

Roger Bastide.

Social Origins of Religion.

Translated by Mary Baker. Foreword by James L. Peacock.

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Nineteenth century scholars rooted their grand theories of religious behaviour in particular aspects or impulses of society (social activity – Durkheim, magic - Frazer, animism - Tylor, etc.). Later, the more modest fieldwork and survey-based theories of the twentieth century concluded that there is often more to religion than what can be determined from its fundamental forms. In his 1935 volume, *Éléments de sociologie religieuse*, Roger Bastide is in the second camp. His book points to some limitations of the sociological method when it comes to studying religion and is a guide to sociological theories of the origins and development of religion. Bastide's book has recently been translated into English as the *Social Origins of Religion*.

Bastide's book is a critique of Durkheim. However, it is much more than that. The topics covered in the *Social Origins of Religion* are wide-ranging because Bastide understands religion as a complex system that cannot be fully explained by examining isolated aspects of social life. Bastide's objective is to "consider religious life in all its shapes" (xxix). Raw material for this consideration comes from the comparative history of religion, ethnography, mythology, and current religious phenomena (xxix).

Bastide begins by defining religion and magic, and the social elements of religion (taboos, rituals, etc.). The second half of the book examines the sociological elements that condition religious systems, and the origin and evolution of religion. Bastide evaluates the validity of the explanations for religious phenomena he describes. He shows how many of these explanations contradict each other or describe aspects of the phenomena they are trying to explain without adequately taking into account their complexity.

Bastide's critique of the meta-theories of the nineteenth century highlights the transition from monocausal to multi-dimensional explanations of religious phenomena. Bastide argues that concepts cannot be defined too precisely (38). Furthermore, there are limits to the sociology of religion. For example, faith is more than just a "simple social fact," it is also a function of the internal spiritual life (61). Bastide also understands that conclusions are often a function of starting points. Thus, the interpretation of sacrifice depends on one's understanding of the origin of religion (97).

As a result, Bastide's discussion of the development/evolution of religious ideas is not concerned with finding the "elementary forms of religion." Rather Bastide argues that such a search is futile because of the lack of data and the complexity of the religions we have observed (37). Starting with the initial forms of religion is "dangerous because the initial society is generally more hypothetical than real" (182). Bastide argues that the appropriate way to explore the development of religion is to start with contemporary religion and work our way back. Even then, Bastide argues, the data are often too ambiguous to come to definitive conclusions. "[A]s far back as we can go, we find forms that are already complex and in which beliefs of various types and, perhaps, various origins overlap" (197). He concludes that the evolution of religion is not simplistic, continuous, or in a single,

well-defined direction (206). To fully understand it we must take into account biological, psychological, and moral factors, in addition to sociological factors (206).

In Bastide's arguments we can see intimations of secularization and globalization. First, Bastide is concerned with the differentiation between religion and society. Bastide argues that Durkheim and others have confused dissolution with the differentiation of functions (202). Bastide acknowledges this differentiation. However, he does not think this is negative for religion. Religion is abandoning fields it has no reason to be in. Religion is not likely to experience dissolution because what it "loses in surface it gains in depth" (202). It is not a "walk towards death but . . . a movement towards the autonomy of the mystical function" (203).

Second, Bastide argues that we need to take into account global variation and examine religious groups globally (xxiii). Thus, Bastide favours theories of religion that treat religion as complex systems (xxxii, 122). Theories based on single groups come in for criticism in his text when they only examine similarities and not differences among groups (xxxi).

This emphasis on systems points to how Bastide is relevant to contemporary sociology. Contemporary sociology of religion continues to be concerned with definitions of religion and secularization. It has added an interest in dimensions of religiosity, civil religion, new religious movements, fundamentalisms, and everyday religion to these initial concerns .

Bastide foreshadows these discussions in his observations that religions develop differently in different contexts (135), that politics, economics and religion always have some relationship (163), and that observations of contemporary religious phenomena are the best way of understanding religion as a whole. Bastide understands the value of ethnography to develop and defend theories about the state of all aspects of religion. He also appreciates the importance of examining religions as systems rather than as collections of elements.

Bastide has been critiqued because he paid little attention to doctrines, ideas, and spiritual experiences. Bastide is aware that these elements influence religion but explains that the sociology of religion is the examination of the "Society of men [sic] sharing the same dogmas and participating in the same rituals" (xxv). The *Social Origins of Religion* is not a theoretical treatise on the state of religion, nor does it deal in detail with the more personal aspects of religious behaviour (e.g., faith, belief). Nonetheless, Bastide ends this book with an explicit acknowledgement that the social factors he has explored are not all there is to religion. "[I]f in addition to collective trends and social needs, religion translates . . . the nostalgia of the mind seeking the absolute, then determinism will be permeated by unpredictable beginnings . . . The sociology of religion can observe their presence, but it cannot explain them." (207)

Bastide can be critiqued because he uses language that is offensive to the contemporary ear (primitive, etc.). However, in practice, he criticizes others for not taking into account the complexity of tribal religions and ignoring obvious signs of extensive development (Chapter 12). While he does not share contemporary understandings of gender or race, he is more even-handed than many of his contemporaries.

This new translation of Bastide's book is a contribution to contemporary sociology in two ways. First, it is a useful historical record of the transition from grand theories of religion that attempted a deterministic explanation of all aspects of religious action to contemporary more focused theories

which examine particular communities or particular aspects of religion.

Second, it can serve as an introduction to the development of the sociology of religion for those who are unfamiliar with the field. Bastide interacts with the main founders of the discipline, provides a brief description of their ideas, and shows some of their limitations. Contemporary sociologists are unlikely to agree with all of Bastide's conclusions or even which aspects of religion he thinks are relevant to the *Social Origins of Religion*. Nonetheless, the book would be an excellent discussion starter for a graduate level course in the sociology of religion.

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