

# 3

## Society as Sacred: Émile Durkheim

The idea of society is the soul of religion.

Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*<sup>1</sup>

In the very years during which Freud put forward his controversial views in Vienna, an equally original thinker in France, Émile Durkheim, set to work on a theory of religion that was just as revolutionary, though in quite a different way. If Freud is the first name that people associate with modern psychology, then that of Durkheim—though less widely known—should be one of the first that comes to mind at the mention of sociology. Durkheim championed the central importance of society—of social structures, relationships, and institutions—in understanding human thought and behavior. His distinct perspective consists in his determination to see almost every major enterprise of human life—our laws and morality, labor and recreation, family and personality, science, art, and certainly religion—through the lens of their social dimension. Without a society to give them birth and shape them, he claimed, none of these things could exist.

At a first glance, of course, a theorist who sounds this social theme hardly seems revolutionary. In the present climate of thought, few discussions of any kind take place without some reference to the “social environment.” Hardly a day passes without some comment on “social decay,” “social engineering,” “social reform,” or “social context.” A century ago, however, such language would have been almost as rare as it is common now. “Society” was a word mostly associated with upper-class manners and the dinner parties of the wealthy. The leading systems of thought were quite individualistic, with a tendency to see any social arrangement—from a single family to a village, a church, or an entire nation—as little more than a collection of separate persons who happened to be brought together by a common location or shared interests. Durkheim’s view was emphatically different. He went so far as to say that

social facts are more fundamental than individual ones—that they are, in their way, as real as physical objects, and that individuals are more often than not *misunderstood* when the powerful imprint of society upon them is ignored or insufficiently noticed. Human beings, after all, are never just individuals; they always *belong* to something—to parents or relatives, a town or city, a race, a political party, an ethnic tradition, or some other group. In Durkheim's view, it is futile to think that we can really comprehend what a person is by appealing only to biological instinct, individual psychology, or isolated self-interest. We must explain individuals in and through society.

In accord with this social premise, Durkheim insisted, very much like Freud, that his subject required nothing less than a new scientific discipline to investigate it. This field he chose to call "sociology," even though he was not the first to use the word and was not himself very fond of it. Simply put, sociology was to be the science of society. In a significant measure it is because of Durkheim's strong advocacy and guiding influence that social science holds such a prominent place in modern life, whether we appeal to it in matters of government, economics, education, or in any other forum of public discussion, from the university lecture room to the television reality show. Today, our instinctively social view of the world is an index of just how thoroughly successful Durkheim's revolution in thought has turned out to be.<sup>2</sup>

Durkheim actually presents us with two parallels to Freud. Not only did both men feel the need to promote special fields of study—psychology in the one case and sociology in the other—but both also found that their new perspectives led them unavoidably back to the very old question of religious behavior and belief. Like Freud, Durkheim too was driven to ask: What is religion? Why has it been so important and central in human affairs? What does it do for both the individual and society? Freud, as we saw, thought he could not fully explain the individual personality without also accounting for the appeal of religion. Durkheim felt precisely the same about society. In the course of trying to understand "the social" in all of its hidden and powerful dimensions, he found himself drawn steadily and repeatedly to "the religious." For Durkheim, religion and society are inseparable and—to each other—virtually indispensable.

### Life and Career

Durkheim was born in 1858 in the town of Epinal, near Strasbourg in north-eastern France.<sup>3</sup> His father was a rabbi, and as a young boy he was also strongly affected by a schoolteacher who was Roman Catholic. These influences may have contributed something to his general interest in religious endeavors, but

they did not make him personally a believer. By the time he was a young man, he had become an avowed agnostic.

In secondary school Durkheim was a brilliant student, and at the age of twenty-one he was admitted to the demanding *École Normale Supérieure*, one of France's finest centers of learning, where he studied both history and philosophy. His experience there was not a completely happy one, in part because he did not like the rigid way in which the programs of study were designed. Yet his response at the time, which offers a clue to his temperament, was not to withdraw or complain; he had too keen an appreciation for social order to abandon an institution just because he was personally unsuited to its rules. After finishing his program and writing the two dissertations required of all students at the *École Normale*, he began teaching at secondary schools in the vicinity of Paris. He also took a year to study in Germany with the noted psychologist Wilhelm Wundt. In 1887 he married Louise Dreyfus, a woman who devoted herself lifelong to his career and their two children. In the same year he became a professor at the University of Bordeaux, which created a new chair of social science and education specifically for his sociological research.

Over the next fifteen years, while working at Bordeaux, Durkheim diligently pursued his sociological inquiries and developed his ideas. His first major book was *The Division of Labor*, published in 1893. It was followed in 1895 by *The Rules of Sociological Method*, a theoretical work that stirred a great deal of debate. He also published an important study, *Suicide* (1897), which looked for the public, social factors behind what others of his day commonly regarded as a strictly private act of despair. At about the same time, he established with other scholars *L'Année sociologique*, a new academic journal that published articles and reviewed other writings from a sociological perspective. This journal, which became famous throughout France and the world, did as much as any of Durkheim's own books to promote the discipline of sociology. Other talented scholars were drawn to contribute their work to its pages and in the process developed Durkheim's perspective into an identifiable "school of thought." Not surprisingly, on the strength of these impressive achievements (and with the help of some political maneuvering in the government), Durkheim was named a professor at the University of Paris. At the age of forty-four, he could boast the supreme achievement of a French academic career.

At Paris, Durkheim passed through years of triumph and later of tragedy. Already in Bordeaux his interests had begun to turn strongly toward an exploration of religion's role in social life, but after his move, new commitments and tasks slowed the progress of this research. Nonetheless, he kept to his plan and a decade later published *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912), his best-known and most important book. Durkheim's chief

claim to importance as a theorist of religion—and his great influence on other thinkers—rests largely on this impressive study, which we shall examine closely in this chapter. As its date indicates, *The Elementary Forms* appeared just two years before Europe was shaken by World War I. This enormous catastrophe fell hardest on Belgium and France, where much of the fighting took place, and it left its sad mark on Durkheim's personal life, as it did on so many others. Though he believed that scholars should preserve their scientific objectivity by avoiding comment on current affairs, he made an exception during the war, speaking out fiercely for the cause of France against Germany. Then, early in 1916, he learned that his only son, André, himself a promising young scholar, had been killed on a military campaign in Serbia. Broken by grief, Durkheim struggled to work and write, only to suffer a debilitating stroke some months later. His own death came just over a year thereafter, in 1917, at the relatively young age of fifty-nine.

### Ideas and Influences

Durkheim's great interest in society was not some sudden creation of his own. As he would have been the first to point out, a sequence of French thinkers before him had shown similar interests, and his ideas could be seen as a development of theirs.<sup>4</sup> One of his two dissertations had been written on the Baron de Montesquieu, the French philosopher of the eighteenth century who carefully observed and analyzed European culture and political institutions. Montesquieu's work showed that social structures could be examined in a critical scientific fashion. Durkheim also read the writings of the Comte de Saint-Simon, a socialist thinker of the early 1800s who believed that all private property should be given over to the state. And he was equally impressed by the most famous French thinker of the early nineteenth century, August Comte (1798–1857), who proposed, like Tylor and Frazer, an evolutionary pattern of civilization. In this grand scheme, earlier stages of human thinking, governed first by theology and then by the abstract ideas of philosophers, are eventually surpassed by the current, "positive" age of scientific thought, in which close study only of observable facts provides the key to all knowledge. During the present epoch of science, a new "religion of humanity" replaces the discredited religions and philosophies of the past. From Comte, Durkheim took an appreciation of the human need for communal ties and a deep commitment to scientific analysis of social phenomena. He was somewhat less taken with the notion of evolutionary social progress.

In addition to these earlier figures, we must not forget two of the most celebrated scholars in France during Durkheim's youth: the great biblical critic

Ernest Renan, who took a keenly social interest in both ancient Judaism and early Christianity, and an extraordinarily gifted classical historian who was one of Durkheim's own greatly admired university teachers at the École Normale. This was Numa Denys Fustel de Coulanges, whose influential book *The Ancient City* (1864) was to become a classic study of social life in the ancient world. In this fascinating work, Coulanges presented his readers with a close social analysis of the Greek and Roman city-states, showing not only how ordinary life was governed by deeply cherished traditions and rooted in conservative moral values but also how thoroughly these traditions and values were steeped in classical polytheistic religion.

Durkheim built naturally upon the ideas of these thinkers in framing his own perspective, but the circumstances of modern French life contributed something as well. As most well know, by the later 1800s France and Europe had passed through two great revolutions. One was economic (the Industrial Revolution); the other was political (the French Revolution and its several successors). In Durkheim's estimate, the joint impact of these two momentous developments permanently changed the pattern of life in Western civilization. Europe had long relied for stability on its agriculture, its well-defined social classes, its property-owning aristocracies and monarchies, and the intimate community ties of its villages and towns, along with the overarching truths, traditions, and structures of the Christian church. In the aftermath of the twin revolutions, these fixtures of Western culture were shaken as never before and so altered as never again to be the same. The effect was to create a new and different kind of civilization, which saw its people moving to factories and cities, its wealth moving from titled lords to enterprising merchants, its power shifting from the old privileged classes to radical movements or popular causes, and its religion everywhere facing disputes, indifference, or open disbelief. In specific terms, Durkheim noticed especially the following four trends, or patterns:

1. In place of Europe's traditional social system, laced together as it was by ties of family, community, and religious faith, a new "contractual" order was emerging, in which private concerns and money-related interests seemed to predominate.
2. In the realm of morals and behavior, the sacred values once sanctioned by the Church were now challenged by newer ideals, which stressed reason over religious faith and a desire for a happiness in this life over any hope of Heaven (or fear of Hell) in the life to come.
3. In the sphere of politics, the emergence of the democratic masses at the bottom of society and a powerful central state at the top had changed the nature of social control. Individuals were finding themselves disconnected

from their old moral teachers—the family, village, and Church—and were left to find what guidance they could from political parties, mass movements, and the state.

4. In the area of personal affairs, this new freedom of individuals released from their old frameworks presented great opportunity *and* great risk. With it came the chance of greater prosperity and self-realization but also the serious threat of loneliness and personal isolation.

## Sociology and “the Social”

Looking over these momentous changes, Durkheim felt that there was only one way to approach them—scientifically. Only a fully scientific sociology could help people comprehend the tremors of an entire world that was moving beneath their feet. Accordingly, he laid down for his scholarly investigations two fixed and fundamental principles: (1) that the nature of society is the most suitable and promising subject for systematic investigation, especially at the present moment in history, and (2) that all such “social facts” should be investigated by the most purely objective scientific methods attainable.

### The Nature of Society

In *The Division of Labor*, Durkheim’s first major book, he shows how easily one can go wrong by ignoring the first of these principles. Social life, he explains, has shaped the most fundamental features of human culture, but that is not how previous thinkers tended to see it. If they considered it at all, they did so as a kind of afterthought. When they looked at the past, they proposed ideas like the famous “social contract,” which held that society began when some individuals agreed to hand power to another, stronger individual—the king—in return for his protection. When this primeval agreement was sealed, society was born. Such stories offer an interesting exercise in imaginative fiction, says Durkheim, but the real history of humanity was never so. Even in prehistoric times, individuals were always born *first* into groups—into families, clans, tribes, nations—and raised in that context. Their languages, habits, beliefs, and emotional responses—even the very concept they had of their individual selves—always came from a social framework that was there to shape them from the first moment they appeared in the world. Ancient contracts, for example, always had to be sworn with a sacred religious oath, which showed that such agreements were not just a matter of convenience between the parties involved but were to be enforced by the gods, for all of the community had an interest in the outcome. So too with the concept of private property. It too is

thought to have developed individually; conventional thinking holds that the idea of a person’s right to own an object or piece of ground arose because these things could be seen as extensions of the individual self. But again, Durkheim claims the facts of history show otherwise. The first possessions were not individual but communal in character, starting with the sacred ground that early peoples regarded as belonging not to the priest or any other single person but to the whole tribe. These *common* holdings provided the earliest ideas of property and ownership. Only out of the notion of *public* rights to things owned or possessed by all—things sacred to the whole clan—did cultures ever develop the idea of something that could be privately possessed by one person alone or by some apart.

Social solidarity, then, has always been primary. Out of an underlying sense of the group have come such basic structures of life as moral obligation and ownership of personal property. That having been said, Durkheim observes that the main difference between ancient and modern societies pertains to the ways in which they try to achieve their unity. Study of legal codes, for example, shows that early communities tend to rely on “mechanical solidarity.” Good behavior is secured by punishments (often severe) for anyone who breaks the moral code of the group. This is external enforcement. In more modern times, on the other hand, a different pattern of “organic solidarity” tends to take over. Because there is the division of labor, because different people can do different things, the sense of moral commitment develops in another way; it comes not from the threat of punishment but from the need that each person acquires for the work of the others. Here enforcement must become internal. A wrong done by any one person must be seen as damaging to the others on whom that person depends. Ancient societies also have a broad and strong “collective conscience”; in them, there is uniform agreement as to what is right and what is wrong in almost all matters of human conduct. Modern societies, by contrast, are marked by moral individualism; they still need a foundation, a common moral basis, but because they allow for more individual diversity and personal freedom, their collective conscience is smaller in scope. It is limited to a few commands and obligations rather than many.

This last fact is especially significant because Durkheim believes firmly that morality, the obligation of each to others and all to the standards of the group, is inseparable from religion. Further, as we shall shortly see, both religion and morals are inseparable from a social framework. We cannot have either without a social context, and as that changes, so must they. When, as has happened especially in Western civilization, a society gives up the collective conscience it had in more primitive times and through division of labor replaces it with a morally individualistic system like that of the present, we should not be surprised to see that religion and morals have changed right along with the rest of the social order.

### The Scientific Study of Society

The second of Durkheim's two principles of inquiry is developed in *The Rules of Sociological Method* (1895), where he explains how sociology must be pursued as an objective, independent science. In France, many people knew the perceptive analyses of society carried out by Montesquieu, Alexis de Tocqueville, and August Comte; these were admirable and insightful narratives in the style of traditional historical study. When Durkheim, in contrast, insisted that his "science" of society was really quite another thing, reasonable people naturally wondered: What kind of other thing? How can there be a science of an abstraction like the social order, of something we really cannot see or touch in the way a chemist or botanist can observe the visible, solid objects of nature? Durkheim's answer was to think of society in a manner similar to that of Tylor and the British anthropologists when they spoke of "culture" but then to go even further. He insisted that social facts, no less than stones or seashells, are real things, as solid in their way as physical objects are in theirs. A society is not just a passing thought in someone's head; it is an accumulated body of facts—of language, laws, customs, ideas, values, traditions, techniques, and products—all of which are connected to one another and exist in a manner quite "external" to individual human minds. They are in the world before we individuals arrive; the moment we are born, they impose themselves on us; as we grow through childhood, they mold us; in adulthood, they animate and guide us; and, just as surely, in death they survive us. Moreover, it stands to reason that if there indeed are such real and independent social facts surrounding us, then there ought to be a distinct scientific discipline devoted to the study of them. We do not imagine that we can explain a living organism only through physics or chemistry; we also need biology. In the same way, we cannot explain society if we look only to biology and psychology or even economics. Society requires sociology; other disciplines are not sufficient.

None of this means for Durkheim that the actual methods of sociological study will be dramatically different from those of other sciences. The key to any science, physical or social, is the gathering of evidence, followed by comparison, classification into groups, and finally the framing of general principles, or "laws," that can in some way be tested for their validity. In this connection, sociology not only does what other sciences do but in some ways hopes even to do it better. For example, Durkheim takes care to separate himself from the well-known comparative method as it was practiced by Tylor, Frazer, and the other Victorian British anthropologists. We have seen how, in their searches for significant patterns, they preferred to travel globally, choosing customs or ideas at will and placing them into a general category, such as "imitative magic," with little attention to their context. Such determined

gathering of facts from the remotest ends and ages of the world does make for large, impressive books like *The Golden Bough*, but in Durkheim's view it is not science. It rests everything on surface similarities and very little on substance. Sociology is more cautious. It knows that comparisons can be made, and general laws laid down, only when two societies are very closely examined and can be seen to fit clearly into a common type.

Though we cannot here follow his account of sociology's methods in detail, we can briefly take note of at least some of the categories Durkheim puts into play in his approach to religion. Among other things, he believes that we can determine, for any society, what is *normal* behavior and, consequently, what is also *pathological*, or abnormal, behavior. This is certainly not a matter of absolute values, of what is good or evil at all times and places. The normal is always determined from within a group, never from outside of it. Suicide, for example, is more "normal" for some societies, like Japan, than for others. Polygamy is more normal for primitive societies than for modern ones. We must always judge the normal from within the social. In addition, whether normal or not, the category of *function* in a society is for Durkheim also extremely important in explaining behavior. And it must be kept separate from the idea of cause. The *cause* of an inner-city religious revival might be the spellbinding sermons of a storefront preacher, but the revival's social *function* may be something that goes entirely unnoticed by those who join it. From the sociologist's standpoint, the preacher's success can be traced not to the number of sinners brought to conversion but to something wholly unnoticed by those who are kneeling in prayer: the event as a whole has restored a sense of community, of shared identity and purpose, to a neighborhood of otherwise poor, isolated, even disillusioned individuals.

A good illustration of these categories can be found in Durkheim's famous study *Suicide* (1895), which was published not long after *The Rules*. After examining and closely comparing the suicide rates in the major countries of Europe, he noticed that the figures were highest in Protestant countries, were lowest in Catholic ones, and fell in between for countries of mixed religious population. In light of these ratios, it is possible to say that a certain kind of suicide, which Durkheim labels "egoistic," is more normal—that is, more typical—for Protestant countries than Catholic ones. We cannot account for this circumstance, he says, directly from the differing religious belief systems because both groups think suicide is wrong. Sociologically, however, there are certain definite and interesting differences. Protestant societies offer the individual greater freedom of thought and life; in them, people are "on their own" before God. Catholics, by contrast, belong to a more strongly integrated social community, where priests mediate between God and the believer and ties within the parish are strong. It would seem, therefore, that the rate of suicide in