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RELIGION IN TERMS OF SOCIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

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As a working conception of religion I offered some years ago this statement, "consciousness of the highest social values."¹ By consciousness was meant appreciation and the active attitude of supporting and perpetuating. There was no expectation of bringing all students of the subject to agreement upon that definition, but it is surprising to see how varied and lively the disagreement has been. Much of it has been due to neglecting the word "highest" and not a little to different uses of the term "social."

Among the recent critics of this conception is Professor James B. Pratt, whose book *The Religious Consciousness* was the most important contribution of last year to the psychology of religion. His treatment of "society" and the "social" is not always easy to understand. A comparison of different passages suggests that the difficulty of understanding him springs from a conflict in his own thought. After defining religion as "the serious social attitude" toward the Determiner of Destiny, he remarks that he uses the word social with considerable misgiving. He asserts that the religious attitude has only a "faint touch" of the social quality and in a merely incipient way. His general psychological position is responsible for this. That view is of the older individualistic type in which the individual is represented as in possession of certain instincts from birth the expression and direction of which are largely due to the influence of society. Having made sure of this individualistic equipment to begin with,

¹ *The Psychology of Religious Experience* (1910).

Professor Pratt becomes quite enthusiastic concerning the value of social experience. "Once we have recognized the original psychical endowment of the individual, the influence of society in making him what he is can hardly be exaggerated"—society "to some extent genuinely constitutes him."

Professor Pratt here follows William James whose view of the instincts was formulated before the development of recent important conceptions of social psychology in this field. James enumerated a list of instincts belonging to the individual as if they were separate, discrete functions. Later investigators are dropping the notion of specific instincts. They speak of impulsive tendencies and attitudes as phases of complex organic behavior. Moreover, these tendencies are conceived as elicited and conditioned by social experience. In this view human nature is always and thoroughly social, involving the interaction of social stimulus and response. Thought, of the most private character, becomes a conversation between the different "selves" within the imagination. These selves are developed through participation in social relations, and consciousness is itself an interplay of rôles gathered from intercourse with one's fellows. The force of this position may be emphasized by trying to imagine what would happen in the oft-conjectured situation of an infant left absolutely alone and yet maintaining life to years of maturity. We have no reason to suppose he would possess any human traits. It is not justifiable to assume that such a being would possess a "rational nature." But positing for him only the normal brain and nervous system of the human animal and the ordinary social medium, the infant becomes rational and sympathetic and civilized. The individual is not then to be set off against society, nor counted simply as one unit which may be associated with similar units to produce an aggregate called society. The mind and "soul" are social through and through. The individual is real enough, but his reality is within the social situation. Professor Pratt does not take

seriously enough the following words which he quotes with approval from Professor Cooley: "A separate individual is an abstraction unknown to experience, and so likewise is society when regarded as something apart from individuals."

In the definition religion is identified with the *highest* social consciousness—not with social consciousness in general. By "highest" is meant the most intimate and vital phases of the social consciousness. This highest social consciousness is not the same in all peoples and times, but every people and every time have a scale of values in which certain interests are felt to be the most important. These constitute their religious values. There is here suggested an index to the religion of any race in any stage of development. To discover the religion of the natives of Australia, examine their ceremonials and their social organization and find what they are most concerned about. The same method is reliable for studying the religions of India and the United States. It is of course recognized that modern society is complex and really consists of many groups. The religion of any group in American life is found when the deepest common interests of that group are discovered. So far as we have a national religious life it may be seen in those most dominant concerns of the whole people. Some observers think our God is Mammon. Some think it is Efficiency. Some think it is Democracy. But the truth is that the national consciousness of this country is not sufficiently unified and homogeneous as yet to afford clear and convincing evidence of what is the highest American social consciousness. And for that very good reason we are in a profound transition period attended with much confusion as to what our religion is or should be!

This suggests why religion is identified in modern society with morality.¹ Religion is older than critical, reflective

¹ J. H. Leuba, in "The Meaning of 'Religion,'" *Journal of Philosophy*, February 3, 1921, objects to this use of the term religion. It is hardly a greater change, however, than in the word "government" to denote democracy as well as monarchy.

morality; but when the highest social values are lifted out of the realm of custom, religion tends to become identified with the more consciously chosen ideals. Superstition and magic atrophy and the rationally appraised and experimentally evaluated focus attention. Morality is enlarging into social idealism in the modern world and this social idealism is precisely the quality of religion.

Other criticisms may be met by pointing out that the conception of religion in terms of the highest social consciousness affords a new and fruitful view of the meaning of God. It is interesting to note that Professor Pratt defines religion as "the serious and social attitude of individuals or communities toward the power or powers which they conceive as having ultimate control over their interests and destinies." That is a good definition. It may be used with entire satisfaction by one who identifies religion with the ideal social values. These values are embodied in different objects according to the life-habits and political organization of the group. For the Malay rice is the god; for the American Indian, corn; for the Aino, the bear; for the primitive Hebrew, the sheep. For the later Hebrew, God is in the form of a man and a king. Whatever the symbol, the substance of the idea of God, the objective reality, is the Spirit of the group whose awesome will is enforced through the commandments of social custom. Social approval and social ostracism are the flaming swords which guard the sanctities of life both in savage and in civilized communities.

Professor Pratt calls this conception of God "subjective," but it certainly is not subjective in the sense of being individualistic. And it is obviously not a "mere" idea—occurring simultaneously in the heads of a number of men. It is the Determiner of Destiny, to use his favorite expression. An analogous case may be found in the familiar use of "Alma Mater" to designate an institution of learning. Is the Alma Mater a *mere* idea? Is it a fiction? Is it subjective? Has it not all the reality of the college buildings, the faculties,

donors, students, and the social influence which flows through the whole body of traditions? Viewed in this way, an alumnus may have perception of his Alma Mater, may derive help from her in the form of recommendations, may sing praises to her and be responsive to her will and thought. Hearing a company of students singing, a spectator might wonder whether they thought there actually was a particular woman to whom their songs were addressed. But he who should decide that the Alma Mater was therefore unreal and merely subjective would also be mistaken. Professor Pratt insists that his definition includes among the religious many an atheist (p. 5). Such an admission raises serious questions concerning the nature of the Determiner of Destiny. At least the highest social values do not admit of their negation on the part of those who are religious. To be antisocial is far deeper heresy than to be atheistic with reference to the Determiner of Destiny as often conceived!

Another misapprehension with reference to the social appears in the conception of its relation to the cosmos or nature. Durkheim and Cornford have shown that the cosmos is socially determined.¹ They hold that for primitive races the notions of space, time, force, motion, and material objects, are conditioned and comprehended within the social. Here, to be sure, arises all the array of conflicting metaphysical theories. But nevertheless the realist who prefers to insist that the order of nature and material objects exist independently of the social medium precisely as he conceives them assumes the burden of proof. That is supposed to have been shown long ago by Immanuel Kant. For him nature is phenomenal. The sociologists of the Durkheim school have given an empirical psychological account of the way in which nature is conformed to the notions and attitudes of the social group. What, in these scientific days, is regarded as an

¹ Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*; Cornford, *From Religion to Philosophy*.

independent material order appears in their writings as a complex of social concepts—collective representations. This does not make nature subjective in the sense of reducing it to images in the brains of men. It only points out that objects as known are objects of social usage and convention. They are matters of value and not only matters of fact.

The crux of the problem largely concerns the doctrine of creation and the enigmatic question of bare existence. The picture of a Deity fashioning the worlds and all that in them is, is so vivid that few realize that it has little if any place in a genuinely scientific view of the world. The idea of the beginning of matter and of life is an abstract metaphysical question probably beyond the possibility of any real answer. The kind of answer which the mind frames is a poetic, imaginative account cast in the mold of the prevailing culture. Primitives tell marvelous tales of how a giant rabbit or beetle or kangaroo or a very anthropomorphic god created all things out of dust or mist. All such stories bear the marks of the social group from which they arise. They gain religious significance in so far as they aid in maintaining taboos and in magnifying reverence for the totem deities. This poetry and imagery of the evaluating social consciousness continues in chastened and elevated forms, as in the writings of Dante and Milton, to serve social, idealistic ends, but it is not to be mistaken for literal representation of “things in themselves.”

The practical attitude of the modern social spirit toward nature illustrates still more impressively that nature is instrumental for the great ideal ends of religion. Instead of an external, providential order before which man is dumb and submissive, nature has become increasingly flexible and subservient to social requirements. We no longer regard disease as the visitation of the wrath of God upon men for their sins. We look for the causes and elicit by experimentation from nature herself means of prevention and cure. Nature has been changed so that some diseases no longer occur. She is

made to yield crops where formerly all was desolation. New species of plants have been grown. Unimagined highways have been opened in the air and over seas and through the mountains. Human beings have made nature serve their social needs by marvelous means of communication and by wonderful devices for preserving records of experience in the printed page and in pictures. Miracles have been performed upon the human body and others are in preparation. The mind itself is in the making through better understanding of methods of education.

The sense of participating in a social experience of this character and magnitude is not lacking in genuine religious significance. It generates an impressive mystical quality and furnishes the elements of a vital and reasonable faith. The finest devotional moods, including prayer and meditation, are vitalized and refined. The meaning of God as the Common Will and the Great Companion furnish conceptions of the divine which are at once intimate and commanding.