

Religion in the Structures of Human Societies

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Abstract

To study the role and place of religion in human societies, we must first describe the latter. In *Sociology Mind*, “Structures of Human Societies” (van Meter, 2014), we have previously described Agoramétrie’s results on how human societies are distributed over a two dimensional structure around a first axis of “openness”/“closure” and a second axis of “emotional”/“non-emotional”. In the same article, we have also shown how early villages and cities were also distributed along the “openness”/“closure” axis ranging from cooperative “Type 1” villages without defensive walls, all the way to “Type 2” walled hierarchically organized closed cities. In the earliest examples of the cooperative villages, there is no archeological evidence of organized religion or its concomitant clergy, or any distinctive evidence of a community. In the earliest examples of hierarchically organized cities, there is such evidence. Here in this article, we examine the place of religion in this two dimensional structure and its close proximity and association with other institutions of society such as doctors, teachers, police, politicians and clergy, and their roles in managing conflict within society. In the specific case of clergy and religion, this implies a fundamental role of “closure” in the management of conflict both at the individual and the societal level. Other methods of analysis or scientific approaches have arrived at similar results and these methods and approaches are closely and fundamentally related.

Keywords

Religion, Social Closure, Trunk Questions, Opinion Polls, Social Conflict, Archaeology, Social Structure

1. Introduction: From Type I Villages to Type 2 Cities

Previously in *Sociology Mind* (van Meter, 2014), we presented how Agoramétrie research has shown the existence of a two-dimensional structure of human societies. Here, our aims are to look more closely at the role and function of religion in

that structure, how it first appeared and how it evolved to become the social institution it is today and its eventual role in the future.

In 2006 at the 71st Annual Meeting of the Society for American Archaeology in San Juan, Puerto Rico, Matthew Bandy, in his presentation “The Neolithic Demographic Transition and Its Consequences” (Bandy, 2006), spoke of the “growing the size of the community” (page 6). This presentation, during the session “Early Village Society in Global Perspective”, mentioned Roy Rappaport’s “group size irritation coefficient” (Rappaport, 1968: p. 116). A year later, A. Jason Ur and colleagues spoke about the “first cities of the Middle East” which expanded “while maintaining a more or less constant density in terms of persons or households per unit area” (Ur et al., 2007: p. 1188). But 9000 years ago, in Çatalhöyük in the central south of what is now Türkiye, one of the earliest sedentary groupings of human beings, who had domesticated some grains and certain animals (UNESCO, 2025), such a more or less constant human density was indeed noticed, “but such a significant increase in violence that Clark Spencer Larsen and his coauthors dedicate a whole section of their article, “Living in a Crowded Community: Assessing Violence and Interpersonal Conflict”, to this question (Larsen et al., 2019), noting that Çatalhöyük was one of the first proto-urban communities in the world and that the residents experienced what happens “when you put many people together in a small area for an extended time.” According to Larsen, it set the stage for where we are today and the challenges we have faced historically in urban living and continue to face even now.

It should be noted that the work of Larsen et al. emphasized the systematic homogeneity of the small, simple rectangular living spaces—without doors or windows—for which ladders were used to enter and exit, dwellings often leaning against each other and in which the inhabitants buried their dead. This homogeneity implies that there were no specialized or structured social groups such as clergy, police, soldiers or rulers. The signs of differentiation existed only between the dead family members buried in the same living space and whose dental analysis showed that the dead were sometimes not all members of the same family. Larsen et al. hypothesize that the non-resident family members could have been individuals with particular pastoral or agricultural knowledge.

Bandy and his work on the Neolithic transition also includes his development of “large villages” and the distinction between Type 1 and Type 2 villages (Bandy, 2006: p. 5) mentioned above in the abstract. For Bandy, on the one hand, in some cases “large villages emerge in the context of a system of more or less equivalent and autonomous villages” and are simply “first among equals, and a markedly convex rank-size distribution may be expected.” Bandy refers to these cases as Type 1 villages. On the other hand, in some cases large villages “emerge initially as the capitals of small regional polities: as chiefdom centers.” In the latter cases the large villages are “functionally distinct from their smaller contemporaries, serving as seats of political power, and a primate, primo-convex or even log-normal rank-size distribution may be expected.” Bandy refers to these cases as Type

2 “large villages” or more simply “cities”.

If the term “village” can be applied to Çatalhöyük, then under Bandy’s system of classification, it is clearly Type 1. In the previous article we published here in *Sociology Mind*, “Structures of Human Societies” (van Meter, 2014), we presented the very hierarchically structured city of Tell Brak, dating from 6200 to 5900 years ago in the north of what is now Iraq, as a Type 2 “village” or rather “city”. It was described in detail by Ur and his colleagues as one of the “first cities of the Middle East” (Ur et al., 2007) with its concentric circles of rulers or leaders, of clergy, of soldiers, of merchants—all within the defensive wall—and the farmers outside the wall. But historically Tell Brak was preceded by several Type 1 villages and at some time between Çatalhöyük and Tell Brak, the “cooperative” Type 1 villages without defensive walls, without clergy, without police or soldiers, evolved into far more socially differentiated and hierarchically structured Type 2 city.

As for social conflict in these developments, Bandy (2006: p. 6) clearly mentioned that “growth in community size produced rapidly increasing levels of internal conflict in these villages.” The village communities had two options: 1) they could fission into two or more “daughter communities, each smaller than the critical threshold size”, which according to Bandy was “provisionally defined as approximately 300 persons”; or 2) they could develop some social mechanism “that regulated and managed internal conflict in such a way as to make fissioning unnecessary”, adding that “these conflict management mechanisms were frequently of a religious or ritual character.”

Indeed, “regulated and managed internal conflict” seems to jump from undifferentiated or “cooperative” Type 1 “villages” to “closed” or hierarchically structured Type 2 “cities” with the systematic presence of rulers, clergy and soldiers.

2. Religion in the Agoramétrie Structure

In our previous *Sociology Mind* article mentioned above (van Meter, 2014), not only did we present Tell Brak, the work of Bandy and that of Ur and his colleagues, but also that of Agoramétrie (1987, 1998, 2005) and the resulting overall structure of public opinion on social conflict (see **Figure 1** below) with its first horizontal axis of “openness”/“closure” and its second vertical axis of “emotive”/“non-emotive” (Durand et al., 1990; van Meter, 2001, 2004). **Figure 1** below and the description of the “trunk questions” of social conflict and the “tools” of social conflict management were also presented in the latter two articles.

Since Tell Brak and the creation of what are now labelled “modern cities”, the clergy and their religions have lost much of their involvement in the management of social conflict and the development of knowledge, but they remain the guardians of “sacred” elements, dogma, practices and certain social “values” associated with these religions and the societies in which they have developed and evolved. Certain of these “values”, including some more directly associated with a tribe, society, or nation, such as “patriotism” or “nationalism”, have a strong emotional component or evoke an attachment to the immediate community that may ob-

scure their aspect and function as “tools” of social conflict management.

The most important aspect of the Agoramétrie approach to social conflict and identifying “trunk questions” is probably the fact that it gives access to an empirical approach in addressing these often rather theoretical concepts and avoids being based on relatively limited samples or even on just a few individuals or specific case studies. By further studying these Agoramétrie results, we are able to see where religion is located in this box of “tools” that manage conflict and make sure societies remain stable enough to continue to exist, to evolve and even to expand.

In the bidirectional **Figure 1** below, and the evident proximity of “religion” and the “closure” pole of the first axis—developed further below—one would expect to find indications of this association on the axis “openness”/“closure” in the diagram. Indeed, the trunk question T5 in the Agoramétrie questionnaire clearly to the right side on the first axis is “God exists”, the only systematic indication of

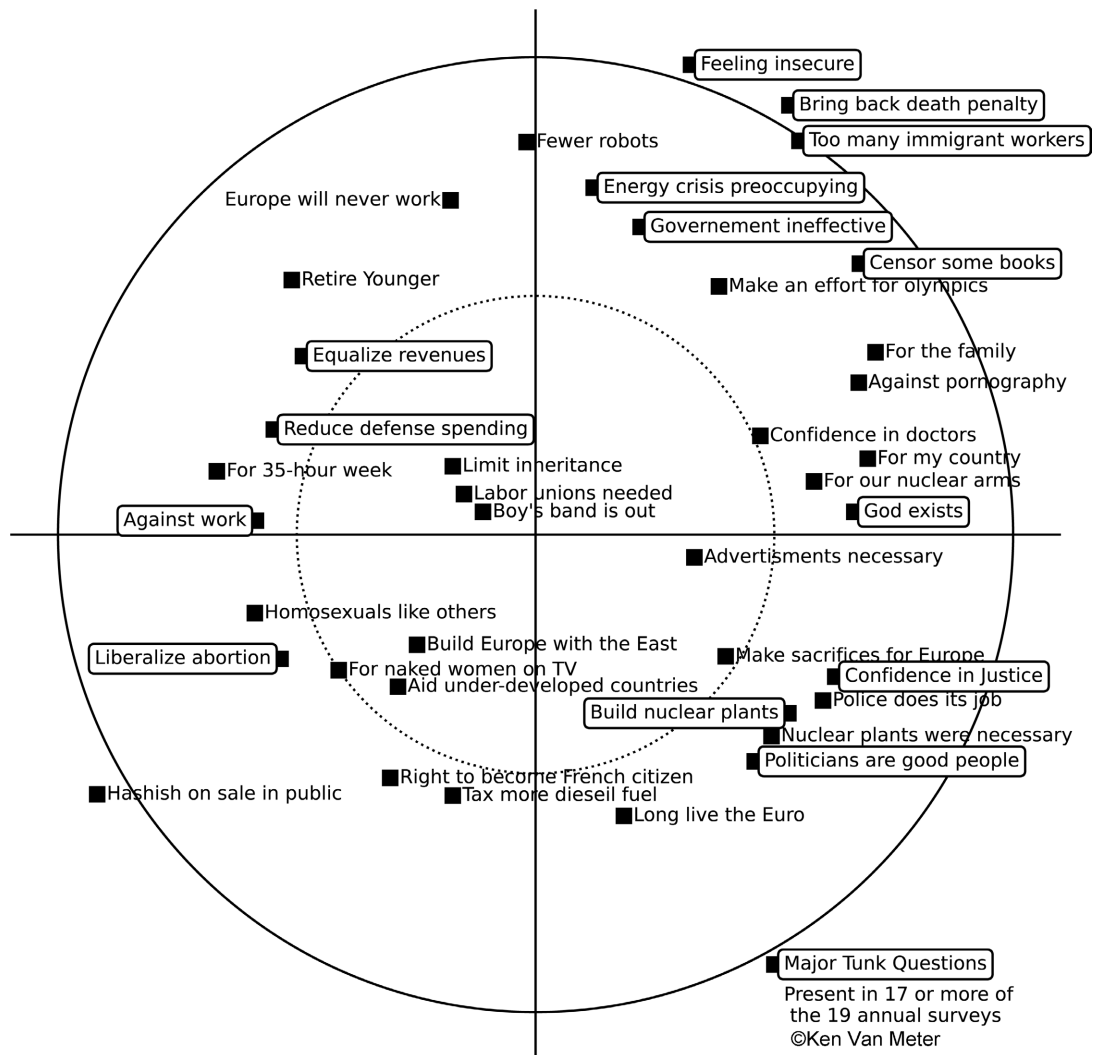


Figure 1. Agoramétrie’s principal components analysis of social conflict with 14 “trunk questions” (present in 17 or more of 19 surveys) in rectangular boxes (for “trunk questions”, see van Meter, “Structures of Human Societies”. *Sociology Mind*, 2014, 4: 36-44).

religion in **Figure 1**. In relation to the second axis—“emotional”/“non-emotional”—the trunk question “God exists” is almost exactly in the middle or thus average. The question is strongly statistically and positively correlated with the external variable “Religious practice”, which appears among basic information such as sex, age, qualifications, salary, etc. in all Agoramétrie surveys. This particular opinion (or belief) is systematically located in a region of the diagram where there is a set of structured social functions on which there is consensus—those that are necessary to “make society work”: politicians, police, doctors, teachers, etc. There is less consensus regarding for example the function of writers, scientists, artists, athletes, etc.

With regard to this position of the trunk question “God exists” in the Agoramétrie structure, this means that these data form a network of highly statistically correlated opinions involving the trunk questions: “You can trust your doctor”, “The police do their job”, “Politicians are honest” and “Our children get an education at school”. These same correlations recur year after year despite changes in the socio-political or economic environment. Here, the subtle links between religion, government and social conflict are evident. It is interesting to note that even if this particular network of opinions is clearly located near the “closure” pole of the first axis, it is located towards the middle of the “emotional”/“non-emotional” axis and slightly on the “non-emotional” side. In **Figure 1** above from the 1997 Agoramétrie questionnaire survey, “God exists” is located in the same area as these other trunk questions such as “Confidence in Justice”, “Politicians are good people”, “Confidence in doctors” and “Police does its job”.

On one hand, this graphic area and, on the other, these particular statistical correlations place this network among the most closed or rigid opinions; that is to say, those most opposed to the openness or the possibility of questioning and changing one’s opinion. In this area, we do not question the action of the police, we do not suspect politicians of corruption, we do not ask a second doctor for an opinion, and we do not ask questions about what is sacred and profane in a religion. If there are problems of social conflict, there are specialized social institutions that should resolve these problems, and if there is not such a specialized institution, it is up to society and its leaders to create such an institution to provide an answer. Since the Neolithic, this seems to have systematically been the role of religion in large societies: providing a solution to social conflict or justifying a solution proposed by other social instances such as political rulers.

All religions have the role of providing solutions to any and all problems that their pupils may encounter and providing answers to any and all questions that their pupils may ask; without this completeness or closure, it is not a religion. Historically, religion functioned not only as the social institution of deposition and guarding of that which a society considers sacred but also as the social institution for settling questions in the secular world, while providing at the same time the intellectual or cognitive closure to avoid questioning the solutions proposed.

Indeed, in the past, religion seems to have provided answers to human curiosity

concerning the world and society, but it has also provided an attitude of closure to individuals confronted with the unknown and without the means of approaching it psychologically, intellectually or empirically. As science now deals at least with the empirical and often intellectual aspects, there remain only the psychological or social-psychological aspects to be dealt with by religion.

3. Other Methods—Similar Results

The above sociological research has been based largely on Agoramétrie research with its more than thirty years of nearly annual French surveys of public opinion on social conflicts, and similar research carried out in Great Britain, Russia and Costa Rica, all with similar results (van Meter, 2001, 2004). This permits an extensive generalization of Agoramétrie results concerning each society's characteristic set of social "tools", "trunk questions" and "values" associated with social conflict.

This association between social conflict management "tools", "trunk questions" and "values" of a society were clearly presented in the section "Two Structures, but Only One Set of 'Tools'" in our previous article here in *Sociology Mind* (van Meter, 2014), noting "that if a society has existed long enough, this implies that it has developed 'tools' to manage these conflicts and to address trunk questions" (*ibid*, page 43).

These Agoramétrie results open a very interesting means for studying social "values" as described by Ronald Inglehart (2008) and by Milton Rokeach and developed more recently by Schwartz (2005). Extensive work has already been done in this direction comparing these three systems of "values", revealing similarities, coherence and complementarity between results (Wach & Hammer, 2003; Dobewall & Strack, 2014; Hammer, 2015; Pagès & van Meter, 2023). As an interesting example of confluence of approaches, one should note the work on the "Big Five" of social psychology, the five major "factors" of personality characterization. In this context, Vassilis Saroglou (2002a), in referring to the "Big Five", has stated that "religious fundamentalism is associated with low Openness. Interestingly, intrinsic-general religiosity, too, is very weakly, but significantly, related to low O [Openness]" (*ibid*, page 22).

The relationships between "tools" and "values" in relation to religion were also the subject of another study by Saroglou in the article "Beyond Dogmatism – The Need for Closure as Related to Religion" which provides an operational definition in five points of what is called "the scale of need for closure" or NFCS – (need for order, need for predictability, ambiguity discomfort and closeness of mind) – (Saroglou, 2002b: p. 186): "religiosity is associated with a great need for closure (NFCS) in general and with all facets of the NFCS". It is also associated with the exclusion of the spirit of decision (*ibid*, page 191).

Subsequent work by Saroglou and his colleagues (Saroglou et al., 2003) reinforced this association between "cognitive closure" and religiosity. He noted that religious people "tend to attribute great importance to the values of the Big Five

of conservation”; that is Tradition and Conformity. They also attribute low importance to “hedonistic values and openness to change”; that is Hedonism, Stimulation and Self-determination (Saroglou et al., 2004: p. 730). They add that in the scientific literature this above result corresponds to “negative attitudes towards sexuality”, a lack of openness towards experience, a link with authoritarianism and a need for closure.

But perhaps the work closest to our Agoramétrie work on social conflict and its social representation is that done in social psychology concerning the central “core” of social representations, in particular the work of Jean-Claude Abric in *Pratiques sociales et représentations* (Abric, 2006). His Chapter 3 is devoted to the formation of this “core” or “heart” and it reveals a great similarity with the “trunk questions” that we described above. To the extent that social representations are based on the core and have “knowledge functions” for understanding, “identity functions” that define and help preserve the identity and group specificity for a “guidance function” that guides behavior and practices (Abric, 2006: pp. 15-16), these are precisely what Agoramétrie calls “tools” for the management of social conflict. The obvious relationship between the results of Agoramétrie and the work in social psychology of Abric is also the subject of my article, “Agoramétrie’s Trunk Questions & Moscovici Social Representation’s Core—More Than Just Similarities,” in the *Bulletin of Sociological Methodology* (van Meter, 2017).

Another avenue to possible investigation and concordance in this domain is the development of the “Morality-as-Cooperation” (MAC) program led at Oxford University by the Institute for Cognitive and Evolutionary Anthropology and by Oliver Scott Curry, and presented in *Current Anthropology* (Curry et al., 2019) with its seven cooperative behaviours: 1) helping family members, 2) helping your group, 3) reciprocity, 4) being brave, 5) relying on your superiors, 6) dividing resources in dispute, and 7) respecting prior possession by others.

In the article’s “Conclusion” section, Curry and colleagues state: “we have shown how one of the theory’s central predictions—that cooperation is always and everywhere considered moral—is supported by an extensive cross-cultural survey of moral values.” In the “Reply” section, Curry and colleagues state quite clearly that: “Morality-as-cooperation (MAC) is the theory that morals are solutions to the problems of cooperation recurrent in human social life.” In Agoramétrie terms, this becomes a society’s “tools” for managing social conflict associated with “trunk questions” are that society’s set of “values” or morals.

One should also note that the entire presentation of Curry and colleagues makes no reference to religion in their development of “Morality-as-cooperation”. Indeed, the term “religion” occurs only once and the term “spiritual” not at all. However, the similarities are obvious between these seven MAC cooperative behaviours, the Agoramétrie “trunk questions” or “tools” for resolving social conflicts, the “values” of Inglehart and Rokeach/Schwartz, and the “core” of Abric’s social psychology and these similarities must be examined and developed further.

In more strictly sociological terms, perhaps the most relevant sociological con-

cept applicable here is the *religious habitus* of Pierre Bourdieu which he presented as a “principle generating all thoughts, perceptions and actions conforming to the norms of a religious representation of the natural and supernatural world” (Bourdieu, 1971). Here, the “cognitive closure” seems to be complete and directly associated with religion and with religion’s association with the “state”, “authorities” and “political labor”.

4. Conclusion

According to Durkheim (1912), the multiple sociological questions to be pursued concerning the place of religion in the structures of human societies should be done with a “genetic approach and concerns the origins and development of religions”, which we have attempted to do here by studying the case of Çatalhöyük, a Type 1 village, and, Tell Brak, a Type 2 city that appeared some 3000 years later in the same region of the world. Çatalhöyük had no religion and no clergy, and Tell Brak had both.

Agoramétrie’s work has proven the association between “trunk questions” and the social “tools” or “values” in managing social conflict and the role of religion in these developments. Independent work of several researchers has also arrived at similar conclusions concerning the role of religion in managing social conflict, particularly in the characteristic social and cognitive closure engendered historically and even today by religion.

Future research on these questions will probably include what type of spiritual or religious activity existed before the sedentarization of Homo sapiens and possibly that of other hominids such as Neanderthals, Denisovans and eventually even other hominids. The relatively recent discovery of caves in Bruniquel (France) where Neanderthals constructed circles with stone arrangements—some call them “chapels”—and dating from 176,500 years ago, means well over 100,000 years before the arrival of Homo sapiens in Europe and makes Neanderthalian spirituality an open question (Jaubert, Verheyden, Genty et al., 2016). And of course, it is necessary to study the very likely concomitant evolution and role played by language and the handling of abstract concepts in possible spiritual activities or religion’s development.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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