Comparison of the theories of sigmund freud and emile durkheim on religion

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Abstract

This paper examines the works of Sigmund Freud and Emile Durkheim on religion, looking at how both theorists essentially viewed religion as serving an integral role in humanculture. In particular, this essay considers how both theorist consider religious believers to be mistaken in their ontological beliefs, and the rational causes for this.

Introduction

While both Sigmund Freud and Emile Durkheim are concerned with the study of human behaviour as it relates to culture, each does so from within distinct traditions. In terms of religion, Freud's approach belongs to the psychological tradition, while Durkheim puts forward a sociological approach. In the Freudian view, human behaviour is largely driven by inborn and intangible " drives", working in the unconscious. Such phenomena are not directly observable, that is, they are non-empirical; they must consequently be inferred, and as such are conjectural. Durkheim's sociological method, on the other hand, utilises direct empirical observations of social phenomena (rites, rituals, customs, et cetera), looking to account for the impetus behind and purpose of group behaviour. Hence Freud is concerned with obscure, intangible internal phenomena, whereas Durkheim is concerned with overt and tangible external phenomena. Evidently, the theoretical positions in question to a degree divide between internal and external motivations.

Different Routes to the Core of a Delusion

Durkheim posits a direct connection between environmental variables, the way groups interact with such variables, and how this interaction is perceived by individual members of said group. There is a mode of cyclical reflexivity in this dynamic: this means people " living together in society generate rules which are felt by any individual member as acting on him from outside, as having a force which he feels as both uplifting and constraining" (Scharf 1970, 151). This force, Durkheim argues, is an externalisation of conventions peculiar to the group; that are perceived as exogenous but which are in fact endogenous. This tendency to externalise, Durkheim suggests, derives from the natural human desire to ascribe meaning to experience, to seek a pattern in the natural order. Thus, as Kunin states, religion likewise " is an externalisation of society and its order" and speaks to the " dialectic relationship between the individual and society" (2003, 82). Religion, then, provides for an externalised object onto which collective emotion can be projected; this is ultimately reflexive because the externalisation at root represents the people themselves. As a result, to honour religious custom is indirectly to honour the group. This is why for Durkheim religious experience serves to strengthen group cohesion and bonding.

Freud's understanding of religion is somewhat pejorative. Connolly observes that Freud noticed " the connection between abnormal psychological conditions and religion" (1991, 146): whichobservationhe expanded upon in his study " Obsessive acts and Religious Practices" (1907). As the paper's title suggests, Freud drew a connection between psychological abnormality and religious practice, noting a resemblance between " what are called

obsessive acts in neurotics and those religious observances by means of which the faithful give expression to their piety" (17). In turn, Freud perceived religion, like neurosis, as symptomatic of deep-seated psychological issues. In the words of Gallucci, " Freud saw religion as a collective neurotic symptom, an obsessional neurosis" (2001, 76). This " neurosis", according to psychoanalytic theory, comes about as a defence mechanism against feelings of helplessness which obtain in a dispassionate cosmos. Hence the need for a cosmic father figure, who, as a parent comforts the child, palliates the religious subject with conciliatory notions (about purpose, meaning, boundaries, rewards, and so on). This entire dynamic apparently stems from Oedipal anxieties, where " each person grows up with a sense of foreboding toward a father figure who is both feared and loved"; this, it follows, " becomes the basis for the cosmic father figure, who offers protection and salvation but in the meantime needs to be appeased by devotion and sacrifice" (Clarke 2002, 43). In Freud's mind, religion therefore constitutes a surrogate parent.

On the surface, Freud and Durkheim proffer two seemingly quite different explanations for religion. Importantly, while these theories are not overtly complementary, nor are they mutually exclusive. Indeed, significant parallels may be drawn between each approach. For example, both both theorists argued that religion is an important factor in community cohesion (Scharf 1970, 155); both agree that " religion is central to any cultural analysis" (Ginsburg and Pardes 2006, 220); and, thus, both hold that " that the cognitive roots of religious belief are to be found in social experience" (Spiro 1987, 202). These similarities are significant and, moreover, point to one

common determinant: that the underlying basis of religious convictions are contrary to what believers suppose. For Durkheim, the real driving force behind religion is social cohesion; for Freud, the impetus is psychological assuagement. In either case, social unity and mental wellbeing obtain, only for slightly different conceptual reasons.

From the above, one might argue that Freud and Durkheim share significant overarching perspectives on religion while holding markedly different structural viewpoints on how and why religion functions. Freud is concerned with psychological structures; Durkheim with sociological structures. Freud believes religion works to console believers from the ultimateanxietyof a meaningless cosmos. Durkheim believes religion provides for a canvas on which social phenomena can be externalised and then re-accommodated as an exogenous entity. Again, both modes of behaviour essentially work to the same purpose: instilling a sense of meaning in human life. At this stage, one might consider the ways in which Freudian theory could compensate for shortfalls in the work of Durkheim and vice versa.

For instance, Durkheim offers little in the way of early psychological developmental insights, into the religious process; yet there is no reason that early anxiety (of an Oedipal nature) could not cohere with Durkheimian ideas. Indeed, such anxiety and the consequent potential for neurosis could suggest an even greater need for group cohesion: as a way of reifying the delusion through consensus, thus alleviating the anxiety. Again, this would chime with Durkheim's understanding that religion is " a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things [. . .] which unite in one single moral community called a Church" (cited in Gain 2010, 39). By the same

token, Freud's limitations could perhaps be overcome with reference to some of Durkheim's insights. Scharf notes a " weakness of Freudian theory" in that it " does little to explain [the] variety" in articulations of paternity and fraternity within religious discourse, advising that, here, " Durkheim's structural approach has more value" (1970, 154). Accordingly we see that a synthesis of theoretical approaches may not only be possible but highly advantageous.

Conclusion

Freud and Durkheim take very different roads to arrive at more or less the same destination. For this reason, significant and consistent core elements may be identified between their works. These include the fundamental belief that religion serves an explicable, material, social purpose which is essentially external to theological concerns; that religious believers are at base mistaken in their beliefs (insomuch as these beliefs are connected to cosmic phenomena beyond the rationally explicable); that, it follows, religion is the irrational articulation of an ultimately rational cause (anxiety or clan behaviour); that religion can function as a surrogate or projection of humanity – reformed with divine auspices; and that, finally, religion is an integral element of human culture. What is fundamentally different in these two authors is their methodological priorities. Each man comes from a very distinct tradition. Put simply, Freud and Durkheim were engaged in different disciplines; as a result, their pursuits were orientated differently

The reason Freud and Durkheim's works are compared at all is that the realms of the sociological and of the psychological possess mutual territory:

the grounds of culture. Both theorists have their limitations. Durkheim can be accused of being over reductive and simplistic. Social structure may not be enough to account for every aspect of religion. Psychological, cognitive and other inborn factors may also have a large part to play. Freud, on the other hand, may place too much onus on the unconscious drives in dictating religious experience. After all, religion is so varied and complex, it might be argued, to defy any wholesale theory to explain it away. What, for example, do we make of religions in which there is no " father figure" proper; or religions which proclaim no deity at allClearly there are unanswered questions on both sides of the aisle. Perhaps a hybrid methodology that adopted a syncretic approach to the study of religion might help answer these questions. After all, it seems to be the case that both Freud and Durkheim arrived at crucial insights into the social and psychological determinants that drive religion.

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