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In: Archives des sciences sociales des religions. N. 16, 1963. pp. 22-25.

Citer ce document / Cite this document :

Busia K.A. Has the distinction between primitive and higher religions any sociological significance ?. In: Archives des sciences sociales des religions. N. 16, 1963. pp. 22-25.

doi : 10.3406/assr.1963.1996

http://www.persee.fr/web/revues/home/prescript/article/assr_0003-9659_1963_num_16_1_1996

HAS THE DISTINCTION BETWEEN PRIMITIVE AND HIGHER RELIGIONS ANY SOCIOLOGICAL SIGNIFICANCE ?

ONE could raise several questions of definition before tackling such a subject, in order to make clear to oneself, as well as to others, the scope and limitations of the subject under discussion. One could begin by asking, for example, how one defines and distinguishes « primitive » from « higher » religions, or what « sociological » is intended to cover in this context. At meetings dealing with the comparative sociology of religion, such questions are inevitable, and unavoidable, and will no doubt frequently arise in the course of the discussions of this section.

But it would be stifling to attempt the definitions and distinctions at the beginning, and in order to avoid a tardy take-off by undertaking what I do not feel competent to do, I leave these questions for discussion at the Conference.

In what follows, I may state at the outset, that I write from a rather limited experience, against the background of what I know of the « primitive » religions of Africa, and of the invasion of Africa of two « higher » religions : Christianity and Islam.

Our subject compels us to try to grasp, as far as possible, the relations between religions and the social structures out of which they have grown or within which they are practised.

African traditional religions are polytheistic and animistic ; their world is peopled with many gods and spirits. Islam and Christianity are on the other hand monotheistic religions, and one may ask whether the difference has any sociological significance.

The religions of Africa have grown among communities that were generally small in size, more or less self-contained, and isolated from other communities. It may be postulated that changes in a people's religious concepts, from polytheism to monotheism, follow changes in social organisation, from the growth, by peaceful means or otherwise, of isolated tribes into nations. From the ancient world of Africa, the history of Egyptian religion would support this hypothesis. Egyptian religion was polytheistic ; a particularly marked feature was the worship of animals : the ape, the bull, the cat, the cobra, the cow, the crocodile, the dog, the fish, the goat, the goose, the grasshopper, the hawk, the hippopotamus, the lion, the pig, the scorpion, and the vulture, were all worshipped as gods. One theory advanced for this is that each clan considered itself to have descended in the remote past from the particular animal which its clan members worshipped. So with the many tribes of the Egyptians were as many gods.

When later the tribes were consolidated into city-states, some of the tribal gods lost in importance, and one or other of the gods gained ascendancy as the supreme god of the new political unit. When the city-states were united into a nation, a similar development took place. The gods of a city-state that was conquered were subordinated to the gods of the victor. Thus a tendency towards monotheism paralleled the development toward nationhood ; and when Egypt became an empire, the national gods, in order to be acceptable to the other nations of the empire, became international.

One might venture to discern a similar development in the religion of the ancient Hebrews from which christianity sprang. During the patriarchal period, from the days of Abraham to that of Moses, the unit of social organisation was the clan ; and each clan had its own god, whose interests were identical with those of the clan. One of the tasks of Moses, when he led the tribes of Israel out of bondage in Egypt to the borders of the « promised » land was to weld the tribes into a nation. Yahweh not only required political unity among the tribes of Israel, but also religious unity ; they must all discard their tribal gods, and worship only Yahweh. The Ark of Covenant was a symbol of the relation between the One God and his people, who were one nation.

It was after the return of the Hebrews from the Babylonian Captivity of the Sixth Century B.C., during the process of national reconstruction, that the sense of mission to the Gentile became manifest. Yahweh was conceived as the God of all peoples, and not only of the Hebrews. This internationalism owed something to the experience of the Captivity, and the contact with other peoples. The monotheism of the Hebrews can be said to have grown out of their historical experience.

By contrast, Mohammedanism started off as a monotheistic religion, because Mohammed borrowed much from the Jews and the early Christians ; but it is noteworthy that he aroused the hostility of his own people because he did not recognise their many gods ; and after the Hejira of 622 A.D., he had to resort to force to build a nation as well as establish a national, monotheistic religion among his people.

In many parts of Africa, polytheistic religions still exist ; they are essentially tribal religions. Will these survive the nationbuilding that is going on in Africa today, or will the « emergent nations » discover or evolve national religions, albeit rooted in African traditions ? That such a search is going on is discernible in contemporary « traditionalism », the self-conscious search for African Culture. Whether it will result in monotheism is a moot question, but political pressure, social change, and the impact of Christianity and Islam compel modifications to religious practice and belief. Contemporary means of communication break down isolationism, and make possible an enlargement which is a threat to traditional polytheism.

Traditional African religions strongly express a sense of dependence on the deities and spirits which are worshipped through many religious rites to propitiate the gods and spirits, or to avert evils, or bring blessings. Traditional religion is primarily participation in ritual. The ritual is indeed an expression of belief, but this is implicit rather than explicit, secondary rather than primary.

This is in sharp contrast with Christianity, and to a less degree with Islam where the creed, or the affirmation of belief, is primary, and ritual is secondary. The emphasis on belief is historical and significant. It stems from the Western tradition where the Greeks long ago introduced the principle of reason into religion. The Greeks sought a religion that satisfied the intellect, and originated a tradition which had something to do with the doctrinal disputes of the early

church. Christianity originating in the Near East, spread to the Western part of the Roman Empire. The two parts of the empire were different in many ways, and disputes arose in religion and politics alike. The West developed the Church's law and organisation; the speculative East busied itself with doctrine. The first of the ecumenical councils, that of Nicaea (A.D. 325), exemplifies the disputes which gave emphasis to belief and doctrine. Fundamentally, the schism was due to the division between the Western and Eastern parts of the Roman Empire; to racial and linguistic differences, as well as to different habits of thought. The plurality of religions, interpretations, doctrines, and heresies that ensued caused emphasis to be placed on doctrine and belief. The disputations, much of which was in writing, point to another important difference between the Primitive religions of Africa, and Islam or Christianity. The latter are « Religions of the Book ». They have the tradition of writing and written disputation; and writing is of sociological significance. It makes it possible to reach an audience beyond the tribe, clan or even a nation, and consequently to take account of other peoples. It is noteworthy that the higher religions are universal in their scope, and missionary in their vision, each considering it its duty to gather all humanity into its fold. It is perhaps not stretching the point too far to see in the struggles between Church and State in the Middle Ages, the medieval Church struggling to become the religious counterpart of the Empire. Thus historical experience gave the principle of universality a meaningful, realizable vision. Not having had such historical experiences, traditional African religions have remained limited in scope and vision. They meet the needs and yearnings of the groups to which they belong.

It used to be held that only the higher religions were specially concerned with morality and that primitive religions had no such concerns. This has been challenged by students of primitive religions. In traditional African societies, religion supports the laws and customs and the accepted rules of conduct. What is noteworthy, however, is that the morality sanctioned by primitive religions enjoins good behaviour within the family, tribe, or nation with which the deities or spirits are particularly identified; whereas Christianity or Islam and the other world religions, in line with the principle of universality, each arrives at a rule of conduct which is universal in scope. They all teach universal kindness and goodwill such as « What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow creature » (Hebrew : Hillel, Sab. 319), or « Always treat others as you would like them to treat you » (Christian, Matthew 7, 12).

Not that such universalism is incompatible with the morality of primitive religions; but that religion on the one side, and the other institutions of society on the other, are so closely united and interdependent that the attention of the gods and spirits are thought to centre almost wholly on the particular tribe or nation they protect. Self-contained, isolated tribes conceive the activities of their gods to be limited to their own needs and aspirations.

Religion concerns itself with the relations between the Deity and man, between man and man, and with the relations of man with his universe. Behind much of the ritual of primitive religions lie implicit assumptions of the nature of the universe. The science, technology, and philosophy of a people influence their religion and vice-versa; and it is in this sphere that the distinction between primitive and the higher religions has the most arresting sociological significance. The primitive religions of Africa envisage a world in which the spiritual and the material, the living and the dead, all interact on one another and belong to the same universe; it is largely a universe of spirits in which the rigid compartmentalisation into sacred and secular and the barrier between the living and the dead are not erected. This is not because there is absolute ignorance of causality

in the realm of nature ; within the limits of their own science and technology, they understand causality ; but the more limited the scientific knowledge of a people, the wider the events which are ascribed to deities and spirits, and the greater the events which are covered by religious ritual.

In the sociology of religion, a great deal of research has still to be done on the cosmology of primitive religions ; on their concepts of nature, human society and the supernatural world, and of the place of man in Nature and Society. Not being « Religions of the Book », we can only hope to arrive at the cosmology from empirical studies of rituals ; but it seems to me distinctions of important sociological significance between primitive and higher religions can be found through comparative studies of the cosmologies of primitive and higher religions.

There are those who having studied some primitive religions have contented themselves with the conclusion that these religions perform a social function, but that the social function of a religion does not depend on its truth or falsity, but on the sentiments of solidarity it evokes or promotes among those who participate in its rituals.

The sociology of religion cannot stop at this conclusion, for consideration must be given to the cosmology implied or expressed by rituals. In 1954, the International African Institute published *African Worlds*, a volume of studies in the Cosmological Ideas and Social Values of African Peoples. The nine essays portray not only that concepts of the universe of the peoples concerned are closely related to their social organisation, but also that their myths, rituals, and beliefs postulate subtle metaphysical concepts.

Hence I would contend that truth and falsity are relevant to religion, primitive or higher, for, as the Greeks taught through their enquiries, religion must satisfy the intellect, if it is to survive. It must make sense of human experience and knowledge. This leads me to submit that the criteria for distinguishing between primitive and higher religions must include rationality. Religious beliefs or rituals that knowledge or experience shows to be false or irrational are eventually discarded. Hence it is that those higher religions that claim to embody *the truth* have increasingly had to emphasize creed and doctrine. African primitive religions make no claims to a monopoly of truth ; polytheism is an acceptance of the fact that other religions may be equally true, or even more so ; that is why polytheism is a hospitable religion prepared to embrace other gods and creeds ; nevertheless, primitive religions too must meet the challenge both of reason and experimental science, and face consequential adaptations and even the threat of extinction from the encounter. For sociological theory at least, this could be of important significance. It would offer more case studies for testing the hypothesis that there is continuous reciprocal adjustment between the religious beliefs, ethical standards, and social experience of a people ; and hence further illuminate the sociological significance of the distinction between primitive and higher religions which have developed in different social contexts. On the basis of this hypothesis, we would answer the question posed by the title of this paper in the affirmative, as a tentative deduction from what is known already.

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