A SOCIOLOGICAL VIEW OF RELIGION

By Professor H. BOIS

The recent publication in an English translation of Professor Durkheim's study of the *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*[1] affords an opportunity for a brief consideration of the modern attempt to explain religion in terms of sociology. Although the book in its French form is not quite new, it still holds the field as a solid contribution representing the views of a most important present-day school of thought. It ought specially to arrest the attention of missionaries, as the sociological school, of which Professor Durkheim is the leader in France, rests its claims and explanations upon sources which are largely missionary, and upon religions which missionaries are more fitted than anyone else to study and to understand. It is needless to say that if sociological theories were to be accepted without qualification, missionaries would perforce have to modify to a considerable extent their attitude towards these religions in the mission field.

Professor Durkheim's object is to study the origin of religion. Religion has a real existence. It is a fact established by sociology, and has outlived all its critics and all the objections urged against it. It must therefore be founded in the nature of things, for it is a sociological law that no institution based on falsehood and error can survive. Religion has thus its roots in reality and corresponds to a human need. The reasons which explain it may be very

[1] *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse : Le Système Totémique en Australie.* Par Emile Durkheim, Professeur à la Faculté des Lettres de l'Université de Paris. Paris : Librairie Félix Alcan. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life : A Study in Religious Sociology.* By Emile Durkheim, translated by Joseph Ward Swain. London : George Allen & Unwin.

different from those put forward by believers. Nevertheless such reasons exist, and it is the business of science to discover them. We are consequently justified in refusing our assent to all theories about religion which lead to the conclusion that it is a mere illusion. Professor Durkheim approaches the question of the origin of religion under new conditions which may be briefly described. He makes no attempt to study many religions, but confines his attention to one—the most simple and primitive that can be known ; a religion, that is to say, found among a people whose social organization is the simplest yet known, and a religion that does not need for its explanation the help of any religion previously existing. The reasons for this choice are purely reasons of method. Sociology must study simple things before those which are complex, and the beginning of an evolution before its final terms. Further, before an institution has become complicated it is easier to resolve it into its constituent elements. Lastly, since in the primitive group individuality is less developed and uniformity nearly perfect, it is easier to grasp the nature of religion. Mythologies and theologies have not yet done their work ; the religious fact still visibly carries the mark of its origin. These reasons explain why Durkheim chooses a primitive religion as the object of his study. His choice also has the advantage of throwing more light on the theory of knowledge which in the present volume forms the second subject of the author's inquiries ; the first systems of representation were of religious origin. Religion contributed to form human thought. The essential ideas or categories which dominate all our intellectual life and form the solid framework of our thinking (ideas of time, space, class, number, cause, substance, personality) have their birth and origin in religion, according to the thesis maintained by Professor Durkheim. And as religion in his view is social in its fundamental nature, the categories of thought are also social. The problem of knowledge is stated in new terms. The hypothesis of the social origin

of these categories, it is claimed, combines the conditions of empiricism and apriorism without incurring any of their inconveniences. It explains the essential principles of the apriorists; the authority of reason is the very authority of society transferring itself to a certain manner of thought. Durkheim thus proposes to give us two new theories—one of the religious life and the other of knowledge.

Before looking for the most primitive and simple religion that can be found, it is necessary to define what is meant by a religion. This definition will help us to distinguish what has a religious character from what has not, and it is of great importance in Durkheim's theory. What characteristic qualities are evidence that we have to do with a religion? Is it the idea of the supernatural? No, replies Durkheim; this has not played a large part in all religions and is a comparatively recent appearance. Primitive man does not possess the idea of mystery which presupposes the idea of natural laws and of determinism. Is it then the idea of divinity? The answer again is No, even if by belief in divinity we mean belief in spiritual beings who cannot properly be called gods. Religion is not the belief in spiritual beings, for there are great religions from which the idea of gods is absent or in which it holds a secondary place—Buddhism, for example, in its essential elements, and Jainism. Even in deistic religions there are rites which are quite independent of the thought of gods and of spiritual beings. Religion goes beyond the idea of gods or spirits. We must look elsewhere for its essence. Durkheim finds the common characteristic of all religions in the classification of all things into two opposite groups, which he designates by the terms 'sacred' and 'profane.' Rites, gestures, beings, things, words, expressions may be sacred. The opposition between sacred and profane things does not come from the fact that sacred things belong to a class superior in dignity, but merely from the fact that they are distinct and separate. Another characteristic is necessary to distinguish religion

from magic, and this is the existence of religious churches, whereas the practice of magic does not require a church. We may therefore define religion as ' 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 ' (p. 47).

With the help of this definition Durkheim sets about the search for the elementary religion he desires to study. Neither the theory of animism, which finds in dreams the first beginning of the evolution of religion, nor the theory of naturism, which finds it in certain natural forces, serves his purpose, since the germ of the opposition that separates the profane from the sacred cannot be found in the nature either of man or of the universe. Both these views are obliged to admit the existence of hallucinations and to regard religion as a mere illusion. Behind animism and naturism there must exist another kind of cult more fundamental and primitive. It is that which ethnologists have called totemism. Totemism was first discovered among the aboriginal inhabitants of America. Then Grey pointed out its existence in Australia. Sir James Frazer studied in it 1887, and his investigations were followed by those of Robertson Smith. The most important works on Australian totemism are those of Baldwin, Spencer and Gillen, and those of the German missionary Karl Strehlow. Professor Durkheim uses them constantly as sources of information. He devotes his attention especially to Australian totemism, a method which permits him to attain a greater precision. Only occasionally he draws facts and illustrations from American totemism, when these are able to throw fresh light on the subject.

Totemism cannot be separated from a very primitive social organization—organization in clans. The members of a clan consider themselves as related to one another, not from the fact of blood connexion but from the fact that they bear the same name. This name is called ' totem '

from a word applied by an Algonquin tribe, the Ojibway, and adopted by ethnologists, though it is in no sense Australian. The totem belongs to one clan only, and no other clan can bear the same name. It is generally the name of some animal or vegetable species. The totem is also an emblem, a kind of badge, a coat of arms. Its image is reproduced everywhere, drawn on rocks and on the earth. The members of the clan cut their hair in such a way as to imitate the external aspect of their totem and also tattoo themselves with it.

The totem has finally a religious character. It is the type of sacred things. Australians make constant use in their rites of certain instruments called *churinga.* The *churinga* are made of wood or of polished stone, generally of oval or oblong shape; on them is engraved a design representing the totem. They are kept in a sacred place which profane people are not allowed to approach, and where wounded animals cannot be killed. They are sacred from the mere fact that they bear the emblem of the totem. Totemic animals or vegetables are sacred for a similar reason; they are not allowed to be eaten, and this prohibition is frequently absolute for profane people. The individual man himself is also sacred. He is regarded as a kinsman of the totemic animal since he bears the same name. He believes himself to be not only a man but also a totemic animal or plant. Certain parts of his person are especially sacred—blood, which women ought not to see flowing, and hair, which is used to make belts or fillets for the cult.

Some scholars believed that they could explain totemism by deriving it from animism or naturism, but Professor Durkheim finds these explanations inadequate. Accordingly he tries to explain totemism by itself, and seeks for the ideas which gave rise to it and have a religious character. This brings us to a very important point in Professor Durkheim's theory. Thus far he has described various beliefs relating to sacred things; he now appeals to the

notion of an impersonal force which is called *mana* in Melanesia. This idea gives unity to totemism and explains the sacred character assigned to so many different things. This sacred character does not come from the things themselves but from a principle common to them all, common to totem animals as well as to the members of the clan. The totem cult is fundamentally related to this impersonal force, which is a kind of god immanent in the world and diffused in an innumerable variety of things. The Australian does not represent these forces as immaterial, but gives them a material form of an animal or of a plant. The cult which is offered to the totem is offered to this force through it. The force is both material and moral. It is true that the native does not conceive this *mana* as clearly as we can, but we can find the idea in a developed form in societies where the evolution of totemism is more advanced. The Iroquois call it *orenda*, the Sioux, *wakan*; they speak of it as if it were a supernatural and immaterial force which can appear in anything. It may therefore be inferred that the idea belongs to the spirit of totemism. This principle regarded by some tribes as absolutely general is in others restricted to the clan by a kind of specialization. It is the original matter out of which have been constructed all gods and spirits. It precedes animism. The principle of totemism is the first of human religious ideas.

The idea of *mana* gives to Professor Durkheim the explanation of totemism. The problem of the origin of totemism is thus the problem of the origin of *mana*. How and out of what materials have men been led to construct the idea of *mana*? What aroused in their minds the idea of an impersonal force is, in Professor Durkheim's view, society. The totem is at once the emblem of the god and of the society. It means that god and society are one, and that the god of the clan is the clan itself.

Social relations thus furnish all that is necessary to awaken in men's minds the sense of the divine. The relation of the individual to society is one of dependence

similar to that of worshippers with their gods. Society pursues ends which are not those of the individual, and it demands that the individual should sacrifice his own interests. It requires him to surrender his desires and sometimes his life, and he obeys. He has for it a feeling of respect which prevents him from doing what it forbids. Further, society has on the individual a strengthening and vitalizing influence which is not always easy to detect but which is real. When a man is in communion of thought with his fellowmen he has increased confidence in himself. If he does his duty, he finds in the manifestations of esteem or affection a feeling of comfort, and the sentiments of his fellowmen towards him increase his self-respect. We owe to society the gifts which create civilization. Towards these forces which we feel confusedly in the world about us, our feelings are different from those awakened by ordinary and material things. There are in us two kinds of feelings, and there exist for us two kinds of realities—the world of sacred things and the world of profane things. Society itself makes things sacred by the respect which it requires for certain words and persons, and the care which it takes to ensure that they are respected. The Australian clan is better able than a more progressive society to awaken in the mind an idea of the divine. The native is more closely dependent than the civilized man on his social group. The life of Australian societies goes through two very different periods—one of dispersion, when everyone is occupied with hunting and fishing and there are no religious ceremonies, and one of concentration, when the clan assembles itself and lives the most intense social life. There is singing, dancing, howling; the native passes out of himself and believes himself to be transported into another world. This period cannot last very long, and the man returns to a calm and stagnant life again. Out of this contrast arises the opposition between the sacred and the profane life, between sacred and profane things. We here touch the bottom of Professor Durkheim's theory.

What religion in all its forms worships is society. The distinction between the sacred and the profane is a social creation. Society itself is the god. It awakens in men's minds ideas of forces superior to man, transcendent in a sense, but also immanent. This theory gives religion a real foundation and explains it without treating it as a mere illusion.

It remains to be shown how this theory explains the ideas of souls of spirits and of gods, for if these ideas are not at the basis of totemism, they nevertheless exist along with it. From an analysis of the beliefs about the soul which he finds among the Australians (doctrines of reincarnation), Professor Durkheim concludes that the soul is only a part of the totemic principle, some *mana* individualized and incarnated in a particular man. The ideas of gods and of spirits have a similar explanation. The spirits of ancestors are conceived in the same way as individual souls whose existence they help to explain. The great god of the tribe is only a more important ancestral spirit. Totemism has thus a real unity in its complexity. It prepares the way for the religions by which it has been supplanted.

The latter part of Professor Durkheim's book is devoted to a study of the primitive cult in its principal ceremonies. His aim is to discover the characteristic attitudes adopted by primitive man in the celebration of his cult. This study enables Professor Durkheim to control the results to which he has been led. He dwells again on the fact that society is the source of sacred things. The periodic rites revive and recall to memory the collective sense and invigorate it. We cannot follow Professor Durkheim through the long analysis of the forms of the primitive cult. We can only note that he distinguishes a negative cult, consisting of a system of prohibitions and ascetic rites, and a positive cult, in the ceremonies of which the beginnings of the ritual which is to have a large place in more advanced religions are to be found—the offerings and the communion meal.

There is one side of the book of which little has thus far been said—the part which deals with the problem of knowledge. As he proceeds in his study, Professor Durkheim shows the religious origin of one category after another. His chapter on the cosmology of totemism helps him to explain how the idea of class has a religious origin. With regard to the idea of *mana*, for instance, he shows that the idea of religious force is the prototype of the general idea of force. In speaking of the soul, he explains how the category of personality took shape. In describing the imitative rites employed to assure the fertility of the species, he shows the emergence of the principle of causality and of the idea of power. He thereby reaches the conclusion that logic and conceptual thought have their origin in society, and that the categories are the expression of social things.

We may now inquire how far Durkheim has achieved his object of giving religion a solid basis and of explaining it without reducing it to a mere illusion. Is the society which we worship the real society, the defects and imperfections of which we know so well? Professor Durkheim is prepared to accept an affirmative answer. All the vices have had their divinity, and Satan or the anti-god is an essential part of religion. But if the society which is worshipped is, as seems more probable, the ideal society, this idealization may be regarded as a natural product of the social life and can be easily explained by the idealization of the collective life. There is no mystery in it. Society is consequently the only basis of religion.

The position adopted by Durkheim is deserving of attention. Instead of treating religion as false and regarding it as purely illusory, he admits that there must be something in it, and this lends an interest to his theory. In recognizing religion to be a reality, Durkheim places himself in opposition to many thinkers who are openly hostile to him, and this is true also of his recognition that it is a force. He sees that in all religions the worshipper seeks and finds a

greater force, a feeling of comfort and strength for which he prays to his divinity. Having performed certain rites and ceremonies he feels stronger. Religion (that is to say, for Professor Durkheim, society) has on man a strengthening and vitalizing influence. For Professor Durkheim it is a fact that religion helps man, and that the need of help and of force lies at its root. He is no foe to religion, and this serious attempt on the part of a man who is not himself a believer to understand the meaning of religion is both interesting and important.

His book is rich in interesting observations. Nevertheless we cannot accept the author's conclusions, and must subject his theory to criticism. First as regards his method, can we judge an institution by its origin? Must we not see all that it has become as well as its humble beginnings? Professor Durkheim himself says (p. 97) that in order to understand an institution 'it is frequently well to follow it into the advanced stages of its evolution, for sometimes it is only when it is fully developed that its real signification appears with the greatest clearness.' Is not this true of religion? The study of its elementary forms is not without difficulties. We find ourselves confronted with rites, beliefs and ceremonies forming a confused whole, where it is not always easy to distinguish the essential characteristics of religion. 'As long as men are still making their first steps in the art of expressing their thought,' says Professor Durkheim himself, 'it is not easy for the observer to perceive that which moves them, for there is nothing to translate clearly that which passes in these obscure minds, which have only a confused and ephemeral knowledge of themselves' (p. 96). There is a risk, we may venture to suggest, of interpreting the facts in the light of the inquirers' own ideas, and of regarding as essential elements what has been considered *a priori* to be such. Professor Durkheim starts with a preliminary definition. But he uses it in more than one place as if it were the last result of his study. He gives it a doctrinal

value, whereas its professed purpose was the smaller one of making clearer the distinction between religious and non-religious things. In this opposition between sacred and profane things we already see the social opposed to the individual as something absolutely heterogeneous, and we may well ask whether the totemic cult was not selected by the author because it offered an easy explanation and verification of this opposition.

The crucial point in Professor Durkheim's theory is the point where he introduces the idea of *mana* or totemic principle. It may reasonably be asked whether the idea of *mana* is in reality in its origin as totemic and as dependent upon society as Professor Durkheim makes it out to be. This force diffused through the whole universe seems rather to be of a cosmic character. Society is undoubtedly more powerful than man, but nature is still more powerful, and society, especially as it exists among clans and primitive tribes, is very dependent on its natural environment. When Professor Durkheim says in his chapter on the Cosmology of Totemism that the Australian 'looks upon the universe as the great tribe to one of whose divisions he himself belongs' (p. 141), and that all known things belong to the tribe, is he speaking in more than a figurative sense? The importance of society, which is real but inferior, seems to be exaggerated. At all events, this exaggeration is obvious in Professor Durkheim's theory of knowledge. Human thought for him is wholly derived from religion, that is to say, from society. The influence of society in the formation of concepts cannot be denied, but alongside of religious thought there was from the beginning secular thought. Man had to live, and it seems probable that the idea of causality, for example, arose more out of this practical need than from the imitative rites employed to assure the fertility of the totemic species. Thought as a whole comes from the whole mind, and it would not be difficult to find in Professor Durkheim's pages acknowledgment of the existence of individual factors

besides those that are collective. In their origin, art, religion and science were closely intermingled. All had a religious colouring. But this does not mean that religion produced everything and created art and science. Professor Durkheim exaggerates the part played by society in the origin of religion and in the problem of knowledge. With regard to *mana*, its origin must be regarded as different from totemic ideas. The question therefore is whether the religious character is due to the totem or to *mana*. Does the totem give *mana* its religious character or *vice versa*? It is possible to hold the second theory, and Belot in the *Revue Philosophique*, May 1913, shows that a theory taking the idea of *mana* as its basis may be adopted and maintained as well as that of Professor Durkheim. Thus the basis of the latter's theory appears to be narrow and inconsistent. For this reason his book, which represents an important contribution to the study of religion, does not speak the last word regarding its origin. Society is a factor of great importance, but it cannot explain the origin of religion, nor does it suffice to provide a solid groundwork for the reality of things.

To sum up, from the point of view of a believer, this volume does not fulfil its aim. The theory does away with religion and ultimately denies it. If God is the society in the midst of which we live, and if this society is so imperfect and so wicked, what spiritual help can we find in Him? If the sociological interpretation of prayer and of communion is true, we can no longer pray, and soon all religion will die. Like naturism and animism, the theory which regards religion as the mythical representation of a reality already known in the end destroys religion.[1]

H. Bois

[1] Unbelievers like Belot acknowledge this, and maintain that no religious institution or cult could subsist if the sociological theory of religion were proved.