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William Robertson Smith vis-à-vis Émile Durkheim as Sociologist of Religion

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There are three contenders for the status of first sociologist of religion: Fustel de Coulanges, Émile Durkheim, and William Robertson Smith. Chronologically, there is no contest: *The Ancient City*, Fustel's main and in fact only work on the sociology of religion, was published in 1864.[1] Smith's principal work on the subject, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites,* was published only in 1889. His sole other work bearing on the sociology of religion, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, was published only four years earlier.[2] Durkheim's writings on religion date from 1899, but his central tome, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life,* did not appear until 1912.[3]

Moreover, Fustel was Durkheim's teacher and deeply influenced him. Smith also deeply influenced Durkheim.[4] By contrast, it is unclear whether Smith was

[1] Numa Denis Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City*, trans. Willard Small (Boston, 1873).

[2] William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, First Series, 1st edn (Edinburgh, 1889). 2nd ed. (Edinburgh, 1894). Citations in this article are from the second edition.

[3] Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London, 1915). Reprinted (New York, 1965). Citations are from the reprint.

[4] On Smith's influence on Durkheim, see my 'Smith's Influence on Durkheim's Theory of Myth and Ritual', in Thomas A. Idinopulos and Brian C. Wilson (eds), *Reappraising Durkheim for the Study and Teaching of Religion Today* (Leiden, 2002), 59–72. That Smith was a key influence on Durkheim's theory of religion as a whole is not in dispute. In two letters published in 1907 in the Catholic journal *La Revue néo-scholastique*, Durkheim denied the charge, made by Simon Deploige in a series of articles in the journal, that he had taken his ideas from the German Wilhelm Wundt. On the contrary, replied Durkheim in the second letter, the real source of his ideas was English-speaking: 'il est qui j'aurais chez Wundt l'idée que la religion est la matrice des idées morales, juridiques etc. C'est e 1887 que je lus Wundt: or c'est seulement en 1895 que j'eus le sentiment net du rôle capital joué par la religion dans la vie sociale. C'est en cettee année que, pour la première fois, je trouvai le moyen d'aborder sociologiquement l'étude de la religion. Ce fut pour moi une révélation. Ce cours de 1895 marque une ligne de démarcation dans le développement de ma pensée si bien que toute mes recherches antériueres durent être reprises à nouveux frais pour être mises en harmonie avec ces vues nouvelles. L'Ethik de Wundt, lue huit ans auparavant, n'etait pour rien dans ce changement d'orientation. Il était du tout antieraux études d'historie trauvaux de Smith et de son école' (Durkheim, 'Lettres au

even aware of Fustel.[5] Fustel did write before the emergence of sociology as a discipline and did see himself as a historian instead. Still, he was concerned with the same sociological issues as both Smith and Durkheim and on chronological grounds therefore merits the title of first sociologist of religion.

But if chronology is one criterion, influence is another. Smith is almost always accorded more influence than Fustel, to the point of being called the first sociologist of religion. Social scientists of the stature of Bronislaw Malinowski, A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, and Mary Douglas have so proclaimed him. Writes Malinowski: 'Robertson Smith [was] the first modern anthropologist to establish the sociological point of view in the treatment of religion'. Smith's 'principle' was 'that religion is a belief carried out by an organized group of people, and it cannot be understood unless we treat a dogmatic system as a part of organized worship and of collective tradition'.[6] Writes Radcliffe-Brown: 'Important contributions to social anthropology were made by historians such as Fustel de Coulanges, Henry Maine and Robertson Smith. The last named writer is particularly important as the pioneer in the sociological study of religion in his work on early Semitic religion'.[7] Writes Douglas: 'Whereas [E. B.] Tylor was interested in what quaint relics can tell us of the past, Robertson Smith was interested in the common elements in modern and primitive experience. Tylor founded folk-lore; Robertson Smith founded social anthropology'.[8]

I beg to differ with Douglas on Smith's supposed interest in 'the common elements in modern and primitive experience'. Smith stresses the differences, not the similarities, between modern and primitive experience, not least religious experience. The key difference for him is that where primitive religion is that of the group, modern religion is that of the individual. By contrast, religion per se for Durkheim is of the group. Because the subject of sociology is the group, Smith 'sociologizes' only half of religion. Therefore the title of

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Director de *La Revue néo-scholastique*', *La Revue néo-scholastique*, 14 (20 October 1907), 613. See also Durkheim's review of Deploige's *Le Conflit de la morale et de la sociologie*, *L'Année sociologique*, 17 (1913), 326–8.

[5] On the purported influence of Fustel on Smith, who himself never cites Fustel, see Steven Lukes, *Émile Durkheim* (Harmondsworth, 1975), 238, 450 n. 1. Against Lukes' claim of influence, see T. O. Beidelman, *W. Robertson Smith and the Sociological Study of Religion* (Chicago, 1974), 68 n. 142.

[6] Bronislaw Malinowski, *A Scientific Theory of Culture and Other Essays* (Chapel Hill, NC, 1944), 188, 189.

[7] A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Method in Social Anthropology*, ed. M. N. Srinivas (Chicago, 1958), 161.

[8] Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (Harmondsworth, 1970 [1st ed. 1966]), 24–5.

first sociologist of religion, even if deserved by Smith vis-à-vis Fustel, is only half-deserved vis-à-vis Durkheim.

Durkheim on religion

For Durkheim, the origin, function, and content of religion are entirely social. Using primitive religion as the simplest and therefore for him the clearest instance of religion generally, Durkheim argues that religion originates socially because, to begin with, it originates in a group. Ordinarily, members of society—more precisely, of the totemic clan—live apart. Whenever they gather, their sheer contact with one another creates an extraordinary feeling of energy and power. They feel infused, uplifted, omnipotent: 'The very fact of the concentration acts as an exceptionally powerful stimulant. When they are at once come together, a sort of electricity is formed by their collecting which quickly transports them to an extraordinary degree of exaltation'.[9] 'In the midst of an assembly animated by a common passion, we become susceptible of acts and sentiments of which we are incapable when reduced to our own forces'.[10]

Knowing that individually they lack this power, primitive peoples ascribe it not to themselves collectively but to possession by something external:

> One can readily conceive how, when arrived at this state of exaltation, a man does not recognize himself any longer. Feeling himself dominated and carried away by some sort of an external power which makes him think and act differently than in normal times, he naturally has the impression of being himself no longer.[11]

Looking about, primitive peoples spot the totemic emblem, which they know is only a symbol of their totem yet which they nevertheless take as the object of worship. They even value it above the totem itself:

> All that he [the primitive] knows is that he is raised above himself and that he sees a different life from the one he ordinarily leads. However, he must connect these sensations to some external object as their cause. Now what does he see about him? On every side those things which

[9] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 246–7.
[10] Ibid., 240. See also 236–51, 463–5.
[11] Ibid., 249.

> appeal to his senses and strike his imagination are the numerous images [emblems] of the totem. . . How could this image, repeated everywhere and in all sorts of forms, fail to stand out with exceptional relief in his mind?. . . The sentiments experienced fix themselves upon it, for it is the only concrete object upon which they can fix themselves.[12]

Because the supernatural power that primitive peoples attribute to the totemic emblem is in fact their own collective power, the true origin of religion is their experience of themselves: 'So it is in the midst of these effervescent social environments and out of this effervescence itself that the religious idea seems to be born'.[13] Surely no origin could be more social.

A logical problem which somehow eludes Durkheim is that totemism, for him the earliest stage of religion, must already exist prior to the gathering that supposedly creates it, for clan members gather to worship the totem. While most of the year clan members live apart 'in little groups' and so live virtually individually, sometimes 'the population concentrates and gathers at determined points for a length of time varying from several days to a few months', and 'on this occasion they celebrate a religious ceremony, or else they hold what is called a corrobbori'.[14] Still, Durkheim intends to be attributing religion to the gathering – that is, to a group event. And that group event is a ritual.

The function, or effect, of the religious gathering is social: it is the instillment or, better, the intensification of a sense of dependence on society. Members of society are in fact beholden to it for everything: their morality, language, tools, values, thoughts, categories of thought, and concept of objectivity.[15] As much as individuals benefit from these phenomena, Durkheim himself is concerned with only the social origin of the phenomena, not with their effect on individuals. Knowing that none of these phenomena, any more than their own effervescent state, is their individual creation, members ascribe them, too, to something external, on which they are therefore dependent. Everyday life confirms their dependence, but religion confirms it most intensely. For only during religious activity are members not just surrounded but possessed by something external. Here, too, Durkheim hardly denies the effect of religion on individuals. He even stresses the energy, confidence, and security that the

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[12] Ibid., 252. See also 252–4, 239.

[13] Ibid., 250. See also 465.

[14] Ibid., 246.

[15] See ibid., 242–3, 22–32, 169–70, 488–90, 480–7. See also Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, ed. and trans. Rodney Needham (Chicago, 1963).

feeling of possession implants. Nevertheless, the consequence of that feeling for society itself concerns him more.

The external cause of possession is taken to be god, not society,[16] but god is taken to be the god of society. Moreover, god is credited with not only possession but all the other social phenomena noted: language, tools, values, and so on. In depending on god for everything, members are in fact depending on society itself, which in its relationship to them is like god to worshipers:

> In a general way, it is unquestionable that a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in minds, merely by the power that it has over them; for to its members it is what a god is to his worshippers. In fact, a god is, first of all, a being whom men think of as superior to themselves, and upon whom they feel that they depend. . . Now society also gives us the sensation of a perpetual dependence.[17]

From dependence on god, and so on society, come loyalty and so unity – the ultimate effect of religion. The society that prays together stays together.

For Durkheim, religion is indispensable to maintaining the unity of society. So indispensable is it that Durkheim at times writes as if society, with a mind of its own, creates religion in order to foster unity: 'There can be no society which does not feel the need of upholding and reaffirming at regular intervals the collective sentiments and the collective ideas which make its unity and its personality'.[18]

Yet however much religion affects society, religion remains a social product. The origin of religion is not individual because there is no individual – more precisely, no innate one. In primitive society the link, or 'solidarity', among members is 'mechanical': occupationally alike, members have no distinctive identity and therefore no individuality. Their sole identity is as members of society. Only in modern society is there a division of labor and therefore the specialization that constitutes individuality. There remains solidarity – Durkheim never pits the individual against society – but it is now 'organic': members are related not just to society itself but, as specialized workers, to one another. They are like organs in an organism.[19]

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[16] See Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 236–40.

[17] Ibid., 236–7.

[18] Ibid., 474–5. See also 465–6.

[19] See Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, trans. George Simpson (New York, 1933).

For Durkheim, individuality both originates and functions socially. Its cause is the division of labor, and its operation requires formal recognition of the individual by society. There is no individuality in traditional religion, which deals entirely with the mechanical, pre-individualistic side of social life. In modern society that side, and so traditional religion, will continue to diminish as organic solidarity grows. Traditional religion will also continue to decline as science grows.[20]

On the one hand Durkheim predicts the eventual emergence of a new, secular religion to replace Christianity. That religion will perhaps be akin to the one created during the French Revolution:

> In a word, the old gods are growing old or already dead, and others are not yet born. . . But this state of incertitude and confused agitation cannot last for ever [sic]. . . We have already seen how the French Revolution established a whole cycle of holidays to keep the principles with which it was inspired in a state of perpetual youth. . . But though the work may have miscarried, it enables us to imagine what might have happened in other conditions; and everything leads us to believe that it will be taken up again sooner or later.[21]

On the other hand Durkheim proposes the creation of a secular religion – a religion worshiping not god but humanity.[22] He envisions a cult of the individual, but by the individual he means the nonegoistic individual, who reveres rather than violates the rights of others and thereby promotes rather than threatens the group. Coinciding with the harmonious individuality of organic solidarity, Durkheim's new religion would thus serve the same social function as the old one:

> Now all that societies require in order to hold together is that their members fix their eyes on the same end and come together in a single faith; but it is not at all necessary that the object of this common faith be quite unconnected with individual persons. In short, individualism thus understood is the glorification not of the self, but of the individual

[20] See Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 478.

[21] Ibid., 475–6.

[22] See Durkheim, 'Individualism and the intellectuals', in W. S. F. Pickering (ed.), *Durkheim on Religion*, trans. Jacqueline Redding and W. S. F. Pickering (London and Boston, 1975), 59–73.

> in general. Its motive force is not egoism but sympathy for all that is human. . . Is this not the way to achieve a community of good will?[23]

Durkheim does grant the existence of individual worship: worship by less than all of society. But he labels it magic rather than religion and deems it parasitic on true, social religion – one of the many ideas that he takes from Smith.[24]

Durkheim gives a wholly sociological analysis of not only the origin and function but also the content of religion. God is imagined in exactly the fashion that society is experienced during group gatherings: as an extraordinary power on whom one is dependent. The number of gods reflects the number of sources of power in society. In primitive society there are many gods because clans are more powerful than the tribes of which they are parts. Not until a tribe becomes fully united does its god become singular.[25]

Smith on religion

Just as in *The Elementary Forms* Durkheim, in seeking the nature of religion per se, turns to Australian aborigines as the most primitive and therefore presumably clearest case, so in the *Lectures* Smith, in seeking the nature of Semitic religion, turns to 'heathen Arabia' as the earliest and therefore presumably clearest case: 'In many respects the religion of heathen Arabia, though we have little information concerning it that is not of post-Christian date, displays an extremely primitive type, corresponding to the primitive and unchanging character of nomadic life'.[26] Smith here evinces the fundamental assumption of his book: that the Semites were initially at a 'primitive' stage of culture and so must be compared with primitive peoples worldwide. Hence his employment of the comparative method.[27] Smith initially hesitates to use the terms 'primitive' and 'ancient' (or 'antique') interchangeably only because Semitic culture in even its ancient stage advanced beyond its primitive beginnings, not

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[23] Ibid., 64. See also Durkheim, *The Division of Labor in Society*, 172–3, 407–9.

[24] On magic, see Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 57–63, especially 61 n. 62; Smith, *Lectures*, 55, 264.

[25] See Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 225–6.

[26] Smith, *Lectures*, 14.

[27] On Smith's use of the comparative method, see my 'In Defense of the Comparative Method', *Numen*, 48 (2001), 339–73, esp. 363–72.

because Semitic religion at the outset was other than primitive.[28] Once he has made this point, he does use the terms almost interchangeably.

Yet Smith's aim is not only to show how primitive ancient Semitic religion originally was but also to show how far Christianity in particular advanced beyond its primitive roots. While his focus on the similarities between ancient Semitic religion and primitive religion is what was revolutionary and controversial, he was equally, if less controversially, focused on the subsequent differences between ancient Semitic and later Semitic religion. He first shows that Christianity, like Judaism and Islam, emerged out of Semitic religion generally, itself originally a case of primitive religion generally. But once he has traced Christianity backwards to its common primitive sources, he traces it forwards to its distinctiveness. So distinctive for him is Christianity that the explanation of its uniqueness can only be supernatural.

Because Smith takes Semitic religion as originally an instance of ancient religion generally and therefore as originally an instance of primitive religion generally, he starts with what makes primitive religion primitive. Where the heart of modern religion is belief, the heart of primitive religion is ritual. For Smith, that difference has often been missed by modern scholars, ingrained as moderns are 'to look at religion from the side of belief rather than of practice'. Thus 'we naturally assume that' in primitive no less than in modern religion 'our first business is to search for a creed, and find in it the key to ritual and practice'.[29] In actuality, primitive religion 'had for the most part no creed' and 'consisted entirely of institutions and practices'. While acknowledging that 'men will not habitually follow certain practices without attaching a meaning to them', in ancient religion we ordinarily find that 'while the practice was rigorously fixed, the meaning attached to it was extremely vague, and the same rite was explained by different people in different ways, without any question of orthodoxy or heterodoxy arising in consequence'.[30] 'It was imperative that certain things should be done, but every man was free to put his own meaning on what was done'.[31] Smith goes as far as to declare that 'ritual and practical usage were, strictly speaking, the sum-total of ancient religions'.[32]

Smith's focus on practice rather than belief as the core of primitive and ancient religion was revolutionary. For example, E. B. Tylor, one of the

[28] See Smith, *Lectures*, 13.
[29] Ibid., 16.
[30] Ibid.
[31] Ibid., 399.
[32] Ibid., 20.

founders of social anthropology, devotes seven out of the eighteen chapters of his *Primitive Culture* (1871) to religious belief but only one chapter to religious ritual, which, moreover, he sees as the mere application of belief.[33] By contrast, Smith devotes six of the eleven lectures in the First Series of his *Lectures* to rituals – specifically, to the key ritual of sacrifice – and devotes most of the other five lectures not to beliefs but to such topics as holy places. Smith might as well have been directing himself against Tylor in stating that 'religion in primitive times was not a system of belief with practical applications' but instead 'a body of fixed traditional practices'.[34]

Yet on ritual, as on other aspects of religion, Smith's revolution stops short, and abruptly so. He does not propose that modern religion as well be looked at as ritual foremost. He approaches modern religion no differently from others of his time. It is creedal first and ritualistic second – no doubt a reflection of Smith's anti-ritualistic, anit-Catholic viewpoint.[35] For him, Protestantism is modern and Catholicism is an atavistic throwback to primitive religion.

Where twentieth-century theorists of religion have tended to stress the similarities between primitive and modern religion, Smith stresses the differences. Where twentieth-century theorists of religion have tended to make ritual the heart of all religion, Smith almost limits ritual to primitive religion. Because ritual for him is a collective activity, his downplaying of ritual in modern religion means the downplaying of the group in modern religion.

To drive home the point that in primitive and ancient religion ritual precedes belief, Smith compares religion with politics, noting that 'political institutions are older than political theories' and that 'in like manner religious institutions are older than religious theories'.[36] But Smith then asserts that in ancient times religion and politics were more than analogous. They were 'parts of one whole of social custom'. Religion was 'a part of the organised social life into which a man was born, and to which he conformed through life in the same unconscious way in which men fall into any habitual practice of the society in which they live'. Religious duty was civic duty, so that

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[33] See E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture*, 5th ed. [1913] (New York, 1958), II, ch. 18.

[34] Smith, *Lectures*, 20.

[35] Even though Douglas celebrates Smith's pioneering transformation of the study of religion from a concentration on individual belief to a concentration on group ritual, she regards his association of group ritual with primitive religion as part of the Protestant, anti-Catholic bias in the modern study of religion: see Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, 29–30; *Natural Symbols*, rev. ed. (New York, 1973 [1st ed. 1970], 28; and *In the Active Voice* (London and Boston, 1982), 35.

[36] Smith, *Lectures*, 20.

'religious nonconformity was an offence against the state'. Nonconformity meant nonconformity in practice, not belief, so that 'so long as the prescribed forms were duly observed, a man was recognised as truly pious, and no one asked how his religion was rooted in his heart or affected his reason'. Just like political duty, of which Smith now declares religion a part, religious duty 'was entirely comprehended in the observance of certain fixed rules of outward conduct'.[37]

Here above all was Smith revolutionary—in seeing ancient and primitive religion as collective rather than individual. Because 'to us moderns religion is above all a matter of individual conviction and reasoned belief',[38] we assume the same of ancient religion. But ancient religion was in fact the opposite of modern. Because Smith takes for granted that modern religion is a matter of the individual, his revolutionary approach once again stops abruptly. His 'sociologizing', as original as it is, is confined to ancient and primitive religion.[39]

Yet it would be going much too far to assert that for Smith modern religion transcends the group. On the contrary, he argues for the indispensability of the group, or the 'Church'. Individual Christians properly seek a personal relationship to God, but the Church is indispensable in helping imperfect individuals secure it:

> The mutual support and assistance which men can thus render one another in thinking out their Christianity into an intelligible form is just one case of the general doctrine of the Church as an organism in which no part can be developed save in and through the development of the whole.[40]

On their own, individuals have a limited, unarticulated, *ad hoc* understanding of God. Only the Church can provide the 'generalisation' and 'system' that constitutes theology.[41]

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[37] Ibid., 21.

[38] Ibid.

[39] See Beidelman, *W. Robertson Smith and the Sociological Study of Religion*, 30–1.

[40] William Robertson Smith, *Lectures and Essays*, eds John Sutherland Black and George Chrystal (London. 1912), 161. On the importance of the Church in modern religion see Smith, 'The Work of a Theological Society: (1869) and 'The Place of Theology in the Work and Growth of the Church' (1875), both published in *Lectures and Essays*, 137–62 and 309–40.

[41] Ibid., 325.

Still, modern religion for Smith is the religion of the individual. The group abets the individual, but the individual is the beneficiary. When Smith declares that primitive and ancient religion 'did not exist for the saving of souls but for the preservation and welfare of society',[42] he could hardly be stressing the difference between primitive and modern religion more sharply. By contrast, religion for Durkheim anytime and anywhere exists 'for the preservation and welfare of society'. Even the modern cult of the individual that Durkheim envisions is to be the worship of the nonegoistic individual. Coinciding with the harmonious individuality of organic solidarity, Durkheim's new religion would thus serve the same social function as the old one.

Smith is rightly viewed as a pioneering sociologist of religion. He shifts the focus of the study of primitive and ancient religion from the individual to the group and from beliefs to rituals, which themselves cease to be taken as autonomous customs and now get taken as whole institutions. For Smith, the function of primitive and ancient religion is the maintenance of the group, even if he does not, like the more relentlessly sociological Durkheim, either make group experience the *origin* of religion or make the group itself the *object* of worship. Still, his sociologizing terminates when he turns to modern religion, and he should be called a sociologist of primitive and ancient religion rather than a sociologist of religion itself.

Smith does not go so far as to make individualistic religion anti-social. Magic is anti-social, but magic stands outside religion. Furthermore, there are many other differences between primitive and modern religion besides that of group and individual and that of ritual and belief. Primitive religion is also materialist and amoral, and modern religion also spiritual and moral. For him, the members of each set of characteristics go together, though it is not clear which characteristic of either set, if any, is primary.

Durkheim considers the same four characteristics as Smith but scarcely makes the same associations. For Durkheim, all religion is of the group, including the future religion of the individual. All religion is creedal as well as ritualistic—with Durkheim devoting separate, equally hefty books within *The Elementary Forms* to belief and to ritual. All religion is spiritual as well as materialist. But all religion, as for Smith, is exclusively moral. Durkheim even defines religion as a 'single moral community, called a Church'.[43] Magic falls

[42] On the differences for Smith between primitive and modern religion, see my introduction to a reprint of the second edition of the *Lectures* (New Brunswick, NJ, 2002), vii–xlii.

[43] Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms*, 62.

outside religion because it is amoral as well as because it does not constitute a group.

Durkheim offers a far fuller sociology of religion than Smith, to whom he is nevertheless gratefully indebted. Not only does he subsume all religion, not merely primitive religion, under sociology, but he subsumes religion under his overall sociology. Where Smith, by profession a biblicist and an Arabist, brilliantly worked out a sociology of primitive religion, Durkheim, as a pioneering sociologist, equally brilliantly applied his sociology to religion per se. Durkheim was able to link religion to society more deeply than Smith, but Smith helped pave the way. For Durkheim, sociology replaces psychology as the explanation of human behavior, including religion, for sociology studies the group where psychology studies the individual. For Smith, sociology explains primitive religion, and theology explains modern religion.

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