

Chapter 1. A century of commentary and debate around Durkheim and *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse*

1.1. Introduction

As is to be expected in regard of a 'Founding Father' of the social sciences, the international literature around Durkheim is enormous. I cannot be expected to present here a full discussion even of the religiously relevant aspects of that literature. However, some selective treatment is imperative so as to provide the necessary background for the chapters that are to follow. I shall first briefly situate Durkheim in his time and age, with special emphasis on his political views and his ethnic identity as a secularised Jew. Then we turn to Durkheim's relation with the discipline in which he was originally trained, philosophy, and articulate his transition to sociology. Our focus in the present book is upon *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse*, and we shall have a look at that book's contents and method, before turning to its specific commentators, both shortly after its publication, and then in the course of the 20th c. CE and up to the present. We will conclude with a brief indication of where we will go after this first chapter.

1.2. Durkheim against the background of his time and age

1.2.1. Durkheim's political views

Durkheim had a keen eye for the political developments in his native country, France, at the time. During his lifetime (1858-1917) that country went through a period of restored monarchy under Napoleon III, was defeated in the war with Prussia (1870), knew internal turmoil (the *Commune de Paris*) which ended in the Third Republic, and after a period of relative prosperity, bliss and colonial expansion in Africa and Asia, was drawn into World War I (1914-1918). The question of socio-political stability loomed large in Durkheim's theoretical concerns. Here he expected far more from consensual symbolic / moral integration of a nation than from forceful, possibly violent, contestation along the line of Marxism, then emerging as a major theoretical and social force throughout Europe.

With decolonisation, globalisation, the transition to post-capitalism, the rise and fall of the welfare state, the outlines of North Atlantic society today differ greatly from those in Durkheim's time, but his political views continue to reflect and inspire neo-liberal thought (Greve 1998). In the important Wolff collection on Durkheim²³ major contributions by Coser and Richter examine the political aspect of Durkheim's thought. Fittingly, an important part of Alexander & Smith's 2005 *Cambridge Companion to Durkheim*, has been devoted to a section dealing with such political implications, under the heading 'Solidarity, difference, and morality'. Recently, James Dingley (2015) has explored the present-day applicability to modern Ireland, of Durkheim's analyses in the field of political sociology.

The history of France in Medieval and Early Modern times was largely the history of the interaction between a secular dynastic state and aristocratic class on the one hand, and on the other hand the Christian Church and its hierarchy (or rather, since the Reformation in Early Modern times, the Roman Catholic Church as well as Protestant denominations). As late as the 17th c. CE, the centralisation of the French state was to a considerable extent the work of a high-ranking Roman Catholic official, Cardinal de Richelieu. However, during the Enlightenment agnostic, even atheist thought gained terrain, the Jesuits (for centuries procurers of the best formal education) were expelled from France in 1764, and the Revolution (1789-1795) proclaimed a secular socio-political order. These developments resulted in the fact that in 1871, and especially with the 1905 Law of the Separation of the Churches and the State, France would write *la laïcité* (i.e. 'the absence of religion from public life') into its very constitution. Considering the ideological and constitutional-legal significance of the notion of *laïcité* in modern France (recently reinforced by the conflicts

²³ Wolff 1964, with an introductory bibliography, pp. 437-445.

on the visibility of Islam in the public sphere), it stands to reason that especially Durkheim's more recent commentators dwell repeatedly and at length on this topic (Baubérot 1990; Hayat 2007). In Durkheim's time, French society went through a phase when anticlericalism was politically correct, and the constitutional separation of church and state (*i.e. laïcité*) was self-evident, as were secular schools. On these points Durkheim was simply a child of his time and age, he championed them, and the only thing that needs surprise us is that, nonetheless, his statements on the incomparable social merits and truthful reality of religion could attain such pathos as one would only expect from a true believer.

1.2.2. Durkheim as a Jew

Against the background of France's insistence on *laïcité*, Durkheim occupied a somewhat precarious position as an originally Jewish leading academician (hailing from a Rabbinical family and himself a former Rabbinical student), and as author of a theory radically relegating all religious belief to a societal basis. Therefore the question as to the impact of Judaism on Durkheim's theoretical outlook deserves close attention.

Substantial aspects of this problematic are addressed in Strenski's (1997; also *cf.* Pickering 2000) book on Durkheim and the French Jewry, and in Strenski's contribution to the Idinopoulos & Wilson's collective volume (2002). Reviewing Strenski's book, the prolific Durkheim commentator the African American Karen Fields observed (1999: 172) that whereas decades ago the master's Jewish connection could be dealt with, by Talcott Parsons, in a few lines and in passing, more recently a full book is not even enough.

After Jews had often been the objects of contempt, exclusion and exploitation ever since the Middle Ages, Durkheim wrote at a time of Jewish gradual emancipation in Western Europe including France, despite the notorious Dreyfus affair (1894-1906; Durkheim was among the petitioners clamouring in 1898 for retrial of the evidently innocently convicted Jewish Alsatian Captain Dreyfus).²⁴ However,

²⁴ #4. KAREN FIELDS ON DURKHEIM AND DREYFUS. As an African American, Fields presented (2002) a stimulating imaginary dialogue between the path-breaking African American intellectual W.E.B. Dubois, and E. Durkheim, whose lives overlapped in time but who in all probability never actually met. Much to her credit, Fields is one of the few to articulate the significance of the fact that Durkheim, from his comfortable West European White urban elite position (though occupying something of a periphery there as an ethnic Jew), and in an age of colonialism and racism, saw no problem in selecting the Australian Aboriginals (classified as 'Black' in 'White' Australian parlance, also by Durkheim himself 1990 / 1960 / 1912: 159, and (citing Palmer) 201, as well as – citing Strehlow – 375, 530; *cf.* the title of Warner 1958) as the exemplary carriers of 'elementary forms of religious life' of the whole of humankind. In passing, and sweepingly equating massive Black activism in the 20th-c. CE USA with the far more limited Dreyfus affair, Fields depicts Durkheim as some kind of social activist of the type propagated by Marxists in the mid-20th century – the ones that learn theoretical insights from social contestation, from *practice* – (*cf.* Rey 1971, 1973; Raatgever 1985; van Binsbergen 1984); although in Durkheim's case that would have

scarcely two decades after Durkheim's death in 1917, mounting antisemitism resulted in the Holocaust extermination of European Jewry under Hitler's *Third Reich*, an unprecedented slaughter of 6,000,000 people within a few years. In the course of the 20th c. CE, the USA (with – as a result of immigration in the late 19th c. CE) the largest Jewish population in the world) became the global centre of academic sociological production as well as the liberator (together with the armies of the USSR) of the Nazi concentration camps with their predominantly Jewish prisoners. Any discussion of Durkheim's Jewish antecedents is necessarily to be informed by awareness of Nazi-perpetrated crimes. By the 1970s, the consolidation of the state of Israel upon time-honoured Palestinian lands, two international oil crises, and the Iranian revolution in the name of fundamentalist Islam, tilted the scales again, and brought new global pretexts for antisemitism and violence. As I am writing this, antisemitism is dramatically rising again in Europe, causing hundreds of French, German and Dutch intellectuals to petition their government for protective action. But on the other hand, the 70th anniversary of the state of Israel was celebrated with the mass murder of more than 60 Palestinian demonstrators.

When sociologists in their naïve insistence on detached objectivity do not take this contemporary-historical background into account, bizarre slips of the pen can occur, like in the following official abstract of Simpson & Conklin 1989:

'Modern multivariate analysis on cross-national samples has challenged Durkheim's observation that Catholics are less likely to commit suicide than Protestants. Previous reanalysis of Durkheim's data has shown that once socio-economic differences are controlled, Protestant and Catholic nations have had and probably continue to have similar suicide rates. A better test of Durkheim's feeling that religion has an independent role in suppressing suicide is to compare Christianity with another religion. Durkheim's theories, after all, were based not only on Christians, but also upon

been, not (that would have been asking too much) for the sake of inequalities based on skin pigmentation, nor those based on class, but on ethnic and religious affiliation – Jewry, in other words. Boldly chiding main-stream sociology as

'glib formulas about the "social construction" of "collective identities"'

(into which she alleges Durkheim to be bowdlerised in our time and age), Fields signals sweepingly that

'we lose sight of the living subjects and active verbs by which Durkheim arrived at the hard-won discoveries of *Forms*.'

It is a most laudable picture, well-intended, idealised, but also one we could expect from a sociologist who, after mainly documentary research on Zambian religious movements in the 1970s, subsequently seems to have withdrawn onto the tower of high social theory. The truth of *Les Formes*, if any, should not have been learned by Durkheim in his (none too extensive) participation in the Dreyfus affair, but by prolonged fieldwork among the poverty-stricken, displaced and utterly rejected Australian Aboriginals, with the proverbial sweat, blood and tears that attends all good fieldwork (which makes fieldwork truly a practice that produces truth). The non-racist choice in favour of the Australian Blacks as Durkheim's showpiece of humanity and its religion, was lofty, and appeals to us Africans and African Americans, but methodologically such 'ethnography by proxy' was not in the least a sufficient condition for the production of *any* truths whatsoever.

Jews, who had very low suicide rates, *but there are too few Jews* [left any more?! – WvB] *in national populations to permit cross-national research.* Today Islam represents a world religion which enjoys a very high degree of fervor and integration among its followers. We present three case studies to support this view. Then using a 71 nation cross-national analysis, we show that Islam does have an independent effect in lowering suicide [among *Muslims*, that is – WvB], thus confirming Durkheim’s hypothesis that religion itself is important as an independent factor in studying suicide.’ (Simpson, & Conklin 1989; my italics; also cf. Stark *et al.* 1983).



Source: Lviv pogrom of 1941 in pictures; at: <https://forum.axishistory.com//viewtopic.php?t=208431> (Axis History Forum); photographer unknown; the Street has been identified as *Medova*. Additional sources of the caption: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum: ‘Holocaust Encyclopedia’, at: <https://www.ushmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005171>; moreover: Longerich 2010: 194

Chased by youth armed with clubs, a woman in the town of Lviv, Ukraina (then occupied Poland) flees in disarrayed underwear from ‘death dealers’ whose legs can be seen behind her in this unspeakably terrible photograph. Between 30 June and 2 July 1941, and again, from 25 to 29 July 1941 (the so-called Petlura days encouraged by the SS) during World War II, at least 6,000 Polish Jews were killed at the Lviv Ghetto by armed Ukrainian nationalists. Additional 2,500 to 3,000 Jews were shot (between these two closely connected pogroms) by death squads of *Einsatzgruppe C*.

Fig. 1.1. *Effervescence, mob lynching, sacrifice, or dehumanisation?* In other

words, why I have never liked the concept of *effervescence*

In Durkheim's religion theory, a major role is played by the concept of *effervescence*: an altered state of consciousness, where individuality is supposed to have given way to great collective excitement over the blessings which society allegedly bestows upon us. Even though Durkheim was fortunate never to have experienced a pogrom, such antisemitic mass slaughters were already going on in Eastern Europe during his lifetime and had triggered a westbound mass migration of Ashkenazy Jews. And as a contemporary of Tarde and Le Bon, he might have realised, even a few decades before Nazism and World War II, and half a century before Girard, that this kind of '*gesundes Volksempfinden*'²⁵ is also what one risks taking on board when putting one's faith in *effervescence*. In Durkheim's time already, every intellectual had access to knowledge about the persecution of Jews in Medieval Western Europe, as well as about the Inquisition and the Christian *auto-da-fé's* in the New World when not only Jews but also Muslims and any non-Christians were the victims, while such staged events also perpetuated an astonishing level of religious mass murder in the form of human sacrifice that, before the arrival of the Europeans, had been endemic among Aztecs, Incas, and their regional neighbours – all blatant acts of violence perpetrated in the name of religion. In this light we may ask the following question: was Durkheim's surprising, dogged belief in the moral powers of religion to bring out the best in humankind, perhaps primarily: the expression of a Jew's desperate hope that history would not repeat itself? Or even, beyond even the anxiety over collective survival which has been part of the shared history of Jewry, do we encounter here an implicit but constant trait of Jewish diasporic culture across two millennia – an irrational optimism also found in otherwise very different Jewish thinkers such as Spinoza, Derrida, Buber and Levinas,²⁶ to the effect that fundamentally the human condition is not totally hopeless, that all is well as long as existential awareness of the Name is not lost?

Fortunately, other commentators have displayed greater subtlety than Simpson & Conklin (and I myself?) in their approach to Durkheim against the background of Judaism (Derczansky 1990; Seligman 2000). The latter, in his otherwise extremely enthusiastic review of Nielsen (1999), sounds the following, well-taken note of caution in regard of interpreting Durkheim's work from a Jewish angle:

'Nielsen makes certain broad claims to the diverse influences on Durkheim, from Aristotle and Bacon to Spinoza and Renouvier. He also attempts to tie his understanding of society and of the individual to Durkheim's Jewish heritage, and he situates Durkheim within a line of Jewish thinkers ranging from Philo of Alexandria through Maimonides

²⁵ German: 'healthy popular pastime / experience' – the Nazi expression for patriotic collective activities propagating Hitler's *Third Reich*.

²⁶ Perhaps a Messianism gone underground, as Wexler 2008 suggests, to whom we shall shortly turn.

to Spinoza. This less-than-successful tack leaves the reader unconvinced. Philo, Maimonides, and Spinoza were highly complex thinkers and their relation to the Jewish tradition could not have been more diverse. While it is no doubt true that one senses a deep Jewish resonance in Durkheim's writings, especially in his conceptions of the self and its relation to community (as in his idea of the *sacred*),^{27,28} much more serious

²⁷ #5. ON THE JEWISH ROOTS OF DURKHEIM'S *SACRED*. What is so typically Jewish about Durkheim's conception of the *sacred*? The ancient Hebrew root *קדש* *qdš*, 'sacred' is attributed to Canaanitic, another Semitic language, with semantics 'to separate, to set apart'. It is very isolated, and does not ascend etymologically to the phylum (Semitic) or macrophylum (Afroasiatic) level, let alone to *Borean. In Wokart's words (2001: 1034; Hebrew text added – WvB; also cf. Whitehouse 1909-1921):

'Im *Alten Testament* bezeichnet [Heiligkeit] die Göttlichkeit Gottes selbst, die sich in Macht und Herrlichkeit offerbart (*Exodus* [*אֱלֹהֵי שְׁמוֹת*] 15:1; *Isaiah* [*סֵפֶר יִשְׁעֵיהוָה*] 5:16); so wird alles, was zu Gott in Beziehung steht, "heilig" genannt, die himmlischen Wesen, der Mensch, den Gott zu seinem Dienst sich weihte, und sogar die kultische Gegenstände (*Deuteronomy* [*דְּבָרִים* *Devarim*] 33:3; *I Samuel* [*סֵפֶר אֶשְׁמוּאֵל* *Sefer Shmuel A*] 7: 1; *I Kings* [*מִלְכִּים א* *Melakhim A*] 8:4). Durch die eschatologische Wende des *Neuen Testaments* tritt das im *Alten Testament* vorherrschende dingliche Element gegenüber dem personalen zurück, wodurch sich dann das theologische Problem stellt, wie [Heiligkeit] als Gott allein zukommender Wesensbegriff und zugleich als Begriff für die durch die Gnade gerechtfertigte Kreatur gedacht werden kann' (*I Corinthians* 1:30).'

The above *Old Testament* verses, saturated with logocentricity like all sacred religious texts, already unmistakably contain, in a nutshell, Durkheim's thinking on the sacred. Wokart suggests that this Israelite / Jewish conception of the sacred, although informing subsequent Christian, Scholastic and Early Modern theology and philosophy right up to Kant, was fairly distinctive in the Ancient World. Although this could be endlessly elaborated by philological and theological analysis of a much more specialist and erudite nature than I command, the Jewish roots of Durkheim's sacred are thus sufficiently identified. In the background we perceive another absolute distinction peculiar to Judaism: the opposition between *כַּשֵּׁר* *kašr*, 'clean, permitted' [food], and its opposite (for which there seems to be no general term, but cf. Yiddish *treife* < *טְרֵפָה*, *terefah* 'torn by a predator', replicated in the Arabic / Islamic opposition between *حلال* *halāl* 'pure, allowed for consumption', and *حرام* *ḥarām*, 'forbidden'. However, we must not jump to conclusions on the basis of this short and superficial exploration. In his impressive study of Germanic cultural and political history through the medium of language history, the British philologist Green (1998) – obviously not without an inspiring impact on the present book – claims that a 'permitted / prohibited' division similar to the Hebrew (< Semitic < Afroasiatic) one may be detected at the root of the Germanic (< Indo-European < Eurasiatic) lexicon of 'sacrifice', even though the linguistic (and, considering recent history, emotional) affiliation of the two cases could scarcely be further apart. Also the great Christian theologian Söderblom, in his lemma on 'holiness: general and primitive' in Hastings's authoritative *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (1909-1921), implicitly maintains that the Israelite conception is rather continuous with much more ethnographic data world-wide. This opens the possibility that, even though undeniably Jewish on the surface, Durkheim's approach may yet be less particular, in space and time, to the Jewish / Israelite heritage alone, and may contain something of the 'elementary forms of religious life', after all. However, scholar's renderings of a religious tradition different from their own cannot be taken at face value, and an alternative reading of the same situation would be that the scholarly interpretations by Green and Söderblom were unintentionally contaminated by Durkheim's (whom Söderblom cites) so that my suggestion of a peculiar Jewish / Israelite perspective may stand.

²⁸ In this specific sensitive context, I cannot bring myself to anachronistically and hegemonically discuss the Jew Durkheim's indebtedness to the *תנ"ך* *Tanak* / Hebrew Bible in terms of its subsequent appropriation by Christianity. In the rest of the present study, however, I shall mainly designate *Bible* books in the conventional West European manner, i.e. with their Latin names based on the 3rd-2nd c. BCE Greek *Septuaginth* (*LXX*) translation: *Exodus*, *Deuteronomium*, etc. Incidentally, when puristically

work needs to be done in this direction than the casual and unsubstantiated remarks Nielsen throws out.’ (Seligman 2000)

An even bolder attempt to fathom the, unconscious if need be, depth of Durkheim’s Jewishness is made by Philip Wexler (2008), when he seeks to interpret something as aetherial as *the possible significance of the lack of mention of a Jewish Messianic tradition* – an omission of which both Durkheim and Freud are found guilty; both were, of course, secular Jews with an almost unrivalled impact on the intellectual life of the 20th c. (but try Einstein, with again similar characteristics). I do not know what to make of Wexler’s contribution. Can Ḥasidism be treated as an alternative interpretative framework in the History of Ideas? Is the argument of silence not commonly recognised as potentially deceptive – one of the lessons of the *Black Athena* debate as initiated by Martin Gardiner Bernal? With Wexler’s piece, are we not having another hoax, tongue in cheek, which reminds us of Sokal’s (1996) making light with postmodern discourse twenty years ago? How close is Wexler’s method to that of Jung, especially in the latter’s approaches (1944, 1956) to archetypes as allegedly surfacing in alchemical texts of the Early Modern period in Europe? There is, anyway, a snag here: like most ‘secret sciences’ (such as geomancy, astrology, other forms of divination, magic, gemmology) the ethnic specificity of alchemy is limited, and we find similar patterns, ideas and symbols all over the Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Age, all along the Mediterranean and further North, and extending even into South and East Asia.²⁹ Against this background, to speak of specifically ‘Jewish alchemy’ may be somewhat myopic – even granting the existence of specifically Jewish traditions such as gematria, the *Sefer Yetsira*, and the *Kabbalah* (Scholem 1941, 1971, 1987). Anyway, let us hear what Wexler proposes:

‘...a reading of the work of two central figures of modern social theory that locates their work within not simply mainstream Jewish thought, but a particular [Ḥ]asidic tradition. Further, I argue that lying behind this, in a repressed form, is an even older tradition of Jewish alchemy. I make no claim to have evidence that either Freud or Durkheim were directly influenced by [Ḥ]asidism or alchemy, but I examine the parallels between the structure of their thoughts and those of the two traditions. Both Freud and Durkheim display a social psychology that is analytically similar to the dualism of [Ḥ]asidism’s *Tanya*³⁰ and the general transformational models of alchemy. This formal model is in opposition to the messi-

insisting on the more original, textual and scriptural form rather than on a West European scholarly appropriation, I am merely applying a general principle of intercultural philosophy: *when vicariously representing the thought and culture of others, humbly and painstakingly make sure to do so in a form that is as close as possible to the original, and be aware of the hegemonic, subordinating implications of the alternative, habitual, routinised, appropriating rendering.* In this book, as in my other recent books, the application of this point of view will not be limited to Hebrew, but inevitably has to be restricted by the very obvious limits of my linguistic and orthographic expertise.

²⁹ Cf. Needham 1980, and (with Wang Ling *et al.*) several volumes (2, 5) of *Part V. Chemistry and Chemical Technology, of Science and Civilization in China*, 1955-; Coudert 1980; Holmyard 1957; Thorndike 1923-1958; Jung, 1944; Ullmann 1972; van Binsbergen 2012d.

³⁰ *Tanya* / תניא, opening word and common designation for the work ליקוטי אמרים *Likkutei Amarim* (‘Collection of Statements’), a text of Ḥasidic philosophy, by Rabbi Shneur Zalman of Liadi, the founder of Chabad Ḥasidism, first published in 1797 (Anonymous, ‘Tanya’).

anic tradition in Jewish thought and analyzes Freud and Durkheim as anti-messianic social psychologists. [H]asidism offers a template for modern theories of social psychology, social interaction and the relation between the social and the individual, that is, collective identity. This essay also considers more generally how modern social theory might make sense of contemporary social phenomena by opening itself to the messianic and mystical traditions in Jewish thought. I suggest that the social and structural transformation associated with the information or network society requires new analytic tools that allow us to explain social energy differently to the way Freud and Durkheim have guided social theory. Contemporary analyses of individual-ization, social movements and sacralization as forms of and reactions to alienation are inadequate. Instead, I ask whether we should not restore a messianic, truly Utopian “lost unity”, which the alchemical, secular gnosis of modern social science displaced, and so renew social theory? (Wexler 2008).

Still, Wexler may have a point. Is Durkheim’s *effervescence*, mediated through layers of *logocentricity* and secularisation, perhaps merely a generalised expression for the joyful Hasidic rapture with which the Chosen dance around, and with, their *Rebbe*? (cf. Potok 1967).

With our above introduction of the concept of *logocentricity* we have already hit upon what is perhaps the most important aspect of Durkheim’s Jewish identity. He came from a tradition where textuality / textual study (*lernen*, as the Yiddish expression is) had for two millennia constituted the principal means of Jewish ethnic diasporic survival, and where textual contemplation in itself is considered to have socially elevating and spiritually redeeming qualities. Against such a background, we can expect even a brilliant social analyst as Durkheim undoubtedly was, to lose sight of the overwhelmingly non-textual aspects of social and religious life, and genuinely believe that he may capture the essence of people on the other side of the globe, without sharing their life, without knowing their language of living their culture – merely on the basis of an (ethnographic) text.

1.3. Durkheim and philosophy³¹

1.3.1. Introduction

Until fairly recently (Early Modern times, as far as the North Atlantic, increasingly globalised, intellectual tradition is concerned), most of the branches of science and scholarship now distinguished in *academia*, all resorted under the

³¹ For me personally, Durkheim’s philosophical dimension and my life-long preoccupation with that author (and with his entirely different fellow-countryman, the Roman Catholic mystical geologist / palaeontologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin) had an important implication: it was one of the factors which allowed me, in 1998, to trade my Amsterdam chair in anthropology for Heinz Kimmerle’s Rotterdam chair in intercultural philosophy, even though, beyond a field in symbolic logic and a linguistic paper (van Binsbergen 1970c) on Whitehead & Russell’s *Principia Mathematica* (1910), I had no any formal academic qualifications in the philosophical field.

heading of philosophy. Sociology and the other social sciences also went through an incubation time of a few centuries at least, when their subject matter was classified as philosophy – in fact, one of the first sociologists ابن خلدون Ibn Haldun, writing in Tunis in the 14th c. CE, was primarily a historian, whereas the first truly modern philosopher, Immanuel Kant, taught anthropology and most of the natural sciences as a matter of course. At least two of the Founding Fathers of sociology, Durkheim and Marx, started out as philosophers. Durkheim's fascination for the essence of society and religion was in the first place an (empirically grounded) philosophical fascination. In this light Durkheim's explorations in the fields of epistemology and pre-modern ('primitive') forms of classification straddled the time-honoured stately garden of philosophy, and the small cabbage-patch which was only beginning to be cleared for the social sciences. Probably Durkheim's greatest achievement was to articulate *the social* as an ontological level not to be entirely reduced to individual consciousness and motivation, and to be approached by a methodology, a conceptual apparatus, and a theory of its own (Halewood 2013; Royce 2015).

A refreshingly original perspective on Durkheim, stressing the latter's Jewish roots, is developed by Donald Nielsen (1999): presenting Durkheim not so much as a scientific sociologist but as a philosophical monist whose thought comes strikingly close to that of another renegade Jew, Baruch de Spinoza, whom we have already encountered above.

'The book provides a comprehensive examination of Durkheim's major and minor writings, especially his theory of religion and the categories, and compares his work with Aristotle, Bacon, Kant, and Renouvier. The author places Durkheim's thought in the context of an encounter between traditional religious ideals, especially Judaism, and modernizing scientific and philosophical currents.' (Nielsen 1999, author's summary)

1.3.2. *Durkheim and Kant*

As a product of the French educational system Durkheim's 'default' frame of reference in philosophy would in the first place be Descartes's radical rationalism,³² yet (due to Durkheim's few years of academic studies in Germany, and also to the influence of his contemporary, the neo-Kantian Renouvier) in fact Kant is the greatest philosophical influence on Durkheim.

In terms of their significance in the History of Ideas, there is a striking similarity between Kant and Durkheim to be considered. In a way, Durkheim did for the social sciences what a century earlier Kant did for modern philosophy: establish the fundamental points of departure, on which there is no longer any going back – for Kant the critical realisation that all knowledge is essentially representation and therefore distortive and partial; for Durkheim the realisation that the social repre-

³² Durkheim wrote an introduction to Octave Hamelin's *Système de Descartes* (1921); Hamelin is among the philosophers claimed to have exerted considerable influence on Durkheim.

sents a level of existence in its own right, not to be reduced to the individual. The two positions are similar, which allows Gell (1998) to embrace in one argument both Durkheim, and what he considers neo-Kantian classic American anthropology of the mid-20th century. However, in another respect the two positions are fundamentally different, as we shall shortly see, and it is anachronistic to present them as equal and interchangeable, especially since Kant, implicitly and indirectly yet demonstrably, exercised a considerable influence on Durkheim. What is more, Hirst (1975) brought to light major epistemological shortcomings in Durkheim when tracing the latter's links back to Kant.

The Kantian connection may also be looked at from a different angle. Company (1992; cf. Davis 1992) follows Godlove in a Kantian framework-model perspective on Durkheim (albeit through what is claimed to be a misreading) and further on to the modern philosopher Davidson. But when Godlove thus stresses the extent to which religion offers a framework to interpret the world,³³ we should be heedful of Durkheim's admonition:

'La religion, en effet, n'est pas seulement un système d'idées, c'est avant tout un système de forces. L'homme qui vit religieusement, n'est pas seulement un homme qui se représente le monde de telle ou telle manière, qui sait ce que d'autres ignorent; c'est avant tout un homme qui sent en lui un pouvoir qu'il ne se connaît pas d'ordinaire, qu'il ne sent pas en lui quand il n'est pas à l'état religieux. La vie religieuse implique l'existence de forces très particulières. Je ne puis songer à les décrire ici; rappelant un mot connu,³⁴ je me contenterai d'en dire que ce sont ces forces qui soulèvent les montagnes. J'entends par là que, quand l'homme vit de la vie religieuse, il croit participer à une force qui le domine, mais qui, en même temps, le soutient et l'élève au-dessus de lui-même. Appuyé sur elle, il lui semble qu'il peut mieux faire face aux épreuves et aux difficultés de l'existence, qu'il peut même plier la nature à ses desseins.' (Durkheim 1969 / 1914; my italics – WvB)

Kant and Durkheim – that would in the first place indicate a certain epistemology. Overlooked, misunderstood and underestimated – this is Anne Rawls's (1996)

³³ In African Studies this kind of perspective has been vocally articulated by Robin Horton in his arguments on conversion, triggering a protracted debate (Horton 1971, 1975; Fisher 1973; Horton & Peel 1976; van Binsbergen 1981; Jules-Rosette 1976; Ifeka-Moller 1974, etc.).

³⁴ It appears as if the non-Christian Durkheim, deliberately or unawares, here attributes to a common expression, and appropriates, what is in fact a literal quotation from the Christian *New Testament*: St Paul's *1 Corinthians*, 13:2:

² *κἄν ἔχω προφητείαν καὶ εἰδῶ τὰ μυστήρια πάντα καὶ*
πᾶσαν τὴν γνῶσιν, κἄν ἔχω πᾶσαν τὴν πίστιν ὥστε ὄρη
³ *μεθιστάνειν, ἀγάπην δὲ μὴ ἔχω, οὐθέν εἰμι. κἄν ψωμίσω*

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing.

Durkheim the agnostic, atheist, or renegade Jew, gives way here to the (meta-)sociologist who believes to have discovered that religion is really the backbone of all social life, and hence worthy of our greatest respect. Incidentally, Durkheim's characterisation of religion as lifting the believer (like one in love?) above herself or himself, reminds us of Plato's evocation of 'transcendence' as the movement which, starting from immanence, lifts the soul upward then let it return to earthly immanence again (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 246a f, *Symposium*, 209e f.; Duintjer 2002; van Binsbergen 2012c: 37 f., 69 f.). See Chapter 7, below.

assessment of Durkheim's epistemology. The same message dominates her splendid (2004) book-length study of *Les Formes*, a book which, in her opinion:³⁵

‘...has been consistently misunderstood. Rather than a work on primitive religion or the sociology of knowledge, Rawls asserts that Durkheim's analysis represents an attempt to establish a unique epistemological basis for the study of sociology and moral relations’.

She elucidates (Rawls 2004: Chapter 2) Durkheim's *dualism* as both ‘Anti-Kant and Anti-Rationalist’, and dwells on Durkheim's notions of the ‘double man’ and of ‘two layers of knowledge’.³⁶ Are we justified to draw up the equation that for Durkheim

social : sacred = individual : profane?

Taking the reader by the hand, Rawls shows rather convincingly that *Les Formes* is, indeed, not in the first place a study of primitive religion or of the sociology of knowledge, but a highly original epistemology and ontology disguised as ethnography but waiting to be decoded by readers who (like herself) are both philosophically and sociologically specialised. Thus she explains (Rawls 2004: 2n) how Durkheim's treatment of categories (which in the light of both Aristotle and Kant is surprisingly selective, and notably leaves out *classification* as an *a priori* category in its own right) can only be understood and appreciated by the trained philosopher. It is the perennial bane of the social sciences: once having hived off from their intellectual and institutional original basis (*i.e.* philosophy and the humanities in general) around 1900 CE, social scientists (and particularly anthropologists) have insisted on ‘going it alone’, and have haphazardly, and usually implicitly,

³⁵ Another reason why Allen *et al.*'s 2012 claim that theirs is the first book to be devoted to *Les Formes* is simply a publicity untruth.

³⁶ #6. ON DUALISM. Contrary to what Rawls suggests, there is a considerable risk of misunderstanding on this point. Dualism (*cf.* Pétrement 1973) may refer to any conceptualisation revolving on a fundamental distinction, from the relation between Lower and Upper Egypt, to body-mind dualism (Plato, St Augustine, Descartes), the Zoroastrian and Manichaean cosmology in which good and evil are considered to be complementary, or a political system that is *de facto* composed of two major political parties, like for decades in the USA and the UK, etc. Anyway, the meaning that applies here is clearly defined:

‘Durkheim felt so strongly about the centrality of his position on dualism to the argument of *The Elementary Forms* as a whole, and was so disappointed that the argument was misunderstood, that, in response to criticism of that book, he wrote an article devoted entirely to an explanation of his position on dualism. The article, “The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions” was published in 1914, in the Italian scholarly journal *Scientia* two years after the publication of *Les Formes*.

In the *Scientia* article Durkheim argued that there are two aspects of each human being: a pre-rational animal being and a rational social, or human, being. These two aspects of the person conflict with one another, producing the internal tension that philosophers across the ages have referred to as dualism.’ (Rawls 2004: 72)

The *Scientia* article was reprinted as Durkheim 2005. Incidentally, Durkheim's central association of evil with the individual, and of good with society could well serve as an illustration of the Jewish undercurrent in Durkheim's thought: *e.g.* Maimonides in the *Guide for the Perplexed* (2012 / 1190) expounds the same view.

applied their gaudy and fragmentary package of naïve common sense to immense problems of individual and social human existence – hilariously unheedful of the work of many centuries done on these crucial topics by philosophers.³⁷

Even more amusingly, virtually all of Rawls' innovative finds and claims are dismissed by another Durkheim scholar of uncontested stature, Walter Schmaus (1998). If my present book had been in the first place a book on Durkheim's philosophical position, it would now be my duty to offer a Judgment of Paris or a Solomon's Judgment between these two positions, trying to reconcile them. But to do so would require, I am afraid, a full book in itself, and a more exclusive focus on philosophy than I can summon in this phase of my intellectual life.³⁸

Nor is Rawls vs. Schmaus the only exchange about categories in Durkheim. Nielsen, who explicitly addresses Durkheim in the first place as a philosopher rather than as a theoretical sociologist, writes insightfully on Durkheim's category of *totality* as an overarching concept in which God, society and religion all seem to come together in the individual experience.

1.3.3. Durkheim's sociology of knowledge

In an impressive study, Paul Q. Hirst (1975; cf. Chazel 1976) examined in detail the epistemology underlying *Les Règles de la Méthode Sociologique* (Durkheim 1895 / 1897), and pronounces it to be simply impossible, implicitly based as it is on the Kantian division between natural sciences and cultural sciences, yet seeking a science of man predicated on the non-subjectivist natural-science model which, nonetheless, is to be non-positivist... A few years before the publication of *Les Formes*, Durkheim presented an argument specifically on epistemology (1909). For this aspect of Durkheim's work, Anne Rawls (1996) can hardly find superlatives enough:

'Durkheim's epistemology, the argument for the social origins of the categories of the understanding, is his most important and most neglected argument. This argument has been confused with his sociology of knowledge, and Durkheim's overall position has

³⁷ van Binsbergen 2003a, esp. chs 1 and 15, pp. 15f., 459f.

³⁸ As I have explained at length in the introduction to *Vicarious Reflections* (2015), my philosophical adventure (1995-2011) is over, and with the present book (as with the previous one, *Religion as a Social Construct*, 2017), I am returning to my old trade as an anthropologist of religion. If I had started the present book one and a half decades ago when I was a Professor of Intercultural Philosophy in the Rotterdam Philosophical Faculty, and if I had known Rawls's work by then, a very different book would have resulted, more centrally philosophical and not dominated, like it has now come out, by the desire to assess Durkheim empirically. However, this book was initiated over half a century ago by an over-eager young student of the social sciences, who lacked the philosophical training to follow Rawls's lead even if it had been available at the time. In the decades that have meanwhile gone by, my post-Judaeo-Christian world view has taken definitive shape, largely under African social, cosmological and epistemological inspiration, and I would not have it otherwise.

been misunderstood as a consequence. The current popularity of a “cultural” or “ideological” interpretation of Durkheim is as much a misunderstanding of his position as the “functional” interpretation from which the current interpretations seek to rescue him. Durkheim articulated a sophisticated epistemology in the classical sense, a point that has been entirely missed’. (Rawls 1996)

Durkheim was not the only one of the Founding Fathers of the social sciences to initiate a *sociology of knowledge*, and to argue (in his case together with Mauss; Durkheim & Mauss 1901) the social origin of our categories of thought. Although ignored by Durkheim, Marx’s epistemology has been better known³⁹ and, given its embeddedness in a materialist view of history as revolving on class struggle, more transparent and less steeped in societal mysticism despite the perspective of the classless society at the end of history. The Durkheimian / Maussian adage to the effect that *the classification of things reproduces the classification of humans* lies at the root of Lévi-Strauss’s (1962a, 1962b) reviving the study of *Totemism*, and *La Pensée Sauvage*, in the 1960s – reinforcing an influential school of Structuralist Anthropology, notably in France, Great Britain, Belgium, and the Netherlands.⁴⁰

In a thoughtful overview Bloor (1982) concedes the value of this perspective, but also reminds us of Gehlke’s and Dennes’s criticism to the effect that by a Kantian conception of mind (as ‘the subject’s system of cognitive faculties’;⁴¹ Kant 1983a / 1781), Durkheim’s approach on this point is allegedly ‘ambiguous, even nonsensical’. The same topic comes back, succinctly, in Alexander’s (1982) consideration of social logic in the light of Marx and Durkheim; in Susan Stedman Jones’s (2012)⁴² reconsideration of categories in *Les Formes*, and in Tony Edward’s (2002) contribution to the volume on Durkheim’s religion theory edited by Idinopoulos and Wilson (2002). Anne Warfield Rawls (1996, 2005) has not been the only one to claim that Durkheim’s theory of the social background of thought was in fact, his principal and lasting contribution to sociology and philosophy. Also LaCapra (1972: 251 *f.*) devotes important pages to Durkheim’s epistemology, which he considers ‘a corollary of his social metaphysic’ (1972:

³⁹ Cf. Marx & Engels 1975-1983, 1975 *f.*; Worsley 1955; Torrance 1995.

⁴⁰ Lévi-Strauss 1962a, 1962b; Leach 1968; de Josselin de Jong 1952; de Heusch 1982. A reconsideration of Durkheimian categories was also part of the 2012 centennial volume (Allen *et al.* 2012), notably in Schmaus’s (2012) contribution there.

⁴¹ This place is as good as any to make the following disclaimer (even though Kant, while the founder of modern philosophy, is not generally recognised as a forerunner of cognitive science in the state-of-the-art sense of today). Some of the most interesting developments in the study of Comparative Mythology, religion, and archaeology over the last few decades have taken place at the interface between these disciplines and *cognitive science* (cf. Farmer 2010; Mithen 1996a, 21996b, 1996c, 1996d, 1997; Renfrew *et al.* 2008). It is not a terrain that I have studied closely, nor one with which I have much intuitive affinity as primarily an anthropological fieldworker, and I prefer to admit my omission rather than (as I usually do) blundering into unknown territory. However, given the importance of that field we shall yet have to deal with it briefly, in our discussion of Mithen’s approach, in Chapter 9 below.

⁴² Jones is also the author of an interesting general study on Durkheim (2001).

251). Moreover, it is his approach to rules, classifications, and causes which made Durkheim one of the great inspirers of a movement prominent in the late 20th c. CE among sociologists and meanwhile subsided: *ethnomethodology* (Hilbert 2001; S.P. Turner 1986).

1.3.4. *On primitive classification*

Tracing in detail the Kantian and neo-Kantian echoes in Durkheim would be rewarding and revealing, but it would require a more specialist philosophical study than I had in mind for the present, primarily empirically-orientated book. However, let me mention one point that has fascinated me ever since my first encounter with Durkheim's work, in 1965. For Durkheim (and Mauss, with whom he pioneered this breakthrough notion; Durkheim & Mauss 1901) the fundamental categories of our thought: time, place, causation, number, logical operations, *etc.*) are not innate in the human individual, but are a product of social life – they emerge from the structuring of reality that is brought about by 'the elementary form of the religious life'. For an intellectual whose founding of the sociological discipline did not leave him the time (contrary to Max Weber) to make, at the same time, major contributions to historiography,⁴³ this position on humankind's fundamental categories is absolutely seminal – even although it admittedly echoed, and rephrased, earlier similar pronouncements made by Marx. If our fundamental categories derive from society, then instead of being innate, universal, and immutable, they may vary from place to place, from period to period, and from culture to culture. They are inevitably subject to a cultural history, whose outlines and remotest periods we may not be able to capture, but whose implications we can at least attempt to think through.

The anonymous reviewer ('B.') of Needham's (1963) English edition of Durkheim & Mauss for *The Journal of the American Oriental Society* (1963), and using Needham's own words, calls our attention to a remarkable oversight:

'it is an odd and perturbing fact that [Durkheim & Mauss's work on primitive classification – WvB] is virtually unknown to the majority of professional anthropologists . . . and even the distinguished gathering of linguists, anthropologists, psychologists and philosophers who met in 1953 to discuss Whorf's hypotheses⁴⁴ about the relationship of linguistic catego-

⁴³ Although history was very much implied in Durkheim's approach to society, as asserts the historical sociologist Bellah (1965).

⁴⁴ More commonly known, and (for its lexical determinism) severely criticised, as the Whorf-Sapir Hypothesis, *cf.* Whorf 1952, 1956; Hoijer 1954; Black 1959; Sapir 1929 / 1949, 1921. I am not sure whether the reviewer's indignation is justified rather than anachronistic. The compartmentalisation between national fields of science production bounded by national languages used to be a fact until in the second half of the 20th c. CE English eclipsed all rival languages (*e.g.* German, French and Latin) as vehicles of international scientific communication. Moreover, when the French School of social science half a century after Durkheim spawned anthropological structuralism, this was initially so fiercely contested that it was bound to be ignored by a international crowd contemplating the claims of such *American* linguists as Whorf and Sapir.

ries to conceptions of the world nowhere mention Durkheim and Mauss's essay in the result on their proceedings.' (Needham *et al.* 1963: ix-xi, cf. 'B.' 1963: 278).

Archaeology, historical linguistics and molecular genetics are the three sciences that, in the course of the last few decades, have made tremendous progress in reconstructing humankind's remotest past with ever greater confidence and methodological credibility, and of late they have been joined by Comparative Mythology.⁴⁵ We may postulate that the emergence of Anatomically Modern Humans, in Africa c. 200,000 years ago (200 ka BP),⁴⁶ or their subsequent spread to other continents, from c. 80 ka BP, already concerns a form of humanity in the full (albeit perhaps still implied, and unfolding) possession of such fundamental categories as characterise and sustain our human existences today. The existence of hundreds of (near-) universals of culture (Brown 1991; we shall return to him in section 9.2 below) suggests that the Out-of-Africa Exodus of Anatomically Modern Humans spread across the globe an initial cultural package that had been incubated on the African continent for more than 100 ka and that contained most or all of our modern fundamental categories. But what went before? How did these categories come into being? No doubt as a result of the gradual differentiation and transformation of productive, reproductive, social, communicative and mental faculties based on emergent social life in very small largely kin-based groups, since the Lower Palaeolithic.

This is a social, and implicitly an historical, answer to the question of origin and growth inevitably raised by Kant's revolutionary position, when he claimed that these same fundamental categories were not in themselves knowledge and the fruits of knowledge formation, but categories *a priori*, for which he therefore claimed the irreducible and often misunderstood status of being 'transcendental'.⁴⁷ It is here where Kant and Durkheim converge, and where the latter begins to quicken Kant's essentially static, eternal and origin-less transcendental categories with the pulse of the earliest social life, and of remotest history – with, in other words, *the elementary forms of the religious life*. In a way, after Kant's *Copernican Revolution* in philosophy,⁴⁸ Durkheim's insistence on the social nature of the transcendental categories went one further step comparable, in importance, to the *Theory of Relativity* (Einstein 1917 / 1960). Little wonder that Rawls sees here Durkheim's greatest intellectual contribution.

⁴⁵ Witzel 2001, 2012; van Binsbergen 2006a, 2006b; van Binsbergen & Venbrux 2010.

⁴⁶ ka = kiloyears, *i.e.* 1000 years; BP = Before Present.

⁴⁷ Cf. Allison 1973; Duintjer 1966; Green 1997.

⁴⁸ See footnote 7, above. It is the leading thought of Kant's critical philosophical writings that we humans cannot know the world as it is, but can only know the (inevitably distorted) representation of the world which we form in our minds. With this central idea Kant brought about the 'Copernican Revolution' in Western philosophy – two and a half centuries after Copernicus did something similar for astronomy, with his heliocentrism; cf. Copernicus 1539; Schiaparelli 1876.

1.3.5. Durkheim's puzzling realism in his approach to religion – and the present writer's proposal concerning the true 'elementary forms of religious life'

Karen Fields not only produced an excellent new translation of *Les Formes*, but also enriched the international Durkheim literature with a series of penetrating studies on the topic. Significantly, she opened the long introduction to her translation (Fields 1995) with a reminder to the effect that for Durkheim, *religion is not an illusion, but is founded upon and expresses 'the real' – notably, the reality that in religion, society becomes conscious of itself and becomes the object of religious veneration.*

Robert Alun Jones, another important writer on Durkheimian matters, in his contribution to *Relire Durkheim* (a 1990, French-language collection from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales – EHESS – Paris, France), believes he can lay bare the roots of this surprising 'realism'⁴⁹ on the part of Durkheim:

'L'Évolution pédagogique en France éclaire des aspects peu connus de la pensée Durkheim, tels que son anti-cléricalisme ou son engagement en faveur de l'école laïque. On sait que Durkheim considérait l'Église médiévale comme le dépositaire de certaines vérités fondamentales: la nécessité de former << l'homme total >>, l'interpénétration de la foi et de la raison dans la philosophie scolastique, et, par dessus tout, l'idée chrétienne du devoir. A l'inverse, il s'en prit à la Renaissance et aux Lumières pour leur interprétation sociologiquement incohérente du Moyen-Age, pour leur intérêt excessif porté au goût, à l'élégance et au style, pour leur adoption des valeurs païennes, à l'origine de la corruption du sens du devoir hérité du christianisme, enfin, pour leur << mentalité mathématique >> qui aboutit à un goût trop simplificateur pour les généralisations et l'abstraction. En fait, les mérites que Durkheim reconnaît au réalisme pédagogique de Comenius, Leibniz, W[u]ndt et, de façon plus générale, au protestantisme allemand, opposé au << formalisme >> du Moyen-Age et de la Renaissance, constituent le contexte à partir duquel il énonça sa célèbre injonction: *considérer les faits sociaux comme des choses*. C'est de partir de là aussi qu'il en appela à un << nouveau rationalisme >>, plus inductif, complexe, historique, et par-dessus tout plus attentif à l'importance première des choses que ne l'était le rationalisme dé-

⁴⁹ #7. ON DURKHEIM'S TYPE OF REALISM. *Realisme* in the present context does *not* have the usual, non-specialist meaning 'the resigned common-sense attitude to accept things as they are', but specifically indicates *the epistemological position according to which we truly have the capability of knowing reality as it really is* – either as projections of concrete models out there (Plato), or as the concrete embodiment of such models (Aristotle). Since Kant, Western philosophy has abandoned these complementary conceptions of reality, for one of radical idealism, and according to which we can only know the images of things we have formed in our mind. Again we expose Durkheim as ultimately un-Kantian. In the words of my Rotterdam colleague Henk Oosterling, since Kant we have been 'Moved by Appearances' (*Door Schijn Bewogen* – the title of Oosterling 1996). However, I think it would be more correct, and do greater justice to both the fact and the incredible powers of religion, to incorporate the Kantian position, as only one limiting condition, in a more comprehensive ontology according to which we continuously oscillate (albeit in ways we hardly understand and cannot yet control, but which yet is the essence of *being in this world*) between (a) mere appearances with all the implied ignorance (Kant), and (b) true reality with all the implied true and essential knowledge, with all the power that entails. In such an ontology, the Aristotelian logical mainstay of classic scientific thought ('where P, there not not-P') would again be relegated to a boundary condition, and religion would occasionally appear as a social / symbolic technology to tap the unlimited resources of the universe.

passé d'un Descartes.' (Jones 1990)

One can understand and corroborate Jones's nutshell summary of European intellectual history, but frankly, contrary to his initial assertion, and brain-washed as I have been for half a century by the *emic / etic* distinction, I fail to see how this compels us 'to consider social facts as things', an imperative already stated in *Les Règles* (Durkheim 1897a). This, in fact, is what Garfinkel (2002), the founder of the sociological movement known as 'ethnomethodology', considers to be 'Durkheim's aphorism' – upon which, Garfinkel asserts, ethnomethodology's entire programme is based. It is a position that (as we have already seen) was endorsed by one of the brightest minds in current Durkheim studies, the philosopher / sociologist Anne Warfield Rawls, who edited and introduced Garfinkel's ethnomethodological *Program*, and in several publications (Rawls 1996, 1997, 2004) maintained that it is not Durkheim's theory of religion or society, but his thesis of the social production of (what since Kant would be called) *a priori* categories, which constitutes Durkheim's main claim to fame (had it not been that Marx made a similar point half a century earlier).

In relation to the conceptualisation of *space* Terry Godlove (1996) takes up related issues and traces Durkheim's indebtedness to Kant through the nineteenth-century French neo-Kantians Renouvier and Hamelin, and moreover asserts the complementarity rather than mutual exclusiveness of Kant and Durkheim. But other authors have been dismissive of Durkheim's epistemology from the beginning, and this may explain how Rawls could perceive a general lack of appreciation of Durkheim's merits on this point.

When insightfully discussing Durkheim's implicit *emergentism*, Sawyer (2002) takes the opportunity of pointing out how precisely the above 'aphorism' has earned Durkheim the most severe criticism from the part of modern sociologists as Giddens, Luke and Alexander.⁵⁰ Already much earlier Goldenweiser, a vocal American anthropological author on totemism at the time of the publication of *Les Formes*, phrased his misgivings in the following terms:

'The author's attempt to derive all mental categories from specific phases of social life which have become conceptualized, is so obviously artificial and one-sided that one finds it hard to take his view seriously, but the self-consistency of the argument and, in part, its brilliancy compel one to do so. In criticism we must repeat (...): in so far as Durkheim's socially determined categories presuppose a complex and definite social system, his explanatory attempts will fail, wherever such a system is not available. The Eskimo, for example, have no clans nor phratries nor a totemic cosmogony (for they have no totems);⁵¹ how then did their mental categories originate, or is the concept of classifica-

⁵⁰ Cf. Giddens 1992; Luke & Scull 1983; Alexander 1982; Alexander & Smith 2005.

⁵¹ This is a moot point, regardless of whether we subscribe to Durkheim's claim as to the central historical significance of totems for early religion. It is methodologically impossible to empirically prove the absence or non-existence of something. Few would have expected to find unmistakable traces of

tion foreign to the Eskimo mind? Obviously, there must be other sources in experience or the psychological constitution of man which may engender mental categories; and, if

totemism in North African saint veneration, but these were plainly manifest (van Binsbergen 1971a, 2013c). Goldenweiser mainly manifested himself as a theorist, including a 1910 authoritative overview of totemism (so he may be trusted to have known the literature on totems, and on the Eskimo totems if any, up to that date). However, used widely in comparative studies, the concept of ‘totem’ is in the first place an *etic* / analytical concept that does not necessarily coincide with any *emic* concept held by historic actors on the ground. In that sense one might also seriously maintain that (*pace* Durkheim, Strehlow, and Spencer & Gillen) the Aranda had no ‘totems’ around 1900 CE. However, such a statement looks like a sophism – being fellow humans, and capable of at least a measure of vicarious understanding across cultural and linguistic lines, we may assume to be somewhat capable of recognising a ‘totem’ in other cultures (even if it is called by a different name there), and also to understand why other anthropologists have done so. More damaging, however, is that even a quick search on Internet Scholar on the conjoint search terms ‘Eskimo’ and ‘totem’ yields dozens of returns, some obviously spurious (*e.g.* art theoreticians making sweeping statements), others coincidental, others again misfired (*e.g.* failing to distinguish Northwest Coast Native Americans from Eskimos), but some apparently genuinely relevant and positive: *e.g.* Fainberg & Hughes 1967; Mickey 1966: 20 (among West Alaska Eskimos there are patrilineally descending totem marks according to Nelson 1900 – as warmly welcomed by Mauss 1902-1903 – , but according to Dall 1870 there is no totemic system); Collins 1949 (reviewing work by Margaret Lantis among the West Alaska Eskimo) does note elements of totemism although

‘Two elements of fully developed totemism are lacking, in that families are not named for or descended from the totem animal’.

Graburn 1987: 52 is a negative case in suggesting that Eskimos’s producing totem poles is a predictable accident of neo-traditional bricolage under external literary influence. The semantics ‘totem’ are hardly represented in the *Tower of Babel* etymological database (see Chapter 8 below), but they happen to be there precisely for the Eskimo languages, and to confirm my findings contra Goldenweiser, while conjuring up the entire near-global package of shamanism:

Proto-Inupik: *qila-, *qəla-, *qəlaunt ‘spirit 1, to invoke spirits 2, to practice sorcery 3, drum 4’
 < Proto-Eskimo: *q[ə]laŋ-, ‘spirit, shaman’s power’. **The direction of the borrowing is unclear; probably from Proto-Chukchee-Kamchatkan *qeləhə id. on phonotactic grounds.**
 Seward Peninsula Inupik: qila 1 (of t o t e m animal), qila- 2, qilarñiq ‘shaman’s trance’
 Seward Peninsula Inupik Dialects: Imaq qilamñ adv. ‘alive, swiftly’
 North Alaskan Inupik: qila, qila 2, ‘shaman’s power’, qila-, qila- 2, qillan ‘shaman’s conjuring rod’, qilaun 4
 North Alaskan Inupik Dialects: (...) qilaun* 4
 West Canadian Inupik Dialects: (...) qilaun* 4, (...) qila- 3, qila ‘object used by sorcerer’, qilaut 4, (...) qilaut (...) 4
 Eastern Canadian Inupik: qila- 3 (by tying limb) (Peck 1925)
 Eastern Canadian Inupik Dialects: (...) qilaut (...) 4, (...) qilauti 4
 Greenlandic Inupik: qila- ‘to conjure over’, qilay- (qilat-*) tr., qihhat ‘charm’, qilāt (qilaut*) 4, ‘violin’
 Greenlandic Inupik Dialects: North-western Greenlandic qilāt 4, ‘guitar’
 Fortescue 1994: 295

Source: like all other such etymological Tables in this book, these data are gratefully derived from © Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008. Original © *Tower of Babel* comments always in **bold**. Acronyms expanded by WvB to the extent possible. * = unattested reconstructed protoform (always in Arial sanserif font)

Table 1.1. The lexicon of ‘totem’ in Eskimo languages, suggested to be borrowed from the adjacent Chukchee-Kamchatkan phylum

In regard of the occurrence of totemism among the Eskimo, the evidence is meagre and somewhat contradictory, suggestive of an ancient substrate system (originally Oceanian, like several other Eskimo traits?) incompletely eclipsed by later forms. Yet we may safely say that Goldenweiser jumped to conclusions on the basis of incomplete evidence when denying the Eskimos totems. I cannot burden this book with further explorations on this point, but it needed to be made, and invites further research.

that is so, we may no longer derive such categories from the social setting, even when the necessary complexity and definiteness are at hand. In this connection it is well to remember that the origin of mental categories is an eternally recurring event; categories come into being within the mental world of every single individual. We may thus observe that the categories of space, time, force, causality, arise in the mind of the child far ahead of any possible influence from their adult surroundings by way of conscious or even deliberate suggestion.⁵² To be sure, these categories are, in the mind of the child, not strictly conceptualized nor even fully within the light of consciousness, but their presence is only too apparent: the individual experience of the child rapidly supplements the congenital predisposition of the mind.' (Goldenweiser 1915: 733; my italics).

What looms behind this entire problematic is the question of emergence: if we need a society in order to be venerated in religion, and in order to produce categories of thought and classification, what then produces society in the first place, and how is the threshold of emergence crossed which leads from incipient, inchoate social relations to the kind of enduring structure that might be able to produce the many effects and characteristics Durkheim attributes to society? To this crucial question, few Durkheim commentators have given any thought. Filloux (1990) speaks of a reconciliation of individualism and socialism and of

'the emergence of a society founded on the religion of the individual',

but from a Durkheimian perspective the latter would be merely begging the question. Far more to the point is Sawyer (2002) when he points out:

'The concept of emergence is a central thread uniting Durkheim's theoretical and empirical work, yet this aspect of Durkheim's work has been neglected,'

and continues to discuss the links between Durkheim's implicit emergentism, and theories of emergence developed by contemporary philosophers of mind:

'In recent decades, emergence has been extensively discussed by philosophers of mind, psychological theorists, and cognitive scientists because these fields are increasingly threatened by the potential of reduction to neuroscience. The threat – analogous to the threats of methodological individualism⁵³ facing sociology – is that these disciplines will be reduced to explanations and

⁵² #8. ON INNATE CATEGORIES AND THE PROBLEM OF EMERGENCE. Goldenweiser here takes an advance on the future outcome of one of the most complex research programmes in developmental psychology. Half a century later, and clearly with Kant's list of *a priori* categories in mind, Piaget gained world fame with a long series of studies on this point. Their innateness (as suggested by Goldenweiser) is again a moot point, – championed by great minds such as Chomsky or Jung, but also contested by many anthropologists, who prefer to restrict the acquisition of culture to a sensorily-supported social communication process. Even so, it looks as if Goldenweiser, when stressing such learning processes in the child, is missing Durkheim's point. The latter's claims as to the social origin of the categories was not just about intergenerational transmission, in other words about the way they are learned by every specific child, but about their very genesis. Without society they would not exist – as if Durkheim was in fact speaking of *culture*, a concept scarcely elaborated yet, in his time, to become the pivotal; theoretical concept it was to constitute later in the 20th c. CE. Remains the problem of *emergence* – what then produced society in the first place, for it to be able to generate the categories?

⁵³ #8a. ON METHODOLOGICAL INDIVIDUALISM. *Methodological individualism* is the theoretical position which, even given the scientific and philosophical discovery, c. 1900 CE, of *the social* as a category *sui generis*, continues to consider the individual-centred perspective (the main current of

analyses of neurons and their interactions. These conceptions of emergence have been inspired by computational models of emergence processes, including connectionism (Clark 1997), artificial life (Brooks & Maes 1994; Langton 1994), and multi-agent models of social systems (Gilbert & Conte 1995; Prietula *et al.* 1998). In this recent formulation, *emergent systems* are complex dynamical systems that display global behavior that cannot be predicted from a full and complete description of the component units of the system.' (Sawyer 2002)

Durkheim implicitly breaks with Kant in insisting upon the social reality that he alleges to lie behind the symbols, and on the knowability of that reality, instead of resigning himself, with Kant, to the mere image we have in our human minds. What Durkheim gains is: thus he begins to be capable to explain the scope and force of religion; what he loses is all anchorage in the single most constructive insight in modern philosophy (Kant's 'Copernican Revolution'). In the process Durkheim particularly forfeits: a credible answer to those who, on substantial grounds, remind us that, after all, the beings venerated in religious ritual do not exist, in other words, are not in any way real to begin with (although they may be virtual in the sense of having real effects). I return to this problematic in Chapter 10.

Impossible though Hirst declares Durkheim's epistemology to be, it yet captures successfully one side of the religious medal:

- the capability of generating realities.

It fails, however, to capture the other side, and the mechanism behind it:

- the constant oscillation (which I believe is nothing less than the ontological essence of reality) between the real and the unreal, between
 - (a) symbols that refer to their referents and
 - (b) symbols that no longer do so and that, situationally, take on a life of their own.

In religion we have proceeded beyond the limits of applicability of standard, Aristotelian, binary logic, the one governed by the adage

'If P, then not (not P)'.

Although exposed to the Kantian and Hegelian tradition, Durkheim remained too much of a rationalistic Cartesian (albeit, in the words of Jones 1994, an 'ambivalent' one),⁵⁴ to dare admit that in this oscillation, more than in any of the institutions and concepts he studied in such detail in Les Formes, lies the true 'elementary form of religious life'.

Western thought ever since Graeco-Roman Antiquity) the only valid explicatory paradigm in the human sciences. Cf. Lukes 1970; Agassi 1960; Cramer 2002; Pouwer 1962.

⁵⁴ Along with Montesquieu, on whom Durkheim wrote his Latin-language doctoral dissertation; cf. Lassman 1998, Miller 1997.

1.3.6. Durkheim the moralist

The common insistence on Durkheim's theoretical-sociological side, and his almost total appropriation by academic sociology (at the expense of philosophy) in the course of the 20th c. CE, cannot capture the thrust of his thought in its entirety. He wrote not from a detached scientific interest but as a deeply concerned member of West European society around 1900 – a time which he perceived to be one of anomie, and of secularisation (of which Durkheim himself was a personal example), even though admittedly his attention was not focused on social inequality, class conflict, the colonial subjugation of large parts of the globe, nor – except towards the end of his life, when the issue of peace entered into his writing – on the mounting international tensions leading on to World War I (in which not only many of his students but also his own son was to be killed, an event which also sent the father to an early grave, aged 59). The way Durkheim writes about religion is puzzling: he is not preaching any particular creed, is himself a non-believer in any form of organised religion or any deity, yet he passionately impersonates the believer and the strength the latter derives from religion, and (as Durkheim thought) via religion, *from society*. This lends to much of his writing a moral dimension which we cannot sweep under the carpet simply because the present-day academic sociologist no longer sees herself or himself as a moralist, a prophet and a healer. Isambert (1990) is one of the commentators to pick up this vital dimension of Durkheim's work; Stephen Turner (1993; cf. Lehmann 1996) devoted an entire book to this issue.

The moral aspects of Durkheim's view of society and religion have been clearly discussed by Bellah (1973, reprinted 1990 in French translation). Confronted with the serious allegation of having misrepresented Durkheim,⁵⁵ Talcott Parsons (for decades one of the leading American sociologists, and Durkheim's most influential commentator) adduces Bellah as sharing his opinion, and responds to his own critics Pope (1973) and Cohen (1974), making only a slight correction to his earlier rendering of Durkheim:

'At this point I wish to modify the position I took in *The Structure of Social Action* (1937). In dealing with the concept of constraint, I said that Durkheim set forth three principal conceptions – constraint by the facts of the environment, constraint by sanctions used in enforcing norms, and constraint by voluntary consent to the binding character of internalized norms, *i.e.*, by moral authority. My change of view has been that, though the last concept came to be central in Durkheim's later work, he by no means abandoned the others, particularly the first. Durkheim's view of the social environment (Parsons 1973) can be interpreted, as I was not aware at the time of writing *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), as the internal environment of the action system,

⁵⁵ Pope 1973 addresses

'Parsons[']s attempts to document Durkheim's shift from positivism to the voluntaristic theory of action and to idealism. Neither attempt is successful.'

in a sense parallel to Claude Bernard's⁵⁶ concept (1865) of the internal environment of a complex organism. In my view Durkheim never abandoned this conception of social facts, and it was correct for him to maintain the position he did.' (Parsons 1975: 107).

1.3.7. Durkheim and other philosophers

Much attention has been paid, over the decades, to Durkheim's relationship with Pragmatism. There have been several studies elaborating this point (Deledalle 1959, 2002; Rusche & Tilman 2007). Here an obvious role should have been played by Cuvillier's (1955; cf. 'D.' 1957 and Wolff 1956) reconstruction of Durkheim's own 1913-1914 lecture course on 'Pragmatisme et Sociologie', at the Sorbonne, Paris. However, we have already heard Anne Rawls's (1997; cf. 2004: 6n) complaint in regard of Durkheim's epistemology: *overlooked, misunderstood and underestimated*.

If Durkheim does not personally and explicitly engage in debate⁵⁷ with Marx despite their converging view on selected points (notably the social origin of the categories), some Marxists and Durkheimian have done just that.⁵⁸ Challenger (1995), writing when Marxism had already gone out of fashion once more in the international social sciences,⁵⁹ made the remarkable point that the real challenge for social theoreticians is to formulate an alternative to the Marxist paradigm. Subsequently, Challenger sets out to demonstrate that, viewed⁶⁰ 'through the lens of Aristotle', Durkheim does precisely that. However, as one reviewer McCance (1995; cf. Stack 1996) cannot fail to point out, Challenger's subsequent treatment of major postmodern philosophers – who, obviously, would be more likely candidates than Aristotle for offering a viable sociological interpretation of our present, post-modern world; cf. van Binsbergen 2004c – leaves too much to be desired to buy his surprising Aristotelian solution lock, stock and barrel.

⁵⁶ A celebrated medical researcher and writer at the time – WvB.

⁵⁷ However, see Durkheim's (1897b) review of Labriola's Marxist exposé; he also wrote a book on socialism (1896), whose 1962 English translation was edited by the prominent American sociologist A. Gouldner, while the originally French introduction was by Mauss.

⁵⁸ Cf. Bottomore 1981; Cuvillier 1948; Filloux 1977; Desroche 1978.; Järvikoski 1996; Mansueto 1988.

⁵⁹ Which says nothing about the persisting value of that theoretical perspective, nor about my own lasting if partial and situational commitment to it; cf. van Binsbergen 1981, 2012a; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985.

⁶⁰ The expression is amusingly anachronistic: spectacles only came into use in the high Middle Ages, 1500 years after Aristotle; centuries after Aristotle, the Emperor Nero, in the first c. CE, was reputed to peep through a *beryl*, i.e. $\text{Be}_3\text{Al}_2(\text{SiO}_3)_6$ crystal, and this provided the etymon for *Brille* / *bril*, 'spectacles', in German, Dutch etc. As I have extensively argued from an African and intercultural-philosophical perspective, it often turns out to be condescending and implicitly hegemonic to try and view the modern world through the lens of Aristotle – which e.g. specialists in rhetoric as a branch of philosophy have tried to do for the case of the transformation of the Republic of South Africa towards majority rule in the 1990s (Salazar *et al.* 2004; van Binsbergen 2004c).

Durkheim was not the only French philosopher with a passion for the ethnographic literature and for problems of intercultural comparison and cultural origins. Anthropologists were early alerted to the work of Durkheim's colleague Lucien Lévy-Bruhl through the initially enthusiastic reviews of his work from the hand of E.E. Evans-Pritchard, a colonial anthropologist stationed in the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Evans-Pritchard would soon, through his writings on the Nuer, the Shilluk, and the Azande, with special emphasis on their religion, magic, divination and kingship, become one of the most prominent British anthropologists. In the next chapter we shall return to Lévy-Bruhl. One of the latter's principal works (Lévy-Bruhl 1910) was published in the context of Durkheim's seminal journal *L'Année Sociologique*, the backbone of the latter's sociological school. Durkheim used one and the same article (1909-1912) to present a summary of both Lévy-Bruhl's book and of his own *Les Formes*, stressing the continuity between the two approaches (cf. Merllie & Durkheim 1989). The closeness between Durkheim and Lévy-Bruhl may surprise social scientists today. For in today's discourse Lévy-Bruhl (with such book titles as *Les Fonctions Mentales Dans Les Sociétés Inférieures / How Natives Think* and *La Mentalité Primitive / Primitive Mentality* became emblematic for a particular, discarded racist construction of the colonial subject as inferior to the West European colonisers.⁶¹ By contrast, Durkheim, although systematically shunning issues of social inequality, exploitation, class struggle and violence, hence open to modern criticism, yet largely managed to escape Lévy-Bruhl's stigmatisation. This was not in the first place because of the wider scope and relevance of Durkheim's thought, but particularly because the latter, from today's (inevitably anachronistic for politically correct) perspective, made the right choice in taking Australian Aboriginals, classified as 'Blacks' and among the most wretched of marginalised peoples around 1900 CE, as exemplary of the whole of humankind and its religion.

⁶¹ #9. ANTHROPOLOGY AS ALLEGED HANDMAIDEN OF COLONIALISM? EVANS-PRITCHARD AND LÉVY-BRUHL. So Evans-Pritchard was not only a colonial civil servant but also a racist, after all? And the common stereotype, vocally represented in African Studies and among African intellectuals in the 1960s-1980s (Leclerc 1972; Copans 1974, 1975; Buijtenhuijs 1972; Asad 1973), of anthropology as a handmaiden of colonial oppression, is confirmed, after all? Were the History of Ideas, and of political correctness, but so simple. Evans-Pritchard was in the first place a fieldworker, his insights in e.g. Nuer village life and in Azande oracles are based on the patient and humble collection of rich and intimate real-life detail, of the kind in which the fieldworker makes herself / himself vulnerable and subservient beyond common limits of endurance (Evans-Pritchard offers famous examples of this), and which leaves little place for the *practice* of racialism – even if in their *theoretical* pronouncements such fieldworkers may have remained children of their racist, imperialist time and age. So was Lévy-Bruhl, although not himself a fieldworker. The latter's insistent and creative engagement with non-Western, non-logocentric, patterns of thought as recorded in the (generally defective) ethnographic material that was at his disposal, to my mind reveals an even greater extent of empathy and identification than Durkheim does in *Les Formes*. Lévy-Bruhl's notion of 'participation' as summing up the positioning of the non-logocentric human subject vis-à-vis Nature, today is in principle as insightful as it was a century ago – although we would no longer use the same expressions for fear of guilty condescendence vis-à-vis the subjects of ethnographic research.

1.3.8. *From philosophy to sociology*

Ironically, Durkheim, against his philosophical background, succeeded in creating a viable sociology by detaching it from philosophy – leaving to subsequent generations the task of creating a viable intercultural philosophy, *i.e.* one cut to the measure of decolonisation, and globalisation (brought about by a whole range of factors and processes, including the capitalist mode of production, world religions, formal education, and modern science, global migration, the emerging global politics of knowledge, digitalised information and communication on a global scale, etc.) When I took over the Rotterdam Chair of Foundations of Intercultural Philosophy in 1998, well over a century after Durkheim had acceded to the first French chair in sociology, at the University of Bordeaux, France, 1887-1888 (*cf.* Durkheim 2008), I came to realise (van Binsbergen 2003a, 2015b) that on this philosophical side painfully little progress had been made in the meantime. The social sciences had effectively been established, and had reached their highest culmination around the middle of the 20th c. CE, but by the end of the 20th century, the position of *academia* within postmodern, post-democratic society had already become so weak and the increasingly volatile, uncontrollable forces of corporate capital in collusion with military and post-imperialist international ambitions, had largely deprived academic intellectual production of all hope at relevant, responsible and independent societal impact. One of the aspects of this process was that my new philosophical colleagues at Rotterdam – and, with them, Postmodernists throughout the present-day world at large – could afford, with impunity, to totally ignore, or ridicule, the empirical basis and methods of the variety of social-science-based intercultural philosophy I had come to represent in their midst. With considerable exaggeration one might say (*cf.* van Binsbergen 2015b: 37 *f.*) that Postmodernism (including the Foucaultian encroachment) had exploded the social sciences which Durkheim had created at the cost of excessively hard work and an early death.

Meanwhile the twentieth century had been the century of the social sciences. The latter had supplanted the individual-centred image of humanity that – I repeat – had dominated Western thought, art and *belles lettres* since Graeco-Roman Antiquity (perhaps with an interlude during Medieval collectivism under the aegis of the Christian Church). That the social had established itself as a category *sui generis*, meant the culminating success of Durkheim's life's project.

Typically, this triumph (although rather wearing out towards the year 2000 CE) could not have been the work of just one man. Admittedly, Durkheim was not the only Founding Father of the social sciences – we must not overlook Marx, Simmel, Tönnies, Weber, Pareto, Troeltsch, etc. Moreover, Durkheim had shown the intuition of the true social scientist by realising that scientific truth is a collective product, and had constantly steered towards the institutionalisation of his insights in the form of an authoritative journal, *L'Année Sociologique*, and an

institutional basis. In fact, the maturation and dissemination of Durkheim's social thought was largely in the hands of his three closest students, Marcel Mauss, Robert Hertz (even though the latter was already killed in 1915 in World War I), and Henri Hubert. These were loyal but independent minds, whose contributions also consisted in correcting one-sidednesses in Durkheim's own work. Hertz's greatest merit has perhaps been to stress the negative aspects of the *sacred* which, in *Les Formes*, appears in exaggerated glory and splendour – an antidote which also renders Durkheim veneration of society somewhat more palatable and realistic. Also Martelli (1993) highlights a disagreement between Durkheim and Mauss concerning the nature of the *sacred*. The differences, in certain respects fundamental, between Durkheim and his closest co-workers, has recently been articulated once more around the concepts of 'soul' and 'spirit', with an application of Vietnamese commemoration of the war dead (Kwon 2014).

It is time to concentrate on *Les Formes*, and terminate this general introduction to Durkheim's sociology whose only purpose was to create a framework against which to understand *the master's final book, which consisted of a theory of religion*. One final point however remains to be made. Outside France, Durkheim's impact upon twentieth-century sociology has been rather more limited than that of Max Weber, especially after Gerth, Mills and Mannheim made Weber's main books, originally written in German, available in English translations. Weber's sociological methodology differed from Durkheim's in stressing the subjective, interpretive, by implication individual-centred, *complementary* dimension of social life and of social research – against Durkheim's artificial sociologicistic insistence on his claim 'social facts are things' (Durkheim 1897). If social facts were indeed things, they ought to be capable of existing without the necessary intervention of the human subject's conscious mind, perceptions and motivations – the very object of Weber's *Verstehende* sociology.⁶² Weber's philosophical roots were not so much Kantian or Cartesian, but had been pioneered by Wilhelm Dilthey in a bid to establish the Humanities on a more secure epistemological footing by the late 19th c. CE. Durkheim's radical positioning has elicited much criticism, already within a year (from the American sociologist Tosti in 1898). However, true to life, and fortunately for the 20th-c. CE development of the social sciences, Durkheim's application of his programmatic statements has not been without contradictions and inconsistencies. Thus, *e.g.*, in *Les Formes*, there is a considerable appeal to the conscious perceptions and motivations of the Australian carriers of the alleged 'elementary forms of religious life'. We should therefore not be too surprised to see Durkheim listed among the precursors of interpretative sociology (Wanderer 2005; *cf.* Gibbons 2007).

⁶² *Cf.* Weber 1985 / 1919. Abel (1948) in a much cited but essentially mistaken discussion rejects *Verstehen* as a sociological method, and also the Diltheyan dichotomy between natural and social sciences on which it is based; *cf.* Dilthey 1883, 1959, 1961.

1.4. Durkheim's last major book: *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse*

1.4.1. Overview

While certainly Durkheim's main contribution to the social science of religion, *Les Formes* (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990) does not stand isolated amidst his other major writings. Many convergent themes, such as the moral factuality of society and the nature of collective representations, also featured in the posthumously published collection of three essays *Sociologie et Philosophie* (Durkheim 1974 / 1924). His book on *Suicide* already foreshadows the pivotal role he would, 17 years later in *Les Formes*, assign to religion. Systems of classifications had been the topic of a joint publication with Mauss in 1901. In preparation of *Les Formes*, vital aspects of Australian ethnography, especially the system of social organisation in clans and marriage classes, had been treated in major articles in *L'Année Sociologique*, where, as the editor-in-chief, Durkheim, would constantly grapple with new ethnographic publications in all modern languages, in eager anticipation of his final and greatest book. It is to a summary of *Les Formes* that we shall now proceed.

Searching for criteria which allow him to define religion in general amidst other human phenomena, Durkheim rejects definitions departing from 'the mysterious'⁶³ or 'the belief in spiritual beings' (Tylor), and proposes the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane*:

'Une classification des choses, réelles ou idéales, que se représentent les hommes, en deux classes, en deux genres opposés, désignés généralement par deux termes distincts que traduisent assez bien les mots de profane et sacré' (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 50).

This opposition is not merely hierarchical, for that would also apply to the opposition masters / slaves; moreover it turns out to be impossible to find other attributes that generally apply to this opposition:

'...il ne reste plus pour définir le sacré par rapport au profane que leur hétérogénéité. Seulement, ce qui fait que cette hétérogénéité suffit à caractériser cette classification, c'est qu'elle est très particulière: elle est absolue. (...) ses formes de contraste sont vari-

⁶³ #10. ON MYSTERY RELIGION. In the scientific study of religion outside the North Atlantic region, which (after promising beginnings) mainly developed in the course of the 20th c. CE, the concept of 'mystery' has not played a central role. Durkheim's reference here seems to be mainly to Graeco-Roman Antiquity, and to Ancient Europe and West Asia in general. In *Les Formes* he rejects the concept of *mystery* in the context of his search for elementary forms of religious life, on the grounds that 'mystery' does not seem original and primary, but on the contrary only a relatively late development in the history of religion. (Had he only realised that the same could be said for *sacred* / *profane*!) A small but representative bibliographical selection of studies emphasising the mystery dimension of religion, with emphasis on studies from Durkheim's own time, may be found in Appendix II, below. Most deal with the Ancient Mediterranean and adjacent regions and periods, with the exception of e.g. Alexander 1917 (America); Cowan 1992 / 1989 (Australia); MacCulloch 1917 (Melanesia and Polynesia); Thomas 1917 (Africa); Talbot 1915 (Nigeria).

ables, le fait même du contraste est universel' (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 53).

Transition from one domain to the other is possible and even necessary, but it entails a veritable metamorphosis *totius substantiae* ('of the very nature of the object in question'), for instance in the case of initiation rites:

'Les deux mondes ne sont pas seulement connus comme séparés, mais comme hostiles et jaloux l'un de l'autre. Puisqu'on ne peut appartenir pleinement à l'un qu'à condition d'être entièrement sorti de l'autre, l'homme est exhorté à se retirer totalement du profane' (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 54-55).

The *profane* is simply that which cannot and must not, with impunity, be brought in contact with the *sacred*, unless an *opération délicate* is at play in which *le profane perde ses caractères spécifiques*, that is: becomes more or less *sacred* in its own right (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 55-56). *Sacred* objects (and every religion comprises more than one such objects) constitute the cores around which the clustering of *croyances* and *rites* takes place. In case the connection with the *sacred* objects is lost, then such a cluster turns into a *survival*.⁶⁴ In combination with the distinction between religion / magic (for

⁶⁴ #11. ON THE CONCEPT OF 'SURVIVAL'. Given great pride of place in as many as two full chapters of Tylor's foundational *Primitive Culture* (1871 / 1903: ch. III and IV, pp. 70*f.*), the concept of *survival* as designation of a particular kind of cultural dynamics featured importantly in the anthropology and related sciences (especially folklore and religious studies) around 1900 CE (e.g. Rivers 1913), but was subsequently virtually eclipsed from the discipline as a result of Malinowski's presentist functionalism; in recent decades, its use has been limited to cultural studies peripheral to mainstream anthropology, such as maritime studies. Reviewing the controversial case of proto-Bantu, the prominent historian of Africa the late lamented Jan Vansina (1980: 315) chided the once leading structural-functionalist anthropologist G.P. Murdock for 'his derivation of proto-Bantu society and culture on the basis of "survivals", a notion that few historians would accept'. In present-day anthropological discourse the word is still abundantly used, but almost exclusively in the material sense of 'avoiding annihilation' (as an individual or a group, culture, nation, language), or 'the state of having avoided annihilation' (e.g. Neanderthals in Southern and Eastern Europe and West Asia after 30 ka BP). In the classic usage, a (!) *survival* meant: *a cultural trait that would appear to be without identifiable meaning and function in the socio-cultural context in which it is found, but that was postulated to have dragged on its existence – through some cultural inertia left unexplained – from an earlier period when it did have such meaning and function*. Lacking, as yet, an all-pervasive and central theory of culture such was to be installed at the heart of anthropology in the course of the 20th c. CE, anthropology up to that time used the notion of *survival* as an important tool to denote the *virtualisation* (van Binsbergen 1997 / 2015b: ch. 1, pp. 85-168) of once vital aspects of culture into a peripheral existence as games, plays, superstitions, fairy tales, masquerades, and other items of folklore. In diachronic cultural analysis the notion of *survival* was used e.g. to discuss the persistence of Mycenaean or quasi-Mycenaean (Homeric) themes into Greece of the classical period (Nilsson 1950; Hirvonen 1968; Bowra 1961; Lorimer 1950; Webster 1958; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: ch. 5, pp. 99 *f.*, and *passim*); of Ancient Israelite traits into the Judaism and Christianity of the Common Era (Barker 1987) – but also the opposite movement has been abundantly observed and interpreted in terms of *survival*: the appropriation and transformation of Christian and Islamic items for magical purposes outside those world religions (e.g. Anonymous 1892; van Binsbergen 2017a: 394n); of the representations and beliefs of the religions of Antiquity, into Early Modern European literature and art (Seznec 1994 / 1961); of earlier, 'pagan', layers of religious belief and practice into the subsequently dominant world religions of Christianity and Islam (Barb 1963; Westermarck 1933 / 1973 / 1933; Bel 1938; Henderson 1911); of Babylonian proto-scientific methods into Graeco-Roman Antiquity, and into the Middle Ages (Neugebauer 1963). In the age of diffusionism, *survival* was often the ready answer to otherwise unaccount-

which the concept of *église* / ‘congregation’ is introduced), Durkheim thus arrives at his famous definition of religion:

‘Une religion est un système solidaire de croyances et de pratiques relatives à des choses sacrées, c-à-d. séparées, interdites, croyances et pratiques qui unissent en une même communauté morale, appelée Église, tous ceux qui y adhèrent.’ (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 65).

Before developing, in this way, his own religion theory, Durkheim considers the explanations given by others before him. Here we encounter a good example of the methodological shortcoming of *Les Formes*: any definition in the social

able presences of far-flung alien cultural items in socio-cultural contexts where they seemed very little at home, e.g. the industry around *Purpurea* snails in Mexico (Nuttall 1909 – argued to be a *survival* from an Old-World, Phoenician background; a claim reminiscent of the later one by Heyerdahl); abundant cultural traits among New World Blacks relegated to West Africa (Herskovits 1941); and although to most inhabitants of the North Atlantic, Australia is the home of the boomerang *par excellence*, the pioneering British archaeologist Pitt-Rivers (1883) put up an argument according to which the Australian specimens could be considered *survivals* from Ancient Egypt (throwing sticks have now been attested in Bronze Age contexts with Libyan, Egyptian and Mesopotamian connotations including the *Gilgamesh* epic)

‘The Australians, whether they are a pure or a mixed race, are without doubt the most primitive people in existence in regard to their arts. All their various weapons are obtained by a selection of natural forms, and they possess none of those complex forms which imply descent from a higher civilisation. Amongst the existing weapons of the Australians, viewed as *survivals*, the whole history of the boomerang may be traced.’ (Pitt-Rivers 1883: 459 f.)

– in preparation of the Egyptocentric, ‘heliocentric’ theories of arch-diffusionism which were to come *en vogue* a few decades later (Smith 1915 / 1929; cf. van Binsbergen, in press (g)). Certain items of culture have proved to be particularly prone to such continuities, notably those of a highly formalised nature, such as boat designs in the Mediterranean and East Africa (Hornell 1923, 1938; Bonino 1974; Tilley 1969, 1973); divination systems; and board games (Murray 1952, esp. p. 233; Culin 1991); the continuities between Mesolithic / Neolithic and later art and religion in Europe (Basch 1966; Gimbutas 1991); or those between Ancient Egypt and the Ancient Near East, on the one hand, and West Africa on the other hand (Wainwright 1949; Lucas c. 1900 / 1995; Meek 1931; Davis 1955; Lange 2004). Inevitably, given the prevailing imperialist, colonialist and racist intellectual climate in the North Atlantic region c. 1900 CE, the concept of *survival* could be put to a dubious use, like in the following passage from the now obsolete Egyptologist Budge when trying to explain away the Ancient Egyptian myth – awkward from a prudish, official Victorian point of view – according to which the first creatures had been brought into the world by the creator god Atum’s masturbation:

‘But in any case this brutal example of naturalism was not intended to be obscene, and it must be regarded as a *survival* in literature of the dynastic period of one of the coarse habits of the predynastic Egyptians, that is to say, of one of the indigenous African tribes from which dynastic Egyptians were partly descended’ Budge 1904 / 1969: 297 f.)

Even so, it is difficult to see how an history-sensitive anthropology could address the historicity of cultural items without recourse to some such concept as *survival* or *cultural lag* (Woodart 1934). The question is dear to me for – despite the risk of facile reproaches for regressive antiquarianism – this kind of problems looms large in my work over the last few decades, and for excellent reasons. Meanwhile, the one-sidedness of today’s paradigmatic rejection of the concept of *survival* is also suggested by Barnard & Spencer’s (1998: 704 f.) remarks on this point: carefully avoiding inclusion of a specific lemma on ‘*survival*’ in their otherwise impressive encyclopaedia, and carefully giving a wide berth to the antiquated theory where that concept was at home, they nonetheless insist that Malinowski (who exclusively attributed everything in culture to ‘*function*’) was wrong and that *survivals* in the classic sense do exist – or Oxford dons would not be wearing formal dress at ceremonial occasions, nor gowns at others.

sciences is in principle *arbitrary*,⁶⁵ and it is equally arbitrary to employ the paired concepts *sacred / profane* in such a definition; Durkheim is therefore to be faulted when he uses his own definition as an argument to reject Max Müller's explanation of religion as an expression of awe or fear caused by natural phenomena such as nightfall and dawn, lightning, solar or lunar eclipses, etc. I shall return to this point below.

Durkheim illustrates and develops his theory by reference to ethnographic data. Here he interprets the religion of the Australian in terms of the opposition *sacred / profane*. Below we shall investigate how Durkheim uses these concepts operationally, translating them into concrete sense phenomena which may be concretely, empirically demonstrated on the ground. From Australian religion he mainly considers:

- the bullroarers, oblong, flat objects which, suspended from a cord, may be brought into a circular orbit and then produce a deeply roaring sound – these objects have a very wide distribution all over the world, since prehistory, and are frequently found in the context of initiation rites;
- the abstract totemic representations (made out of sticks, or drawn, either on the bullroarers, on rocks, or in the sand);
- the animal and vegetal species and (to a far lesser extent) other concrete natural objects, after which the totems have been named and for which the totems serve as representations
- the people themselves
- and finally the individual totems.

He posits that all this may be called *sacred*, albeit not all in the same degree: the vegetal and animal species less so than the bullroarers and the totemic representations. What makes the latter *sacred* can only be their reference, through a characteristic design or pattern, to the totem, which in its turn is the emblem, the flag, of the clan.

After rejecting how others have interpreted these representations, Durkheim presents, in the famous seventh chapter of Book II of *Les Formes*, his theory of the fundamental connection between religion and society. He attempts to demonstrate that society (both in general, and Australian society in particular)

⁶⁵ Unless we use the definitional format in order to ethnographically or historiographically render, emically, the way the historical and local actors in question impose their own categories upon the world – then, our definition cannot be merely arbitrary but has to be built around methodically grounded information on the actors' views.

in capable of inspiring its members with a sense of the *sacred*; God and society are conducive to the same attitudes – they make demands, request cooperation, and in turn this brings about in us

‘toute sorte de gênes, de privations et de sacrifices’ (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 295).

Both have that sort of power. Hence they inspire us with an intense *respect*:

‘On dit d’un sujet, individuel ou collectif, qu’il inspire le respect quand la représentation qui l’exprime dans les consciences est douée d’une telle force que, automatiquement, elle suscite ou inhibe des actes, *abstraction faite de toute considération relative aux effets utiles ou nuisibles des uns et des autres*’ (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 296).

Such attitudes are constantly sustained in the mutual contacts between the members of society: this is how society convinces; and it reacts vehemently, by moral and physical sanctions, in case one deviates from these attitudes – religion is the translation of this moral aspect. But in addition, society also lends force, on the occasion of certain events perhaps more clearly so than others (Durkheim points at the French Revolution), but still constantly: through the moral support which one enjoys individually as a member of a certain group, and more fixedly and permanently, through traditions, customs, language. Because of the inspiration which society engenders in us, a human being knows two conditions, which as it were constitute two different worlds: under one condition he looks at the things without ‘respect’, with an eye only for their intrinsic utility to the individual, and in the other condition the very opposite obtains – corresponding with *profane* and *sacred* respectively. Incessantly society makes out of *profane*, *sacred*.

Application to the Australian societies, and further elaboration, leads to the following formulation concerning the emergence of *sacred* objects:

‘On peut maintenant comprendre comment (...) toute force religieuse est extérieure aux choses dans lesquelles elle réside. C’est que la notion n’est nullement construite avec les impressions que cette chose produit directement sur nos sens et sur notre esprit.⁶⁶ La force religieuse n’est que le sentiment que la collectivité inspire à ses membres, mais projeté hors des consciences qui l’éprouvent, et objectivé. Pour s’objectiver, il se fixe sur un objet qui devient ainsi sacré; mais tout objet peut jouer ce rôle. En principe, il n’y en a pas qui soient prédestinées par leur nature, à l’exclusion des autres; il n’y en a pas davantage qui y soit nécessairement réfractaires. Tout dépend des circonstances qui font que le sentiment générateur des idées religieuses se pose ici ou là, sur tel point plutôt sur un tel autre. Le caractère sacré que revêt une chose n’est donc pas impliqué dans les propriétés intrinsèques de celles-ci: *il y est surajouté*. Le monde du religieux n’est pas un aspect particulier de la nature empirique; il y est superposé.’ (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 327-328).

After further elaboration, and little convincing attempts to explain such forms of religious representation as ‘soul’, ‘god’, ‘spirit’ in terms of the general theory,

⁶⁶ This expression does reveal the Kantian element in Durkheim’s thinking.

Durkheim in *Book III* proceeds to the discussion of ritual. In explanation of the 'ascetic rites' (i.e. prohibitions, taboos; Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 428 f.) the opposition *sacred / profane* is further worked out; Durkheim indicates in what ways whatever may be prohibited in connection with the *sacred*, and tries to explain those prohibitions. In his opinion, such prohibitions may separate two *sacred* objects from one another (which either means that one is more *sacred* than the other, or refers to the *ambiguïté du sacré* to which we will come shortly); alternatively, such prohibitions may separate the *sacred* from the *profane*. In his explanation Durkheim constantly appeals to what he considers as an absolute and universal distinction in our thought, that between *sacred* and *profane*, from which these prohibitions would immediately and logically follow (if only that assumption of absolute difference were not merely an *etic*, i.e. analytically constructed and imposed, theoretical *a priori*). Moreover he introduces the notion, in analogy to Frazer's⁶⁷ approach to magic, of the *contagiosité du sacré*: the *sacred* is contagious, so the *profane* has to be protected against it. In turn, Durkheim explains this contagiousness from his tenet that the *sacred* is not something intrinsic, but has been externally imposed – this allegedly explains (but I find this one of the weaker spots in Durkheim's argument) that whatever is brought into the same sphere, will share in the *sacred* attribute, especially since the emotions associated with *sacred* objects are so very intense.

The ascetic rites are also a symbol of the many demands society makes from her members. They constitute the condition for the 'positive cult': sacrifice,⁶⁸ fertility rite, and commemorative rite (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 419 f.). Sacrifice is explained on the basis of the mutual dependence between the *sacred* and its worshippers: we offer prestations to the *sacred* in order to ensure that the things that are in our interest, will actually continue to take place; but because the *sacred* derives its power from the group assembled for the rites, the *sacred* is more intensely experienced during the collective rites, and is then all the more real. This constitutes a perfect analogy, identity even, with society: the latter makes us to what we are, but also can only exist because of us:

'...le culte a réellement pour effet de recréer périodiquement un être moral dont nous dépendons comme il dépend de nous. Or cet être existe: c'est la société.' (Durkheim

⁶⁷ Frazer 1911-1915 (3rd edition, first edition 1890).

⁶⁸ #12. *ON SACRIFICE*. It cannot be maintained that Durkheim ignored *sacrifice* in his religion theory, yet one wonders if this concept should not have occupied a more central place, as it does in Judaism (Noah's absolutely constitutive sacrifice after the flood, Abraham's abortive sacrifice of Isaac (the human father sacrificing the son on the orders of God), the sacrifices made in preparation, and during, the Exodus from Egypt) and in Christianity (the Christian conception of Christ's death on the cross amounts to a shocking reversion of Abraham's sacrifice: God the Father sending His Son to be sacrificed for the benefit of humankind). In the popular fringes of all world religions sacrifice plays a major role, as it does, more centrally, in many illiterate / non-logocentric forms of religion. Many writers on religion (e.g. Wellhausen, Freud, Girard, Vernant, Burkert) have elevated sacrifice to a central religious act. Further reflection is needed on this point. Cf. Bourdillon & Fortes 1980; Millbank 1995.

1912 / 1960 / 1990: 497).

Finally, in a bid to explain the rites surrounding death, Durkheim introduces the notion of the *ambiguité du sacré*, on which we have already anticipated (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 584 f.). The *sacred* has two aspects: one positive and benign – the other negative, the forces of illness, death, sorcery, profanation, pollution. Both aspects are equally prohibited to the *profane*. Frequently the two aspects pass into each other and back, respect and dismay are fairly close to one another. According to Durkheim the benign *sacred* refers to society

‘au moment où elle s’affirme avec confiance et presse avec ferveur les choses de concourir à la réalisation des fins qu’elle poursuit’,

whereas the negative *sacred* refers to those things which

‘l’attristent, l’angoissent ou l’irritent’ (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 589–590 [where “[a]”, i.e. ‘it’, repeatedly refers to society as the proposed referent of all religious symbolism – WvB].

Durkheim claims that these two aspects may be discerned in all rites as discussed by him, and therefore all these rites are essentially the same.

In summary Durkheim attributes in *Les Formes* the following characteristics to *sacred* / *profane*:

- it is a universal and absolute distinction, applying to both material and ideal objects
- something can be more *sacred* or less *sacred*
- whether an object is *sacred* is determined by society and does not in the least derive from intrinsic characteristics of that object
- because [?] the *sacred* is merely an attribute it transfers itself to everything with which it is brought into contact⁶⁹
- therefore the profane must keep a distance from the *sacred*, or assimilate with the latter
- whatever is *sacred* is an object of absolute respect, inspired in us by the power which society holds over us
- the *sacred* has two aspects, positive and negative, corresponding with whatever is either constructive or destructive for society.

⁶⁹ Do we detect here another weak spot in Durkheim’s argument? Why should not the profane, also a mere attribute, follow the sacred’s example and also behave contagiously? Apparently a third, unidentified factor is at work here. In general, if mere contact would be sufficient to transfer attributes, our world would be *cameleontic*: contact with a pious person, a redhead, a genius would automatically turn us all into pious persons, redheads, or geniuses.

Durkheim's argument clearly has two phases:

1. the construction of a conceptual apparatus with which to describe the phenomena, and
2. the postulation of certain empirically verifiable relationships between the phenomena what we have identified as corresponding with the concepts constructed under (1).

Constantly, Durkheim tries to substantiate, through reference to ethnographic data, the relationships which he posits between religion and society.⁷⁰ However, such testing is not systematic, and however illuminating Durkheim's insights may be, for the time being they cannot be considered more than deductions from essentially arbitrary premises: the paired concept *sacred / profane*, the central criterion in the definition of religion. It is very important to keep this in mind when below we will explore the possibility of maintaining these paired concepts as analytical tools for the social sciences.

The concept of *collective representations* is pivotal to Durkheim's religion theory, and it is to this topic that the recent literature has returned frequently and in considerable detail.⁷¹ As Stephen P. Turner (2011) elucidates in his dismissive review of Collins (2010), we need collective representations because they provide the link between, on the one hand, individual perceptions and motivations, which may be anti-social and may ramify out in all directions, and, on the other hand, the consensual convergence which is needed for a society, and which individuals may learn and apply even if that requires an act of submission. Replace 'collective representation' by 'culture', and the difference can hardly be noticed.

Did Durkheim truly believe (as many later commentators have reproached him for) to have captured, with the Australian Aboriginals, *the most primitive form* of religion? He was well aware that the Australians had millennia of cultural history behind them,

'comme tous les peuples connus' (Durkheim in Poulat & Durkheim 1970).

He believed that studying what he thought was a relatively simple form of religion, would bring out the essence of the topic most clearly – although his reasons for classifying religions into simpler and more complex varieties remain somewhat obscure, and no doubt are indebted to the evolutionism *en vogue* in his time. Surely, studies of Australian systems of social and natural classification⁷² have revealed the extreme complexities of Australian cultures, as com-

⁷⁰ In an illuminating inaugural lecture, John Bossy (1982) goes into the history (especially Early Modern) of the key words in Durkheim's equation, 'religion' and 'society'.

⁷¹ Pickering 2002; Plascencia 2007; Friedland 2005, who under the intriguing and certainly fashionable title 'drag queens at the totem ball' deals with the erotics of collective representation in Durkheim and Freud (especially 1963 / 1928).

⁷² E.g. Spencer & Gillen 2004; Lévi-Strauss 1962a, 1962b; Petersen 1976; Meggitt 1952; Malinowski

pared to which those of the Ancient Greeks, the Ancient Chinese, modern folk culture in Western Europe, or some African systems of thought, appear to be wonders of simplicity and transparency...

1.4.2. Durkheim's method in *Les Formes*

The method which Durkheim employed in capturing 'elementary forms of religious life' is one that would have little to recommend it today: he did not engage in extensive cross-cultural comparison, nor in historical comparison, nor allowed himself to be inspired by the thrust of many years of personal fieldwork involving extensive participant observation and mastery of a local language and culture – instead, he relied exclusively, second hand, on a few extensive ethnographies which were then being published on the Australian Aborigines. *Les Formes*, in all its detailed analysis of contents and structure, is merely ethnography by proxy, as we have seen. Nanda (1980; cf. Giddens 1970) plausibly argues that Durkheim's main empirical inspiration was the spate of new ethnographic publications coming out internationally at the time, and passing through Durkheim's hands as a principal reviewer for *L'Année Sociologique*. *Les Formes* took a long time in preparation; during one and a half decades, Durkheim published shorter studies on parts of his argument in the main book, and his international colleagues already entered in debate with these earlier instalments; thus Andrew Lang (1905) could already reflect in print on Durkheim's analysis of totemism, seven years before the publication of *Les Formes*. Thus also the exchange between Lang and Durkheim on the immutability of a clan's totemic association, within the pages of the scholarly journal *Folklore* (Durkheim 1904; Lang 1904a, 1904b).

Admittedly not from fieldwork, but on the basis of the existing ethnographic literature, Durkheim had yet a detailed knowledge of Australian social organisation, and wrote about it extensively; e.g. Durkheim 1896-1897 (on the incest prohibition, largely in connection with Australian clan systems; that this is the opening article of the very first volume of *L'Année Sociologique*, already indicates how much importance Durkheim attached to the topic). Clearly, the sustained effort of research and writing resulting in *Les Formes* (1912) had already begun long before that book's final publication.⁷³ Also in this respect is

1913; Livingstone 1959; Radcliffe-Brown 1931; Rose 1960; Berndt 1974; Berndt & Berndt 1970, 1968, 1989, 1993; Berndt & Tonkinson 1988.

⁷³ The reviewer Ember (1964) declared the long-awaited French translation, of 1963, as 'merely of historical interest'. But that in itself would be enough for a text by one of the Founding Fathers of sociology. Needham (1966), however, barely able to conceal his irritation, pointed out three reasons why a (preferably: better) translation of Durkheim on incest would have been of eminent importance: it is unique in Durkheim's oeuvre, of enduring importance for the explanation of four-section systems of social organisation (an emphasis on foursomes which potentially situates it in a world-wide post-Neolithic tradition; cf. van Binsbergen 2012d), and a good illustration of Durkheim's method.

Les Formes truly Durkheim's masterpiece: the culmination of a continuous focus on religion. J.S. Fish's (cf. Nisbet 1972) point is well-taken:

'it is the religious and emotional foundations of order that provide the true germinative link between Durkheim's early and later work, and not structural functional differentiation, as commentators like Wallwork (1984, 1985) had otherwise suggested' (Fish 2002: 203).

Another such largely ethnographic piece is Durkheim 1903-1904 (on Australian marriage systems).

1.5. Early reception of *Les Formes*

Les Formes, when first published (1912), immediately had great impact in the form of reviews and criticism, and was certainly a prominent part of what Randall Collins has called 'the Durkheimian movement in France and world sociology'.⁷⁴ Early reviews of *Les Formes* included: Adams 1916 (who compares Durkheim with his contemporary, the comparative religionist Royce); Beckerson 1916 (who defends Durkheim against the – implicitly racist – allegation that taking the religion of non-Western, illiterate peoples to try and understand modern North Atlantic religion means debasing the latter); and King 1913 (who immediately realised the full importance of Durkheim's book). Weatherly (1917) is less enthusiastic, but fair:

'It cannot be said that M. Durkheim has entirely escaped two pitfalls which have caught so many recent students of social origins. He occasionally reads back into the savage mind something of the abstruse mental processes of the critical scholar, and he attempts to find inclusive generalizations which shall cover the most heterogeneous and often contradictory facts. However useful may be the *sacred-profane* classification, it does not follow that "the religious life and the profane life cannot coexist in the same unit of time" (p. 308), for very many religious rites, as much among the Australians themselves as elsewhere, have a distinctly economic and utilitarian basis. It is no doubt true that the gradual separation of the two concepts resulted in the setting aside of feast days and holy days, but these are clearly not primordial.' (Weatherly 1917)

And while appreciating Durkheim's critical discussion of other authorities on totemism, Weatherly points out that Durkheim's approach is far from universally applicable and certainly does not cover the ethnographic facts of *North American* totemism – then already known in detail. Webster (1913) is similarly critical, and devastatingly chides what he rightly thinks is the obsolescence of Durkheim's central themes:

'To the reviewer, this book, however, is more valuable for its sociological method of investigation than for its positive additions to our knowledge on specific points. The author surely exaggerates the significance of totemism as a primitive institution. At the

⁷⁴ Collins 2005: 101-135, in Alexander & Smith 2005; cf. Honigsheim in Wolff 1964 and Bellah 2005.

very hour when Mr. J.G. Frazer in England is proclaiming throughout four bulky quartos that totemism, though important, is not the whole of savage society,⁷⁵ and when Mr. Goldenweiser in America is making an “analytical study” of totemism⁷⁶ to prove that it has no specific content at all, being merely a “process of socialization,” comes M. Durkheim to assure us that everything significant in Australian religion is an outgrowth of totemic conceptions. In this way he would even explain the “high gods” ([Durkheim 1912:] pp. 409-22) round whose misty personalities so much debate has raged. I am persuaded, too, that, in common with other members of his school, M. Durkheim makes far too much of the *mana* idea, not only in Australian, but in other savage religions. More evidence than is yet available will have to be presented that the notion of *mana* is a truly primitive conception and not, as seems more likely, a relatively developed philosophical explanation, the investigation of which does not take us very far into the rudiments of the religious emotion. The time has gone by for “keys to all the mythologies.”⁷⁷ The elaborate systems which attempt to explain the totality of primitive religion by reference to a single factor – *ancestor worship* with Herbert Spencer, *taboo* with M. Reinach,⁷⁸ *totemism* with M. Durkheim – “have their day and cease to be.” (Webster 1913)

Bronislaw Malinowski, then already holding two doctorates from Poland and Germany (but not in the social sciences but in mathematics / natural science), and still at the London School of Economics preparing for his epoch-making Melanesian fieldwork, wrote his own review of *Les Formes*. His beginner’s assessment was respectful but stern, rightly⁷⁹ finding fault with Durkheim’s *effe-*

⁷⁵ #12a. ON THE TERM ‘SAVAGE’. Cf. Frazer 1887, 1889, 1937. In the implicitly evolutionist intellectual climate of the early 20th c. CE, and against the background of colonialism, ‘savage society’ happened to be an acceptable, not necessarily pejorative, expression for illiterate non-Western societies with limited forms of socio-political organisation. Lévi-Strauss’s book title *Pensée Sauvage* (1964), reminds us that half a century later the term was still permissible, although he was writing, not really on ‘savage thinking’, but on ‘undomesticated’, non-logocentric, pre-scientific forms of thought such as constitute the default mode of thought among all humans of all times and regions.

⁷⁶ Goldenweiser 1910.

⁷⁷ ‘Key to all mythologies’ is a common expression in modern English-language intellectual life. It probably goes back to George Eliot’s novel *Middlemarch* (1871-1872), where one of the protagonists, Rev. Casaubon is searching for the ‘key to all mythologies’. The character Casaubon is significantly named after Isaac Casaubon, the 16th-c. CE pioneer of textual criticism, especially in regard of the texts of Hermeticism, greatly revered in his time and thought to be contemporary with the Biblical Moses – the latter himself largely a pseudoepigraphical character – yet hermeticism is shown by Isaac Casaubon to date from the beginning of the Common Era. More or less the same search for the key to all mythologies motivated the Orientalist Max Müller (one of the founders of Comparative Mythology, and editor of the 50-volume series *Sacred Books of the East*, 1875-1910), and stood at the cradle of Michael Witzel’s revival of Comparative Mythology in recent decades.

⁷⁸ Salomon Reinach was a leading antiquarian and comparativist of religion at the time. While an authority of recognised stature, in the course of his splendid career he was involved in a number of scandals: naïvely lending his impressive academic name to the validation of forgeries which, if genuine, would have had racist, Aryanist implications (Brodrick 1963; Rieth 1967; Anonymous, ‘Glozel’, 1975).

⁷⁹ I admit there is an element of circularity here. Malinowski was very much the father of the modernist, field-work based social anthropology in which I was trained at Amsterdam University, so my agreement with his verdict on *Les Formes* is not entirely independent and may be suspected to be contaminated by prejudice.

vescence and the latter's reliance on individual mental processes:

'To sum up, theories concerning one of the most fundamental aspects of religion cannot be safely based on an analysis of a single tribe, as described in practically a single ethnographical work. It should be noted that the really empirical version of this theory of origins is by no means a realization of the "objective" method, in which M. Durkheim enjoins treating social facts as things and avoiding individual psychological interpretations. In his actual theory he uses throughout individual psychological explanations. It is the modification of the individual consciousness in big gatherings, the "mental effervescence," which is assumed to be the source of "the religious." The *sacred* and divine are the psychological categories governing ideas originated in religiously inspired crowds. These ideas are collective only in so far as they are general, *i.e.* common in all members of the crowd. None the less we arrive at understanding their nature by individual analysis, by psychological introspection, and not by treating those phenomena as "things." Finally, to trace back the origins of all religious phenomena to crowd manifestations seems to narrow down extremely both the forms of social influence upon religion, and the sources from which man can draw his religious inspiration. "Mental effervescence" in large gatherings can hardly be accepted as the only source of religion. But, while one is bound to criticize certain points of principle in Prof. Durkheim's work, it must be added that the work contains in a relatively small bulk such thorough analyses of theories of religious facts, – several of which, of first-rate importance, are original contributions by Prof. Durkheim or his school,— as could only be given by one of the acutest and most brilliant living sociologists, and that these by themselves would make the book a contribution to science of the greatest importance.' (Malinowski 1913: 530*f.*)

That importance is also borne out by the fact that Jane Harrison, continuing the line of anthropologically-inspired classics of which Frazer had been a particularly prolific and successful exponent, already a year before *Les Formes* was published (but amply anticipated in its authors preliminary installments), applied Durkheim's sociologic insights in: *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1911 / 1927 / 1977).

1.6. Commentators upon *Les Formes* in the course of the 20th c. CE and most recently

In the century following the publication of *Les Formes*, the book continued to be the focus of lively and profound debate. Perhaps Nisbet's (1965: 141) is still a fair, though far from generous, assessment:

'The above summary sketch of Durkheim's analysis of the social functions of ceremony and ritual can do justice neither to its profundity nor to its wisdom. Durkheim may have been mistaken in his interpretation of certain Australian ceremonies and in his sharp differentiation between magic and religion, (...) and no doubt he erred in considering only religious rites to the practical exclusion of secular ritual, and in neglecting in general to give due attention to those phenomena that are social but nonreligious. His functional analysis of ceremonial and ritualistic institutions, nonetheless, remains, we believe, a major contribution to sociology.'

Individual monographic pieces on aspects of Durkheim's argument have not

been scarce,⁸⁰ still it seemed as if we had to wait till the centennial of the book's publication, in 2012, before the first full book (Allen *et al.* 2012) would be completely devoted to what was yet, undoubtedly, the main book initiating the sociological theory of religion. The Allen *et al.* 2012 book was well worth waiting for, for here a well-chosen crowd of excellent contributors addressed many of the major outstanding problems around Durkheim's argument on religion, including: the theoretical status of Spencer and Gillen's ethnography to which Durkheim's argument was largely indebted (Morphy 2012); Durkheim's concept of belief (Jones 2012); Durkheim and Kant on God (Miller 2012); *sacred* identity (Thompson 2012); how symbolic anthropology has squandered Durkheim's heritage (Ruel 2012); Durkheim's own, bourgeois class position as informing his theory of sacrifice (Strenski 2012); the puzzles posed by Durkheim's central category of effervescence (Ramp 2012 and Allen 2012).

Yet Allen's *et al.* 2012 collective volume, despite the claim to this effect in its blurb, was not the only centennial celebration of *Les Formes élémentaires* (*cf.* Hausner 2012), nor, in fact, the first book to deal with Durkheim's religion theory. A decade earlier already, Idinoupulos & Wilson (2002) had published an entire volume on Durkheim's approach to religion, but here also Durkheim's other publications beside *Les Formes* were considered, and the treatment was more global and circumstantial, somewhat tangential to the core arguments of *Les Formes*. A real boon here has been an incisive piece, by the Historian of Ideas Robert Segal, on Robertson Smith's influence on Durkheim (Segal 2002). And soon (2004) followed Anne Rawls's book-length, enthusiastic epistemological assessment which we already discussed above.

The African American sociologist of religion Karen E. Fields⁸¹ has been the second (1995) translator of *Les Formes* (Swain's first translation was published in 1915). In that capacity she most timely stressed a point that unavoidably comes up in relation to the reception of French scholarship in the English speaking sections of academia:⁸² the fact (almost in confirmation of the contentious Whorf / Sapir thesis) that literal, one-to-one translation of French academic texts (an *a fortiori* of *belles-lettres* texts, for that matter) into modern English is a practical impossibility – so that generations of English-speaking students and scholars have to go by lame pseudo-translations (proffering a neo-Scholastic barbarian discourse full of hilarious neologisms), without truly understanding the texts in their original setting. The more even the social sciences

⁸⁰ *E.g.* Jones 2005 in Alexander & Smith 2005; W. Watts Miller in the Hausner volume 2012.

⁸¹ Whose first book (Fields 1985) was – like my first major one (van Binsbergen 1981; which she knew but chose not to cite) – a study of religious innovation in South Central Africa in the early 20th c. CE, and who also contributed an important chapter on Durkheim's method to the Hausner collection on Durkheim (Fields 2012; Hausner 2012).

⁸² It is particularly, appallingly, manifest in the hype, now fortunately subsiding, of French post-structuralist philosophers such as Foucault, Lyotard, Guattari and Deleuze replacing classic social-science writers in the postmodern social-science curriculum; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2015b: 38f.

become colonised by an alien, routinised, data-driven natural-science model, and the more they steer away from the Humanities and from their natural companions philosophy, historiography and *belles lettres*, the more this confusion of tongues will deprive us from any serious understanding of the social and the religious, and the more social research as an empathic encounter between human actors will be a thing of the past. This (of the ‘grumpy old man’ variety, unmistakably...) is not quite what Fields herself argues, but her sentiment comes somewhat close.

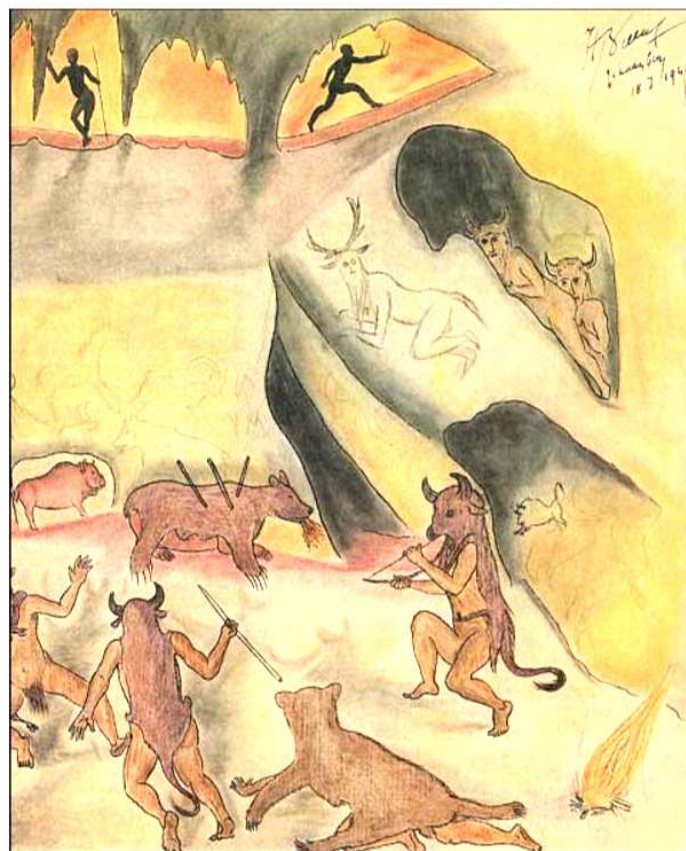


Fig. 1.2. ‘Breuil’s illustration of a religious ceremony in the Upper Palaeolithic’
(Gamble 2012: 130)

In a most interesting discussion, the prominent palaeoanthropologist Gamble (2012) looks at Durkheim’s work on religion from his specialist perspective, tracing the history of ideas of the study of prehistoric religion, and embellishing his argument with a suggestive – though immediately profoundly criticised – ‘artist’s impression’ (based on actual prehistoric depictions which have become famous by now in their own right) in which the pioneer palaeoanthropologist Abbé Louis Breuil represents an Upper Palaeolithic bear ritual (reproduced as Fig. 1.2). Regrettably, although Durkheim employed early work on prehistoric religion, his own impact on that field remained very limited:

‘But it does seem premature to consign Durkheim to the history of anthropology, the fate

meted out to Tylor, Pitt-Rivers,⁸³ Frazer and other nineteenth-century giants. Judging retrospectively, the conclusion must be that archaeology never worked through Durkheim's agenda. When archaeologists did consider religion, they turned for understanding to the bricolage of Frazer's *Golden Bough*, inspired by classical texts and ethnographic borrowings, or much later to the compartmentalization of systems theory that separated religious behaviour from other areas such as the economy, trade and crafts.⁸⁴ Little attention was given to the social basis of religion, which instead was treated as a separate and, from a Palaeolithic perspective, unique attribute of an evolving humanity. The discovery for the Palaeolithic was the extension of ritual and ceremony to species other than ourselves, *Homo sapiens*. Neanderthals had religious rituals, as we have seen, as did some of the earliest examples of [A]natomically [M]odern [H]umans, 160,000 years ago from Herto in Ethiopia (Clark *et al.* 2003). Complex mortuary practices are claimed for much older hominins at Atapuerca, Sima de la Huesos (c. 400,000 years old), involving a grave-good hand axe nicknamed Excalibur (Canals *et al.* 2003) and based on post-mortem treatment (Andrews and Fernandez Jalvo 1997) of the corpses. Further evidence of nutritional cannibalism, from Atapuerca, and dated to 800,000 years ago, has also been presented (Pettitt 201b: 47). These are fascinating insights into the complexity of hominin behaviour. However, they continue the evidence-based approach to the study of ritual, and by inference religion, that has dominated the subject. The need for a convincing proxy has stunted the study of Palaeolithic religion, so much so that Pettitt's (201b) valuable compendium of human burial in the Palaeolithic does not refer to religion at all, but only to society among chimpanzees. This failure to close the loop between society and religion underscores the continuing value of *Elementary Forms* in 2012, a century after its first publication. Durkheim's importance is to remind archaeologists of the absolute importance of social life in their Palaeolithic histories. Religious behaviour, as Durkheim argued, comes in many forms and has a social origin. It should never be seen as separate, and there is no reason to restrict its analysis to the genealogy of material symbols'. (Gamble 2012: 138 f.)

Numerous⁸⁵ have been the reactions to Durkheim on religion in the course of the 20th century. Among many, I merely mention: Seger 1957, *cf.* Pickering 1975 (*cf.* Desroche 1975 and Jones 1976); Yinger 1957 (*cf.* Eister 1958); Fournier 2012; Gangas 2011; Glinska 2012; Riley 2002; Gurvitch 1959; Schmaus 2004 (*cf.* Hawkins 2006); Jones 1984 (*cf.* Mestrovic 1988 and Prades n.d.); Morrison 2003;

⁸³ General Augustus Pitt-Rivers (1827-1900) had a most stimulating effect on the early phases of archaeology (he was called by some that subject's 'father') and anthropology, his ethnographic collection forms the core of the famous museum named after him, his obituary was written by the leading anthropologist Tylor (1901), but his published texts were predominantly archaeological, his main published works (Pitt-Rivers 1883, 1900, 1906) do not mention totemism, and his impact on the theory of totemism therefore appears a creative inference on Gamble's part – WvB.

⁸⁴ Clark 1957; Clarke 1968; Renfrew 1972 (original footnote).

⁸⁵ One particularly amusing reaction occurred when in the 1970s the British publisher Allen & Unwin reprinted a few social-science classics, including J. Swain's first English translation of *Les Formes*. That book's title was rendered by the anonymous reviewer 'S.' as: *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Left*. It was less than a decade after Plumyène & La Sierra, in a rather malicious book, had exposed *Le Complexe de Gauche* – as a strange mixture of political correctness, vicarious fascination by violence, by bull fights, perhaps misogyny, etc. Now we know were the lefties got their principal inspiration! Of course, with Durkheim! Seriously, if Durkheim, with his almost corporatist, occasionally somewhat fascistoid, veneration of society, submission, duty, calling, order, the sacred, and his lack of attention for class and inequality, should appeal to a political crowd at all, it would be on the right-wing side.

Weiner 1988 (applying the model of *Les Formes* to the Papua male cult of New Guinea); Segal 1988 (assessing the relationship between Durkheim and that other highly influential writer on religion, Clifford Geertz); Riley 2002 (arguing that both Durkheim and Bergson stood at the cradle of postmodern theory and the postmodern 'return of the *sacred*'); Petersen 1944 (*cf.* Riemer 1947); Marjolin 1937 (on Durkheim and Comte); Rhodes 1978 (on Durkheim and the historian Marc Bloch); Idinoupulos & Wilson 2002 (an important collective work to whose constituent contributions we shall turn elsewhere in the present book; also *cf.* Ramp 2004).

Ramp himself (2001), following a Foucaultian inspiration, looks at Durkheim's work in

'an attempt to bring to scientific scrutiny the specific and unacknowledged genesis of certain universal categories of modern life.' (Ramp 2001)

From this exercise, Durkheim does not emerge unscathed, but laden with

'charges both of essentialism and of selective forgetting' (Ramp 2001).

And yet

'Durkheimian sociology still remains instructive to those who confront issues of knowledge and certainty in a postmodern context' (Ramp 2001).

Leuba's (1913) was an appreciative reaction but on the basis of Durkheim's earlier articles, without yet taking *Les Formes* (1912) into account. Mary Douglas's biographer and student, Richard Fardon, argues (1987) how her splendid career consisted, in fact, in one sustained commitment to continue and bring to conclusion Durkheim's project – hence her sociologicistic insistence upon structure and relationships, rather than upon culture and the actual contents of 'natural symbols' (Douglas 1970). Greenberg (1976) probed into the early life of both Bergson and Durkheim in order to find clues there as to the subsequent development of their thought. Hilbert (1989) discusses Durkheim and the leading American sociologist of the mid-20th c. CE, Robert Merton, on their divergent use of the concept of *anomie*. Hsu (1973) briefly but (in the face of post-Obama developments) almost visionarily discusses the possible long-term prospects for totalitarianism in the USA, on the strength of the theories of Marx and Durkheim (the latter as mediated via Parsons). Peacock (1981) rather sweepingly traces the influence of Durkheim on anthropology in the course of the 20th c. CE. Janssen & Verheggen (1997) explore what they claim to be Durkheim's theory of symbolism, finding parallels with Dante Alighieri (*cf.* Hopper 1938; Fletcher 1921) and Paul Ricoeur, and attributing to poor old logocentric, non-Marxist Durkheim both a dialectical style and the centrality of the human body – as befits the postmodern post-Marxist he so unmistakably was; or was he? (Also *cf.* Rundell 2007.) Aldous (1972) deals with Durkheim and Tönnies. Schmaus (1994, *cf.* Jones 1995, and Lehmann 1996) discusses Durkheim's philosophy of science and the sociology of knowledge – complementarily to

Kaufman-Osborn (1988) on the politics of knowledge displayed by Durkheim in his plea for secular education. Morton (2013), perhaps for lack of a discipline-defined theoretical argument, offers a very personal, autobiographical reflection, pondering over the extent to which all anthropology of religion could be, after all, theology gone stale / perverse; historically, in the *longue durée*, he certainly has a point in that in the course of the last two millennia of Western thought, the concerns of theology as pursued by the Fathers of the Church and the Schoolmen, gradually gained independence from theology and hived off to constitute the modern academic subjects of philosophy, natural sciences, and social sciences.

Poulat offers us a short unpublished text by Durkheim, which however brings little that is new (Poulat & Durkheim 1970). Sumpf (1965) offers another unpublished text by Durkheim, in which the latter declares to have opened up, only in 1895⁸⁶ to the study of religion as fundamental to society – another 17 years to go to the publication of *Les Formes*. However, as is so often the case, the subject herself or himself is seldom a reliable judge of the important steps in one's life: as Wallwork (1985) argues, Durkheim was already holding a complex theory of the nature and social role of religion before 1895. Meanwhile, the most impressive publication initiative in the present connection is the three-volume edition of Durkheim texts by Karady (1975; cf. Tiryakian 1977).

Schoffeleers (my PhD supervisor) & Meijers (1978; cf. Séguy 1981) entered in debate with the principal theses on religion of both Durkheim and Weber. And while Schoffeleers's Durkheim-relevant section of their little book opportunely stresses the fact (so clearly attested in sub-Saharan Africa in the 1970s, and in subsequent decades more and more manifest on a global scale) that religion not only unites but also disunites, the most interesting section is where my sometime Free University colleague Daan Meijers, a Jewish anthropologist specialising on North Atlantic Jewry, argues (by reference to the Sephardic / Portuguese Jewish population of Amsterdam from the outgoing 16th c. CE onward – the native milieu also of de Spinoza) that Weber's thesis exclusively linking the rise of capitalism to Protestantism needs considerable revision – but I doubt whether that should go the extent of reinforcing the racist, manifestly deadly stereotype of Jews as capitalists?

We have already encountered several attempts to keep the Durkheimian heritage alive by applying it to topical problems a century after Durkheim. Another such example is Thompson (1993): a plea to apply Durkheim's approach to the *sacred* to then (ca. 1990 CE) current conflicts between political and religious leaders in the USA and the UK.

On the occasion of the publication of Fields's new translation of *Les Formes*,

⁸⁶ *I.e.* two years after the publication of *De la Division du Travail Social*, and two years before *Le Suicide*, in which the central significance of religion is already acknowledged.

Smith & Alexander offered a useful overview of the book's impact on the social sciences ever since it was published in French in 1912. Another overview, referring to quantitative evidence (number of citations) concerning the impact of Durkheim on the social sciences, is by Takla & Pape 1985, particularly highlighting the central importance of *Les Formes*, after which their argument concentrates, more predictably, on both theory and 'metatheory', with particular attention to the philosophical implication of Durkheim's thought.

Needless to add that also Durkheim, as a male child of his time and age, inevitably (though somewhat anachronistically) was to be subjected to the feminist test of a century later, and found to be defective on almost all counts (Lehmann 1994) – a fate he predictably shares with Marx, Freud, Jung and his other great male contemporaries. But already in the 1930s Phillis Kaberry (1939) was to make a feminist correction to the male-centred perspective then dominating Aboriginal studies.

1.7. Where do we go from here?

Confronted with the wealth of critical scholarship so far devoted to Durkheim and especially to *Les Formes*, the reader might get the impression that in fact, all is said and done, and that there is little room for another book-length discussion of Durkheim on religion. Yet, three complementary tasks may be delineated for the present book:

- 1) closer theoretical and methodological scrutiny of the contentious paired concepts *sacred / profane* – this will be our task for Part II;
- 2) further thinking through Durkheim's theory and its implications, with special attention to
 - a) *transcendence* (this will be our task for Chapter 7);
 - b) *effervescence* – a point we will deal with shortly;
 - c) the question whether Durkheim, despite all his assertions to the contrary and his insistence that religion is the backbone of all social life, yet *with his theory explodes all religion* since he argues it to be, in the last analysis, social, and a human creation, devoid from any true supernatural inspiration – also this point we shall briefly deal with before concluding the present chapter;
- 3) empirical testing of Durkheim's religion theory in the way already indicated in the Preface, notably by reference to specific ethnographic fieldwork conducted with his religion theory in mind (Chapters 5, 6 and 7); and by reference to long-range Comparative Linguistics, and Comparative Mythology – the latter task will occupy us

throughout Part IV, Chapters 8 and 9.

First a brief remark about Durkheim's concept of *effervescence*. As indicated already above in connection with the history of Judaism in Europe, I have never had much confidence in it, even though (or: precisely because) I have studied *ecstatic* ritual all my adult life, and made it a major topic in several of my books (van Binsbergen 1981, 1988b). The more remote Durkheim's commentators have been from the actual practice of non-logocentric, non-Western religion also in its ecstatic dimensions (and this certainly applies to the recent commentators on effervescence cited above, including Nick Allen 2012), the more impressed they seem to have been by this *armchair* concept. As I wrote and circulated on the Internet in 1999 (now reprinted in van Binsbergen 2015b: 249 f.):

'A more promising elaboration of Durkheim from the point of view of religious studies is the work of Victor Turner,⁸⁷ who on the basis of detailed ethnography of both the social and the ritual process in the mid-20th century CE society of the Ndembu in North-western Zambia, South Central Africa,⁸⁸ greatly refines Durkheim's theory of religious symbolism. He situates the construction and the experience of the sacred no longer in the static characteristics of a belief system which is supposed to be formulated once for all, but (in a way which we might characterise as *praxeological*) in the dynamic dramaturgy, the micro-historicity, of the unfolding ritual process in concrete settings of time and place. Another major innovation is that Turner identifies the idealist, even totalitarian streak in Durkheim's approach to the social: while the social may admittedly be the ultimate source of sacred meaning and of experienced reality, it also takes on the characteristics of Big Brother (*cf.* Orwell 1961), forcing the individual into sociable submission by extremely powerful symbolic devices. For Turner, by contrast, ritual does not necessarily produce, reproduce and replicate (through isomorphism) the social order – it may also *challenge* that order, create situations where that order is temporarily suspended, denied, or overthrown: *liminal* (*i.e.* threshold-like) situations, like pilgrimage, retreat, ecstasy, rituals of a rebellious or orgiastic nature. Then not structure but *anti-structure* is being produced. Therefore in Turner's hands Durkheim's '*effervescence*' becomes '*communitas*' – an intersubjective sense of transcendence of individuality into sociable collectivity. *Communitas* does not necessarily refer to some pre-existing community whose members are tied to one another by enduring institutionalised social relations, who participate in the ritual, whose structure is culturally reinforced and is perpetuated; the transformation of alterity into community may merely involve those actually participating in the specific ritual at hand, but then again it may transcend, consciously or by implication, the concrete setting and generate identification with a very wide class of humanity and even with the non-human world, with the world at large, the cosmos – holding up ideals and aspirations concerning an ideal world rather than reinforcing the *status quo* in the real world and its structures. While for Durkheim ritual reinforces the power structure of a society, for Turner it is likely to expose and potentially explode that power structure.' (van Binsbergen 1999b / 2015b)

That Vic Turner's *communitas* is a transformation of Durkheim's *effervescence*

⁸⁷ Turner 1967b, 1968b, 1969, 1974, 1975, 1982; Turner & Turner 1978.

⁸⁸ In language, culture, political organisation, and history the Ndembu are closely related to the Nkoya people of Western Zambia, with whom I have done historical and ethnographic research since 1972. Many of my publications relevant in this connection may be found in the bibliography at the end of the present book.

was also found, as ‘a previously unnoticed equivalency’, by Olaveson (2001), who after carefully unpacking both concepts proceeds to situate them in more ‘recent scholarship in transpersonal anthropology and the anthropology of consciousness’, citing a number of recent publications where *effervescence* is treated.⁸⁹ It remains to be seen whether Turner’s rephrasing of *effervescence* as *communitas* yields a better analytical concept, both for the approach of ecstatic religious forms and for an understanding of the alleged ritual backbone of social life. The question is too complex and too extensive to be meaningfully tackled here, and I propose to postpone it till a later opportunity, notably my current writing project *Sangoma Science*, where I hope to review the lessons I have learned from studying, and participating in, ecstatic religion in North Africa, Zambia, Botswana, Sri Lanka and Bali.

Then the question as to *whether Durkheim exploded organised religion as we know it?* Ever since Voltaire, Feuerbach, and the self-congratulatory materialist climat of the 19th-c. CE – when the biologist Haeckel could claim that ‘all mysteries of the universe’ (*Die Welträthsel*, 1895 / 1899) had been solved – , academic religious studies have tended to debunk religion and to relegate it to the domain of fables. It is seldom that authors in this field, in reference to a particular religion theory, ask the question: ‘if this theory is correct, does it mean that I cannot believe any more?’ However, Steven Lukes (2012) asks precisely that question about Durkheim’s theory, in full appreciation of the fact that Durkheim treats religion with great respect as the backbone of social life, as the form in which society brings us to venerate herself – but therefore, by possible implication (and despite Durkheim’s assertion as to the reality of religion), also as a *delusion*.

‘Does Durkheim’s sociology of religion pose a challenge to the faithful? Durkheim said no in debate with contemporary non-believers and believers, portraying religion not as “mere illusion” but as consisting in “moral forces” that command, comfort and strengthen the faithful, forces generated and regenerated within them by the “collective effervescence” of rituals. Thus empowered, the faithful imagine in symbolic form “the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it.” Durkheim’s answer is shown to have three components: (a) a critique of naturalist and animist “error theories” of religion; (b) a method of “deep interpretation,” uncovering the “reality” beneath the symbolism; and (c) *an explanation of why the meaning of religion thus interpreted should have been for so long unacknowledged by the faithful*. It is argued that, in principle, they can, on certain assumptions, accommodate his sociology of religion. But this, in turn, makes key assumptions and claims that have been seriously questioned: notably, that “religion” names a unified phenomenon and that Durkheim’s definition captures it. Recent revised “Durkheimian” accounts of religious thought

⁸⁹ Some of these we have already encountered or shall encounter below. Others include: Mellor 1998; Ono 1996; Shilling & Mellor 1998. It is as if towards the end of the 20th c. CE, with drugs and trancelike dance entering the public scene, *effervescence* has taken a more prominent place among the conceptual apparatus of religious studies. Also Pickering’s 1984 study of Durkheim’s religion theory, profound and of lasting importance, has as many as two chapters (21 and 22) on *effervescence*.

and practice are considered,⁹⁰ accounts that abandon these assumptions and also his “social realism,” while seeking to preserve his insights. It is argued that these too need not directly challenge religious belief in the way that the cognitive science of religion does.’ (Lukes 2012; italics and numbered series added by me – WvB)

While Lukes is very generous (far more than I would have been) in conceding that Durkheim covered all three components, and that (even with later sympathetic revisions) religious faith may still be vindicated, we cannot simply take Durkheim’s word for it (as Lukes seems to do) that

‘the unanimous feeling of believers down the ages’ (Durkheim 1912 / 1960 / 1990: 420; also *apud* Lukes 2012: 46)

*cannot be a mere illusion...*⁹¹ By comparison, hundreds of millions of male humans believe in their gender superiority over women, as justification of a self-proclaimed right to impose their sexual will upon women; a similar number believe in their own superiority as a members of a lowly pigmented category of

⁹⁰ Notably: Bloch 2007; Robbins 2010. In my opinion, the point about these recent Durkheimian adaptations is that they are short, impressionistic; and by far not systematic, elaborate and theoretically ambitious enough to count as viable alternatives to ‘real thing’, *i.e.* *Les Formes*, let alone to allay the believers’s fear of cheating themselves.

⁹¹ #13. *ON EPISTEMOLOGICAL CHARITY*. Yet, implicitly, Durkheim – however much a Cartesian rationalist in other respects – is applying here the argument of *epistemological charity*. By this term – a leading principle in intercultural philosophy – we understand (LePore 1993; Malpas 1988; McGinn 1977; van Binsbergen 2003a) the empathic, dialogical and encounter-orientated positioning, in which the analyst, when confronted with concepts and arguments that are initially alien and meaningless to her or him, prefers to be led by the following thought:

‘if this is what my interlocutor clearly believes in and holds dear, who am I to dismiss it off-hand and wholesale?’

Apart from realising that there are modes, levels, degrees of believing – most ‘belief’ as found in illiterate, non-logocentric social situations governed by face-to-face relationships is not a form of *credo quia absurdum* (St Augustine – ‘I commit myself to this statement by a deliberate act of will, even though I know it is nonsense’) but simply a form of cultural conformism, ‘keeping up with the ancestors, and with the Jones’s’. *The challenge is to find a delicate balance between taking seriously the believer whose belief we yet do not share, and our own reasons for not sharing it. By the standard binary logic that has dominated Western thought since Aristotle (although dramatically revolutionarised since the middle of the 19th c. CE, by such logicians as Frege and Russell; cf. Oderberg 2005) such a balance cannot be found: where P, there not (not P), i.e. the Law of the Excluded Third. Adoption of a different logical standard would threaten to explode science as we know it, yet seems the only way out – provided we realise that the Law of the Excluded Third remains, for most situations, a firm boundary condition, which only occasionally does not apply. That would be analogous to the laws of Newton’s mechanics, which offer firm boundaries conditions for most mesoscopic situations (those near the order of measurement of the human body), but would have to be superseded by more precise but distortive quantum and relativistic equations once we deal with the infinitely large (celestial bodies, galaxies) or the infinitely small (sub-atomic processes). The religious field has yielded many instances where the subjects, or observers, have had the impression that the Law of the Excluded Third occasionally does not apply; this at least has been my own personal experience across the decades, but while this is a revolutionary and fundamental insight, as yet we fail to pinpoint in precisely which situations this boundary condition is overruled.*

humans ('Whites'!) – and in both these cases we know that their belief, although time-honoured, is nonsense; smaller numbers believe, with the same nonsensical doggedness, in their superiority as supporters of a particular sports club, of varieties of pop music, of varieties of hallucinogens, brands of beer or motor cars... Monomanically concentrating on the case of the Aranda, which Durkheim only knew second-hand from published ethnographies, he had no way of appreciating *the varieties of intensity and of commitment* to religious beliefs among the Aranda in the first place, let alone of appreciating the whole possible range of disbelief, scepticism, opportunism which 'believers down the ages' (I take this to mean: worldwide and of all times) may have displayed, occasionally, privately, jocularly, as adolescents, as criminals, when drunk, when in love, when seeking to seduce an apparent believer, when seeking to sell an overpriced motor car, in particularly trying times, at the verge of dying, in altered states of consciousness, etc.⁹² And secondly, the principal empirical result of the present study (Chapter 9 below) is that religious beliefs, at least the theistic ones, have not been of 'all ages' but have only existed within a very limited timeline since the middle of the Upper Palaeolithic, 20 ka BP. Admittedly, Durkheim's religion theory, if found to be substantiated, has serious implications for the continued credibility of religious beliefs and actions. The overall result of the present book's argument is to vindicate Durkheim's theory and thus to activate these implications. However, a proper answer to these challenges depends on a more viable ontology such as is being foreshadowed at several points in the present book and especially in the Envoy at the end, but for whose specific development the present context is not the right one. Also this issue, therefore, we shall need to postpone until *Sangoma Science*.

Finally, a substantial part of the present book will be taken up by the task of empirical testing of important aspects of Durkheim's theory of 'elementary forms of religious life', against the results of anthropological fieldwork in the Ĥumiri highlands of Northwestern Tunisia (Chapters 5 and 6) and among the Nkoya people of Zambia, South Central Africa (Chapter 7), and more in general by the application of Long-Range Linguistics and Comparative Mythology (Part IV). Considering the highly abstract and philosophical orientation of Durk-

⁹² #14. *SCEPTICISM AMONG THE VERY SUBJECTS OF RELIGIOUS ANTHROPOLOGICAL RESEARCH*. Cf. Köbben 1975; van Dijk 2001; Wadley *et al.* 2006; Thornton in press; Frazer 1933: 6; Spiro 2002. The prominent anthropologist Raymond Firth (1959) recommends an occasional display of scepticism on the part of the fieldworker as a data-collecting technique but does not disclose whether his informants would share such scepticism or are merely being drawn out. Anthropologists are generally very reticent to discuss in print (as distinct from private conversations in the institutional common room and during the after-hours at conferences) their informants's signs of disbelief and religious scepticism. However, on the basis of my own extensive fieldwork experience I submit that the range of variation in content and intensity of belief is enormous – beliefs are subject to social control only to the extent to which they are made public in conversation and other utterances, but within the unarticulated privacy of the individual mind representations, doubt, fantasy may roam widely from the culturally established norm.

heim's arguments, it is not surprising that few of them have so far been operationalised into testable hypotheses, and subjected to the kind of empirical assessment on the strength of which sociology may call itself a science in the eyes of more conservative, modernist (as distinct from post-modernist) researchers inspired by a natural-sciences model of research. Meanwhile the entire idea of such rigorous testing has been severely questioned. As Turkel (1979; cf. Lakatos 1970) has reminded us, for one, in recent decades the scientific community has drifted towards the insight that *all a theory can do is to explicitise a research programme*; the Duhem-Quine thesis (formulated by the theoretical physicist Duhem and the analytical philosopher Quine; cf. Harding 1976) puts a big question mark behind the, once *sacred*, essentially apotropaic empirical methodological procedures of half a century ago (de Groot 1966; Popper 1959 / 1935). Even so, there have meanwhile been empirical tests of Durkheim's claims, in the classic (but obsolescent) sense, e.g. suicide rates against religion (Simpson & Conklin 1989). If by Durkheim's suggestion

‘theistic assertions are metaphorical representations of social facts, (...) then there is a parallel between the characteristics attributed to the gods and real properties of the social world’

we have a reason to empirically test salient features of social organisation against details of religion (as already in Swanson's *Birth of the Gods* – 1964). The same hypothesis brought Hertel & Donahue (1995) to screen a few thousand families for parallels between parent-child and God-human images, and to find Durkheim's claim confirmed (and again we are reminded of a much older, similar claim, in Karl Marx's *Thesen über Feuerbach* – 1845).

The vindication of Durkheim's religion theory which gradually emerged, in the first half of 2018 when this book's final version was written, as its central *raison d'être*, is to be found in the empirical arguments of Chapters 5 through 9, below. These have eclipsed what initially was planned as the central feature of this book, a critical, dismissive assessment of the paired concepts *sacred* / *profane*. Yet it is to the latter assessment that we shall now turn, saving the vindication for the later chapters.

Meanwhile, there is one question which we have consistently refrained from asking, and which – despite its importance – will not be answered throughout the present book: *what was it, in Western European society of just over a century ago, that produced the specific kind of thought on religion as materialising in Les Formes?* We might be tempted to appeal to the *secularisation* process then beginning to have an impact on all classes and layers of society, as a result of urbanisation, industrialisation and socialism of the 19th c. CE – and see Durkheim's thought as an exponent of this process. But that would be far too simple. Durkheim's thought is not directly an exponent of secularisation, but rather an attempt to salvage religion in the face of secularisation including Durkheim's awareness of his own unbelief. From his Jewish background Durkheim derived an extreme form of logocentrism, and also such a fundamentally religious ori-

entation that, even though having lost his faith, he continued to consider religion the backbone of the human social and individual existence. (My own life-long preoccupation with religion may be similarly inspired.) This posed an immense dilemma to Durkheim's acute and well-trained mind, because from his exposure to French, German and Anglosaxon modern thought on religion he could not help but deriving total disbelief in a literal Judaeo-Christian theistic conception of the world and of the human existence. (Non-Western religions, even world religions such as Buddhism, Hinduism, and Islam, although abundantly documented at the time and exerting great attraction upon his principal students, yet remained surprisingly beyond his own grasp; his fascination for the Australians had methodological rather than personal or existential grounds.) Had Durkheim's maturity not coincided with the formative decades of the social sciences, he might have looked in a different direction to articulate and solve his dilemma. Teilhard de Chardin, two decades his junior and from Christian petty aristocratic stock, climbed the band wagon of the natural sciences, and could accommodate both his obsolescent religiosity, and his scientific futurology, in that context. Obscurantism, racism, depth psychology, the frontiers of science (especially physics was going through a total transformation), the graphic arts, music and *belles lettres*, feminism, politics, passionate though resigned parenthood, all these were among the paths open to brilliant young men and women experiencing, like Durkheim, the existential dilemma of the times in more or less parallel ways. One could imagine a fascinating research project, painstakingly comparing biographical data and ego documents against the background of a truly comprehensive and imaginative study of the West European *fin-de-siècle*. So many candidates, so many possible lines of approach come to mind here. It is not the kind of project one undertakes at the end of one's career. What seems to have been decisive in Durkheim's case (with his sense of social and national responsibility, of intellectual leadership, of self-assertion as a Jewish French national, and of self-expression through scientific texts) is that for him a leading role in the creation of the social sciences fell open, and this is where he found his sociologicistic, inspiring but also surprising and (at the existential level) essentially unconvincing answer that constitutes the main argument of *Les Formes*.

But on that note, let us turn away from the person of the writer of *Les Formes*, and concentrate on the book's seminal text.