

Kinship, Religion, and the Transformation of Society

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Social anthropologists study people in those parts of the world that have not yet experienced the full consequence of the industrial revolution. These people still derive a large part of their living from the food they grow themselves, from the animals they herd, or from their hunting and gathering activities. They expect the place where they were born to be their permanent home, and they rely on the cooperation of kinsmen and neighbors (the two are often synonymous) to accomplish the necessary tasks and goals of their lives.

One might ask why a serious scholar should study these people. A number of answers can be given to this question, one of which is that one cannot look critically at his own society or even understand it until he has seen something that is very different. The novelist Somerset Maugham remarked that he only began to understand the English after he had traveled to other parts of the world (Mair, L.P., 1974:2).

For the anthropologist who spends several years with a nonindustrial people, living in close rapport with the basic conditions of human existence—an experience that has not been possible in the Western world for many generations—modern society takes on a new light. He comes to an appreciation of the

institutions of his own society that is not possible otherwise. It is in this interest that I now want to examine certain aspects of kinship and religion in both nonindustrial and industrial societies.

Kinship in Nonindustrial Societies

It is a characteristic of nearly all nonindustrial tribal societies that their social orders are based on kinship. This means that the vital activities of life involve the cooperation of kinsmen. Sustenance is provided through a division of labor between the sexes, the young men of the group are its defense, the elders its law and government, and its ancestors are its gods and the custodians of the moral order among the living. Thus, all these vital activities are embedded, as it were, in a network of kinship relations.

The system of kinship terms used in such societies as these is wholly unlike our own and reflects the binding ties that are characteristic of this kind of social life. One calls not only his mother *mother*, but also the term is applied to all her sisters. Not only is one's father *father*,

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but his brothers also. Consistent with this usage, the children of all these “mothers” and “fathers” are called *brother* and *sister*. Society becomes the family writ large.

Societies based on kinship usually seem very restrictive to people in the modern world; yet they have their advantages in the form of emotional and social security. For example, if when a child is born its mother does not lactate or if she should die, the child has a jural right to be nurtured and cared for by one of the other women he calls mother. This is the kinship society’s version of an orphanage.

Several years ago a Navajo friend told me that, when he was a young boy, his grandmother took him to her and said, “My eyes have become your eyes, and my hands have become your hands.” My friend said that what she meant by this was that since she had gotten old and was no longer capable of seeing and doing with eyes and hands what she had been wont to do, all would be well because the eyes and hands she had given him would now work for her. Think of the peace and security that must crown the heart of an old person in this arrangement.

Kinship means kindness. In fact, the German word for child—*kind*—and *kind*, *kindness*, and *kin* all have the same generic root. To be without kinsmen in nonindustrial societies is the equivalent of being a man without a country. A most effective punishment among the Cheyenne Indians was banishment. Such a sentence in many cases was equivalent to a consignment to death. Life was nearly impossible without the sustaining influence of kinsmen.

Contracts in Industrial Societies

What happens to such societies when the transformation from nonindustrial to industrial occurs? Sir Henry Maine, the eminent British jurist, long ago noted that in the course of history there had been a shift from kinship to contract as the cooperative basis of society

(Maine, 1861:172–74; 183–85). Social anthropologists have since observed that this shift is concomitant with the transformation from nonindustrial to industrial; that is, industrialism is associated with a type of society based not on kinship, but rather on contract.

As this change occurs, the vital activities of life are separated from their basis in kinship relations and are performed instead by business firms. Now, rather than cooperate as groups of kinsmen, individuals contract with business firms to perform a task for a money wage, which is used in turn to purchase subsistence contractually from other firms.

Contractual relations, whether of necessity or not, generally have been individualizing and isolating in their social impact. The interests of the contracting agents in each other are of an economic and legal nature rather than social or moral. They are goal oriented and of short duration. When the end for which the contract was entered into is achieved, the relationship is usually terminated. Such relations are outside the family and are unmodified by personal acquaintance.

The family in any society moves through a cycle of development. In industrial societies a new family is begun with each marriage. It expands as children are born to the union. With the maturation of the children, a dispersion process occurs with which we are all familiar. As sons and daughters acquire professional and technical competence and marry, they enter into their own contractual arrangements with firms and institutions, which may send them to different parts of the country or even of the world. Parents are thus often isolated, and children born to the new marriages are commonly raised with little or no contact with their kin.

As Jules Henry notes, the majority of people in industrial societies have little or no personal or social involvement in the organization for which they work (Henry, 1963:28–29). Work more often than not sunders rather than integrates important personal relationships. For

this reason, work in industrial societies lacks human meaning. These impersonal circumstances necessitate that each individual build for himself his own social universe, and the great mobility of our population may require that this be done numerous times during one's lifetime (Henry, 1963:147-48). Kinship, on the other hand, is forever. The social universe based on kinship remains intact and provides a large measure of security to the individual, whereas a social universe based on contractual relations is often temporary and provisional. It fosters insecurity.

Reflect for a moment on the child entering school for the first time in a large urban or suburban area. He may never before have seen most of his classmates. If he is a sensitive child, he may be filled with anxieties. Sometimes these pupils are labeled hyperactives and present a problem in the classroom. Our technological genius has come to our rescue in this matter. I have what appear to be reliable statistics that indicate that in the city of Omaha, Nebraska, between 5 and 10 percent of the 62,000 school children are on behavior modification drugs (H. Lennard et al., 1972:31-32; 110-17). It is reported that this is only part of a national pattern for coping with hyperactive children. How is the nation to solve its drug problem when the individual's first encounter with drugs is medicated by his teacher?

Young people in junior high and high school, and to a lesser degree in college and the university, manifest the effects of our impersonal social structure. It has been noted that young girls especially, since their activities generally do not require as great a number of participants, often feel left out (Henry, 1963: chapters 6 and 7). Much of their behavior reflects fear and anxiety about isolation. They strive for popularity. This often takes the form of extremes of dress and makeup. Gossip among these young people is virulent and vicious as they vie with each other for position. If a girl can become popular, this seems to

assure her of a stable social position. The schools oblige in the quest, and we have queens selected for as many occasions as can be imagined and cheerleaders by the score for every class. One wonders sometimes how there can be any energy left over for academic pursuits.

I have one more example of the isolating tendency of industrial societies. I alluded earlier to the fact that children when they mature and marry are often drawn into employment with firms at great distances from the home in which they grew up. This leaves the parents to grow old alone, an anxious and fearful thing for many older people to contemplate, especially when one of the pair dies. In contrast to the Navajo grandmother who lived out her later years in the kind security of relationships with her own offspring, old people in industrial societies are to an ever-increasing extent living out their last years in the contractual setting of a rest home.

One wonders also to what extent the drug problem and the high rates of crime, suicide, and alcoholism in industrial societies have a correlate in the impersonality and fragmentation of relationships. Could Malachi have had in mind these conditions when he said that, unless the heart of the fathers is turned to the children and the heart of the children to the fathers, the earth should be smitten with a curse (Malachi 4:5-6)?

I have reflected here more on the adverse aspects of this comparison of industrial and nonindustrial societies. And even with this adversity not many of us would exchange the personal freedom, the possibility of movement, the great variety of experience, and the flood of subsistence and luxury goods that industrial society provides for the more restricted life in the nonindustrial societies. Yet it is a sobering experience to see the high price we pay in human values for the way of life we cherish.

The Secularization of Human Experience

In the remaining minutes I want to explore a further transformation that, I feel, accompanies the shift from nonindustrial to industrial and from kinship to contract. This is a transformation from a condition in which life, the world, and the whole human experience are deemed to be sacred, to a circumstance in which life becomes desacralized, secularized, and profane.

In most nonindustrial societies, closely structured on a kinship foundation, the vital activities of life occur within sacred parameters. This does not mean that all tribal people are about to join Enoch in his city, but only that they believe that the earth was created by a god and that he was the giver of their law and social order. Many peoples feel that in very ancient times their forefathers dwelt in close proximity to God and that by some unwitting act they became separated from him. They attribute to this separation nearly all the ills that flesh is heir to, and they feel that peace, joy, and prosperity can only come when earth and heaven (human action and the ways of the divine) are brought back into proximity (see Lienhardt, 1961).

Victor Turner has observed that nearly all nonindustrial peoples have occasions or periods of timeless time in which they seek through some form of rite or ceremony to transcend the arbitrary man-made world of things and connect their institutions, relationships, and customary usages and laws to a transcendental realm (Turner, 1968:1–24). It is as though they felt that human actions were intrinsically meaningless and that they became meaningful only insofar as they unfolded according to a divine pattern.

In the words of Micea Eliade, the great professor of comparative religion at the University of Chicago, nonindustrial man wants to be other than he finds himself, and he undertakes to make himself over in accordance with ideal images that are revealed in myths and rituals.

The sacred festivals so important in this connection reenact the whole cosmogony—that is, the creation of the earth, man, plants, and animals. They dramatize how it all came to be. To participate in these festivals is to become contemporary with the original creative event and to dwell for a period in the presence of the creator. The sacred dimensions of existence are thus recorded in ceremonial performance. The ceremonies are repeated again and again, and this repetition aids man in his endeavor to conform his life to the divine ideal. One learns how the gods created man, taught him appropriate social behavior and procedures for work, and provided him with sacred or divine models for all of the important activities of life. Houses, for example, are commonly constructed on a model of the universe. Canoes are built, fields are laid out, and crops are planted, harvested, and even consumed according to the work and order of the gods. In this manner there is established a cosmic identity and value for man and his actions (Eliade, 1954: 1–73; 1959: 20–213).

Godfrey and Monica Wilson (1945: 79–80) suggest that religion is a putative participation of man in reality. Though peoples may conceptualize reality differently, they seek always through some means to participate in their version of it. These means, by Wilson's definition, are their religions. The reality in which Western man seeks to participate has—from the Renaissance through the Enlightenment, from the Scientific and Industrial Revolutions to modern industrial society—become a progressively more materialistic “reality.” The philosopher George Santayana observed that

No opposition could be more radical and complete than that between the Renaissance and the anti-worldly religion of the gospel. To say that Christianity survives, even if weakened or disestablished, is to say that the Renaissance and the

Revolution are still incomplete—have not yet run their course. [Santayana, 1957: 37–38]

Almost all of the prominent literary figures of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe were concerned with this materialization and secularization of life, and T.S. Eliot is so far perhaps the most profound and articulate spokesman to write about this transformation in the twentieth century.

What social anthropologists have to add to the observations of the great men of literature is that secularization or the profanation of life is a product of a definable social experience—the product of a type of social structure. Just as the demise of kinship and the fragmentation of life have followed industrialization and the wide-scale use of the principle of contract, so secularization appears to attend the fragmentation.

Mary Douglas of the University of London feels that secularism in middle-class European and American communities is a predictable result of a process of socialization in which the child never internalizes well-defined social statuses and never experiences the need to defer to and respect consistent and well-defined authority (Douglas, 1970:33). Another way of putting this is that honoring father and mother may be a first and necessary step to a viable faith in God. It appears that the life of the spirit tends to flourish in a closely structured, well-ordered, and well-defined social milieu. Conversely, isolation and fragmentation in social life sound the death knell of the spirit.

This condition was summarized by Walter Lippman in 1929. He wrote:

These are the prisoners who have been released. They ought to be happy. They ought to be serene and composed. They are free to make their own lives. There are no conventions, no taboos, no gods, priests, princes, fathers or revelations which they must accept. Yet the result is not as good as they thought it would be. The prison door is wide open.

They stagger out into trackless space under a blinding sun. [Lippman, 1929:7]

Thomas Mann (1942) wrote of Abraham that he feared lest he should fall away from the covenant and become lost in matter. The covenant for him was the connecting link with the divine order, the center that held all things together. It appears that industrial man has let go his hold on the center, choosing rather to make his own way. He lacks a foundation for involving himself in significant experience. In the words of T.S. Eliot, “These are the decent, Godless people, their only monument the asphalt road and a thousand lost golf balls” (Eliot, 1956:103).

For modern man there are no universal paradigms that centralize and order the human experience, that define for men generally their relationship to each other, to the earth, and to God. Therefore, we lack ties of sympathy and fellowship one to another. The closer we squeeze together in our cities and towns, the less we know each other and ourselves. We are lonely, lonely with the loneliness that comes from the need to discover for ourselves, without the aid of culture and society, the meaning of life.

Further, there is a death of common meanings among modern men. Even science, which has been the dominant dispensation of our times, has not succeeded in alleviating this circumstance. According to Max Planck, there is scarcely a scientific proposition that is not questioned by somebody (see Scott, 1960).

There has been a collapse of genuine certainty about almost everything in the human experience. One experience seems to be as important as another. When everything is of equal value, then basic value can be assigned to nothing. We can establish guilt, but in our individuated state and the individuated state of our judges, we find it difficult to allocate responsibility. Right and wrong have come to

be decided in terms of the most efficient adjustment to the environment.

Having been taken out of their sacred context, the earth, man, and his body, with its capacities for involvement in creative processes, are no longer features of a divine order. It was, I believe, these conditions that led a sensitive soul like Friedrich Nietzsche to exclaim, “Where is my home? For it do I ask and seek, and have sought, but have not found it. O eternal everywhere, O eternal nowhere, O eternal in vain” (Nietzsche/Kaufmann, 1954:386).

In 1831 Joseph Smith received this characterization of our times from the Lord:

For they have strayed from mine ordinances, and have broken mine everlasting covenant;

They seek not the Lord to establish his righteousness, but every man walketh in his own way, and after the image of his own God, whose image is in the likeness of the world, and whose substance is that of an idol, which waxeth old and shall perish in Babylon, even Babylon the great, which shall fall.

Wherefore, I the Lord, knowing the calamity which should come upon the inhabitants of the earth, called upon my servant Joseph Smith, Jun., and spake unto him from heaven, and gave him commandments . . .

. . . that man should not counsel his fellow man, neither trust in the arm of flesh—

But that every man might speak in the name of God the Lord, even the Savior of the world;

That faith also might increase in the earth;

That mine everlasting covenant might be established;

That the fulness of my gospel might be proclaimed by the weak and the simple unto the ends of the world, and before kings and rulers. [D&C 1: 15–17, 19–23]

The efficacy of the ordinances mentioned in this statement springs from the fact that they represent eternal realities—the order of heaven. It is in them that the knowledge and power of

godliness are manifest to men on earth. They facilitate for man access to these realities and thereby provide divine and sacred paradigms around which man can pattern his life. In the temple there is scarcely a relationship for which a model is not provided—relationships with God, with the earth and its whole web of life, between husband and wife, between parents and children, between siblings, and among men generally. These models or patterns allow us to see the earth, ourselves, and our bodies, with their marvelous creative capacities, as part of a divine order of things transcending the arbitrariness and transience of human arrangements. They allow man to become discretionary about his experiences and to mobilize his capacities with genuine conviction. They also facilitate a sense of community not available otherwise.

However, to make the ordinances viable in our own lives, we must start with reintegrating and extending our kinship ties. There is something sacred about kinship, as most social anthropologists who have studied its operation in the field are prepared to admit. Joseph Smith told us that it is the very foundation of the celestial order (see E. D. Parry, 1913: 30–32). It was no accident that genealogy should have been given such an important place in the Restoration. Yet we must learn that genealogy—kinship—is not restricted to a concern with the dead. The ancestors, always and everywhere, symbolize and hallow ideal relations among the living.

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