

1 Durkheim's religious quest

I Adolescent changes, family life and personal beliefs

1 Introduction

If the subject of this book is Durkheim's study of religion, why should an attempt be made to consider at the outset Durkheim's personal and academic life? His aim, after all, was to undertake an objective and scientific analysis of religion according to those canons of sociology which he himself had laid down. If that is the case, if the discoveries he made are to be judged by scientific criteria, his own life, beliefs and professional achievements can hardly have any bearing on such judgment. For example, one does not need to be acquainted with the life of Faraday in order to understand and make use of his discoveries in electricity. A different kind of challenge to even a brief inquiry into the life of the man, who was to dominate French sociology and to give it new life in the two decades before the First World War, might come from the fact that much has been recently written about Durkheim's life, particularly with the publication of a definitive intellectual biography by Steven Lukes (1972). To write anything new is virtually impossible: all the facts and sources have been well worked over.

Both these questions need to be answered. The study of religion, like religion itself, is, when taken seriously, emotionally charged and ideologically evaluated. A student may set out with the strong conviction that he will be objective and fair, but few are those who in the long run achieve such objectivity. More than likely, the more radical the conclusions, the less neutral the outlook of the student. The liberal quest of many nineteenth-century academics to analyse religion without bias has in the last

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analysis proved to be very difficult. It may well be that some writers have shown themselves to be fairer than others: the outcome is relative, not absolute. Since religion itself is based on a system or a group of values and ideas related to this world and, usually, to a world that is held to exist beyond it, it is inevitable that strong convictions enter into the study of religion, for such beliefs cut deep into matters of life and death, of what ultimately matters. Neutrality about religion, even as a subject for study, is rarely, if ever, achieved. The nature of modern disciplines associated with religion, no matter how much their aim is to be scientific – and it was certainly Durkheim's aim – are not free from the personal outlook of the scholars who work in them. In this respect personal involvement in the study of religion is markedly different from personal involvement likely in the work of natural scientists. In a study of morals, politics and religion one cannot completely filter out such values. There is obvious merit, therefore, that in coming to grips with the conclusions of a great scholar in the field of religion, one should also be aware of his personal life and the way he relates it to his academic thought and action. Such a procedure affords assistance in trying to know the way he reaches his conclusions, and more importantly, the axioms he assumes at the outset.

In a book such as this, it would be remiss not to give some attention in the beginning to Durkheim's life, and in particular to those aspects of it directly associated with religion. And while, as we have said much has been written about his life, nevertheless we dare to dig over old ground in order to bring out more pointedly his religious attitudes and outlook. Here, the beginning links up with the end, for in the last part, before the conclusion of the book, we treat in some detail Durkheim's evaluation of western religions based on evidence from his own writings and we also attempt to assess what was his religious quest, apparent in his early life and expressed in his professional achievements. Further, those who might come to Durkheim for the first time through a study of his sociological analysis of religion, because their primary interest is in religion rather than in sociology, and who may not want to read a more general account of his life in another book, would benefit from some knowledge of his life and the part he played in the French academic world of his day.

2 Boyhood, youth and the rejection of Judaism

Émile Durkheim's background and upbringing were strongly religious. He was born on 15 April 1858, in the town of Épinal in Alsace-Lorraine, into a rabbinic family. His father Moïse Durkheim (1805–96), himself the son of a rabbi, who in turn was also a rabbi's son, had come from Hagenau in Alsace in the 1830s. (For details about the childhood of Durkheim, see Lukes 1972:39ff.; Greenberg 1976.) Moïse Durkheim had wanted to complete philosophical and scientific studies in Paris before he settled down as a rabbi, but financial difficulties prevented him (Greenberg 1976:625). As events turned out, he became the Chief Rabbi of the Vosges and Haute-Marne. Of the four children of the family, two were sons, neither of whom was destined to be a rabbi. Félix, who entered commerce, died relatively young, and Émile, the youngest child, born when his father was 53 years of age, also rejected the rabbinate and opted for an academic career. Émile went, as might be expected, to the rabbinical school at Épinal and was taught Hebrew, the Old Testament, the Talmud and Jewish doctrines, and this he did whilst attending the local state school. Alpert maintains that he did not study Hebrew systematically (1939:15).

Through a personal communication made to Lukes from a distant relative of Durkheim, all seemed set for him to become a rabbi (1972:39 n.2). One assumes it was very much the wish of the family that the young boy should continue in its tradition and perhaps the local orthodox Jewish community felt the same. That he eventually said no to such a possibility must have been a disappointment to the family, especially to his father. And it was in all probability a rather emotionally wrought decision on Émile's part, for he would have realized the possibility of his family's hostility to or strong dislike of his decision. There is some evidence to suggest that Durkheim was never strongly attracted to the rabbinate. Lenoir, writing in the 1930s, made the point that he only toyed with rabbinic studies ('Les études rabbiniques ne furent qu'une velléité': Lenoir 1930:293). At what age Durkheim made up his mind not to proceed with the rabbinate, and when he told his parents, is not known. He did not talk about the event publicly nor did he mention it in his writings. It could have occurred at

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any time from the age of perhaps 12 or 13 until he went to the École Normale Supérieure in 1879 when he was 21, having attended the Lycée Louis-le-Grand in Paris a few years before and having failed the entrance examination to the École twice. Although details of the event are lacking, it must have been important in the life of the young Durkheim. It clearly shows that he was thought to be interested enough and clever enough to be a rabbi, and further, that he was prepared to accept the consequences of his action within the family.

The second stage in Durkheim's early religious odyssey would seem to be an episode that has now become well-known, through the account of it by Durkheim's student and close friend, Georges Davy (1883–1976) (1919:183). The setting was the state school he attended in Épinal, where he showed himself to be an able pupil. When the event occurred is also not clear: perhaps it was shortly after his bar mitzvah at the age of 13. The story is that he was considerably influenced by an elderly female teacher who was a Catholic. As a result he underwent some form of spiritual crisis by which it is said he was attracted to mysticism and in the long run to the Catholic Church. He did not take the final step of crossing the religious divide: had he done so, he would have unquestionably precipitated further turmoil in the Durkheim household, if by this time he had already communicated his intention of not becoming a rabbi. Davy does not hesitate to remark that Durkheim did not take long to free himself from the crisis; and Davy seems to want to redeem what might be thought a weakness on the part of the grand master of sociology, for it might be seen to be a failure of judgment to become entangled in an undesirable religious flirtation. Apart from the remarks of Davy, we know nothing of what happened. But it seems legitimate to ask whether it was the institutions and liturgy of Catholicism which attracted Durkheim, as Auguste Comte had been attracted by them some fifty years earlier, and when he later incorporated them into his religion of humanity. Or was it, as Davy suggests, the search for some kind of mysticism, say, in the soul seeking union with God or in a striving after saintliness? Gaston Richard (1860–1945), once a collaborator and then an opponent of Durkheim, held that there were elements in Durkheim's nature which were strongly opposed to mysticism (see chs 23.4 and 9.5). Whether Davy and Richard meant the same thing by mysticism

is difficult to say. Richard seemed to imply personal attitudes towards a divine source which involved an act of worship. Davy refers to the interlude as 'feminine' or 'womanish' (1919:182). What does this mean? Does it refer to the agent of the crisis? That he had a crush on the *institutrice*? Or, again, is it Davy's biased way of describing mysticism?

A general observation might be made about Durkheim's flirtation with these forms of religion. It relates to the historical background of conversions from Judaism in nineteenth-century Europe. One might note that during the early part of the century, as Jews gradually gained their civil freedom in the face of a complicated political situation, the walls of their ghettos were broken down, if not literally, then certainly intellectually and socially. A consequence was that many of the Jews, who entered the professions which were now open to them but which before had remained closed, abandoned Judaism as a religion and were often converted to Catholicism or Protestantism, or more frequently became rationalists and agnostics. In the field of the social sciences one recalls Georg Simmel (1858–1918), an almost exact contemporary of Durkheim, a man of letters who was much interested in sociology and social psychology, and who became a Protestant. Generally, however, those who were pioneers in the human or social sciences rejected all established forms of religion. One can think of no great scholar in the nineteenth century in the social sciences who continued to practise as an orthodox Jew. Such sciences tend to be by nature agnostic or atheistic, and the personal lives of those who are devoted to them reflect a similar outlook. Two prominent examples come readily to mind: Marx with his unusual religious background – his father became a Protestant when he was 6 years old; and Sigmund Freud, who retained an academic interest in religion, but who felt that it was little more than a neurosis. Another point is that if Davy's description of the episode is accepted and the word mysticism is applicable, there are interesting though perhaps remote links with some of the facets of Durkheim's sociological thought which have escaped the attention of commentators. As we shall see, Durkheim's sociology, on account of the reverence he had for society, was thought by some to be 'spiritual' or even 'mystical' (see ch. 13.3). Such a charge is clearly quite contrary to the rationalist and scientific analysis of social behaviour which Durkheim was attempting to

establish (see *The Rules of Sociological Method* 1895a/t.1938b). Patently what mysticism there is here is not that imputed to his adolescence; rather, it is associated with his so-called sociology in which social factors are held to be of overriding importance compared with individual factors in explaining social behaviour. The alleged mysticism which was said to have engulfed his concept of society and his approach to collective *représentations* had associated with them mysterious qualities which were not far removed from the divine. Society seemed to be above scientific analysis, despite Durkheim's claim to be scientific: it had a soul (*l'âme collective*). Writing in the late 1950s, Davy went so far as to state that Durkheim's rationalism was permeated with mysticism (1960:6). Clearly one does not want to make too strong a link between the adolescent episode in the school at Épinal and Durkheim's exaltation of the concept of society; nevertheless, the parallel is not without interest.

The third step that Durkheim took in the religious journey of his younger days was the final rejection of the faith of his fathers and, with it, the rejection of all traditional forms of Judaeo-Christian religion. Once again, little by way of biographical detail is known. Perhaps this stage could be divided into two parts – intellectual and ritual – a rejection of the traditional monotheism which is at the heart of Judaism and Christianity, and the refusal to take part in synagogue worship and to follow Jewish laws and ritual requirements. His severance from Judaistic practice was probably not as decisive and as dramatic as one might suppose and there was probably no clear-cut date or event to mark it, although here once again this is speculation. A reported comment from Étienne Halphen suggests that the final break with Judaism came while Durkheim was at the *École Normale Supérieure*, perhaps shortly after he arrived in 1879 (Lukes 1972:44 n.2). However, he may have rejected the theological claims of Judaism at some earlier time. Filloux has suggested that he abandoned his beliefs 'very quickly' (*très tôt*) (1970:31), but the reference is vague. Did Durkheim begin to have serious doubts about the claims of Jewish belief before his short-lived flirtation with Catholicism? It does seem likely that, for some years until he took what was for him the irrevocable step of totally abandoning orthodox Judaism, he entertained considerable doubts about the truth of religion. Lukes suggests that it was his friendship with two fellow-

students slightly senior to himself – Henri Bergson, a Jew who also rejected his faith, and Jean Jaurès, who later became a socialist leader – which was instrumental in his eventual severance with Judaism.

The question of time apart, what were the reasons for Durkheim's rejection of Jewish and, we might add, Christian belief? In the absence of personal testimony on the part of Durkheim, one can only infer them from his academic writings, from various references and asides.

It would seem that at the very heart of his eventual disbelief was an uncertainty about the existence of God and the refusal to accept the traditional doctrines of the deity. As commonly understood, the truth of western religion turns on the fact that there is a God and that he has certain attributes or qualities – he is creator, almighty, totally good, and so on. It seems clear that certainly by the time he left the *École Normale*, Durkheim could not accept the claims about God made by traditional religion. For him no God, defined as a spiritual being and existing beyond the universe, exists. Similarly, there are no spiritual beings and the soul, as traditionally defined, does not exist. Durkheim believed that these doctrines, as proclaimed within the Hebraic-Christian tradition, were totally unacceptable to anyone of an honest intellectual outlook. Nothing that can be called real exists outside the world as defined by the scientific mind or by everyday experience (see ch. 15.2). All that is in the world is the result of natural processes, including of course the work of man. Such a position epitomizes the outlook of any rationalist and agnostic.

The claims of monotheism were rejected by Durkheim, it is suggested, because they did not match the findings of modern knowledge. The universality claimed by monotheism, that God is the God of the world, was contradictory to the growing awareness that in different societies around the world men had different gods. Each society had its own conception of the deity, or in wider terms, what was ultimately true. In the face of such relativism it was impossible to believe that any one form was true and, by implication, others false. As Durkheim observed in his own writings, man makes his gods, or more accurately society makes gods for men. If there were one God, supreme and universal, all men would be aware of him and worship him. Comparative knowledge about religious systems other than those of the western world,

brought about by missionaries, explorers and anthropologists, weakens the authority of any one system in which the claim is made that it possesses ultimate truth and rightness in religious matters. The same kind of inherent weakness also undermines any moral system, which is held to be true beyond the particular societies in which it is found.

The clue which supports the hypothesis that this kind of thinking lay behind Durkheim's youthful rejection of religion and the opting for a relativist position, which after all was common in his day, is to be found in an essay he published in 1911, 'Jugements de valeur et jugements de réalité'. The problem which Durkheim was discussing centred on the fact that men love and aspire to the ideals of goodness, beauty and truth. Yet such ideals are never realized, although men make such a world their sanctuary. Why should this be so? Durkheim responds:

To this question, the theological hypothesis carries some semblance of a response. The world of ideas is taken as real and has objective existence, but an existence which is supra-experimental, and the empirical reality of which we are part comes from it and depends on it. We are then attached to the ideal as to the very source of our being. But despite the known difficulties that this conception raises when one so hypostasizes the ideal, it is at the same time immobilized, and every means of explaining its infinite variability is lost. We know today not only that the ideal varies according to human groups but that it ought to vary: the ideal for the Romans is not ours, nor should it be ours, and the scale of values changes similarly. These variations are not the product of human blindness, they are based on the nature of things. How can one explain them if the ideal expresses one unassailable reality? *One is forced to admit then that God himself varies with space and time; but to what could this surprising diversity be attributed? The divine process will only be intelligible if God himself had the task of realizing the ideal which is beyond him; however, the problem would then be shifted.* (1911b/1924a:129–30/t.1953b:88–9; our italics)

Although this was written about thirty years after his rejection of orthodox Judaism, it speaks of his awareness that theological relativism militates against, indeed denies a belief in the existence

of an omnipotent, absolute God, as found in the Old Testament and implied in the New Testament.

But the denial of ethnocentrism, be it religious or moral, brings with it its own problems, one of which is the denial of absolutes, and for the individual within a society making legitimate his own religious and moral beliefs. If the absolute goes, how is one to justify the rightness of one's own belief and action? Durkheim realized this and it was of constant concern to him in the development of his sociology. A society cannot be a healthy one where men live only according to half-committed beliefs and ideals. He was honest enough to face the problem in his studies on morality, education and religion (see, for example, 1909a(2)). The dilemma that he saw was that in rejecting the truth-claims of a religion or moral system, the sense of authority is very seriously weakened and so the system becomes vitiated. Some kind of surrogate authority must be found and this, Durkheim felt, was in society itself. He was one of the few thinkers of his day who saw the social weaknesses of religious and moral relativism.

It is one thing to abandon intellectually one's belief in God: it is another to cut oneself off irrevocably from a religious body in which one is deeply rooted. As an individual one can harbour doubts about religious tenets, one can even secretly deny them, for one's thoughts are hidden from the public gaze. Not so attendance at church, at the synagogue, not so the upholding of dietary laws, of abstinence and fasting. These are public acts which cannot be hidden: to absent oneself from them is to evoke query and judgment. To leave a closely knit religious group, such as that to which Durkheim was attached, may well bring upon the individual a reaction of social ostracism. Mixed marriages are also strongly disliked because of the threat they pose to the religious group and frequent in such marriages is the charge of infidelity to the group.

As we have noted, Durkheim's refusal to proceed to the rabbinate most likely brought about a degree of family unhappiness, if not a certain amount of dishonour. It seems quite likely that Émile Durkheim's discarding of the customs and beliefs of the religion in which he was brought up and his adoption of Gentile habits probably bordered on the traumatic. This is Coser's opinion also, especially as Durkheim was an Ashkenazi Jew (1971:162; see following section and the footnote). Some of the emotional

turmoil and feelings of guilt may be caught in an early review that he wrote of Guyau's *L'Irréligion de l'avenir*:

The Christian who for the first time eats a normal meal on Good Friday, and the Jew who for the first time eats pork, experience a remorse which it is impossible to distinguish from moral remorse. (1887b:308/t.1975a:35).

It is possible that he may have exaggerated the feelings of Christians in the case he cited. Apart from the fact that Protestants do not follow such a precept, the rule did not have the same status amongst Catholics (for whom it was subject to local custom) as had the taboo on the eating of pork amongst Jews. And writing a few years later in his doctoral thesis, *The Division of Labour in Society*, he again refers to the horror felt in eating a particular meat forbidden by society. Interestingly enough he observed in a footnote that a penal rule (which would include a taboo) should be conserved only if it is supported by a 'living and energetic' collective sentiment (1893b/1902b:76/t.1933b:107 n.45).

Durkheim may have thrown off his orthodox beliefs and practices, but like others before and since, no matter what their religious affiliation, he tended to conform when he visited the parental home. Perhaps not to give offence, he attended synagogue worship with his mother. One incident which Durkheim found embarrassing is recalled by Filloux (1970:301). When as professor at the Sorbonne, Durkheim, under pressure from his mother, found himself attending the synagogue in Épinal on a holy day. The rabbi, seeing the son of his predecessor in the congregation, referred to the presence of an eminent person in their midst, which he said indicated that Judaism was still a flourishing religion.

It might be noted that for reasons of conformity or otherwise, Durkheim married someone who was undoubtedly a Jewess, Louise Dreyfus. Her family home was in Alsace, where her father was in business in the iron trade. After Durkheim graduated from the *École Normale Supérieure* with very poor marks, perhaps due to a serious illness, he taught philosophy in various lycées until he was given a government grant to visit several German universities in the academic year 1885–6. Then in 1887 he was appointed *chargé de cours* of social science and pedagogy in the University of Bordeaux. His marriage occurred just before he went there,

but nothing is known of the religious outlook of Louise Durkheim: one imagines that she tended to adopt the views of her husband and we have no knowledge as to whether their children, André and Marie, were brought up as orthodox Jews. It seems most unlikely.

3 Psychoanalytic factors

Greenberg's psycho-historical treatment of Durkheim's early years is interesting but not convincing. He argues, in using a parallel case, that of Henri Bergson, that the fathers of these two great contemporary nineteenth-century figures had in various ways failed, that the schools they had attended offered them models of success, that they both rejected their fathers in school years, and that in higher education they found a response to their needs and to their goal of assimilation into French society (1976:630). Once again the argument turns on a basic proposition of a psychological kind which uses the attitudes of sons towards their fathers to explain later attitudes and successes. These factors are also said to engender hard work and determination, not least in school and university (*ibid.*:633). How far one can accept Greenberg's position is in part determined by the degree to which the psychoanalytic theory of causation can be admitted; and in the case of Durkheim, whether there is in fact sufficient biographical material to substantiate the argument, even if the form be accepted. Durkheim's relations to his father are not well documented. One point that seems most doubtful, and which is of great interest to the present study, is the considerable enthusiasm that Durkheim showed for religious thought in the mid-1890s when he read Robertson Smith for the first time. Greenberg suggests that this was directly due to the death of his father, Moïse Durkheim, in 1896 (*ibid.*:616 n.22) (see ch. 4.2 for a discussion of the reference to Robertson Smith). It should be noted, however, that Durkheim's interest in religion always seems to have been a strong one. It is difficult to know exactly in what ways Robertson Smith inspired Durkheim, but one thing seems certain, apart from substantive issues – he offered Durkheim a new way of approaching religion. Does the discovery of a method

supply the right kind of evidence in dealing with personal problems? But further, there is the problem of the dates. Moïse Durkheim died in February 1896. Durkheim in the famous reference to Robertson Smith indicates that it was in 1895 that the traumatic change occurred in his religious thinking (1970b/r.Deploige 1911:402–3). The problem of Durkheim's relation to his father and the influence of the death of his father has subsequently been raised by Lacroix (1981), who has adopted the same position as Greenberg although he does not refer to him. The Robertson Smith episode of 1895, references to nervous complaints attributed to Durkheim, and even Durkheim's lack of political commitment as being due to a fear of castration, are all used by Lacroix to substantiate his position. But as Besnard rightly points out, as we have just observed, this does not constitute enough material on which to base a psychoanalytical argument and the material is far less than that for Max Weber in relation to his mental breakdown (1981:3). Further, the facts themselves are very dubious and the dates which are crucial to the argument are often wrong (*ibid.*). A psychoanalytical approach in trying to understand Durkheim's thought and action, especially that relating to religion, is a fruitless task because of the lack of adequate and firm evidence.

4 The significance of Jewishness

Further attention must be given to Durkheim's Jewish background. The place of Jews in France, particularly in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, is a subject that has recently received considerable attention (see, for example, Aubery 1962; Bourdel 1974). Only limited aspects of a very wide subject are touched on here.

The medium-sized town in which Durkheim was born is in the Vosges, near Strasbourg and Nancy. It is situated in a part of France where in times past Jewish refugees from the east usually arrived. They were generally of Ashkenazi descent and it is not surprising that eastern France as a whole, particularly Alsace, had in Durkheim's day proportionally more Jews than any other region of the country.¹ Épinal itself contained a large Jewish community

with three synagogues. To the north, and on the same river as that on which Épinal stands, the Moselle, is Trèves (Trier) where Karl Marx, also a Jew, was born some forty years before Émile Durkheim.

The French Revolution had been one of the most important instruments in allowing Jews to leave their ghettos and in helping them to assimilate into Gentile life. However, the process of integration in Europe was not a smooth one and was continually subject to ups and downs. It received a serious setback in the 1880s, when socialists in their attack on capitalism switched their attention to Jews and accused them of being the worst offenders – accusations which Marx himself had once made, and in so doing pointed to the alleged evils of his own race. In France the crisis came with the Dreyfus affair in 1894, which dragged on for twelve long, tense years, and which has been so extensively documented. Over and above the question of the innocence or guilt of an army officer of Jewish birth, or even the question of anti-Semitism there quickly emerged issues of larger consequence – the rights of the individual, the concept of patriotism, the well-being of *La Patrie*, *La Nation*, France herself. Like the events of May 1968, but more decisively, the affair divided the country right down the middle. The old traditional divisions appeared: right versus left, Catholic versus Protestant; moreover, socialists themselves were divided, so were Catholics, so also were families. In the early days, mob action bordered on persecution as crowds shouted 'Death to the Jews'. The army and government administrative bodies attempted to remove from their ranks not only Jews but Protestants, republicans and Freemasons. Hostile action was attempted against any groups or individuals who were thought to be failing in a sense of patriotism. Durkheim, like many Jews at the time, suffered from verbal hostility (Peyre 1960a:14). As expected, he had no hesitation in standing on the side of the Dreyfusards not only in demanding justice for the wronged officer, but also in his support of liberal ideals which he and many others held were the foundation of the Third Republic, and which came under sustained attack during the crisis. Not only was Durkheim very quick to join the ranks of the Dreyfusards, but he also became a member of the supporting movement, the Ligue pour la Défense des Droits de l'Homme, which was formed partly on his suggestion. He became secretary for the Ligue in the Bordeaux region (for Durkheim's

involvement in the Dreyfus affair, see Lukes 1972:ch. 17; also Lalande 1906:253; LaCapra 1972:76; Besse 1913:238; Clark 1973: 172–4). In 1898 he published an important article called ‘L’Individuisme et les intellectuels’ (1898c). In it he answered some of the charges levelled against the Dreyfusards, notably their lack of patriotism, and at the same time he helped to clarify the moral and social issues. Although the essay was of political importance, it was also significant for another reason, namely, that it was written while Durkheim was at Bordeaux and when he was beginning to formulate systematically his sociology of religion (*sociologie religieuse*) (see ch. 27). Certainly one result of the affair was increased anti-clericalism, and with this a heightened religious fervour amongst many believers. But beyond that, national division and internal hostility which had been engendered by the affair, strengthened what Durkheim had so clearly seen after the 1870 Franco-Prussian war: the need for France to realize its unity and to seek a morality based on an unambiguous, scientific foundation. For him, what happened to France during those years was an occasion of moral and political stirring: it was an example of his notion of effervescence (see chs. 21 and 22). The outcome was all to the good, for it was a great awakening which carried with it seeds of change and invigoration. Indeed, Durkheim greatly welcomed the intellectual and political activity which was fermented during the affair.

But was Durkheim drawn to the ranks of the Dreyfusards to become their stalwart supporter on account of his loyalty to Judaism, or by a conviction about republican and liberal principles? Commentators such as Filloux and Lukes feel that Judaism *per se* was not a primary consideration (Filloux 1970:257; Lukes 1972:33 n.49). Strong moral considerations about freedom and human rights were of far greater importance to Durkheim than Jewish loyalties. But could it not be argued that the situation was probably more complex and that both issues were important to Durkheim? That he so quickly rallied to the Dreyfus cause, which was initially concerned with the problem of Jewishness, might suggest that he was quite ready to assist the movement on such grounds. It should be remembered that Durkheim supported certain Jewish organizations throughout his life, provided religious orthodoxy was not the criterion of membership. During the First World War he was a member of a large number of national

committees, including the Comité Française d'Information et de l'Action auprès des Juifs des Pays Neutres (Davy 1919:193). Again, the origins of justice and of the rights of the individual can be traced back in part to the eighth-century Jewish prophets about whom Durkheim had learned as a boy. He was very much aware of the persecutions that the Jews in Europe had suffered through the centuries at the hands of Christians. One wonders therefore whether Jewish loyalty was of such secondary consideration as some have maintained. But there is further evidence that the Jewish question was always with him.

During the 1914–18 war, anti-Semitism strangely enough was an ever-present threat to national unity. Durkheim was a sufficiently important figure in the public eye to suffer unpleasant attacks on account of his Jewishness, and that despite his patriotic pamphleteering (see, for example, 1915c). At one point he was castigated in the *Libre Parole* as 'a Boche with a false nose, representing the *Kriegsministerium* whose agents are swarming throughout France' (cited in a letter to Léon, 26 January 1916, quoted in Lukes 1972:557). He was also attacked by a senator, M. Gaudin de Vilaine, who requested an examination of residence permits to foreigners, including 'Frenchmen of foreign descent, such as M. Durkheim, a Professor at our Sorbonne' (ibid.). The scurrilous suggestion of the senator was vigorously denounced by a government official who gave high praise to Durkheim and forced de Vilaine to withdraw his remarks.

During the latter part of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century, there was a widespread movement in France towards national unity and away from loyalty to regions. It enabled France to reach a new level of self-consciousness. The movement was without reference to religion or to political party, and it was found as much amongst Catholics as amongst anti-clericals. In the Catholic Church no better example of this is to be seen than in the Sacré Coeur de Montmartre, dedicated as it was to national repentance and unity. It was thought of as the *Basilique du Voeu National*. Durkheim's patriotism was of this genre. It was not to a region of France, say to Alsace, where he was born, but to the nation as a whole. It was the inevitable outcome of his early wish that France should be firmly united and as such he saw regional loyalty to be divisive.

It is the case that in later life Durkheim does not seem to

have been troubled about his Jewish origins, as for example was Sigmund Freud and perhaps Karl Marx. Quite naturally he opposed anti-Semitism, though not in a spirit of hatred: he certainly opposed Jewish extremism (1899d). He presented himself not so much as a Jew, who had guiltily rejected the faith and practice of his forebears, but as an enlightened, intellectual European liberal. There would appear to have been something in him that wanted to play down or quietly cover up his Jewishness. Was it, for example, an accident that he always referred to himself as Émile Durkheim, and not as David Durkheim? He had been given both names, David Émile. He wanted to be accepted for what he was – an intellectual, and a devoted son of France, and in particular an ardent supporter of the Third Republic (see the following chapter). And it was to the country as a whole and not to a particular region of it that he showed his loyalty. He appears to have adopted without much difficulty a ‘rational’, common-sense attitude towards his Jewishness and here one might recall the example of Disraeli. His background neither obtruded so as to suggest it was the basis of some emotional or intellectual imbalance: nor was it repressed or totally denied. It was quietly laid on one side. To this degree Durkheim seems to have been happily integrated into Gentile society, whilst at the same time remaining in many respects loyal to Judaism. He was *déraciné* yet felt himself embedded in a country which he virtually adored.

5 Asceticism and family life

Although Durkheim became a non-believer at a relatively early period of his life, he firmly retained some of the moral precepts and ideals projected by western religion. One of these was asceticism; not the asceticism practised by hermits and monks, not one based on extreme physical deprivation, but an asceticism tempered by moderation and manifested in the form of self-control and total dedication towards work. From his early days when he entered the *École Normale Supérieure*, Durkheim exhibited a firm belief in the importance of duty and moral integrity. Georges Davy, to whom we owe much of our knowledge of Durkheim’s personal life, used the words ‘*la croyance au devoir*’

as being an outstanding quality of the young Durkheim (1919:182). Let it not be forgotten that Durkheim was no Protestant who might have been influenced by the so-called work ethic: indeed he seemed to have had but little understanding of Protestantism (see ch. 23.4). He was considerably influenced by Kant and neo-Kantianism, which can be seen in his concern for morality and for a high sense of duty which he held everyone in society should have. According to Filloux, the family from which he came was austere and showed great respect for the law (1970:8). Many of Émile's friends pointed to his cold, stoical and ascetic appearance (Davy 1919:194). Work, duty and justice seem to have been the foundation of his morality and happiness, even in the days of his youth (Davy 1960:6–7, 17). He also stood aloof from the arts and from games (see ch. 19.2). Hubert Bourgin, who came to know Durkheim at the turn of the century, wrote perhaps somewhat flamboyantly about the aura of authority and seriousness that surrounded this '*maître impérieux*' (1938:224). 'One felt oneself to be under the judgment and already under the authority of a man who had devoted himself to his task, his mission, and who in admitting you to his presence and within his circle, delegated to you a place within the responsibilities he had assumed' (ibid.:217). His main joy seems to have come in talking about ideas – a Spinoza type of joy, as one writer described it. His warmth was most apparent in conversation (Davy 1919:194).

There can be no doubt that Durkheim worked prodigiously hard, and within the family he was helped a great deal by his wife in proof-reading and similar tasks (see *AS*, n.s., II:8–9; also Lukes 1972:99 n.4). His own home was described as austere, in which the overriding ideals were work and duty (Davy 1960:17). (I have seen where he lived in Bordeaux – a conventional, middle-class terraced house.) Nevertheless, Durkheim's family seems to have been an extremely happy one in which there was warmth and tenderness (Greenberg 1976:627). Certainly Durkheim was very much a family man, devoted to his wife and children. In Louise Dreyfus he was said to have married just 'the right person'. (She had no family connection with the person involved in the later political scandal.) Durkheim was devoted to his two children, although it is reported that he refused to allow his gifted daughter to pursue her education (ibid.:627 n.28). In one sense Durkheim was well prepared to take on family duties, for at the death of his

father, when he was young, he became the head of the family (LaCapra 1972:28). Thus, behind Durkheim's austere moral disposition there lurked a warm personality, which made him liked amongst his collaborators, although it must also be admitted that his relations with the members of the *Année Sociologie* group were, at least in part, dominated by empire-building motives (see ch. 2.2). He seems to have needed collaborators more than they needed him and in many cases his relations with them were warmer than theirs with him.

One wonders how right Greenberg is in suggesting that Durkheim was ambivalent towards the family as an institution, implying an ambivalence towards his own family. Greenberg's argument rests on the fact that discipline, if not asceticism, dominated the Durkheim family. Such a characteristic of Durkheim's own family seems beyond doubt. Greenberg's position about Durkheim's ambivalence rests on the doubtful assumption that family life and discipline verging on asceticism are totally incompatible, and that there cannot be a happy home life where there is such discipline. This is a very doubtful proposition, not only in general terms, but is virtually contrary to Durkheim's own thinking. Durkheim always considered that his most treasured lecture notes, which alas have been lost and which he took with him wherever he went, were those on the subject of the family (Lukes 1972:179). This might be a pointer that family life, both intellectually and emotionally, was of enormous importance to Durkheim himself, and he believed to society at large.

6 His religious quest

We noted earlier that Durkheim firmly rejected traditional religion during his early manhood. The result was, as Filloux has said, that Durkheim 'called himself agnostic, rationalist and atheist' (1970:301). There is no reason whatever to deny the broad truth of the statement. But what is to be challenged is whether such a description, in some such form frequently repeated not only by Durkheim himself but also by his colleagues, is as straightforward an assertion as it seems to be. True, he was a rationalist in the broad sense of the word and was a devoted supporter of France's

Third Republic which was to become avowedly secular. Yet, his attitudes towards religion were not as conventionally hostile or even negative as might be imagined from one's general knowledge of rationalism in France at the time. Despite his claims to follow the dictates of reason and science, he was not the thoroughgoing debunker of religion one imagines he might have been. Indeed, to declare one conclusion of our study at the beginning, there was much about Durkheim that could be called 'religious'. What marked him off from so many of his rationalist, anti-clerical contemporaries was that, as it will become apparent, he had a great reverence for religion. One could say that he was 'religious' about religion. Evans-Pritchard, who was critical of much of Durkheim's thought, but who was largely responsible for the translation of several of Durkheim's writings into English after the Second World War, supports this view in speaking of Durkheim's extraordinary interest in religion (1960:16 n.1). When Durkheim addressed a conference of Free Thinkers and Free Believers in Paris in 1914, he declared vehemently that he was as much opposed to those who were strongly anti-religious as he was to those who were dogmatic believers (1919b). Unlike so many rationalists of his time, and indeed before his day, he never mocked or derided religion, although he was often critical about the contemporary institutional brands of it (see ch. 23).

The truth of the matter is that he saw a *via media* between traditional believers and anti-clericals, and pointed to both the desirability of new forms of religion and the fact that they were emerging anyway. He believed that the moral and social uncertainty of the times was in part due to the failure of traditional religions – Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism – to offer a satisfying system of beliefs and rituals, which could even approximate to the intellectual demands of the day – demands based on reason and science (chs 24 and 25). The new patterns of religion which were in fact emerging were of the kind to which scientifically minded people such as himself could readily subscribe (ch. 26).

Like many French intellectuals before him, Durkheim looked for a religion without God, but which at the same time contained what might loosely be called 'a spiritual element'. From the time of the Revolution, and indeed before it, France proved itself to be a veritable seed-bed of humanistic religions and sects. As such it was an earlier and secular challenge to the religious fertility of

the United States. The French Revolution did not take the logical step of abolishing religion root and branch, but attempted to create forms which were in keeping with some of its basic ideals. Such forms centred on the code of reason and the institution of ritual and festivals associated with human and moral virtues. Later there was the Nouveau Christianisme of Saint-Simon, followed by the religion of humanity of Auguste Comte, who was for a time Saint-Simon's secretary. During this turbulent period, France might show itself to be anti-clerical and anti-Catholic, and even anti-Christian, but there were always those who searched for what might be called surrogate, humanistic religions, often highly ritualized as in the case of Comte's church. The theology, however, of such religions was always based on man and on human values. The goal was to create a Christian-like morality devoid of the 'false' premises of Christian belief and free from the inimical control of the Catholic clergy. Such an end is exemplified in the title of one group, Société de Morale Chrétienne, which existed in the 1820s.

Durkheim categorically disassociated himself from these distinctive movements, which were carefully contrived inventions to bring about an institutional religion with man as its centre, accompanied by rituals in praise of him. For him new religious forms were not something which had to be deliberately engineered or promulgated: they emerged in history. Within society as a whole the new form of religion which he held was growing was one which took the shape of individualism. It was based on a deep respect for man in relation to other men and set within his social order. There existed in society a morality based on the dignity of the human personality, but which was mediated by society itself. His nephew, Marcel Mauss, said that 'morality was really the goal of his existence . . . the foundation of his mind' (1925:9). And Davy somewhere made a similar point, that anyone is destined to fail to understand Durkheim's work unless it is realized 'that morality is at the centre of it . . . its end'. Some more recent commentators have gone so far as to suggest that Durkheim was more a moral philosopher than a sociologist. Bellah wrote in 1973 that Durkheim was 'a philosopher and moralist in the great French tradition of moral thought' (1973:x) and Wallwork's book, *Durkheim: Morality and Milieu* (1972), was the substantiation of the thesis that Durkheim 'stood in the classical tradition of moral

philosophy that stemmed from Plato and Aristotle' (1972:vii). Such arguments as these receive support from the fact that after the publication of *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Durkheim set about writing what he hoped would be an even more important book, this time on moral philosophy. The war years interrupted his efforts and when he died he had only written the introduction (1920a; see Pickering 1979a:4).

As we have hinted, there were, however, political reasons for upholding this emerging form of humanism which appeared to sway Durkheim more than purely theological reasons. It is true, as Richter says, that all Durkheim's endeavours were affected by his search for a religion minus a transcendental god (1960:203). The reasons for such a lifelong search were doubtless deep in his psyche, but from his writings and all other evidence the urge was to discover some quasi-transcendental base on which to build political stability and strength.

It was an attempt to give a rational understanding of the sacred base for an emerging morality which could thus be strengthened and made more effective. Hence there was the prior need to understand religious life, because of its very close relation to morality and because in it is located, as nowhere else, the sacred. A deep concern for matters religious is thus at the heart of Durkheim's thought.

7 Patriotism, politics and war

Épinal is situated in an area of France renowned in the nineteenth century for its sense of identity and for its patriotism. When he was only twelve years of age, Durkheim witnessed the 1870 Franco-Prussian war fought, as it were, on his very door step. After the French suffered their unexpected and humiliating defeat – the war lasted a bare three months – it was followed by the collapse of the Second Empire, the rise of the Third Republic and the Commune of 1871 with its chaos and bloodshed. Internal wrangling between the Orléanists, Legitimists and Bonapartists gave rise to continued instability, until eventually the republicans gained a moderately firm control in 1877. They were initially a somewhat divided group, since support came from many quarters, from

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thoroughgoing atheists, from Freemasons, anti-clericals, liberal Jews and Protestants. They formed an alliance against extremists who threatened them from the left and from the right. The right was, on the whole, a stronger group with an alliance between royalist factions, 'nationalists' and the supporters of the Catholic Church.

One result of the war and the annexation of Alsace-Lorraine to the Germans was to engender in the young Durkheim a deep sense of patriotism and nationalism. He was struck by the uncertainty of the times, the humiliation of defeat, the multiplicity of political parties each striving for different goals, the pluralism of institutional religion. As Essertier said, he was living at the end of a century which was marked by every kind of confusion. In literature there was a vague sadness which may have exaggerated its importance, but traditional beliefs, a sense of duty, the love of one's country seemed to be at the point of sacrifice. What one held most deeply could be the subject of blasphemy and laughter (Essertier 1930:34). Durkheim was utterly convinced that a moral and intellectual crisis was afoot. Duties were no longer related to the realities of life and what was needed was a new discipline which could demonstrate the nature of the crisis and point to the need for moral integrity, national regeneration and re-organization.

The moral fibre of France was to be tried again forty-five years later with the outbreak of the First World War. Once more the French and the Germans were at each other's throats, this time with the French seeking revenge for what had happened in 1870. And once more Durkheim, like so many other Frenchmen, was emotionally stirred, and now he was a man at the height of his powers. He had no hesitation in lending what intellectual weight he could to the cause of his country. As someone who was 'passionately devoted to science, justice, his native land' (Worms 1917:567), he found that everything he stood for was threatened by the war. Even when the clouds were beginning to gather at the turn of the century, he had no hesitation in making contributions to such subjects as militarism (1899b) and later patriotism and pacifism (1908a) (Lukes 1972:350). When the storm eventually broke, Durkheim showed a burning desire to see what he called a 'moral revival', which was necessary if France were to survive (Davy 1960:6). With the memories of 1870 rekindled, he

held more strongly than ever that only through a sense of unity and moral fervour, coupled with justice within society, could France gather sufficient moral and social strength so as to be victorious in the war. As a public figure, he helped by writing a series of tracts, sometimes with the help of others, with such titles as:

Qui a voulu la guerre? Les origines de la guerre d'après les documents diplomatiques (1915b);

L'Allemagne au-dessus de tout: la mentalité allemande et la guerre (1915c);

Lettres à tous les Français (1916a).

These essays or tracts formed sections of a general volume, *La Science française*, which was sponsored by the French Ministry of Education; they were in response to German manifestos justifying the war. Durkheim's essays were amongst the last he wrote, for, as we have said, he died in 1917. Davy, writing just after Durkheim's death, made a great deal of his ardent patriotism and observed that his master had launched a strong appeal to his countrymen to have 'patience', 'confidence' and 'make a maximum effort for victory' (1919:190ff.). Recently there has come to light an open letter that Durkheim wrote during the war in an educational journal (1916c). In it he pays tribute to the heroism of the French troops and to the moral greatness of France; Ferdinand Buisson, whom he followed at the Sorbonne, wrote in a similar vein at much the same time (1916). Durkheim speaks of the soundness of moral education in France, meaning secular moral education, which he himself played a large part in fostering. He calls attention, however, to the weaknesses of the French in their individualism and nonchalant attitude towards national action. The schools in the future will have to have a greater respect for authority and a high sense of discipline, though not that 'mechanical, punctilious discipline' that was once practised. Once again, he employs religious terminology in asking that school discipline 'must appear to children as something good and sacred – the condition of their happiness and moral well-being'.

The truth of the matter is that Durkheim was an ardent nationalist from his earliest days to his last. Davy recalled that in 1880, after he had been at the *École Normale* for a year, he rejoiced greatly during the festivities of 14 July and spent the whole day

on the streets, caught up in the enthusiasm of the occasion (Davy 1919:188).

The morality which Durkheim saw emerging, and to which he committed himself, had in his eyes a sacred base in an unquestioning respect for the human personality. But it was not the human personality *per se*, in isolation, which was sacred, but rather, in its relation to society, to other people, who formed society. There were thus two principles – two ‘deities’ – and in this dyad Durkheim never saw any real or lasting conflict. Under normal conditions they were in complete harmony – the individual and society.

Durkheim’s basically ‘religious’ outlook was thus in part confirmed by the fact that he was always ready to see that the most cherished ideals and ideas within a society could be described as sacred (see chs 7 and 8). The sacred was at the very heart of religion; it was also at the heart of society. Hence what is basically a religious concept is the most satisfactory and indeed scientific way of analysing a society, even a society which at first sight is thoroughly secular.

France’s Third Republic, which had begun in 1870, had declared itself to be agnostic and had pursued such a policy at a time of moral and religious uncertainty. What Durkheim saw as his ‘religious’ task was to point very clearly to the emerging morality that was non-religious yet sacred, nationalistic yet universal in application, scientifically enlightened and yet authoritarian. Of course he wanted not only to point to the existence of such a morality, but in some way to strengthen it. Both these points are important. Obviously he was not alone in hoping to see this kind of morality firmly established in France – an essentially lay (*laïque*) morality, the authority of which was firmly established in the state. His thinking was very close to that of Louis Liard, who was his patron and Directeur de l’Enseignement Supérieur. Durkheim’s unique contribution was in attempting to show the part that the new discipline of sociology could play in the moral strengthening of France along the lines proclaimed by the Third Republic.

In an anonymous obituary, Durkheim’s goal in helping to bring about the stability and spiritual invigoration of France is clearly set out:

Already, during the days of his youth, following the Treaty of

Frankfurt, he abandoned the idea of psychological research on quality and quantity in order to concentrate on work of an almost new kind in France. This was in finding in the science of societies the objective base for a re-organization of national life. (Anon. 1917:750–1)

The writer makes plain the fact that Durkheim at an early age turned to sociology for what might be called political, pragmatic or ideological reasons. From the time Durkheim entered the *École Normale* he was attracted by the problem of social justice (Essertier 1930:34). In this he was influenced by Jaurès, who later became a prominent socialist thinker. Jaurès was one year his senior as a student at the *École* and through him he turned away from a formalist and intellectual approach to politics and radical philosophy. The search for moral justice received a more practical interest, although Durkheim never became a member of a socialist party. Hubert Bourgin suggests that in the last analysis Durkheim was more concerned with moral issues than he was with the development of sociology as a social science. He wrote:

the founder and principal contributor to the French school of sociology was a sociologist more on moral grounds than on scientific grounds. Sociology was for him the only and certain means of reconstructing morality, which had been shattered by the very conditions of life in our society, which was too vast and overstretched. (1938:218)

The task of sociology, as Durkheim saw it, was to construct the intellectual foundations of an imperative morality for the whole of society – a morality which was already in existence (*ibid.*:219). Thus, sociology had to give a ‘theological’ basis, which was essentially naturalistic and pragmatic, to the new quasi-religious morality that was emerging in France, and which was thought necessary for the well-being of the nation.

8 The epilogue

When Durkheim died in 1917, the medical diagnosis of his death was a stroke, but it was commonly said that he died through a

broken heart (Davy 1919:181; Lukes 1972:559). Although it was held that he always had delicate health, he was irrevocably saddened when he learnt in January 1916, that his only son, André, had died in a Bulgarian hospital from wounds he had received whilst commanding a rearguard action on a retreat at the Serbian front (Anon. 1918). André had been wounded before on the western front and his health had always been somewhat uncertain (Worms 1917:568). He had been taught by his father, who realized that in his son there was a promising linguist. The series of lectures on pragmatism (1955a) were specially intended for André, and in them were Durkheim's last academic references to religion. But the loss of his son was yet one more sorrow heaped on others for, as we shall see in the next chapter, Durkheim was already weighed down by the death of many of his most promising students and collaborators, members of his *équipe*, who had also been killed during the war. Obviously the saddest blow of all was the loss of his son. At such a time of misery and desolation, Durkheim yearned, it is said, for the consolation of religion. He had written objectively about the functions of religion and the help that it gave at such occasions as he was experiencing. Now he only encountered utter misery in the form of a personal vacuum. He could scarcely talk about the death of André (Davy 1919:181–2). In the darkness which surrounded him he categorically admitted that religion offered him no hope or comfort. He wrote to Xavier Léon:

Of course I know that the religions are there, and that their practices are rich in experience that is unconscious and full of accumulated wisdom. But their wisdom is crude and empirical; nothing resembling ritual practices has been of use to me or seems effective to me. (Letter dated 20 April 1916; quoted in Lukes 1972:556)

It is remarkable that having rejected the truth-value of all religions he should have momentarily turned to them in seeking consolation at the hour of crisis. Was the backward glance another pointer to Durkheim's religious nature? Clearly the edifice of the cult of man on which he had consciously based his beliefs had crumbled. The brittle foundations had given way in the face of the holocaust of the war. The hatred between civilized nations had rendered liberal humanism virtually untenable. Was it also such embittered

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suffering that caused him to forbid all ceremonial and speeches at his own funeral (Worms 1917:568)?

Society, which he seemed to worship as a quasi-deity, offered not comfort but betrayal..

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