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AN OVERVIEW ON W.S.F. PICKERING'S STUDY OF DURKHEIM'S WORK

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One of the most famous scholars who have written about Émile Durkheim's works is Dr W.S.F. Pickering, the author of a number of books on the French sociologist and his followers, and the General Secretary of the British Centre for Durkheimian Studies, a center that he initiated and founded in 1991, in the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Oxford University. His well-acknowledged book on Durkheim's views on religion is *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion, Themes and Theories*, first published in 1984. The 2009 edition of the book includes, on the back cover, extraordinary remarks on Pickering's book: a "book of great erudition" and "the summation of all that one can know – or almost know – of Durkheim's sociology of religion", the single book that "has explained Durkheim's views on religion using the whole corpus of his writing" (2009). The book is intended to respond to a call, states Pickering (2009: xxv), much similar to the one of W. E. H. Stanner, the Australian anthropologist, who, fascinated by "this inexhaustibly interesting scholar", responds to the impulse of repeatedly turning back in order "to study again and again" Durkheim's great book on religion, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, one of the classics of sociology because "it is constantly read and reread", providing permanent "academic refreshment and insight" (xix).

Doctor Pickering's *Introductory remarks* synthesizes the content of the book making reference to some rationale, the purposes of the book as well as the presentation of the works written by Durkheim on the subject of religion in his "attempt to explore social phenomena scientifically" (xix). What the author is underlining from the very beginning is that it is not only *The Elementary Forms* that is the focus of his analysis but also the many articles, reviews, writings, i.e. "the entire corpus of his writings which deal with religion and allied subjects" (xx). Furthermore, the reader is told,

Durkheim's Sociology of Religion gives attention to the sociologist's followers and critics, not much taken into consideration previously. Dr Pickering repeatedly expresses fascination for the subject of his study, "a classical writer whose mind has been shown to be outstandingly great" (xx), who must be analyzed "with a degree of reverence" (xxii) and explains that in approaching a classic, one has to "expound what the man has written" (xx). There are three main reasons for this: (1) the number and the complexity of the ideas and their ramifications, (2) the stringent criticism on Durkheim's atheistic, positivist and reductionist beliefs and (3) the attempt to focus less on the weaknesses of Durkheim's works but rather to "expound Durkheim's thought" because "the overall task is to come to terms with Durkheimian thought about religion, not to argue about how one come to terms with any classic or classical thought in general" (xxi). Minute examination is the principal method of analysis of Durkheim's texts and their meaning that Dr Pickering uses, often implying a going back and re-interpretation of the French original in order to avoid misinterpretation and obscurity, for "one can only judge him by what he did and what he set out to do" and any other judgment entails "a completely different set of criteria" (xxii). That is the reason why, Dr Pickering explains, the book is not to compare Durkheim with any other sociologist because his sociological thought is a "complete system", a "sociological Thomism" and any attempt to compare systems would be a "futile exercise, only excusable as an examination question for undergraduates" (xxii). Another aspect to take into consideration when analyzing text and life is the historical perspective, an imperative, the reader is told, for Durkheim was "very much a man of his time"; therefore, the book connects the religious issues of Durkheim's time, his religious background, his education, ideals, as well as the changes that his thought underwent during his lifetime (xxii). Special remarks are made by Dr Pickering when referring to the criticism that Durkheim's works were subject to, more or less because of a particular weakness of sociologists, who often believe criticism is "their main craft", tending to be critical or negative before the exposition or the unfolding of the picture (xxii). Dr Pickering states that there is a very simple reason for titling the book *Themes and Theories*, and this is that Durkheim covered vast topics in his study of religion, which would result in "a book of inordinate length", which is not the intention of the book (xxiii). That is why the author divides Durkheim's corpus of work into five parts, similar to the structuring of the content of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, in five books. Another aspect, a more "controversial area" that the author mentions here is the sociology of knowledge, much bound up with religion, and which could make the subject of an entire, totally different book (xxiv). Special formulation is given to explaining why the subject of the book is religion, as "unashamedly" stated, and not society, social behavior, social institutions or epistemology (xxiv), although the book

evidently considers the relations of religion with other areas. It is also stated that the book makes no connection with Durkheim's Jewish background. Sharp remarks are made when it comes to stating that *Durkheim's Sociology of Religion* is not to categorize the sociologist in any way, calling him "a positivist, a social realist, and idealist, and so on"; and a rhetorical question stands for a reason here: "Is this how one is to judge a classic or a classical writer? [...] As if this is all that is to be said! If this is so, the notion of a classic is meaningless (xxv)".

Part I titled *Historical Perspectives* contains the first five chapters covering aspects regarding Durkheim's religious quest in connection to family life and personal beliefs, to the arena of education, and the development of Durkheim's thought on religion, in the early, the middle and the last period of his life. This part of the book begins with an Introduction and a question, which could be seen as an epitome of the paradoxes generated by the sociologist's works: "If the subject of this book is Durkheim's study of religion, why should an attempt be made to consider at the outset Durkheim's personal and academic life? His aim, after all, was to undertake an objective and scientific analysis of religion according to those canons of sociology which he himself had laid down. If that is the case, if the discoveries he made are to be judged by scientific criteria, his own life, beliefs and professional achievements can hardly have any bearing on such judgment", states Dr Pickering (3). Yet, the reader is told, some aspects of the sociologist's life, those associated to religion, are to be analyzed, daring to "dig over old ground" in order to point out his religious attitudes and outlook. Special references are made to Durkheim's boyhood, youth and the rejection of Judaism, including some psychoanalytic factors and further details about the place of Jews in France during Durkheim's time, including the 1894 Dreyfus affair and anti-Semitism, his asceticism, different from the one of monks or hermits and marked by moderation, self-control and total dedication to work and his life as a family man, together with his wife and two children. Further on, the first chapter of the first Part debates on Durkheim's calling himself "agnostic, rationalist and atheist" and on why this is "as straightforward an assertion as it seems to be" (20). Consideration is given to Durkheim's "ardent" nationalism and patriotism, more or less resulting from the set of wars and political events that he witnessed, starting from the 1870 Franco-Prussian war, the Commune of 1871 and then WWI. According to W.S.F. Pickering, as Durkheim saw it, "sociology had to give a 'theological' basis, which was essentially naturalistic and pragmatic, to the new quasi-religious morality that was emerging in France, and which was thought necessary for the well-being of the nation" (27). Durkheim died in 1917, after the death of his son, and he is said to have passed away through a broken heart. It was after the tragic event that Durkheim admitted that "religion offered him no hope or comfort" (28) and the result, according to Dr Pickering, was that the "edifice of the cult of man on which he had

consciously based his beliefs had crumbled” (28) and society, “which he seemed to worship as a quasi-deity, offered not comfort but betrayal” (29). The second chapter of Part I refers to the most fruitful period of Durkheim’s life, the years of university and professional life when he established himself as “the doyen of sociology in France” (31) while laying the foundation of a well-acknowledged sociology. References are made to his disciples, the *équipe* made up of Marcel Mauss, Celestin Bouglé, Georges Davy, Henri Hubert etc. (32), and the journal, *L’Année sociologique*, comprising high quality writing that addressed not only sociologists but also psychologists, historians, philosophers, lawyers. “Influence in the realm of education” refers to Durkheim as an educator, not only a thinker but also a “man of action” interested in praxis and teaching only what he believed and trying to change the outlook of the teachers along with the content of education (35). “More a priest than a scholar” debates on the hostility that Durkheim created and the “frequent charge” of dogmatism, which one could wonder if seriously sustained; consequently, Dr Pickering brings in some reasoning to eliminate some of the “ways in which Durkheim was seen to be a dogmatist” and referring rather to locating it in the academic world (41). As previously mentioned, the next three chapters of the first part refer to the development of Durkheim’s thought on religion, focusing on trying to answer the question whether “Durkheim’s ‘sensible’ approach, coupled with professional determination, itself bordering on the religious, is intellectually tenable” (46). The early period (1880 - 1895) is marked by the publication of Durkheim’s three books, two of them including large sections devoted to religion: the first one was his doctoral thesis, *De la Division du travail social* (1893), the second one was *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* (1895), his manifesto for sociology, and the third book was *Le Suicide: étude de sociologie* (1897); beside this, Dr Pickering also includes here the number of reviews or review-articles associated with religion (51). Durkheim’s earliest attitudes toward religion emerge from his sociological studies, according to which “Religion dictates to people actions, ideas and sentiments and it also possesses its own authority. Therefore, like law and morality, it has a regulating function in society and creates social equilibrium”, meaning that “law, morality and religion can all be legitimately studied by sociology” (54). It was in this period that Durkheim formulated some secondary characteristics of religion, namely “the notion of God, belief in life after death, a sense of the mysterious, a collection of individual beliefs” (54). What interested Durkheim in this period was “the search for the origin of religion in the very structure of the phenomenon itself” (59). The middle period from 1895 to 1906 is the richest not only intellectually but also professionally, states Dr Pickering. If the first period placed religion within the sociological framework, the second one gives rise to the “technical name *sociologie religieuse*” and the revelation Durkheim had after reading Robertson Smith’s book, *The Religion of the*

Semites. Under his influence, Durkheim discovered that it was religion that could open many sociological doors, that “society now had its mysteries revealed by the mystery of religion and religion itself was to be understood by its relation to society” (74). The “final formulation”, the last chapter of Part I includes the period 1906 – 1917, from the lectures on religion in the Sorbonne between 1906 and 1907, titled ‘La Religion: les origines’, to Durkheim’s most important contribution to the sociology of religion, his book *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie*, published in 1912. What is evident is that the lectures correspond to a certain extent to *The Elementary Forms* published later and Dr Pickering outlines some of the “points of difference in summary form” (81). The chapter dedicated to *Les Formes élémentaires* sums up the book and refers to the number of reviews of the book, the English translation and some changes of the subtitle, and the review that appeared in *Année sociologique*, as a résumé of the book, signed by Durkheim himself together with Marcel Mauss, his nephew (83). “Its reception” briefly points to the “general strengths and weaknesses of the book raised by various scholars” (87).

As Dr Pickering states, the first part of *Durkheim’s Sociology of Religion* “has meant showing in the broad sweep the many themes and ideas he raised in his work on the subject” (91). The next four parts “will be focused on a selection of the issues which have been mentioned” in the first part, and so far in the present review.

Part II Taking up Positions consists of six chapters that focus on some of the “alleged errors and false assumptions in the matter of method connected with his sociological approach to religion” (95), pointed out by critics. In short: it is the relation “the sacred and the profane” that is defined, the origin of the terms, their basic meanings, their relations and distinctions, and all the issues that the dichotomy involves when connected with “Commitment to a definition” (chapter 9). Changing the definition of religion [from the ‘1899 religion’ = “Σ religious phenomena and Σ social facts and individual phenomena of a religious kind” to the ‘1912 religion’ = “Σ socio-religious phenomena (social facts)” (180)] laid Durkheim open to three charges, Dr Pickering states, namely (1) reductionist, (2) providing an essential definition and not a nominal one, and (2) presenting a theory within a definition (179). This leads to further questions that the author of the book tries to answer as regards Durkheim’s being misunderstood in his attempt to define religion (see page 189). Chapter 10, “The problem of the social and the individual in religion” and Chapter 11, “ ‘All religions are false: all religions are true’ ” attempt to reevaluate Durkheim’s definition of religion, religious *truth*, *reality* and *force*, within the context of methodology.

Part III Beliefs and Ideas has six chapters that deal with Durkheim’s original, “brilliant and daring way” of overcoming the difficulty that 19th-century sociologists and anthropologists had when trying to explain

religion, as a concept constructed by man, by means of rational arguments (227). What Durkheim did was to concentrate on the concept of society in order to show that the place/locus of God was in society. Chapter 12, "God's identity revealed" explains in detail Durkheim's enterprise on the notion of God, which ends with Figure 12.2, *God and society*, referring to the strong and the less strong associations of the two concepts (see page 243). Chapter 13, "Society: a divine being?" refers to "the doctrine of the deification of society" (244). The reader is explained the fact that "God's nature has been revealed as society hypostasized does not mean that *ipso facto* society itself is divine, and Durkheim never said that it was" (244); to him society is the *ens realissimum* and the *summum bonum* of ethical behavior (244). Further Durkheimian concepts involved in the definition of society are explained, such as *conscience collective*, and the next chapter, "In the beginning: religion or society" debates on the paradox derived from Durkheim's attempt to link religion and society, i.e. "religion is derived from society, but in the beginning religion was the matrix of all that is social" (268). Chapter 15 tries to answer a set of questions as regards the meaning of *représentations* (of society/God), as a key to understanding man and society, as well as that of 'reality' (pp. 276-279-283). The last chapter of part III is a question to be answered by Dr Pickering, "The functions of religion: a case of misunderstanding?", pointing out two major functions: "one speculative and related to thought and the other practical and concerned with action (302), but also referring to religion meant to function so as "to stabilize and integrate society" (307) and "to control in a negative or ascetical mode" (310).

Part IV Ritual and Effervescent Assembly embodies debates on the importance of ritual in Durkheim's thought on religion, in three chapters, from 'Prolegomena', 'Classification and function' and 'Its relation to *la vie sérieuse*'. The Introduction to the concept refers to the two main components of religion, belief and rituals, corresponding to faith, dogma, thought, *représentations*, and to action, cult, rite, ceremony, practice – both reduced to thought and action (321), both reevaluated in the next two chapters, 18 and 19. In emphasizing the concept of *la vie sérieuse* (the social and the sacred), Dr Pickering introduces another concept never used by Durkheim, "in order to bring out the dichotomy which perhaps existed in his own mind" (353), the phrase *la vie légère*, associated with the profane and the individual. Chapter 20 continues the debate on Durkheim's ritual, paring it with myth and discussing on their primacy and parity. The last two chapters of Part IV elaborates on the significance of the term "effervescent assembly", often associated by Durkheim with the French Revolution and contained not only in *The Elementary Forms*, but also in a paper presented at the International Congress of Philosophy in Bologna (382). Collective effervescence, closely associated with Durkheim's theory of representations, is seen as the source of religious

change and strength and Dr Pickering outlines the process itself, and then he analyzes the questions, criticism and evaluation of the concept.

Part V Contemporary Religion consists in four chapters that all deal with the very sensitive issue of *secularization*. Chapter 23 comprises Durkheim's attitude to traditional religions, such as Christianity, Roman Protestantism and Protestantism, starting from the idea that Durkheim's analysis viewed the religion, beliefs and practices of primitive people, often implying, as Pickering states, that he intended his conclusions to be generalized and seen as universal or even applied to contemporary western societies (421). Chapter 24, "Secularization: the history of mankind" deliberates on "religious change *per se*", and "religious change implying a decline or weakening of religion within society, especially in its institutional forms" (442), the latter being associated with the issue of secularization. Actually, the reader is told, Durkheim never used the Anglo-Saxon word, but rather he referred to *décline, affaiblissement, regression*; the chapter elaborates on these terms and then on age-long secularization and recent secularization, the latter referring to the state of decline of modern religion, determined by at least five factors, in Dr Pickering's view (448-450): the loss of the temporal power of the Church, religion turning into the subject of scientific inquiry, the inability of religious institutions to enforce rules relating to sacrilege, the inability of the Church to control the lives of individuals and the non-believers that formed most of the intellectual world. The second factor mentioned above is the subject of chapter 25, "The invasion of religion by science", which Durkheim proved to be a "factor of overwhelming importance in the process of secularization", science being to him a "tool for destroying religions" and an "instrument for pointing to the conservation of religion" (475). "Religion, therefore, must continue!" (475), concludes Durkheim, and Dr Pickering continues the idea in the last chapter of part V titled "The new religion: the cult of man or society", which prognosticates on Durkheim's view on a future religion, on the working classes as the source of religious revival, on the emergence of an old French religion and on the heresy of egoism, a new religion that Durkheim often referred to as individualism, as the cult of man or the cult of the individual, or as the cult of the human personality (485). This is the starting point of the last parts of this chapter, themselves some questions to be answered: 'But who is god? Man or society?' (487) and 'Can the cult be justified?' (490). The alternative to a traditional religion, or the new cult, is not another religion, the reader is explained, but in fact a moral system (499). What Durkheim hoped was that in "emphasizing a reverence for science and a reverence for man and bringing them together, he had breached the gap between religion and science", a relation that "has gone through many phases of rapprochement and hostility"; nevertheless, this is a relation that does have some common ground where, Dr Pickering explains, the scientist and the fair-minded (the liberal) can meet (498).

Part VI Postscript attempts to finish the study and to provide “A final look” at *sociologie religieuse* as “a hope that quickly fades”, pointing out some of Durkheim’s vulnerability, and the eclipse of Durkheim’s religious sociology, but also as “a case of exaggerated claims”, with such chapters like “religion as demiurge” and “the alleged destructiveness” of Durkheim’s work.

The study of Dr Pickering is intended to “set forth the truth about Durkheim by delineating his thought on the matter of religion”, on the one hand, and “to try to bring out the ‘truth’ of the truth of Durkheim, that is, the ‘truth’ of the analysis he so imaginatively put forward”, on the other hand (xxv). *Durkheim’s Sociology of Religion* can be called successful in serving such purposes because it does present, with accurate details, all that Durkheim said about religion in his corpus of literature, comprehensively and eruditely underlining the master’s genius: Durkheim’s contribution is today seen as fundamental to the development of sociology in general and all that has been done after him seems to be an extension of his theories because “no one opened up or developed more issues than he did” (523).

All reflections on Durkheim’s work start from the well-acknowledged idea that the master’s exquisite contribution to the religious phenomenon can be called *the* classic in the sociology of religion. Such a classic advanced theories on the relation between society and the individual, placing religion at the core of social phenomena. Durkheim’s works, inspired by the scientific canons of sociological methodology, laid the foundation for the understanding of the multiple influences of community and society on individual behavior and practices. Thus, it is understandable why it is exceptionally difficult to concentrate such a great legacy in a single study, which makes Dr Pickering’s work considerably consistent and unique.