Miscellany – Durkheim
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“What dost thou chiefly learn by these Commandment?”

“I learn two things: my duty towards God, and my duty towards my Neighbour.”[i]

My duty towards God was short and simple; it was inspired by a fervour, an almost ecstasy, that carried one safely to the rather breathless end. My duty towards my neighbour was long, difficult, intricate, full of pit-falls to the unwary, and happy the “good child” who reached the goal without a stumble. One thing was clear. No “good child,” no honoured parent ever doubted that his duty towards God and his duty towards his neighbour were distinct; separate though compatible. He had learnt “two things.”

And now comes Professor Durkheim and tells us they are one; that in intent God is your Neighbour—the capital letter is justified.

To the most up-to-date and open-minded catechumen this pronouncement comes at first as a shock. Is not this sheer atheism, rank irreligion? Sheer atheism in a sense, yes; rank irreligion,
no. Man, Professor Durkheim holds, not only always has been religious, he always will and must be. Moreover, religion on the whole is not only for man inevitable; it is positively beneficent. Theology is nearly all a misrepresentation, but “religion has been able on the whole to compensate for its own secondary errors.”[1] What, then, is religion?

To answer this question is the object of the book, but Professor Durkheim is far too scientific a sociologist to set out merely from a definition. His method is not to define religion but to examine religious phenomena. To clear the road, however, he deals with the canonical definitions and has small difficulty in showing them inadequate. As a mere matter of fact religion did not arise in the other world of hallucinations and dreams, still less in an awestruck attitude towards the infinite. Religion is not to Professor Durkheim—and here this arch-rationalist is at issue with most rationalists—a terror and a nightmare, not even a beautiful dream, it is a stern and very helpful reality. It—and here we scent the pragmatist—works.

To get at the essence of the thing we must examine its simplest forms, those least embarrassed by secondary characteristics. Professor Durkheim selects for his purpose the most primitive state of society known to us, totemism. Better, he constantly tells us, one body of facts, one real unit carefully scrutinized in its entirety than a mass of accidental resemblances loosed from their surroundings. Totemism has no god and hence no worship, no belief in the immortality of the individual soul, two things we are apt to think of as distinctively religious. Yet we cannot deny it the name of a religion, for it has in high measure what lies behind all gods and rites and dogmas, the notion of sanctity—of two worlds, distinct though in frequent contact, the sacred and the profane. The final question that faces us is what is Sanctity? How did man, faced in actuality by only one world, come to conceive of two, the sacred and the profane?

Sanctity is not mystery, not the quality of the unknown or unknowable. Mystery is but a late-born correlative of clarity of thought unexperienced by the primitive. Still less is sanctity moral purity. Roberts de Smith long ago made it abundantly clear that the impure and the sacred were often co-extensive. Sacra are things tabooed, things socially fenced round by prohibitions. Now a totem is [63] the typical sanctity; it is sacro-sanct. What, then, is the totem? Nothing, whether plant or animal, but the emblem of the clan. The totem is not a single animal sacred for its strength or cunning, a totem may be a feeble insect. It is a class of plants or animals and it stands for a human class or rather a clan. It is the focus of clan-emotion, the primitive national flag. A totem is not a god, though it is the stuff out of which later gods are made; it is the will of the clan externalized, objectified, and of this collective will religion is compact. Religion is social ab initio if not in saecula saeculorum.

The idea takes some living with. At first our individualistic minds, reared in the warm atmosphere of a personal god, find it cold and arid. We are conscious chiefly of loss. Something is gone from our mental outlook, some mystery, some enchantment, some solace long harboured. Our holy world has lost her halo. But by degrees we adjust ourselves and become conscious that old poisonous vapours have lifted and the landscape is clearer and cleaner. Moreover, we are dealing now with realities, not fictions, with actual forces at work to-day, not with dream fancies or fear-begotten bogeys. The longer we think the clearer it becomes that this theory answers to the pragmatic test. It explains so much, clears up so many muddles, leaves the world so much more intelligible and ordered.

Perhaps the classical scholar will be the first convert. Viewed in the light of his ancestor the totem, a classical god every other god is seen to be but the externalization of a group-emotion. The scholar understands now why the thiasos of the Bacchoi project a god Bacchos. The Bacchoi are not followers called after the name of a ready-made god Bacchos; Bacchos is but the exhalation, the objectification of the Bacchoi. Everywhere, by a pardonable paradox, worshipper antedates the god. The hearts of all collectivists, whether Catholic or Congregational, should go...
out to greet this new doctrine. The Church not only fosters, it positively engenders the god; without a living Church, as Protestants are sadly learning, the god dies down or shifts into the barren devil of scepticism.

Yet another point, and it is an argument of which it seems to me Professor Durkheim—who is no specialist in classics—hardly makes the use he might. Yet it seems made to his hand. The capital discovery recently made in Greek religion—a discovery wholly due to the inroads of anthropology—is this: the Greek Mysteries are now known to have out of Initiation Ceremonies. Initiation ceremonies are primarily nothing more nor less than rites of introducing the full-grown man into his group rites, of turning him from an individual into a social being. At the back and base, then, of the most spiritual and profound forms of Greek religion we have simply a social fact, the social fact of induction into the group.

Now every handbook tells us that the Mysteries—e.g., the Eleusinian Mysteries—held out to man the hope of a future life, thus opening out to him new spiritual vistas and leading to higher moral purity. Perfectly true, but what has this to do with initiation into the tribe and social sanctions? Everything, it would seem. The primitive knows nothing of individual immortality, but he firmly believes in reincarnation—i.e., tribal immortality. There is to him a given stock of, so to speak, tribal souls—at death these pass out of sight. They do not die in our sense, at birth they come back reincarnated in the new generation, the grandchild is in dead grandfather or great-grandfather. Here again we touch a solid basis of fact. The clan does live on though the individual dies. It is to the reality of this racial immortality we are coming back nowadays. Now it is to this community of clan-souls that the boy at initiation is introduce this in the doctrine of immortality he learns. A later egotism develops this doctrine into personal immortality.

Again, at initiation, as we have seen, the boy is introduced to his spirit ancestors and to all the sanctities of his tribe. He sees and learns the totem marks and blazons unknown before. He is made free of them, learns how to handle and use them. He thereby enters a new world, the world of the sacred—and henceforth his life is two-fold, he lives half in his profane individual life, half in his life that is sacred social. The bit of him that is socialized is his soul in contact with all the other socialised souls, the soul is before all things contagious. At initiation his soul is born; that is he, the individual, is socialised. Hence the importance in initiation of the Rites of the New Birth. Women as a rule are not initiated: therefore they have no soul, no socialised part: therefore they cannot safely see the sacra, the social sanctities of the tribe. When the clan gathers together, and the Bull-Roarer begins its holy booming, women must fly or fall with their faces flat to the ground. The Suffragist more than she wots is fighting for her immortal soul—i.e., her social existence. Primitive man, nearer realities, felt by instinct that only a member of Parliament could fitly go to Church.

All cults, then, are primarily rites of initiation, rites de passage, means of sale transit from the individual-profane into the social-sacred and back from the social-sacred to the individual-profane. Hence a fact that has surprised unwitting investigators: rites that we expect to be alien, such as the rites of death and marriage, are found to be analogous, even identical. All involve this intense consciousness of two alien but contagious worlds, the natural or individual, the sacred or social. Professor Gilbert Murray has recently shown that conceptions such as our Heaven and Hell, felt to be so characteristically religious and even to some extent Christian, took primarily their shape and even colour from Initiation Ceremonies.

This sense of two worlds which is essentially religious is simply at the outset social. What light this throws all round! We see now instantly why religion is characteristic of humanity. It is humanity. The kindest and best and cleverest of individualistic elephants knows nothing of sanctity, nothing of social sanction. Again, instantly, we understand the real function of religion. Its very essence is to free the man from his individual whims and lift him to the heights of
collective desire. The social will is not the sum of the individual wills, otherwise it would only be confusion worse confounded, it is the portion of each separate will that is, that can be, in common, the portion that nowhere conflicts. It is this that is engendered and intensified by the life of the herd—that is its necessary condition. This is what we call our “better selves.” Religion not only kindles and fosters motive power but it generalises the will of man, it is the nursery and forcing house of those fair plants, tribal and national ideals.

Professor Durkheim goes further; and here one hesitates to follow him, for his sociology borders on a metaphysic. He holds that the categories are religious—i.e., social in origin—that the notion of Time, e.g., is based primarily on the divisions of the religious calendar, the feasts and fasts, and Space on the spatial ordering of the clans in camp. In support of his view he brings a mass of primitive facts. This metaphysical portion of his system has been critically examined in Dr. C. E. Gehlke’s monograph, Emile Durkheim’s Contributions to Sociological Theory, issued by the Faculty of Political Science of Columbia University (1915), and to this one may refer the metaphysicians among one’s readers. Dr. Gehlke’s monograph contains a valuable Bibliography of Durkheim literature. Such a Bibliography should, I think, have been appended to the translation I am discussing, as Professor Durkheim’s position can only be fully understood in the light of his general sociological outlook, an outlook based on prodigious labour and the co-operation of a whole school of workers in various fields, as witnessed by the volumes of the Année Sociologique. Before leaving the translation I may say that it is clear and adequate. Only twice have I had to refer to the French to see what a passage meant. Professor Durkheim’s style, somewhat heavy and reiterative, has no magic incommunicable in a translation. The translator has a (American?) fondness for new coinage—“evitable,” “imprecise,” and he should control his passion for the taboo-word “commence.”

Professor Durkheim’s remarkable theory on the origin of religion was before the world in 1898. It reaches us tardily in 1915, but perhaps just at the psychological moment. We are a people of individualists and our understanding of religion has been perpetually blocked by the two great individualistic facts and projections, Kings, and their correlatives, gods. France is ahead of us here. France is more solidaire. She, the fostermother of syndicalism, has long understood the power of the group to project the god and—the devil: her Unanimist poets have long voiced their sense of immense social responsibility and cried with René Arcos

“Each man makes God a little—with his life.”

Individualist England is lifted just now on a tide of collective emotion intensified to the pitch of religion. A book like that of Professor Durkheim may well help her to look Leviathan in the face sanely. It makes for clear and even cold thinking. It points to a due balance of social motor intensity and conscious humane individuality.

Entre cette France si libre et les Allemands furieux […] ce n’est pas un fleuve qui fait la séparation — bien plus que le Rhin il y a tout l’abîme qui s’espace entre la conscience et l’instinct.

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NOTES

1. [The Book of Common Prayer]
2. The Elementary Forms or Religious Life. A Study in Religious Sociology, by Emile Durkheim, Professor of the Faculty of Letters in the University of Paris. Translated by John Ward Swan, M.A. George Allen & Unwin. 15s. net.
5. [Charles Elmer Gehlke, Émile Durkheim’s Contributions to Sociological Theory, Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of philosophy in the Faculty of Political Science, New York, Columbia University, 1915, 189 p.]
8. [René Arcos, Ce qui naît : poème, Paris, E. Figuière, 1910.]