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Review 'Herbert Spencer—*Ecclesiastical Institutions: being Part VI of the Principles of Sociology*'

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After a silence of three and a half years, partly as the result of his bad state of health, Spencer has just published a further volume of his *Sociology*. The sixth part which he now gives us is devoted to the study of ecclesiastical institutions. In accordance with his usual method, he follows the evolution of religious life from the earliest and most obscure origins to its full growth: he even attempts to outline its probable development in the future.

Religion began at that point when man found he was able to picture a supernatural being, and the first supernatural being thus imagined was a spirit. In the first part of his *Sociology*, the reader will find the history of this belief. Our earliest ancestors were unable to account for the apparently contradictory double phenomenon of dreaming and sleeping, except by discerning two men in each man, one who remained motionless, lying down, asleep, whilst the other wandered freely through space. This other self—this double, as Spencer calls it—is the spirit. Death is merely a longer separation of these two beings: what characterizes it is that its length is indefinite. Consequently, the savage imagines that all around him there is a multitude of wandering spirits which he fears just as man fears everything that is invisible and mysterious. To ward off the effect of

their malevolence and ensure their protection, he seeks to propitiate them by means of offerings and sacrifices, and later by prayers. It is in this way that the cult of spirits, the initial form of every religion, was founded.

All the complicated and subtle religious systems that are to be found in history are merely the development of this first germ. Fetishism is nothing more than the cult of the spirit transferred to things which the spirit is supposed to inhabit. Naturism is simply the result of an error of language, a crude figure of speech which in their naïvety primitive men ended by taking literally. Through flattery, certain particularly feared and respected personages were given names used to describe the great forces of nature, and in time tradition no longer distinguished the men and the things described by the same word. It is this confusion which gave rise to the personification of these natural agents and to the human origins and adventures attributed to them.

Naturally, the spirits which each family held in the greatest reverence were those of its ancestors. However, when several families combined and became subject to the leadership of a single chief, each began to worship the ancestors of the common patriarch in addition to its own. In fact it seemed that the protective spirits of such a powerful man would necessarily be themselves very powerful and it was therefore prudent to gain their good will. All this gave rise to polytheism, each individual participating in two cults at the same time; one strictly domestic and the other common to the whole tribe. Yet there were no qualitative differences between these various gods. They all had the same role and the same functions and the only way to differentiate them was that they were not all equally powerful. Men did not succeed in imagining truly heterogeneous gods until different societies had reached the stage where they interacted with each other. The extent to which war contributed to this development is well known: conquerors annexed the gods of the vanquished along with the vanquished themselves. The same phenomenon occurred whenever a substantial fragment broke away from an over-large tribe, found another location, and created new gods whose cult was added to that of the ancient deities brought from the mother country. Conflicts inevitably arose between the supernatural beings born of popular imagination, since all the gods fought over the credulity and piety of their worshippers. According to the circumstances and skill of the priests, some appeared to be more powerful than others in the

eyes of the faithful and so a kind of hierarchy amongst the gods was established. Step by step they even became subordinate to a supreme god who was thought to be the source of their power and who, with the help of developing thought, ended by absorbing them all and becoming the unique and true god. Polytheism had changed itself into monotheism.

This is what we might call the physiology of religion, but what of its morphology? From function we pass to structure, from the religious idea to ecclesiastical institutions. Whilst the witch doctor or exorcist is called upon only to combat evil spirits, the role of the priest is above all to propitiate benevolent spirits. For each family these spirits are those of the ancestors. Here is the explanation why, in the first instance, sacerdotal functions were private and domestic and all the members of the family exercised them indiscriminately. In the same way as every homogeneous body is unstable, so the priestly functions did not remain in this diffused state for long. As the family became constituted, the functions were concentrated in the hands of the father and eldest son. At the same time their nature changed: from being purely domestic they became simultaneously political and indeed religious. It is no longer only out of affection that we mourn the dead, it is out of duty. Just as the heir is seen only as a provisional steward of the goods left to him for which he will have to render an account to their legitimate owner, so when the wandering spirit comes back to reanimate the body, which it has momentarily left behind, the funeral offerings constitute a sort of debt or legal obligation which must be borne by the estate. On the other hand, as they are no longer destined to express the personal sentiments of the survivor but to ensure the protection of a supernatural being for the whole family, the person entrusted with the task of making these offerings takes on a truly ecclesiastical character.

In the patriarch there is vested a threefold power: at one and the same time he presides over domestic, political and religious life. Successively these three functions become dissociated and the religious function separates itself from the two others so that it is established on its own. When the family had developed to the point of becoming a village community, strangers eventually infiltrated it and settled in it. Under these conditions the patriarch controlling the composite group naturally had to abandon his domestic character. He remained the political and religious chief, however, for he acted

as intermediary between the other families and his personal ancestors which the whole tribe worshipped together with him. From that moment it was but a step to ecclesiastical functions becoming quite independent. As society increased, so political preoccupations were enough to occupy the whole of the chief's attention; he delegated his religious powers to one of his near relatives and the priesthood was finally established. Once formed, this special organ continued to evolve along with the function, integrating and differentiating itself. In other words, it developed into a hierarchical system which was ever more complex and centralized.

As religious and political power has been intermingled for many centuries, the process was a slow one and never quite complete. Religious functions have been mixed up with others for a long time and it is only with difficulty that they can be disentangled from them. That is why the priest retained genuinely military functions at the height of the Middle Ages—the last vestige of those times when he was entrusted with the responsibility of making known and respected the whims of a jealous and often cruel god. History is full of examples of the influence exercised by the clergy even in recent times over the civil, political and legal administration of states. By the very fact that it held supernatural power in its hands, this caste which was always rich and highly organized, could not fail to have a dominant influence in primitive societies. Besides, by repressing people's minds, the military government prepared them for all forms of slavery and thus cleared the way for religious despotism. Consequently, as industrialism replaced militarism, a revolution took place in men's minds; they assumed the habit of resisting any kind of oppression, religious along with the rest. According to the rule of free contract, there can only be freely accepted beliefs. At the same time as it popularized scientific knowledge, industrial progress undermined for ever the preconceived notion of supernatural causation. Dissidence took place and has been proliferating ever since.

For all that, the ideal of religion will not disappear because it contains a germ of truth already to be found in the superstitions of savages and which time has gradually isolated and developed. Indeed, the cult of spirits implies the belief that internal events and external phenomena reveal two different but analogous forces, that is to say, these two forces are themselves only two different forms of one and the same energy, the source of all life and all change, of

which reason clearly conceives the necessity but which intelligence is for ever powerless to imagine. It is this unknowable with which science comes into collision and which it fails to explain. To be sure, it does away with absurd preconceptions and infantile explanations; nevertheless there remains an unintelligible residuum which transcends scientific knowledge. This eternal mystery is the object and *raison d'être* of religion. It follows that if religion is destined to survive, the same is true of the priesthood but it too will be purified and increasingly transformed. It will no longer consist of a highly centralized corporation, subject to more or less authoritarian rule but become a vast system of local and autonomous institutions, as is appropriate in a truly industrial society. At the same time, the functions of the priest will be more spiritual and more moral. His role will no longer consist in appeasing the gods by means of sacrifices or other propitiatory measures, but in teaching us our duty, in discussing the great and difficult problems of morality, and finally, in giving us either by word or by all the means at the disposal of art, the sentiment of the relations that we maintain with the unknown cause.

As can be seen, the germ of most of these ideas was put forward in the *First Principles*. However, we find them condensed here into a system and supported by an incalculable number of facts taken from the whole span of history. In its erudition, which is prodigious, this sixth part of the *Sociology* concedes nothing to the other parts. At the same time all these facts are grouped and organized with the great ingenuity which is the hallmark of this eminent philosopher. It is wonderful to see how there emerges from the belief in ghosts, a weak enough idea in all conscience, the refined idealism of our modern religions. What is more, it is impossible to spot the slightest gap in the long process of evolution. At first sight there seems to be nothing in common between such dissimilar dogmas, such varied ceremonies and rites. If, however, with Spencer we go below the surface and penetrate the external layer, we find everywhere the same development and the same original germ.

Naturally, this system suffers from the same shortcomings as all other systems and it has, perhaps with good reason, been accused of over-simplification. Indeed, the proposed formula seems very limited when one thinks of the prodigious complexity of religious phenomena. One cannot help but see that the explanation of the process whereby the mind moves from the cult of the dead to the cult

of nature, is a singularly tenuous one. Are we to believe that naturism, the religion which for so long has been the richest source of poetic inspiration, and to which people tired and worn out by all other forms of religious speculation have an almost instinctive tendency to return, has a figure of speech and an ambiguity as its essential and almost unique cause? It is difficult to understand why once men had formulated the concept of a spirit distinct from but animating the body, they should not have made use of it to attempt to understand natural phenomena. As they visualized a sort of soul inside the human body, why should they not have visualized in a similar way a mysterious force beneath the waters of a river regulating its course, or visualized a secret energy behind the bark of a tree bringing it to life? Far from having been spawned by animism, naturism could be quite independent of it—and many facts have been quoted in support of this thesis. Furthermore, one might well ask whether, of these two religions, the latter might not necessarily have preceded the former. In fact, to be able to imagine spirits which can by intervening in the course of events disturb them in their natural course, one must already suspect the existence of an order and a sequence in the concatenation of phenomena. Now, this is too complex an idea to have been other than late in its emergence: it must therefore have been subsequent to the first religious sentiments. That is why, according to Réville, the first religious manifestations would have consisted in the worship, pure and simple, of the personification of the great forces of nature.[1]

It is with some hesitation that we open a debate in a field where we feel unqualified to speak, which brings us to the gravest objection we dare level at Spencer. Sociology has often been reproached for being a very vague and badly defined science; and it must be admitted that on more than one occasion it has merited this reproach. If, indeed, it wishes to study all the phenomena which are to be observed at the heart of societies, as it often aspires to, it is not a science but science itself. It is a complete system of all human knowledge and nothing stands outside it. For our part, we believe that its scope is more restricted and that it has a more precise object. For a fact to be sociological, it must not only concern all individuals taken in isolation, but society itself, that is to say, the collective being [*être collectif*]. The army, industry, the family, all have social functions, since the object of the one is to defend society, the other to feed society and the third to assure its renewal and continuity. If,

however, religion is reduced to being merely a collection of beliefs and practices relating to a supernatural agent which is conjured up by the imagination, it is difficult to see in it anything more than a fairly complex aggregate of psychological phenomena. One can even readily imagine that religious sentiment might have been developed outside organized society altogether. That is how Spencer's book comes to include a great number of questions which are not relevant to our science. Sociology and the history of religions are and must remain separate disciplines.

That is not to say that religion has no place in sociology, but the sociologist must apply himself uniquely to the determination of its social role. We believe that this question, which Spencer dealt with in passing,[2] should have dominated the whole work. However, if the problem is presented in these terms, everything is transformed. The idea of God which seemed to be the sum total of religion a short while ago, is now no more than a minor accident. It is a psychological phenomenon which has got mixed up with a whole sociological process whose importance is of quite a different order. Once the idea of divinity had been formed in a certain number of *consciences* under the influence of completely personal sentiments, it served to symbolize all sorts of traditions, customs and collective needs. What must concern us then is not the symbol, but what it hides and expresses. We might perhaps be able to discover what is thus hidden beneath this quite superficial phenomenon if we compare it with others which resemble it in certain respects. In fact, what difference is there between the prescriptions of religion and the injunctions of morality? They are equally directed at the members of the same community, they are supported by sanctions which are sometimes identical and always analogous; finally, if any of them, no matter what their kind, is violated, the same sentiments of anger and disgust are aroused in people's *consciences*. If we re-read the Ten Commandments, we see that they make us rest on the Sabbath and eschew idols as insistently as we are ordered to respect the life and property of our neighbour. The history of uncivilized peoples could furnish even more conclusive examples in support of this thesis. It is consequently impossible to study these two classes of facts by separating them from each other. That is not all. The law, too, is merely a collection of commandments, of imperatives sustained by material sanctions. Here then, we have three kinds of phenomena whose origin is manifest and which can usefully shed

light on each other. Now, it is the object of law and morality to maintain the equilibrium of society and to adapt it to environmental conditions. This must also be the social role of religion. It is a part of sociology to the extent that is exercises such a regulating influence on society. The problem confronting social science is to determine the content of this influence and to compare and contrast it with other influences. It is of little consequence whether the action is performed in the name of polytheism, monotheism or fetishism; it is of little consequence to know how humanity has progressed from one of these cults to the next and what took place in the obscure *consciences* of primitive men. That is for historians to decide. Moreover, when social institutions which are under the authority of religion come to change, it is not on account of the transformation of the popular conception of the deity. To the contrary, if this idea changes it is because the institutions have changed, and if they have changed, it is because external conditions are no longer the same. Each variation in the symbol presupposes a corresponding variation in the thing symbolized.

It is true that in the ordinary way one visualizes this evolution taking place in the inverse order. From time to time, Spencer himself appears to do so. Indeed, he attributes to the enquiring mind a somewhat extravagant role in the development of civilization. According to him, the main progress of religious ideas has been the result of the sentiment of independence and the taste for free enquiry, awoken and fostered by industrial society. We take the contrary view that the role of the *conscience collective*, like that of the *conscience individuelle*, can be reduced to noting facts without making them. It reflects more or less faithfully what is happening in the innermost recesses of the organism. It does no more than that. A prejudice is not dispelled because it is seen to be irrational; rather, one sees that it is irrational because it is in the process of being removed. When it no longer fulfils its function, that is to say when it no longer ensures the adaptation of individuals or the group to external circumstances, because these have changed, confusion and uneasiness result. The person with an alert conscience then intervenes, perceives that a social instinct is in the process of dissolution, records this dissolution; but at the most only accelerates it a little. It is no doubt true that if the Graeco-Roman religion was transformed it was partly because philosophers submitted it to a critical examination. That they did submit it to a critical examination was because it was

no longer capable of ensuring the equilibrium of those great communities of men created by the Roman conquest.

Thus the sociologist will pay scant attention to the different ways in which men and peoples have conceived the unknown cause and mysterious depths of things. He will set aside all such metaphysical speculations and will see in religion only a social discipline. The power and authority of every discipline resides in habit: it is a totality of ways of behaving fixed by custom. Religion, therefore, is merely a form of custom, like law and morality. What, perhaps, best distinguishes this from all others is that it asserts itself not only over conduct but over the *conscience.* It not only dictates actions but ideas and sentiments. In short, religion starts with faith, that is to say, with any belief accepted or experienced without argument. Belief in God is only one kind of belief. There are many others. Do not most of us believe in progress in the same naïve way as our fathers believed in a beneficent God and in the saints? Moreover, we have no intention of maintaining that there is nothing more to religion. It is only too clear that, for a certain number of people, more than anything else it gives full scope to that need for idealism, to those aspirations towards the infinite, to that vague disquiet which stirs within all warm hearts. However incontestable and noble these sentiments may be, they are not of interest to sociology but to intimate [*intime*] and familiar [*familière*] morality. These phenomena do not arise out of the *conscience privée* and do not give rise to social consequences, at least not appreciable ones. Religion is far too complex a phenomenon for us to be able to consider all its aspects and characteristics even in a major work. Everyone has the right to his own point of view. We have simply indicated the one which is relevant in our opinion to sociology; in other words, that aspect of religion which we see when it is viewed purely as a social phenomenon.

If then we look at things from this angle, the future of religion appears to be quite different from that predicted by Spencer. How difficult it is, in fact, to admit that the confused *représentation* of the unknowable should provide such rich material for the speculations of men and exercise an effective influence over their conduct! Moreover, the very reasons given to demonstrate the existence of the unknowable are not always very conclusive. For, in the end, if reason cannot understand that everything is relative, no more can it conceive of the absolute. How is one to choose between these two

absurdities and why should one prefer the second to the first? But let us leave all these logical arguments and focus attention on our own particular point of view. To turn religion into some sort of idealistic and popular metaphysic, to reduce it to a mere collection of personal and considered judgments on the relativity of human knowledge and on the necessity for an after-life, is to divest it of all social significance. It can only remain a collective discipline if it imposes itself on every mind with the overpowering authority of habit; if, on the other hand, it becomes a voluntarily accepted philosophy, it is nothing more than a simple incident in the private life and *conscience* of the individual. This theory would have as its consequence the tendency of religion to disappear as a social institution. It is far from stating, as does Spencer, that the status and importance of custom declines with civilization. How extraordinary it is that this great mind should have subscribed so completely to the common error regarding the growing omnipotence of free enquiry. In spite of the current meaning of the word, a prejudice is not a false judgment but simply an established judgment or one regarded as such. It conveys to us, in the form of a summary, the results of experiences undergone by others and which we ourselves have not experienced. In consequence, the more the field of knowledge and action is widened, the more there are things which we must believe on the authority of someone else. In other words, progress only serves to increase the number of prejudices;[3] and when we affirm that, on the contrary, its effect is to substitute clear reason for blind instinct everywhere and in everything, we are the victims of a downright illusion. A host of hereditary prejudices are in the course of crumbling and disappearing because they are no longer adapted to the new conditions of social life. In the midst of all these ruins reason alone remains standing, and it seems as if every endeavour of humanity has been channelled into preparing for its advent and for ensuring its supremacy. What we assume to be an ideal is only an unhealthy and temporary condition. A society without prejudices would be like an organism without reflexes: it would be a monster incapable of living. Sooner or later, therefore, custom and habit will claim their rights and that is what authorizes us to presume that religion will survive the attacks of which it is the object. For so long as men live together, they will hold some belief in common. What we cannot foresee and what only the future will be able to decide, is the particular form in which this faith will be symbolized.

To sum up, the law, morality, and religion are the three great regulating functions of society; these three groups of phenomena must be studied by a special branch of sociology. This is the essential conclusion to emerge from the whole discussion.

Notes

1 For an interesting discussion on this subject see Harrison and Spencer, *The Nineteenth Century*. January, March, July, September [also November—W.S.F.P.] 1884.
2 Ch. IX, pp. 763–74.
3 Quite simply, the prejudices of today are perhaps more flexible than those of the past.