

Totemism is a subject of growing importance, daily mentioned in the magazines and papers, but of which there is no good account anywhere—precisely one of those cases where we have an opportunity of getting ahead of every one and getting some reputation. There is no article in the volume for which I am more solicitous. I have taken much personal pains with it, guiding Frazer carefully in his treatment . . .<sup>18</sup>

We shall move on shortly to consider some aspects of Frazer's work; but before we do so, it will be necessary to inquire briefly into parallel developments in France, where the heirs of Auguste Comte, and particularly Émile Durkheim, were producing—partly on the basis of the work of M'Lennan and Robertson Smith—strikingly similar results.

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We have previously touched upon the influence of the Comtean philosophy of history in creating an intellectual climate in nineteenth-century Europe. Comte had many followers, among them Jean-Marie Guyeau (1854-1888), whose book *L'Irréligion de l'avenir* (1887) had confidently predicted the demise of all religion, and the creation of a more or less anarchic and utopian state.

Although this type of sociological prophecy appealed to some, greater influence on the future of religious study was exercised by the less extreme Émile Durkheim (1858-1917).<sup>19</sup> An atheist of Jewish extraction, he studied law, philosophy, social science and *Völkerpsychologie* (the influence of Wundt is clear) and spent his academic career at the universities of Bordeaux and Paris, where he occupied a chair at the Sorbonne from 1892. Among his published works may be mentioned *De la division du travail social* (1893), *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* (1895), *Le Suicide* (1897) and—a classic in the sociology of religion—*Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912).

Comment on a thinker and writer of Durkheim's stature is difficult in a survey of this kind, not only because of the far-ranging character of his work, but also because of the vast secondary literature which has grown up around his name since his death. As far as comparative religion is concerned, however, there are certain themes

<sup>18</sup> *Life*, p. 494f.

<sup>19</sup> Among the mass of writings on Durkheim, mention may be made of Nisbet, *Émile Durkheim* (1965) and Wolff (ed.), *Émile Durkheim 1858-1917* (1960). See also Rex, 'Émile Durkheim', in Raison (ed.), *The Founding Fathers of Social Science* (1969), pp. 128ff.

which recur frequently in Durkheim's writing and which were to place the entire study, in some quarters at least, on a new footing. It is on these—notably his interest in totemism, his consequent interpretation of religion as a social fact *par excellence*, and his parallel conviction that religion can be treated adequately only in terms of its social function—that we must now focus.

First of all it should be noted that Durkheim's work was conceived in sharp reaction against the psychologically-oriented individualism of much of the ostensibly 'social' thought of the late nineteenth century (precisely that kind of thought under the influence of which comparative religion and anthropology first developed). The way to an understanding of the forms in which humans band themselves together is, he held, not through a piecemeal analysis of the minds of the individuals concerned, but through a close study of the groups themselves. There are, in other words, 'social facts', which exercise compelling power over the individual, and which appear to be the product of a collective consciousness, above and beyond the minds of the individuals who make up the collective. Only these 'social facts' can be scientifically investigated. On this general foundation Durkheim built a considerable edifice of theory concerning the development of social life, and such elements within that life as the division of labour, suicide, morals and religion. He attempted to describe the division of larger social units into smaller, more homogeneous units, and then to demonstrate how each separate group possesses what might be called a mind of its own, distinguishable from the sum of the minds of its members. There are thus collective states of mind, the nature of which cannot be reduced to the sum of the opinions of individuals.

To Durkheim, religion is the most characteristic product of the collective mind. Its attitudes, values and sanctions are imposed upon the individual by the group of which he is a part; this is indeed the condition on which he becomes (by initiation) and remains a member of the group. Further, each of its constitutive elements, such as cult, rite and symbol, fulfils an integrative function within the group. In this, Durkheim was to some extent recapitulating the thesis expressed by one of his most influential teachers, Numa-Denys Fustel de Coulanges (1830-1889), whose book *La Cité ancienne* (1864) had analysed the city-state in terms of its religious beliefs and traditions. But Durkheim carried de Coulanges' theories into a much wider area of principle.

Durkheim's mature views on the subject of religion are to be found in two works in particular, *De la définition des phénomènes religieux*, an essay of twenty-eight pages published in the second volume of his periodical *L'Année sociologique* (1899), and the cele-

brated *Les Formes élémentaires* (1912). In a way, the former is methodologically the more important of the two, since it discusses matters which are presuppositions for the later work.

In the preface to the second volume of *L'Année sociologique*, Durkheim stressed that 'facts' in the spheres of religion, law, morals and economics should all be treated in conformity to their own nature, i.e., as *social facts*, attached to a definite social milieu. The science of religion, he points out, had hitherto spoken of religious beliefs and practices as though they belonged to no social system at all. The criticism was not unjustified; nevertheless it is important to realise that the reason for this particular point being raised was largely that of safeguarding the possibility of dealing with religion on scientific lines, and to guard against undue subjectivity in treatment. 'Scientific', it may be added, was a term used in antithesis to attitudes involving commitment and belief; popularly it was supposed to guarantee a state of freedom from distorting presuppositions. Durkheim's desire was to establish principles, patterns and laws: so far so good. But it is soon evident that in rejecting one set of presuppositions, he is merely accepting an alternative set, involving the thesis of the non-existence of any supernatural order whatsoever.

It was in line with this conviction that Durkheim maintained that the concept of deity, so far from being fundamental to religious life, is only 'a secondary episode'—a product of a special process by virtue of which various 'religious' characteristics are hypostasised. What is genuinely fundamental is the basic separation of all things into the two categories of *sacred* and *profane*, a distinction which is, he asserts, 'very often independent of every idea of god'—which idea was formed subsequently 'in order to introduce the beginnings of organisation into the confused mass of sacred things'.<sup>20</sup>

The picture thus emerges of the primitive group behaving in certain ways, asserting certain obligations incumbent on every single member of the group. In reality, these obligations have no other sanction than that provided by the need to perpetuate the life of the group; but they are given a further absolute sanction by being referred to supernatural originating agencies, which are in effect products of the collective imagination.

'Religious phenomena,' according to Durkheim, 'consist in obligatory beliefs, connected with definite practices which refer to objects given in these beliefs.' It is precisely the quality of *obligation* which characterises them.<sup>21</sup> But obligation presupposes an authority: and to Durkheim, the only conceivable authority is that of the group of

<sup>20</sup> *L'Année sociologique* II (1899), p. 15.

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.

which the individual is part. It follows that 'society' prescribes to the faithful the dogmas which he must believe and the rites which he must observe; religion, then, originates in collective states of mind (*états de l'âme collective*).

The force before which the believer bows are not simple physical energies, such as are presented to the senses and the imagination; they are social forces.<sup>22</sup>

In this perspective, religion becomes comprehensible. If it emanates from the individual, it remains a mystery:

For since, by definition, it expresses things otherwise than they are, it appears as a sort of vast hallucination and phantasmagoria of which humanity has been the dupe and the *raison d'être* of which is impenetrable.<sup>23</sup>

Admit that religion is a social phenomenon, and the mystery is dispersed. Whatever residual mystery may remain is a product only of ignorance, and will inevitably vanish in the clear light of science, given time.

We have said that it is in the distinction between sacred and profane that Durkheim sees the germ of all religion. This is the achievement of the collective mind: to establish such a distinction, and to specify in each separate instance to which category a phenomenon belongs. All else is derivative and secondary. Thus in a celebrated formulation Durkheim defines a 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.<sup>24</sup>

Religion involves the formation of communities bound together by a common attitude to certain 'sacred' objects, places and persons. The individual can only accept this common attitude; nothing more is expected of him, and nothing more is acceptable.

Durkheim's indebtedness to the Scottish anthropologists is most clearly seen in the argument which he uses in support of this general theory. He holds in fact that it is precisely in the social institution of totemism that a collective representation, involving a clear and socially motivated distinction between sacred and profane, is most evident in human history. Hence there is much totemism in Durk-

<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>23</sup> *loc. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (Eng. tr. 1915), p. 47.

heim's work. He makes use of the customary turn-of-the-century theory of survivals to justify reference to the Australian aborigines as an example of the earliest human social system. There he finds totemism, and in totemism he sees the beginning of religion. In the totem there lies a mysterious power (*mana*), by which means transgressions against *tabu* might be punished; *tabu* is of course 'the sacred' in its simplest form. The totem itself is both a symbol of the tribal deity or deities and a symbol around which the tribe might gather, and by which it might identify itself. It follows that if the same symbol can serve two such functions, then *a priori* there must be more than merely a casual relationship between these functions. Such is Durkheim's conclusion: to all intents and purposes the god is the tribe or clan; god and totem are simply alternative expressions of 'society', the collective. To be sure, there have been developments out of this originally homogeneous form of religion; but they constantly betray their collective origin, since

... the great tribal god is only an ancestral spirit who finally won a pre-eminent place. The ancestral spirits are only entities forged in the image of the individual souls whose origin they are destined to explain. The souls, in their turn, are only the form taken by the impersonal forces which we found at the basis of totemism, as they individualise themselves in the human body. The unity of the system is as great as its complexity.<sup>25</sup>

Although widely read, Durkheim was so dominated by the desire to explain away the phenomenon of religion that his theories about the origins of religion are of little consequence. His failure to accept mankind's belief in the actual existence of an unseen supernatural order—a failure in which he was to have many followers—led him into serious errors of interpretation. In addition, many of the anthropological theories and assumptions on which he built have since been shown to have been unreliable.<sup>26</sup> The student of comparative religion will, perhaps, read him less in order to acquire a knowledge of either the nature of religion or the thorny problem of the origins of religion, than to learn something of the standing of these theories in turn-of-the-century France.

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<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, p. 295.

<sup>26</sup> We shall not enter here into the question of the long-term validity of Durkheim's theories, save to point out that much of the anthropological data on which they are based has since been shown to be unreliable: the theories of totemism and *mana* in particular have been challenged. Sociologists often remain unaware of such criticisms, and continue to write as though these turn-of-the-century positions remained entirely unchallenged.

Returning now across the Channel, we may observe that the hundred years of comparative religion which we are considering have not produced very many literary classics, or even works of literary quality. Writers on problems of comparative religion are not as a rule noted for their elegance and lucidity. One exception would of course be William James' *The Varieties of Religious Experience*; another—and perhaps a more widely-known contender—J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. Unfortunately, like most classics, *The Golden Bough* is seldom read today. Its sheer size and the complexity of its publishing history have made abridgment more than usually necessary, and those who know it other than as a yard of green bookcloth on the library shelves usually know it only in its abridged form. But Frazer's writing was a model of classical English prose: the English of the scholar, fastidious, balanced and sane. He was never obscure, even when dealing with matters obscure enough in themselves. Therein lay his strength—and perhaps also his weakness.

James George Frazer (1854-1951)<sup>27</sup> was born in Glasgow, and was brought up, like his close friend William Robertson Smith, as an orthodox son of the Kirk. Robertson Smith's work and example was one of the great formative influences upon his scholarly career—the other being the example of E. B. Tylor. But unlike Robertson Smith, Frazer's attachment to Christianity remained implicit, rather than explicit. His allegiance was early given to science, and he frequently applied the Comtean philosophy of human history to the world as he saw it; in this cosmic vision, mankind was seen to be moving into a new stage of development, characterised not by religion, still less by magic, but by science. And yet he admitted that he cherished

... the blind conviction, or the trembling hope, that somewhere, beyond these earthly shadows, there is a world of light eternal, where the obstinate questionings of the mind will be answered and the heart find rest.<sup>28</sup>

Frazer was in fact conventionally Christian all his life, and in no way wanted to see his work applied to the dismissal of religion. In all probability, he gave little thought to the possibility of any 'application' whatsoever of his work; his biographer has drawn attention to his utter simplicity and even naïvety in the ways of the world. He worked in the area of anthropology simply because he

<sup>27</sup> There is no adequate critical biography of Frazer. See however Downie, *James George Frazer: The Portrait of a Scholar* (1940) and *Frazer and the Golden Bough* (1970). A recent critical study is J. Z. Smith, 'When the Bough Breaks', in *History of Religions* 12/4 (1973), pp. 342-71.

<sup>28</sup> Quoted by Downie, *James George Frazer*, p. 54f.