

Introduction

I

This book was planned and actually started a considerable time before the appearance of Steven Lukes's *Émile Durkheim: his Life and Work* early in 1973. The publication of such an important and superb intellectual biography had the effect of making my own limited beginnings and plans in writing about Durkheim's analysis of religion seem somewhat questionable. In the light of the thoroughness and careful documentation of Lukes's book, what more could now be said about Durkheim? And particularly, what more about his sociology of religion, which is so extensively treated? My efforts were in part undermined because Lukes pointed to several books and articles which referred to religion and which until now were not generally known in this country. Some of these works Jacqueline Redding and I had already translated into English. Also, a few months prior to the release of *Émile Durkheim: his Life and Work*, Anthony Giddens of Cambridge University published his *Émile Durkheim, Selected Writings* (1972), in which sections of certain of the books and articles just alluded to became available to the English-reading public through his translation.

However, despite the effervescence—if one might adopt a Durkheimian expression—of interest in the great French sociologist, and through the encouragement of Lukes, who had just written so much on the subject, as well as that of others, it seemed worth while pressing on with the original plan of presenting selected translations of Durkheim's work on religion, together with bibliographies and an accompanying commentary. It was hoped then and it is still hoped that the project will be valuable and in no way a pale reflection of these recently published books.

The first part of the scheme is embodied in this volume: the commentary will appear as a separate book in the near future. That publication should proceed in this order seems right because it is on the whole better to present some of the documents and the bibliographies before offering a critical review of Durkheim's work on religion. And surely the man himself would be pleased to see the starting point is to be the 'facts'.

No attempt is made in this introduction to interpret Durkheim's religious thought or even to describe it. In this sense the introduction makes no contribution to academic studies. Such contribution as I have to offer will appear in the succeeding book. What is presented here is an attempt both to justify publishing a volume of translations of Durkheim's sociology of religion and to show the principles on which the selection of readings has been made. Readers who want a general description of Durkheim's religious thought are advised to consult the bibliography, and at the risk of repetition it might be said that Lukes's treatment of the subject is probably the most comprehensive yet to appear.

II

Interest in Durkheim's life and work has probably never been as widespread as it is at the moment, both within the sociological world and beyond it. This has partly come about because of the great development of the sociological world itself since the time of Durkheim who died in 1917, and particularly because in England and the United States, since the end of World War II, there has been a considerable growth in the teaching of sociology in universities. The interest has also arisen through a recent gathering of clouds of uncertainty about the path sociology should take in the future. Driven by a rejection of sophisticated theory on the one hand

and crude empiricism on the other, many are turning to the writings of the founding fathers for enlightenment and inspiration.

Repeatedly one hears it said that the three men who contributed more than any others to sociology in the nineteenth century were Durkheim, Weber and Marx. If some may doubt the presence of Marx within the trinity and would prefer to see Simmel, Pareto or Spencer as the substitute, the fact remains that no one can dethrone Durkheim from being one of its members. The continual publication of his works in their original language, the ever-growing number of translations into various languages, and a very recent upsurge in books written by English-speaking academics—for example, those of LaCapra (1972), Wallwork (1972), Lukes (1973), Clark (1973), Bellah (1973)—are but the external signs of a renewed awareness of his place at the zenith of the sociological world at the end of the last century, if not the first half of the present century. There is no need to extol in detail the contributions this Alsatian Jew made to sociology—this man who in 1887 held one of the first academic teaching posts in sociology in France at Bordeaux, although first under the guise of education, who became a professor in 1896 and then taught in Paris in 1902. The story and the nature of his greatness have been told often enough, and now in a more recent book we have it before our eyes in large letters.

However, there is one point that ought to be emphasized, since it has direct bearing on this volume: the prominence that Durkheim gave to religion. From the time he went to the École Normale Supérieure, and even before, Durkheim showed an extraordinary interest in religion that persisted, and indeed grew, with the passing of years until his death in 1917. To an outsider such an interest would seem incompatible with his convinced rationalist and anti-clerical outlook. But the fact remains that in a very great deal that he wrote—and this is certainly true for most of his books—there appeared constant references to religion, which though framed in a scientific mould were often more in praise than condemnation. Indeed, towards the end of his career, and it was a career that was snuffed out at the height of its powers when he was fifty-nine years old, religious issues were of burning importance. The demonstration of this fact is in the publication of his most definitive, and some would add his finest and most original book, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie*, published in 1912. With carefully stated assumptions, Durkheim set

out to explain by sociological means the phenomenon of religion. Although he used material gathered from primitive peoples—the primary source, Australian aborigines; North American Indians his secondary—the findings were held to be applicable to religion in general. None the less, while it is true that Durkheim tried to understand religion on scientific grounds by reference to social phenomena, even society itself, the obverse is also true, that is, he used religion to explain society. Such was the importance it assumed before his eyes.

The sociological study of religion owes Durkheim an enormous debt which it has not always acknowledged. From the time he founded the journal. *L'Année sociologique*, in 1896, he began to exert a powerful influence on all those around him who wished to study religion within the terms of reference of sociology. But because his ideas became so readily accepted and developed, his creative ability has not been as widely recognized as it should have been. All too frequently it has been taken for granted. In a recent book, *Ecstatic Religion* (1971:11), I. M. Lewis, professor of anthropology at the London School of Economics, has written: 'Except in such specialized areas of interest as witchcraft, initiation rites, or pollution behaviour, the subject [of the sociology of religion] remains as a whole very much where it was left by Durkheim and Weber.' Lewis admits this is a harsh judgment but a true one. And if the point is taken, it might legitimately be asked, why has no further progress been made? It is a question too vast to try to answer here but in the case of Durkheim (and indeed of Weber) no answer can be offered until a thorough analysis has been made of what Durkheim set out to do, the methods he employed, and the conclusions he drew from substantive material.

Those who have but a limited acquaintance with Durkheim's religious thought are usually those who have read *Les Formes élémentaires*, in part or in whole in the English translation, or who have gained knowledge of the book from the lectures of others. They might also recall a relevant chapter or so in the earlier book, *Le Suicide*, which appeared in 1897. To some degree this is understandable since *The Elementary Forms* is not only a superb piece of writing and forms the peak of Durkheim's study of religion, but it was also the first of his books to be translated into English, in fact by an American classical scholar, J. W. Swain, in 1915. But as has just been noted, Durkheim's interest in religion is evident in his

very early writings, and therefore any comprehensive appreciation of his religious thought must take into account his early references and generalizations about religion, as well as those which appeared at the summit of his thought. No one climbs a mountain starting at the peak!

Despite Durkheim's wrestling with religious issues, it is most surprising that commentators, especially his disciples such as Mauss, Davy, Halbwachs, Fauconnet, and so on, have given very little space to the subject compared with other issues. Halbwachs's *Les Origines du sentiment religieux* (1925) is but a résumé of *Les Formes élémentaires* for popular consumption: indeed it is reminiscent of a tract. Georges Davy, friend and admirer, in the many articles that he wrote on Durkheim after his death—and he seems to have assumed the role of an official interpreter of the master—gives relatively little space to his thought on religion. It might be suggested that one writer was an exception, namely Marcel Mauss, his nephew, who from the early days of *L'Année sociologique*, often in collaboration with Durkheim himself, wrote many monographs and reviews on religious topics. Aided by Hubert and Hertz, Mauss became the foremost authority on religion in the Durkheim school. However, his most fruitful period on the subject of religion was up to the time of World War I rather than after it. It is true he lectured on religious sciences at the Hautes Études and at the Sorbonne but his creative work seems to have been in another direction, for example, exchange-theory as in the *Essai sur le don*. R. Bastide wrote a systematic treatise on the sociology of religion based on Durkheim's ideas entitled *Éléments de sociologie religieuse*: it appeared in 1935 but in the event did not prove to be an important book. Of course it could be argued that Durkheim's work on religion was extended by ethnographers and anthropologists in, say, the Institut d'Ethnologie and the Musée de l'Homme, and by the historians of early civilizations. One calls to mind such scholars as Lévy-Bruhl, Granet, Rivet, and of course Mauss himself (see Lévi-Strauss, 1945). But by and large there was not a great interest amongst scholars in expounding Durkheim's theories of religion as such. Apart from the flourish of reviews in 1912 and the years that immediately followed, direct references to Durkheim's work on religion in the 1920s and 1930s become meagre indeed, particularly in France where one would have expected a contrary state of affairs. This is no occasion to elaborate the point, to document it or to try to

account for it, but simply to state that when Durkheim died widespread interest in religion amongst his disciples died with him. At least it might be observed that within his followers, neglect of his ideas on religion seems to have arisen because of overriding interests in other fields opened up by his sociology, and by comparison many more references were made to basic issues raised by *De la Division du travail social* (1893b), *Les Règles de la méthode sociologique* (1895a), *Le Suicide* (1897a), and essays reproduced posthumously in *Sociologie et philosophie* (1924a). Interest centred on the sociology of the family, the sociology of law, the sociology of knowledge (admittedly a very important element in *Les Formes élémentaires*), the relation of psychology to sociology, methodology, etc. It is possible to argue that the position was not quite as bare in the English-speaking world since, through the work of the British social anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown, Durkheim's works began to be introduced to students in a comprehensive way from the 1930s onwards. Radcliffe-Brown both accepted and developed some of the ideas of Durkheim on religion. Generally speaking, it cannot be denied that Durkheim's theories through the process of general diffusion became very important in the development of anthropological and sociological studies in religion. However, if one examines the whole gamut of his writings and the subjects he analysed, his ideas, and those on religion which were so crucial to his thought, have not been accorded by commentators the attention given to other aspects of his work. This book and the one which is planned to follow is an attempt to help redress the situation.

III

The primary consideration in selecting extracts from Durkheim's works which incidentally deal with or are devoted to religion was to choose items from the entire period of his academic life. Such an aim has the advantage of showing, however inadequately, the development of his thinking on religion. A further principle of selection was to focus on items which although important in themselves had not been translated into English: for example, his early approach to a systematic study of religion which appeared in an article in volume II of *L'Année sociologique* entitled 'De la Définition des phénomènes religieux' (1899a[ii]). Moreover, it was thought desirable to present something of Durkheim's ideas on

modern religion—ideas which are evident in *Les Formes élémentaires*. He did not write scientifically or extensively on the subject, although he was ready enough to talk about it. (See 1898c, 1919b; also 1909a and 1913b not translated.)

A formidable task was encountered in choosing sections from Durkheim's *magnum opus*, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*. In one sense, any selection of parts is destined to failure. A piecemeal reading of this great book cannot but be unsatisfactory: it is a work that has to be read in its entirety. However, in such a volume as the present one, only travesty and failure would result if no extensive reference were made to it. Inevitably one has to take the plunge and it was decided that the points of entry would be those in the early, middle and late chapters which portray Durkheim's methods and findings which have application to religion as a whole. In short, his detailed analysis of the social and religious life of the Arunta has been excluded, and attention has been focused on the generalizations he deduced from such analysis. Sadly the chapters towards the end of the book on ritual and sacrifice have also been excluded because of the close intertwining of ethnographic material and the generalizations that Durkheim deduces. With rather more decisiveness, sections of the sociology of knowledge have been excluded, important though they are. Durkheim's sociology of knowledge requires a separate volume; and to introduce such a topic here, together with his earlier writings on the sociology of knowledge, would be to completely miss the focal point of this book. Therefore, where well-defined sections on the sociology of knowledge appear in the chapters which have been selected, such sections have been omitted. Nevertheless, a certain small portion has been retained which shows at a very elementary level how, in Durkheim's eyes, religion has contributed to the development of concepts. It should also be noted that sections in the opening chapters of *Les Formes élémentaires* which correspond to sections in the earlier essay, 'De la Définition des phénomènes religieux', have been omitted in order to avoid repetition. For a very brief summary of the book, the reader is referred to that which Durkheim wrote together with Mauss in a review in *L'Année sociologique* which is included here (see 1913a[ii] [12]).

After some deliberation it was decided to incorporate one or two critical reviews of the many that appeared at the time of the publication of *Les Formes élémentaires*, as well as criticisms that

were published subsequently. Of the early reviews, that of Goldenweiser (1915) is outstanding because of its wide approach and, in the light of continual reflection, the soundness of its criticisms. In recent times that of Stanner (1967), which is an analysis of one or two of Durkheim's ideas, notably the concept of the sacred and profane, has received wide acclaim. This, together with Goldenweiser's review, has been included as well as that of van Gennep (1913). This last review is of interest because it comes from a well-known, respected and creative anthropologist who was never given an academic post in France. The review has not been translated before and neither has a much longer, general and more searching attack made by Gaston Richard in 1923. Richard's work in sociology is virtually unknown in England. He was an early collaborator with Durkheim: later he turned against him. A key issue, but not the only one, that caused Richard to oppose his former master was Durkheim's approach to religion. A short account of Richard's life and work is given at the end of the book.

From the outset, another type of principle dominated the selection of extracts. As stated already, there scarcely exists a book by Durkheim which does not mention religion. Some of the references are short but none the less of great importance, as for example those in *De la Division du travail social* (1893b). But in compiling a book such as this it seemed totally wrong to reproduce by themselves short paragraphs or even sentences. Thus presented, they would be given in a vacuum, against many kinds of contexts, and their overall number would be very great. There would be the temptation to group together extracts which had a common subject and this would give rise to a string of maxims and sayings, hardly doing justice to Durkheim's scholarship. As far as possible all the extracts offered here are complete articles, chapters, or sections of chapters. When there has been an omission in a chapter, a very brief summary of the missing section is put in its place.

If no reference were made to those works by Durkheim which raise religious ideas because the ideas are encapsulated in a few sentences or paragraphs, the object of the book would not be achieved. To forestall such a deficiency, it seemed appropriate to provide notes on all the writings of Durkheim which make a significant reference to religion, but which for reasons, including those just stated, have not been mentioned in the readings. The notes are given in a separate section and it is hoped that for those not well

acquainted with Durkheim's works they will provide useful pointers for further study.

IV

The Durkheim bibliography is in three sections. The first gives the works of Durkheim in which religion is mentioned in some significant way. Here, with his kind permission, the dating-enumeration of Steven Lukes, which itself is based on that of Alpert, has been adopted. Durkheimian studies can be helped at a mundane level if there can be a common agreement on the dating and enumeration of his works. Lukes's comprehensive and, it would seem, complete bibliography is without rival. References to English translations, where applicable, also follow his enumeration.

The second section of the bibliography relates to totemism. The subject of totemism is a perplexing one to any student of Durkheim. All too well known is the fact that Durkheim in *Les Formes élémentaires* made the totemism of the Australian aboriginal tribe, the Arunta, the 'well conducted experiment' to demonstrate his conclusions about the nature of religion. Further, before the publication of the book he wrote extensively on totemism and allied matters, and reviewed many books on the subject. Today, totemism no longer assumes the critical place it did amongst anthropologists in Durkheim's time: gone is the contention supported by Durkheim and others that it was the most primitive form of social organization known to man, which, moreover, constituted a religious system. The question therefore arises, should the student of Durkheim pay as much attention to his writings on totemism as he should pay to his other and more general analyses of religion? Judged, on the one hand, by the present interest in Durkheim's religious thought, and on the other, by the relatively scant attention given today to those arguments about totemism in which Durkheim was immersed, the answer would appear to be towards the negative. However, in order to be comprehensive, and to serve those who wish to examine Durkheim's writings on totemism in detail, a bibliography on that subject has been provided.

The third section of the bibliography consists of books and articles, written by other scholars, which refer to Durkheim's analysis of religion, and, as might be expected, includes a fair number of reviews of *Les Formes élémentaires*. Also, some books

and articles have been mentioned which speak of Durkheim's life and of his deep interest in religion; others in which he is named deal with the religious situation in France during the Third Republic to which he showed so much devotion. Since the list is moderately extensive, no comments are made on individual items. The virtue of many of these contributions, some of which are unknown to the English-reading public, will become apparent in the projected second book on Durkheim. This third section cannot claim to be complete, for references to Durkheim's thought are as numerous as the sand on the sea shore.

From these brief introductory remarks, it should be apparent that this volume is a reference book, a source book, on Durkheim's religious thought. As such it is hoped that it will be of some service to students studying sociology and anthropology, as well as those of other disciplines such as the history of religions or the philosophy of religion—in fact to all those who want to gain some insight into Durkheim's thought on religion. To this end they are given a selection of texts or parts of texts, and are also encouraged to turn to scholarly commentaries that have been written on the subject. The deficiencies of this volume can best be overcome by reading the complete works of the great master himself, preferably in the original language.

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