



The Interpretation of Religion in Royce and Durkheim

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THE INTERPRETATION OF RELIGION IN ROYCE AND DURKHEIM.

IN the introduction to his series of Gifford lectures, Professor Royce distinguished three different conceptions of the study of natural religion. The first is based upon the results of natural science accepted uncritically. The second conception views religion as a confession of the needs and the experiences of men, as "the voice of human nature itself." Now the needs of human nature, the problems and tasks of men in society and in the work of civilization, are matters of experience and of history, of psychology and of the social sciences. One may be distrustful of metaphysics and of every enterprise of philosophical synthesis which claims to be other than a report of the facts of experience, and one may nevertheless be profoundly interested in the function of religion within experience and within society. The sociologist will approach religion from this second point of view. The third conception of the study of natural religion identifies it with a study of the most fundamental metaphysical problems. It attempts the 'contemplation of being as being.' It is the traditional approach of the technical philosopher who views the significance of religion as consisting in the truth of metaphysical doctrines concerning the real world. It is thus that *The World and the Individual* views the problems of religion.

There is something more than a decade between *The World and the Individual* and *The Problem of Christianity*. Here too the fundamental problems of the philosophy of religion are dealt with, but from a point of view decidedly different from that of the earlier work. *The Problem of Christianity* approaches the study of religion from the second rather than the third of those three conceptions mentioned just now. The ideas and doctrines of religion are here viewed as growing out of the social experience of mankind; they are needed primarily in order to express "the saving value of the right relation of any human individual to the community of which he is a member." They need "no technical

metaphysical theory to furnish a foundation for them.”¹ The intensely practical and empirical task of man in building up a worthy and stable social order generates the life of religion. To be sure, it is possible to exaggerate this contrast between *The World and the Individual* and *The Problem of Christianity*. The central metaphysical thesis of the earlier book concerns precisely the way in which all true beliefs, and the real world itself, are linked to our practical interests and are fulfilments of purpose. And in the later book, religion is viewed not only as a practical solution of a social problem, not only as a ‘doctrine of life,’ but as a ‘doctrine of the real world’ as well. And this ‘doctrine of the real world’ is essentially that of Royce’s earlier writings. Nevertheless, the shift of emphasis and point of view from *The World and the Individual* to that of *The Problem of Christianity* is significant. The sociologist would discover, on the whole, little which concerned his own problems in *The World and the Individual*; he can discover very much indeed in *The Problem of Christianity*, yet both of them are investigations of the meaning of religion.

It is Royce’s interpretation of religion in terms of our social experience which invites comparison with other interpretations of religion in similar terms. There are many of these at the present time. One such I here choose, that of Émile Durkheim. The significance of such a comparison is enhanced if we remember that Royce and Durkheim are the spokesmen for two different philosophical traditions; the bearing of idealism and positivism upon our social interests and the tasks of civilization may become apparent from a study of these two men. To select but a few of the more prominent topics here which invite comparison and discussion, to point out some notable agreements between Royce and Durkheim, and some divergencies as well, is the object of this brief note.

Royce and Durkheim agree in regarding man’s social experience as, in some sense, the source of religion, as the region in which the dominant characteristics of religion make their appearance, and finally, as presenting man with the *objects* of his religious

¹ *The Problem of Christianity*, Vol. I, p. xx.

ideas and cult. That "the reality which religious thought expresses is society,"¹—this is the fundamental thesis of both writers. For both men, religion is a language which utters truths about the right relations between an individual and some community. No one better than Royce has given an interpretation of the traditional doctrines of Christianity in terms of the significance which the community has for the individual, in terms of what the community really is and does. No one better than Durkheim has interpreted primitive religion in terms of the overwhelming importance, in primitive life and thought, of man's social experience. This general agreement between Royce and Durkheim rests upon the thesis, which each of them has elaborately defended, of the autonomy, the reality, and the uniqueness of society. Durkheim's entire social philosophy is a commentary upon what Royce speaks of as "the problems of the two levels of human existence."² There is—so Durkheim in one place sums up the matter—"an individual being which has its foundation in the organism and the circle of whose activities is therefore strictly limited, and a social being which represents the highest reality in the intellectual and moral order that we can know by observation—I mean society. . . . In so far as he belongs to society, the individual transforms himself, both when he thinks and when he acts."³

This doctrine of "the two levels of human existence," the unique reality of the community and its importance for the life of the individual, is made use of by Royce and Durkheim in somewhat different ways, in their account of the office and the significance of religion in social experience. For Royce, the social meaning of religion lies in its ability to heal an inevitable mutilation and discord in our nature which civilization increasingly involves. This discord is a result of the very processes which alone make civilization possible. The higher products and the

¹ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by Swain, London, 1915, p. 431.

² *The Problem of Christianity*, Vol. I, p. 203.

³ *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, p. 16. Durkheim discusses the autonomy of "collective representations" and their relation to individual representations in an earlier article in *Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale*, 1891, p. 273.

finer achievements of man's social life are possible only when individuals have reached a correspondingly high level of moral self-consciousness and of reflective freedom. "My moral self-consciousness is bred in me through social situations that involve—not necessarily any physical conflict with my fellows,—but, in general, some form of social conflict,—conflict such as engenders mutual criticism."¹ This is the 'moral burden of the individual,' this discord and mutilation, this conflict between his increasing self-consciousness and that tightening of social bonds which civilization brings with it. Such discord and inner conflict increase with the growth in the complexity of life and in the social structures of civilization. Social progress thus "breeds men who, even when they keep the peace, are inwardly enemies one of another."² There is a clash between the inner will, the self-assertion, the longing for freedom, and the constraints which society more and more imposes. It is this situation, depicted by Royce with such insight and such skill, which, within the tasks of man's social life and independently of all dogma, increasingly calls for salvation. The function of religion is to furnish such a salvation. It can come about only through a spiritual transformation inspired by the love for a community. This is the religion of loyalty, and this is its task in the enterprise of civilization. The truths of Christianity may all be stated in terms of this social situation, and of its healing. Such is the way in which Royce, in *The Problem of Christianity* interprets religion as the work of man's social consciousness, as the function of the 'beloved community' in the life of man.

Let us turn briefly to the way in which Durkheim too interprets religion in terms of social experience. He has set this forth at greatest length in his study of primitive religion. Now the one fundamental and permanent idea in religion is the idea of the *sacred*. "All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two

¹ *The Problem of Christianity*, Vol. I, p. 139.

² *Ibid.*, p. 143.

distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words *profane* and *sacred*. This division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought."¹ Durkheim's great service, I take it, to social psychology lies in giving us a natural history of this 'collective representation' of the sacred. For his main thesis is that society is the only reality which can generate this idea. It is the community, it is man's social experience which is "constantly creating sacred things out of ordinary ones."² Religion, according to Durkheim, is just this community experience together with its residue, the idea of the sacred, and the acts and beliefs which center around that idea. His formal definition of religion is this: "A religion is 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."³ So much for Durkheim's central thesis in his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. But this is primarily a thesis concerning the past, concerning the beginnings of religion in man's historical life. What of the function and the fortunes of religion within the growth of civilization,—that, which for Royce, is so much the essential thing? To answer this we need to turn to an earlier book of Durkheim, in which he studies, not primarily religion, but the process and the causes of civilization. In his *De la Division du Travail Social*,⁴ Durkheim views the growth of civilization as an increase of the division of labor. It is a process of differentiation, of increasing individualism. So much is, of course, a commonplace. But the essential and—to some extent at least—novel character of Durkheim's essay lies in his belief that the division of labor, instead of causing the bonds of social solidarity to dissolve, is itself the source of a new form of such solidarity. He calls it "organic solidarity" in contrast with the more primitive "mechanical solidarity." Mechanical solidarity

¹ *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, p. 37.

² *Ibid.*, p. 212.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁴ Paris, 1902.

is that which results from social pressure upon individuals who are in all essential respects similar, none of whom has as yet attained any distinctive and individual self-consciousness. Such mechanical solidarity is much like the early "blind instinctive affection," the "natural love of individuals for communities," arising "from the depths of our still unconscious social nature," which Royce contrasts with genuine loyalty.¹ In his *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim shows how the collective consciousness of such a primitive society, constituted by mechanical solidarity, generates the life of religion. In his earlier book, he shows how such primitive mechanical solidarity is being supplanted more and more by organic solidarity, defined by the division of labor. Does it not follow that, for Durkheim, religion must necessarily play a constantly decreasing rôle in the development of civilization? If the division of labor is itself the source of social solidarity, of a new and essentially non-religious sort, then there is no such problem of salvation becoming more and more insistent as civilization progresses, which Royce regards as solved only through a religion of loyalty. This might plausibly appear to be a fair statement of the relation between Royce's and Durkheim's interpretation of religion. Durkheim distinctly says, for instance, that the rôle of our "collective consciousness diminishes as the division of labor progresses," and accordingly that "not only does the domain of religion not increase along with that of temporal life, and in the same measure, but it is more and more decreasing . . . it is a witness that there is a constantly diminishing number of collective sentiments and beliefs sufficiently collective and sufficiently strong to take on a religious form."² Moreover, the division of labor which Durkheim views as *itself* the source of an organic solidarity, is it not identical with that limitation of our activity, that "narrowness of our span of consciousness," which is, for Royce, instead of a source of strength "one of our chief human sorrows?"³

Yet, thus to state the comparison between Royce and Durkheim is not, I believe, the last word. That distinction which for Royce

¹ *The Problem of Christianity*, Vol. I, pp. 180, 181.

² *De la Division du Travail Social*, p. 356.

³ Royce, *The Sources of Religious Insight*, p. 262.

is so important, between natural group emotion and a moral and religious loyalty runs along parallel with Durkheim's distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity. That is to say, a level of social organization characterized by the division of labor is one in which the reality of the community is more prominent and more decisive; it is one in which the community is of necessity more of a living organic being, and less of a merely natural aggregate. In a regime in which there is a highly developed division of labor, each individual's nature will appear, if you view him merely as an individual, vastly mutilated; how much more reason there is, then, to complete him, to discover the real substance of his being, to create—or to discover—the beloved community!

It is, perhaps, because Durkheim insists upon identifying religion only with the deposits of that primitive group emotion which characterizes mechanical solidarity, that he declines to see any religious significance in the accelerating process of the division of labor within civilization. With Rousseau and with Lamennais, most 'democratic' interpretations of religion in terms of our social experience seek for religion in some primitive sympathy, some species of universal fraternity which is only a prolongation of nature, in something on the level of Hume's *impression* rather than the *idea* which man imputes to his world through his own activity. An organic solidarity, held together by the division of labor, does not come of itself. It implies activity and loyalty, creation of and devotion to the community. Herein lies Durkheim's essential agreement with these words of Royce: "For the true Church is still a sort of ideal challenge to the faithful, rather than an already finished institution,—a call upon men for a heavenly quest, rather than a present possession of humanity. 'Create me,'—this is the word that the Church, viewed as an idea, addresses to mankind."¹

And, if Durkheim declines—as he does in his earlier book—to define this task of the creation of organic solidarity, of the transformation of a natural community into a moral community, in religious terms, it must be because of the divergent metaphysics

¹ *The Problem of Christianity*, Vol. I, p. 54.

which lie behind the thought of Royce and Durkheim. For positivism, the values of man's social experience remain something isolated from the total background of human experience; for idealism, there is some continuity between social experience and its environment, between the 'internal' and the 'external' meaning of our ideas. And religion not only avows that man's social experience is significant and creative within the processes of history and civilization, but that it is, in some sense, true as well. It is the spokesman for idealism, then, who can claim as religious those energies and ideas upon which the tasks of civilization must in the last analysis rely.

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