

RITUAL AND THE SACRED: A NEO-DURKHEIMIAN ANALYSIS OF POLITICS, RELIGION AND THE SELF by Massimo Rosati, *Rethinking Classical Sociology Series*, Ashgate, Aldershot 2009, pp. xvi + 163, £55.00 hbk

If the mass media in England were to be relied on, one would have thought that any interest in religion within the social sciences had long expired. To a remarkable degree, this is not the case. At present, there is a considerable growth of interest in religion, theology, and matters of the sacred, well typified in this study by Rosati. A paradigm shift in sociology has occurred, involving re-appraisals of the interests of Weber and Simmel in religion. Such concerns always figured prominently in Durkheim's writings and these are likely to increase with the centenary reflections in 2012 on his last great work, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.

While not forming a school of thought, there are an unexpected number of Italian sociologists with interests in religion – one has in mind Cipriani, Ferrarotti, Garelli, and Giordan. The works of these Italians translate well, being characterised by élan, rhetorical flourish, and some original theoretical re-castings. They exhibit interesting bibliographies that are exploited well in their texts. Rosati is prominent amongst these, sharing with some particular interests in Durkheim. Parts of two chapters of this study have been published earlier in *Durkheimian Studies* (the journal of the British Centre for Durkheimian Studies based at Oxford).

Overall, this is a well-structured overview of some wide ranging debates that are unfamiliarly cast and to that degree the study has much to commend it. Rosati characterises his work as a personal interpretation (p. 6). Besides his treatment of ritual, largely in the first three chapters of the study, Rosati seeks to find a religious basis for a notion of 'principled tolerance' (p. 10) and this quest forms its second part. In this latter part, Durkheim slightly melts into the background.

For unknown reasons, the study of ritual has fallen from a dominant position held in sociology and anthropology in the 1980s and 1990s. A value of Rosati's work lies in its resolute defence of the significance of ritual. In his introduction, he claims 'ritual behaviour is a barrier against cognitive chaos' (p. 4). More assertively, he treats rituals as the building blocks of the social. His aim, for what he terms Durkheim's second programme of research, is to seek a 'marriage of cultural sociology and religious studies', which is treated as a 'very urgent task' in sociology (p. 6).

Chapter 1 starts alluringly with the suggestion that Durkheim is 'a naïve figure, a deaf and blind positivist', out of kilter in a strange competition over the tragic basis of modernity (p. 10). This disenchantment with modernity, Rosati suggests, leads Durkheim to stress the moral significance of ritual and the sacred as means to ameliorate on-setting individualism. There is much of value in the chapter, not least on the Jewish aspects of *The Elementary Forms* that expand a theological dimension to the study. Theological issues also emerge in chapter 2, on 'modernity and the rise of the introspective conscience', which is useful on Protestantism and individualism (pp. 24–27). This chapter, dealing also with Mauss, is thoughtful. Echoing Taylor, he charges Protestant-like religions with obscuring the significance of rituals and the sacred. Rosati is at his best when writing closest to Christian theology.

Chapter 3, on society, rituals and tradition marks steps into diffuseness. Rosati is heavily reliant on the American sociologist of culture, Jeffrey Alexander, and what emerges is schematic and not very illuminating. It speaks too much of what is familiar on performance, but in ways that add little. The material on Turner, Bellah and Collins is interesting but too soft-focused. The work of Seligman on Jewish rituals emerges not very profitably in relation to the overall concerns of the study (pp. 64–68). In that chapter references start to appear to Rappaport,

the most important sociologist of late, who dealt innovatively with ritual. Within a bitty chapter 4, on 'Politics: An Anthropological Gaze' he is given a useful exposition (pp. 90–97) but one that somehow blunts his liturgical and theological significance. Rosati overstates the influence of Durkheim on his work.

No study should be judged by a series editor's preface, where Chalcraft treats as 'almost laughable' the notion that the Bible should have as sacred a place in the nation in the early 21st century as it did in 1953, going on to add that 'Rosati does not make these kind of errors' (p. x). He might be free from 'error' with his recourse to Islam and Confucianism, but what emerges is expositional, uncritical, and oddly removed from the earlier concerns with Durkheim. There is a peculiar and decidedly unpersuasive property to his section on 'Comparative Perspectives: Rabbinic ethics and Confucianism' (pp. 84–88) which sits uncertainly in chapter 4 on 'Self-cultivation: The Individual as a Ceremonial Being'. Insights are cast in manners of assertion so that when he turns to Confucianism in relation to politics and ritual, thin sociological gruel emerges. His main insight drawn from this religion is that 'personalism, within a network ethic of mutual help, is the ritualist Confucian way to a constrained democratic engagement' (p. 110).

Like Taylor, Rosati seeks new outlets and ambiances for rituals 'consistent with a post-liberal approach, and above all with a post-post-protestant understanding of religions within the public sphere' (p. 112). Besides Confucianism and Judaism (references to Catholicism are oddly brief and perfunctory given his emphasis on liturgy in the study), Rosati looks to Islam for solutions. These emerge in chapter 5 on 'Politics: An Anthropological Gaze' where he deems Islam as transcending and subverting politics, which facilitates a fusion of the public and the private in ways that are peculiarly resistant both to secularisation and to modernity (pp. 102–106). Islam is used in the context of politics, where orthodoxy of practice, not theology matters most. A glimmer of what Rosati might have in mind as exemplifying his ideal of ritual emerges in his final chapter, on new routes to pluralism in regard to religion. A Jewish dimension unexpectedly emerges though this aspect is not surprising given Durkheim's rabbinical background.

Seligman, a Jewish sociologist who has written on ritual (and who gives the study a glowing jacket cover endorsement) is invoked as exemplary for the multi-faith 'Scriptural Reasoning' sessions he runs as part of an international summer school, where common religious texts are read in 'an egalitarian speech situation', in a 'neutral place' (pp. 131–34). He sees these annual sessions as constituting 'a quasi-liturgical practice', which signifies one of the main purposes of ritual as conceived in the study, of re-casting boundaries and decentering the self. The ritual seems to involve a lot of listening. The aim is to recognise the particularism of other faiths and to bracket differences, all done in the humility of a ritual ordering where utterance of the 'error' of others is unspeakable.

The conclusion commences with a vision of multi-faith cacophony in Rome realised by an imaginary figure called Davita who finds solutions in Durkheim's sociology of religion and his image of society. It then proceeds into cryptic comments on the significance of Durkheim for the new millennium. The end point of the study is to conclude that 'to ritual and the sacred, eventually, lies the task of teaching (even to moderns) the virtue of the "lightness of *thoughtfulness*"' (p. 142). Given his current post as Director of the Centre for the Study and Documentation of Religions and Political Institutions in Post-Secular Society, Rosati's wrestling with the legacy of Durkheim is interesting in illustrating the increasingly inchoate ends of modernity which seem so peculiarly resistant to sociological encapsulation.

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