

RELIGION AND THE MORES¹

WILLIAM G. SUMNER
Yale University

Mohammedanism, Romanism, and Protestantism contain Systems of world-philosophy which have been deduced from religious dogmas. The world-philosophy is in each case removed by several steps of deduction from the religious postulates. In each case Customs have grown up from the unavoidable compromise between metaphysical dogmas and interests, and these customs, so far as they inhere in essential traits of human nature, or in fundamental conditions of human life, or as far as they have taken on the sanctity of wide and ancient authority so that they seem to be above discussion, are the mores. Does a Roman Catholic, or a Mohammedan, or a Protestant child begin by learning the dogmas of his religion and then build a life-code on them? Not at all. He begins by living in, and according to, the mores of his family and societal environment. The vast mass of men in each case never do anything else but thus imbibe a character from the environment. If they learn the religious dogmas at all, it is superficially, negligently, erroneously. They are trained in the ritual, habituated to the usages, imbued with the notions, of the societal environment. They hear and repeat the proverbs, sayings, and maxims which are current in it. They perceive what is admired, ridiculed, abominated, desired by the people about them. They learn the code of conduct—what is considered stupid, smart, stylish, clever, or foolish, and they form themselves on these ideas. They get their standards from the standards of their environment. Behind this, but far behind it for all but the scholars, are the history and logic by which the mores are connected with the religious facts or dogmas, and when the scholars investigate the history and logic they find that the supposed history is a tissue of myths and legends and that the logic is like a thread broken at a hundred points, twisted into innumerable windings, and snarled into innumerable knots.

But now it follows that the mores are affected all the time by changes in environmental conditions and societal growth, and by changes in the arts, and they follow these influences without regard to religious institutions or doctrines, or, at most, compromises are continually made between inherited institutions and notions on one side and interests on the other. The religion has to follow the mores. In its nature, no religion ever changes. Every religion is absolute and eternal truth, it never contains any provision for its own amendment or "evolution." It would stultify itself if it should say: I am temporarily or contingently true, and I shall give way to something truer. I am a working hypothesis only. I am a constitution which may be amended whenever you please. "The faith once delivered to the saints" must claim to be perfect, and the formula itself means that the faith is changeless. A scientific or

¹ Address of the President of the American Sociological Society at its fourth annual meeting in New York, December, 1909.

developing religion is an absurdity. But then again nothing is absolutely and eternally true. Everything must change. Religion is no exception. Therefore every religion is a resisting inertia which is being overcome by moving forces. Interests are the forces, because they respond, in men, to hunger, love, vanity, and fear, and the actual mores of a time are the resultant of the force of interests and the inertia of religion. The leaders of a period enlist on the side either of the interests or the resistance, and the mass of men float on the resultant current of the mores.

Religion is tradition. It is a product of history, and it is embodied in ritual, institutions, officials, etc., which are historical. From time to time it is observed that the religious generalizations do not hold true; experience does not verify them. At last skepticism arises and new efforts of philosophy are required to re-establish the religious dogmas or to make new compromises. Philosophy appears as a force of revision and revolution. In the New Testament we see a new philosophy undermining and overthrowing rabbinical Judaism. This operation may be found in the history of any religion. It is often repeated. The institutional and traditional religion stands like an inherited and established product; the philosophy appears like a new and destructive element which claims to be reformatory, and may turn out to be such, but which begins by destruction.

We may see one of these operations in the ecclesiastical schism of the sixteenth century. The mediaeval system broke down in the fifteenth century. It was not able to support the weight thrown on it by the great changes of that period. New devices were charged with the great societal duties. For instance, the state was created and charged with duties which the church had claimed to perform. The state thus got control of marriage, divorce, legitimacy, property, education, etc. These things were in the mores, and the mores changed. The masses accepted the changes and readjusted their ideas accordingly. They turned to the state instead of the church for the defense and control of great interests, the schism in the church was a result. Those who still kept faith in sacramental religion have clung to institutions, ritual, dogmas, etc., which are consistent with sacramental religion; those who rejected sacramental dogmas have made new usages and institutions to fit their religious needs and experience. The latter school have made new deductions and inferences from the great principles of their creed and faith. The deductions thus made, when turned into injunctions or inhibitions, impose certain duties which are imperative and arbitrary. For instance, we are told that we must do a thing because the Bible says so, not because there is any rational relation between that act and self-realization. Nobody has ever done what the Bible says. What men have always done, if they tried to do right, was to conform to the mores of the group and the time. Monastic and puritan sects have tried over and over again in the history of the church to obey the gospel injunctions. They begin by a protest against the worldliness of the church. They always have to segregate themselves. Why? They must get out of the current mores of society and create an environment of their own where they can nurse a new body of mores within which the acts they desire to practice will be possible. They have always especially desired to create a society with the mores which they approved, and to do this they needed to control coming generations through their children or successors.

No such effort has ever succeeded. All the churches, and nearly all the Christian denominations have, until within a few years, resisted investigation of the truth of history and nature. They have yielded this position in part but not altogether; within a year we have heard of a movement in the Church of Rome to test and verify traditions about history and nature. So far, it has been suppressed. In the mores of today of all the intelligent classes the investigation of truth is a leading feature, and with justice, since the welfare of mankind primarily depends on correct knowledge of the world in which we live, and of human nature. It is a very heinous fault of the ecclesiastical organizations that they resist investigation or endeavor to control its results. It alienates them from the mores of the time, and destroys their usefulness. The mores will control the religion as they have done hitherto, and as they do now. They have forced an abandonment of ritual and dogma.

However, the case which is really important and which always presents itself in the second stage is that logical inferences as to what men ought to do are constructed upon the world-philosophy. In the New Testament the scribes and Pharisees were denounced because they had bound heavy burdens and laid them on men's shoulders. This referred to the rabbinical constructive duties of ritual and behavior—an elaborate system of duties in which energy was expended with no gain in self-realization. The mediaeval church fell under the dominion of the same tendency and by construction and inference multiplied restrictions and arbitrary duties which had the same effect. We now hear constructive arguments made to prove from Scripture that there should be no divorce, and that no man should be allowed to marry his deceased wife's sister, although there is no authority at all in Scripture for such prohibitions.

It appears probable that all religious reformations have been due to changes in the mores. Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt in order to get them out of the collision between their mores and those of the Egyptians. The contrast between the mores of the Israelites and Canaanites is emphasized throughout the Old Testament.

It is against the mores of the Jews of the time of Jesus that the New Testament is a revolt. The denunciations of woe on the scribes and Pharisees are an expression of it. Christianity failed among the Jews because the revolution in the mores which it called for was too great; it was, in reality, a Hellenistic world-philosophy, and a treason inside Judaism. Mohammed's action was based on innovations in the mores of the Arabs which had partially prevailed, and which he adopted and urged with supernatural sanctions against the old mores. It is probable that Zoroaster and Buddha made themselves exponents of a revolution in the mores of their peoples. Zoroaster's work and the hostility between the Iranians and their kindred of India has made the history of the Persians, and of the other peoples of the Euphrates Valley and its neighborhood.

These examples show us that the influence of the religion on the mores is not to be denied, but they show us what this influence is and what it is not. Out of the experience arises the world-philosophy including religion. Thus there is a constant alternation of action or experience and thought. So far well, but then the deductions

from the world-philosophy begin. They are metaphysical. They turn into dogmas which are logical or speculative or fantastic. There is not a sequence of experiences reflection, action, but the sequence is experience, reflection, deductions—perhaps repeated logical deductions, resulting in dogmas as an arbitrary injunction—and then new action. The ecclesiastics or philosophers get a chance to introduce selfish elements for their own aggrandizement. Next these dogmatic products are brought back to the world of experience and action as imperative rules of conduct. They may win outward respect and pretended obedience, but they are evaded. The moral product is chicane and hypocrisy, and this is what enters into the mores. At the same time, if the religion offers any bribes or concessions to human passion or weakness, the mores seize upon these and swell them into the vices of an age. If the church sets rigid and arbitrary rules it has to sell dispensations; why then should not the age become venal? If people revel in descriptions of torture and agony they will be callous to it. If the religion presents sensual indulgence as a reward of good conduct, then sensuality is an ideal. It is licensed, not restricted. In primitive society all customs were sanctioned by ghosts. Hence all customs are ritual; hence abortion, infanticide, killing the old, cannibalism, etc., etc., were all ritual acts and not only proper, but within the prescribed conditions they were duties. When Christendom declared sex-renunciation to be the ideal of perfection for one half of civilized men, and Mohammedanism presented sex-pleasure as the ideal for the other, a striking picture was presented of the two poles of excess and ill between which men are placed with respect to this great dominant interest of the race. All religions are creations of fantasy. They come out of the realm of metaphysics. They come down into this world of sense with authority. The moral ideas come out of the mores which move, and they are used to criticize the religious traditions which remain stereotyped. Religions enjoin acts which have become abominable in the mores, such as cannibalism, human sacrifice, child-sacrifice, prostitution, intoxication. They aim to supersede experience, knowledge, and reason by labors and injunctions. Galton² says: "The religious instructor, in every creed, is one who makes it his profession to saturate his pupils with prejudice." Some obey, but the great mass of the society do, day by day, what will satisfy their interests according to the best knowledge they have or can get from the usages of the people around them. These acts and the thoughts, codes, and standards which go with them are the mores. Every people, therefore, takes out of its religion or out of the religion which is brought to it just what suits its tastes and its ways.

No religion of those which we call world-religions, and which have a complete system, is ever put in practice as a whole. The people always take out of it what suits their tastes and ideas, and that means especially their mores. Buddhism has run out into quite independent forms in Ceylon, Tibet, and China and has died out in Hindustan. Its excessive ritual, its contemplativeness, its futile learning, the phantasmagoria of supernatural beings which take the place of a god, its spells and charms and prayer-wheels bear witness to antecedent traits in the people who adopted it and which it has never overcome. The mores follow these traits, not the religious dogmas. All the

² *Human Faculty*, p. 210.

elaborate (i. e., civilized) religions impose duties which are irksome, especially if they are interferences with interest or with human passions and appetites. The duties are neglected. Then comes fear of the anger of the deity. At this point ritual comes in as expiation, and atonement, especially in the forms of self-discipline, sacrifice, self-mutilation, scourging, fines, fasting, pilgrimages, church-going, etc. Consequently, when religion is ritual and its methods of reconciling man and God are ritualistic, all the methods of self-discipline enter deeply into the mores. Mediaeval Christianity and Mohammedanism illustrate this by the importance ascribed to fasting. It is an active agent as it is employed. The English ritualists of the last sixty years have introduced ritual as an engine to teach the old doctrine of religion and to bring the interest of men back to the mediaeval views that the greatest interest of man is the apparatus and operation (sacraments) by which his fate in the other world may be decided. Zoroastrianism may very probably be due, in the main, to one man, for it seems to be an invented system, but it came out of a body of magi who had long existed and it contains a system made by them and for them. The old demonism of Babylonia overpowered it. For the practical life of persons who were not magi it was realistic and matter of fact. It inculcated industry and thrift and its ideals of virtue were industrial. They consisted in good work, in subduing the earth, and making it productive. It fell in with the mores of the people of the Euphrates Valley and strengthened them. Mohammedanism has been a conquering religion; it has been imposed on some people who were heathen. For them it has great influence because its creed is simple and its ritual is simple, but at the same time strict and incessant. It has split into great sects on account of the transformations imposed on it by more civilized people who accepted it. Its fatalism, lack of civil ideas, spirit of plunder and conquest, fanaticism, and scientific ignorance have entered into the mores of all the people who have accepted it. Hence the mores of Mohammedan nations present a great variety, and often very grotesque combinations. Christianity has taken very different forms among Greeks, Slays, Latins, and Teutons. It inculcates meekness, but few Christians have ever been meek. It has absorbed all kinds of elements where it has met with native and national elements which it could not displace. That is as much as to say that it has had to yield to the mores. We hear a great deal about its victories over heathenism. They were all compromises, and when we get to know the old heathenism we find it again in what we thought were the most distinctive features of Christianity. The religion of Odin was a religion of warriors and for warriors. It took its tone from them and gave back the warrior spirit with a new sanction and an intensified ideal in this world and the other. Ferocity, bloodshed, and indifference to death were antecedents and consequents of the religion.

Sects of religion form upon a single idea or doctrine. This they always exaggerate. Then the dogma gets power over the whole life. This is the case in which the religion rises superior to the mores and molds them, as in the case of the Quakers. Some sects of India (the Jams) have put the prohibition against killing anything whatsoever which has life before everything else, and have drawn the extremest inferences from it as to what one ought to do and not do lest he kill anything. Their whole mode of life and code of duty is a consequence.

Within fifty years in the United States the mores have very powerfully influenced religion, and the effect is open to our view. The dogmatic side of religion has been laid aside by all the Protestant denominations. Many instances may be shown in which the mores have modified the religion. The attitude toward religion is in the mores; in recent mores open attacks on religion are frowned upon as bad manners and religion is treated with respect. The deism of the eighteenth century was an attack on religion, but the agnosticism of the nineteenth century, although irreligious, sought no war with religion. At the same time the interest in religion has very greatly diminished, and it is a symptom of indifference when men do not care to carry on controversies about it. The clergy has ceased to preach "theology." They and their congregations care for theology no longer; they look upon "morality" as the business of the clergy and the pulpit. The pulpit, as an institution, no longer speaks with authority. It tries to persuade, and to do this it has to aim at popularity. It wants to attract attention like newspapers, books, the theater, the lecture-platform, and it has to have recourse, like them, to sensational methods. If it cannot command authority, it must try to recommend itself by the power of reason. The current fashion is social endeavor, especially under the forms of charity. This sets the lines along which the churches and denominations vie with each other for the approval of the public. A church, therefore, turns into a congeries of institutions for various forms of social amelioration, and the pulpits exercises consist in discussions of public topics, especially social topics, "from an ethical standpoint," that is, by the application of the ethical, or quasi-ethical, notions which are at present current in our mores. What is that but a remodeling of the ecclesiastical institutions which we have inherited, according to the notions, standards, and faiths which are in the mores of our time? Religion, properly speaking, simply falls away. It is not as strong a motive as humanitarianism, and it is in nowise necessary to the work of social amelioration. Often it is a hindrance by diverting energy and capital from social work to ecclesiastical expenditures. When theologians declare that they accept the evolution philosophy, because, however the world came to be, God was behind it, this is a fatal concession for religion or theology. When religion withdraws into this position it has abandoned the whole field of human interest. It may be safe from attack, but it is also powerless, and a matter of indifference. Theologians also say now that the miracles of Christ are proved by the character of Christ, not his character by the miracles.³ This is another apologetic effort which is a fatal concession. In the record the miracles are plainly put forward to authenticate the person; they are construed in the other way they are, in an age whose mores are penetrated by instinctive scorn of magic and miracles, a dead weight on the system. The apology therefore wins nobody, but interposes a repelling force. An apology is always a matter of policy, and it would be far better to drop miracles with witches, hell, personal devil, flood, tower of Babel, creation in six days, etc., in silence. The various attempts of the eighteenth century (Butler, Paley) to sustain religion or theology by analogies, design, etc., are entirely outside of our mores. The philosophical or logical methods no longer have any force on the minds of any class in our society. When a church is only a slightly integrated association for ethical discussion and united social effort, religion ceases

³ Robbins, *A Christian Apologetic*.

to be, and when religion withdraws entirely into the domain of metaphysical speculation, it is of no account. In the middle of the nineteenth century those Protestants who wanted to maintain religion for itself. Or as an end in itself, did what the situation called for; they made religion once more ritual and tried to revive the "Catholic faith" without the pope. That would be a revival, to a great extent, of mediaeval ecclesiasticism and mores. We are therefore witnesses of a struggle to stem the tide of the mores by concerted action and tactics in the interest of mediaeval religion. At the same time the mores of modern civilization are sapping the foundations, not only of mediaeval and Greek Christianity, but also of Mohammedanism and Buddhism. The high-church or ritualistic movement is therefore a rally in the battle which has been going on for five hundred years between mediaeval Christianity and the improved mores.

In the fifteenth century the great inventions, the geographical discoveries, the extension of commerce, the growth of capital, the rise of the middle class, the revival of learning, the growth of great dynastic states, destroyed the ideals of poverty, obedience, and chastity. The idea of Catholicity died just as the idea of the Crusades did; it was recognized as a chimaera. The church was not doing the work it stood for in the world. These were fatal facts and courage was found to face them. It was the mores which shifted—moreover all the bad as well as the good of the mores entered into the change.

The mores are a vast and complex mass of acts and thoughts—not some good and some bad, but all mixed in quality. All the elements are there always. The sects deride and denounce each other and they always select material for their jibes from what they allege to be the facts about each other's influence on the mores.

The Christian church disapproved of luxury and ornament and repressed them in the mores of Christendom until the fourteenth century. The Renaissance brought in pagan ideas of beauty, art, ornament, pleasure, and joy in life, from which luxury arose. In the present mores of all civilized peoples the love of luxury is strong. It is increasing and is spreading to all classes; those who cannot enjoy it think themselves wronged by the social order. This sentiment is one of the very strongest in the masses. It characterizes the age and is one of those forces which change the face of institutions and produce social war.

The change of interest, in the sixteenth century, to the philosophy and the paganism of the classics included a great reduction in the other-worldliness of the Middle Ages. The point of interest was in this world and this life, without denial of the truth of a future life; terror of the future world and anxiety to know how to provide for it, with eager seizure of the sacramental and sacerdotal means which the church provided, all declined. The Renaissance tried to renew the Greek joy in life with art, pleasure, music, grace, social enjoyment, freedom, and luxury instead of asceticism, ritual, ecclesiasticism, rigid authority, distrust, and gloom. The religious wars greatly interfered with the programme of the Renaissance. They partly dispelled gaiety and grace. It was in the mores that the changes occurred. Churches fell to decay;

monasteries disappeared; chantries were suppressed; clergymen abandoned their calling; pilgrimages, processions, retreats—all were neglected. Some lamented and protested; others applauded; the greatest number were indifferent. The attitude depended on the place and circumstances, above all upon commercial and industrial interests and upon intellectual attainments. The great fact was that faith in sacramentarianism as a philosophy of this life and the other was broken, and the mores which had been the outcome of that faith fell into neglect. The Counter-reformation arose from supposed effects of the church schism on the mores. The removal of the other world to a remoter place in human interest was a great change in religion. At its best, modern religion became a guide of life here, not a preparation for another life. Modern thought has been realistic and naturalistic, and the mores have all conformed to this world-philosophy. The other-worldliness has been ethical. It has been at war with the materialism of this world, a war which is in the mores, for we are largely under the dominion of those secondary or remoter dogmas deduced from grand conceptions of world-philosophy and inculcated as absolute authority. Our mores at the same time instinctively tend toward realistic and naturalistic views of life for which a new world-philosophy is growing up. Here we have the explanation of the gulf which is constantly widening between the "modern spirit" and the traditional religion. Some cling to the traditional religion in one or another of its forms which, after all, represent only the grades of departure from the mediaeval form toward complete harmony with the modern mores. What the mores always represent is the struggle to live as well as possible under the conditions. Traditions, so far as they come out of other conditions and are accepted as independent authorities in the present conditions, are felt as hindrances. It is because our religious traditions now do not assume authority, but seek to persuade, that active war against them has ceased' and that they are treated with more respect now than in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Other-worldliness, that is, care about the life after death and anxiety to secure bliss there by proper action here, occupied a large share of the interest of mediaeval men. Feudalism is a form of society which arises under given conditions, as we see from the numerous cases of it in history. Mediaeval society shows us a great population caught up in the drift of these two currents, one of world-philosophy and the other of societal environment, and working out all social customs and institutions into conformity with them. The force of this philosophy and the energy of the men are astounding. In the civil world there was disintegration, but in the moral world there was coherence and comprehensiveness in the choice of ideals and in the pursuit of them. In the thirteenth century there was a culmination in which the vigorous expansion of all the elements reached a degree of development which is amazing. The men of the time fell into the modes of feudalism as if it had been the order of nature; they accepted it as such. They accepted the leadership of the church with full satisfaction. Preaching and ritual, with popular poetry aided by symbolism in art, were the only ways of acting on the minds of the mass; there was no tendency to reflection and criticism any more than among barbarians. The mores were the simple, direct, and naive expression of the prevailing interests of the period; that is why they are so strong and their interaction is so vigorous. The sanction of excommunication

was frightful in its effect on beliefs and acts. The canon law is an astonishing product of the time. It is really a codification of the mores modified somewhat, especially in the later additions, by the bias which the church wanted to impress on the mores. It is because the canon law is fictitious in its pretended historical authority, and because the citations in it from the fathers are selected and interpreted for a purpose, that it really expressed just the mores of the time. "The Decretals were invented to furnish what was entirely lacking, that is, a documentary authority, running back to Apostolic times, for the divine institution of the primacy of the pope and of the teaching office of bishops."⁴ The period entirely lacked historical sense and critical method. What it had received from the last preceding generation was, and must have been always. But that was the mores. Horror of heretics, witches, Mohammedans, Jews, was in them, and so were all the other intense faiths, loves, desires, hates, and efforts of the period. In the lack of reading, travel, and discussion there was very little skepticism. Life went on from day to day by repetition along grooves of usage and habit. Such life makes strong mores, but also rigid and mechanical ones. In modern times the thirst for reality has developed criticism and skepticism; everything is discussed and questioned. There are few certainties in our knowledge. Our mores are flexible, elastic, and to some extent unstable, but they have strong guarantees. They are to a great extent rational, because if they are not rational they perish. They are open and intelligent, because they are supported by literature and wide discussion. They are also tough, and rather organic than mechanical.

All modern students of the mediaeval world have noted the contradictions and inconsistencies of living and thinking. Of these the most important is the contradiction between renunciation of the world and ruling the world; a Gregory VII, or an Innocent III, goes from one to the other of these without a sense of moral jar, and the modern students who fix their minds on one or the other have two different conceptions of the Middle Ages. Phantasms and ideals have no consistency. A man who deals with them instead of dealing with realities may have a kaleidoscopic relation between his ideas, which relation may be symmetrical, and poetically beautiful; he will have no nexus of thought between his ideas, and therefore no productive combination of them. The mediaeval people had a great number of ideals, and they went from one to the other by abrupt transitions without any difficulty. They had intense feelings and enthusiasm for their ideals, but when an intense feeling instead of deep knowledge is the basis of conviction there is no mental or moral consistency.

I have maintained that the religion comes out of the mores and is controlled by them. The religion, however, sums up the most general and philosophic elements in the mores, and inculcates them as religious dogmas. It also forms precepts on them. For an example we may note how the humanitarianism of modern mores has colored and warped Christianity. Humanitarianism grew out of economic power by commerce, inventions, steam, and electricity. Humanitarianism led to opposition to slavery, and

⁴ Eicken, *Mittelalt. Weltanschauung*, p. 656.

to the emancipation of women. These are not doctrines of the Bible or of Middle-Age Christianity. They were imposed on modern religion by the mores. Then they came from the religion to the modern world as religious ideas and duties, with religious and ecclesiastical sanctions. This is the usual interplay of the mores and religion.