

## THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL STUDY OF RELIGION\*

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IT seems to me that the purpose of an inaugural lecture given to an audience comprised in part of persons from different fields of study should be either to explain the nature and broad significance of one's own subject or to show its relevance to some particular topic of general interest. Only two years ago my predecessor in this Chair, Professor J. A. Barnes, dealt in his inaugural lecture with the history and present status of social anthropology. I could not equal his brilliant exposition, and there would be no point in my trying to do so. Instead, I propose to take the second course and to attempt to show what light anthropology may throw on the topic of religion. I shall try to explain very briefly some of the theories which anthropologists have developed to account for religion and then, rashly, I intend to step beyond the role of an anthropologist to discuss how adequate any or all of these theories are for a complete understanding of religion.

Last year, on the green in the sunshine outside this hall, another speaker, also referring to himself as a student of anthropology, spoke of religion to a far larger audience than this. In that address Dr. Graham said that religion—in this case religion as laid down in the Bible—was either completely true or it was the greatest hoax in the history of mankind. Not many anthropologists would accept either alternative. It is true that with very few exceptions anthropologists are not believers in specific creeds. Faced with the great relativity of moral standards in different cultures and a wide variety of supernatural concepts, it is extremely difficult for them to accept any particular dogma as valid for all mankind. But even those who are complete unbelievers in any creed know that religion is not a hoax, at least not in any simple sense, for it expresses and supports values important to man both in his social and his personal life.

This was not always the case with anthropologists. The suggestion that religion was a hoax gained some support from earlier theorists. Tylor, writing in 1871, said of magic that it is "an elaborate and systematic pseudo-science. It is, in fact, a sincere but fallacious system of philosophy".<sup>1</sup> He took the same view in regard to religion which, he said, in its primary form of animism attempts to explain the features and forces of nature by endowing them with a vitality similar to that of

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<sup>1</sup> E. B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture* (1st Ed. 1871) (1889), p. 135.

human beings. The supernatural is thus on Tylor's view not a deliberately perpetrated hoax but it is an illusion born of intellectual mistake.

The theory should not be dismissed lightly. A principal feature of it is that it holds that magic and religion are intellectual products, the former springing from man's efforts to control nature and the latter from his efforts both to control and explain it. In this it contains an important measure of truth. If Tylor, like Comte before him and Spencer and Frazer later, erred in making religion too rationalistic, his fault is little greater than that of many recent anthropologists who have shown an almost equally exclusive concern with the social functions of religion.

But the theory of Tylor and other theories of the same purely rationalistic order have serious defects. As Goode points out in a recent book, any entirely rationalistic theory fails to take into account the emotional, obligatory character of religious beliefs and practices.<sup>2</sup> If the theory further states that the reasoning is fallacious, then it becomes very difficult to explain the relationship which religion clearly has to social values. A much earlier critic, Emile Durkheim, argued that it was inconceivable that so persistent an element in human life as religion should not reflect some "reality". We shall return to Durkheim's theory presently in order to show what was the reality he had in mind.

The theory that religion is an illusion was advanced from different grounds by the psychologist Freud. The parent-child relationship, he said, is projected into the external world. It is this pathology, this illusion, which is behind all religion. Although it shares the common feature with the theory of Tylor of making religion a mistake, Freud's theory is essentially different in that it is non-rationalistic. The parent-child relationship is of an emotional order and the projection of it is subconscious, binding and dictating to the reason. The greatest weakness of the theory, apart from its lack of empirical verification, is that it makes religion an individual matter, re-created afresh for each person, and so fails to account for its institutionalized nature. The theory does however provide a possible explanation of the compulsive character of religious ritual and religiously sanctioned codes of conduct and the idea that neurosis is involved in religion has, since the time of Freud, influenced the theories of many anthropologists. In order to show how this line of thought developed I wish to outline briefly one of these theories—that of the American anthropologist Paul Radin.

Radin's theory explains religion as a blend of rational thought processes and abnormal psychology worked out in a social context. He believes that religion arose from magic through attempts "to understand and explain . . . the disease and death situation".<sup>3</sup> Magic, he says, is man's attempt at subjective coercion of objects in order to make nature oblige him. But he finds that sometimes objects act the other way and coerce him, as when he falls sick. Therefore there must be another agent external to himself also capable of influencing objects. This agent, which must

<sup>2</sup> William J. Goode, *Religion Among the Primitives* (1951), p. 244.

<sup>3</sup> Paul Radin, *Primitive Religion* (1937), p. 68.

be supernatural since it cannot be perceived, may cause the sickness either by intruding a foreign object into the body of the patient or by possessing the patient's soul. For the sick person to be cured the agent responsible for the sickness must be coerced or persuaded in the first case to stop his intrusions and in the second case to give up the soul. But who can undertake this coercion or persuasion of the external agent ?

There are in all human groups, says Radin, a certain number of persons who have what he calls a neurotic-epileptoid disposition. These persons are by their constitution prone to develop obsessions, experience seizures, trances and recovery to normality, behaviour which to others appears to be supernaturally caused. Because of this interpretation by others, these persons are able to capitalize on their affliction and gain a role in the social group as mediators with the spirits.

Abnormal persons of this kind set the form of religion but once the form has been set and an avenue of success opened up enterprising persons who are not emotionally abnormal may seek to profit by it. In the more simply organized groups like the Arunta and the Eskimo, says Radin, the basic qualification of the shaman and the medicineman is that he belongs to the neurotic-epileptoid type. In more complex economic organizations, many normal people are attracted to the priesthood by the emoluments of office. But they have to accept the formulation of religious experience established by their neurotic predecessors. This formulation comprises three parts : (1) the description by the shaman of his neurotic temperament and his actual suffering and trance ; (2) the description of his enforced isolation, physical and spiritual, from the rest of the group ; (3) the detailed description of what might be called an obsessive identification with his goal. From the first part arose the theory of the ordeal through which the shaman must pass ; from the second part arose the insistence upon taboos and purifications ; and from the third part came the belief that the shaman was possessed by the goal, in other words, all that is connoted by concept of spirit-possession.<sup>4</sup>

Briefly, Radin's argument is that everyone has fear and uncertainty. First of all shamans and then an established priesthood exaggerated and capitalized on this fear and uncertainty : " The religious formulator developed the theory that everything of value . . . was surrounded and immersed in danger ; that these dangers could be overcome only in a specific fashion and according to a prescription devised and perfected by him."<sup>5</sup> Everyone who has worked among primitive peoples knows that much of what Radin says about theories of disease and the nature of spiritual measures to counteract it is correct. Elements in the content of all developed religions also suggest primitive parallels of the kind he describes. But his theory has several serious weaknesses.

The first weakness concerns the analysis of spirit-controlled behaviour in simple societies of the kind in which Radin claims to have found the genesis of religious behaviour. It is true that persons who become shamans, or spirit-mediums, are

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 131-2.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

usually abnormal in the sense that their behaviour is at variance from the standard behaviour of other members of the community. But often it seems that their abnormality consists only in their shamanistic behaviour and therefore it is not an explanation but a tautology to say that they are shamans because they are abnormal. When Radin speaks of the neurotic-epileptoid type he implies a more generalized disorder of the kind described by psychiatrists in Western society. If this form of abnormality existed in the shamans, one would expect it to be displayed in more widespread or repeated maladjustments. But frequently the shaman, once he has passed through his initial experience, can practise at will and at call and for all the rest of the time he is often a responsible member of the community—indeed sometimes a leader. This is a behaviour pattern hard to square with mental affliction of any severity. The theory that mental disturbance plays a part in the origin of religious behaviour cannot be dismissed but more study is needed to determine what that part is. There is the further point that sometimes the behaviour of the shaman is not even abnormal in the religious field. Radin mentions, although only in passing, the case of the Wintun, one of the several American Indian tribes in which supernatural experiences are obtained by a majority of the tribe. It is difficult to believe that the whole tribe have neurotic-epileptoid dispositions.

The second weakness of Radin's theory is its assumption that the prototypes of complex religious institutions can be studied in the simple societies found in the world today. Most social anthropologists are most careful to avoid any such assumption. Although they frequently use the word "primitive" as a convenient term for the technologically simple and non-literate societies, they do not equate primitive in this sense with "primal", for they realize that most of these societies have as long a history as their own and that it is usually impossible to say when they came into existence and under what conditions. Radin is less careful and, because he relies too much upon an assumption of a historical sequence which he cannot demonstrate, his theory is not convincing as an explanation of religious phenomena in complex societies. Some of these phenomena may be products of the complexity and not at all results of history.

When most social anthropologists study modern primitive societies they do so because it is possible in these societies to isolate factors which it is difficult to isolate in complex societies. With the information thus gained the study can then be carried into more complex societies to see whether these same factors continue to operate in the same manner or whether the situation has been changed by new factors. Examined on this basis Radin's theory appears both to have analytical weaknesses and to leave a good deal unexplained.

Radin suggests that the appeal of religious beliefs in simple societies is the relief they give to the ordinary man from fear and anxiety and the gain and power they give to the religious practitioner. Is this true of primitive societies? We may suggest that the picture it gives of individual motivation even in the simple societies is incomplete. Fear is undoubtedly a potent force in all religions. We see its

influence particularly in the Calvinistic varieties of Christianity and a recent writer in the *Hibbert Journal*, Dr. S. G. F. Brandon, argues that "from what we know so far of man when he first emerges in the historical record, it would appear that religion originally stemmed from human consciousness of the temporal process, the menace of which was focussed in death but alleviated by the promise of new life manifest in the phenomenon of birth".<sup>6</sup> Amongst the social anthropologists Malinowski especially emphasized the fear of death and the longing for immortality as a motivating force in religious belief. But fear is surely not the only motive. There are others, and strong amongst them in all societies appears to be the intellectualistic desire for understanding.

Radin is not unaware of this. He says there are "two general types of temperament among primitive peoples, that of the priest-thinker and that of the layman; the one only secondarily identified with action, the other primarily so; the one interested in the analysis of religious phenomena, the other in their effect".<sup>7</sup> That is to say, there is a religious interest for its own sake, apart from the motive of gain and power. But Radin does not pay much attention in his analysis to this motive and implies that at best it is only secondary. In the case of the Dayaks amongst whom I lived for two years I became at times strongly inclined to the belief that it was primary. In Dayak society priests were rewarded for their performances but the reward was so small that it was little more than rather poor compensation for their labour. Nearly a third of the older men were priests—far too many for the majority of them to accumulate much prestige. They liked gain; they liked power; but not noticeably more so that the generality in their society. They took pride in their performances. They were enlightened by their own speculations. The best of them were artists and philosophers and in their own minds visionaries and theologians.

Such motivation is more clearly evident in the case of the greater religions. In these greater religions the motives of gain and power play an obvious part. But it is never regarded as proper that they play the major part. When it happens that they do murmurs of corruption arise and the religion is ripe for a reformation which often comes from within the ranks of the priesthood itself. It would not be a valid argument to claim in support of Radin's analysis that the situation in respect to the greater religions is different from that in respect to the primitive religions. If his evolutionary theory is to explain adequately religious motivation it must cover all situations.

The final criticism of Radin's theory which we wish to make is its comparative lack of attention to the social character of religion. Radin does not entirely neglect its social character. Fear, gain and power are individual motivations but they have social consequences. The majority of people in any society, he says, are usually

<sup>6</sup> S. G. F. Brandon, "The Origin of Religion", *The Hibbert Journal* (1959), Vol. LVII, No. 4, p. 355.

<sup>7</sup> Radin, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

non-religious. In the power structure of the tribe the priests form an upper stratum. Their motives are the enhancement of their own economic security and the strengthening of the authority of the elders, which usually implies strengthening their own. Once their position is secured they become strong supporters of the established social order. Nevertheless the motivation is individualistic and selfish and the social role of religion is a by-product of it. In view of the social importance of religion this hypothesis is unconvincing.

We can now contrast Radin's theory with a group of theories which explain religion in purely social terms. The most important theorist in this group was the French sociologist Emile Durkheim. Writing at the turn of the century, he said that "religion is a social phenomenon". By this he did not mean simply that religious ideas, symbols and practices were expressed in social action and perhaps controlled it. He meant that society generated the religious concepts. According to his theory, men's living together in a group generates sentiments of solidarity. These sentiments constitute each individual person's awareness of his wider social personality. Felt, but their true origin not understood, they acquire a mystic supernatural importance. Expressed through ritual or symbolized in deities, the sentiments are intensified and the real social bonds are strengthened.

In terms of such a theory it would be expected that ritual, which allows direct expression of the felt sentiments, should figure more largely in primitive religious systems than systematic beliefs, which are one degree further removed from the actual stuff of social life. Radcliffe-Brown, the first occupant of this Chair, and the great English exponent of Durkheim, says: "The social function of rites is obvious: by giving solemn and collective expression to them the rites reaffirm, renew and strengthen those sentiments on which the social solidarity depends."<sup>8</sup> Many other anthropologists have stressed ritual as the main feature of religion and almost relegated belief to the category of an unnecessary excrement. Speaking of the Australian Aborigines, who have elaborated ritual to an extent probably without parallel in primitive society, Stanner says that existence and being are mysteries. They were apparently understood by ancestors but men have only such information about them as the ancestors handed down. The continued maintenance of the ceremonies is a guarantee of a social life with a moral order. "The ancestors taught, and fathers from time out of mind have instructed their sons, that certain actions of *living* are carried out in certain ways."<sup>9</sup>

It is not only in primitive religions that ritual is often more important than belief. Speaking of Judaism, Huston Smith argues that observance of ritual is more central than ideas. "In sinking the roots of his life deep into the past", he writes, "the Jew draws nourishment from events in which God's acts were clearly visible and in doing so keeps the deadly prosaicism of the God-eclipsed perspective at bay."<sup>10</sup> Compare

<sup>8</sup> A. R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society* (1952), p. 164. (The quotation was first made in the 1945 Henry Myers Lecture to the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland.)

<sup>9</sup> W. E. H. Stanner, "On Aboriginal Religion", *Oceania* (1959), Vol. XXX, Pt. I, p. 116.

<sup>10</sup> Huston Smith, *The Religions of Man* (1959), p. 259.

this with Stanner's statement on the Aborigines : " The aboriginal doctrine may be summed up in two statements which are accepted as great truths : in the beginning of things, life and death, and all things connected with them, took on the characters they now have because of marvellous events which took place once-for-all ; living men should, indeed must, commemorate those events, and keep in touch with the consequences, by acts to signify and symbolize what happened and, somehow, keeps on happening. By such means men ' follow up The Dreaming ' through a repeated memorial of it."<sup>11</sup>

That ritual plays a larger part in some religious systems than explicit doctrine has been shown. But the case must not be pressed too far. As Goode remarks, rituals in themselves do not constitute a self-enclosed system. The gestures, words, objects, and movements derive significance from the meaning invested in them by the system of belief.<sup>12</sup> In the Aboriginal case, as to some extent in the Judaic case, the reference point of the belief is an historical event rather than a theological concept. Acceptance of sacred tradition hallows life and circumstance. But sacredness is a quality of mind not of action. It implies belief in an authority which is supernatural in the sense that it interpenetrates the present in a mystic manner from a source beyond it.

Certainly no generalization which will cover all societies can be made concerning the relative importance of ritual and belief. The apparent relative unimportance of the latter element in certain societies could in fact have been exaggerated by such generalizing as is absolutely necessary if useful statements are to be made about primitive societies. In a society which lacks an organized priesthood and lacks writing, both of which allow ideas to be easily communicated from person to person and from generation to generation, there is an enormous variation of ideas from one member of the society to another. A generalization made by an anthropologist about the whole society necessarily eliminates these variations and states only the common norm. This is often mainly the ritual and to this extent the generalization may differ from the reality.

Even though it be true that ritual is the most prominent feature of religion in some societies, belief is an aspect of religion everywhere and in some religions it is a most important aspect. A valid sociological theory must take account of it and explain it. Durkheim does take account of it. He speaks of religion as " an integrated system of beliefs and practices which unite in one moral community all those who adhere to it ".<sup>13</sup> And he explains the system by saying that it is generated by the social reality and in turn sustains the social reality. We could draw a parallel with a system of secular laws. The society develops the laws and the laws preserve the society. To assess the validity of the theory we must ask two questions. Is

<sup>11</sup> Stanner, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

<sup>12</sup> Goode, *op. cit.*, p. 237.

<sup>13</sup> Emile Durkheim, *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912), 2nd Ed., Paris, F. Alcan, p. 65.

the system of beliefs simply a derivation from the social reality? Secondly, what is the effect upon the social reality of the system of beliefs?

Concerning the first question, probably a majority of modern British social anthropologists would agree with Durkheim that religious ideas are in fact a derivation from the social reality. But consider the following statement from an illuminating article recently published by Professor Raymond Firth: "The Kelantan village Malays among whom spirit mediumship and shamanism are common, have no corporate descent groups. It is interesting then to note that the spirits possessing their mediums are not those of their ancestors, but an elaborate range of Indonesian, Hindu and Muslim god spirit characters not linked by kinship to the medium at all, but arranged in a loose hierarchy with much endowment of social and political titles. The Kalantan medium's spirit troop then reflects his social structure in its absence of kinship bonds and its free use of status labels. The Tikopia situation is almost the reverse. The society has corporate descent groups of patrilineage type, and strong links of persons with their matrilineal kin. While the system of chieftainship is given very great respect, there is a strong proliferation of titles in a status system. Correspondingly, there is a strong kin tie and specific lineal element in the Tikopia mediumship."<sup>14</sup>

In the examples given we see that in the Tikopia case the spirit world does correspond to precise features of the social reality. If we were to consider that case alone, we might believe there is a causal relationship between the two. But when we consider the Kelantan case where the spirit world occurs without that correspondence except in a negative way, then it becomes clear that the reasons for the existence of the spirit world have not been fully explained. The use of the word "reflects" in this case cannot connote a causal relationship because all that is "reflected" is an absence. Professor Firth's examples do demonstrate excellently that in both societies there is a consistency between the overt social structure and the systematized beliefs, but they do not account for the beliefs.

The danger of assuming that consistency implies a causal relationship is also present in the common statement that religious activity is "integrative" in a society. As religious activity is social activity, it must be integrated with, in the sense of being consistent with, other forms of social activity or else the society would be in a state of disharmony and probably unable to survive long. The mere statement that there is integration cannot therefore be taken as supplying a reason for the existence of religious activity.

The claim that religious conceptions are a mirror image of the social structure has not been validated. This pillar of the sociological theory of religion therefore collapses. Religious ideas appear to be variously derived—from history and by hallucination, inventiveness or insight. Nevertheless if it can be shown that the ideas are meaningful only through the support they give to the social structure then

<sup>14</sup> Raymond Firth, "Problem and Assumption in the Anthropological Study of Religion", *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (1959), Vol. 89, Pt. II, p. 142.



to this extent the sociological theory is correct. Let us therefore examine whether this is so by considering the second of the questions we posed earlier : what is the effect upon the social reality of the system of religious beliefs ?

Durkheim stated that the effect of a religion was to "unite in one moral community all those who adhere to it".<sup>15</sup> By a moral community is meant a community the members of which accept common moral values. Without some system of common values in a society social life would be impossible because there would be no predictability of behaviour on the part of other members of the community on which persons could count in their social relationships. But common values are of various types. Not all of them are moral. Some are economic, depending upon a rational appreciation of utility. Others are political, depending upon a calculation of power. All values of these and similar types, which can be justified by a rational accounting of self-interest by those who uphold them, we may classify into the one general category of empirical values. The values to which Durkheim refers belong to a different category. They are the moral values which, according to whether they are positive or negative, arouse emotions of approval or disapproval and oblige persons to perform or to refrain from certain actions. They are non-empirical because their acceptance is not based upon a rational calculation of self-interest. Every society has such a system of moral values.

We may now examine the relationship between the moral values and religion. Durkheim implies that the main function of religion is to support the moral values. If we find that moral systems exist independently of religion, then his argument fails. Macbeath has examined anthropological reports on three primitive societies and concluded that there is in fact no inevitable relationship between moral and religious systems.<sup>16</sup> We need, however, to press the analysis a little more closely.

At the outset we may note that it is possible to discuss this question in more general terms than is sometimes believed. At first sight societies appear to differ greatly in their codes of behaviour. This has given rise to the belief that moral values are very largely relative to particular cultures and that no common system can be found. But closer examination shows that the relativity is far less than it seems on a superficial view. Let us consider an instance of apparently complete difference of value between two societies. In the society of the Trobriand Islands described by Malinowski unmarried persons are permitted complete sexual freedom.<sup>17</sup> In our own society sexual relations between the unmarried are held to be morally wrong. The opposition of values appears to be complete. But in fact both societies have a common area of sexual taboo. Both apply the restriction to classes of near kin and to married persons. The difference between the societies is not therefore in the nature of the taboo but in its range of application. Europeans extend it more widely. A Trobriand moralist might say we are more taboo-ridden.

<sup>15</sup> Durkheim, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>16</sup> Alexander Macbeath, *Experiments in Living* (1952).

<sup>17</sup> Bronislaw Malinowski, *The Sexual Life of Savages in North-Western Melanesia* (1929).

Although anthropologists have rarely attempted the task, considering perhaps that it more properly belongs to the philosophers, it is almost certainly possible to find a core of moral values common to all societies. Relativity operates in a wide periphery around this core. We shall, therefore, speak of the relationship between religion and morality in general terms, although the testing of any theory developed must depend upon examination of particular societies.

For the purposes of our analysis we may distinguish between negative and positive values, the former being the prohibitions or taboos and the latter those actions or sentiments which are considered desirable. Since they place restrictions upon behaviour to which persons may naturally incline, the negative values require sanctions. The sanctions may be legal but in the case of a true taboo system sanctions of a legal kind are at best secondary. The action concerned is regarded simply as something that is "not done". Yet there is a sanction behind it. In the vast majority of primitive societies there is a concept of supernatural retribution. I suspect there may be in all societies. The supernatural agency may not be conceived everywhere in terms of gods or spirits. There may just be a sense of evil consequence. Even this belief may be absent when the taboo is observed without questioning. But this does not take the taboo out of the realm of the supernatural. In one sense every ethical judgment is supernatural in that it is not deduced from the sense-experienced world. If we are prepared to regard implicit acceptance of the supernatural as religion, then religion always lies behind the taboos of primitive man. It lies behind many of the positive values also. In every society there are codes of conduct which preserve the community and frequently these codes are explicitly justified by religion.

But there is one positive value into which religion often does not seem to be involved at the primitive level. Moreover this value is a central one in all moral systems. We spoke earlier of moral relativity operating around a common core. The centre of this common core is the very general value of respect, consideration or, for those who are willing to accept the term, "love" for one's fellow members of society. The range of the value varies but it is omnipresent. Always in primitive society people believe in the obligatory character of various forms of helpful behaviour towards particular kin and in a more general way towards all members of the community. Yet this central moral value is frequently not explicitly involved in religion. It is true that religion may be embryonically present in that the behaviour is sanctioned by tradition and the tradition often carries a supernatural quality of revelation, but the behaviour is rarely clearly thought of in religious terms.

To gain some clues as to why this central value is not explicitly involved in religion in primitive societies we should examine the nature of those values into which religion does clearly enter. The special feature of the forms of activities involved in these values, it seems to me, is that they go beyond the facts of ordinary day-to-day activity in that they involve considerable restraints or constraints on behaviour. The restriction or direction of behaviour may be of three forms: (1) certain actions to which persons may incline are prohibited; (2) certain actions are required for the

general rather than for the personal benefit; (3) actions are required, or evoked, which are unusual or which demand an unusual degree of energy.

We have already discussed the first class of actions—those which are prohibited by taboo—and found that religious concepts tend to be associated quite definitely with them. In regard to the second class of actions, community action could not eventuate unless there was a sense of group identity. The group concept is frequently symbolized in terms of a group god. Subsidiary to this main symbolization the particular interests which the group is pursuing at any moment may be given a divine sanction. Within a total society, too, there may be sub-groups with distinctive interests and these interests may become associated with religious distinctions. For example, last year a graduate of the Department of Anthropology, the Reverend Mr. Alan Dougan, made a survey of religious affiliations in the Bathurst district of New South Wales and found that the membership of the different Christian denominations tended to be associated with class and status differences. In circumstances where there is a great need for group cohesion and for justification of group membership religion may become more than ordinarily important. In a recently published statistical survey of religious activity in Great Britain and the United States Argyle shows that “minority groups tend to have an above-average level of religious activity”. In such cases the character of the group’s needs gives character to the religious values it adopts. The minority groups, according to Argyle, adopt “forms of religion which are either completely other-worldly or aggressively critical of society”.<sup>18</sup>

The third type of situation into which we have suggested religion enters is that in which there is a need for unusual activity or activity at an unusual level. Situations of this type may be various. Sometimes the religious concepts provide a rationale for behaviour the purpose of which, being remote, is difficult to keep in the forefront of the mind as a motive. Thus in primitive society it is common to find that spirits are believed to decree the division of activities into the periods which comprise the seasonal cycle, or that the effort required for a large production such as an ocean-going canoe is conceived as pleasing the gods. It would probably be wrong to view all situations of this type as involving constraint on impulse. In some cases this is so. An analysis of primitive cultures suggests, however, that people yearn for special efforts, which give them pleasure and which they pursue with great enthusiasm, as for instance in the preparation of enormous feasts displaying rational concern neither for conservation of energy nor for their effects on their ordinary economy. But whether involving constraint or satisfying subconscious need, the activity requires a purpose and if this purpose cannot be understood in material terms then it is understood in non-empirical religious terms.

The general model situation into which religion enters therefore has two features—an abnormal activity pattern (restraint on behaviour, constraint or the evocation of unusual activity) and a lack of rational explanation for the activity in terms of self-

<sup>18</sup> Michael Argyle, *Religious Behaviour* (1958), p. 134.

interest. If either of these features alters, then religion is less likely to enter. Situations may in fact change rapidly, resulting in loss of one or other of the features. For instance, as members of a group gain in education and as practical opportunities for improvement of their condition occur, their aims may become material and a longer vision of self-interest may be sufficient to unite them in common purpose. The theologian Niebuhr remarks: "It is a striking fact that the revolutionary tendencies of the poor in the nineteenth century were almost completely secular in character, while in the preceding eras they were always largely religious in nature."<sup>19</sup> The same type of development can be seen in the case of primitive peoples in contact with the industrial world. For example, in the lightly contacted areas of Melanesia the effort to achieve the wealth and status of the Europeans takes the form of cargo cults, but in Fiji, where the population is literate and knowledge of the Western world is greater, the era of cargo cults seems to be over and the major group efforts to improve conditions are now secular. What has happened in these cases is that values have moved out of the realm of the non-empirical into the empirical, that is to say out of the spiritual realm into the mundane. Thus religion is an ever-changing phenomenon. As material opportunity develops it tends to decline. However, if the suggestion we made earlier regarding the yearning for abnormal achievement is correct, we may expect it to revive in some form should conditions of material satiation be reached. And the problem of the non-empirical remains, unsolved, as we shall argue in a moment, in a very basic sphere.

We are now in a position to suggest, in terms of the previous analysis, the reasons why the central value of society, consideration for one's fellows, is often not explicitly involved in religion at the primitive level. Durkheim, you will remember, said that religion comprised "an integrated system of beliefs which unite in one moral community all those who adhere to it". The issue here is clearly made the morality of the community but as we have seen the morality of the community is one of the least of the concerns of religious belief in primitive societies. Why is this so?

What we have found from our analysis is that in primitive religions, as indeed in all religions, religious concepts enter when there is a need to restrain, constrain or evoke behaviour for purposes which are not easily or immediately explicable—that is to say where there is a puzzle, or rather where there would be a puzzle were not the supernatural answer provided. The morality of the community is not generally a religious concern in primitive societies because it is not yet a conscious puzzle. It is not a puzzle because in small-scale societies where relationships are based upon close ties of kinship or neighbourhood, reiterated daily in face-to-face meetings in a hundred and one activities, and where there is a homogeneity of attitudes, obligations are accepted with little question and a general traditional sanction for the behaviour is usually enough.

But there is a potential puzzle, for moral behaviour is non-rational. Talcott Parsons makes an important criticism of the Durkheimian theory when he says:

<sup>19</sup> H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (1957), p. 72.

“ the empirical, observable entity ‘ society ’ is understandable only in terms of men’s ideas of and active attitudes towards the non-empirical. If the ‘ equation ’ is to be accepted at all the significant way of putting it is not ‘ religion is a social phenomenon ’ so much as ‘ society is a religious phenomenon ’.”<sup>20</sup>

As society becomes more complex and social relations demand a conscious morality, the potential puzzle becomes real. In this respect religion must be seen as an emergent development. Therefore it cannot be accounted for, in the way that Radin seeks to account for it, as a survival from primitive stages of society. As society changes religion declines in some spheres and develops in others, its enduring roles being to provide explanation and to give purpose.

All the greater religions show concern with the central problem of the restraint of selfish desire for the social good. The problem is a real, inescapable one. To analyse fully the answers offered to it would take us far beyond the present hour, day or year. Broadly they appear to fall into three categories. One category is typified by the theory of scientific humanism. This theory appears to me to amount to a combination of the arguments of Durkheim and Darwin. I may not do it justice, but it seems to depend upon two principal propositions: (1) Men may subserve the interests of society at the expense of their immediate self-interest because an ordered society gives far greater benefits in the long run to its members than would social anarchy. (2) Men act in this way because it is in their nature to do so. One variant of the theory would have this nature inborn in the persons and another would have the persons born “ little savages ” but acquiring the nature through education by their seniors. In both cases the support for the proposition is the evolutionary hypothesis that those societies survived, and ensured the survival of their members, in which social motivation was strong.

Each of the propositions of scientific humanism is open to criticism. The ultimate good served by society is a majority good and individual persons who do most for it, at the expense perhaps of their lives, may receive no reward in terms of self-interest. To say that sacrifice is itself rewarding to self-interest because it pleases the nature of man, be this nature inborn or conditioned, is to have recourse to the second proposition. But this proposition implies slavery to nature and is more appropriate to insect society than to the ideal society of free men which humanists generally claim to support. What of the man with emancipated intelligence who declines to accept sacrifice? Either he must be allowed freedom to follow his self-interest as he sees it or society must make demands upon him. In the latter case there must be an organ of authority to make the decision for him and to decide what is right for the general good, sacrificing members of the society if necessary in pursuit of it. Scientific humanism would appear, therefore, to be a type of philosophy consistent with either an “ I’m all right, Jack ” type of behaviour or an authoritarian society. It provides no logical justification for the main value of non-authoritarian societies which is the sanctity of the individual person. It is very difficult to get

<sup>20</sup> Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action* (1st Ed., 1937), 1949, p. 427.

away from moral values. In fact the authoritarian, totalitarian societies all elevate sacrifice into a mystic value and so involve themselves, to my mind, in a massive contradiction.

The second category of answers to the basic problem of social morality is agnosticism. The values are accepted intuitively but their nature is left mysterious. On the very wide definition of the supernatural as the non-empirical this view at least borders on religion but it involves no concept of deity.

The third category is the explicitly religious. This is a type of answer which apparently can be found only by illusion, insight, revelation, or faith. No rational road to it has yet been found and many famous thinkers have failed in the attempt to discover one, or have declared the effort futile. The Buddha declined to pronounce upon the reality of the gods, saying: "Consider as unexplained what I have not explained." Protagoras made no pretence of wisdom. He said: "Concerning the gods I can say nothing, neither that they exist or that they do not exist; nor of what form they are: because there are many things which prevent one from knowing that, namely both the uncertainty of the matter and the shortness of one's life."

The social anthropologist cannot say much more. He can show something of the part the gods have played in human society. He can show how moral concepts have developed in conjunction with concepts of the deity. He can tell us a good deal about the nature and conditions of religious beliefs, the forms they take and partly why they take them, their social implications and the social contexts in which they have value. All this may help to advance human understanding. But the main purpose of this paper has been to show that the theories of the social anthropologists come to the same conclusion as those of the philosophers—they cannot explain religion. They may perhaps justify an agnosticism. They cannot by themselves prove either a theology or an atheism.

There is one final point I wish to make. We spoke first of theories which sought to explain religion as a personal matter, but we dealt with them only critically in order to show their inadequacy to account for the social aspects of religion. This did less than justice to their merits. Religion is both a personal and a social matter, and a few other things besides. When religion in its broadest sense is equated with the supernatural, everything which is supernatural or non-empirical gets tossed into the religious classification as though it were a great sack—morality, miracles, visions, immortality beliefs, fate and the immaterial substance of griefs, hopes and fears. Priests and philosophers tip out the contents and sort them into apparent order. Perhaps one school of wise men has sorted only one part of the bag and another school another part, or their sortings overlap, thus bringing confusion to the work of those who take their classifications as starting-points for further analysis. The problems in studying religion may therefore be partly logical problems due to the enforcing of an order upon phenomena which have no consistent order. Sophisticated observers are sometimes puzzled by the fact that members of primitive societies have no coherent doctrine for all their magical and religious activities. The primitives may

in fact be the true sophisticates. But for the rest of us the sorting has now gone on for two millennia, creating a new religious reality.

The role of the social anthropologist in regard to religion is to study it empirically in its social aspects, not to assess the theological worth of the beliefs. If tonight I have stepped beyond this role it is because occasionally every student of every department of human affairs should look at the broader meaning of his findings in order to see them in perspective.