

## Religious Knowledge: A New Dimensional Approach for Studying Religiosity's Social Impact in Muslim Societies

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### **Abstract**

*Researchers frequently postulate a strong relationship between religiosity and social peace and stability. If one examines the construct of religion in sociological literature (e.g., doctrine, rituals, etc.), it appears that it is so diverse and multifaceted that a single measure of religiosity is inadequate. While quantification of religiosity is possible, social studies rely exclusively on single-item markers of religiousness (e.g., frequency of church attendance). Moreover, two of the dimensions of Glock's (1962) model - religious knowledge and the consequential dimension - have not been examined at all (Filsinger & Wilson, 1986). This paper's objective is to draw attention to the "religious knowledge" dimension as an influential social factor within society by attempting to construct a peculiar definition to the sociology of Muslim societies. Besides, this paper aims at putting emphasis on the importance and the validity of "religious knowledge" scales and their ability to provide an overview about Muslim individuals' religiosity.*

**Keywords:** *Religiosity, Religious Knowledge, Religiosity Scales, Sociology of Religion*

### **RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE AND ITS SCALES IN SOCIOLOGICAL LITERATURE**

Because religion and society depend on each other, researchers and numerous sociologists who studied religiosity's social impact anticipate close relationships between them. This line of reasoning leads to the hypothesis that religion strengthens and stabilizes social systems. Nevertheless, religion is a multidimensional construct and is so diverse and multifaceted that it seems inadequate to consider a single religious dimension in the academic study of religiosity. While quantification of religiosity is possible (with a large scholarly literature testament to this) there are no clear standards regarding what aspects should be measured since different aspects may relate to fundamentally different types of religiosity (McAndrew & Voas, 2011: 2)

Belief, practice, cult membership, informal affiliation, doctrinal knowledge, moral sense, core values etc. are among those dimensions whose social effects have been studied by sociologists. Yet, only some of these dimensions have been the focus of attention of sociologists when elaborating their religiosity scales. This is also valid for social studies in Muslim countries where sociology relies mainly on theoretical and methodological approaches coming from the European or the western sociology in general ('Abd al-M'otī, 1981: 170-171), and this fact raises questions about the feasibility of religiosity scales based on the other religious dimensions that were neglected. This article aims at exposing the space "religious knowledge" occupied within sociological literature, elaborating a suitable definition of "religious knowledge" based on the Muslim academic background and finally highlighting the legitimacy that this dimensions deserves among the religiosity scales employed by sociologists, especially in the Muslim societies.

A quick glance at the sociological literature may show that the notion of "religious knowledge" was not present explicitly in a number of sociological definitions of religion. Durkheim suggested that beliefs and practices are the two core dimensions of a religion (Durkheim, 1995: 44), while three dimensions were used by Joachim Wach in approaching the religious experience: the Theoretical Expression (Doctrine), the "Practical Expression" (Cultus) and the Sociological Expression (Communion, Collective and Individual Religion) (Wach, 1957: 18-19). Moreover, Gerhard Lenski proposed a different set of four dimensions: doctrinal orthodoxy, devotionalism, associational religiosity (within the church setting) and communal religiosity outside the church setting (Lenski, 1963: 56,115).

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However, Charles Glock gave a place to “religious knowledge” in his multidimensional scheme of religiosity, which is one of the most frequently cited: ideological (beliefs), ritualistic (practice), experiential (religious experience or feeling), intellectual (knowledge of church dogma or scripture), and consequential (religious effects on secular life) (Glock, 1962: 98-99). Since then a number of researchers developed survey questions based on these dimensions and according to the objectives set out in their studies about religiosity’s social influence. Robinson even widens the viewpoints from which religiosity has been operationalized and which included aspects such as religious affiliation, church attendance, religious homogamy or some spiritual elements such as spiritual commitment, spiritual well-being and one’s relationship with a “divine other” (Robinson, 1994: 207).

Nevertheless, a major problem characterizes previous scale measures of religiosity employed in previous studies: these measures are often unidimensional, ignore the complexity of the dimensions underlying the religious phenomenon and consequently do not focus on measuring the influence of every religious dimension at the societal level. Ignoring the fact that people can be committed to religion along various dimensions such as belief, behavior, feelings of religious experience, and religious knowledge, most previous research measured religiosity by asking only about one’s church membership or attendance (Encyclopedia of Religion and Society, 1998: 105).

In an attempt to demonstrate that the dimensions of religiosity are so interrelated that their separate scales would give satisfactory results about an individual’s religiosity, Clayton goes so far as to argue that religiosity as measured by the separate five scales (the ritualistic, experientia, ideological, intellectual and consequential scales) constructed by Faulkner & DeJon (1966) may merely be components of a single dimensional religiosity scale (Clayton, 1974: 136). Voas noted also that religious affiliation, practice and belief could be measured on a unidimensional scale (Voas, 2009: 157). Nonetheless, it remains that limiting religiosity scales to one or two of Glock’s dimensions seems to be a widespread trend.

For instance, with respect to studies that emphasized the relationship between religiosity and family, it is claimed that 80% of the marital studies rely exclusively on single-item global markers of religiousness (e.g., frequency of church attendance) (Mahoney, Pargament, Tarakeshwar & Swank, 2001: 561). In fact, the type of religion, the dimension of religiosity and the type of family must all be considered in assessing the religiosity - family connection with appropriate empirical, conceptual, and contextual sensitivity (Dollahite, Marks & Goodman, 2004: 421). Moreover, while scrutinizing that connection, a person’s spiritual beliefs, religious practices, and involvement with a faith community must all be taken into consideration (Lambert & Dollahite, 2006: 439). However, excluding Dollahite and a few other exceptions, researchers have not employed more than one or two indicators of religiosity (Filsinger & Wilson, 1986: 150).

In this respect, Filsinger and Wilson attempted to discover whether religious effects on marital adjustment are limited to one or two of the religious dimensions. The findings of their study - whose data were collected from 190 couples already identified as religious - supported a fairly broad-based relationship between marital adjustment and religiosity rather than a relationship limited to one or two aspects of each: religious ritualism, experience, consequences, and belief were all related to marital adjustment. The study concluded also that no study has formally investigated all five dimensions of Glock’s (1962) religiosity model, while two of the dimensions of the model - religious knowledge and the consequential dimension - have not been examined at all (Filsinger & Wilson, 1986: 148).

This fact must also apply to the Muslim sociological studies which have been influenced by theoretical and methodological approaches coming from the European or the western sociology in general (‘Abd al-M’oṭī, 1981: 170-171). This methodological trend is also in line with the societal view of religiosity in Muslim societies where individuals reduce it to the individual’s affiliation to a certain religious group, such as conservative and liberal groups, or to the individual’s practical expression that includes going to mosques, fasting and so on as indicators of his level of religiosity. By taking into account the previous observations, the dimension of “religious knowledge” was chosen to be the core of this article which attempts to provide its definition accordingly with the Muslim academic field, and to shed light on the validity of its scale measures in sociological studies within Muslim societies.

## **Definition of “Religious Knowledge”**

In order to provide a conceptual framework about “religious knowledge” in the Muslim society, it is essential to define separately the two parts of the compound term “religious knowledge” according to their meanings in Arabic. Al-Jawharī defined the word “knowledge – ma’arifah” as “a state that requires the knower to resort to the object, unlike denial which implies aversion between the denier and the denied thing” (al-Jawharī, 1990: 4/1400). In the same context, Ibn Fāris declared that “knowledge” was the opposite of ignorance (Ibn Fāris, 14 :979/109-110). It appears that these etymological definitions explain the word “knowledge” by describing its resulting aspect which is the state of closeness and familiarity with the object, or by giving its opposite. It has been well-known that Arab lexicographers used to define things mentioning their opposite, or by comparing them to something well known, or referring to one of its ones – if it is something countable – without diving into its essence as philosophers do while delimiting something’s definition (az-Zunaydi, 13 :9926).

In the Arab terminology, “knowledge” is the “cognition that comes after ignorance” (al-Tahānuwy, 1996: 2/1583), or the “cognition of the images, or the qualities, or the traits, or the signs, or the abstract meanings of things whether they exist outside the mind or not” (Al-Maīdānī, 1993: 123). It may also refer to “the cognition of something as it actually is” (Al-Maīdānī, 1993: 123). Meanwhile in the Philosophy Lexicon (*Al-M’ojam al-falsafī*), the word “knowledge” has two meanings: “1- It is the mental act by which the image of something takes place in the mind, whether this act is accompanied by emotion or not; 2- It is the mental act by which one gets into the essence of the object in order to understand its reality, so that the complete knowledge of the thing is clear of all ambiguity and suspicions” (Ṣalībā, 1982: 2/393).

Besides, the methods of cognition may differ according to the type of the object. According to Al-Maīdānī, if the object is something that has an image that is perceived by the outward or inward sense, then the knowledge of its form occurs by the impression of this form on the cognizer’s mind, and if it is something that has an attribute or a feature that is not cognized by the senses, then the knowledge of this attribute or feature occurs by cognizing it as it is in reality. Moreover, if it is one of the mental abstractions such as existence and non-existence, truth and falsehood, good and evil, then its knowledge occurs by cognizing its abstract reality, as it actually is in reality (Al-Maīdānī, 1993: 123). On the other hand, the word “knowledge” can refer to its content and its outcome, not to the mental act with which it is achieved, and from this meaning comes the expression “human knowledge” as an example (Ṣalībā, 1982: 2/393).

Regarding the meaning of “religion”, its etymology in Arabic carries the following meanings: “reward”, “judgment”, “obedience”, “habit”, “humility”, “everything that God is worshiped with”, “sect” (Ibn Manẓūr, 1993: 13/170; Fīrūz’ābādī, 2005: 1198; Ibn Fāris, 1979: 2/319-320; Ar-Rāzī, 1986: 91). Moreover, the terminology of the term “religion” refers to two types of definitions in the Muslim academic field. The first type of definitions considers “religion” as the one revealed to the prophets of Islam, as we can perceive in the definition of Al-Kafawy who defined religion as “a divine set which can lead people with intellects by their commendable choice to goodness, whether it is mental or tangible, such as belief (Iman), knowledge (Ilm) and prayer (Namaz)” (Al-Kafawy, 1998: 443). In the same context, Al-Jorjānī declared religion was “a divine set that calls those with intellects to follow what was revealed to the Mohammed PBUH” (Al-Jorjānī, 2006: 92-93). The Moroccan intellectual ‘Allāl al-Fāsī, also declared that religion was “the set of what Allah has legislated of heavenly rulings that were revealed to His prophets, and it includes faith (Iman), Islam and excellence (Ihsan)” (al-Fāsī, 1993: 80).

Meanwhile, the second type of definitions gives an objective perspective about religion. For instance, Ibn ‘Aṣūr affirmed that religion denotes “the sum of beliefs and actions taught by a Messenger of God who promises bliss for those who follow them and punishment for those who reject them” (Ibn ‘Aṣūr, 1984: 3/188). Darrāz also gave a similar definition by stating that religion is “a set of theoretical laws that define the characteristics of the divine power, and a set of practical rules that outline the way to worship it” (Darrāz, 2007: 85-86).

In addition, after Mawdudī investigated the meaning of the word religion (Deen) in the Quran, he claimed that this term means “a whole way of life in which a person gives his submission and obedience to someone whom he regards as having the ultimate authority, shapes his conduct according to the bounds and laws and rules

prescribed by that being, looks to him for recognition honor, and reward for loyal service, and fears the disgrace or punishment that could follow any lack on his part” (Mawdudi, 2006: 29).

The way religion is perceived in the previous definitions is based on the distinction between two aspects which manifest in every religion: “beliefs” and “rituals”. While “beliefs” designate the set of mental states or mental perceptions about a sacred being, “rituals” or acts of worship represent the practical ways and behavioral aspects that individuals must perform towards that sacred being. This distinction is also perceived in Durkheim’s definition of religion, where it carries the meaning of “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” (Durkheim, 1995: 44).

After reviewing the terminological meanings of “religion” and “knowledge”, two definitions of “religious knowledge” can be conceived throughout consolidating the previously mentioned meanings:

- 1- Religious knowledge is “the mental act that allows cognizing a certain amount of religious information and their impression on the cognizer’s mind”
- 2- Religious knowledge is “the sum of cognitions acquired from religion and its outcome that results in the form of religious information”

Nevertheless, if we merge these two definitions, we can reach the meaning that suffices the purpose of this article: “Religious knowledge is all what the cognizer has cognized from religion using the mental act of cognition”. This meaning can also be transformed into an operational definition that may serve the purpose of sociological studies by saying briefly: “Religious knowledge is all what the cognizer has cognized from religion”. Based on this definition, religiosity scales may measure individuals’ amount of religious information concerning a certain topic (e.g. familial relationships, marital duties, work ethics, etc.), in order to correlate the scores obtained with the social behavior of the sample in question and to uncover the extent to which religious knowledge can be influential on the social behavior. Although this definition was constructed adequately to the Muslim or the Arab conception of “knowledge” and “religion”, its meaning can also apply to other societies with different cultures and religions.

### **Scientific Legitimacy of the “Religious Knowledge” Scales**

The persistent reaching out for contact with the infinite has always been testifying to the high value man has been placing upon his religious beliefs. In consequence, religion early became a basic part of his culture. However, a quick glance at the international corruption indexes would reveal that many of the least corrupt and highly developed countries claim to be secular and neutral when it comes to religion. This assumes that a large number of the citizens of these countries are committed to a set of moral values which are present in religion, despite the fact of being atheist or believing in God’s existence without going beyond it to practice religious rituals.

This observation comes at a time when many of the countries where Islam is adopted as the official religion are struggling with an ethical crisis on the social and economic levels - without the need to go into its details -. Thus, the question of religious ethics remains on the table in the Muslim societies, even though the teachings of Islam cover a wide range of topics in the individual’s daily life. If one looks at religious knowledge with a relatively realistic mindset, one discovers that although the Muslim religious teachings which emanate from religious knowledge are supposed to be followed by the religion’s adepts, the actual state of affairs from a sociological point of view reveals that human nature or human temptations could make people deviate from the ethical teachings of religion and lead them to commit “sins” or “crimes”.

These observations make the followers of the ethical issue in human society – or in Muslim societies - refute the hypothesis that a person must adhere to the ethical teachings of religion if they take the form of sacred imperatives. The same observations lead to the search for the secret of moral and religious obligation in general, which makes a person move according to religious teachings. This ethical issue may raise the following questions: why are religious imperatives not being followed in officially religious societies despite the abundance of jurisprudential rulings that cover many aspects of the individual’s life? Why are not the existence of religious

teachings and the target individuals' awareness of them sufficient to become committed to religious ethics? Would there be other potential factors (economic, social, etc.) behind the individual's commitment to the religious teachings? What are the reasons and circumstances that accompany the phenomenon of religion and make it effective on both individual and collective levels?

Yet, deviating from the right path of religious teachings may not be considered "sinful" in some cases where religious teachings remain open to different interpretations. Even though religious practitioners may point to a positive impact of religious knowledge on society, the salutary outcomes of religious knowledge are not certain since the different interpretations of religious texts may lead to a divergence of application with regard to social rights and duties. Thus, attention should be drawn to the ability of religious knowledge to orientate the social behavior of individuals positively or negatively and to influence their degree of social commitment, especially since today's world has been witnessing the emergence of new religious actors and intellectual currents which have provided individuals with different interpretations of the religious texts, and therefore contributed to shaping different religious views and expectations about life matters through various means of communication.

## CONCLUSION

This article represents an attempt to establish the value of the "religious knowledge" dimension in sociological studies that make religiosity's social impact under scrutiny. By making use of "religious knowledge" scales, these studies may have the opportunity of uncovering the extent to which religious knowledge can be effective on the societal level as well as the other essential factors for its impact over social phenomena. The definition of "religious knowledge" constructed above could be considered a basis for further development of the conceptual framework of this topic, especially that its scope can be widened so as to include the various perceptions of religion within different nations.

It may be estimated that the variables of the scales in question do not have to go beyond the scope of the jurisprudential or the ritualistic side of a certain religion, since the aim of these scales is assessing the practical manifestation of religion within society. Nonetheless, for an effective use of the "religious knowledge" scales on the operational side, they have to include items related to "beliefs" and to "religious jurisprudence" as well, because "beliefs" play the role of the driving force regarding human behavior. Whether positive or negative, the correlation between the results of "religious knowledge" scales and social behavior metrics would call attention to the role of the official religious establishments which are supposed to manage spreading the right religious knowledge within society and to be in charge of people's religious awareness of their religious rights and duties.

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