The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

Emile Durkheim


Emile Durkheim (1858–1917) was a sociologist of Jewish background concerned primarily with questions of social solidarity, vitality, and malaise in modernity, especially in his native France. If Tylor ended by arguing that primitive religions are characterized by their amoral quality, one of the central aims for Durkheim is to show the intrinsic connection of the moral and the religious. The excerpt here is inevitably composed of small portions of a large and hugely influential body of work. Like Tylor, Durkheim was an evolutionist and, like Tylor, he sought the origins of religion. But he was much clearer than Tylor (or Freud) that one could not trace social phenomena to some moment of sheer beginning, and so restates the question of origins in a structural manner as a quest for “the ever-present causes upon which the most essential forms of religious thought and practice depend” (1915 [1912]: 20). His strategy is also radically different from Tylor’s. Where Tylor progresses by citing a vast sample of material to support his generalizations, Durkheim turns a slow and careful eye on what he considered a single case, namely the Aborigines of central Australia, that he thought could show the “elementary forms” of religion most directly. Durkheim also departs from Tylor by proposing an original way in which a nonbeliever can yet understand any and every religion as not being in error. Furthermore, the core of his definition of religion lies not with any specific belief or kind of belief but with a system of classification.

By defining the sacred as that which is set apart, Durkheim deftly evades having to give it any substantive content, a strategy that has enabled subsequent scholars to move beyond trite definitions. This is vastly superior to something like “belief in the supernatural,” where, as noted in the General Introduction, both “belief” and “supernatural” beg a good many questions. (But see Collier and Yanagisako 1989 for a feminist critique of the sacred/profane dichotomy.) A system of classification is also collective and no longer to be derived from individual psychology or experience.
from Kantian innate categories of understanding. With respect to the social, Durkheim makes a number of significant arguments. First is the strong idea that religion is a natural expression of society, society's moment of reflecting on its own ascendent power. Second is the functionalist notion that religion provides a form of social cohesion, the glue of mechanical solidarity. These are actually inversions of another: the first can be captured in the phrase that "the family that prays together" and the second, to quote from a billboard from my th, that "the family that prays together stays together." Perhaps what is most interesting about the latter is less the functionalism than the attention given to ritual as a form of action.

Durkheim's most infamously ambiguous argument is that all religions can be understood as true because it is seen that what they represent is actually society. His position is thus one that recognizes the essentially symbolic quality of religion. If totems or gods symbolize society, this is not as reductive as it sounds, since Durkheim's understanding of society is so high-minded. Durkheim accepted and drew upon the dualism present at the (in Freud as well) between the biological or natural individual and the social and moral collective. For Durkheim society enables humanity to transcend itself, both to some selfish and violent urges and to seek, via the categories of understanding it provides, higher and ennobling paths. Society seen in this light does in fact approximate the view of religion as understood by many non-Durkheimians.

Durkheim influenced a subsequent line of French thinkers, including his nephew Marcel Mauss, who published in the *Année Sociologique*. Among the significant essays if the Durkheim school (translated into English by Evans-Pritchard and his Oxford colleagues) are those by Durkheim and Mauss on symbolic classification (1933), Hubert and Mauss on sacrifice (1964 [1898]), Mauss on the gift (1990 [1925]), bodily habitus (1973 [1935]), and on the concept of the person (1985 [1938]), and Lévy-Bruhl on death and on the right hand (1960 [1909]; cf. Needham, ed. 1973). Important sections of Durkheim's own essays (1973, 1974, 1992) include useful modern introductions. Lévi-Strauss was also interested in problems of symbolic classification but, as often said, he turned Durkheim on his head. If there are correspondences between society and ideational patterns, for Lévi-Strauss this is because both of these stem from the same source, namely the mind, rather than from society. Insofar as Durkheim depicted totemism as the elementary form of religion, Lévi-Strauss's book deconstructing totemism may also be seen as an attack on his intellectual ancestor.

In describing the northwest American potlatch as a "total" phenomenon, Mauss (1930 [1925]) makes the shattering observation that attempting to distinguish the religious from the economic or the political makes little sense in certain kinds of societies, and may provide quite distorted images. These categories—religion, economy, etc.—are conceptual tools emerging from the social experience of modern western societies (based on organic solidarity). The ethnographic facts from other times and places are not tailored to fit them. Moreover, the lesson that the study of other societies can bring back to us is the arbitrariness of our own systems of classification and division into discrete social institutions. And thus mana itself, which was the essence of religion in the theories of the proponents of animatism (who succeeded Tylor and the concept of animism), is revealed by Mauss to mean wealth or authority as much as sacred power and, indeed, to refer to a world in which these are not understood as discrete and autonomous. Since Durkheim's and Mauss's work on the categories of thought, one of the effects of the anthropological study of "religion" has thus been to immensely complicate the issue by seeing things of "religious" or "symbolic" import in domains of life that western society has tried to argue are quite distinct and built up entirely on practical, secular, or rational grounds. Conversely, where religion is not separated from
other social institutions, so it does not stand opposed to them as some morally distinct and distinctively moral realm. (The analogy here is to the argument that the gift in such societies cannot take on the connotations of pure generosity that it has for us. See the important discussion by Parry (1986).)

Another element of Mauss’s thought that has had a profound influence on the anthropology of religion and is more fully worked out in his essay on the person (1985 [1938]) is that the chiefs taking part in the potlatch were understood as incarnations of the gods and ancestors (cf. Mauzé 1994). Indeed, the concept of the “individual” no less than that of “religion” is revealed as ethnographically and historically specific. This, in turn, would challenge theories like Tylor’s that tend to assume a universal individuality. These points have been particularly well developed by Dumont (1970, 1986).

Durkheimian concerns with symbolic classification are also evident in Douglas’s notions of purity and danger (see chapter 15). Finally, it may be mentioned that in his discussion of honor, Mauss makes questions of morality central. Honor, dignity, self-worth, and the virtuous comportment and action they suppose are as critical to human consciousness as the puzzlement, awe, and fear attributed to humans by some thinkers or the instrumental concerns with food, sex, or power attributed to them by others. Elsewhere, in his essay on the body (1973 [1935]), Mauss sets out the notion of the habitus, subsequently developed by Bourdieu (1977), in which moral comportment is understood as rooted in embodied habit. In these respects Mauss and Bourdieu draw on Aristotelian conceptions of virtuous disposition and practice (Lambeck 2000a).

The other major locus of Durkheim’s influence was on the structural-functionalism that developed in British anthropology with Radcliffe-Brown (1964 [1952]) and produced a number of major studies of religion in specific societies (e.g., Warner 1959, Middleton 1987 [1960]). The British also drew on Durkheim’s predecessors Robertson Smith (1894) and Fustel de Coulanges (1956 [1864]). For all these thinkers, society or the social group was understood as primary, and among the British it was the representational and functional sides of Durkheim’s approach that were developed and elaborated, often making very good sense of aspects of the lineage-based societies of Africa, although not of all aspects (as Evans-Pritchard, in particular, was quick to note). Durkheim’s conception of the sacred is most systematically pursued by Douglas, who is perhaps the most Durkheimian of the generation of symbolic anthropologists. Durkheim’s emphasis on the moral remains extremely significant while his chief weakness, as has often been noted, lies with the inability to address historical change. Weber is much more attuned to history.

I propose in this book to study the simplest and most primitive religion that is known at present, to discover its principles and attempt an explanation of it. A religious system is said to be the most primitive that is available for observation when it meets the two following conditions: First, it must be found in societies the simplicity of whose organization is nowhere exceeded; second, it must be explainable without the introduction of any element from a predecessor religion.

I will make every effort to describe the organization of this system with all the care and precision that an ethnographer or a historian would bring to the task. But my task will not stop at description. Sociology sets itself different problems from those of history or ethnography. It does not seek to become acquainted with bygone forms of civilization for the sole purpose of being acquainted with and reconstructing
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them. Instead, like any positive science, its purpose above all is to explain a present reality that is near to us and thus capable of affecting our ideas and actions. That reality is man. More especially, it is present-day man, for there is none other that we have a greater interest in knowing well. Therefore, my study of a very archaic religion will not be for the sheer pleasure of recounting the bizarre and the eccentric. I have made a very archaic religion the subject of my research because it seems better than any other to help us comprehend the religious nature of man, that is, to reveal a fundamental and permanent aspect of humanity.

This proposition is bound to provoke strong objections. It may be thought strange to arrive at an understanding of present-day humanity, we should have to turn away from it so as to travel back to the beginning of history. In the matter at hand, procedure seems especially unorthodox. Religions are held to be of unequal standing; it is commonly said that not all contain the same measure of worth. Thus it would seem that the higher forms of religious thought cannot be compared with the lower without bringing the higher forms down to the lower level. I grant that the crude cults of Australian tribes might help us understand Christianity, for example, is to assume – is it not? – that Christianity proceeds from the mentality, in other words, that it is made up of the same superstitions and rests on the same errors. The theoretical importance sometimes accorded to primitive religions could therefore be taken as evidence of a systematic irreligion that invalidated the results of research by prejudging them.

I need not go into the question here whether scholars can be found who were of this and who have made history and the ethnography of religion a means of waging war against religion. In any event, such could not possibly be a sociologist's point of view. Indeed, it is a fundamental postulate of sociology that a human invention cannot rest upon error and falsehood. If it did, it could not endure. If it were not grounded in the nature of things, in those very things it would have met with resistance that it could not have overcome. Therefore, when I approach the study of primitive religions, it is with the certainty that they are grounded in and express the inevitable coming up again and again. What I criticize in the schools I part company with is precisely that they have failed to recognize it. No doubt, when all we do is consider the formulas literally, these religious beliefs and practices appear disconnected, and our inclination might be to write them off to some sort of inborn irrationalism. But we must know how to reach beneath the symbol to grasp the reality it represents and that gives the symbol its true meaning. The most bizarre or barous rites and the strangest myths translate some human need and some aspect of life, whether social or individual. The reasons the faithful settle for in justifying these rites and myths may be mistaken, and most often are; but the true reasons exist nonetheless, and it is the business of science to uncover them.

Fundamentally, then, there are no religions that are false. All are true after their fashion: All fulfill given conditions of human existence, though in different ways. Granted, it is not impossible to rank them hierarchically. Some can be said to be superior to others, in the sense that they bring higher mental faculties into play, that they are richer in ideas and feelings, that they contain proportionately more concepts than sensations and images, and that they are more elaborately systematized. But the greater complexity and higher ideal content, however real, are not sufficient to place the corresponding religions into separate genera. All are equally
religious, just as all living beings are equally living beings, from the humblest plastid to man. If I address myself to primitive religions, then, it is not with any ulterior motive of disparaging religion in general: These religions are to be respected no less than the others. They fulfill the same needs, play the same role, and proceed from the same causes; therefore, they can serve just as well to elucidate the nature of religious life and, it follows, to solve the problem I wish to treat.

[...]

My research is not solely of interest to the science of religions. There is an aspect of every religion that transcends the realm of specifically religious ideas. Through it, the study of religious phenomena provides a means of revisiting problems that until now have been debated only among philosophers.

It has long been known that the first systems of representations that man made of the world and himself were of religious origin. There is no religion that is not both a cosmology and a speculation about the divine. If philosophy and the sciences were born in religion, it is because religion itself began by serving as science and philosophy. Further, and less often noted, religion has not merely enriched a human intellect already formed but in fact has helped to form it. Men owe to religion not only the content of their knowledge, in significant part, but also the form in which that knowledge is elaborated.

At the root of our judgments, there are certain fundamental notions that dominate our entire intellectual life. It is these ideas that philosophers, beginning with Aristotle, have called the categories of understanding: notions of time, space, number, cause, substance, personality. They correspond to the most universal properties of things. They are like solid frames that confine thought. Thought does not seem to be able to break out of them without destroying itself, since it seems we cannot think of objects that are not in time or space, that cannot be counted, and so forth. The other ideas are contingent and changing, and we can conceive of a man, a society, or an epoch that lacks them; but these fundamental notions seem to us as almost inseparable from the normal functioning of the intellect. They are, as it were, the skeleton of thought. Now, when one analyzes primitive religious beliefs methodically, one naturally finds the principal categories among them. They are born in and from religion; they are a product of religious thought. This is a point that I will make again and again in the course of this book.

Even now that point has a certain interest of its own, but here is what gives it its true significance.

The general conclusion of the chapters to follow is that religion is an eminently social thing. Religious representations are collective representations that express collective realities; rites are ways of acting that are born only in the midst of assembled groups and whose purpose is to evoke, maintain, or re-create certain mental states of those groups. But if the categories are of religious origin, then they must participate in what is common to all religion: They, too, must be social things, products of collective thought. At the very least — since with our present understanding of these matters, radical and exclusive theses are to be guarded against — it is legitimate to say that they are rich in social elements.

This, it must be added, is something one can begin to see even now for certain of the categories. For example, what if one tried to imagine what the notion of time would be in the absence of the methods we use to divide, measure, and express it with objective signs, a time that was not a succession of years, months, weeks, days,
and hours? It would be nearly impossible to conceive of. We can conceive of time only if we differentiate between moments. Now, what is the origin of that differentiation? Undoubtedly, states of consciousness that we have already experienced can be reproduced in us in the same order in which they originally occurred; and, in this way, bits of our past become immediate again, even while spontaneously distinguishing themselves from the present. But however important this distinction might be for our private experience, it is far from sufficient to constitute the notion of category of time. The category of time is not simply a partial or complete commemoration of our lived life. It is an abstract and impersonal framework that contains not only our individual existence but also that of humanity. It is like an unspecimen on which all duration is spread out before the mind’s eye and on which all possible events are located in relation to points of reference that are fixed.

It is not my time that is organized in this way; it is time that is received of objectively by all men of the same civilization. This by itself is enough to make us begin to see that any such organization would have to be collective. And observation establishes that these indispensable points, in reference to which things are arranged temporally, are taken from social life. The division into days, weeks, months, years, etc., corresponds to the recurrence of rites, festivals, and public ceremonies at regular intervals. A calendar expresses the rhythm of collective activity while ensuring that regularity.

The same applies to space. As Hamelin has shown, space is not the vague and indeterminate medium that Kant imagined. If purely and absolutely homogeneous, it would be of no use and would offer nothing for thought to hold on to. Spatial presentation essentially consists in a primary coordination of given sense experience. But this coordination would be impossible if the parts of space were qualitatively equivalent, if they really were mutually interchangeable. To have a spatial ordering of things is to be able to situate them differently: to place some on the right, others on the left, these above, those below, north or south, east or west, and so on, just as, to arrange states of consciousness temporally, it must be possible to place them at definite dates. That is, space would not be itself if, like time, it was divided and differentiated. But where do these divisions that are essential to space come from? In itself it has no right, no left, no high or low, no north or south.

All these distinctions evidently arise from the fact that different affective colorings and the distinctions that arise from them also be held in common — which implies almost necessarily that they are of social origin.

Besides, in some instances this social character is made manifest. There are societies in Australia and North America in which space is conceived in the form of an immense circle, because the camp itself is circular; and the spatial circle is divided in exactly the same way as the tribal circle and in its image. As many regions are distinguished as there are clans in the tribe, and it is the place the clans occupy in the encampment that determines the orientation of the regions. Each region is defined by the totem of the clan to which it is assigned. Among the Zuni, for example, the pueblo is made up of seven sections; each of these sections is a group of clans that has acquired its own unity. In all likelihood, it was originally a single clan that later subdivided. Space similarly contains seven regions, and each of these seven sections of the world is in intimate relationship with a section of the pueblo,
that is, with a group of clans. "Thus," says Cushing, "one division is considered to be
in relation with the north; another represents the west, another the south, etc." Each
section of the pueblo has its distinctive color, which symbolizes it; each region has its
own color, which is that of the corresponding section. Over the course of history, the
number of basic clans has varied, and the number of regions has varied in the same
way. Thus, spatial organization was modeled on social organization and replicates
it. Far from being built into human nature, no idea exists, up to and including the
distinction between right and left, that is not, in all probability, the product of
religious, hence collective, representations.

Analogous demonstrations concerning the notions of genus, force, personality, and
efficacy will be found below. One might even ask whether the notion of contradiction
does not also arise from social conditions. What tends to make this plausible is the fact
that the hold the notion of contradiction has had over thought has varied with times
and societies. Today the principle of identity governs scientific thought; but there are
vast systems of representation that have played a major role in the history of ideas, in
which it is commonly ignored. These systems are the mythologies, from the crudest to
the most sophisticated. Mythologies deal with beings that have the most contra-
dictory attributes at the same time, that are one and many, material and spiritual,
and capable of subdividing themselves indefinitely without losing that which makes
them what they are. These historical variations of the rule that seems to govern our
present logic show that, far from being encoded from eternity in the mental constitu-
tion of man, the rule depends at least in part upon historical, hence social, factors. We
do not know exactly what these factors are, but we can presume that they exist.

Once this hypothesis is accepted, the problem of knowledge can be framed in new
terms.

[...]

Religious phenomena fall into two basic categories; beliefs and rites. The first are
states of opinion and consist of representations; the second are particular modes of
action. Between these two categories of phenomena lies all that separates thinking
from doing.

The rites can be distinguished from other human practices — for example, moral
practices — only by the special nature of their object. Like a rite, a moral rule
prescribes ways of behaving to us, but those ways of behaving address objects of a
different kind. It is the object of the rite that must be characterized, in order to
characterize the rite itself. The special nature of that object is expressed in the belief.
Therefore, only after having defined the belief can we define the rite.

Whether simple or complex, all known religious beliefs display a common feature:
They presuppose a classification of the real or ideal things that men conceive of into
two classes — two opposite genera — that are widely designated by two distinct terms,
which the words profane and sacred translate fairly well. The division of the world
into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane —
such is the distinctive trait of religious thought. Beliefs, myths, dogmas, and legends
are either representations or systems of representations that express the nature of
sacred things, the virtues and powers attributed to them, their history, and
their relationships with one another as well as with profane things. Sacred
things are not simply those personal beings that are called gods or spirits. A rock,
a tree, a spring, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word anything, can be
sacred. A rite can have sacredness; indeed there is no rite that does not have it to some degree. There are words, phrases, and formulas that can be said only by consecrated personages; there are gestures and movements that cannot be executed by just anyone. If Vedic sacrifice has had such great efficacy — if, indeed, sacrifice was far from being a method of gaining the gods’ favor but, according to mythology, actually generated the gods — that is because the virtue it possessed was unparable to that of the most sacred beings. The circle of sacred objects cannot be fixed once and for all; its scope can vary infinitely from one religion to another. What makes Buddhism a religion is that, in the absence of gods, it accepts the existence of sacred things, namely, the Four Noble Truths and the practices that are derived from them.

But I have confined myself thus far to enumerating various sacred things as examples: I must now indicate the general characteristics by which they are distinguished from profane things.

One might be tempted to define sacred things by the rank that is ordinarily assigned to them in the hierarchy of beings. They tend to be regarded as superior in dignity and power to profane things, and particularly to man, in no way sacred when he is only a man. Indeed, he is portrayed as occupying a rank inferior to and dependent upon them. While that portrayal is certainly not without truth, nothing about it is truly characteristic of the sacred. Subordination of one thing to another is not enough to make one sacred and the other not. Slaves are subordinate to their masters, subjects to their king, soldiers to their leaders, lower classes to ruling classes, the miser to his gold, and the power seeker to the power holders. If a man is sometimes said to have the religion of beings or things in which he recognizes an eminent value and a kind of superiority to him, it is obvious that, in all such cases, the word is taken in a metaphorical sense, and there is nothing in those relations that is religious in a strict sense.

On the other hand, we should bear in mind that there are things with which man feels relatively at ease, even though they are sacred to the highest degree. An amulet has sacredness, and yet there is nothing extraordinary about the respect it inspires. Even face to face with his gods, man is not always in such a marked state of inferiority, for he very often uses physical coercion on them to get what he wants. He beats the fetish when he is displeased, only to be reconciled with it if, in the end, it becomes more amenable to the wishes of its worshipper. To get rain, stones are thrown into the spring or the sacred lake where the god of the rain is presumed to reside; it is believed that he is forced by this means to come out and show himself. Furthermore, while it is true that man is a dependent of his gods, this dependence is mutual. The gods also need man; without offerings and sacrifices, they would die. I will have occasion to show that this dependence of gods on their faithful is found even in the most idealistic religions.

However, if the criterion of a purely hierarchical distinction is at once too general and too imprecise, nothing but their heterogeneity is left to define the relation between the sacred and the profane. But what makes this heterogeneity sufficient to characterize that classification of things and to distinguish it from any other is that it has a very particular feature: It is absolute. In the history of human thought, there is no other example of two categories of things as profoundly differentiated or as radically opposed to one another. The traditional opposition between good and evil is nothing beside this one: Good and evil are two opposed species of the same
genus, namely morals, just as health and illness are nothing more than two different aspects of the same order of facts, life; by contrast, the sacred and the profane are always and everywhere conceived by the human intellect as separate genera, as two worlds with nothing in common. The energies at play in one are not merely those encountered in the other, but raised to a higher degree; they are different in kind. This opposition has been conceived differently in different religions. Here, localizing the two kinds of things in different regions of the physical universe has appeared sufficient to separate them; there, the sacred is thrown into an ideal and transcendent milieu, while the residuum is abandoned as the property of the material world. But while the forms of the contrast are variable, the fact of it is universal.

This is not to say that a being can never pass from one of these worlds to the other. But when this passage occurs, the manner in which it occurs demonstrates the fundamental duality of the two realms, for it implies a true metamorphosis. Rites of initiation, which are practiced by a great many peoples, demonstrate this especially well. Initiation is a long series of rites to introduce the young man into religious life. For the first time, he comes out of the purely profane world, where he has passed his childhood, and enters into the circle of sacred things. This change of status is conceived not as a mere development of preexisting seeds but as a transformation totius substantiae. At that moment, the young man is said to die, and the existence of the particular person he was, to cease — instantaneously to be replaced by another. He is born again in a new form. Appropriate ceremonies are held to bring about the death and the rebirth, which are taken not merely in a symbolic sense but literally. Is this not proof that there is a rupture between the profane being that he was and the religious being that he becomes?

Indeed, this heterogeneity is such that it degenerates into real antagonism. The two worlds are conceived of not only as separate but also as hostile and jealous rivals. Since the condition of belonging fully to one is fully to have left the other, man is exhorted to retire completely from the profane in order to live an exclusively religious life. From thence comes monasticism, which artificially organizes a milieu that is apart from, outside of, and closed to the natural milieu where ordinary men live a secular life, and that tends almost to be its antagonist. From thence as well comes mystic asceticism, which seeks to uproot all that may remain of man’s attachment to the world. Finally, from thence come all forms of religious suicide, the crowning logical step of this asceticism, since the only means of escaping profane life fully and finally is escaping life altogether.

The opposition of these two genera is expressed outwardly by a visible sign that permits ready recognition of this very special classification, wherever it exists. The mind experiences deep repugnance about mingling, even simple contact, between the corresponding things, because the notion of the sacred is always and everywhere separate from the notion of the profane in man’s mind, and because we imagine a kind of logical void between them. The state of dissociation in which the ideas are found in consciousness is too strongly contradicted by such mingling, or even by their being too close to one another. The sacred thing is, par excellence, that which the profane must not and cannot touch with impunity. To be sure, this prohibition cannot go so far as to make all communication between the two worlds impossible, for if the profane could in no way enter into relations with the sacred, the sacred would be of no use. This placing in relationship in itself is always a delicate operation that requires precautions and a more or less complex initiation. Yet such
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operation is impossible if the profane does not lose its specific traits, and if it does become sacred itself in some measure and to some degree. The two genera cannot, at the same time, both come close to one another and remain what they were.

Now we have a first criterion of religious beliefs. No doubt, within these two fundamental genera, there are secondary species that are themselves more or less compatible with each other. But characteristically, the religious phenomenon is that it always assumes a bipartite division of the universe, known and knowable, into two genera that include all that exists but radically exclude one another. Profane things are things protected and isolated by prohibitions; profane things are things to which the prohibitions are applied and that must keep at a distance what is sacred. Religious beliefs are those representations that express the essence of sacred things and the relations they have with other sacred things or with profane things. Finally, rites are rules of conduct that prescribe how man must conduct himself with sacred things.

When a certain number of sacred things have relations of coordination and coordination with one another, so as to form a system that has a certain coherence and does not belong to any other system of the same sort, then the beliefs and rites, taken together, constitute a religion. By this definition, a religion is not necessarily contained within a single idea and does not derive from a single principle that may with the circumstances it deals with, while remaining basically the same everywhere. Instead, it is a whole formed of separate and relatively distinct parts. Each homogeneous group of sacred things, or indeed each sacred thing of any importance, constitutes an organizational center around which gravitates a set of beliefs and rites, a cult of its own. There is no religion, however unified it may be, that does not acknowledge a plurality of sacred things. Even Christianity, at least in its Catholic form, accepts the Virgin, the angels, the saints, the souls of the dead, etc. – above and beyond the divine personality (who, besides, is both three and one). As a rule, furthermore, religion is not merely a single cult either but is made up of a system of cults that possess a certain autonomy. This autonomy is also variable. Sometimes the cults are ranked and subordinated to some dominant cult into which they are eventually absorbed; but sometimes as well they simply exist side by side in confederation. The religion to be studied in this book will provide an example of this confederate organization.

At the same time, we can explain why groups of religious phenomena that belong to no constituted religion can exist: because they are not or are no longer integrated into a religious system. If, for specific reasons, one of those cults just mentioned should manage to survive while the whole to which it belonged has disappeared, it will survive only in fragments. This is what has happened to so many agrarian cults that live on in folklore. In certain cases, what persists in that form is not even a cult, but a mere ceremony or a particular rite.

Although this definition is merely preliminary, it indicates the terms in which the problem that dominates the science of religions must be posed. If sacred beings are believed to be distinguished from the others solely by the greater intensity of the powers attributed to them, the question of how men could have imagined them is rather simple: Nothing more is needed than to identify those forces that, through their exceptional energy, have managed to impress the human mind forcefully enough to inspire religious feelings. But if, as I have tried to establish, sacred things are different in nature from profane things, if they are different in their
essence, the problem is far more complex. In that case, one must ask what led man to see the world as two heterogeneous and incomparable worlds, even though nothing in sense experience seems likely to have suggested the idea of such a radical duality.

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Even so, this definition is not yet complete, for it fits equally well two orders of things that must be distinguished even though they are akin: magic and religion.

Magic, too, is made up of beliefs and rites. Like religion, it has its own myths and dogmas, but these are less well developed, probably because, given its pursuit of technical and utilitarian ends, magic does not waste time in pure speculation. Magic also has its ceremonies, sacrifices, purifications, prayers, songs, and dances. Those beings whom the magician invokes and the forces he puts to work are not only of the same nature as the forces addressed by religion but very often are the same forces. In the most primitive societies, the souls of the dead are in essence sacred things and objects of religious rites, but at the same time, they have played a major role in magic. In Australia as well as in Melanesia, in ancient Greece as well as among Christian peoples, the souls, bones, and hair of the dead figure among the tools most often used by the magician. Demons are also a common instrument of magical influence. Now, demons are also surrounded by prohibitions; they too are separated and live in a world apart. Indeed, it is often difficult to distinguish them from gods proper. Besides, even in Christianity, is not the devil a fallen god? And apart from his origins, does he not have a religious character, simply because the hell of which he is the keeper is an indispensable part in the machinery of the Christian religion? The magician can invoke regular and official deities. Sometimes these are gods of a foreign people: For example, the Greek magicians called upon Egyptian, Assyrian, or Jewish gods. Sometimes they are even national gods: Hecate and Diana were objects of a magic cult. The Virgin, the Christ, and the saints were used in the same manner by Christian magicians.

Must we therefore say that magic cannot be rigorously differentiated from religion — that magic is full of religion and religion full of magic and, consequently, that it is impossible to separate them and define the one without the other? What makes that thesis hard to sustain is the marked repugnance of religion for magic and the hostility of magic to religion in return. Magic takes a kind of professional pleasure in profaning holy things, inverting religious ceremonies in its rites. On the other hand, while religion has not always condemned and prohibited magic rites, it has generally regarded them with disfavor. As messieurs Hubert and Mauss point out, there is something inherently antireligious about the maneuvers of the magician. So it is difficult for these two institutions not to oppose one another at some point, whatever the relations between them. Since my intention is to limit my research to religion and stop where magic begins, discovering what distinguishes them is all the more important.

Here is how a line of demarcation can be drawn between these two domains.

Religious beliefs proper are always shared by a definite group that professes them and that practices the corresponding rites. Not only are they individually accepted by all members of that group, but they also belong to the group and unify it. The individuals who comprise the group feel joined to one another by the fact of common faith. A society whose members are united because they imagine the sacred
and its relations with the profane world in the same way, and because they
date this common representation into identical practices, is what is called a
Church. In history we do not find religion without Church. Sometimes the Church is
nearly national; sometimes it extends beyond frontiers; sometimes it encompasses
tire people (Rome, Athens, the Hebrews); sometimes it encompasses only a
denomination (Christian denominations since the coming of Protestantism); sometimes it
is by a body of priests; sometimes it is more or less without any official directing
body. But wherever we observe religious life, it has a definite group as its basis. Even
called private cults, like the domestic cult or a corporate cult, satisfy this condi-
tion. They are always celebrated by a group, the family or the corporation. And,
more, even these private religions often are merely special forms of a broader
religion that embraces the totality of life. These small Churches are in reality only
pasts in a larger Church and, because of this very scope, deserve all the more to be
named by that name.

Magic is an entirely different matter. Granted, magic beliefs are never without a
currency. They are often widespread among broad strata of the population,
and there are even peoples where they count no fewer active followers than religion
as a popular. But they do not bind men who believe in them to one another and unite them
in the same group, living the same life. There is no Church of magic. Between the
magician and the individuals who consult him, there are no durable ties that make
him a member of a single moral body, comparable to the ties that join the faithful of
the same god or the adherents of the same cult. The magician has a clientele, not a
Church, and his clients may have no mutual relations, and may even be unknown to
another. Indeed, the relations they have with him are generally accidental and
insensitively, analogous to those of a sick man with his doctor. The official and public
character with which the magician is sometimes invested makes no difference. That
he functions in broad daylight does not join him in a more regular and lasting manner
with those who make use of his services....

By contrast, religion is inseparable from the idea of Church. In this first regard,
there is already a fundamental difference between magic and religion. Furthermore,
and above all, when magic societies of this sort are formed, they never encompass all
the adherents of magic. Far from it. They encompass only the magicians. Excluded
from them are the laity, as it were – that is, those for whose benefit the rites are
conducted, which is to say those who are the adherents of regular cults. Now, the
magician is to magic what the priest is to religion. But a college of priests is no more
a religion than a religious congregation that worships a certain saint in the shadows
of the cloister is a private cult. A Church is not simply a priestly brotherhood; it is a
moral community made up of all the faithful, both laity and priests. Magic ordina-
arily has no community of this sort.

But if one includes the notion of Church in the definition of religion, does one not
by the same stroke exclude the individual religions that the individual institutes for
himself and celebrates for himself alone? There is scarcely any society in which this is
not to be found. As will be seen below, every Ojibway has his personal manitous that he
chooses himself and to which he bears specific religious obligations; the Melanesian
of the Banks Islands has his tamaniu; the Roman has his genius; the Christian has his
patron saint and his guardian angel, and so forth. All these cults seem, by definition,
to be independent of the group. And not only are these individual religions very
common throughout history, but some people today pose the question whether such
religions are not destined to become the dominant form of religious life—whether a
day will not come when the only cult will be the one that each person freely practices
in his innermost self.

But, let us put aside these speculations about the future for a moment. If we
confine our discussion to religions as they are in the present and as they have been in
the past, it becomes obvious that these individual cults are not distinct and autono-
mous religious systems but simply aspects of the religion common to the whole
Church of which the individuals are part. The patron saint of the Christian is chosen
from the official list of saints recognized by the Catholic Church, and there are
canonical laws that prescribe how each believer must conduct this private cult. In the
same way, the idea that every man necessarily has a protective genie is, in different
forms, at the basis of a large number of American religions, as well as of Roman
religion (to cite only these two examples). As will be seen below, that idea is tightly
bound up with the idea of soul, and the idea of soul is not among those things that
can be left entirely to individual choice. In a word, it is the Church of which he is a
member that teaches the individual what these personal gods are, what their role is,
how he must enter into relations with them, and how he must honor them. When
one analyzes the doctrines of that Church systematically, sooner or later one comes
across the doctrines that concern these special cults. Thus there are not two religions
of different types, turned in opposite directions, but the same ideas and principles
applied in both cases—here, to circumstances that concern the group as a whole, and
there, to the life of the individual. Indeed, this unity is so close that, among certain
peoples, the ceremonies during which the believer first enters into communication
with his protective genie are combined with rites whose public character is incon-
testable, namely, rites of initiation.

What remains are the present-day aspirations toward a religion that would consist
entirely of interior and subjective states and be freely constructed by each one of us.
But no matter how real those aspirations, they cannot affect our definition: This
definition can be applied only to real, accomplished facts, not to uncertain possi-
bilities. Religions can be defined as they are now or as they have been, not as they may
be tending more or less vaguely to become. It is possible that this religious indi-
vidualism is destined to become fact; but to be able to say in what measure, we must
first know what religion is, of what elements it is made, from what causes it results,
and what function it performs—all questions whose answers cannot be preordained,
for we have not crossed the threshold of research. Only at the end of this study will I
try to look into the future.

We arrive thus at the following definition: 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. The second element thus holds a place in my definition
that is no less essential than the first: In showing that the idea of religion is
inseparable from the idea of a Church, it conveys the notion that religion must be
an eminently collective thing.

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Most often, the theorists who have set out to express religion in rational terms have
regarded it as being, first and foremost, a system of ideas that correspond to a
definite object. That object has been conceived in different ways—nature, the
infinite, the unknowable, the ideal, and so forth—but these differences are of little importance. In every case, the representations—that is, the beliefs—were considered the essential element of religion. For their part, rites appeared from this standpoint to be no more than an external, contingent, and physical translation of those inward states that alone were deemed to have intrinsic value. This notion is so widespread that most of the time debates on the topic of religion turn around and about on the question of whether religion can or cannot be reconciled with science—that is, whether there is room alongside scientific knowledge for another form of thought held to be specifically religious.

But the believers—the men who, living a religious life, have a direct sense of what constitutes religion—object that, in terms of their day-to-day experience, this way of seeing does not ring true. Indeed, they sense that the true function of religion is not to make us think, enrich our knowledge, or add representations of a different sort and source to those we owe to science. Its true function is to make us act and to help us live. The believer who has communed with his god is not simply a man who sees few truths that the unbeliever knows not; he is a man who is stronger. Within himself, he feels more strength to endure the trials of existence or to overcome them. He is as though lifted above the human miseries, because he is lifted above his human condition. He believes he is delivered from evil—whatever the form in which he conceives of evil. The first article of any faith is belief in salvation by faith.

But it is hard to see how a mere idea could have that power. In fact, an idea is but one element of ourselves. How could it confer on us powers that are superior to those given us in our natural makeup? As rich in emotive power as an idea may be, it cannot add anything to our natural vitality; it can only release emotive forces that are already within us, neither creating nor increasing them. From the fact that we imagine an object as worthy of being loved and sought after, it does not follow that we should feel stronger. Energies greater than those at our disposal must come from the object, and, more than that, we must have some means of making them enter into us and blend into our inner life. To achieve this, it is not enough that we think about them; it is indispensable that we place ourselves under their influence, that we turn ourselves in the direction from which we can best feel that influence. In short, we must act; and so we must repeat the necessary acts as often as is necessary to renew their effects. From this standpoint, it becomes apparent that the set of regularly repeated actions that make up the cult regains all its importance. In fact, anyone who has truly practiced a religion knows very well that it is the cult that stimulates the feelings of joy, inner peace, serenity, and enthusiasm that, for the faithful, stand as experimental proof of their beliefs. The cult is not merely a system of signs by which the faith is outwardly expressed; it is the sum total of means by which that faith is created and re-created periodically. Whether the cult consists of physical operations or mental ones, it is always the cult that is efficacious.

This entire study rests on the postulate that the unanimous feeling of believers down the ages cannot be mere illusion. Therefore, like a recent apologist of faith, I accept that religious belief rests on a definite experience, whose demonstrative value is, in a sense, not inferior to that of scientific experiments, though it is different. I too think “that a tree is known by its fruits,” and that its fertility is the best proof of what its roots are worth. But merely because there exists a “religious experience,” if you will, that is grounded in some manner (is there, by the way, any experience that is not?), it by no means follows that the reality which grounds it should conform
objectively with the idea the 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, then, 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.

This is precisely what I have tried to do. We have seen that this reality – which mythologies have represented in so many different forms, but which is the objective, universal, and eternal cause of those sui generis sensations of which religious experience is made – is society. I have shown what moral forces it develops and how it awakens that feeling of support, safety, and protective guidance which binds the man of faith to his cult. It is this reality that makes him rise above himself. Indeed, this is the reality that makes him, for what makes man is that set of intellectual goods which is civilization, and civilization is the work of society. In this way is explained the preeminent role of the cult in all religions, whatever they are. This is so because society cannot make its influence felt unless it is in action, and it is in action only if the individuals who comprise it are assembled and acting in common. It is through common action that society becomes conscious of and affirms itself; society is above all an active cooperation. As I have shown, even collective ideas and feelings are possible only through the overt movements that symbolize them. Thus it is action that dominates religious life, for the very reason that society is its source.

To all the reasons adduced to justify this conception, a final one can be added that emerges from this book as a whole. Along the way, I have established that the fundamental categories of thought, and thus science itself, have religious origins. The same has been shown to be true of magic, and thus of the various techniques derived from magic. Besides, it has long been known that, until a relatively advanced moment in evolution, the rules of morality and law were not distinct from ritual prescriptions. In short, then, we can say that nearly all the great social institutions were born in religion. For the principal features of collective life to have begun at none other than various features of religious life, it is evident that religious life must necessarily have been the eminent form and, as it were, the epitome of collective life. If religion gave birth to all that is essential in society, that is so because the idea of society is the soul of religion.

Thus religious forces are human forces, moral forces. Probably because collective feelings become conscious of themselves only by settling upon external objects, these forces could not organize themselves without taking some of their traits from things. In this way, they took on a kind of physical nature; they came to mingle such with the life of the physical world, and through them it was thought possible to explain events in that world. But when they are considered only from this standpoint and in this role, we see only what is most superficial about them. In reality, the essential elements out of which they are made are borrowed from consciousness
Ordinarily, they do not seem to have a human character except when they are thought of in human form, but even the most impersonal and most anonymous are nothing other than objectified feelings.

Only by seeing religions in this way does it become possible to detect their real meaning. If we rely on appearances, the rites often seem to be purely manual operations – anointings, purifications, meals. To consecrate a thing, one places it in contact with a source of religious energy, just as today a body is placed in contact with a source of heat or electricity in order to heat or electrify it. The procedures used in the two cases are not essentially different. Understood in this way, religious technique seems to be a kind of mystical mechanics. But these physical operations are but the outer envelope in which mental operations lie hidden. In the end, the point is not to exert a kind of physical constraint upon blind and, more than that, imaginary forces but to reach, fortify, and discipline consciousnesses. The lower religions have sometimes been called materialistic. That term is incorrect. All religions, even the crudest, are in a sense spiritualistic. The powers they bring into play, above all, spiritual, and their primary function is to act upon moral life. In this way, we understand that what was done in the name of religion cannot have been done in vain, for it is necessarily the society of men, it is humanity, that has reaped the fruits.

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NOTES

1 I will call those societies and the men of those societies primitive in the same sense. This term certainly lacks precision, but it is hard to avoid; if care is taken to specify its meaning, however, it can safely be used.

2 Of the whole essence.
