14 In the beginning: religion or society?

1 True to his own principles

The relation between religion and society posed by Durkheim must be further explored since the consequences and ramifications of his position are diverse and complex. We have already shown how, by using the concepts of society and *représentations collectives*, he attempted to demonstrate the locus of the concept of God and indeed its source. But if society is the reality behind God – and God is basically a social god – surely it is true of every facet of religion, not only the concept of God? Religion, in its totality, is derived from society. This is not to say that individuals, prophets, church leaders do not have a place. In religion as a whole – in religious institutions seen as entities of persistence – the influence of the social is of paramount significance. Therefore the locus of man's religious experience, of his religious tools, of his religious structures is in society – in socio-cultural life. What is religious is not derived from some biological or psychological source, although religion does cut into these fields, but from the social. Therefore when Durkheim attempts to use society to 'explain' religion, he is doing nothing more than being faithful to his methodological principle of avoiding reductionism, for he attempts to explain religious facts, that is social facts, by social facts.

2 All that is religious is social

Durkheim's unequivocal statement that religion is an essentially social phenomenon is to be found at the beginning of his academic life. In an early review he spoke of religion 'viewed purely as a social phenomenon' (1886a:68/t.1975a:21). And he died with

virtually the same theme on his lips when he wrote of his last book, in a review, that its main object was 'to demonstrate that the origins of religion are social' (1913a(ii)(6) and (7):35/ t.1975a:171). His standpoint on this matter was always misunderstood by his critics (cf. Richard 1923:247/t.1975:259). Perhaps more accurately than most commentators, van Gennep referred to Durkheim's 'well-known personal tendency to emphasize the collective element (social) above all else and to put it to the foreground' (1913:390/t.1975:207). Nor should it be overlooked that Durkheim's views were, in all probability, strengthened in reading Robertson Smith, who held that the distinction between the social and the religious was often meaningless, since every social act had reference to the gods as well as to men, and that the social body was made up of gods as well as men (1889/1894:30).

Durkheim's contention that religion is pre-eminently social and is derived from society is demonstrated or asserted in a number of different ways.[1] We have noted already that he places great emphasis on the social element in his developed definition of religion, employing the notion that a community, church or ecclesia is an integral element in the definition (65/47/123; see ch. 9.5). We have dealt in some detail with his concept of religion as something essentially social before and have no intention of going over the ground again (see ch. 10.2).

As always, Durkheim does not hesitate to contradict ideas opposed to his own. In this case he repudiates the notion that religion is essentially an individual phenomenon for the benefit of individuals, originated by individuals, individual in character. The origin and sustenance of religion is not from individuals, but from individuals working in a group.

> The only moral forces superior to those which the individual *qua* individual has at his command are those issuing from individuals in association. That is why religious forces are and can only be collective forces. (1913a(ii)(11) and (12):98/ t.1975a:180)

Religion does not further personal ends: indeed, said Durkheim, 'it exercises, at all times, a constraint upon the individual' (1893b/ 1902b:59/t.1933b:92). He had in mind here those taboos and moral directives issued in the name of religion which curb and discipline man's psychological and individual satisfactions.

It is impossible for an individual to have any religion unless he is in contact with society – unless he is part of a society. There can be no religion in a personal vacuum. As he remarked early on in his career:

> Religions have only been found at the heart of established societies; among sick people who have been rigorously excluded from the rest of society by an accident (blindness allied to deafness) religious sentiment has never been found before the day it was communicated to them. (1887b:307/t.1975a:33)

And a little later he observed that religion is unknown in the animal kingdom and that 'it is never found except where a collective organization exists' (1897a:352/t.1951a:312). Further, 'it varies with the nature of societies' and only in a group do men think religiously (ibid.).

3 The primacy of religion: all that is social is religious?

To be sure Durkheim saw religion as a social institution amongst other institutions such as law or marriage and that as such a religion is born, grows and dies. He readily admitted that all institutions, including of course religion, were subject to change (1913b:67). Religion, however, was special. It was not one of equal standing with other institutions: it was the queen of institutions. Though subject to social 'laws' and changes, it had pre-eminence. It was in fact a primal institution. Durkheim maintained such a position throughout his life. Poggi holds that for Durkheim religion is the paradigmatic institution (1971:252ff.), or the proto-institution of all other institutions. It was, as we shall see, the prototype of knowledge and of social conduct. Religion ultimately supports all other institutions. As Poggi says:

> Religion directly cultivates and mobilizes attitudes of respect, devotion, submission, willingness to sacrifice oneself, etc., which all other institutions presuppose if they are to operate successfully. (ibid.:254)

One of the clearest examples of his position is to be seen in the

following quotation, taken from an early work, his doctoral thesis. In it one sees what he called his broad theory of secularization (see ch. 24.3). More to the point, it discloses how he visualized religion in a primitive society – in man's earliest days. Religion, he held, embraced the entirety of life.

> Originally, it [religion] pervades everything; everything social is religious; the two words are synonymous. (1893b/1902b:143/ t.1933b:169)

In this passage Durkheim seems to be arguing in terms of ideal conditions. 'Religion is equated with mechanical solidarity where an individual's thought and actions are little differentiated from those of other individuals' (Richard 1925:360). Durkheim indeed says that in societies typified by mechanical solidarity, 'we know that religion pervades the whole social life' (1893b/1902b:154/ t.1933b:8). In this sense Durkheim is arguing in terms of ideal conditions: indeed the concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity which stand at the heart of *The Division of Labour* can be interpreted as 'ideal types' not entirely dissimilar to Weber's use of the concept. A perfect example of mechanical solidarity or a perfect example of organic solidarity does not exist. Exaggerated characteristics of certain social states and conditions are made for analytical purposes. No anthropologist today would deny that in most, perhaps all primitive societies, religion as a social institution pervades great areas of life. It could be argued that when Durkheim says that in societies characterized by mechanical solidarity, the two worlds of the religious and the social are synonymous, he is exaggerating a clearly understood relationship. But Durkheim believed that he had found incontrovertible empirical evidence to show that the exaggerated connection, as we have called it, virtually existed. What he had presumed in the 1893 thesis was to be found in totemism. In the 1906–7 lectures on religion, he could triumphantly state from material he had been examining that: 'L'univers tout entier prend ainsi un caractère religieux' (1907f:98). So significant did the reporter of the lectures, Paul Fontana, see the idea to be that he had it printed in italics.

In a review in 1897 of Labriola's *Essais sur la conception matérialiste de l'histoire*, he held that according to sociologists and historians religion was the most primitive of all social phenomena, from it all other manifestations of collective activity emerged – 'Dans

le principe tout est religieux' ('In the beginning all is religious') (1897e:650). Economic institutions, however, appear more rudimentary than religion but they depend on religion, which is a richer and more pervasive phenomenon, more than religion depends on them (ibid.). It is impossible to see how concepts of the deity have been influenced by economic factors to which religion cannot be reduced.

Two years later he was to modify his position slightly, when in the preface to the second volume of the *Année sociologique*, he took up the old theme once more:

> Religion contains in itself from the very beginning, even if in an indistinct state, all the elements which in dissociating themselves from it, articulating themselves, and combining with one another in a thousand ways, have given rise to the various manifestations of collective life. From myths and legends have issued forth science and poetry; from religious ornamentations and cultic ceremonies have emerged the plastic arts; from ritual practice were born both law and morals. One cannot understand our *représentation* of the world, our philosophical conceptions of the soul, of immortality, of life, unless one knows the religious beliefs which are their primordial form. (1899a(i):iv/t.1960c:350–1)

Durkheim goes on to refer also to kinship, punishment, contract, gifts and so on. But he now has doubts about one group of phenomena – economic organizations. He gives the hint that they could be derived from another source and wants to keep the question open. The general theme is that religious institutions are the source of all other institutions; and that religious ideas are the origin of other ideas. In his last book, as we have repeatedly noted, he emphasized the fact that the most fundamental ideas that man has devised – abstract categories of thought – had religious origins (see 12–15/9–11/110–12). Here are included concepts of time, space, number, cause (see also 1913a(ii)(6) and (7);35/t.1975a:171). From the same source came all man's symbols. And further, Durkheim, together with Lévy-Bruhl, held that primitive mentality was 'essentially religious' (ibid.). It also meant that science itself had religious origins; and this allowed him to conclude:

> If the main aspects of collective life began as mere aspects of the religious life, it is obvious that the religious life must have been the eminent form of collective life and a shorthand expression of it viewed in its entirety. If religion has given birth to everything that is essential in society, the reason is that the idea of society is the soul of religion. (598–9/419/148)

Thus Poggi rightly states that religion in Durkheim's thought 'holds an unchallengeable position of supremacy' and that it stands as the ultimate historical source of the whole institutional apparatus of society (1971:254). In *The Elementary Forms* Durkheim speaks of religious forces embracing both the physical and the moral. 'This double nature' of religion has enabled it 'to be like the womb from which come all the leading germs of human civilization' (319/223). In these assertions it is implied that not only does religion create other institutions, but it is the primal source of ideas and all that is social. Hence, in the beginning was religion; and all that was, was religious. It is possible to argue that religion may have been the matrix of many social institutions, say on historical grounds, but do not Durkheim's assertions mean that religion actually creates the social, creates society? Certainly H. S. Hughes holds that this is precisely what Durkheim meant and that religion does give rise to society. He wrote:

> The practice of religion produced a sense of solidarity, of personal reinforcement through the group – in short, a sense of society itself. Thus Durkheim was led to define society as religious in origin. Religion *created* society: that was its true function from the standpoint of positive science. (1958:285)

Statements such as these need to be treated with a certain amount of reservation. Certainly Durkheim holds that religion gives rise to social solidarity and cohesion. He wrote:

> It is through a religion that we are able to structure a society, the stage of unity it has reached and the degree of cohesion of its parts. Religions are the primitive way in which societies become conscious of themselves and their history. (1950a/1969g:188/t.1957a:160)

Although religion produces a sense of communal unity amongst those who adhere to it, it creates society only in this sense, as the

quotation just given implies. A society exists before its religion. But this implies knowledge of how things were in the beginning. Durkheim is ambivalent here. On the one hand, as we have already noted, he flatly denies the possibility of ever knowing historical origins, but, on the other, he seems to imply historical statements by pointing to elementary forms which he held existed near the beginning of man's social life. It is evident that he wishes to assert a structural relation between the two entities in holding that religion 'from the beginning' has been and always will be closely associated with the formation and persistence of society.

4 A meaningless paradox?

Two basic ideas which emerge in Durkheim's thought in relating society to religion appear to be contradictory: religion is derived from society, but in the beginning religion was the matrix of all that is social. Several questions follow. Did Durkheim understand the ambiguity of his position? Has one misread him? Is there any meaning in what he is saying?

Desroche is one who responds to the dilemma by adopting a dialectical approach (1968:61–2/t.1973:39). He argues that for Durkheim religion is a function of society only because in a different sense, society is or has been a function of religion. Without a professed religion or before the acceptance of such a religion, society is not a society. Thus, religion and society are complementary functions in a total act. Here Desroche emphasizes two types or two levels of society in asserting that according to Durkheim, society becomes itself only in a super-society (*sur-société*), the entrance to which is none other than the religious act. If religion is 'a social thing', this is not because it reflects an already established society: rather, it is social because it is an emblem of a society that is in the process of being made, which is none other than an act of self-creation. Such an interpretation, despite its plausibility, is to use a language Durkheim did not use and to read too much into his notion of society. It is more legitimate to see Durkheim's position not in dialectical terms but as a paradox which is never solved, but which contains elements of truth.

At the risk of repetition and to avoid misunderstanding, it should be observed that Durkheim was concerned with the issue of trying to establish the *fons et origo* of religion and all social institutions. For this reason he examined the most primitive group that he believed was known to man at the time, and emphasized the importance of this in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (ch. 6.2). In saying that religion was the progenitor of social institutions, Durkheim was making historical statements about the development of social life which have received general confirmation (Stanner 1967:221). For example, van Gennep has said that within semi-civilized societies religion viewed as a totality of beliefs and actions is the most social phenomenon known to man in so far as it embraces 'law, science, everything' (1913:391/t.1975:208). Van Gennep also agrees with Durkheim in saying that most primitive societies do not differentiate social components. The social and religious are all combined. Such societies could be called religious in so far as religious ideas dominate them.

The all-pervasiveness of religion in primitive society allows some commentators to go so far as to suggest that Durkheim sees society as a religious phenomenon. This is so with Talcott Parsons (1937:427). The claim is made in conjunction with what Parsons saw as Durkheim's increasing interest in *représentations* as factors of explanation (see ch. 15.4). And H. S. Hughes follows Parsons and declares that for Durkheim, 'if religion in the end proved to be a social phenomenon, so also society turned out to be a religious phenomenon' (1958:285). Here is the paradox well and truly declared!

The reason for what appears to be a paradoxical and unresolved contradiction in Durkheim rests on the fact that he sees the social, society itself, as being sacred. Yet, on the other hand, religion is *the* locus of the sacred, it is defined in terms of the sacred, it contains the sacred ideas about society which is itself sacred. All too clearly there are the problems of identity and the danger of circular argument.

The problem comes out in another sentence in *The Division of Labour*:

> It is, indeed, a constant fact that, when a slightly strong conviction is held by the same community of men, it

> inevitably takes on a religious character. (1893b/1902b:143/t.1933b:169)

Thus living together (society) makes strong beliefs take on a religious character and so become part of religion. But surely the beliefs, which Durkheim admits were common to people living together and which existed before the process of intensification occurred, were religious? This he indicated in the previous sentence, when he held that people living together embraced a number of religious sentiments. Therefore, such communal living-together makes more religious what was religious before. And since religion is essentially social, society is thus an amplifier of itself. If it could be shown that society was in some way independent of its beliefs, such a position would be less ambiguous.

Let us try to re-examine the situation logically. For Durkheim it is unquestionably the case that all that is religious is essentially social and of social origin. Religion is derived from society and sustained by the social. Is it legitimate, however, to reverse the equation, as Durkheim seems to do and to say that all that is social is of religious origin – that religion gives rise to society? On grounds of logic this step cannot be taken. All X is from Y is not the same as all Y is from X, since X and Y are understood to be different. It is possible only when X and Y are identical. Now we have shown elsewhere that Durkheim could not and did not adopt this extreme position of identity (see ch. 13). He came very near to it, but did not take the ultimate step. We have just had occasion to refer to a quotation in *The Division of Labour* where Durkheim said that the two words religious and social were synonymous, but as we said then, it does not mean that the substantives, religion and society, are synonymous or identical. Durkheim was in this context referring to an idealized situation – to a primordial state of affairs of undifferentiated primitive society.

Thus Stanner seems quite right in stating that the relation between religion and society is not a symmetrical one. None the less he goes on to agree with Alpert that what Durkheim was really stating was 'the *identity* of religious thought and of social thought in general' (our italics). Identity, not being a relation, does not require either primacies or causalities to be asserted (1967/r.1975:282). In avoiding the charge of ambiguity in his own case, Stanner goes on to suggest that the key to the problem is

whether one is arguing about conceptual primacy or chronological primacy, a point that will be taken up shortly.

To uphold a relationship of theses which is symmetrical would be bolstered, quite apart from the failure of logic which we have indicated, by the notion that religion creates society. This view, as we have just noted, is supported by Hughes in conjunction with Parsons. Giddens rejects the idea of Hughes, as we do, on the grounds that religion is 'the expression of the self-creation, the autonomous development of human society' (1971:110). Such an assertion is in accordance with the methods Durkheim proposed that social facts should be explained by social facts.

If one is prepared to re-phrase the theses and to take them out of their paradoxical relationship, two generalized statements emerge, which might be more generally acceptable.

1 Religion is social in origin in so far as it is derived from social interaction, of man living with fellow men in a social group. There is thus a correlation between the social and the religious, between society and religion.
2 Most social institutions as they have emerged in history were originally associated with religion and in this sense were part of religion.

Perhaps such formulations weaken Durkheim's position. They do not necessarily eliminate criticism, which could be said to apply as much to these statements as to those originally made by Durkheim. However, given the theses above, a third has to be set on its own as being inherently paradoxical, or perhaps in this case more accurately dialectical. It is that religious activity creates a sense of society or a sense of the social. In one sense this is a circular argument, since religion is itself derived from the social. On the other hand, it can be seen that when religious beliefs and practices are increased and intensified there is amongst those who adhere to them a greater sense of social coherence. And from this greater sense of society further religious ideas may emerge.

5 Further considerations

Much of the difficulty which arises out of Durkheim's two main theses about religion and society turn on whether he is making historical assertions or whether they are structural and conceptual.

Gustave Belot said of Durkheim's preface to the second volume of *L'Année sociologique* (see section 3 of this chapter) that, if his thesis about the association of religion and society is confined to strictly historical criteria and if it means that successive forms of beliefs and institutions follow one another, it is easily justified and has been upheld for a long time (1900:289). If, however, one tries to support it in more sociological terms, it is less easy to maintain. Belot held that it was difficult to determine whether certain forms and activities were born of religion, in the sense that they had come out of it, or whether they invaded it and therefore restricted it. In the matter of religion giving birth to various autonomous disciplines, the key issue is to know the principle by which the religious becomes the non-religious. What in fact brings about differentiation? And Belot said later that it is fairly clear that the family, morality, art, morals and so on have their origin in religion and that under the cover of religion and religious ideas these different functions were found, and later separated themselves from religion. This would seem to be the case historically, but if that were so the notion of origin becomes confused and is not a scientific explanation. The confusion rests on *cum hoc ergo propter hoc* (1909:30).

Much therefore turns on Durkheim's use of the ambiguous concept of origin. He was quite aware of this and he wrote: 'To be sure, if by origin we mean an absolute first beginning, the question is not a scientific one and must be dismissed out of hand' (10/8/109). It is thus impossible to find a historical moment when religion began. 'In common with every human institution, religion had no beginning' (11/10/109). Origin therefore cannot be usefully couched in historical terms. Yet in both *The Division of Labour* and *The Elementary Forms* Durkheim seems to be answering a hidden question: in the beginning what was society like? What was religion like? In the latter book, he was able to be more empirically based by using what he thought was the most primitive form of society at that time known to man. All too easily

Durkheim seems to have committed himself to a historical position and, although not primarily interested in history, gambled on historical speculation. In wanting to establish a structural or conceptual link between society and religion, he is not able to escape from historical considerations. Such considerations he might have thought would have strengthened his position, but this does not turn out to be the case.

The methodological position he most strongly proclaimed was scientific, and in searching for scientific origins – hardly a legitimate expression? – he held that the task was to find 'a way of detecting *the ever-present causes* behind the most essential forms of religious thought and practice' (11/10/109; our italics). He continues: 'these causes are most readily observed when the society under consideration is of the least complicated kind. That is why we are trying to revert to origins' (ibid.). Durkheim is therefore less worried *how* religion originated than as to *where* it originated – its locus. And where the fountain is located is where the never-ceasing supply of energy is to be found. If he cannot show the mechanisms by which it began, he claims to have found the continuing source from which it is eternally replenished. Durkheim's claim therefore is that there exists a timeless, an ahistorical relation between society and religion – a structural relation in which the two are intrinsically linked and, we would add, in an asymmetrical fashion.

Such a clarified position is not without its difficulties, however. It may be acceptable enough in general terms, but it is much more difficult to determine the nature and exactness of the correlation. The ideals of a society's religion, or of its gods, may indeed resemble the social structure of that society and its ideology at a given point of time, but is there an immediate, automatic and inevitable change in one component when the other changes? Are not both elements far more complex than Durkheim would have us imagine, far more complex than his delineation of 'the elementary forms'? It is this emphasis on elementary forms which is so deceiving. One cannot escape the problems of time and history and the question of empirical testing. Fürer-Haimendorf has noted in his study of the Apa Tanis and Daflas located in the Eastern Himalayas that their world-views challenge Durkheim's theory that religion is a reflection of social situations (1962:1). His findings suggest 'the possibility that an ideology rooted in a specific

cultural background can persist with little modification in societies of very different structure and character' (ibid.). This raises the problem of a time-lag and once the factor of time is introduced, the association between religion and society as something intrinsic becomes tenuous. Fürer-Haimendorf concluded that changes in economic structure amongst the Apa Tanis were accompanied by slow changes in ideology and ritual which remain virtually unaltered despite growth in population and economy (ibid.:18). Belot, much earlier, had pointed to the question of the slowness by which functions and disciplines gained their autonomy from religion. In this respect, religion and society do not explain what is to be explained. Rather, 'each gives an account of the reverse of the problem, that is to say the slowness with which these diverse functions are differentiated, purified, and have become fully aware of the role they play' (1913a:379). Nor does Durkheim explain how the process of differentiation occurs. He hides behind such ideas as the inevitable changes in society (see ch. 22.6).

There can be no doubt that the difficulties which Durkheim faced in considering the relation between religion and society arose at a relatively early date, from say 1895 onwards (see ch. 4). The problems occurred because of the uncertainty in his own mind as to whether he saw society as the factor *par excellence* of explanation in social behaviour or whether religion was that factor. He was caught between the two and could never commit himself to the primacy of one over the other.