

Scientific Study of Religions: Critical Analysis on Western Scholarship

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Abstract

The study of religions becomes the prominent interest among Western scholarship nowadays. They have pioneered in many approaches of scientific studies of religions which contain empirical, experiment and rational study of religions. For instances, they established the anthropology study of religion, psychology of religion, sociology of religion. However there are some critics regarding their study of religions since their study only concern with the rational and empirical study. Therefore this paper aims to critic the three scientific approaches in the study of religions which are: anthropology, psychological, and sociological. Three aspects which had been scrutinized regarding the scientific study of religions are denying the transcendent factor, analyzing religion as a human phenomenon and exterior approach of defining religion.

Keywords: Religion, Scientific, Comparative, Critical, Methodology

1. Introduction

As concluded by Howard G. Schneiderman (2015, pp. xi), in the past two decades, religion has become one of the most popular areas in social sciences study. In western scholarship, a sense of interest towards other religions was developed in the sixth century B.C., when the first critical impulse appeared with the criticism of Greek thinkers toward their own religion. Sharpe (1975, p. 3) asserts that the starting point of studying other religions can possibly be traced back to the civilizations of antiquity. It is reported that Thales (585 B.C), a Greek philosopher had criticized and condemned the immortality of their gods and perceived that the Greek gods had no domination on humanity. However the passionate and intense on studying other religions is largely seen to have been pioneered by the ancient Greek historian Herodotus (484-425 B.C.) who tried to explain that the gods Amon and Horus, whom he met in Egypt, were the equivalents of Zeus and Apollo in his native Greece. He was actually offering at least the beginning of a general theory of religion (Daniel L. Pals, 2006, p. 4). However, there is a noticeable difference in the views of other religions during the Middle Ages in which Christianity and Judaism embraced the Western worldview. Christians and Jews perceived their religion as “exclusive” with only one true God; the Lord of the Covenant. In other words, they did not perceive a variety of gods, a variety of religions, or a variety of rituals. To them, deities outside their own god and religions other than their own were no more than mere human imagination (Daniel L. Pals, 2006, p. 4). Arising from this position was little concern for the need to compare and explain other religions. In short, the Western study of religions during the medieval period was almost absent (Siti Nur Leha, 2012, p. 38) Consequently, the period of enlightenment in the eighteenth century witnessed a new view of religion by intellectual groups with a great interest in natural religion as guided by reason with its two branches; rationalism (speculative reason) and empiricism (empirical reason). During this time, the modern study of religion began as a western intellectual phenomenon (Wan Mohd Fazrul Azdi Wan Razali, 2009, p. 1) Later, in the nineteenth century is acknowledged as the beginning of the modern era where many discoveries and intellectual findings were achieved as a result of their newly formed scientific interests. In the western tradition, the pioneer of the scientific study of religions was Friedrich Max Müller (1832-1900).

This is particularly evident in two of his publications namely *Chips from a German Workshops* (1867) and *Introduction to the Science of Religion* (1873). Müller introduced the scientific study of religion as a result of his efforts in establishing the science of language (Friedrich Max Müller, 1869, vol. 1, p. xix). Later, he introduced the term *religionswissenschaft* (science of religion) (Friedrich Max Müller, 1869, vol. 1, p. xix)

Therefore, pertinent to this purpose, modern western scholars attempt to rely heavily on scientific discoveries. For instance, Edward B. Tylor (1832-1917), is the leading scholar in anthropology study of religion as it shows in his maxim opus, "Primitive Culture (1871)" (Carl Olson, 2003, p. 54). In the psychology study of religion, Malory Nye (2004) asserted that the most famous thinkers was probably Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) who controversially proposed that religion is an illusion with his *Totem and Taboo* (1913), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), and *Moses and Monotheism* (1939) (Carl Olson, 2003, p. 343). Whereas Emile Durkheim (1858- 1971) is the outstanding figure in the sociological approach to the study of religions. Durkheim's contributions can be seen in his work titled *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* which was published in 1912 (Carl Olson, 2003, p. 212). For the purpose of understanding of the scientific study of religions, John Milton (1970) defined scientific study of religions as "the simultaneously anthropological, psychological and sociological approach to the study of religions; deal with the individual forces, the cultural systems, and the social structures that in interaction, shape religion and are shaped by it." (Wan Mohd Fazrul Azdi Wan Razali, 2009, p. 3) Concluded from the definition, there are three major approaches in the scientific study of religion namely anthropological, psychological and sociological approach. Undoubtedly there are also other approaches adopted in the study of religions such as the combined approaches. These approaches are the capstone of the modern western study of religions.

2. Critical Analysis on Scientific Study Of Religion

Although these approaches in the scientific study of religion had been spread among scholars and researchers especially in the west, some aspects of the methods and approaches are exposed and vulnerable to criticism due to its inconsistency to scientific study at large. Several important aspects that need to be addressed are as follows:

2.1. Undermining the Divine Aspect in the Study

It is very obvious that the new methods implied in the modern scientific study of religion had expelled the relation between divine and religion or at least degrading the heavenly aspect of religion. Sharpe (1975, p. 95) asserted that the anthropology study of religion is heavily influenced by the theory of evolution which was brought by Charles Darwin in nineteenth century. From the evolutionist point of view, evolution is the only possible theory to understand the various stages of development. Edward B. Tylor (2003, p. 12) considers the practice of believing in spiritual beings such as souls, gods, angels, spirits and ghosts are a form of animism and sees it as the basis of religious development. By doing so, he ignores the divine aspect in the existence of any religion.

From the psychology of religion point of view, Freud's study of religions is just to confirm the atheism hypothesis because he approves that religious ideas do not originate from God or gods and that gods do not exist. He sees no value and purpose in rituals and religious life. Based on this belief, in 1927 he published his famous work *Future of an Illusion*, in which he clearly states that religious beliefs are illusions which people very much want to be true although it is not true (Sigmund Freud, 1983, p. 38-43). Apart from the anthropology and psychology study of religion, the sociology of religion is seen to give a fairly accurate position of the divine aspect in their view of religion. Emile Durkheim (2003, p 212-225) a prominent figure in the Sociology of Religion had established 'sacred' as the very essence element of a religion and the most important component of it formation. However, as explained by Jacques Waardenburg (1999, p. 301), the sociological study of religion perceives religion as "a society in a projected and symbolized form." Therefore, sociologists propose that religion should be studied in response to social needs and reality. Understanding religion in this way had undermined the divine element in the study of religion. Studying religion by isolating god from the essence of religion is not an accurate method of study as god is the most vital aspect in most religion if not all to connect human with divinity . In a very specific term, as stated by H. A. Mukti Ali (1999, p. 79), Muhammad Iqbal (1974, p. 1) and Lord Herbet (1583-1648) God is one of the essential pedestals of religion and it is the centre pillar of divinity (Adeng Muchtar Ghazali, 2000, p. 14). Furthermore, isolating god from religion rendering to the reality of denying the divinity. Religion gives strong emphasis on the divine aspects, thus it is a paramount factor not to be isolated in order to ensure that the study of religion is truly focusing on the religion itself.

If not, scientifically it is not the study of religion but rather it is the study of “why religion exist?”, or “why god is accepted by human?” or “what is the perspective of these approaches towards religion?”

2.2. Religion as a Human Phenomenon

Wan Mohd Fazrul (2009, p. 28) concluded that the modern study of religions, regards religion as a human phenomenon. In conjunction with this idea is a conception of religion as a human invention, intently developed or unconsciously formed. The shift from religion as theological connotation to merely human phenomenon happens gradually as a result of clashes between religion and science (Wan Mohd Fazrul Azdi Wan Razali, 2009, p. 29). Tylor (2003, p. 12) the leading scholar in anthropology study of religion confirms that religion is developed by human. He argues that primitive people created their religion by constructing concepts to explain what they perceived through their senses. It is here that he realized that all religions employ a belief based on spiritual beings such as souls, gods, angels, spirits and ghosts. Tylor considers the practice as a form of animism and sees it as the basis of religious development (Tylor, 2003, p. 12). According to him, the evolution of culture from lower forms to modern forms corresponds to the evolution of religion from something other and lower than religion (Eric J. Sharpe, 1975, p. 58). He believes that animism is a theory for the origin of religion that should not be discarded (Eric J. Sharpe, 1975, p. 58). He identifies three fundamental stages of cultural evolution; first is the savage stage, second the barbaric stage and third; the civilized stage (Carl Olson, 2003, p. 50).

The psychologist perspective of religion embeds religion as totally a creation of human. Specifically, religion is the creation of human's psychology confined in a sphere of illusion. Sigmund Freud (1989, p. 65-71) in his *The Future of an Illusion* concluded that those who adheres to a religion is a person in illusion and a sick person. Freud wishes to restore people's health and free them from the bondage of religion. Freud thinks that people need to strive to exercise correct thought and be conscious not to succumb to imaginative and hopeful thinking. He concluded that religious believe as illusions, fulfilments of the oldest, strongest, and most insistent wishes of mankind. Thus religion is a human invented mental defence against the more threatening aspects of nature – earthquake, flood, storm, disease, and inevitable death (John H. Hick, 1990, p. 33). Generally, the perception of sociologists towards religion is shaped by various types of social forces and religion is perceived by them as socially constructed (Carl Olson (2003, p. 209). In connection with that, although the sociology of religion established 'sacred' as a major element in religion, they perceived the 'sacred' from the human perspective which divert it from the meaning of God as an existing reality. In line with the development of reason and intellect, the sociology of religion rests on scientific and rational bases rather than that of theology. Durkheim's interest in the origin of religion brought him to discover this origin in to totemism and sacred symbols that represents an impersonal force supporting a tribe's beliefs, rituals, and way of life. The intended impersonal force is as a symbol of the god and clan which represents the sanctity of one's religion (Carl Olson (2003, p. 210). As a result of this kind of interpretation towards religion, created the understanding of religion as originated to the human own consciousness. It forms the common view that humans actually make up the value of its own, to mold for good or ill the minds of its members (John H. Hick, 1990, p. 30) Studying religion under this kind of understanding, in reality is not the study of religion by itself. Rather than it is merely the study of the connection between human and god or the connection between human and what human perceived as god.

2.3. Exterior Approach of Defining Religion

As a result of denying the divine aspect of religion and prescribe it as human invention, the definition given by the scientific study of religions is not a precise definition. Rather than a definition that provide a prescription of a religion it is merely a definition that prescribe human's atheism towards religion. Obviously, the misguided definition of religion is the result of denying major elements of religion itself from the beginning. John H. Hick (1990, p. 30-35) attests that the definition by the sociological theory of religion and the Freudian theory of religion are been given to deny the function of God in human life. Ignoring these essential parts of the religion rendered an exterior approach of defining religion. We will analyze some definitions given by the scientific study or religions: Clifford Geertz (1969, p. 4) defines religion - in his own words - : “...a religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic” (Edward B. Tylor, 2003, p. 12) The definition confines religion to only a system of symbols that denies the inclusive aspect of some religion that accounting all aspects of human life. Further, the definition does not establish the most important aspect of religion, that is 'believing in something supernatural beyond the existence of human being'.

The use of the word “seem” in the definition indicates that religion does not offer the reality of the absolute truth to its adherents. Instead, what the adherents feel or perceive in their devotions is just a “mood” and “motivation”. It is due to the perception that religion is a phenomena created by men themselves within their own environment. It is an exterior definition of religion that base on the religious phenomena among the adherents while ignoring the substance of the religion itself.

Another exterior approach in defining religion can be seen from Emile Durkheim's definition of religion. He stated: “A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them.” (Louis Schneider, 1970, p. 11). The above definition may be considered to be one of the accurate definitions given by the scientific study or religion. However, when the approach of defining is based on certain methodology, it diverts the meaning of religion to be a statement used to interpret religion from the view point of that particular methodology. Although, the sociology of religion established 'sacred' in the definition, however it perceives 'sacred' from human perspective while destitute the 'sacred' from the divine source. In summary, religion according to Freud is merely a collection of fears binding adherents to the actions and beliefs of a particular religion in order to restrain themselves from any sense of guilt, fear and/or punishment. Sigmund Freud in his *Future of an Illusion* portrayed religious belief as illusions, fulfillments of the oldest, strongest, and most insistent wishes of mankind. Thus religion is a mental defense against the more threatening aspects of nature –earthquake, flood, storm, disease, and inevitable death (John H. Hick, 1990, p. 33).

As we can see, the definitions are given to serve the conclusion made by the variety approaches of the scientific study of religion. By doing so, the understanding and definition of religion will be absent from the real substance of the religion itself to the certain approaches, tendencies and methods. As a result, there are phenomenological definition, psychological definition, and sociological definition, naturalistic and also religious definition of religion (John H. Hick, 1990, p. 2). Some of the approaches are deemed to deny religions from its root. The approaches itself are arguments against the existence of God that is the pillar of the religion. As we can see the definitions by the Freudian theory of religion are been given to deny the function of God in human life (John H. Hick, 1990, p. 30-35).

3. Conclusion

The scientific study of religions with regard to modern Western scholarship originated and developed from efforts towards developing rational and reason of human nature. Although those who are involved in the study are among adherents of Christianity, the revelation source of Christianity is not an encouraging factor for the study. Conversely, it is based on the secularization of knowledge and thought. Secularization is precisely beneath the modern western scientific study of religion, as al-Attas (1993, p. 17) elaborates the meaning of secularization: “the deliverance of man, first from religious and then from metaphysical control over his reason and his language.” Taylor clarifies that “the secular was, in the new sense, opposed to any claim made in the name of something transcendent of this world and its interests.” (Daniel Boscaljon, 2013, p 671). Consequently, modern Western scholars constructed the methodologies that rely heavily on the western scientific discoveries while ignoring the divinity as the source of religions. Therefore, these new methodologies deny the divinity element towards the understanding of religion and confirm religion as a humanly or earthly invented. Furthermore, the methodologies present a misguided prescription of religion. As al-Faruqi (1986, p. 14) concluded, those methodologies are unable to study religions in its totality to encompass man’s entire religious experience which includes the experience of Ultimate reality. It can be concluded that the scientific study of religions as perceived by the western scholarship is not an absolute method in studying religion. It is an ongoing process that should be analyzed critically as science itself is an ongoing process with new discoveries are being made along its stride (Kanu, Macaulay A., 2015, pp 77).

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