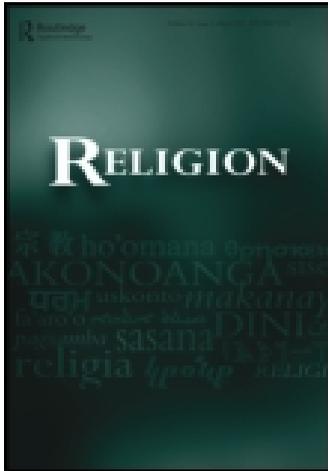


This article was downloaded by: [New York University]

On: 08 August 2014, At: 07:05

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



## Religion

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rrel20>

### Is Durkheim's understanding of religion compatible with believing?

Steven Lukes<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Department of Sociology, New York University, 295 Lafayette Street, Fourth Floor, New York, NY, 10024, USA

Published online: 21 Feb 2012.

To cite this article: Steven Lukes (2012) Is Durkheim's understanding of religion compatible with believing?, *Religion*, 42:1, 41-52, DOI: [10.1080/0048721X.2011.637312](https://doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2011.637312)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0048721X.2011.637312>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

## Is Durkheim's understanding of religion compatible with believing?<sup>†</sup>

---

Steven Lukes\*

*Department of Sociology, New York University, 295 Lafayette Street, Fourth Floor, New York, NY, 10024, USA*

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

**KEY WORDS** belief/believer; ritual; collective effervescence; error theories; transcendental; cognitive

Does Durkheim's sociology of religion pose a challenge to the faithful? Is it subversive of religious belief? Was he engaged in debunking or unmasking the faith of religious believers, exposing it as based on illusions? This is a question that cannot fail to strike readers of his writings on religion, just as it struck his contemporaries. He repeatedly answered the question in the negative, but, as we shall see,

---

<sup>†</sup>Readers of Alasdair MacIntyre will recognize that my title echoes that of an early paper of his entitled 'Is Understanding Religion compatible with Believing?' Both our arguments concern the relations between skepticism and belief in relation to anthropology, but mine differs from his, the gist of which is that the 'skeptic and believer do not share a common grasp of the relevant concepts' (MacIntyre 1964: 132). If MacIntyre were right, Durkheim's project could never even get off the ground for, as we shall see, he invited the skeptic to 'bring to the study of religion a sort of religious sentiment.'

\*Email: sl53@nyu.edu

that answer is complex, requiring and repaying attention. I shall ask how convincing that answer is. I shall then consider some recent attempts to revise and reinterpret his understanding of religion and, in the light of these, raise the question anew.

### Durkheim addresses his contemporaries

In 1914, two years after the publication of *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (henceforth referred to as *Formes*), Durkheim addressed a meeting of the Union des Libres Penseurs et de Libres Croyants pour la Culture Morale devoted to the discussion of Durkheim's book. Though unable to stay for the discussion, Durkheim delivered an introductory impromptu speech, in which he addressed the question in specifying how he hoped his book would be studied and discussed. He first addressed himself to the '*libre penseur*' and then to the '*libre croyant*.'

He urged the freethinking non-believer to 'confront religion in the state of mind of the believer.' On this condition alone, he went on, could one hope to understand it:

Let him experience it as the believer experiences it, for it only really exists in virtue of what it is for the latter. Thus whoever does not bring to the study of religion a sort of religious sentiment has no right to speak about it! He would be like a blind man talking about colors. Now, for the believer, the essence of religion is not a plausible or seductive hypothesis about man or his destiny. He sticks to his faith because it forms part of his being, because he cannot renounce it, so he thinks, without losing something of himself, without being cast down, without a diminution of his vitality, a lowering of his moral temperature.

In a word, the characteristic of religion is the dynamogenic influence it exercises on men's minds. To explain religion is thus, above all, to explain this influence.

Religion, he argued, was not simply to be seen as a system of ideas but primarily as a 'system of forces.' The man who lived religiously was not just someone who represented the world in a certain way, knowing what others do not: he was a man who felt within him an extraordinary power, a 'force which dominates him, but which, at the same time, sustains him and raises him above himself,' giving him greater strength to face life's difficulties and enabling him to bend nature to his designs. Such a sentiment was too general throughout humanity and too constant to be illusory. An illusion could not thus last for centuries. Whence, then, came this force? It could not result from men's attempts to interpret natural phenomena, even the great cosmic powers; physical forces did not penetrate the inner life:

I do not feel stronger, better armed against destiny, less enslaved by nature because I see the rivers flow, crops germinate and the stars accomplish their revolutions. It is only moral forces that I can feel within me that can command and comfort me.

These forces, he insisted were 'real, for they are really within me. For this sentiment of comfort and dependence is not illusory' (Abauzit 1919: 99–101).

He turned next to the '*libre croyant*' – the freethinking believer, 'the man who, while having a religion, even adhering to a confessional creed (*formule*), nevertheless brings to the examination of that creed a freedom of mind that he strives to render as complete as possible.' Asking for such a believer's sympathy, he conceded that, if one holds to a confessional creed in an exclusive and intractable manner, if

one believes one possesses religious truth in its definitive form, then mutual understanding is impossible and 'my presence here would make no sense.' But if

one judges that creeds are only provisional expressions that last and can only last for a time, if one thinks that they are all imperfect, that what is essential is not the letter of these creeds but the reality they conceal and all express more or less inexactly, that one must therefore penetrate the surface to attain the underlying dynamics at work (*la force des choses*), then I believe we have an undertaking we can pursue with a common accord, at least up to a point.

He urged the believers to forget provisionally the creeds in which they believed, if only to return to them later. The task was to uncover the reality which religious creeds express, all more or less inexactly. In this way, they would not be tempted to commit the unjust error of those believers who had characterized his way of understanding religion as thoroughly irreligious. Indeed, he remarked, a rational interpretation of religion could not be thoroughly irreligious, since an irreligious interpretation would deny the very fact it sought to explain. Nothing would be more contrary to scientific method. His own account of the source of religious life should surely, he claimed, be acceptable to all believers. They might, of course, hold there to be another, higher religious life with quite a different origin but could they not recognize that 'there exist within us, outside us religious forces that require that we unleash and call them into existence, indeed cannot avoid arousing them by the very fact of coming together, of thinking, feeling and acting in common'? An orator, he continued, had recently gestured prophetically at the heavens, proclaiming that they were emptying and urging his hearers to turn their gaze earthwards and attend to their economic interests. This had been called impious but from Durkheim's standpoint, it was simply false, for 'there is no reason to fear that the heavens will ever become quite empty; for it is we ourselves who people them' (Abauzit 1919: 102–103).

In the ensuing discussion, held unfortunately in Durkheim's absence, the key speaker was the philosopher Gustave Belot, a non-believer, like Durkheim, and an ex-Catholic (see Pickering [2010]). Belot put the question before us in a singularly direct and simple way. Durkheim was essentially claiming, he maintained, that all religions are false in so far as they do not accept his own theory. Who, he asked, would continue to pray if he knew he was praying to no one but merely addressing a collectivity that was not listening? Where, he continued,

is the man who would continue to take part in communion if he believed it was no more than a mere symbol and that there was nothing real underlying it? (Abauzit 1919: 131).

We can surmise that, had he been present, Durkheim would have responded by reminding Belot that on his account 'there are no religions that are false. All are true in their own fashion,' whether they accept his account or not, and by repeating that there is, of course, something real underlying the symbolism. Indeed, as he had written: 'We must know how to reach beneath the symbol to grasp the reality it represents and that gives the symbol its true meaning' (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 2). And Professor Evans-Pritchard, had he been transported to the meeting back in time, might then have intervened in support of Belot and repeated his gibe from *Nuer Religion* that it was 'Durkheim and not the savage who made society into a god' (Evans-Pritchard 1956: 313).

### Durkheim's answer analyzed

Durkheim's negative answer to our question – denying that his sociological understanding of religion is subversive of the beliefs of the faithful – is composed of three distinct but related claims. The first consists of the rejection of what we may label 'error theories' of religion.<sup>1</sup> This is the gist of chapters two and three of *Formes*, which respectively discuss and dismiss animist and naturist theories of religion. It is, he wrote, 'unthinkable that systems of ideas like religions, which have held such a large place in history – the well to which peoples in all the ages have come to draw the energy they had to have in order to live – could be mere fabrics of illusion' (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 66). The animists and naturists supposed that the notion of the sacred was formed through 'the superimposition of an unreal world upon reality.' But this unreal world was

constructed entirely with the phantasms that agitate his spirit during dreams, or with the often monstrous derangements that, supposedly, the mythological imagination spawned under the deceptive, if seductive, influence of language. But it then becomes impossible to understand why humanity should have persisted for centuries in errors that experience would very quickly have exposed as such. (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 226)

Consider, for example, the idea that sacredness is contagious, so that

the respect we have for a sacred being is ... communicated to all that touches that being and to all that resembles it or calls it to mind. Of course an educated man is not the dupe of such associations. He knows that the emotions result from mere plays of images, entirely mental combinations, and he will not abandon himself to the superstitions that these illusions tend to create.

It was claimed that 'the primitive objectifies these illusions, without critiquing them,' but this was 'to forget that primitive religions are not the only ones that have ascribed to sacredness such an ability to propagate.' The most modern cults had rites based on this principle:

Does not every consecration by anointing or washing transmit the sanctifying virtues of a sacred object into a profane one? Although that mode of thinking has no natural explanation of justification, still it is hard to see today's enlightened Catholic as a kind of backward savage.

In short, it was to the nature of religious thinking, not to human proneness to error that one should look for an explanation. It was not 'in the general laws of human intelligence that we must seek the origin of these predispositions but in the special nature of religious things' (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 326).

The second component of Durkheim's answer amounts to his justification for declining to accept the explanations and justifications of their beliefs and practices provided by the faithful. It consists of a theory that offers what Arthur Danto has called a 'deep interpretation' of such beliefs and practices (Danto 1981): an account

---

<sup>1</sup>I borrow this term from J. L. Mackie, who, in his book *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong* argued that moral theories which claim that there are 'objective values' err in supposing there to be 'entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe' (Mackie 1977: 38). (Mackie dubbed this the 'argument from queerness' – an argument that was both epistemological and metaphysical). Analogously, an error theory of religion would be an account of religious beliefs that has believers asserting or implying the existence of what does not exist.

of their meaning that is, for the most part, hidden from the faithful. Thus a deep interpretation expresses what surface beliefs and practices mean and explains them; and it is a representation of what actors believe and practice, but, at the same time, the fact that they represent the world thus is hidden from them. Of course, as my and Danto's (and also Durkheim's) language of depth and surface suggest, Durkheim was undoubtedly making a claim here to have attained a truer, better-warranted account than those of the faithful, an account that in turn explains these. Thus he could write, in commentary upon William James's *Varieties of Religious Experience* that:

merely because there exists a 'religious experience,' if you will, that is grounded in some manner, ... it by no means follows that the reality which grounds it should conform objectively with the ideas that believers have of it. The very fact that the way in which this reality has been conceived has varied infinitely in different times is enough to prove that none of these conceptions expresses it adequately. If the scientist sets it down as axiomatic that the sensations of heat and light that men have correspond to some objective cause, he does not thereby conclude that this cause is the same as it appears to the senses. Likewise, even if the feelings the faithful have are not imaginary, they still do not constitute privileged intuitions; there is no reason whatever to think that they inform us better about the nature of their object than ordinary sensations do about the nature of bodies and their properties. To discover what that object consists of, we must apply to those sensations an analysis similar to the one that has replaced the senses' representation of the world with a scientific and conceptual one. (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 420)

The third component of Durkheim's answer is explanatory, namely, an account of why the deep interpretation should have remained deep. The 'faithful are not mistaken when they believe in the existence of a moral power to which they are subject and from which they receive what is best in themselves. That power exists, and it is society.' The Australian aborigine who 'is carried above himself, feeling inside a life overflowing with intensity that surprises him' is 'not the dupe of an illusion,' for that 'exaltation is real and really is the product of forces outside of and superior to the individual.' His mistake lay in taking literally the totemic symbolism representing the power,' for behind 'these forms, be they cruder or more refined, there is a concrete and living reality' (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 226–227). Why, then, were the faithful unaware of the real meaning of their beliefs? Why had Durkheim's deep interpretation of religion – as 'a system of ideas by means of which the individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it' (p. 227) – remained hidden from the faithful of all faiths for so long? Religion was for Durkheim in part a cognitive enterprise, offering 'a first representation of what the intelligible relations between things might be' and a 'first explanation of the world' (p. 239, amended translation) confronting 'the realities of nature, man and society.' It 'strives to translate those realities into an intelligible language that does not differ in nature from that used by science. Both attempt to connect things to one another, establish internal relations between those things, classify them and systematize them.' As for the 'mystery that appears to surround them,' this disappears with scientific progress: the scientific method brings to bear 'a critical spirit that is unknown in religion,' surrounding itself with 'precautions to avoid "haste and bias" and to keep passions, prejudices and all subjective influences at bay.' For the realities to appear as they are, 'it is

enough to pull aside the veil with which the mythological imagination covered them.' Science, although the 'offspring of religion,' tended, therefore, 'to replace religion in everything that involves the cognitive and intellectual functions' (Durkheim 1995: 431). Progress in the natural sciences had displaced religion's cognitive pretensions, but religion survived in the face of social realities as a kind of mythical proto-sociology, because, since

social pressure makes itself felt through mental channels, it was bound to give man the idea that outside him there are one or several powers, moral yet mighty, to which he is subject. Since they speak to him in a tone of command, and sometimes even tell him to violate his most natural inclinations, man was bound to imagine them as being external to him. The mythological interpretations would doubtless not have been born if man could easily see that those influences upon him come from society. But the ordinary observer cannot see where the influence of society comes from. It moves along channels that are too obscure and circuitous, and uses psychic mechanisms that are too complex to be easily traced to the source. So long as scientific analysis has not yet taught him, man is well aware that he is acted upon but not by whom. Thus he had to build out of nothing the idea of those powers with which he feels connected. From this we can begin to perceive how he was led to imagine those powers in forms that are not their own and to transfigure them in thought. (p. 211)

### Durkheim's answer assessed

So far I have presented Durkheim's affirmative answer to the question of whether his understanding of religion is compatible with the self-understanding of the faithful. Of *Formes* he wrote that the 'entire study rests on the postulate that the unanimous feeling of believers down the ages cannot be mere illusion (*ne peut pas être purement illusoire*)' (p. 420). But this can only mean that it *was*, in part illusory, in its obliviousness hitherto, for the reasons indicated, of his deep sociological interpretation of the religious imagination. In this presentation, I have so far abstained from assessing that interpretation. In turning now to consider the cogency of his answer, I propose to maintain that abstention. In short, we should now ask whether, given that interpretation, the religious beliefs of the faithful can survive intact.

Some types of religious belief plainly cannot. Most obviously, as Durkheim himself observed at the 1914 meeting, his position cannot be acceptable to anyone who 'holds to a confessional creed in an exclusive and intractable manner' and so 'believes one possesses religious truth in its definitive form.' On the other hand, he appealed to freethinking believers prepared to 'forget provisionally the creeds in which they believed, if only to return to them later.' Actually, they would have to be more freethinking still if they were to accept the argument of *Formes*, since that required them to accept totemism, not merely as a religion but among its most 'elementary' – that is, elemental – forms,<sup>2</sup> displaying its 'enduring elements,' namely, 'a certain number of fundamental representations and modes of ritual conduct,' thereby revealing 'the common basis of religious life' (pp. 4–5). They would have to accept, not only the ecumenical idea that all instances of

---

<sup>2</sup>Karen Fields comments on the significance of the ambiguity of the French word '*élémentaire*,' meaning both 'elementary' and 'elemental' (Fields 1995: lix–lx). Durkheim was, plainly and significantly, intending the second sense as well as the first.

religion are various ways of investing moral power in what they hold as sacred, but also the provocative thought that it was appropriate to compare their own sources and objects of religious feeling with a sacred animal or plant, or indeed with a 'rock, a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house,' for 'in a word anything can be sacred' (p. 35).

Could such accommodating believers accommodate Durkheim's account of religion? There are doubtless several ways in which they could do so. They could appeal to the notion of polysemy, allowing that their own religious ritual and symbolism was capacious enough to include the Durkheimian deep interpretation. Presumably, though, in holding there to be 'another, higher religious life with quite a different origin' than Durkheim posited, they would have to deny his interpretation to be 'deep' in the sense specified (the metaphors of 'height' and 'depth' both invoking the same devaluation of what lies at the surface). If their religion involved belief in the divine, they could argue a theological case that their God or gods had so arranged things as to render effective the ritual and symbolic causal mechanisms, the 'meetings, assemblies and congregations' (p. 429) which Durkheim identified as generative through a kind of collective effervescence of religious faith: the 'means by which that faith is created and recreated periodically' (p. 420). And they could perhaps allow sociology and theology to be non-overlapping and thus non-conflicting cognitive enterprises, so that Durkheim, in his role as social scientist could claim, as Laplace did to Napoleon when the latter asked where God fitted into his calculations, that he had no need of that hypothesis. Darwinism has often been defended similarly and so Durkheim's theory could be seen as just another version of one side of the classic divide between religion and science, offering, in this case, a naturalistic explanation, sociological and implicitly psychological, of why the faithful believe in divine presence and intervention, while leaving such beliefs intact.

Durkheim's sociology of religion and his denial that it was subversive of religious faith rest, however, on two key assumptions, both of which can be and have been put into serious question. The first is his assumption that 'religion' successfully identifies a 'reality' of which there are innumerable varying 'forms,' from the most 'elementary' to the most complex. But, as Maurice Bloch has observed, 'anthropologists have, after countless fruitless attempts, found it impossible, to usefully and convincingly cross-culturally isolate or define a distinct phenomenon that can analytically be labeled "religion"' (Bloch 2008: 2). On the contrary, he writes: 'What we call religion in anthropology is a rag-bag of loosely connected elements, without an essence or core' (Bloch 2007: 77). Moreover, as James Laidlaw has noted, 'religion' 'as it is understood in the modern (post-) Christian West is not an object with a single origin, let alone a single essence that defines it, but a local and contingent meeting of several questions and areas of concern' (Laidlaw 2007: 226). Thus, for instance, as Laidlaw reminds us, in the West before the 17th century, it scarcely existed as a separate category, referring to the right ordering of worship; only thereafter did it come to involve a distinction between God as a universal cause and the worldly spheres of politics, economics, morals and science. Furthermore, as Charles Taylor has extensively argued, in our secular age the meaning of religion for the religious changes as religion becomes an option among others (see Taylor [2007]). And the place of 'belief' is far more central to Christianity than to other traditions. Indeed, Laidlaw suggests: 'The effort to discover what religion really is – to get the definition of it definitively right – is based on a category error' for the

'changing history of how the word "religion" has been understood is, inseparably, the history of "it" changing' (Laidlaw 2007: 227).

Durkheim, of course, attached great importance to getting the definition right, and his second key assumption was, precisely, the assumption that he had: that his famous definition – that a religion is '*a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church all those who adhere to them*' (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 44) – captures the 'essence or core' of religion. But here, quite apart from the foregoing objection to the very pursuit of such a thing, we can see at work Durkheim's characteristic tendency to beg the question, committing the error of *petitio principii*, building his conclusions into his very definition of religious phenomena, and then seeking to prove it by adducing examples. As one of his sharpest critics, W. E. H. Stanner, acutely observed, 'in the beginning was the end' (Stanner 1967: 238–239).

### Durkheim revised

In face of the convincing objections to these two key assumptions, and to other aspects of Durkheim's sociology, including his account of religion, several scholars have attempted to revise the latter, in order to extract what remains of value in his understanding of religion. Thus Maurice Bloch, in an intriguing essay entitled 'Durkheimian Anthropology and Religion: Going in and out of Each Other's Bodies,' maintains that it is 'possible to maintain some aspects of his conclusions about the nature of religion and of the social with quite different types of arguments to those he employed' (Bloch 2007: 63). Bloch rejects what he calls Durkheim's 'idealist fantasy' according to which 'the social' comes 'from we know not where, mysteriously causes the cultural and the empirical, and then gives us the tools to invent what is, irrespective of what the world is like' (pp. 77–8). Bloch's argument centers on what he characterizes as the interpenetration of minds, blurring the boundaries between individuals. This occurs through the hard-wired, allegedly distinctively human capacity of mutual mind-reading that cognitive scientists call 'theory of mind.' It involves a distinct kind of consciousness: an awareness of the partialness and fluidity of boundaries between individuals that Durkheim examined under the label 'solidarity' and is often, though not always, at work in what we call religious and ritual contexts. When this occurs, we 'continually interpenetrate as we communicate and also hold as true information which only makes sense because it is also contained or continuous with that in other minds.' This 'makes it possible for the content of knowledge stored in an individual not to be understood by them, nor consciously thought to be understood, but this individual is likely to be aware of the solidarity on which the whole system of cognition is based and this may be greatly valued' (p. 70).

Bloch develops this idea in another essay (Bloch 2008), in which he focuses on something with which Durkheim was obsessed, namely, the notion that 'social facts' are distinct from and irreducible to facts about individuals: as he repeatedly insisted, society is '*a reality sui generis*: it has its own characteristics that are not found in the rest of the universe or are not found there in the same form. The representations that express society have an altogether different content from the purely individual representations, and one can be certain in advance that the former add something to the latter' (Durkheim 1995: 15). Bloch's idea is that this

notion – which he calls ‘the *transcendental* social’ – refers to a distinctively human phenomenon (unknown among chimpanzees, our nearest surviving relatives) that consists in essentialized roles, where rights and duties apply to the role, not to the individual, and essentialized groups, which exist as descent groups and nations exist, as ‘imagined communities.’ He contrasts this with what he calls ‘the *transactional* social,’ allowing for domination, coalitions, manipulation, assertion, and defeats and the like, as found among chimpanzees and also among humans, ‘irrespective of the role-like essentialized statuses and the essentialized groups of the *transcendental* social though it may use the existence of the transcendental social as one of the many counters used in the transactional game’ (Bloch 2008: 3). Bloch offers this distinction as a way of understanding Durkheim’s often-repeated idea of the duality of human nature – or, as Bloch writes, of ‘human sociality’ (p. 3). On this interpretation, what distinguishes human sociality from that of other species is its appearance as a system of interrelated roles and complex of inter-relations, ‘even though this systematicity may be something of an illusion’ (p. 4). The key point seems to be that it confers identity upon transcendental members, who, though they differ one from another at the transactional level, are identical as members of a single ‘body,’ such as a clan or a nation that can

with no problem include the dead, ancestors and gods as well as living role holders and members of essentialized groups. Ancestors and gods are comparable with living elders or members of nations because all are equally mysterious invisible, in other words, transcendental. (p. 5)

The implications for our understanding of religion are obvious. In short, Bloch arrives at Durkheim’s conclusion – identifying religious with social consciousness – but via a different route, and treating ‘the transcendental social’ not as *explanans* (coming from ‘we know not where’) but as *explanandum*. On his account, it consists in ‘the omnipresence of the imaginary’ and is manifested throughout our everyday lives which we live ‘very largely in our imagination.’ Thus ‘nothing special is left to explain concerning “religion”’ (p. 10).

Does this recasting of Durkheim’s sociology of religion challenge the faithful? No more, I think, than the original version – indeed, perhaps less, since the social, on this account, can no longer vie with the divine as the source of the *imaginary* since it is its product. Whether *what* we imagine is, in its turn, real is a further question, both the meaning of and answer to which Durkheim, on this reading, can leave to others.

A different line of rethinking Durkheim on religion focuses on his account of ritual and, in particular, of the ‘collective effervescence’ that he associated with ritual practices. The anthropologist Joel Robbins, placing himself within what he calls ‘the neo-Tardean strain of contemporary social thought,’ has recently published an essay that aims for ‘some Durkheimian insights transformed but still recognizable; shorn of their mystical tendencies but not so bare as to be beyond use’ (Robbins 2010: 93). In other words, Robbins seeks to discard Durkheim’s ‘notions about the reality of the social’ while allowing for ‘the inventive, labile, differentiating qualities’ favored by the followers of Gabriel Tarde’s nominalist vision of social life (p. 94). His interest is, in Bloch’s terminology, to develop a transactional account of the distinctive interactions that are rituals: to develop ‘ways of treating ritual that recognize its possession of some qualities that are unique in relation to other forms of interaction, but do not, for all that, rely on realist notions of

society or preclude the kind of open associative worlds which neo-Tardeans have become so good at describing' (p. 94).

This interest derives from Robbins's work on Pentecostal Christianity and its spread across the world. Observing that this religion's remarkable capacity to spread across borders and move without central planning involves a very high level of ritual activity – of individuals carrying out all kinds of formulaic rituals together – Robbins seeks to explain its success by 'yoking a Durkheimian emphasis on ritual to a Tardean model of social life as creative interaction' (p. 97). In making this case, he draws on Randall Collins's *Interactive Ritual Chains* (which, in turn, links Durkheim to Erving Goffman), citing Collins's claim that there is a human tendency for people to go through life seeking to participate in as many successful interaction rituals as they can, accumulating emotional energy. Successful interaction rituals, in which people tend to invest incorporate, as Durkheim maintained, two interrelated and mutually reinforcing mechanisms, namely, 'shared action and awareness' and 'shared emotion.' Thus, in Collins' summary,

Movements carried out in common operate to focus attention, to make participants aware of each other as doing the same thing. Collective movements are signals by which intersubjectivity is created. Collective attention enhances the expression of shared emotion; and in turn the shared emotion acts further to intensify collective movements and the sense of intersubjectivity. (Collins 2004: 35)

The chief results of rituals are 'to charge up symbolic actions with significance, or to recharge such objects with renewed sentiments of respect;' to endow individuals with emotional energy, which 'gives them a feeling of confidence, courage to take action, boldness in taking initiative'; and, in brief, '*morality*,' in the sense that 'rituals are the source of the group's standards of morality,' generating 'the conception of what is good; what is opposed to this is what is evil' (Collins 2004: 38–40).

Applying this to the Pentecostals, Robbins gives a range of examples to show that 'Pentecostals can draw on a wide variety of ritual forms and personal configurations in relating to one another, and this allows Pentecostal sociality in a wide variety of contexts and across a wide variety of scales to be marked by a high degree of mutual ritual performance' (Robbins 2010: 96). This gives them the emotional energy that, on this argument, is its own reward. And Robbins cites another scholar's description of the 'spiritual acquisitiveness' of the early Pentecostals pressing 'relentlessly on to the next experience, impelled by an insatiable longing for more rather than by determination to reach a specific goal' (Robbins 2010: 98). Robbins adds that Pentecostal converts across the globe all share a common belief that 'the Holy Spirit is powerful and gives gifts of power to human beings' (p. 98). And he cites another scholar of Durkheim, Anne Rawls (Rawls 1996; 2004), in support of the further idea that the participants' 'very mobile repertoire of ritual interactions and the experience of force such interactions produce' generate their 'shared cosmology of force figured as the power of Spirit' (Robbins 2010: 99–100).

And so we can ask, once more, whether this reading of Durkheim's account of ritual constitutes a challenge to the faithful. Can Pentecostal converts accept that they are engaged in successive interaction rituals, accumulating emotional energy that is its own reward? The answer to this depends on what we mean by

'can'? Do we mean: 'can they consistently maintain this, given their other beliefs?' or do we mean: 'can they accommodate it psychologically?' Either way, the answer will depend, as Durkheim remarked to the *libres croyants*, on how 'exclusive and intractable' is their commitment to their faith. But, in principle, in the absence of intractable doctrinal exclusiveness, there is always available the response that the Holy Spirit can have caused them to be the kind of beings who seek such rewards.

We should note, finally, that there is a way of theorizing about religion, much in vogue today, which looks as though it should pose a frontal challenge to the beliefs of the faithful. I refer to the so-called cognitive science of religion. Like Durkheim, its proponents have often taken what they call 'religion' to be a single phenomenon instantiated in different forms across history and across the globe. (In doing so, they do not necessarily thereby commit the same logical sin of *petitio principii*, discovering what they assume, since they assume universality and do the empirical work of comparing populations in pursuit of generalizable results). Like Durkheim they seek causal mechanisms, aiming to 'discern ever-present causes on which the most basic forms of religious thought and practice depend' (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 7). Thus Pascal Boyer has written that 'many aspects of cognitive processing are explained by *causes* rather than reasons, that is, by functional processes that do not always make sense' (Boyer 2002: 69). Indeed it is the very failure to make sense (to the non-believing enquirer) that typically motivates this explanatory enterprise. Call this 'the non-believer's puzzle.'

Now Durkheim, the resolutely *laic* social scientist, was, plainly, also motivated by this puzzle. But he responded to it by combining a causal with a phenomenological account of religious belief and practice (requiring the non-believer to 'confront religion in the state of mind of the believer,' indeed to 'bring to the study of religion a sort of religious sentiment.')

This is, in effect, to *dissolve* the puzzle, since the point of his deep interpretation was to reconceive the explanandum by displaying religion as, indeed, making sense. As I understand it, the strategy of the cognitive scientists is different. It is to *solve* the non-believer's puzzle by providing an exclusively causal account of an unaltered explanandum,<sup>3</sup> namely the various cognitive malfunctions distinctive of religion, their omnipresence across history and the globe, their existence and persistence in vastly diverse human environments, and their exceptional capacity to spread. They offer, in short, error theories, whose explananda embrace such topics as witchcraft and sorcery, ancestors and the after-life and belief in the gods and whose explanantia focus on evolved cognitive mechanisms that generate such errors as by-products and cultural stimuli that favor or disfavor their emergence. But the question raised by Durkheim remains: 'to understand why humanity should have persisted for centuries in errors that experience would very quickly have exposed as such' (Durkheim 1995: 226). He maintained

---

<sup>3</sup>A particularly clear instance of this assumption comes from Stewart Elliott Guthrie who defines religion as 'a system of thought and action for interpreting and influencing the world, built on anthropomorphic and animistic premises.' The 'perceptual and conceptual mistakes' consist in thinking that we have detected human or other animal agency, or one or more of their characteristics, when in fact we have not. They arise, inevitably, as by-products – namely, as false-positives – of our scanning an uncertain world for what matters most. What matters most is agency, especially complex agency, and prototypically that of our fellow humans. We are unconsciously geared to detect such agency by various perceptual sensitivities and by the conceptual framework called theory of mind ... and we have a low threshold for judging that we have detected them (Guthrie 2007: 37).

that *this* could only be understood by a deep interpretation of religion that rendered it non-illusory, an interpretation that, he claimed, no non-dogmatic religious believer could reasonably reject.

**Steven Lukes** is a Professor of Sociology at New York University and a member of the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton 2011–2012.

He is the author of *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work*; co-editor, with Martin Hollis, of *Rationality and Relativism* and, with Michael Carrithers and Steven Collins of *The Category of the Person*.

## References

- Abauzit, Frank et al. 1919. Le Sentiment religieux à l'heure actuelle. Paris: Vrin. Meetings and Discussions of the Union de Libres Penseurs et Libres Croyants pour la Culture Morale during Winter of 1913–14. Durkheim's contribution to the meeting of 18 January 1914 on 'La Conception sociale de la religion' (97–105) is also available at [http://www.uqac.quebec.ca/zone30/Classiques\\_des\\_sciences\\_sociales/index.html](http://www.uqac.quebec.ca/zone30/Classiques_des_sciences_sociales/index.html)
- Bloch, Maurice. 2007. Durkheimian Anthropology and Religion: Going In and Out of Each Other's Bodies. In *Religion, Anthropology and Cognitive Science*, ed. Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw. Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 63–80.
- . 2008. Why Religion is Nothing Special but is Central. *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B. Biological Sciences* 363/1499: 2055–2061. ISSN 0962-8436. DOI 10.1098/rstb.2008.0007. Available at <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/27111/>: 1–13.
- Boyer, Pascal. 2002. Why do Gods and Spirits Matter at All? In *Cognitive Approaches in the Cognitive Science of Religion*, ed. Ilke Pyysiäinen and Veikko Anttonen. London: Continuum, 68–92.
- Collins, Randall. 2004. *Interactive Ritual Chains*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Danto, Arthur. 1981. Deep Interpretation. *Journal of Philosophy* 78/11: 691–706.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1995. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Trans. Karen E. Fields. New York: Free Press.
- Evans-Pritchard, Edward E. 1956. *Nuer Religion*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Fields, Karen E. 1995. *Translator's Introduction to Durkheim*.
- Guthrie, Stewart Elliott. 2007. Anthropology and Anthropomorphism in Religion. In *Religion, Anthropology and Cognitive Science*, ed. Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw. Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 37–62.
- Laidlaw, James. 2007. A Well-disposed Social Anthropologist's Problems with the 'Cognitive Science of Religion'. In *Religion, Anthropology and Cognitive Science*, ed. Harvey Whitehouse and James Laidlaw. Durham, North Carolina: Carolina Academic Press, 211–246.
- Macintyre, Alasdair. 1964. Is Understanding Religion Compatible with Believing? In *Faith and the Philosophers*, ed. John Hick, 115–133. London: Macmillan.
- Mackie, J.L. 1977. *Ethics: Inventing Right and Wrong*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Pickering, William. 2010. Gustave Belot, Critic and Admirer of Emile Durkheim: An Introduction. *Durkheimian Studies* 16: 109–124. Durkheim Press. DOI:10.3167/ds.2010.160108 ISSN 1362-024X.
- Rawls, Anne Warfield. 1996. Durkheim's Epistemology: The Neglected Argument. *American Journal of Sociology* 102/2: 430–482.
- . 2004. *Epistemology and Practice. Durkheim's The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Robbins, Joel. 2010. If There is No Such Thing as Society, is Ritual still Special? On using The Elementary Forms after Tarde. In *The Social after Gabriel Tarde: Debates and Assessments*, ed. Matei Candea. London: Routledge, 93–101.
- Stanner, W.E.H. 1967. Reflections on Durkheim and Aboriginal Religion. In *Social Organization: Essays Presented to Raymond Firth*, ed. Maurice Freedman, 217–240. London: Aldine.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.