

The Foundations of Religion / By Fred Foldvary, Ph.D.

When we practice and observe religious rituals and beliefs, it is all too common to only think about the superficial appearances. Understanding the underlying deep reality of religion requires some insight and analysis. Fortunately, one of the founders of sociology, Emile Durkheim, one hundred years ago delved into the mysteries of religious belief and ritual in his book, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. (The book was originally published in French in 1912; a 2012 centennial edition was published by Quid Pro Books.)

Durkheim studied the descriptions by anthropologists of the religions of the Australian aborigines. By analyzing what he thought were the primal beliefs that preceded the evolved religions practiced today, he could gain insights into the origins and deep realities of religion. Acts which appear to us to be arbitrary and based on false ideas have an underlying social value and are based on deep truths masked by the superficial varieties of the practiced rituals.

The essential concept of religion, said Durkheim, was not a belief in a God or gods, but a distinction between the sacred and the profane. In the aboriginal Australian religions, a sacred character is not just imputed into physical objects, but is infused into the members of the clan. When worshipers give food to their gods, what they are really giving are their thoughts. Their gods are a symbolic expression of society. Religion is essentially

social. Durkheim wrote that the basic purpose of sacrificial banquets is to make the worshiper and his god communicate "in the same flesh." The ritual forms a bond of kinship between the worshiper and his god, and more fundamentally, it forms a social bond among the community of worshipers. Durkheim called the periodic giving, taking, and sharing of food "an act of alimentary communion."

The origin and essence of immortality is not moral judgment, to reward the good and punish the bad. The religious belief in immortality reinforces the concept of the continuity of the collective life of the community. The existence of souls is part of the continuity, as souls cannot be created from mere matter, but come from other, already existing, souls.

Religions typically include symbols that are worn or painted or embedded on skin. Tattoos and other decorations are images that bear witness to the common existence of the members of the religious community, which in primal societies is also the ethnic community, the clan or tribe. Distinctive marks on the body, or objects worn on the body, show evidence that the person is a member of that group. They make visible the unity of that group. Likewise when a congregation utters the same cry, or performs the same prayers and gestures, they become and feel themselves to be in unison. There is in human beings a deep desire to be in psychological intimacy and connectedness with others, and religion provides that bond more so than profane interests.

The sacredness of a physical object does not originate in any intrinsic properties of the item. Sacredness is instilled into the object by the believer. This concept is in accord with a basic premise of economics, that values are subjective, that things have value only because people have an interest in them, a value that comes from the mind, and not from any inherent aspect of the object. Even science itself depends on people believing that logic and evidence warrant truths.

Beyond the superficial figures of a religion, there is a living reality. Religion "is a system of ideas with which the individuals represent to themselves the society of which they are members," and the relationships individuals have with their society.

Religion shares with science a seeking to understand ultimate reality. Religions include the belief in the eternal truth that there exists outside of us "something greater than us, with which we enter into communion." With science we can discover mere facts, but with religion, we can have a psychologically intimate and emotionally satisfying relationship with others in our society, with other living beings, with the earth, and with the universe.

Thus does religion strengthen the bonds attaching individuals to their society. The gods of the religion are a figurative expression of one's society. In delving into the essence of religion, Durkheim explains how religious beliefs are not "a tissue of illusions," fantasies, and dupery. Religion is essentially social and collective; its various manifestations come from an

evolution of culture, but beneath the details there exists a rational underlying sociological purpose.

We can understand the prohibitions that religions prescribe when we realize the essence of religion in making a distinction between the sacred and the profane. Religions have bans, prohibitions, and restrictions because these interdictions demonstrate "the presence of something sacred." This is why believers become so upset when their most sacred beliefs and figures are perceived to be insulted.

We should therefore, out of both respect and self-preservation, not mock or disparage others' religious symbols and beliefs. But also, the members of a religion should not impose their beliefs on others, because that denies the sacredness of the others' religions. There is one religious belief that should be challenged, and that is supremacism, the belief that one's religion is not only the true belief, but inherently superior. Supremacy is the belief that the society that one's religion serves extends to all humanity, and must therefore be imposed by force.

The world will never be at peace until most people believe that aside from their religious and cultural beliefs, there is an ethic universal to all persons, a natural moral law that is the imperative and foundation for proper governance. Some critics regard the universal ethic as just another personal belief, but as the philosopher John Locke wrote, natural moral law is derived using reason, from premises grounded in our common human nature.

Human moral equality has been recognized in declarations of rights, yet is denied by most people when it comes down to applications. Every thief implicitly denies the equality of his victim, and that includes people who think they are doing good by imposing implicitly supremacist costs and restrictions on honest and peaceful but disfavored human actions.

The wars of the world are in essence conflicts among supremacist cultures, but also the ethical conflict between the belief in the equal sacredness of all human beings, and the belief in the superiority of the sacredness of particular religions, societies, and persons.

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