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Durkheim on Original and Aboriginal Religion

Issues of Method

When Émile Durkheim wrote of the *formes élémentaires* of religion, he was not writing about the origins of religion, as did so many of his contemporaries, from E. B. Tylor to James George Frazer. Rather, drawing on the work of some perhaps unlikely predecessors, chief among them Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Durkheim built a theory of religion that ought to have disallowed the question of origins altogether. For, if religion is a reflection and an integral part of society itself, how could we even imagine a human society existing before the emergence of religion? This article revisits Durkheim's seminal work on Australian Aboriginal religion in light of this basic feature of his theory and questions whether Durkheim was able, ultimately, to avoid the thorny question of the origin of religion.

By deploying the term *élémentaire* in the title of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, it would appear Émile Durkheim had written a book

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about "the origins of religion."[1] But appearances can be deceptive because Durkheim was openly cagey about quests for elusive, far-distant beginnings. We often forget that Durkheim began his work with penetrating critiques of "origins theorists"—Edward Tylor, Herbert Spencer, Friedrich Max Müller, James George Frazer and their like—and that when he began considering Australian Aboriginal religion (which occupies him for most of the book) he states right from the start the limitations of his historical perspective.

> It is not our intention to retrace all the speculations into which religious thought, even of the Australians alone, has run … there is no need to follow them through all their development. (101)

When Durkheim, after five crucial chapters on totemism (bk. 1, ch. 4; bk. 2, chs. 1–4), entitles his three following chapters (bk. 2, chs. 5–7) on "The Origin of these Beliefs," we are not to presume he means any deep-chronological commencement of them.

In addressing his predecessors in the book, we acknowledge, Durkheim raises many substantive points of a general conceptual nature. How can Tylor's (albeit "classic") definition of religion as "the belief in Spiritual Beings" stand up, when ("southern") Buddhists have no deity and treat the Buddha as a man? and why should the exclusive stress be on beliefs, when rites are just as important? (29–33). If Spencer held that the experience of ghosts gave impetus to beliefs about souls (and thus "animism"), and reckoned this inference better accounted for religion's commencement than Tylor's notion of seeing doubles in water and dreams, why accept either explanation? (50–54) Spencer's theory of a transformation of "the cult of the ancestors" into a universal worship of nature or "naturism" simply had "no psychical mechanism necessitating it" (54–55), and might we not say, since "they reappear periodically" (in China, Egypt, Greece and Rome), that cults of the dead are not "primitive" (in a chronological sense) after all (63–64)? As for Max Müller's

[1] A trap too easily fallen into by Robert Nisbet, "Introduction," in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 2nd ed., by Émile Durkheim, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: Allen & Unwin, 1976), viii. I will use Swain's translation of *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse: le système totémique en Australie* (Paris: Libraire Félix Alcan, 1912), almost exclusively paginating Swain in the text hereafter, rather than the new translations by Karen E. Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995) and by Carol Cosman (with edited abridgement by Mark S. Cladis [Oxford World Classics] Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), because readers will have more immediate access to Swain's rendition and it has stood the test of time (see the 2008 Dover reprint).

different form of "naturism," that gods and their names multiplied from extra meanings given to words denoting simple actions, because of humanity's perplexities towards "marvellous forces" in its response to "the infinite" (71, 75), Durkheim once again worries about the cogency of the case. He concedes "that men have an interest in knowing the world which surrounds them and consequently that their reflection should have applied to it at an early date" (79), but (as with Müller himself) that is not saying anything about palaeolithic possibilities. And he resiles from the Müllerian postulate that earlier religious changes towards anthropomorphism (and myths illustrating these shifts) resulted from a "disease of language," because he cannot abide the idea of humans being that "slow to perceive … a false route" (80–81). In any case, the practicalities not just the words and notions of religion have to be attended to for a preferred understanding of mutations. Regarding Frazer on magic preceding religion, moreover, he took the theory to "presuppose a thoroughgoing idiocy on the part of the primitive that known facts do not allow us to attribute to him. He does have a logic, however strange it may at times appear," yet it is not one by which he would remain entranced by the spells and alleged effects of a clever magician, who could *inter alia* trick people to trust "a personal totem" for protection in danger (172–73). Magic always stays alongside religion, and Frazer had failed to realize that it has no "church" (*église*) or power of social cohesion by itself (44).

At least Durkheim takes the challenge of these predecessors seriously. Unfortunately, but perhaps predictably, he was not as ready to admit that they all anticipated his own work in various ways. Of the four just considered, he seems most respectful to the man he began with, pioneering anthropologist Tylor, whose definition remains a "classic" and "whose authority is always great" (55). But there is a strange silence over the fact that Spencer, who could surely lay claim to be the pioneer sociologist of comparative religion,[2] was first to bring "structural" and "functional" analyses of culture into a binary togetherness.[3] Müller is treated as a theorist of origins comparable to Tylor, Spencer and Frazer, it would seem, when instead Müller used a strict historical method that disallowed conjectures about far-distant ori-

[2] Garry Trompf, "The Origins of the Comparative Study of Religion" (Masters thesis, Monash University, 1967), ch. 3. Cf. Émile Durkheim, "De la définition des phenomènes religieux," *L'Année Sociologique* 2 (1899): esp. 10–11 treating Buddhism and Jainism together.

[3] See Herbert Spencer, *Types of Lowest Races, Negritto Races, and Malayo-Polynesian Races*, vol. 1, bk. 3 of *Descriptive Sociology or Groups of Sociological Facts* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1874), tables 1–17.

gins without "real facts" (such as ancient words) and had a dislike of reading humanity's first ancestors as "savages."[4] Durkheim takes Frazer to belong to the (British) "anthropological school" (357), yet while he did come to hold a chair in social anthropology (at the University of Liverpool, 1907–08), he was above all a classicist and a special protagonist for comparative religion, as the sub-title of the 1890 edition of *The Golden Bough* clearly shows. He completed not-unimpressive comparative studies in the religions of Oceania barely responded to by Durkheim, and it is arguable that Frazer used the same sources as Durkheim less polemically, and with more astute observations about the integral relationships between belief, rite and society.[5]

Be Durkheim's special criticisms as they may, and these signs of unfairness accompanying them, they all turn out to be secondary matters beside his key, persistent, and estimable concern to establish a sound sociological method, one that avoids stressing evolutionary theories of human and social development while accommodating all imaginable possibilities of "social evolution," and one downplaying the psychological causation of social phenomena for the independence of "collective life" as a body of "social facts" necessary to account for the nature, continuities and changes of human activity. Thus in Durkheim's assessment, Tylor, Spencer, Müller and Frazer were offering "psychological" explanations for the origins of religion, just as his own great French predecessor Auguste Comte, who supposed that there was an instinct for betterment or progress in every individual and in the whole human race as "a germ from its primordiality." Once a certain psychological attitude insinuated itself, religious developments would follow according to a logic of evolution (inevitably deduced by hindsight). In Spencer's case, as with Comte before him, a general psychological principle or "motivating force" apparently urged humans to "greater happiness," an axiom Durkheim found quite unconvincing when he looked at the outcomes of modern industrial society; and it would be far too simplistic for him to accept the Frazerian assumption that "human progress or development has been steady and con-

[4] Garry Trompf, *Friedrich Max Mueller as a Theorist of Comparative Religion* (Bombay: Shakuntala, 1978), 64–72.

[5] Frazer's *Golden Bough* was subtitled: *A Study in Comparative Religion*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1890). See also his *Totemism and Exogamy: A Treatise of Certain Early Forms of Superstition and Society*, 4 vols. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1910) and *The Belief among the Aborigines of Australia, the Torres Strait Islands, New Guinea and Melanesia (Gifford Lectures, 1911–12)*, vol. 1 of *The Belief in Immortality and the Worship of the Dead* (London: Macmillan, 1913).

tinuous" from the time "primitive man" had sets of comparable ideas across the board and a "*prevalence* of similar institutions."[6]

We could agree that the theorists Durkheim seeks to better in his *Elementary Forms* are all "developmentalist" thinkers, or in one way or another "cultural evolutionists." As suggested at the beginning, then, surely Durkheim has to mean that simpler religious life precedes more complex expressions of it, and that the latter would be the product of an evolving process? Supposing this to be the case might explain why some commentators readily fall into the furrow of giving him an "evolutionary perspective," as one "preoccupied with discerning the origins of religion."[7] After all, in the first number of the journal he founded, *L'Année sociologique* (1898–), he thought it appropriate to consider Josef Kohler's recent ideas about the beginnings of marriage (in *Zur Urgeschichte der Ehe*), and thereafter give "a yearly survey of the literature on all phases of civilization."[8] While Durkheim never turned his back on the developments of history, however, and the passages of change in every society, including "the very different forms of civilization" in the French experience, his methodology is distinctive precisely for its opposition to the (Darwino-)Spencerian paradigm, and for pitching a steadiness of "social structure" against adaptive mechanisms of change as "the model" for understanding the religious past.[9]

Thus it was, as I have called it elsewhere,[10] that Durkheim invented "a cunning device" of sociological method to avoid speculations about beginnings and eschew explaining the social facts of religion by starting from its

[6] Durkheim, especially *The Rules of Sociological Method*, ed. George E. G. Catlin, trans. Sarah A. Solovay and John H. Mueller (New York: The Free Press of Glencoe, 1964), 98–113; cf. *De la division du travail social* (Paris: Librairie Félix Alcan, 1922), bk. 3, ch. 1. Cf. Auguste Comte, *Cours de philosophie positive* (Paris: Bachelier, 1830–42), 4, lectures 40–45; Herbert Spencer, *Social Statics*, Abridged and revised ed. (London: Williams & Norgate, 1892), 7–10, 123; Frazer, letter to Henry Jackson 22 August 1888, quoted in Robert Ackerman, *J. G. Frazer: His Life and Work* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 88–89.

[7] Brian Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion: An Introductory Text* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 114.

[8] Josef Kohler, *Zur Urgeschichte der Ehe: Totemismus, Gruppenehe, Mutterrecht* (Stuttgart, 1897); cf. Robert H. Lowie, *The History of Ethnological Theory* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1937), 197.

[9] E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, Sir D. Owen Evans Lectures (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1965), 58; see also Marvin Harris, *The Rise of Anthropological Theory: A History of Theories of Culture* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co., 1968), ch. 18.

[10] *In Search of Origins: The Beginnings of Religion in Western Theory and Archaeological Practice*, Studies in World Religions 1 (Slough: New Dawn Press, 2005), 101.

supposed or inferred "first nature." Rather than agonizing over "the old problem of the origin of religion," following an urge to conjecture about the misty past that "has nothing scientific about it, and should be resolutely discarded," he sought to establish what religion was and *always* had been. His business was to isolate "the *ever-present* causes upon which the most essential forms of religious thought and practice depend" (20). Although it is not inappropriate to arrange religions hierarchically, showing how some "where superior," or perhaps "richer in ideas and sentiments" than others, the linear-evolutionary plotting of them commits the investigator to an arbitrary chronologic placement and an unscientific principle of causality. All religions, in Durkheim's methodological readjustment, whether primitive, barbarous or civilized, apparently "respond to the same needs, play the same role, and depend on the same causes" (15).[11] They therefore should all conform to his preferred definition of religion as "a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things" and "unified into one single moral community called a church" (*église*, a term deployed generically to convey cult and group life) (47).[12] Sociology is about establishing "social facts" with this kind of stability, their characteristics being durable independently of changing circumstances and mental developments.[13]

What were the sources of this special reorientation? From Durkheim's investigation of others' field research (for he himself had no living experience of cultures outside Europe), or prior social theory? More the latter, apparently, and from what many might have thought was an unlikely source: Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Pre-Revolutionary *philosophe* Rousseau, it turns out, "was one of Durkheim's cultural heroes," and, along with Montesquieu, rated a crucial *précurseur de sociologie*.[14] He read these two as suggesting "a method

[11] Here, however, modifying Swain's translation.

[12] See also Durkheim, "De la définition des phenomènes religieux," 15. The usage *église* is idiosyncratic and not picked up in learned literature; cf. Littré's *Dictionnaire de la langue française* (1962), vol. 3, pp. 512–13. One suspects he made the unusual choice because for him the terms *culte* (*à la* his teacher N. D. Fustel de Coulanges, see *The Ancient City: A Study on the Religion, Laws and Institutions of Greece and Rome*, trans. Willard Small (1873; Garden City: Doubleday & Anchor, 1956), bk. 1, chs. 2–4) and *congrégation* (perhaps also the Hebrew equivalent *qahal* from his own Jewish background) did not convey the double meaning of both cultic and group life like *église* did. Cf. also Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion*, 57.

[13] Durkheim, *Rules of Sociological Method*, esp. chs. 1, 5–6.

[14] Robert Bierstedt, *Émile Durkheim* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1966), 27.

appropriate to the nature of things studied" in "social science," so that for Montesquieu on law and for Rousseau on politics "things … have a stable nature of their own and are able to resist the human will." For if a single will could change society (and Durkheim would deny it could, here concurring with his Russian contemporaries Tolstoy and Plekhanov, who were more famous on the matter),[15] and if society was to be read merely as the sum of individuals comprising it, one would be left with "psychology, not social science."[16] In Rousseau particularly, moreover, Durkheim finds a foil to those who, like Comte, are bent on establishing "a series of societies" in chronological sequence, when they should have been considering the nature of society generally. The nature of society is indirectly discovered by Rousseau because he was so concerned with "the state of nature," which preceded our social state. Far from being some "reverie" about some Edenic "golden age," Durkheim takes Rousseau's state of nature to be "a methodological device," to distinguish the human who is "free" in "the perfect balance between his needs and the resources at his disposal … in his immediate physical environment," from the time when civility and contractual obligations, agriculture, metallurgy, the division of labour, property and the rules of justice were first laid down.[17] Rousseau thus detected "the germ of social existence inherent in the state of nature," and recognized "natural causes" that led from one state to the other, produced by "an element of stability" that marked the difference between human and animal. But this did "not make society a natural phenomenon;" social conventions are artificial and "'manifestly contrary to the law of nature'," and a "society is 'a moral entity having specific qualities distinct from those of the individual beings which compose it'," like "chemical compounds with properties owing nothing to their elements."[18] Rousseau inspired a theory of social solidity, and the chemical analogy that came to

[15] Leo Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, trans. Anon., vol. 2 (London: Dent, 1957), bk. 9, ch. 60; G. V. Plekhanov [= A. Kirsanov], *The Role of the Individual in History*, trans. J. Fineberg (1898; London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1940)

[16] Émile Durkheim, *Montesquieu and Rousseau: Forerunners of Sociology*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1960), 12–13.

[17] ibid., 69–70, 78, cf. 60; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine de l'inégalité*, vol. 2 (1753; Paris: Flammarion, 1938), 125–41.

[18] Durkheim, *Montesquieu and Rousseau*, 81–82, 84, 86, 90; cf. Rousseau, *Manuscrit de Genève*, in *Du contrat social, édition comprenant avec le texte définitif les versions primitives de l'ouvrage collationnées sur les manuscrits autographes de Genève et de Neuchâtel*, ed. Edmond Dreyfus-Brisac (Paris: F. Alcan, 1896), 249; Rousseau, *Discours*, 117–19.

mind complemented the Durkheimian view that traditional, simpler societies hold together in a "mechanical" solidarity, not as a malleable "organic" growth.[19]

Whether Durkheim read Rousseau correctly is one matter for debate. As a methodological device, it was not necessary that Rousseau's state of nature ever existed, so long as the point about the difference between the natural and social had been made. In fact Durkheim apparently misread the *Discours sur l'origines de l'inégalité*: as Claude Lévi-Strauss was quick to point out (to his own advantage) there was ambiguity about the original state of savagery—it had touches of wretchedness that have been neglected, even though, like a germ indeed, "social virtues … were dwelling eternally (*éternellement*) in the primitive condition"—while "the *époque* happiest and most lasting (*durable*), … the best for Man," was *between* savagery and civilization, which logically Durkheim would have called barbarian, when the "terror of revenge" patterns were put under control and the first experiments in social organization began.[20] This is the long time of what we would call traditional societies, connected by Rousseau to a happy pastoral village life under an earlier "aristocratic" governance of "simple peoples," the kind of passing societies Lévi-Strauss was nostalgic about in his *Tristes tropiques* because they were threatened by urbanization and grand-scale agriculture.[21] Another debatable matter is whether Durkheim drew the right conclusions about social existence from the exposition he found in Rousseau. Society came to dwell *éternellement* among humans, just as—according to the Swiss *philosophe*—the state of nature had, yet this meant circumventing the Rousseauan stress on the continual "forming and changing" of political forms because "for every indi-

[19] Ronald Fletcher, *The Making of Sociology: A Study of Sociological Theory*, vol. 1 (London: M. Joseph, 1971), 360–61.

[20] Rousseau, *Discours*, 117–19; *Essai sur l'origines des langues*, ed. Angèle Kremer-Marietti (1781; Aubier Montaigne, 1974), ch. 9 (on these "barbaric times"); *Contrat social*, III, 5; and see I, 6; Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur les sciences et des arts* (1750; Paris: Flammarion), I, 11; Rousseau, *Contrat social*, 248 (ambiguities on savagery); Cf. David Pace, *Claude Lévi-Strauss: The Bearer of Ashes* (Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), 70; Garry Trompf, *From the Later Renaissance to the Dawn of the Third Millennium*, vol. 2 of *The Idea of Historical Recurrence in Western Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, forthcoming), ch. 7, sect. 4; and see Durkheim, *Montesquieu and Rousseau*, 35, 72 for the savagery-barbarism distinction.

[21] *Tristes tropiques*, Terre humaine (1955; Paris: Plon, 2009). The whole matter is discussed by Trompf in "Klod Levi-Stross o Proischoshdenii Religii [Claude Lévi-Strauss on the Origins of Religion]," in *Rasznoobrazie i Identichioste*, ed. Vladimir I. Ionesov and Garry Trompf (Samara: Samara State Academy of Culture & Arts, 2010), 170–82.

vidual who tries to stabilize them, a hundred do their best to destroy them."[22] On the other hand, since Rousseau also gave recognition of the body politic (whatever its constitutional form) as a body in its own right, Durkheim saw in this the key to his own methodological insight, that each society "taken individually, may be regarded as a live, organized body, similar to that of a man," but transcending the individuals comprising it while at the same time determining and guiding their behaviour. Rousseau's paradigm of "the general will" becomes "the collective" and "homogeneous force" of a society itself, its own intrinsic "sovereignty" that has "to emanate from the entire people" for a society to work.[23]

Upon returning to *Elementary Forms*, therefore, it will be logical that the compass of religion is that of the whole society but in a special sense, and that this will be "a social fact," always remaining the case. As with "every other institution, there was no given moment when religion began to exist" (and thus no specific "original religion" to be conjectured), for religion responds to and encapsulates the transcendent power of society and constantly reaffirms society's collective force by a human hypostatization. Religion—humanity's beliefs, rites and other "manifestations of collective life"—actually turns out to be society worshipping itself, or individuals collectively responding to the social transcendence that directs their lives *qua* "imperative moral force." For societies to exist at all a "new set of psychical forces," or "collective effervescence," has to occur (naturally), and a society "must assemble and concentrate itself" through a set of "ideal conceptions" or "collective representations" that "individualize themselves" and proves to a people that it has "its own stamp" (xvi, 15, 208–9, 219, 221, 422–23). This makes religion absolutely integral to society, and of fundamental corporate significance, while at the same time apparently eliminating any preternatural causes, any "real experiences" of the numinous (as a Rudolf Otto might have insisted), but only collective "conceptual projections" (*réprésentations*) of what Ludwig Feuerbach had already said about God as the mere reflection of an individual's bigger, better, and higher self.[24] Whatever may be said in his defence about a recovered sense of

[22] Rousseau, *Contrat social*, 247; Durkheim, *Montesquieu and Rousseau*, 87.

[23] Ibid., esp. 83, 110–11, cf. 99; Rousseau, *Contrat social*, III, 1–11. Rousseau, though, is dealing with constitutions, not whole societies, cf. Garry Trompf, "The Untethering of Memory: On French Intellectuals responding to the Classical Theory of Political Cycles from Montesquieu to the Revolution," in *History and Memory*, ed. Robert Aldrich, French History and Civilization: Papers from the George Rudé Seminars 4 (Brisbane: George Rudé Society, 2011), 39–40.

[24] See Trompf, *In Search of Origins*, 51–54, 97–102, and on projection in Durkheim's con-

religion as "social reality" and as the discrete object of sociological research, Durkheim was inevitably reductionist: as a social scientist he made religion into something less than its participants would want it made out to be (if they were reflective enough, anyway), and a clear reduction in the eyes of scholars who sensed that, while definitely being social, the real object of religion was super-societal and bore an eternal irreducibility.[25]

Important and pressing questions remain, nonetheless, about Durkheim on both original and Aboriginal religion. For, *à propos* origins, was not Durkheim bound to aver that religion was there at the very dawn of human society, as *fons et origo* of morality and all the phenomena of collective life? Rousseau's "impossible" state of nature aside, and psychologistic imaginings of very beginnings rejected, yes, this much had to be true. It was almost inevitable, then, that he would still "try to get as near as possible to the origins" of things by isolating a thoroughly elementary social situation, and establish from it in the plainest manner of all what religion *really* was.[26] What better aim, then, than to "show that the role religion played for the most rudimentary society was the same for all societies. And which society did he choose as the most rudimental and proemial? None other, of course, than that of the Australian Aborigines, whose rites had been so patiently recorded by Baldwin Spencer and Frank Gillen," at least in their earliest book on the *Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899), and whose religious life had already generated a growing collection of other studies (with the names William Howitt, Carl Strehlow, Northcote Thomas, Wilhem Schmidt and indeed Frazer looming large as key authors).[27]

A number of special Durkheimian emphases about Aboriginal religion were all meant to exemplify the "elementary forms of religious life" in a

temporary Sigmund Freud, 90–91. The French word *projection* was overwhelmingly physical in connotation and use (Littré, vol. 6, 493), while its equivalent as collective conceptual representation was already in Rousseau (*Discours sur les sciences*, II). Cf. Philip C. Almond, *Rudolf Otto: An Introduction to his Philosophical Theology* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984); Eugene Kamenka, *The Philosophy of Ludwig Feuerbach* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970).

[25] Garry Trompf, "Religious Faith and Social Scientific Reductionism," in *Religion and the Social Sciences*, ed. Peter Forrest, Proceedings of the Social Science Seminar, University of New England, 14th June 1989 (Armidale: University of New England, 1990), 78–81.

[26] *Elementary Forms*, 20, cf. 236–38; cf. the programme in the Préface to *L'Année Sociologique* 2 (1899): iv.

[27] Trompf, *In Search of Origins*, 101; cf. *Elementary Forms*, esp. pt. II, ch. 5. Spencer and Gillen's first book also had an available sequel, *The Northern Tribes of Australia* (London: Macmillan, 1904).

broader sense. The most famous one lies in what he had to say about the *system of totemic ceremonies* called the *Intichiuma* among the Arunta (Arrernte) people of the central Australian desert, rites described in detail by Spencer the Professor of Biology at Melbourne and Gillen the sub-Protector of Aboriginals around Alice Springs. Each Arunta clan understood itself to acquire group solidarity through its allegiance to a totem, a species of animal or life-form (kangaroo, honey-ants, etc.) to which members believed the clan had blood relations and which were seriously prohibited to kill in hunting. In the *Intichiuma* ceremonies, however, clans would perform elaborate rites for the fertility and increase of their own totems, knowing full well that other clans could and would kill and eat these non-human "blood brothers" they nurtured. Now, no deity had been documented for the Arunta, and Durkheim saw great significance (partly spurred by Frazer's intuitions) that the object the *Intichiuma* was the totem. But for him this was not to confirm magic preceded religion (with its gods), but rather (and crucially) that the object of the Aruntas' ritual life was actually (but not consciously) their society as a whole.[28]

To be able to disconfirm magic's chronological precedence over religion, especially against Frazer, was a second Durkheimian emphasis of note. A nationalistic touch enters here, because the French sociologist's closest colleagues, collaborators in his *L'Année sociologique*, indeed his protégés, the duo Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, were involved in the settlement of this issue.[29] The matter had become tied up with para-Frazerian theories of *mana*, a term English missionary anthropologist Robert Codrington first introduced into scholarly vocabulary from Melanesia, as denoting an impersonal, diffuse spirit-force invoked by islanders to reinforce leadership and social cohesion.[30] By Durkheim's time theorists had associated *mana* with magical force, and inferred its presence as a basic belief before animism and/or religion.[31] The

[28] *Elementary Forms*, 221 et passim; cf. Spencer and Gillen, *Native Tribes*, 167–211; and see various responses from E. O. James, *The Social Function of Religion*, London Theological Library (London: University of London Press, 1940), to N. J. Allen, W. S. F. Pickering, and W. Watts Miller, eds., *On Durkheim's* Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Routledge Studies in Social and Political Thought 10 (London: Routledge, 1998).

[29] See esp. Mauss [and Hubert], *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. Robert Brain (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), first published in *L'Année Sociologique* 7 (1902–03).

[30] R. H. Codrington, *The Melanesians: Studies in their Anthropology and Folk-lore* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1891), esp. 118. A comparable Amerindian notion was *wakan*, known from the Lakota-Sioux groups, cf. *Elementary Forms*, 199–200, 203.

[31] Trompf, "Origins," 18–19, esp. n. 8, on the literature; cf. also Frazer, *Golden Bough*

point of the exercise by Hubert and Mauss was to show that "magic as whole reposes on mana," and mana only shows the primal-looking integration or "kinship" between magic and religion and their rites.[32] "Without ethnological justification," Durkheim

> read a connection between totem and mana into the Australian situation. Thus for him Deity emerges as a category because with these prior "materials," society has already made a "universe" of symbols, rituals and high thoughts (which Durkheim calls "collective representations") and has thus divinized itself.[33]

Totem, *mana*, magic, these were constituents of religion, together, always, in one way or another; and Lévi-Strauss was essentially agreeing with Durkheim when he once affirmed that "there is not religion without magic any more than there is magic without the least trace of religion."[34]

We should note, however, that a third distinctive Durkheimian stress concerns *symbolism*, and especially the symbolic content of the *Intichiuma* complex and its relation to totems. For, the totem is before all else symbolic; and by his deduction stands for two things at once: the object of religiosity (or "divinity") and the clan itself. In Durkheim's own terms:

> The god of the clan, [in the Arunta case] the totemic principle, cannot be anything other than the clan itself, but hypostatized and represented to the imagination under the sense-perceptible (*sensible*) species of vegetable or animal serving as totem.[35]

The totem stands for god and society as one, and provides the clue to religion as act of "societal self re-affirmation." The engraved oval-shaped stones or pieces of wood called *churinga* symbolize the clan's essence and are kept

(here 1911, e.g., edn.: London: Macmillan), pt. 1, vol. 1, 111n2), 227, 228n1, 339; Frazer, *Belief in Immortality*, 1: 346–52 (not making the same leap).

[32] See Durkheim's assessment in *Elementary Forms*, 201.

[33] Trompf, *In Search of Origins*, 102–3; cf. *Elementary Forms*, 22–25, 245–64; the ideas of *conscience collective/réprésentations collectives* apparently deriving from Octave Hamelin, *Essai sur les éléments principaux de la représentation* (Paris: Félix Alcan, 1907), and of society divinizing itself from William Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1894), 53–57.

[34] Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 2nd ed. (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1972), 221; cf. *Totemism*, trans. Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), chs. 3 and 5 (although Lévi-Strauss was wary about using the term religion at all).

[35] In this case my translation of the French original, *Les formes élémentaires*, 294–95.

away in secret (sacred as against profane) places where their primordial power reproduces each clan and its associated species (120, 198n4, 206). Although Durkheim drew a "staggeringly simplistic conclusion," and took an all-too rapid jump across "a wide logical gap," as anthropologist Raymond Firth contends,[36] we can readily see how it happened, since his reading of Rousseau provided the trigger. "Early society" had all that was necessary to generate the sensation of the divine, because of the power and control it exerted over its members; and because "society maintains in us the sensation of a perpetual dependence"—indeed we really depend on society when we think we depend on the divine.[37] At least Durkheim had "focused our attention on the significance of a symbol for the corporate characterization of human conceptualization and sentiments,"[38] even though he did not have the fieldwork experience to know how individuals (through dreams, "numinous encounters," etc.) could radically alter "religious conceptions" in traditional small-scale societies.[39]

In these various moves, Durkheim was tackling the thorny question of which came first, religious ideas or religious acts (or rites), and a fourth emphasis of his is on the *interdependence* of cult and belief, as a principle separated from origins theory. It turns out that he is not so committed to unconscious factors contributing to symbolic and ritual life as his many formulations might seem to imply. Durkheim, on my close reading, is "intellectualist-structuralist" when it comes to religion, always giving religious beliefs a quiet temporal priority over related structures that accompany them.[40] That his position is comparable to the psychological interpretations

[36] Raymond Firth, *Symbols: Public and Private* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1973), 133–34.

[37] Ibid.; and also Émile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, trans. George Simpson (London: Collier Macmillan, 1964), 92 for his Vico-like stress on law as *conscience collective* and punitive and religious law being the same "in primitive societies." Cf. Frederick Neuhouser, "Freedom, Dependence, and General Will," *The Philosophical Review* 102, no. 3 (1993): 382–85 on Rousseau's original views; and consider the analogue between Friedrich Schleiermacher's definition of religion in terms of (an individual's) dependence (*Abhängigkeit*) on God and Durkheim's theory of social dependence.

[38] Firth, *Symbols: Public and Private*, 134.

[39] Start with Garry Trompf, ed., *Prophets of Melanesia* (Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, 1986); Michele Stephen, "Dreams of Change: The Innovative Role of Altered States of Consciousness in Traditional Melanesian Religion," *Oceania* 50, no. 1 (1979): 3–22.

[40] He thus is truer to his teacher de Coulanges than some suppose, but in Durkheim it is no longer a case of easily defined ideas bringing into being corresponding institutions (against Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion*, 112).

he rejects requires a critical noting, although for him the similarity hardly pertained, because "society" is apparently the necessary condition for religion, and the clan or some primary group contains within its "impersonal self" the generative force making religious life possible, indeed inevitable.

> Since religious force is nothing other than the collective and anonymous force of the clan, and since this can be represented in the mind only in the form of the totem, the totemic emblem is like the visible body of the god … [and] from it … actions, whether kindly or dreadful, seem to emanate, and to it the cult is consequently addressed. (221)

This is "classic" Durkheim (as if, to give recognition to his rather "catholic" view here, *une église* comes first, then new thought about bread and wine, and then the Mass). The matter does not stop there, of course, because if "the cult depends on the beliefs … it also reacts upon them" (296), and their reactive interdependence will facilitate continuing religious activity and variation. For Durkheim, once society provides the conditions for effervescence, it will be ideas, conceptions, or collective *mental* representations that "take up" the societal force and express it for action to happen. Not for him the principle *im Anfang war die Tat*, famously enunciated by Wolfgang Goethe, reinvoked by Carl Jung, and later recast altogether in the Lévi-Straussian dictum that naturo-biological (at a very early stage animal-like ritual-biological) relations preceded cultural thoughts about the meaning of rites.[41] Durkheim was truly Rousseauan in orientation: simple peoples are free to the extent that they can make their own contractual arrangements—even exert their classificatory powers—but only under the conditions of their own collectivity (each "first group" apparently having its own misty prehistory beyond our probing).[42] For, in his fair reading of Rousseau, the natural was synonymous with

[41] *Man and His Symbols*, ed. Carl Gustav Jung (London: Aldus, 1964), 81; cf. *Symbols of Transformation*, Collected Works, vol. 5, Bollingen Series 25 (1912; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), 80–83, etc. for Jung adapting Goethe; Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 481; cf. Trompf, *In Search of Origins*, 134n35, 36n11.

[42] See Sheldon S. Wolin, *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Thought* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 331–34 (perhaps over-accentuating Durkheim's mediation of Rousseau); cf. Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, *Primitive Classification*, 2nd ed., ed. and trans. Rodney Needham (London: Cohen & West, 1968), though noting that "humanity at the beginning lacks the most indispensable conditions for the classi-

the rational (an old Aristotelian touch), and any society must already reflect the reasoning activity of humans.[43]

In all this careful footwork, of course, one cannot deny that Durkheim was tempted into origins questions. After all, most of the thinkers he was using, not just those he criticized, often succumbed to the temptation he avowedly resisted. One authority who had great importance for him deserves mention here, because his theory had the potential to bring Durkheim to the brink he verbally declined to approach. This was the contemporary German ethnologist Konrad Preuss, Americanist and Director of the Berlin Ethnological Museum, who published a series of articles on *Der Ursprung der Religion und Kunst* for the learned journal *Globus* in 1904–05 at the same time Hubert and Mauss were working on a *théorie générale de la magie* (see 201–2).[44] Preuss went on to sustain his views that pre-animist magical beliefs lay at the root of all cultural forms—religion, art, games, agriculture, marriage, clothing, even speech itself—with some field research among coastal Mexican and highland Columbian indigenes. The interesting point about Preuss's appearance in *Elementary Forms* is the way his work is reinterpreted and utilized, for "if we stick to the letter of the terminology of the author," whatever Preuss says about primal belief in "magical forces,"

> He does not intend to put them outside religion: for it is in the essentially religious rites that he shows their action, for example, in the great Mexican ceremonies. [And] … the impression becomes more and more prevalent that even the most elementary mythological instructions are secondary products, which cover over a system of beliefs, at once simpler and more obscure, vaguer and more essential, which form the solid foundations upon which the religious systems are built. It is this primitive foundation which our analysis of totemism has enabled us to reach.

Various other writers have arrived at similar conclusions by looking at a great diversity of religions, but Durkheim believed he had reached the very bottom,

ficatory function," (7) precisely and logically because those necessary conditions are (genuine) "society," so Lévi-Strauss's implicit criticisms in *La pensée sauvage* (Lévi-Strauss, *Savage Mind*), may be grounded in a shallow reading.

[43] For the evidence, Douglas F. Challenger, *Durkheim Through the Lens of Aristotle: Durkheimian, Postmodernist and Communitarian Responses to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield, 1994), 21.

[44] See *Globus* 86–87 (1904–05), issued in one *Sonderabdruck* (1905): 1–54.

"the most simple" of things, "for it is impossible to go lower than totemism" or beyond the point of *mana* and other conceived magical powers arising from the "the notion of the totemic principle" (202–03).[45] Here Durkheim virtually joins the ranks of other theorists of religious origins, and Preuss has taken him there, and we are even left with a primordial-looking *notion* like the ones he himself met and rejected in Spencer, Müller and Frazer. It is just that we have to remember everything else Durkheim has written about what religion "always and essentially is" rather than "first was," and decide whether he has successfully managed to walk his own argumentative tightrope or fallen into his own net. We are probably forced to concede that Durkheim was inevitably an evolutionist against his own liking, but one of specific kind, that refused to wander into Spencerian or Tylorian traps.

And Aboriginal, as distinct from original religion, how may we now evaluate Durkheim's interpretations of it in the light of recent research? Given the foregoing analysis of his method, the first thing to say in answer is that Durkheim's *sociological* stress on [totemico-]kin relations (including classificatory "skin" relations as they are discussed today) remains very valuable, because the bonds of Aboriginal society are clearly social and spiritual at the very same time. On the other hand, research into Aboriginal religion has so broadened and deepened since 1912 that Durkheim's *Elementary Forms* (along with his other pieces on Aboriginal beliefs)[46] seems now but a distant milestone. There is little in the tome about land, space-and-time orientations, "walkabout"-mapping aspects of *alchuringa*s and spirit-tracks, singing the cosmos, law in a broader sense than totemic prohibition, let alone any detailing of kin and human-spirit relationships that we learn about through more recent research.[47] Spencer and Baldwin did not even publish their mas-

[45] The first phrases of my quotations are slight re-translations.

[46] See Tony Swain, *Aboriginal Religions in Australia: A Bibliographical Survey*, Bibliographies and Indexes in Religious Studies 18 (New York: Greenwood Press, 1991), esp. 80.

[47] On these matters in turn e.g., T. G. H. Strehlow, *Central Australian Religion: Personal Monotheism in a Polytotemic Community*, Special Studies in Religions 2 (Adelaide: Australian Association for the Study of Religions, 1978); Tony Swain, "Altercations over Alcheringa" (Honours dissertation, University of Sydney, 1979); Monica Engelhardt, *Extending the Tracks: A Cross-Reductionist Approach to Australian Aboriginal Male Initiation Rites*, Acta Universitatis Stockholmiensis 34 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiskell, 1998); Garry Trompf, "Les religions des Aborigènes australiens," *Histoire et Religions* 3 (2008): 7–10; John E. Cawte, *Medicine is the Law: Studies in Psychiatric Anthropology in Australia's Tribal Societies* (Adelaide: Rigby, 1974); Francesca Merlan, *Caging the Rainbow: Places, Politics and Aborigines in a North Australian Township* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1995), esp. 209–28.

terful monograph on the Arunta until 1927. The sense of a complexity of over 500 different culturo-linguistic complexes in Australia, which came especially with the publication of Norman Tindale's catalogue and mapping of tribal boundaries in 1940, was completely lacking.[48]

In one interesting respect, however, Durkheim did leave a special (if rather obtrustive) mark on contemporary orientations towards the study of Australian Aboriginal religion in its diversity. Because Spencer and Gillen's research revealed no talk among the Arrernte of a supreme being, Durkheim believed he was now discussing a truly elementary religious life prior in its development to "theistic" traditions. He thus entered into the turn of the century debate about so-called high-gods, coming out against the views of Andrew Lang and Wilhelm Schmidt about signs of proto-monotheistic beliefs among Aborigines and other stone-age cultures (esp. 180–87, 273–96). Durkheim, reserved and far from flamboyant, was not the kind of scholar to understand the scintillatingly eccentric Lang, who had a heightened sensitivity towards "spooks" that put him in touch with the fears and foibles of traditional peoples, but without being able to find a device (against Durkheim's predecessors and his like!) to show how "Life" or a conceptual equivalent to the divine—certainly rather than "Society itself"—expressed a "total way of being" over and above kin, totem, ceremony, magical evil power (the Arrernte *Arúnkulta*), etc.[49] Durkheim's manner of sparring with those, like Lang, who saw signs of Aboriginal beliefs and cults of deity, was to demar-

[48] *The Arunta: A Study of a Stone Age People* (London: Macmillan, 1927); Norman B. Tindale, 'Map showing the Distribution of the Aboriginal Tribes of Australia,' Adelaide: Government Lithographer, 1940. Cf. Norman B. Tindale and Rhys Jones, *Aboriginal Tribes of Australia: Their Terrain, Environmental Controls, Distribution, Limits, and Proper Names* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974) (with four encased maps).

[49] Lang died at the time of *Elementary Forms* publication, thus see esp. [post. Lang.], "Mr. Andrew Lang's Theory of the Origins of Exogamy and Totemism," *Folk-Lore* 24 (1913): 155–86; *Myth, Ritual and Religion*, 2 vols. (1887; London: Longmans Green, 1913) (never revised to counter Durkheim). Over and above the articles listed in Swain, *Aboriginal Religions*, under nos. 0093–95, 0174, 0804–5, 0982, 1058, I herewith provide a more complete list of his relevant works than previously given: cf. *Modern Mythology* (London: Longmans Green, 1897); *The Making of Religion* (1898; London: Longmans Green, 1900); *Magic and Religion* (London: Longmans, Green, 1901); (with J.J. Atkinson), *Social Origins and Primal Law* (London: Longmans, 1903): Lang alone, *The Secret of the Totem* (London: Longmans, Green, 1904); *The Origins of Religion, and Other Essays* (London: Watts, 1908); *The Origin of Terms of Human Relationship* Proceedings of the British Academy, 3 (London: British Academy, 1909, pamphlet); Andrew Duff-Cooper, ed., *Andrew Lang on Totemism: [1911-]1912 Text of [Method in the Study of] Totemism*, CSAC Monographs 8 (Canterbury: University of Kent, 1984); not forgetting Lang's introductions to *Australian Legendary Tales*, etc. As for Schmidt,

cate such phenomena as later developments, like all beliefs in spirits, springing from the totemic complex that expressed the primary society. Again, entering into this argument without a full reading of Durkheim, one might easily suppose his was another theory of origins; yet be that is it may, it was a principle of methodological priorities that would leave a serious mark on subsequent approaches to Aboriginal religious life.

One cannot say this ordering of things was novel. The implication was there in the absence of talk about deity among the Arrenrte *à la* Spencer and Gillen. Apart from Max Müller, none of the theorists Durkheim criticized would have disagreed that gods come after what they thought came first—beliefs in ghosts (Herbert Spencer), souls (Tylor), magic (Frazer)—but Durkheim put it more systematically, that all these beliefs came before gods, but all came after the initial affirmation by society of itself. Thus it has turned out that, when my student and colleague, Tony Swain, penned the first "history of Australian Aboriginal being," he took the investigations in the desert (from Carl Strehlow, Baldwin Spencer, Frank Gillen, etc. onwards) as work in the kinds of marginal situations where the best surviving profiles of indigenous traditions could be found. He then goes on to plot more decidedly recent external influences from outside the Australian continent—Melanesian influences, Macassan traders, Captain Cook, colonization, mission talk, New Age discourse about Mother Earth—and decides that the outside notions of relations with the spirits, especially transcendental ones coming from further afield than Papua or Melanesia, were foreign to "the land-spirit connection which constitutes the Aboriginal understanding of what defines a person's essence."[50] Swain paints a more complex picture, but the structuring of the likely development process is essentially Durkheimian, and Swain honours the Frenchman for being so adept at detecting what he took to be early infiltrations of missionary ideas to generate The All-Father cults of south-eastern

see esp. his "Die Stellung der Aranda unter den australischen Stämmen," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 40 (1908): 866–901, cf. the Australian material scattered through *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee: Eine historisch-kritische und positive Studie*, 10 vols. (Münster: W. Aschendorffsche, 1912–55). For a well known neo-Schmidtian who has been at work for years discerning unspoken indigenous representations of "God," see Ennio Mantovani, "Dema as Religious Symbol in Papua New Guinea," in *Religion and Retributive Logic: Essays in Honour of Professor Garry W. Trompf*, ed. Carole M. Cusack and Christopher Hartney, Numen Book Series 126 (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 81–100. The Arrernte term is Carl Strehlow's re-transliteration of the one reported in Spencer and Gillen, *Native Tribes*, 548n1.

[50] Tony Swain, *A Place for Strangers: Towards a History of Australian Aboriginal Being* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 82 et passim.

Australia.[51] On the other hand, (as my recent review of relevant literature confirms)[52] how far have Swain and other researchers brought us away from a Durkheimian perspective on traditional Aboriginal religion that places all the stress upon society, and on toward new appreciations of crucial human-spirit connections with land!

Over the last century, naturally, all the key issues raised in Durkheim have been contested. He was not to know, for example, that Methodist missionaries were combining resources to throw light on the nature of various expressions of Melanesian totemism, among cultures with a greater diversity of beliefs about spirits and deities than found in central Australia.[53] Once Tony Swain's assessments were abroad in recent years, moreover, various positions taken by Durkheim came up again as debatable. Refusals to believe that high gods were chronologically secondary in all Aboriginal societies, for instance, can still be heard; and some would take note that Durkheim's position was not as radical as Swain's for holding (with Lang) that Aboriginal high-gods were not originally "foreign" but "beyond reasonable doubt autochthonous."[54]

We cannot cover every specific matter of interest in this piece. Neither is it worth entering into endless high-theoretical debates about whether Durkheim's methods carried with them hegemonic discourse or a hierarchizing "political ontology" that went with his position of immense influence in the educational programme of a highly imperialistic France and inevitably affected his outlook on "first peoples."[55] Suffice it conclude that Durkheim's

[51] Ibid., 147, cf. 33 on Durkheimian influences on the Western interpretations of Aboriginal cultures.

[52] Review of Maxwell John Charlesworth, Françoise Dussart, and Howard Morphy, eds., *Aboriginal Religions in Australia* and Tanya Storch, ed., *Religions and Missionaries around the Pacific, 1500–1900*, in *Australian Religion Studies Review* 22, no. 3 (2009): 368–70.

[53] J. T. Field et al. (including George Brown), "Notes on Totemism," *Annual Report on British New Guinea from 1st July, 1897, to 30th June, 1898* (Brisbane: Government Printer; 1898), Append. C, 14–17; followed by Brown himself, "The Conceptional Theory of the Origin of Totemism," *Proceedings of the Australasian Society for the Advancement of Science, Section F* 13 (May 1, 1913): 401–13; cf. Garry W. Trompf, "The History of the Study of Melanesian Religions," in *Religions of Melanesia: A Bibliographic Survey*, Greenwood Bibliographies and Indexes in Religious Studies 57 (New York: Praeger, 2006), 11n27.

[54] See e.g. Lester R. Hiatt, *Arguments about Aborigines: Australia and the Evolution of Social Anthropology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 106–7.

[55] For relevant insights, Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972–1977*, ed. Colin Gordon (New York: Pantheon, 1980); David Graeber, *Direct Action: An Ethnography* (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2009). Cf. Bent Flyvbjerg, *Making Social*

effort, for its time and context, was extraordinary, and the powers of his sociological reasoning and method remain forces to be reckoned with to this day. We have not hesitated to warn of his weaknesses, but we neglect the challenges of his thinking at our peril. And if indeed anyone discovers, to their dismay, that their religiosity is reducibly social, or exhausted by sociality alone, then how useful Durkheim's critical method might be to spark a work of purification and self-reconsideration!

Science Matter: Why Social Inquiry Fails and How It Can Succeed Again, trans. Steven Sampson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), esp. ch. 7.