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The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

Emile Durkheim

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) was a sociologist of Jewish background concerned primarily with questions of social solidarity, vitality, and malaise in modernity, especially in his native France. If Tylor ended by arguing that primitive religions are characterized by their amoral quality, one of the central aims for Durkheim is to show the intrinsic connection of the moral and the religious. The excerpt here is inevitably composed of small portions of a large and hugely influential body of work. Like Tylor, Durkheim was an evolutionist and, like Tylor, he sought the origins of religion. But he was much clearer than Tylor (or Freud) that one could not trace social phenomena to some moment of sheer beginning, and so restates the question of origins in a structural manner as a quest for “the ever-present causes upon which the most essential forms of religious thought and practice depend” (1915 [1912]: 20). His strategy is also

radically different from Tylor’s. Where Tylor progresses by citing a vast sample of material to support his generalizations, Durkheim turns a slow and careful eye on what he considered a single case, namely the Aborigines of central Australia, that he thought could show the “elementary forms” of religion most directly. Durkheim also departs from Tylor by proposing an original way in which a nonbeliever can yet understand any and every religion as not being in error. Furthermore, the core of his definition of religion lies not with any specific belief or kind of belief but with a system of classification.

By defining the sacred as that which is set apart, Durkheim deftly evades having to give it any substantive content, a strategy that has enabled subsequent scholars to move beyond trite definitions. This is vastly superior to something like “belief in the supernatural,” where, as noted in the General Intro-

duction, both “belief” and “supernatural” beg a good many questions. (But see Collier and Yanagisako 1989 for a feminist critique of the sacred/profane dichotomy.) A system of classification is also collective and no longer to be derived from individual psychology or experience or from Kantian innate categories of understanding. With respect to the social, Durkheim makes a number of significant arguments. First is the strong idea that religion is a natural expression of society, society’s moment of reflecting on its own transcendent power. Second is the functionalist notion that religion provides a form of social cohesion, the glue of mechanical solidarity. These are actually inversions of one another: the first can be captured in the phrase that “the family that stays together prays together” and the second, to quote from a billboard from my youth, that “the family that prays together stays together.” Perhaps what is most interesting about the latter is less the functionalism than the attention given to ritual as a form of action.

Durkheim’s most infamous argument is that all religions can be understood as true once it is seen that what they represent is actually society. His position is thus one that recognizes the essentially symbolic quality of religion. If totems or gods symbolize society, this is not as reductive as it sounds, since Durkheim’s understanding of society is itself so high-minded. Durkheim accepted and drew upon the dualism present at the time (in Freud as well) between the biological or natural individual and the social and moral collective. For Durkheim society enables humanity to transcend itself, both to overcome selfish and violent urges and to seek, via the categories of understanding it provides, higher and ennobling paths. Society seen in this light does in fact approximate the view of religion as understood by many non-Durkheimians.

Durkheim influenced a subsequent line of French thinkers, including his nephew Marcel Mauss, who published in the *Année Sociologique*. Among the significant essays of the Durkheim school (translated into English by Evans-Pritchard and his Oxford colleagues) are those by Durkheim and Mauss on symbolic classification (1963 [1903]), Hubert and Mauss on sacrifice (1964 [1898]), Mauss on the gift (1990 [1925]), on bodily habitus (1973 [1935]), and on the concept of the person (1985 [1938]), and Hertz on death and on the right hand (1960 [1909]; cf. Needham, ed. 1973). Important collections of Durkheim’s own essays (1973, 1974, 1992) include useful modern introductions. Lévi-Strauss was also interested in problems of symbolic classification but, as it is often said, he turned Durkheim on his head. If there are correspondences between society and ideational patterns, for Lévi-Strauss this is because both of these stem from the same source, namely the mind, rather than from society. Insofar as Durkheim depicted totemism as the elementary form of religion, Lévi-Strauss’s book deconstructing totemism may also be seen as an attack on his intellectual ancestor.

In describing the northwest American potlatch as a “total” phenomenon, Mauss (1990 [1925]) makes the shattering observation that attempting to distinguish the religious from the economic or the political makes little sense in certain kinds of societies, and may provide quite distorted images. These categories – religion, economy, etc. – are conceptual tools emerging from the social experience of modern western societies (based on organic solidarity). The ethnographic facts from other times and places are not tailored to fit them. Moreover, the lesson that the study of other societies may bring back to us is the arbitrariness of our own systems of

classification and division into discrete social institutions. And thus *mana* itself, which was the essence of religion in the theories of the proponents of animatism (who succeeded Tylor and the concept of animism), is revealed by Mauss to mean wealth or authority as much as sacred power and, indeed, to refer to a world in which these are not understood as discrete and autonomous. Since Durkheim's and Mauss's work on the categories of thought, one of the effects of the anthropological study of "religion" has thus been to immensely complicate the issue by seeing things of "religious" or "symbolic" import in domains of life that western society has tried to argue are quite distinct and built up entirely on practical, secular, or rational grounds. Conversely, where religion is not separated from other social institutions, so it does not stand opposed to them as some morally distinct and distinctively moral realm. (The analogy here is to the argument that the gift in such societies cannot take on the connotations of pure generosity that it has for us. See the important discussion by Parry (1986).)

Another element of Mauss's thought that has had a profound influence on the anthropology of religion and is more fully worked out in his essay on the person (1985 [1938]) is that the chiefs taking part in the potlatch were understood as incarnations of the gods and ancestors (cf. Mauzé 1994). Indeed, the concept of the "individual" no less than that of "religion" is revealed as ethnographically and historically specific. This, in turn, would challenge theories like Tylor's that tend to assume a universal individuality. These points have been particularly well developed by Dumont (1970, 1986).

Finally, it may be mentioned that in his discussion of honor, Mauss makes questions of morality central. Honor,

dignity, self-worth, and the virtuous comportment and action they suppose are as critical to human consciousness as the puzzlement, awe, and fear attributed to humans by some thinkers or the instrumental concerns with food, sex, or power attributed to them by others. Elsewhere, in his essay on the body (1973 [1935]), Mauss sets out the notion of the *habitus*, subsequently developed by Bourdieu (1977), in which moral comportment is understood as rooted in embodied habit. In these respects Mauss and Bourdieu draw on Aristotelian conceptions of virtuous disposition and practice (Lambek 2000a).

The other major locus of Durkheim's influence was on the structural-functionalism that developed in British anthropology with Radcliffe-Brown (1964 [1952]) and produced a number of major studies of religion in specific societies (e.g., Warner 1959, Middleton 1987 [1960]). The British also drew on Durkheim's predecessors Robertson Smith (1894) and Fustel de Coulanges (1956 [1864]). For all these thinkers, society or the social group was understood as primary, and among the British it was the representational and functional sides of Durkheim's approach that were developed and elaborated, often making very good sense of aspects of the lineage-based societies of Africa, although not of all aspects (as Evans-Pritchard, in particular, was quick to note). Durkheim's conception of the sacred and his concerns with symbolic classification are most systematically pursued by Douglas, who is perhaps the most Durkheimian of the generation of symbolic anthropologists (see chapter 16 below). Durkheim's emphasis on the moral remains extremely significant while his chief weakness, as has often been noted, lies with the inability to address historical change. Weber is much more attuned to history.

I propose in this book to study the simplest and most primitive religion that is known at present, to discover its principles and attempt an explanation of it. A religious system is said to be the most primitive that is available for observation when it meets the two following conditions: First, it must be found in societies the simplicity of whose organization is nowhere exceeded;¹ second, it must be explainable without the introduction of any element from a predecessor religion.

I will make every effort to describe the organization of this system with all the care and precision that an ethnographer or a historian would bring to the task. But my task will not stop at description. Sociology sets itself different problems from those of history or ethnography. It does not seek to become acquainted with bygone forms of civilization for the sole purpose of being acquainted with and reconstructing them. Instead, like any positive science, its purpose above all is to explain a present reality that is near to us and thus capable of affecting our ideas and actions. That reality is man. More especially, it is present-day man, for there is none other that we have a greater interest in knowing well. Therefore, my study of a very archaic religion will not be for the sheer pleasure of recounting the bizarre and the eccentric. I have made a very archaic religion the subject of my research because it seems better suited than any other to help us comprehend the religious nature of man, that is, to reveal a fundamental and permanent aspect of humanity.

This proposition is bound to provoke strong objections. It may be thought strange that, to arrive at an understanding of present-day humanity, we should have to turn away from it so as to travel back to the beginning of history. In the matter at hand, that procedure seems especially unorthodox. Religions are held to be of unequal value and standing; it is commonly said that not all contain the same measure of truth. Thus it would seem that the higher forms of religious thought cannot be compared with the lower without bringing the higher forms down to the lower level. To grant that the crude cults of Australian tribes might help us understand Christianity, for example, is to assume – is it not? – that Christianity

proceeds from the same mentality, in other words, that it is made up of the same superstitions and rests on the same errors. The theoretical importance sometimes accorded to primitive religions could therefore be taken as evidence of a systematic irreligion that invalidated the results of research by prejudging them.

I need not go into the question here whether scholars can be found who were guilty of this and who have made history and the ethnography of religion a means of making war against religion. In any event, such could not possibly be a sociologist's point of view. Indeed, it is a fundamental postulate of sociology that a human institution cannot rest upon error and falsehood. If it did, it could not endure. If it had not been grounded in the nature of things, in those very things it would have met resistance that it could not have overcome. Therefore, when I approach the study of primitive religions, it is with the certainty that they are grounded in and express the real. In the course of the analyses and discussions that follow, we will see this principle coming up again and again. What I criticize in the schools I part company with is precisely that they have failed to recognize it. No doubt, when all we do is consider the formulas literally, these religious beliefs and practices appear disconcerting, and our inclination might be to write them off to some sort of inborn aberration. But we must know how to reach beneath the symbol to grasp the reality it represents and that gives the symbol its true meaning. The most bizarre or barbarous rites and the strangest myths translate some human need and some aspect of life, whether social or individual. The reasons the faithful settle for in justifying those rites and myths may be mistaken, and most often are; but the true reasons exist nonetheless, and it is the business of science to uncover them.

Fundamentally, then, there are no religions that are false. All are true after their own fashion: All fulfill given conditions of human existence, though in different ways. Granted, it is not impossible to rank them hierarchically. Some can be said to be superior to others, in the sense that they bring higher mental faculties into play, that they are richer in ideas and feelings, that they contain proportionately