his philosophically informed sociology God constitutes a conceptual equivalent of society, defined as “a synthesis or the general term for the totality of interactions”¹¹. The common features of these two ideas are found in the phenomenon of faith and in the concept of unity.

In *A Contribution to the Sociology of Religion* and later in his book *Religion*, Simmel stated that many human relations (social conditions or interpersonal relationships) – like the relation of a child to its parent or of a patriot to his country – may have a common tone which has to be described as religious. This “religious tone” constitutes a mixture of specific feelings: “of unselfish devotion and eudaimonic desire,

⁸ This phrase was later popularised by David Frisby. See: D. Frisby, *Sociological Impressionism. A Reassessment of Georg Simmel's Social Theory*, London 1981.

⁹ L.A. Coser, *Georg Simmel's Style of Work: A Contribution to the Sociology of a Sociologist* [in:] *Georg Simmel: Critical Assesments*, D. Frisby (ed.), vol. II, New York 1994, p. 27.

¹⁰ M. Kaern, *Introduction One: Simmel as a Puzzling Figure* [in:] *Georg Simmel and Contemporary Sociology*, M. Kaern, B.S. Phillips, R.S. Cohen (eds.), p. 1.

¹¹ D. Frisby, *Sociological Impressionism. A Reassessment of Georg Simmel's Social Theory*, London 1981, p. 96.

of humility and exaltation, of sensual concreteness and spiritual abstraction”¹². Even faith, which is widely considered the essence of religion, is first a relation between individuals:

We illustrate a specific psychological reality, hard to define, when we [say that we] “believe in someone” – the child in its parents, the subordinate in his superior, the friend in a friend (...). The social role of this faith has never been investigated, but this much is certain: without it, society would disintegrate. (...) From the subjective faithprocess there develops, conversely, an object for that faith¹³.

An absolute object of human faith is given in the idea of God¹⁴. In other words: there are some forms of social relation whose structure predestines them to be an ideal raw material for development of religious life. Simmel characterizes these relations as “semireligious in form” (or as the “religious semi-products”: *religiöse-Halbprodukte*; he also uses the term “religioid factors”). If they reach a certain level of intensity, they may condense or refine themselves into a system of religious ideas, and “form religion – that is, the world of the objects of faith”¹⁵.

Another common feature of the idea of God and the idea of society lies in the concept of unity. Simmel claimed that the idea of unity originated in the social group. It developed from a twofold contrast: first, the hostile demarcation from other groups; second, the relation of the group to its individual elements. Synthesis of individuals in the form of group unity is often perceived by the individual as some kind of miracle. One might also say that the process of social unification causes a religious reaction¹⁶: “The unity of things and interests which first impresses us in the social realm finds its highest representation (...) in the idea of the divine”¹⁷. Simmel suggested that God was the name given to the social unit: the interactive processes within the group “have taken on their own distinct existence as the god”¹⁸.

For Simmel, the essence of the idea of God is represented in the Nicholas of Cusa’s phrase: *coincidentia oppositorum*. In *The Philosophy of Money* he stated that out of this ideathat all conflicts of existence find their unity and equalisation in God “there arises the feeling of peace and security”¹⁹. Later, in *Religion*, Simmel thus described the idea of God as a tranquilizing force²⁰. It is clear, though, that emotions associated with the idea of God can be traced back to the relation of individuals to the whole.

¹² G. Simmel, *A Contribution to the Sociology of Religion* [in:] *Essays on Religion...*, p. 104.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 109 f.

¹⁴ G. Simmel, *Religion* [in:] *Essays on Religion...*, p. 171.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 150.

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 181.

¹⁷ *Idem*, *A Contribution to the Sociology of Religion...*, p. 112.

¹⁸ *Idem*, *Religion...*, p. 208.

¹⁹ *Idem*, *The Philosophy of Money*, transl. by T. Bottomore, D. Frisby from a first draft by K. Mengelberg, 3rd enlarged edition, London 2004, p. 236.

²⁰ G. Simmel, *Religion...*, p. 168.

One can easily notice the parallels between Simmel's theory of social origin of religion and that of Émile Durkheim²¹. As Lechner states:

Like Durkheim, Simmel offered a kind of sociological projection theory. Religion emerges in social relations of special intensity. In his relation with God, the individual repeats and transcends his relation to the collectivity. The unity of the group is expressed in religious terms; the deity is the name for that unity. (...) But religion is not mere reflection or projection (...). The social origins of religion do not fully account for its nature and function²².

According to Simmel, religion "is not a finished product, but a vital process which each soul must beget for itself, no matter how stable the traditional content may be"²³. Religion is able to draw a given content into the flow of the emotions, which continuously renew it: "In this sense there are really «origins» of religion whose appearance and effectiveness occur long after the [historical] «origin» of religion"²⁴.

Here, Simmel contrasts religion understood in terms of content ("religion in the stricter sense") with religion understood in terms of subjective process ("religion in the wider sense") – or religiosity. In the essay *Contributions to the Epistemology of Religion* (*Beiträge zur Erkenntnistheorie der Religion*, 1902) he clarified this distinction as an opposition between religion (religious content) and religiosity (religious form). This formulation is based on general opposition between form and content (or form and life).

The dialectic of form and content is considered to be Simmel's main heuristic device. He discussed social and cultural phenomena in terms of "forms" and "contents" with a transient relationship: form becoming content, and vice versa. In the course of human history, form and content constantly transform into one another. As Horst Jürgen Helle put it, "what appears as form and what as content depends on the perspective"²⁵: the same content – for instance, government – appears in different forms (democracy or autocracy), and the same specific form – for instant, autocracy – may shape various contents (like state, family, or church). Also the idea of God may become the content of quite different forms: either a pious meditation or an intellectual reflection. The first is a religious phenomenon; the second is not, even though the content here is the idea of God, taken from objectified religion.

In Simmel's own words: "neither does the religious state of the soul logically require any specific content nor does any such content bear within itself the logical necessity to become religion"²⁶. Religiosity as a fundamental *a priori* category, as one of "great forms" (among others, like science or art) can accept as its content the entire wealth of reality. Every such form gathers the fragments of existence into

²¹ See: S.G. Meštrović, *The coming fin de siècle: an Application of Durkheim's sociology to modernity and postmodernism*, London 1991, p. 55 ff.

²² F.J. Lechner, *Simmel, Georg* [in:] *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society*, W.H. Swatos, Jr. (ed.), <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/ency/Simmel.htm> [accessed: 20.11.2011].

²³ G.Simmel, *A Contribution to the Sociology of Religion*, p. 119.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 119.

²⁵ H.-J.Helle, *Introduction* [in:] *Essays on Religion...*, p. XIII.

²⁶ G. Simmel, *Contributions to the Epistemology of Religion* [in:] *Essays on Religion...*, p. 125.

a unified totality. None of them can be privileged over any other; and none is ever able to substitute for an other.

Seen as a “great form”, religiosity – in its pure essence – is a way of life, or life process, of the religious person. When we are in a religious mood, we experience all possible spheres of life as religious. Then, from this general religious mood of life, the process of religion acquires a physical, objective form. Religious attitude (especially toward the natural world, toward fate and toward other people) “creates” the finished product of religion, in which the religious quality has acquired concrete shape and content. Therefore Simmel concludes: religion does not create religiosity, but religiosity creates religion.

We can thus agree with Phillip Hammond, who stresses that “Simmel’s notion of religion is one of sensitivity *to* or capacity *for* religion”²⁷. Simmel himself realised that his concept liberates religious feeling from exclusive liaison with transcendent objects: “There are an infinite number of affective relationships to some very earthly objects, animate or inanimate, that one can designate only as religious”²⁸ (such as the response of the patriot to his country, or the response of a person of aesthetic temperament to that which is beautiful to look at).

Religiosity – as 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 religion-like (*religioid*) character prepares an individual foundation for religion, but it can also express itself in other cultural pursuits (like science or art). Religiosity becomes religion when it assumes a specific form in human interaction. Still not every product of a religious attitude can be termed “religion”. We should not forget that for Simmel the idea of God remains constitutive for religion in the stricter sense. His observation concerning the modern transformations of the idea of God is worth noting in this context. In *The Personality of God (Die Persönlichkeit Gottes, 1911)* he claimed that “the concept of God has passed through so much heterogeneous historical content and so many possibilities of interpretation that all that remains is a feeling that cannot be fixed in any precise form”²⁹.

In one of his last texts – *The Conflict of Modern Culture (Der Konflikt der moderner Kultur, 1918)* he noticed that the eternal struggle between life and form has entered a new stage: it is no longer a struggle of a new form against an old, lifeless one, „but the struggle against form itself, against the very principle of form”. As a consequence, „the fixed content of religious beliefs tends to dissolve into religious life” – understood as a tuning of the inner process of life from which the content of belief originally developed³⁰.

This concept of religiosity has profound implications for the analysis of religious transformations in late modernity. Ivan Varga claims that Simmel’s understanding of religiosity as a functional quality which “entirely determines some individuals

²⁷ P. Hammond, *Foreword* [in:] *Essays on Religion...*, p. VII.

²⁸ G. Simmel, *Contributions to the Epistemology of Religion...* p. 125.

²⁹ *Idem*, *The Personality of God* [in:] *Essays on Religion...*, p. 45.

³⁰ *Idem*, *The Conflict of Modern Culture* [in:] *Essays on Religion...*, p. 21.

and exists only in rudimentary form in others”³¹ has a particular relevance for understanding of contemporary spirituality³². Deena and Michael Weinstein not only consider the Simmelian theorem of “liberation of religiosity from religion” (as they call it) to be a “heroic project” of „radical reorientation of the religious impulse from transcendentalized objects to the depths of life”³³. They see it also as a variation of the death-of-God-story. I think we may agree with them. Nevertheless, Simmel was not a conservative, but rather a countercultural thinker, as Ralph M. Leck suggests³⁴. For all we know, he was not nostalgic about the petrified contents of Judeo-Christian religion. Already in *The Problem of Religion Today (Das Problem der religiösen Lage, 1911)* he suggested that the melting of religious content poses a problem only for non-religious or inadequately religious people, for whom “religious dogma is the only possible way of leading some kind of religious existence”. In contrast to them, a truly religious person simply **cannot** lose religion:

I am sure that the inner spiritual processes of people who can be considered at all religious can occur only as religious in the first place, just as the movements of a graceful person are graceful in themselves (...). A religious person is never left with nothing, for he has a fullness of being³⁵.



³¹ *Idem, Fundamental Religious Ideas and Modern Science: An Inquiry* [in:] *Essays on Religion...*, p. 5.

³² I. Varga, *Georg Simmel: Religion and Spirituality* [in:] *A Sociology of Spirituality*, K. Flanagan, P.C. Jupp (eds.), Aldershot 2007, p. 151.

³³ D. Weinstein, M.A. Weinstein, *The Liberation of Religiosity from Religion* [in:] *Georg Simmel between Modernity and Postmodernity*, F. Dörr-Backes, L. Nieder (eds.), Würzburg 1995, p. 137 f.

³⁴ Ralph M. Leck, who sees Simmel as a “post-Christian existential philosopher”, stresses that he “was a modernist, not a romantic antimodernist”. See: R.M. Leck, *Georg Simmel and Avant-Garde Sociology: The Birth of Modernity 1880–1920*, New York 2000, p. 18 and 20.

³⁵ G. Simmel, *The Problem of Religion Today* [in:] *Essays on Religion...*, p. 14 ff.