RELIGION IN PRIMITIVE SOCIETY[1]

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EARLY European travellers among savage peoples generally related that they had little or no religion. Anthropological writers often give the impression that they have little else. This contrast is, of course, to some extent accounted for by the great increase in knowledge about these peoples, but it is also due to a wider definition in modern times of what may be regarded as a religious fact. If the early traveller found among a people nothing corresponding to what he himself had been brought up to regard as religion he was prone to report that they had no religion, only some superstitions. As, however, the definition of religion was extended by anthropologists to cover ancestor cults, totemic observances, fetishism, and even magic and witchcraft, the part played by religious conceptions in the simpler societies received greater emphasis. The widening of the definition would seem to be due in part to changes in our own intellectual atmosphere. The early explorers were Christians. The early anthropologists were not. For the explorers had religion and the savage had not. But the positivism of the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, associated in most people's minds with the name of Comte, had had so strong an influence that the positions tended to become reversed in anthropological theories from the middle of last century till well into the present one. Since it was then held that religion is a way of thinking characteristic of the earliest phase of human development, savages had to be portrayed as totally lost in its darkness. Sir James Frazer, speaking of primitive religion, asserted that 'the life of the savage is saturated with it'. Lévy-Bruhl declared that 'the reality in which primitive peoples move is itself mystical'.

[1] Broadcast in the Third Programme of the B.B.C. on March 1st, 1953.

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1953.tb00580.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

But though pictured as immersed in religious superstition, it was incompatible with positivist and evolutionary dogmas that the most primitive peoples known to us should have monotheistic religions, or indeed even the conception of God. Sir Edward Tylor, the leading anthropologist in England in the latter half of the last century laid it down as an axiom that the idea of God is a late conception in human history, the product of a long development of animistic thought; and this was so much taken for granted that no one would listen when Andrew Lang, and after him Wilhelm Schmidt, pointed out that, as far as the most primitive peoples in the world today are concerned, the evidence points to the opposite conclusion.

Even the best scholars of the time were so dominated by the idea of evolution that they were blind to evidence. Let me take a final example. William Robertson Smith, who died at an early age in 1894, was perhaps the only well-known writer on anthropological topics who was not what used to be called a free-thinker—he was a Presbyterian minister. According to him the most primitive form of religious sacrifice, including the earliest Hebrew sacrifice, in which he was particularly interested, is a communion in which men and their tribal god feast on the flesh of the victim, which is moreover itself the god in another form, a totemic or theriomorphic god. This theory had a powerful influence, and not only on those primarily engaged in Semitic and anthropological studies, but also on theologians and psychologists. But when we look into the matter we find that there is almost no evidence which would lead us to conclude that primitive peoples have a totemic communion of this kind and that there is no trace of it in the records relating to the early Hebrews. The theory was simply another example of the Victorian anthropologists' tendency to imagine what would be the crudest and most materialistic form of some institution, custom, or belief in their own society and then to postulate this as its earliest historical form.

Such theories of origins—in the chronological sense of the word—are now seen to be little more than speculation and they are accepted by no anthropologists today. But what

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1953.tb00580.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

generally went with them, assumptions about psychological origins, are still current. Even if religion is primitive superstition, it still remained to account for its existence, and this was done by introspection. The Victorian anthropologist endeavoured to think out how he would have reached savage beliefs were he a savage. The earliest explanations of religion were in terms of intellect. According to Tylor, religion began when men tried to account rationally, though erroneously, for such phenomena as death, sleep, and dreams by supposing that there is a soul detachable from the body. Tylor thought that, having hit on this idea, primitive man proceeded to endow animals and plants, and even what we regard as inanimate objects, with souls, and this led eventually to belief in powerful beings imbued with the same quality—gods, spirits and demons. Frazer told us that men first trusted entirely in the power of magic, but that when the more intelligent of them saw that magic does not really achieve the ends aimed at, they substituted for it a belief in men-like beings who direct the course of nature and can be prevailed on, by one means or another, to alter it to man's advantage. Other anthropologists—if we may include Max Müller and the rest of the nature-myth school under this heading—were busy explaining religion in terms of personification of such natural phenomena as sun, sky, and rain.

These interpretations did not satisfy anthropologists of the next generation. Psychology had in the meanwhile changed its course, and it was now taught that man is guided by his appetites and emotions rather than by his reason, and if this were so for twentieth-century Europeans it must be all the more so for primitive peoples. Explanations of their religions must therefore be sought in affective rather than in cognitive states. The method of analysis was still introspection, but instead of asking how you would think if you were a savage, you now asked yourself how you would feel. Dr Marett, for example, told us that religion is essentially a mode of feeling, its characteristic emotion being awe. Professor Malinowski told us that religion arises and functions in situations of emotional stress, and particularly at the crises of life such as initiation and death. It opens up

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1953.tb00580.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

escapes where there is no empirical way out. Other anthropologists told us that religion is just feeling strongly about things or that it is characterised by a kind of thrill. It is difficult even to discuss theories of this kind, for evidence is seldom cited in support of them, and it is in any case perhaps unnecessary to make the attempt, for once again psychology has moved on. Awe, amazement, and thrill are no longer part of its stock-in-trade. Catching up with it, anthropologists now often explain religion in terms of projection, following Freud, for whom religion is an illusion characteristic of a phase of immaturity both for the individual and for the human race.

Durkheim and his colleagues and pupils of the *Année Sociologique* have steadfastly, and in my opinion rightly, opposed any such psychological explanations of religion. In their view religious facts, whatever else they may be, are social facts and cannot therefore be explained only in terms of individual psychology. Religion is not an individual matter. It is a social phenomenon, something general, traditional and obligatory. The aim of the sociologist is therefore to discover in what way religious conceptions and practices are interconnected and in what way religious facts are bound up with other kinds of social facts.

Presumably no one would deny that religous thought and practice are powerfully affected by prevailing economic, political, and other circumstances, and this is particularly evident in those primitive societies with which anthropologists are chiefly concerned. Religious rites are there performed in relation to vital events and dominant interests: birth, initiation, marriage, sickness, death, hunting, animal husbandry, and so on; and they are intimately concerned also with family and kinship interests and with political institutions. The influence of other activities of the social life on religion may not be immediately so evident in highly developed and complex societies, but a little reflection shows how strong it has been, and is. However, as that great nineteenth-century social historian, Fustel de Coulanges, so tirelessly proclaimed, both anthropological and historical facts show us also that religion does not play a merely passive role but shapes domestic, economic and political institutions

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as much as, or more than, they mould it. This then is the task of the social anthropologist, to show the relation of religion to social life in general. It is not his task to 'explain' religion.

For Durkheim and his school, with whom in this matter I am in agreement, generalisations about 'religion' are discreditable. They are always too ambitious and take account of only a few of the facts. The anthropologist should be both more modest and more scholarly. He should restrict himself to religions of a certain type or of related peoples, or to particular problems of religious thought and practice. Durkheim did not try to explain religion as a universal phenomenon but only to understand certain characteristic forms it takes in certain primitive societies. He wrote on such topics as the polarity of the sacred and the profane, the sociological significance of totemism among the Australian aboriginals, and primitive forms of classification. Hubert and Mauss and Hertz set themselves particular problems such as the nature of primitive sacrifice and of magic, the relation of mortuary rites to representations of death in Indonesia, and the reasons for the pre-eminence of the right hand among certain peoples. Sweeping generalisations reached by dialectical analysis of concepts were abandoned in favour of limited conclusions reached by inductive analysis of observed facts. Such studies are, however, few and far between, and it cannot be claimed that anthropologists have yet built up a science of comparative religion, or even that they have yet rid themselves entirely of those preoccupations which have in the past hindered its construction.

We are far from the rigorous discipline which men like Mauss had in mind, a discipline which supposes the specialist study of a lifetime and which, while setting limits to aims and problems, necessitates scholarship which embraces not only a vast range of information about primitive peoples but also the study of the history of religions, of sacred texts, and of exegesis and theology. We shall remain far from it while anthropologists set themselves up to explain in a few sentences the religions of the world, and especially when they do so in terms of 'sentiments' and of 'awe', 'thrill', 'projection' and so forth. Those of my colleagues who continue to

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1953.tb00580.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

write in such terms naturally would not accept this judgment.

It seems to me to be only too evident that our study of religion has hardly begun to be a scientific study and that its conclusions are more often posited on the facts than derived from them. Let me give some brief examples. Anthropologists still distinguish between, or pointedly do not distinguish between, as the case may be, magic and religion among primitive peoples in terms of categories derived from an analysis of ideas of our own culture. The scientific procedure, on the contrary, would be to start from distinctions made by primitive peoples between two kinds of thought and action and then to determine what are the essential features of each and the main differences between them. If one then cares to label them magic and religion one may do so, and if one does so one has reached an understanding by observation and induction of the difference between magic and religion, so defined, among the peoples under investigation. Again, most anthropologists have simply posited the ambiguity of their own thought on primitive peoples in classing together pneumatic conceptions and animistic conceptions under the general title of 'spirit'. Had they started from an analysis of primitive concepts they would have avoided this confusion. A final example—it is a very common custom, especially in Africa, for two men to bring themselves, and sometimes their kin also, into a close relationship by drinking one another's blood. Anthropologists have tended to explain this rite by saying that as kin are people of one blood, so those who partake of each other's blood become kin by doing so, but once more they are reaching conclusions by analysis of their own concepts for, as a recent book by Dr Tegnaeus shows, those African peoples who have this custom do not think of kinship in terms of blood. In other words, in the sphere of religion, anthropologists still have not yet sufficiently broken away from the rationalist, introspective, and ethno-centric anthropology of the nineteenth century; and their classifications still lack objectivity.

To obtain objectivity in the study of primitive religions what is required is to build up general conclusions from

https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-2005.1953.tb00580.x Published online by Cambridge University Press

particular ones. One must not ask 'What is religion?', but what are the main features of, let us say, the religion of one Melanesian people; then one must seek to compare the religion of that people with the religions of several other Melanesian peoples who are nearest to the first in their cultures and social institutions: and then after a laborious comparative study of all Melanesian peoples, one may be able to say something general about Melanesian religions as a whole. One can only take this long road. There is no short cut. The great number of field studies now being carried out in many parts of the world among primitive peoples and the turning away of students from speculation to modest and detailed comparative research within restricted geographical provinces give hope that we may eventually reach by this means certain general and significant conclusions about the nature of the religions of primitive peoples as a whole.

But if we are yet far from this goal, at least we know today very much more about primitive religions than we did thirty years ago. The fact that the interpretations that satisfied the Victorian and Edwardian anthropologists now appear so lacking in understanding that we are surprised that anyone could ever have thought them adequate, is in itself some measure of our advance. We have moved away from their theoretical positions because they are no longer tenable in the light of our now much greater knowledge of primitive religions. It will give you some idea of the volume of facts now at our disposal, and stored for the use of posterity, if I tell you that Wilhelm Schmidt's work, *The Origin of the Idea of God*, which deals solely, and in a summary form, with the religions of primitive peoples, already runs into some ten thousand pages and is not yet completed. We may take legitimate pride in this accumulation of knowledge from all parts of the world.

And it is not just a question of accumulation of facts, but it is also a matter of evaluation and interpretaion. The modern anthropological field worker living for two or three years close to the native people he is studying, and speaking to them in their own language, does not merely record beliefs and rites as isolated facts but can see them in perspec-

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tive and hence judge their significance. What seems when studied in isolation to be bizarre or unreasonable, appears quite differently when seen in its full social context. Religious myths, for example, then appear not as stories requiring some special interpretation but as integral parts of rites in which their meaning is embedded and through the enactment of which it is made manifest. Likewise, the rite of animal sacrifice does not appear any more as a simple and more or less mechanical act once its performance is related not only to the full range of circumstances in which it takes place but also to the whole system of moral and religious conceptions of the people who practise it. It is then seen to be a highly complex rite made up of symbolical acts which can only be understood in the light of a detailed examination of a people's entire categories of thought. Indeed, the importance of symbolism in the religions of primitive peoples is only beginning to be appreciated as our knowledge of their languages increases, but it is becoming more and more evident that it often conceals a theology which appears to be lacking altogether when one seeks only for a rational system of dogma.

Without discussing any further examples, I can say in conclusion that anthropological studies in the last thirty years or so have constructed at any rate the framework of a science of what is sometimes called Comparative Religion, and that this framework rests on solid foundations of field research, and not, as in the last century, on what was for the most part rationalist speculation. Social anthropology is therefore now in a better position to make a contribution to other subjects concerned with problems of religion, such as Theology, the Philosophy of Religion, Ethics, and critical and exegetical studies of Sacred Texts, and I believe that its significance for these related disciplines will become increasingly evident and important.

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