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Essays in Sociological Theory

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Pp. 197-210 X. The Theoretical Development of the Sociology of Religion  
1949 edition A Chapter in the History of Modern Social Science.  
pp. 52-66

197 About the middle of last century.. generalized thinking about the significance of religion to human life tended to fall into one of two main categories. The first is the body of thought anchored in the doctrinal positions of one or another specific religious group... .. the main tenor of such thought tended to be normative rather than empirical or analytical, to assure its own religious position and to expose the errors of opponents.

198 The other main category may be broadly referred to as that of positivistic thinking... .. the strong tendency had been to minimize the importance of religion, to treat it as a matter of 'superstition' which had no place in the thinking enlightened of modern civilized man.. [hence search for motivation in other fields.. economic and political.. biology and psychology]

.. first important change in this definition of problems, which was highly unfavorable to a serious scientific interest in the phenomena of religion, came with the application of the idea of evolution to human society.

social anthropologists (Tylor, Spencer) found primitives very religious

199 accounting for religion by underlying biological or psychological factors beyond the reach of rational control

or else as the views arrived at by primitives because of their lack of accumulated knowledge, limitations of technique and of opportunities of observation

It is, however, a basic assumption of this pattern of thinking that the only critical standards to which religious ideas can be referred are those of empirical validity..

No one today would ascribe empirical validity to religious and magical practices, and so religion has disappeared.

200 Developments from Pareto Malinowski Durkheim Weber none of whom had any important direct influence on the others.

Pareto: starting point in cognitive patterns orientating actor in his situation of action

Distinguished 'logico-experimental' standards and two modes of deviance from them, namely, (1) failure to attain a logico-experimental solution, in brief, pseudo-scientific solution and (2) theories which surpass experience, eg attributes of God

201 Pareto did not confine his thought to cognitive elements, but treated them in functional relation to what he termed the sentiments, thereby breaking through rationalistic bias of previous thinkers.

Critical evaluation of Pareto's work reveals that he did not reduce non-cognitive factors to instincts but left the issue open.

202 Malinowski maintained continuity with the classical approach in that he took men's adaptation of practical situations by rational knowledge and technique as his initial starting point of reference. Instead of attempting to fit all the obvious facts positively into this framework, however, he showed a variety of reasons why in many circumstances rational knowledge and technique could not provide adequate mechanisms of adjustment to the total situation.

This approach threw into high relief a fundamental empirical observation, namely that instead of there being ~~an~~ one single set of ideas and practices involved... there were in fact two distinct systems. On the one hand, the native was clearly possessed of an impressive amount of sound empirical knowledge of the proper uses of the soil and the processes of plant growth... Side by side with this system of rational knowledge and technique, however, and specifically not confused ~~by it~~ with it, was a system of magical beliefs and practices.

203 It is true that the Trobriander believes that a proper performance of magic is indispensable to a successful outcome of the enterprise, but it is one of Malinowski's most important insights that this attribution applies only in the range of

\* uncertainty in ~~the~~ the outcome of rational technique, to those factors in the situation which are beyond rational understanding and control on the part of the actor.

Hence Malinowski was able to refute Lévy-Bruhl (primitives confuse supernatural and sacred with utilitarian and rational) and Frazer (magic essentially primitive science).

M laid stress on importance ~~of~~ of emotional factors. Combination of strong emotional interest with important ~~of~~ factors of uncertainty produces state of tension and gives rise to frustration. Were there no magic, functionally equivalent phenomena could be expected.

204 M adds strong emotional factors combined with no uncertainty (eg death) yields burial ritual (not merely dispose of corpse but also provide outlet for emotions of survivors).

205 Durkheim: where M considered sentiments in relation to specific situations, Durkheim systematically distinguished sacred and profane: 'sacred' is realm radically disassociated from utilitarian context.

'The sacred is to be treated with a certain specific attitude of respect, which D identified with the appropriate attitude toward moral obligations and authority.

Where Spencer had derived notion of sacred from reappearance of the dead to the living and the respect they merit, where Max Müller and the naturalist school had derived all sacred things in the last analysis from the personification of of certain phenomena of nature that were respected because of intrinsically imposing or terrifying character,

206 Durkheim asserted that no class of objects was intrinsically sacred, that objects (any objects) became sacred inasmuch as they became symbolic.

206 Whence Durkheim proceeded to conclude that 'society is always the real object of religious veneration'.

'... religious ritual was of primary significance as a mechanism for expressing and reinforcing the sentiments most essential to the institutional integration of society.'

207 Summary: religion (1) mistaken cognitive, (2) related to mistaken cognitive or sentiments, (3) objectively uncertain results and/or emotional tension, (4) religious objects are symbols, and their function is the integration of social institutions

207 Circular pattern to D's thought: religious patterns are symbolic manifestation of society; fundamental aspect of society is a set of patterns of moral and religious sentiment.

Max Weber established 'wht he felt to be an adequate relation of congruence between the cognitive pattern of Calvinism and some of ~~the~~ the principal institutionalized attitudes of ~~Calvinism~~ towards secular roles of our own society..'

208 through broadest possible comparative study especially with the religion and social structure of China, India and ancient Judea, he found it was not possible to reduce the striking variations of pattern on the level of religious ideas in these cases to any features of an independently existing social structure or economic situation, though he continually insisted on the very great importance of situational factors in a number of different connections. These factors however served only to pose the problems with which the great movements of religious thought have been concerned.. But the distinctive cognitive patterns were only understandable as a result of a cumulative tradition of intellectual effort in grappling with the problems thus presented and formulated.

W greatly contributed to functional significance of religious ideas in the social system of action.

W made clear above all that there is a fundamental distinction between problems of empirical causation and what, on the other hand, he called 'problems of meaning.'

eg how accidental death happened, easily understood; why accidental deaths do happen at all, what sense is there to it, a quite different type of problem

problem of evil, meaning of suffering, etc.

209 'It is a differentiation with respect to the treatment of precisely such problems which constitute the primary modes of variation between the great systems of religious thought.

209 Perhaps the most striking feature of Weber's analysis is the demonstration of the extent to which precisely the variations in socially sanctioned values and goals in secular life correspond to the variations in the dominant religious philosophy of the great civilizations '

210 When we look back Tylor and Spencer seem hopelessly naive; but change occurred not by direct repudiation but by selecting and remedying points where earlier deficient.