

On Durkheim's *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*

Edited by

N.J. Allen, W.S.F. Pickering
and W. Watts Miller

Routledge Studies in Social and Political Thought



ON DURKHEIM'S *ELEMENTARY FORMS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE*

This is the first collection of essays to be published on Durkheim's masterpiece, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. A classic of sociology and the study of religion, and one of his most important and influential works, *The Elementary Forms* is currently enjoying a renaissance in other, related disciplines.

This collection represents the work of the most important, international Durkheim scholars from the fields of anthropology, philosophy and sociology. From these diverse viewpoints, the contributors examine Durkheim's perspective on the role of religion and social life. The essays focus on key issues, for example, the method Durkheim adopted in his study; the role of ritual and belief in society; the nature of contemporary religion, as well as on debates on the notion of the soul and contemporary collective civic rituals. This collection fills a major gap in studies on Durkheim, and will be a vital resource for students and researchers in anthropology, sociology and philosophy and religious studies.

The contributors N. J. Allen, Werner Gephart, Terry F. Godlove, Jr., Robert Alun Jones, Dominique Merllié, Howard Morphy, Dénes Némethi, Giovanni Paoletti, William Ramp, Malcolm Ruel, Warren Schmaus, Sue Stedman Jones, Ivan Strenski, Kenneth Thompson, W. Watts Miller.

The editors N. J. Allen is Reader in the Social Anthropology of South Asia at Oxford University and specialist in the work of Marcel Mauss. W. S. F. Pickering helped to found the British Centre for Durkheimian Studies in the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology in Oxford in 1991. He has written on Durkheim's sociology of religion and, more recently, was joint editor of *Debating Durkheim*, published by Routledge. W. Watts Miller is editor of *Durkheim Studies/Études durkheimiennes*, and the author of *Durkheim, Morals and Modernity* (1996). He lectures in the Departments of Sociology and Philosophy at the University of Bristol.

ROUTLEDGE STUDIES IN SOCIAL AND
POLITICAL THOUGHT

1. HAYEK AND AFTER

Hayekian liberalism as a research programme

Jeremy Shearmur

2. CONFLICTS IN SOCIAL SCIENCE

Edited by Anton van Harskamp

3. POLITICAL THOUGHT OF ANDRÉ GORZ

Adrian Little

4. CORRUPTION, CAPITALISM AND DEMOCRACY

John Girling

5. FREEDOM AND CULTURE IN WESTERN SOCIETY

Hans Blokland

6. FREEDOM IN ECONOMICS

New perspectives in normative analysis

Edited by Jean-François Laslier, Marc Fleurbaey, Nicolas Gravel and Alain Trannoy

7. AGAINST POLITICS

On government, and order

Anthony de Jasay

8. MAX WEBER AND MICHEL FOUCAULT

Parallel life works

Arpad Szakolczai

9. THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF CIVIL SOCIETY
AND HUMAN RIGHTS

G. B. Madison

10. ON DURKHEIM'S *ELEMENTARY FORMS OF
RELIGIOUS LIFE*

Edited by N. J. Allen, W. S. F. Pickering and W. Watts Miller

11. ILLNESS AS A WORK OF THOUGHT

A Foucauldian perspective of psychosomatics

Monica Greco

ON DURKHEIM'S
ELEMENTARY FORMS
OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

*Edited by N. J. Allen,
W. S. F. Pickering and W. Watts Miller*

Published in conjunction with the British Centre
for Durkheimian Studies



London and New York

First published 1998
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Transferred to Digital Printing 2005

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Ave, New York NY 10016

© 1998 Edited by N. J. Allen, W. S. F. Pickering and
W. Watts Miller

Typeset in Baskerville by
Florenccotype Limited, Stoodleigh, Devon

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted
or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic,
mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented,
including photocopying and recording, or in any information
storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing
from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available
from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data
On Durkheim's Elementary Forms of Religious Life / edited by
N. J. Allen, W. S. F. Pickering and W. Watts Miller.
p. cm. – (Routledge studies in social and political thought)
(hc : alk. paper)

1. Durkheim, Emile, 1858–1917. Formes élémentaires de la vie
religieuse. 2. Religion. 3. Totemism. I. Allen, N. J. II. Pickering,
W. S. F. III. Watts Miller, William, 1944–

IV. Series
GN470.D83069 1998
306.6–dc21 97–29595

CIP
AC

ISBN 0–415–16286–6

CONTENTS

<i>List of contributors</i>	vii
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
<i>Explanatory note</i>	xi
 <i>Introduction</i>	 1
1 Spencer and Gillen in Durkheim: the theoretical construction of ethnography HOWARD MORPHY	13
2 Did Lucien Lévy-Bruhl answer the objections made in <i>Les Formes élémentaires</i> ? DOMINIQUE MERLLIE	29
3 Religion and science in <i>The Elementary Forms</i> ROBERT ALUN JONES	39
4 The concept of belief in <i>The Elementary Forms</i> SUE STEDMAN JONES	53
5 Durkheim, Kant, the immortal soul and God W. WATTS MILLER	66
6 The cult of images: reading chapter VII, book II, of <i>The Elementary Forms</i> . GIOVANNI PAOLETTI	78
7 Durkheim and sacred identity KENNETH THOMPSON	92
8 Rescuing Durkheim's 'rites' from the symbolizing anthropologists MALCOLM RUEL	105

9	Durkheim's bourgeois theory of sacrifice IVAN STRENSKI	116
10	Memory and the sacred: the cult of anniversaries and commemorative rituals in the light of <i>The Elementary Forms</i> WERNER GEPHART	127
11	Effervescence, differentiation and representation in <i>The Elementary Forms</i> WILLIAM RAMP	136
12	Effervescence and the origins of human society N. J. ALLEN	149
13	Change, innovation, creation: Durkheim's ambivalence DENES NEMEDI	162
14	Durkheim on the causes and functions of the categories WARREN SCHMAUS	176
15	Durkheim and a priori truth: conformity as a philosophical problem TERRY F. GODLOVE, JR.	189
	<i>Bibliography</i>	203
	<i>Author index</i>	216
	<i>Subject index</i>	220

CONTRIBUTORS

N. J. Allen won a scholarship in classics to New College, Oxford, in 1957. He studied medicine there and later in London. He returned to Oxford to study social anthropology, basing his D.Phil. on fieldwork in Nepal. He lectured in Durham from 1972 to 1976. Since then he has been Lecturer and Reader in the Social Anthropology of South Asia in Oxford. His forty main publications focus on the Himalayas, kinship theory, the history of French anthropology and Indo-European comparativism with special reference to Hinduism.

Werner Gephart has been Professor of Sociology at the University of Bonn since 1992. He was Alfred Grosser Guest Professor at the Institut d'Etudes Politiques in Paris. His main interests are in the sociology of law, sociological theory, symbolism, culture and religion, on all of which he has written various articles. He is to be the editor of a critical edition of Max Weber's sociology of law.

Terry Godlove, Jr., is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Chair at Hofstra University, New York. His research interests include epistemology and interpretation theory. In 1989 he published *Religion, Interpretation and Diversity of Belief: The Framework Model from Kant to Durkheim to Davidson*. His articles are on epistemology and the category of space in Durkheim.

Robert Alun Jones is Professor of Religious Studies, History and Sociology at the University of Illinois, Urbana. His major research interests include Durkheim and his intellectual context, the methodology of the history of ideas, and the scholarly use of electronic documents and networked information systems. He is the author of *Emile Durkheim: an Introduction to Four Major Works* (1986) as well as numerous journal articles on Durkheim. He has been editor of *Etudes durkheimiennes*, and is also responsible for the Durkheim site on the Internet. He is writing a book on Durkheim's social realism.

Dominique Merllié teaches sociology at the University of Saint-Denis in Paris. He is a member of the Centre de Sociologie de l'Education et de la Culture (EHESS and CNRS, Paris). His research fields include social mobility and the uses of statistical categories. Among his publications are: *Initiation à la pratique sociologique* (with P. Champagne, R. Lenoir and

L. Pinto (1996), and *La mobilité sociale* (1994). He was the editor of a special issue of the *Revue philosophique* (1989, 4) about L. Lévy-Bruhl, which includes some of his publications on this author.

Howard Morphy is Professor of Anthropology at University College London. He has conducted fieldwork in Arnhem Land, Northern Australia, and has collaborated on many films with Ian Dunlop of Film Australia. His most recent books are *Ancestral Connections* (1991) and *Rethinking Visual Anthropology* (edited with Marcus Banks, 1977). With John Mulvaney and Alison Petch he has recently completed an edited edition of Gillen's letters to Spencer (1997). He has twice been awarded the Stanner Prize for Aboriginal studies.

Dénes Némédi studied history in Debrecen in Hungary and is now Assistant Professor of Sociology at the Eötvös University of Budapest. He has written on social research in Hungary in the inter-war period, on modern German sociology and on Durkheim. He has recently published in Hungarian, *Durkheim: Knowledge and Society*.

Giovanni Paoletti studied philosophy at the Scuola Normale of Pisa. He is at present preparing a doctoral dissertation. He is the author of articles on the history of sociology and Durkheim's sociology of religion, including 'Durkheim à l'Ecole Normale Supérieure: lectures de jeunesse', *Etudes durkheimiennes/Durkheim Studies*, IV, 1992; 'Les Règles en France, du vivant de Durkheim' in M. Borlandi and L. Mucchielli (eds) *La Sociologie et sa méthode*; 'Les Règles de Durkheim un siècle après' (1995).

W. S. F. Pickering was a lecturer in social studies at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne until he retired in 1987. In 1991 he helped to found the British Centre for Durkheimian Studies in the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Oxford. He has written and edited books on Durkheim and published articles on him and members of the Année Sociologique group.

William Ramp is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the University of Lethbridge, Alberta, Canada, where he teaches classical sociological theory. He is the author of 'Durkheim and Foucault on the Genesis of the Disciplinary Society', forthcoming in M. S. Cladis (ed.) *Durkheim and Foucault: Punishment and the School* (British Centre for Durkheimian Studies, 1997). His interests include sociological theories of identity and subjectivity as applied to religion and social movements.

Malcolm Ruel, D.Phil. (Oxon. 1959), is a Fellow of Clare College, Cambridge, and until his retirement was a University Lecturer in the Department of Social Anthropology. He has conducted fieldwork in West and East Africa. His most recent publication, *Belief, Ritual and the Securing of Life: Reflexive Essays on a Bantu Religion* (1997), matches the role of 'belief' in Christianity against that of 'ritual' (*inyangi*) for the Kuria people of East Africa.

Warren Schmaus is the author of *Durkheim's Philosophy of Science and the Sociology of Knowledge* (1994), as well as numerous articles in the history and philosophy of the social sciences and on issues of science and values. He is Professor of Philosophy at the Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago and a fellow of the Center of the Philosophy of Science at the University of Pittsburgh.

Sue Stedman Jones studied philosophy and completed a London doctorate titled 'From Kant to Durkheim'. She formerly taught social philosophy and the philosophy of the social sciences at Goldsmith's College, London. She is now pursuing independent research and is currently working on a book, *Durkheim Re-considered*, dividing her time between London and Paris.

Ivan Strenski is Holstein Family Community Professor of Religious Studies at the University of California, Riverside. He is author of *Four Theories of Myth in Twentieth Century History* (1987), *Religion in Relation* (1993), and *Durkheim and the Jews of France* (1997). He has also published an edition of Malinowski's writing on myth (1992). His articles include ones on Durkheim and the Durkheimians, Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, on questions of race, historiography, political mythology, the rise of ritualism and on the sacred.

Kenneth Thompson is Professor of Sociology at the Open University, UK. Educated at Leicester and Oxford universities, he has held teaching appointments at the University of California, Los Angeles, Rutgers University and Smith College. His books include *Bureaucracy and Church Reform* (1970), *Auguste Comte: The Foundation of Sociology* (1975), *Emile Durkheim* (1982), *Sartre: Life and Works* (1984), *Beliefs and Ideology* (1986) and *Moral Panics* (1997). His most recent edited book is *Media and Cultural Regulation* (1997). His current ESRC-funded research project is on 'Moral Regulation and Television'.

Willie Watts Miller is editor of *Durkheim Studies/Etudes durkheimiennes*. His publications include *Durkheim, Morals and Modernity* (1996) and a critical edition and translation of Durkheim's Latin thesis on Montesquieu. He is a member of the Centre for Durkheimian Studies, Oxford, and of the Departments of Sociology and Philosophy in the University of Bristol.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost the authors wish to express their appreciation for the help they received in the organization of the conference which gave rise to the papers constituting the basis of this book. In particular, they thank Jean-Claude Vatin, Director of the Maison Française, Oxford, for encouraging us to hold the conference there, and for the assistance of its administrative staff.

Financial assistance came by way of a seminar award of the Economic and Social Research Council. Without it the conference would not have been as large as it was and many people could not have come from various parts of the world to present papers. For the administration of the grant we appreciate the work of Isabella Birkin of the Institute of Social and Cultural Anthropology, Oxford.

For the preparation of the book, we should above all thank the contributors themselves, who had to provide chapters in accordance with stringent technical instructions. Without willing authors there would indeed be no book. But we should also show our appreciation to those who gave papers which, for various reasons, we have not been able to include but who all made a positive contribution to the conference.

We are also grateful to certain members of staff of the Computing Service of Oxford University for helping us in technical matters, to Chris Holdsworth for assisting in the preparation of the bibliography, to Miriam Kochan for translating one of the papers and to Carol Pickering who undertook a great deal of typing and sub-editing.

EXPLANATORY NOTE

It is necessary to forewarn readers of some technical points in the format of this book.

Lukes' dating-enumeration has been followed throughout (see Bibliography). Since the book is a commentary on another book, references to the latter are inevitably numerous. Instead of continually referring to *Les Formes élémentaires* as 1912a, the dating-enumeration '1912a' is omitted. In many cases a bracket contains two numbers, e.g. (589/412). This means that the quotation or reference is to be found on page 589 of *Les Formes élémentaires* and on page 412 of Swain's translation, perhaps corrected (see below). Where only one number appears, e.g. (133), this relates to page 133 of the French text. If the quotation from *Les Formes élémentaires* is in English with no translation dating-enumeration, it is assumed that the translation has been made by the author. Further, unless otherwise stated, English translations of pieces in Italian or German have also been made by the author of the chapter. If the reference is of the kind (1968c/1975b 2:18–19), it means that it is located by referring to Durkheim 1968c in the Bibliography, but the reference is also to be found, reprinted, in Durkheim 1975b, volume 2, with the page numbers 18–19, also located in the Bibliography.

Where contributors have used an English translation of passages in *Les Formes élémentaires*, they have nearly all drawn on Swain's translation of 1915. As is well known, it is often inaccurate. Unfortunately the new translation by Karen Fields did not appear until 1995, just before the conference, and the editors decided against the wholesale changes that would have been involved in adopting it throughout. Instead, quotations using the Swain translation have been retained, and where necessary corrected. At least, giving the page number in Swain's translation allows the reader to see the context of the reference in English. We have followed Fields' translation of the title of Durkheim's book however, by omitting the word 'the' before 'Religious Life'.

It is the common practice in writing on Durkheim and *Année Sociologique* group to keep certain terms in French since there is no satisfactory equivalent in English. The practice is followed here, as with the words, *conscience* and *représentation*. The first of these means either consciousness or conscience; the second, image, reflection, idea. The reader has to judge the meaning from the context.

INTRODUCTION

The object of the following essays is certainly not a collective plea, an apologia, for people to read *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Suffice it to say that it was Durkheim's most powerful book – his most demanding and exciting. As readers may know, it has become a classic in the realm of sociology and the study of religion. Further, its importance has become increasingly recognized, not least by the demands made in the production of a new, commendable English translation which appeared in 1995. Whether Durkheim's book on ethics which was planned to follow *The Elementary Forms*, but of which only the opening sections were written, would have been more outstanding is anyone's guess. To be sure, ethics was his overriding concern, more so perhaps than religion, though for him the two had a common origin and were very closely intertwined.

But if this book does not go out of its way to 'sell' *The Elementary Forms*, neither is it an exposition of the book viewed as a whole – a book that has so many themes relating to sociology, anthropology and the 'scientific' study of religion. Anyone wishing to be convinced of the importance today of Durkheim's book should consult the introduction in Karen Fields' new translation mentioned above (1995:xvii–lxxiii). For a more general appreciation, the reader's attention is drawn to the relevant sections in Steven Lukes' unique intellectual biography of Durkheim, published in 1973.

If *The Elementary Forms* is not systematically treated here as a whole, neither are all its main academic issues. Rather, this book forms an occasion for scholars of various disciplines, who would call themselves serious students of Durkheim, to reflect on key issues which have been the subject of debate over the years, such as the method Durkheim adopted in his study, the role of ritual and belief in society, and the nature of contemporary religion. In one or two cases, relatively less-discussed problems are analysed which are beginning to come to the fore, such as the notion of the soul and collective effervescence.

Where well-known issues are raised, the intention is not simply to rehearse them according to the inclination of individual writers but to bring to them new light and insights. Before these are mentioned in more detail, something of the origins and the internal problems of the book might be mentioned.

The reader has gleaned enough already to realize that the book is the product of a conference. It took place over three days in July 1995 and was

organised by the British Centre for Durkheimian Studies in Oxford. The year 1995 was in fact the centenary of the 'revelation' which came to Durkheim when he read the work of Robertson Smith: it consequently made him take seriously the sociological study of religion (Durkheim 1907b:613). *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* published in 1912 was in fact the culmination of that 'revelation'.

As mentioned, a large number of subjects is covered in the book. This gives rise to many possibilities in the presentation of papers at a conference where the participants have freedom in the choice of topics. Whilst a certain openness might be acceptable for a conference, a book based on its papers is a different matter. Publishers rightly make certain demands about uniformity, coherence and length. For such reasons not all the 28 papers given at the Oxford conference could be accepted for this book. The editors were faced with the unenviable problem of choosing some and eliminating others, and the even more exacting task of arranging in a coherent order the papers which had been selected. The structure finally adopted was that used by Durkheim in his book. Thus, the papers here included fall into four sections – methodology, belief, ritual and epistemology. Not surprisingly some of the papers cross the rigidity of such boundaries.

Where is the contemporary interest in issues raised by *Les Formes élémentaires*? The response of scholars to the internationally advertised conference provides some, albeit limited, indication of this. In terms of reinterpretation or criticism nothing was offered with regard to defining religion or to overall theories about religion *per se*, such as functionalism and structuralism (but see Chapters 7 and 13). Issues relating to belief and ritual received approximately equal attention. But popular areas proved to be epistemology; the sociology of knowledge; and the cult of individual, seen as the religion of today's western world. Many of the contributions of this kind were made by those who would call themselves philosophers rather than sociologists or anthropologists. A narrower issue which appeared in many of the papers, irrespective of their titles, was collective effervescence or effervescent assembly (see Pickering 1984:Chs 21 and 22). Although this is a phenomenon which has usually been kept in the background in Durkheimian studies, it appeared in many papers across the board. For many years it was not discussed in any systematic or comprehensive way and little was done to develop the idea. In part this may have been because it was thought that such a phenomenon could not be fitted into a scientific approach to social change in society as well as to religion.

Another observation arising from the conference was the relatively large number of American participants who attended it and a corresponding lack of those from France. This, it might be argued, is a reflection of the place of *Les Formes élémentaires* within Durkheimian studies, not least perhaps in the teaching of undergraduates. It is probably not far wrong to say that in France, of all Durkheim's works published in his lifetime and most frequently referred to in books and articles, relatively few citations consider in detail the classic which is the subject of this book. Preference is for issues raised by *De la Division du travail social* (1893b), *Les Règles* (1895a) and

Le Suicide (1897a). This is reflected in the fact that in France, of these four books, *Les Formes-élémentaires* is the one that has sold the fewest copies. Nor are epistemological issues relating to the sociology of knowledge as prominent in France as they seem to be amongst American and English scholars. Again, it might be argued that the relative popularity of *Les Formes élémentaires* in the United States reflects the fact that the United States still considers itself to be a religious or Christian country and that in the academic world issues of religion are still prominently debated. Might one be so bold as to say this is in stark contrast to the position in the academic world in France?

Now to a brief examination of the issues raised by this book.

I

Since Durkheim made the claim that sociology was in some sense a scientific study and that truth comes from science, his approach to religion was one that inevitably meant it had to comply with the canons of the natural sciences – at least to the degree that this was possible and in accordance with the canons of science as they were seen in his day (see 1895a). In *Les Formes élémentaires* he asserted that all that was required scientifically was ‘one well carried out experiment’ to prove his conclusions (593/415).¹ The ‘experiment’ written up in the book was based on a study of what he along with others held to be one of the most primitive and simple of all societies then known to scholars, the Arunta of Australia which had been so well described by ethnographers (1/1). In such a society, he assumed, it was possible to see religion in its most basic form, to observe how it functioned and its place in social behaviour.

These methodological axioms have not been without their opponents. Criticism was levelled against his definition of religion, which was based on the notion of the sacred as a universal concept (49–65/36–42). More basic questions centred on the validity of studying religion by the method of the natural sciences. These two issues, which were once so prominent, have receded into the background as being either irresolvable or of little practical merit, seen against the development of the sociology of religion. Most anthropologists and sociologists now side with Durkheim on these well-worn matters, not with his opponents. The word scientific has become more flexible with the growth of the philosophy of science. The notion of the sacred as being at the heart of religion is no longer openly rejected: it is a matter for refinement. The area, however, which has from time to time been raised concerns the ‘material’ used in the ‘experiment’. How well did Durkheim carry out his work? Was the ‘material’ adequate to make generalizations which, once formulated, would apply without reference to culture or time?

With the exception of Mauss, Durkheim was probably one of the last, if not the last, great armchair anthropologist. It seems generally agreed that his knowledge of Australian ethnography proved to be quite outstanding, and Evans-Pritchard certainly thought so (1960:24). In his task Durkheim was aided by Mauss’ extensive reading of the data. Nevertheless, Durkheim may

well have made mistakes in detail and his assumptions may have been wrong. The fact that he chose preliterate groups based on totemism, which he held to be the most primitive form of social organization, and through which every society had passed, is a case in point. But there is the question of the interpretation of what the ethnographers wrote, especially Spencer and Gillen. Did he read too much into them? Did he overlook important material?

To a limited extent these issues have been raised before, though infrequently by anthropologists specializing in the Arunta. One post-war exception was W. E. H. Stanner, who worked in the 1950s and '60s amongst the Aborigines of northern and central Australia (see also Hiatt 1996). Howard Morphy, a younger scholar in Australian ethnography, raises the question of ethnography and theory in Durkheim's approach to the data he had available (see Chapter 1). It is not so much a matter of error or false deduction that distances the theorist from the ethnographers, Spencer and Gillen, as one of emphasis. For example, Durkheim saw totemism and religion as being more important than magic for the upholding of social solidarity. In his concept of religion he made a clear differentiation between the sacred and the profane, and indeed postulates them as a universal socio-religious characteristic. Not so for Spencer and Gillen. They accepted the notion of the sacred and the profane but held that it had great variations and related to a person's life-cycle and to seasonal activities. The older a man, the more sacred he was seen to be. Nor is the separation between the sacred and the profane as rigid in Spencer and Gillen as it was in Durkheim. Durkheim associated totemism with social organization: the clan was seen as a socially tight group, something Spencer and Gillen did not suggest. They showed a more complex relation between the clan and social organization. Totems went across territorial organization. Durkheim reified the clan in the way the ethnographers did not. Further, his lack of attention to Aboriginal myths, songs and dances excluded a fruitful area which became overlooked by scholars (see also Chapter 13).

Do these and other criticisms of a similar ilk nullify the 'experiment'? Here scholars remain divided. No one would see *The Elementary Forms* fit only for the wastepaper basket. The book remains a classic, not so much on account of the rigour of its scientific method but because of the imaginative and penetrating ideas it contained, and which were later verified. Morphy argues that *The Elementary Forms* is not dependent on the ethnography for its merits.

Arising from the publication of *Les Formes élémentaires* and also within a somewhat wider debate, was the question of whether 'primitive peoples', as they were then termed, exhibited a mentality far from that of modern, western man, which might be called 'prelogical'. If it could be demonstrated that those tribes to which Durkheim referred had a mentality that both preceded and was radically different from that of modern, rational man, then doubts might be raised about our understanding of the religion of man in preliterate societies. If early man possessed quite a different mentality, would our established 'scientific' deductions about religion and its evolution, extending to mankind today, be wrong? Hence the debate about the mentality of preliterate man

was, in at least one respect, of considerable importance to Durkheim's enterprise. His deductions would be invalid if they were held to be inapplicable to modern man. Lévy-Bruhl, standing just outside the Durkheim circle, had in 1911 posited the idea of a prelogical mentality, maintaining a clear distinction between the thinking abilities of primitive man and those of modern man. For various reasons, one of which we have just mentioned, Durkheim attacked this position in a review and opposed the notion of a sharp and distinctive break in the development of man's mentality (1913a(ii)(6) and (7)). Rather than positing discontinuity, Durkheim argued in terms of a gradual evolution. But there was another type of evolution. The nature of religion was such that it gave birth to science. Science gained its autonomy to the degree it was able to sever itself from the religious womb and leave dogma behind. There was, however, no decisive break or sudden emergence, the birth was a long and gradual process.

The debate, heightened by the ideas of Lévy-Bruhl and Durkheim, was to continue, and the outcome has never been clearly resolved, although Lévy-Bruhl supposedly changed his mind. There is little doubt that he did change his mind, the problem is over what? Nomenclature or substance? Certainly Lévy-Bruhl can be applauded for attempting to explore the particular 'logic' of preliterate societies. The contest with Durkheim was far from useless (Merlié in Chapter 2).

Durkheim's commitment to science in terms of its method and its ability to deliver 'truth' – something absent from other human activities – is, hardly surprisingly, not without its problems. When he was at the Ecole Normale Supérieure as a student he was very much the young philosopher who was nicknamed the 'Metaphysician'. To be sure, he quickly asserted that a great deal of the philosophy taught in his days was dilettantism. How, then, did he become so committed to science? In this it would appear that he was much influenced by one of his teachers, Emile Boutroux, a philosopher and especially a philosopher of science, who is not much known in the English-speaking world (Jones in Chapter 3). Two problems engaged the men – the nature of science and whether there can be a science of religion. Durkheim followed Boutroux's thinking in holding that in any science one set of phenomena had to be explained by another set within the orbit of that science; for example, electrical facts are to be explained by electrical facts. But what of social facts? They were to be 'explained' by other social facts. And more pertinently, what of religious facts? Here the two men differed. Surely religious facts would have to be explained by religious facts? Events showed this was not acceptable to Durkheim. Boutroux, a Catholic modernist, felt that a science of religion was a contradiction in terms, because such a science would dissolve the very material the scientist was studying. This point Durkheim never responded to.

II

Every religion contains a belief system – intellectual ideas, a credo or a set of doctrines. They may not be coherent or systematized in the eyes of

modern, western thinkers but they exist, and it is impossible to imagine a religion without them. To rational-minded thinkers beliefs are usually held to be the most important element of a religion. It is argued that action emerges from thought, and so thought is prior. Belief is the means by which a religion is communicated to others. Through it religion is comprehensible to an observer.

The prime issue which faced rationalists, and amongst them one would initially place Durkheim, was that of the truth of religious beliefs. No thorough-going rationalist could accept the proclaimed truth of any religion, let alone that in which they found themselves, namely Christianity. They were atheists or agnostics and that was certainly Durkheim's position religiously speaking. But for him, and here he differed from other rationalists, it did not mean that religious beliefs were illusory. He calmly proclaimed 'there are no false religions' (3/3). If they were completely false, they would quickly dissolve. Truth persists: the lie disappears. Durkheim holds that the 'truth' of religious beliefs is that they are socially effective and constitute part of the social reality that is the subject matter of sociology. There is a parallel here in the approach of William James to religion – a parallel however which also has sharp divergences (Stedman Jones in Chapter 4). Durkheim went beyond James' pragmatism (Durkheim 1955a). It was not just a question of their being '*true practically*' (113/80. Durkheim's emphasis), but that religious beliefs, even of preliterate peoples, revealed in their own way certain truths about the human condition in its social and individual modes.

But the question arises, what exactly did Durkheim mean by religious belief and how was it to be distinguished from other beliefs? Religious belief relates to the 'otherworldly', to God or the gods, and is deemed to be sacred but is expressed in terms of this world. In order to explore the idea what Durkheim emphasized was not so much individual beliefs but collective beliefs. Many of these ideas can be traced back to Kant, who held that religious belief was not of the order of pure reason but of practical reason, that is, while failing to satisfy the canons of logic, it is necessary for human living. But Durkheim goes further and asserts that gods and the sacred are not only the objects of belief but that they become such through belief. Some support for this comes from Renouvier, whom Durkheim recognized as an influence on his own thinking. Renouvier, while praising Kant for his analysis of religious belief, criticized him for leaving belief suspended in a void. Durkheim would seem to provide an answer in positing that beliefs spring from the community and through individuals return to the community by which they are reinforced.

There has been widespread neglect of Durkheim's discussion of ideas of the soul. Perhaps this is because the subject seems of purely academic interest, with little bearing on contemporary issues. But his treatment of the idea of the soul has recently been explored by Karen Fields (1995; 1996; and see Chapter 7 of this book). Watts Miller also enters this deserted area in examining Durkheim's general interpretative strategy in dealing with particular religious beliefs and in considering their modern secular substitutes (see Chapter 5). Durkheim opposes the view that ideas of the soul are nonsense

and illusion. He first tries to make sense of them as ritual beliefs and a subsidiary move allows for their metaphorical expression in story-like myths. It is only then that he interprets beliefs as a more or less obscure social symbolism, in which, for example, the idea of the soul represents the individual's membership of an enduring group.

Can modern society dispense with the immortal soul and God? Kant insists it is necessary to believe in them, as postulates required by any coherent understanding of morality. Durkheim, in his engagement with Kant, is more sensitive than philosophers of today are to the dangers of secularization. Watts Miller argues that it is particularly disastrous if, in giving up the soul, we fall back on a highly individualistic idea of the self, so completely annihilated at death that it cannot have post-mortal concerns. We need a Durkheimian 'organic' self to have, as mortality requires, a commitment in our lives to concerns that go beyond us and to ideals that may never be realized until long after death. This is different from abandoning God – the one 'religious' belief so many people in our secular world continue to hold. God might be a Durkheimian symbol of society, man and the moral dualism of duty and the good. This still leaves out a wider cosmological function. But also, Watts Miller argues, it is precisely as a symbol of the good – in the Kantian sense of all the happiness consistent with virtue – that God does not and cannot have a secular substitute.

A set of beliefs may not consist of logically related statements, and indeed beliefs may not be expressed intellectually. Particular beliefs may be held in myths or in physical objects – in short through symbols. Such a position seems most applicable to preliterate societies. Here stands the pioneering work of Durkheim and the claim could well be made for Durkheim as the father of the sociological study of symbolism. His unshakeable stand was that if the literal content of religious beliefs cannot be accepted as 'truth', other truths can be postulated which are hidden or implied, apart from the general assertion that they are part of the social reality. These hidden meanings often relate to things, objects, actions, events, be they sacred or otherwise. The hidden meanings have to be communicated and interpreted.

Probably the most profound and extensively debated part of *Les Formes élémentaires* is Chapter VII of Book II, which is Durkheim's final consideration of the origin of totemic beliefs. In it symbol or image as a key concept stand between knowledge and religion, between intellectual proposition and worship. One of Durkheim's much quoted assertions is that 'social life, in all its aspects and at every moment of its history, is made possible only by a vast symbolism' (331/231). A problem that calls for exploration is why a society needs to have symbols in order to be a society. In trying to answer this question, Durkheim holds that a symbol has properties of materiality and represents a sets of ideas. He points to a flag, but in referring to a flag with contemporary connotations he opened up an area of controversy. In a symbol there exists a relation between reality, image and observer, which in turn is related to the individual and to society. Paoletti argues that rules about symbolic images follow rules about social facts as Durkheim conceived them in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895a) (see Chapter 6).

While concentrating on the 'well carried out experiment', and always basing his argument on ethnographic material, Durkheim not only suggests generalizations but links his findings to examples current in his day. If Durkheim did this, it seems legitimate for those who follow him to apply his ideas to the contemporary scene. Thus, it might be argued that the notion of the clan and the soul help us to understand modern social formations, not least in marginal groups, such as ethnic groups and new social movements, whose ideology and practice have certain affinities with early societies. Indeed, Thompson holds that one way of reading *Les Formes élémentaires* is seeing it as a contribution to the theory of ideology. Ideology acts in a such a way as to produce or reproduce social order largely through the agency of symbolic representation (see Chapter 7). Amongst marginal groups in a post-modern setting, as it is called, body-symbolism may well play an important part as an individual appropriates collective symbolism. Once again Durkheim showed himself to be a pioneer in developing a sociology of the body in his analysis of tattooing amongst the Arunta. But tattooing is making its reappearance in today's marginal groups which are highly dependent on symbolism and here Durkheim's analysis is helpful in accounting for such trends.

III

If religious belief is not illusory but is to be regarded in a positive way as being 'true' for society, indeed necessary, then surely the same thing is to be said for the other side of the religious coin, namely ritual. It is indeed the other side of the coin, not least because Durkheim defined religion in terms of 'a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things' (65/47). The question of the relation of belief and action and their relative importance or primacy, is one of continual debate, as is evident in several of the essays of this book (e.g. Chapter 4). It raises problems of logic, history, and anthropological evidence.

To the observer, ritual *per se* is not causally effective or instrumental, as believers would assert; but neither in Durkheimian thought is it valueless or wasted action. Like belief, its real virtue is perceived by the 'scientist' to be in its value to society. In utilizing the ethnographic material from the Arunta for an analysis of ritual, Durkheim surpassed any other thinker who preceded him. One result was that he created an ideal which others have attempted to follow, if not emulate.

How then is ritual to be studied if scholars either deny its literal virtue as asserted by believers, or assume its irrelevance? We have just said that it is in its relation to the collective. One British anthropologist, Radcliffe-Brown, supposedly basing his reasoning on Durkheim, adopted a functional account, in which ritual was seen to be an expression of the unity of society (Radcliffe-Brown 1933). But not only does it express this unity it helps to create it (Ruel, Chapter 8). The weakness of Radcliffe-Brown's position, which was to become very influential, is that he did not really differentiate ritual from, on the one hand, religion or, on the other, religious belief. Indeed, belief plays a

very secondary role in his analysis, which is not the case in Durkheim. Evans-Pritchard, while adopting a symbolic stance, held that one must take into consideration the beliefs of the participants in any interpretation of ritual. The point is that religious action cannot be separated from belief. This is all the more necessary where it is not a question of the analysis of one ritual but of a system of interlocking rituals. Durkheim emphasized that rituals are actions supported by tradition and authority, and therefore by belief. What is of importance is that they exert a force and beyond that, Malcolm Ruel argues, generalizations cannot be made. What is more important is to relate a ritual to its associated objects and to see the place of ritual in particular societies. At least Durkheim stressed one methodological canon – the necessity of focusing on ritual in a specific society or culture.

Amongst religious rituals perhaps none is more complicated or open to different interpretations than sacrifice. It is commonly found in a large number of religions, be the sacrifice a bloody one involving animals or a spiritualized form of sacrifice as in Christianity. Durkheim devoted a whole chapter to the *Intichiuma*, the ‘sacrifice’ of the Arunta (Book III, Ch.II). It should be noted in passing that many today, such as Testart, the French anthropologist, deny that the Australian ritual is a sacrifice in the true sense of the word. However, the debate which was raging in Durkheim’s time was fuelled by what he said about the intention of the sacrifice. Robertson Smith’s writing changed Durkheim’s attitude towards religion and encouraged him to see it as the *fons et origo* of society (see Pickering 1984:62ff.). Durkheim is also said to have followed Robertson Smith’s radical theory of sacrifice in holding that sacrifice is a communal meal at which one eats the deity or with the deity. But also present in *Les Formes élémentaires* is the theory of sacrifice as gift and consecration. Much evidence shows that Durkheim’s final theory of sacrifice was influenced by the theories of the Indologist, Sylvain Lévi, a relatively little known scholar in Britain or the United States. Lévi’s ideas were taken up by Durkheim through his disciples, Hubert and Mauss (Strenski in Chapter 9).

If a religion needs to recall past events through myth and ritual, so does a society. This is very much the message of *Les Formes élémentaires*, where certain conclusions derived from studying the Arunta may be seen to be applicable to modern, western society – a society no longer based on a religious belief system. As we have noted, Durkheim gave little place to myth in his use of Australian ethnography. With the cult of the individual, which he held was the secular religion of modern society, myth also plays little or no part, and that is what is evident in what Durkheim wrote about the cult of the individual. Indeed, can there be a myth within such a religion? Perhaps it is more fruitful to turn to the notion of social memory, for it stands at the heart of a society’s system of rituals. The notion of the social memory is strongly evident in Durkheim and was later developed by his disciple, Maurice Halbwachs. Social memory, it can be argued, is the best way of interpreting Durkheim’s social theory (Gephart in Chapter 10). The unity of a society is closely connected with its collective memory which guarantees social identity. But this memory is dependent on organization and on collective symbols which need to be ritualized. One problem of modern, western societies is

how to ritualize its changing social memory – changed through historical events. How does one ‘successfully’ hold a celebratory ritual for, say, the French Revolution, the founding of a city, the end of Communist rule? How is one to recall the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes? Different and perhaps hostile interpretations of great historical events emerge, even in one society. Probably no such attempt is more problematic than in finding an adequate ritual which recalls the Holocaust. It is to be remembered: but how is it to be remembered? Does uncertainty or various readings of past events mean no rituals are possible and therefore the social memory fades?

Much overlooked by traditional commentators is the concept of collective effervescence or collective assembly. It is held to be a *sui generis* experience or event and is analysed in creative and ritualistic terms. The nature of the phenomenon was such that it did not fit into a sociological framework and its ‘explanation’ was better suited to psychology. But its significance sociologically is now being understood. Excitable gatherings, regularly convened or otherwise, heighten people’s passions and energies. Role reversals may take place: moral norms may be deliberately broken. In the delirium unimagined actions may occur and radical ideas emerge. A revolution or a period of revolution, or a national crisis, exemplified in the Dreyfus Affair (Durkheim 1898c), is very much an effervescent occasion. One general appraisal of effervescent assemblies is that of celebration and the creation of social cohesion, but it is also one of violence, suffering and differentiation (Ramp in Chapter 11). Unity and disunity co-exist, as creativity and destruction. There is a parallel with sacrifice in which there is controlled violence, not least in the slaying of the victim. Sometimes difficult to accept by contemporary religious thinkers is the fact that for a very long time there has been a violent side to religion. But it should be noted that the suffering and disunity produced by collective effervescence is never that of social chaos. Great effervescent happenings have to be remembered and this is achieved through ritual re-enactment (see also Chapter 13).

Durkheim held that all institutions stem from religion and in *Les Formes élémentaires* he attempted to analyse and derive the origin of religion itself. It can be argued, as Allen does, that by extension the book can shed light on the origin of society, despite the fact that it was written many years ago and that palaeoanthropology has made great advances since then. If it is held that human societies were originally quadripartite, which is arguably the simplest imaginable kinship-based structure and is exemplified by many Australian tribes, how is it that they have emerged, since such holistic structures are absent among non-human primates? The key is to be found in collective effervescence as the locus *par excellence* of human and social creativity (see Chapter 12).

IV

Durkheim never really lost his love for philosophy, although he distanced his cherished sociology from it in order to give the new discipline its autonomy. His brand of sociology was always close to philosophy, however,

in a way that that of Max Weber was not. Removed from it also was the empirical sociology that later developed in the English-speaking world. Durkheim's interest turned full circle, for in *The Elementary Forms* he goes so far as to assert that sociology can solve at least two age-old philosophical problems. One question was concerned with epistemology. From where does man gain knowledge, what are its origins? Here Durkheim established a close link with the social, for knowledge is socially mediated. And in origin, the social was in fact religious, since the two were scarcely separable. Another issue was the problem of categories. From whence come the basic categories – concepts of number, class, space, time? Between the a priori and empiricist arguments, Durkheim postulated that the origin of categories again lay in society, in social causes. Both these solutions implied relativism and a denial of absolutes, since societies vary one from another in the matter of specific categories.

Némédi in seeing a weakness in Durkheim's arguments holds that in searching for the origin of religious categories Durkheim adopted contradictory approaches (see Chapter 13). He first focused on religious institutions as the observable side of religion, but then he had to go beyond practices to an initial state – to an original beginning. Durkheim's epistemological position is unsatisfactory because he sees religion as being at the heart of knowledge and indeed the seed-bed of categories. Earlier, in 1903, Durkheim and Mauss' essay on primitive classification showed the connection between social institutions and classification, but by 1912, it has been argued, Durkheim felt forced to focus on religion by itself as the key to the origin of categories (see also Pickering 1993).

Némédi asserts that Durkheim posited three concepts which had categorical status – sacred–profane, impersonal force (mana) and soul. Was Durkheim not too ambitious in thinking that a study of religion could provide the key to a multitude of social issues? Durkheim's book contained flaws of several kinds, including the assertion that religion is the centre of the understanding of society. He juggled with institutionalization but was forced to turn to creative effervescence, which can in no way be regarded as a theory of change. Indeed, attractive though it may be, collective effervescence has little to commend it in terms of theory or epistemology. Although Némédi's views on collective effervescence may be contrary to those of many Durkheimians, he poses a problem which will not go away. In itself effervescent assembly is difficult to accommodate in a general theory of society, even though it can be classified as a social phenomenon.

Plenty of scholars have turned against Durkheim's relativist sociological solution to the origins of categories. It can be shown in a new analysis that the notion of category in Durkheim's hands contains an ambiguity and assumes an essentialist model of explanation which combines causal and functional accounts and denies the plurality of causes (Schmaus in Chapter 14). What vary with social causes are not categories but classificatory concepts – ways of representing time, space and causality. If categories are necessary for the existence of society they must be the same for all societies. Indeed, all societies have categories of time and space, etc. but each can have different

measurements of time and of space. In this way, Durkheim's relativism can be challenged.

If all knowledge is in fact relative and there are no absolutes, no universals, how can one hope to establish universal truths? There are only truths which exist for certain societies and cultures. Is there nothing which can be an exception to this rule? One possibility is the law of non-contradiction or the principle of contradiction in the language of Aristotle. It stands at the heart of all reason and knowledge. Whether Durkheim held that the law of contradiction was subject to relativism is open to debate. One author here considers the possibility that Durkheim is an undaunted relativist and that the basic canon of logic is context-dependent – dependent on social structure (Godlove in Chapter 15). Durkheim's relativism at this point is in terms of a religious person speaking of God as one and many. Godlove relates the problem to several thinkers such as Russell, and Bloor and Barnes and puts forward the thesis that it is useless trying to demonstrate precisely why we must conform to the principle of contradiction.

These chapters provide examples of Durkheim's ideas where in some instances the authors not only revise and go beyond them but show the importance of grappling with his thought at the most fundamental level.

W. S. F. P.

Notes

- 1 For this type of referencing to *Les Formes élémentaires*, see Explanatory Note on p. xi.