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THE LABYRINTHS OF HUMAN IMAGINATION

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Summary

Humans have been exploring their dreams for millennia, and these explorations have most often been conducted in religious terms and contexts. The general cognitive aim of this paper is to analyse the important relationship between dreams and human spirituality. The capacity of sociological and religious studies can be demonstrated by considering the work of certain sociologists of religion, including such luminaries as Emil Durkheim, Max Weber, Peter Berger, and Daniell Hervieu Leger.

Key words

Sociology, Imagination, Myth, Sacred, Religion, Dreams, Sociological Dreams.

Humans have been exploring their dreams for millennia, and these explorations have most often been conducted in religious terms and contexts. Religion was the original field of dream study. The earliest writings on dreams are primarily texts on their religious and spiritual significance. Dreams are important religious phenomena in virtually all the world's religious traditions.

Scholars of religion are interested in dreams because dreams are a nearly universal locus of religious experience, reflection, and ritual practice. The religious studies can enrich the discussion among dream researchers about the important relationship between dreams and human spirituality. The capacity of religious studies can be demonstrated by considering the work of certain sociologists of religion, including such luminaries as Emil Durkheim, Max Weber and Peter Berger.

In their view, the advance of modern Western culture has left vast numbers of people in a state of spiritual and psychological alienation. The rapid pace of technological change, the dominance of huge, impersonal institutions, and the bewildering complexity of modern society has left many individuals feeling adrift, isolated, and lacking sense of meaning or purpose to their lives.

Perhaps one of the greatest ironies of our postmodern world is that we have more capacity for communication than any other time in the history of humanity-and yet, there is a widespread feeling of disconnection. We are preoccupied with distractions while at the same time being imbued with a stark feeling of loneliness.

The modern people are surrounded with satellite television, radio, e-mail, computer networking, fax machines, and of course the mother of all beasts, the internet. There is a profusion of data, but very little knowledge that connects with people; there is a deluge of information, but very little wisdom that helps us live in a better way.

Still another value of religious studies for dream research involves our understanding of the spiritual dimensions of dreams now, in the secularized culture of the XX-the century west. If we took the time to think about it, most of us would have to admit that we live very differently from what we want or dream.

In the rapprochement of religious studies and dreams, a key methodological issue is the distinction between "real" dreams and dreams recorded in myths, epics, and other sacred texts.

DREAMS AND RELIGIOUS PHENOMENA

The Egyptians certainly were the first dreamers to attempt interpretation of their dreams; in fact, Egypt was where the process of "dream incubation" began. The Greeks didn't begin seriously considering dreams until VIII-the century BC. Homer, in his *Iliad*, describes a scene wherein Agamemnon receives instructions from the messenger of Zeus in a dream.

The first steps into modern dream interpretation were taken in the 5th century BC when the Greek philosopher Heraclites suggested that a person's dream world was something created in their own mind. It is uncertain whether or not the first dream interpreters were legend or reality.

This went against the other philosophers who believed dreams were the result of outside forces, such as the gods. Most Greek philosophers, in that time period, pondered dreams and what they might mean.

Plato was one of these philosophers, and realized how much dreaming could affect a personality or someone's life. In the *Phaedo*, he tells how Socrates studied music and the arts because he was instructed to do so in a dream.

Aristotle finally put an end to Herodotus' idea that dreams were messages from the gods. He began to study dreams and the dreaming process in a rational way. In his *De divinatione per somnum*, he states, most of the so-called prophetic dreams are to be classed as mere coincidences, especially all such as are extravagant. Later he includes that the most skillful interpreter of dreams is who has the faculty of absorbing resemblances. Dream presentations are analogous to the forms reflected in water. Aristotle's *Parva naturalia* suggests that dreams are in fact believed to be a recollection of the day's events.

When Christianity came along they revived the idea that dreams were of the supernatural element. The Old Testament of the Bible holds an abundance of dreams.

Probably the most famous of these dreams was Jacob's dream of a ladder from Earth to Heaven. Bible Dreams offers a tour de force for the modern imagination.

Two other men of the church, St. Augustine and St. Jerome, claimed that the direction of their lives was dramatically affected by dreams that they had.

Even other religions believed in the significance dreams had to offer our lives. Mohammed "received" much of the text of the Koran from a dream he had, as well as interpreting dreams of his disciples.

It wasn't long until others came along and went against the ideas that were presented in the past. Martin Luther, the founder of Protestantism, was a believer in the idea that dreams were the work of the Devil.

The Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and Christians weren't the only ones interested in dream interpretation in the early stages. An anonymous Persian writer determined that to truly interpret a dream it must be done during the day of occurrence.

The Zoroastrians were a religious group that followed this theory, which set rules for each day of the month. The second day is that of Brahman . . .

The Europeans were very curious about dreaming around the beginning of the XIX century. A metaphor is where one thing is spoken as if it were another. The house in a dream is most often a metaphor for the dreamer, the house being a representation of the dreamer. The house would represent the dreamer's psychological, physical or spiritual condition, a proxy for the complexes. In most instances you should take dream symbols as metaphorical references to the dreamer's condition and not a literal interpretation, to fully understand the message in the dream.

THE DIFFERENT FORM OF INTERPRETATION

Probably the most well-known of the modern dream philosophers was Sigmund Freud. His theory was that although dreams may be prompted by external stimuli, wish-fulfillment was the root behind most of our dreams.

Freud's idea was that our dreams were reflection of our deepest desires going back to our childhood. To Freud, no dream was of entertainment value, they all held important meanings.

Carl Jung, a student of Freud for some time, disagreed on the theory that erotic content was the basis behind most of our dreams.

Jung believed that dreams reminded us of our wishes, which enables us to realize the things we unconsciously yearn for, and helps us to fulfill our own wishes. Contradictory to how Freud believed dreams were a product of our desires that were too outrageous for our own belief, and were in our unconscious to help conceal these desires. These dreams were messages, Jung believed, from ourselves to ourselves and that we should pay attention to them for our own benefit.

According to Emile Durkheim, the idea of the human soul was first suggested by the contrast between the mental representations experienced while asleep (dreams) and those of normal experience. The primitive man grants equal status to both, and is thus led to postulate a "second self" within himself, one resembling the first, but made of an ethereal matter and capable of traveling great distances in short periods of time.

There are two beings in him: an individual being which has its foundations in the organism and the circle of whose activities is therefore strictly limited, and a social being which represents the highest reality in the intellectual and moral order that we can know by observation - I mean society.

A fact of common experience cannot give us the idea of something whose characteristic is to be outside the world of common experience. A man, as he appears to himself in his dreams, is only a man. Natural forces, as our senses perceive them, are only natural forces, however great their intensity may be...

The transformation of this soul into a spirit is achieved with death, which, to the primitive mind, is not unlike a prolonged sleep; and with the destruction of the body comes the idea of spirits detached from any organism and wandering about freely in space.

Henceforth, spirits are assumed to involve themselves, for good or ill, in the affairs of men, and all human events varying slightly from the ordinary are attributed to their influence.

As their power grows, men increasingly consider it wise to conciliate their favor or appease them when they are irritated, whence come prayers, offerings, sacrifices in short, the entire apparatus of religious worship.

Reasoning wholly by analogy, the primitive mind also attributes "second selves" to all non-human objects (plants, animals, rivers, trees, stars, etc.), which thus account for the phenomena of the physical world and in this way, the ancestor cult gives rise to the cult of nature.

Durkheim concluded, that men find themselves the prisoners of this imaginary world of which they are, however, the authors and models."

If this animistic hypothesis is to be accepted as an account of the most primitive religion, Durkheim observed, three parts of the argument are of critical significance: its demonstration that the idea of the soul was formed without borrowing elements from any prior religion; its account of how souls become spirits, and thus the objects of a cult; and its derivation of the cult of nature from ancestor worship.

Doubts concerning the first were already raised by the observation, to be discussed later, that the soul, though independent of the body under certain conditions, is in fact considerably more intimately bound to the organism than the animistic hypothesis would suggest.

Even if these doubts were overcome, moreover, the animistic theory presumes that dreams are liable to but one primitive interpretation, that of a "second-self", when the interpretive possibilities are in fact innumerable; and even were this objection removed, defenders of the hypothesis must still explain why primitive men, otherwise so unreflective, were presumably driven to "explain" their dreams in the first place.

The very heart of the animist doctrine, however, was the explanation of how souls become spirits and objects of a cult. Even if the analogy between sleep and death were sufficient to suggest that the soul survives the body. This still fails to explain why the soul would thus become a "sacred" spirit, particularly in light of the tremendous gap which separates the sacred from the profane. And also the fact that the approach of death is ordinarily assumed to weaken rather than strengthen the vital energies of the soul.

Most important, however, if the first sacred spirits were souls of the dead, then the lower the society under investigation, the greater should be the place given to the ancestor cult; but, on the contrary, the ancestor cult is clearly developed only in relatively advanced societies (China, Egypt, Greece and Rome) while it is completely lacking among the most primitive Australian tribes.

That is to say that space could not be what it is if it were not, like time, divided and differentiated. But when did these divisions become so essential?

By themselves, there are neither rights nor lefts, up nor down, north nor south, etc. All these distinctions evidently come from the fact that different sympathetic values have been attributed to various regions.

Since all people of a single civilization represent space in the same way, it is clearly necessary that these sympathetic values, and the distinctions which depend upon them, should be equally universal, and that almost necessarily implies that they be of social origin.

The fundamental proposition of the apriorist theory is that knowledge is made up of two sorts of elements, which cannot be reduced into one another, and which are like

two distinct layers superimposed one upon the other. Our hypothesis keeps this principle intact.

In fact, that knowledge which is called empirical, the only knowledge of which the theorists of empiricism have made use in constructing the reason, is that which is brought into our minds by the direct action of objects. It is composed of individual states which are completely explained by the psychical nature of the individual.

If, on the other hand, the categories are, as we believe they are, essentially collective representations before all else, they should show the mental states of the group; they should depend upon the way in which this is founded and organized, upon its morphology, upon its religious, moral and economic institutions, etc.

So between these two sorts of representations there is all the difference which exists between the individual and the social, and one can no more derive the second from the first than he can deduce society from the individual, the whole from the part, the complex from the simple.

Society as a reality *sui generis*; it has its own peculiar characteristics, which are not found elsewhere and which are not met with again in the same form in all the rest of the universe. The representations which express it have a wholly different content from purely individual ones and we may rest assured in advance that the first adds something to the second.

Even the manner in which the two are formed results in differentiating them. Collective representations are the result of an immense cooperation, which stretches out not only into space but into time as well; to make them, a multitude of minds have associated, united and combined their ideas and sentiments; for them, long generations have accumulated their experience and their knowledge.

Despite an occasional dalliance with the ritual theory of myth, Durkheim's most consistent position was that the cult depends upon the beliefs; but he also insisted that beliefs and rites are inseparable not only because the rites are often the sole manifestation of otherwise imperceptible ideas, but also because they react upon and thus alter the nature of the ideas themselves. Having completed his extensive analysis of the nature, causes, and consequences of totemic beliefs, therefore, Durkheim turned to a somewhat shorter discussion of the "principal ritual attitudes" of totemism.

Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities. The rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states in these groups. So if the categories are of religious origin, they ought to participate in this nature common to all religious facts; they too should be social affairs and the product of collective thought.

Sacred things, as we have seen, are those rather dramatically separated from their profane counterparts; and a substantial group of totemic rites has as its object the realization of this essential state of separation. In so far as these rites merely prohibit certain actions or impose certain abstentions, they consist entirely of interdictions or "taboos"; and thus Durkheim described the system formed by these rites as the "negative cult."

The interdictions characterizing these rites were in turn divided into two classes: those separating the sacred from the profane, and those separating sacred things from one another according to their "degree of sacredness".

Even the first class alone assumes a variety of forms - certain foods are forbidden to profane persons because they are sacred, while others are forbidden to sacred persons because they are profane. Certain objects cannot be touched or even looked at, certain words or sounds cannot be uttered. Certain activities, particularly those of an economic or utilitarian character, are forbidden during periods when religious ceremonies are being performed.

For all their diversity, however, Durkheim argued that all these forms are reducible to two fundamental interdictions: the religious life and the profane life cannot coexist in the same place, and they cannot coexist in the same unit of time.

For Durkheim, however, the clearest refutation of the animistic hypothesis lay in one of its unstated, but implied, consequences. If it were true, not only would it mean (as Durkheim himself believed) that religious symbols provide only an inexact expression of the realities on which they are based.

It would imply that religious symbols are products of the vague, ill-conceived hallucinations of our dream-experience, and thus (as Durkheim most certainly did not believe) have no foundation in reality at all.

Law, morals, even scientific thought itself, Durkheim observed, were born of religion, long remained confounded with it, and are still somewhat imbued with its spirit; it is simply inconceivable, therefore, that religions, which have held so considerable a place in history, and to which, in all times, men have to receive the energy which they must have to live, should be made up of a tissue of illusions.

Indeed, the animistic hypothesis is inconsistent with the scientific study of religion itself; for a science is always a discipline applied to the study of some real phenomenon of nature, while animism reduces religion to a mere hallucination.

What sort of science is it, Durkheim asked, whose principle discovery is that the subject of which it treats does not exist?

The passage of things from the one world to the other is possible only through "true metamorphosis". It is ambiguously perceived as a blessing and a curse at the same time, as "mighty" and fascinating, but on the other hand - vulnerable to the attacks of the worldly. It exists in separate space and time and is enclosed with rituals. Ceremonies open the gates to the world of gods, by means of them, and so humans go through metamorphosis.

Without this reality, human existence is empty and anonymous. Nevertheless, the sacred in its' classical form seems to be losing ground. Examining the world of the profane and the world of the sacred and the relations between them, Durkheim reveals the important role that religion has in the formation and development of societies. The general conclusion is that religion is something eminently social.

The whole of the religious answers constitutes the sacred universe of traditional societies, but it could be included in the creation of a modern sacred. In a condition, that "sacred" doesn't mean only "religious", religion could help to legitimate the purposes and actions of the society, to strengthen the determination of the people, to help build up the sense of identity.

Perhaps one of the greatest ironies of our post modern world is that we have more capacity for communication than any other time in the history of humanity-and yet, there is a widespread feeling of disconnection. We are preoccupied with distractions while at the same time being imbued with a stark feeling of loneliness.

Regardless of the logic of profanization and secularization of the modern world, there seems to be a process of reversion to the sacred – to the modern sacred. In their efforts to note at the same time the loss of influence that the institutional religions suffer, and the dispersions of the religious symbols in modern's societies, a lot of researchers use the term "sacred". Sacred things with their immunity offer the ultimate meaning of everyday life, because within the limits of the profane it is impossible to find such meaning. Because of this the existence of societies is impossible without religions – neither authentic, nor the so-called "earthly", civil or laic religions.

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