

Introductory remarks

Sociology is commonly held to be a discipline which was crystallized in the nineteenth century against the background of an accelerating industrial revolution. It can also be described as a secular or even atheistic discipline. Yet Émile Durkheim (1858–1917), one of its pre-eminent founding fathers, standing alongside Max Weber (1864–1920) and Karl Marx (1818–83), gave to the study of religion a place of overriding importance in his attempt to explore social phenomena scientifically. Although he was not an orthodox believer, he had an innate reverence for religion. Any doubts about the primacy of religion within his scheme of thought are quickly dispelled in reading his book *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912a). It now stands as one of the classics, not only in the sociology of religion but in sociology itself. As Steven Lukes, who has done so much to revive Durkheimian studies, said in a debate: ‘I went and read *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* and had my mind blown, and as a result I just became totally immersed in Durkheim’ (in Clark 1979:131). In many respects it remains *the* classic in the sociology of religion, for no other book has supplanted it. The contributions of Max Weber are considerable, but he never produced a book on religion which dealt with the subject in the broad sweep, or raised as many issues as Durkheim did, in what, as events turned out, was his last book. But besides being a classic in the sense that it is the corner-stone of a discipline, *The Elementary Forms* is also a classic in that it is constantly read and reread. It is published and republished. It is a fountain from which one continually gains academic refreshment and insight. It is a book that goes on living.

Although *The Elementary Forms* contains Durkheim’s most developed ideas on religion, to concentrate only on that book and to disregard all else he wrote on the subject, as many who concern themselves with Durkheim do, is an inadequate procedure in trying to come to grips with his analysis of religion, which is the purpose of this book. In the many articles and reviews that

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Durkheim wrote and in virtually every book, there were allusions to religion (see Pickering 1975:323ff.). One can therefore only begin to understand the complexities of his thought and its paradoxes, if one is prepared to examine and evaluate the entire corpus of his writings which deal with religion and allied subjects. For Durkheim, religion is not only one social institution amongst other social institutions, it is of such significance that it explains other phenomena rather than being explained by them. It is thus scarcely surprising that it weaves its way into so many facets of social life in which he was interested. To be comprehensive, it is also necessary to give careful attention to Durkheim's many followers and critics at the time he was writing as well as subsequently. On the whole the views of his contemporaries, both friendly and hostile, especially those in France, have not up to now been given much attention (see, for example, Pickering 1975: 205–8 and 228–76).

To approach a classic which has stood the test of time and triumphed over the attacks of critics, or to come to the work of a classical writer whose mind has been shown to be outstandingly great, means that the primary task must be to expound what the man has written. This is necessary for three reasons. The first is that, as with all classical works, the ideas involved and their ramifications are numerous and complex. Often in the course of time some become forgotten and need to be revived. So, for example, there has been a notable lack of attention given to Durkheim's theory of ritual and collective effervescence. The second is that largely because of its alleged atheistic, positivist and reductionist assumptions, Durkheim's work in the sociology of religion has been subject to stringent criticism. Continued attacks, however, often bring with them distortion of what the author originally meant. By concentrating on the weaker points his thought tends to be misinterpreted and not seen as a whole. The third reason is that to focus solely on the weaknesses of Durkheim's thought is to be small-minded. He made a similar point himself in connection with Montesquieu's theory and quoted with approval Paul Janet who complained that most commentators had been interested in showing only Montesquieu's errors (1892a/t.1937b and 1953a/t.1960b:61). It would have been better, argued Janet, to have given 'a detailed idea of the vastness and obscurity of the subject he chose and of the intellectual power with which

he mastered it' (ibid.). The primary task must therefore be to try to expound Durkheim's thought. And while the present writer does not pretend to have the intellectual prowess of Durkheim, his intention is to try to follow Durkheim's own advice in the quotation from Janet and to apply it to the grand master of sociology himself.

Immediately questions are raised. How is a commentator to proceed with his work? What principles are to guide him? What are his presuppositions? Such issues raise acute hermeneutical and historical problems, some of which have been broached by R. A. Jones in his article 'On understanding a sociological classic' (1977), where he actually considered *The Elementary Forms*. There is no intention to enter into the debate of how far interpretation should be purely historical or how far sociological; nor indeed to consider in detail the issue of whether, if at all, one can approach the task free from personal and ideological bias. Or, again, to raise what principles are involved in studying historically the work of the founding fathers of sociology, for example, principles recently raised by Quentin Skinner, who in approaching the history of political theory, would emphasize the intention of the author in what he was writing. All that is intended in these remarks is to state very briefly the principles which we hope and believe have been used and by which the work should be judged. The overall task is to come to terms with Durkheimian thought about religion, not to argue about how one comes to terms with any classic or classical thought in general. Clearly such a wide issue has an important place in the academic world, but that place is not here.

For our purposes the starting-point must always be the texts themselves, the careful appraisal of what they mean and at the same time the avoidance of reading into them what the commentator would like to see. It means continually going back to the French original and trying to wrestle with it, especially where it is obscure. Careful attention must be given to key words and phrases. Indeed this book must be judged on whether or not it is a faithful account of some of the work of Durkheim. The truth of the matter is that one cannot escape from the written word, from the texts themselves.

The task is therefore to try to ascertain what Durkheim said. What he did not say, what he did not attempt to do is of little consequence. One can only judge him by what he did and by

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

what he set out to do. Any other sort of judgment calls for a completely different set of criteria.

In letting Durkheim's ideas speak for themselves, no attempt is made to try to compare the work of Durkheim with, say, that of Max Weber, far less to try to combine them. Durkheim's sociological thought stands on its own. It is a complete system, almost like a sociological Thomism. And let it be noted that Durkheim was very much attracted to medieval philosophy (see 1938a). His work therefore stands or falls by the completeness of the system. And with whom does one conflate St Thomas? To compare Durkheim in detail with other sociologists, especially in the matter of religion, is a futile exercise, only excusable as an examination question for undergraduates.

To help elucidate the text and to understand Durkheim's aims and ideas, both his work and indeed his life have to be placed in a historical perspective. Durkheim, an enthusiastic liberal, humanist and agnostic, was very much a man of his time. This may sound a truism, but to take into account historical factors in evaluating his work, scientific and ahistorical as he claimed his conclusions to be, is imperative. His ideals cannot be understood apart from the fact that he was an ardent supporter, indeed an academic spokesman of and for France's Third Republic. Steven Lukes's intellectual biography of Durkheim, published in the early 1970s, has proved to be a model in providing a historical setting for the development of Durkheim's work. But in a study such as this, which focuses on religion, attention will have to be given to some of the religious issues of his day and at the same time to his own religious background, upbringing and ideals. On internal evidence, it has often been argued that Durkheim's thought underwent changes during his lifetime and such a possibility within the area of his analysis of religion will have to be examined.

Although one must approach all classics with a degree of reverence and a readiness to follow their logic, complexity and imagination, this does not preclude criticism and assessment. The danger is to be critical before exposition, to be devastatingly negative before the picture has been unfolded. Here is a particular weakness of sociologists, not least at the present time, when criticism seems to be their main craft. Nor must it be forgotten that Durkheim was a severe critic himself, although he was never sarcastic and vitriolic, even in his controversy with Tarde. It was

his opponents who tended to be the more aggressive (see Pickering 1975:347, 356). As we have had occasion to note, Durkheim's work, particularly that on religion, has been subject to much criticism, but such criticism needs to be sifted and evaluated. In the last analysis, exposition must give rise to assessment and criticism of some kind or another.

The book has deliberately been given the subtitle 'Themes and theories'. The reason is simple enough. Durkheim's study of religion covers a vast number of topics. To write about them all and in detail would mean producing a book of inordinate length. Further, some of the topics are only tangential to Durkheim's main argument. Others cover issues now dead and buried. Some have had to be omitted because the space is required for more pressing issues. However, the main subjects that Durkheim dealt with can be readily grouped. The corpus of Durkheim's work on religion, highlighted as it is in *The Elementary Forms*, is to be divided as follows:

- 1 the methodology of the sociology of religion;
- 2 a theory of religion based on social origins;
- 3 the interpretation of the religion of certain Australian and other tribes;
- 4 ritual and collective effervescence;
- 5 modern religion, the decline of traditional religions, and the rise of 'secular' religions.

The first contribution mentioned, that of methodology, is still of considerable importance to the current standing and understanding of the sociology of religion and must of necessity be treated in detail. His theory of religion based on social concepts is rejected today by most scholars, but it still has a number of interesting insights which should be considered on their own merits. Durkheim's contributions to the study of totemism and the religion of the Arunta and other tribes is still open to debate, although most scholars think that at the time he wrote his contributions were outstanding. But the interest here is only for the technically competent in anthropology and will only be incidentally alluded to in what follows. Durkheim's analysis of ritual, admittedly set within the context of primitive societies, has been little explored and, it is suggested, has still a great deal to offer. But even more important is Durkheim's notion of collective effer-

INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

vescence, since it provides some understanding of religious change and at the same time has particular relevance in the modern context – something confirmed by the observation of Eliade (1973:21). In turn, this has bearing on Durkheim's analysis of the modern religious situation which has so frequently been overlooked. What might be called his theories of secularization will be considered, particularly in connection with the rise of what might be called the cult of man. The reader is therefore warned in advance in the light of these emphases, that the following topics have not been dealt with in detail or as subjects in their own right: animism, naturism, magic, Australian totemism, the notion of the soul, and sacrifice.

Yet there is another, altogether more controversial area. It is the sociology of knowledge which was so bound up with religion in *The Elementary Forms* and in which Durkheim was greatly interested. An earlier article which was incorporated in his book had the title 'Sociologie religieuse et théorie de la connaissance' (1909d). This branch of sociology is scarcely considered here. The criticism about such an omission is parried by the argument that to deal with the sociology of knowledge in Durkheim is to open up a vast territory which itself could be the subject of a book. It is stated unashamedly that the subject considered here – the substantive area – is religion. It is not society, social behaviour, social institutions or even epistemology. If we have concentrated on religion and drawn sharp lines of demarcation and are criticized for it, so be it. Relations with other social areas will inevitably be considered, but always one comes back to religion and so to the base of operations. We are therefore not offering a complete exposition of *The Elementary Forms*, but only those of parts that are relevant to our quest.

No attention has been given to the question of how far Durkheim's Jewish background, particularly Jewish beliefs, affected his sociology. The question is a large one, full of methodological problems, and a consideration of Durkheim's sociology *in toto* which would be necessary, is beyond the confines of this book (see Filloux 1977:36ff.).

In order not to create false expectations it must be said that in what follows there is no attempt to support an overall thesis about Durkheim's analysis of religion. Nor is there any conclusion which would allow Durkheim to be categorized as a positivist, a social

realist, an idealist, and so on. Is this how one is to judge a classic or a classical writer? Is this the way to deal with the writings of Plato, St Thomas Aquinas, or Karl Marx? Is their work to be summed up by one phrase, by one characteristic, by one thesis? As if this is all that is to be said! If this is so, the notion of a classic is meaningless. Rather, there is the attempt to look at some of the many aspects of Durkheim's work on religion, each on their own merits, and to appraise them accordingly. Every effort has been made to eschew a particular ideological approach in such a task. This is the intention at the outset: how far it has been realized is another matter.

In brief, there are two purposes of the study. One is to set forth the truth about Durkheim by delineating his thought on the matter of religion. The other is to try to bring out the 'truth' of the truth of Durkheim, that is, the 'truth' of the analysis he so imaginatively put forward.

And imagination he certainly had. That will become apparent in the various propositions and assertions that he made in his analysis of religion. What is more difficult to convey is his style of writing and great knowledge. To see this it is necessary to read the author himself. As Parodi said, Durkheim wrote '*avec une érudition imposante et une force dialectique incomparable*' (1919: 136).

The greatness of Durkheim is no better attested than by an Australian anthropologist, W. E. H. Stanner, an authority on Australian aboriginal religion, which forms the empirical core of Durkheim's great book on religion. Stanner wrote:

for some at least, [there is] an impulse to turn back and to study again and again this inexhaustibly interesting scholar. There is a widespread view that everything of value which he wrote has long since been incorporated into the theory and practice of social anthropology. This does not seem to me true. (1967/r.1975:290)

It is hoped that this book in some small way responds to such a call.