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The Eternality of the Sacred : Durkheim's Error ?

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THE ETERNALITY OF THE SACRED: DURKHEIM'S ERROR?

Durkheim affirmait que le sacré était éternel. Il pouvait prendre des formes diverses et changer d'une société à l'autre mais il était toujours présent. Cette affirmation est mise au défi, non pas sur le plan de la théorie sociale mais sur celui de la réalité empirique de la Grande-Bretagne. En dépit de l'existence de nombreuses enclaves où l'on rencontre du sacré, lorsqu'on observe le pays, globalement, les seules revendications perceptibles sont en faveur d'une forme d'humanisme. Jusqu'à quel point et dans quels groupes les repère-t-on? Serait-ce dans les attitudes humanistes que les citoyens britanniques trouveraient leur sacré? L'humanisme ne serait-il qu'un système moral?

Durkheim soutenait que toute morale comportait une dimension sacrée sinon religieuse. Mais on peut douter qu'il en soit réellement ainsi. Selon Durkheim l'humanisme servait de base à la religion de l'homme occidental moderne. Le culte de l'individu auquel il se réfère si souvent constitue-t-il une religion? Il ne réunit pourtant pas les critères que Durkheim posait pour définir la religion. Durkheim met lui-même en échec la visée « scientifique » de sa démarche lorsqu'il affirme que les notions de sacré et de religion sont des universaux culturels. Et si la Grande-Bretagne n'était qu'une des exceptions à la règle, cela même suffirait à soulever un certain nombre de questions.

Prolegomena

When Durkheim defined religion in terms of the sacred —of what is sacred in society— he gave weight to an approach to the scientific study of religion which persists to this day. Sociologists and anthropologists have held that to define or visualize religion in this way, or at least to make it the base of religion, is more valuable than to define it in terms of a relationship to a god, spirit or some transcendental force or existence. For Durkheim, along with his disciples, such as

Hubert and Mauss, the notion of the sacred was central to religion and religious phenomena. The sacred was historically and logically prior to the idea of god.

Crudely explicated, Durkheim's position might mean that whatever is sacred is religious and whatever is religious is therefore sacred. It must be immediately admitted, however, that he never held that all that was religious was sacred. The profane or secular was always near at hand and secular elements existed in religion. As one cannot understand a religion without seeing the central place of the sacred within it, so society will never be comprehended if the sacred is disregarded or accorded a minor place.

I have dwelt elsewhere with the major issues surrounding Durkheim's use of the notion of the sacred and the other side of the dichotomy, the profane (see Pickering, 1984: ch. 7 and 8). Here I focus on one or two facets relating to both theoretical and empirical issues, only incidentally touched on there.

For Durkheim the sacred is eternal (1899a (ii): 25, and elsewhere). This would imply that in every society there is always a constituent element which can be labelled sacred. The content may change with time, and usually does, but as a reality it always exists and in this sense is timeless. To visualize it somewhat materialistically, the sacred is a kind of "lump" which, whilst it might change its texture, and spread itself in different ways in different societies, it is always present and is perpetually maintained. Since the sacred is so closely associated with religion, religion may be viewed in the same manner as "a constant". *Ergo*, Durkheim, along with those who follow him, hold that religion is a universal and everlasting phenomenon.

Mary Douglas, herself influenced in many respects by Durkheim, has challenged these assumptions in a way which is well known but might be repeated here. In *Natural Symbols* she marshals evidence from field workers such as Frederik Barth and Colin Turnbull, who have shown that amongst Persian nomads, the Basseri, there exists a poverty of ritual activities. A similar observation was made amongst the Ituri pygmies —so minimal was ritual amongst them that field-workers thought at first that they had no religion— "their religion is not concerned with their correct orientation within elaborate cosmic categories nor with acts of transgression, nor rules of purity; it is concerned with joy" (1970: xff. and 14ff.). To argue that all societies are "equally" religious or have the "same amount" of religion but under different forms is fallacious, if not ridiculous. And the same can be said of the sacred. Unless one is going to play fast and loose with the terms religion and sacred, it is absurd to suggest that modern western societies make as much use of religious concepts and rituals, and what is sacred, as do primitive societies, or as Christian societies did in the middle ages, or European countries during the Reformation. Today, people may be so socialized as not to want to sacralize their experiences, nor do they feel obliged to do so. This is very much in line with Max Weber's assessment that modern man has become disenchanted with the world, has demystified it and rid it of magic.

If the argument be conceded thus far, it is *logical* to hold that the fact of variability allows not only eternity, but zero as a possibility. Just because sacred objects and ideas were in abundance amongst people in the middle ages and later, that is no guarantee that in modern society the sacred still exists to any appreciable degree, irrespective of its forms. Of course, it will be argued that pluralistic societies, such as we have at the present time, will never reach a stage where

religion and the sacred are completely eliminated. But more plausible is the fact that it has possibly become so severely negated by rejection or non-observance that for all practical purposes it has reached the stage of being a negligible force. Further, where it does exist, it is found in many small but different religious groups. For modern man and the society with which he identified, the sacred stands as something of the past. It is no part of man come of age, either theoretically or empirically.

Such a position is not taken by those who would argue in strictly Durkheimian terms for the perpetual existence of the sacred, presumably to be found in every society. We point to two recent studies; one by J.A. Prades, *Persistence et métamorphose du sacré* (1987), and the other by collaborators with J.A. Alexander in his *Durkheimian Sociology: Cultural Studies* (1988).

The reason why Durkheim subscribed to the notion of the eternity of religion need not be elucidated in detail here. But it can be argued that the empirical evidence of the past and the present is so overwhelming that the future can be safely predicted in positive terms. Durkheim often held that wherever people were gathered together and so constituted a society a religious component was to be found. It is sometimes difficult to know whether he derived this kind of statement from observation or from logic. The more frequently asserted foundation of eternity today is derived from abstract ideas related to the contention that the sacred is an essential part of Durkheim's theory of society, of social coherence and control. This position has recently been exposed cogently by H.P. Müller (in Alexander, 1988: ch. 6). Thus, *a priori* reasoning gives rise to the notion of eternity.

The brief here is not to raise issues of theory and theoretical necessity found in Durkheim's work but to relate basic concepts to actual social situations and so to evaluate the helpfulness or otherwise of his ideas in understanding such societies. It cannot be denied that the conclusion of this essay has direct consequences for certain theories of society but such consequences are not within our sights (see Müller, 1988).

There is also another reason for empirical application. A danger exists in Durkheim's thought, and that of other theorists, of reifying the concept of the sacred. It is true, as Durkheim showed, that the symbols of a sacred object or idea may become more sacred than the objects or ideas themselves, but the existence of the sacred depends on whether there are in a given society things and ideas which have the status of the sacred (see 1912a: 325). All too easily, and for various reasons, a key term in social theory can be elevated to an absolute with a metaphysical or ontological existence (see Vergote, 1974: 471). J. Remy, editing an issue of *Social Compass* on "Sacredness and Everyday Life" openly admits that "the sacred appears [as] an absolute referant beyond criticism, which enables one to develop an evaluative and critical stance which fits into the day to day flow of our activity" (1982: 263).

The notion of the sacred, like that of alienation, is not to be taken for granted, or be seen to arise inevitably from a universal social situation. In the last analysis "the public" —people at large— have to declare their experience and attitude to what they hold to be sacred or what makes them feel alienated. It is they who as a society constitute social reality, not social theory or what social theorists might say. The sacred has the same snares and problems for Durkheim as alienation had for "the early" Marx. That Marx is said to have abandoned alienation as a

key concept in a later period might be attributed to the fact that he saw severe problems associated with it as a basis of his more developed theory. So often the most fundamental concept at the base of a theory is unanalysable, clouded in mystery, and empirically questionable.

Locating the sacred today

Where can the sacred, as defined by Durkheim, be located in the western world today? There are two strong possibilities —one is in civil religion and the other in humanism. The two are often linked. All other candidates, whether established religion, the occult, small sects, attitudes to sex, nature, time, space, royalism, command no *general* acceptance in terms of the sacred. Religious revivals, cults, sects, and so on, peripheral to a society, indeed exist at the present time but they are *not* the concern of this paper. Many of them have a firm sacred component but it is confined to the boundaries of their respective followers. None of them can be called sacred according to the canons established by Durkheim, which are that the sacred be universally accepted, undergirded by the authority of society, state or nation in which it is located, and subject to taboo and repressive measures. What is at stake is a consensus sacred or a legitimated sacred, based on *représentations collectives*, not that which is found in groups at loggerheads with or even tolerated by the official religion, by the state, nation or society.

Another candidate must also be ruled out —religion seen to be an integral and eternal part of man's intrinsic nature. Religion, as Durkheim saw it, was not defined in terms of existential questions, as it is for the American sociologist, Daniel Bell and for others (Bell, 1977).

With these candidates succinctly disposed of, we return to the two originally mentioned.

Civil religion, according to Bellah's own position —and he has certainly encouraged the use of the term— is a concept derived from the notion of the welding together of political ideas and Protestantism. It is specifically applicable to the United States (see Alexander, 1988: 7 ff.). By extension, something akin to civil religion can also be applied to communist countries (see Lane, 1981). However, P.E. Hammond, who with Bellah has worked on the concept of civil religion, admits that "not every nation-state has a civil religion" (in Bellah and Hammond, 1980: 121). And Durkheim himself never used the term civil religion, which was originally attributed to Rousseau (see Prades, 1987: 308). Müller argues that Durkheim employs concepts and ideas which would allow one to attribute to him the notion of civil religion. Further, Müller claims that the notion of civil religion is of crucial importance to Durkheim's theory of society (1988: 142 ff.). It is beyond the scope of this essay to try to examine Müller's contention and to re-open the whole problem of Durkheim's theory of society and the issue of legitimation. Since, as we have just noted, some of the supporters of the concept of civil religion feel that it does not have unquestioned support, it is best to leave it to one side for the moment, as the issue of universality within modern western capitalist societies is what is at stake.

The only remaining candidate is humanism —man's enthronement of man, man the individual, endowed with rights and self-autonomy. One advantage in

focussing on this is that it is directly in line with Durkheim's thought. Some, who see *le nouveau sacré* taking the form of humanism, proceed further, and like Durkheim, hold that these beliefs and their associated activities constitute a religion —the cult of the individual, the religion of humanity (a phrase with Comtean overtones), or the religion of man. This religion is held to be widespread and is the only religion today of general acceptance in the western world.

Given such assertions, two distinct issues call for analysis: 1) on empirical grounds, can humanism in fact be said to constitute what is sacred in modern society? 2) can humanism, as an ideological system, be called a religion?

It must be emphasized that the issues will be examined against a framework set by Durkheim himself in using his definitions of what constitutes the sacred, religion, church, society, and so on. The analysis will thus not be complicated by modifying his concepts or reading into his thought what he *might* have implied.

Another point must be stressed. We said earlier that it was necessary to apply empirically Durkheim's assertions to given societies. We do so only within the context of western Europe generally and more specifically, Britain.

A sociological approach to humanism

In contemporary society, humanism may be said to exist at three levels. a) as an organization or cluster of organizations which deliberately attempt to propagate humanistic values. b) as humanistic beliefs and actions clearly visible within an élite. c) the diffusion of humanistic ideas and practices throughout society. Each of these will be treated separately.

Humanist organizations began to emerge in the XIXth century, some even before, such as the British Humanist Association. They were deliberate attempts to create ethical systems and ideals without any reference to Christianity, to religion, or to God. Often they were strongly anti-clerical and asserted they had to be so because the clergy were the main opponents of their ideas. Humanist organizations which deliberately inculcate secular doctrines, have nearly always been supported, and still are by middle-class intellectuals. They have never progressed beyond sectarian status.

Not all humanists belong to an organization concerned with the fostering of such ideals. Those who may deliberately refer to themselves as humanists constitute a smallish group of people almost entirely confined to political leaders, intellectuals, and other members of the middle classes. They probably have much in common with Humanists but they are not as a rule anti-religious or anti-clerical. But they see no need to belong to an organization to promote their ideals. There are, however, many societies and groups which receive their support and which are based on humanistic values. These societies are completely secular. Religion, or what is generally declared to be sacred, has no place in their constitutions. One example which readily comes to mind is the United Nations, with its charter. Clearly associated with it is Charter 77. The United Nations, humanist in inspiration, belief and execution, receives wide assent from countries around the world. At a national level the legislation that is passed by the various governments of western Europe today is based, not on Christian doctrine, but on

human values largely derived from it. Nothing could provide more evidence for such values, for example the freedom to worship, than the fact that Britain and most countries of western Europe accept religious pluralism. That the Church of England is by law established has limited social meaning in the face of secularization and religious pluralism. Some English organizations which have the practical goal of relieving suffering, such as the Save the Children Fund, Oxfam, Help the Aged, and so on, are humanist by implication. They are certainly not overtly Christian. Nor is it the case that all people who subscribe to these groups are *bona fide* humanists for the groups are supported by "religious" as well as "non-religious" humanists.

So to humanism at the third level. It can be maintained that society at large is permeated with ideals which are loosely based on the ethical teachings of Christ but without the traditional notion of God, and which are devoid of certain specific moral ideals upheld by the churches, such as traditional sexual morality. England has often been called a society of "do-gooders" —decent people having a concern for other people, both at home and abroad. The central concern is with the well-being, especially the physical well-being, of those of their own society. Some people are clear in their minds that this constitutes their religion —it is what true religion is all about. For others who wish to have no association with religion, such actions are seen to be humanistic and nothing more. In most sections of the British population these diffused ideas abound.

Further evidence relating to the contemporary situation will emerge in the pages ahead as various points are discussed.

The possible responses of Durkheim to the three levels

Let us assume for the moment that this is a minimal but adequate summary of the empirical position of humanistic values and actions in contemporary British society. How, then, do Durkheim's assumptions and assertions about the sacred and religion relate to the three levels of analysis?

With the first Durkheim had but limited interest. Although he himself had very strong humanistic ideals he saw no need to belong to a voluntary organization whose purpose was to propagate them, but he was always prepared to defend the ideals when they seemed under threat as, for example, in what he wrote in the article of 1898 on individualism (1898b). He joined various societies and groups concerned with particular issues, such as those associated with the Dreyfus case, and with relief operations during the First World War (see Pickering, 1984: 14-26). It is fair to say that he did not believe that these societies within society were sacred but held that they were based on values which he saw to be sacred. One organization, overtly given to the propagation of humanistic values which Durkheim shunned like the plague was the Positivist Church of Auguste Comte. This movement to establish a religion of humanity, combined ideology with a highly complicated ritual system based on that of Catholicism. Comte's churches were planted in various countries around the world, including England. Durkheim's strong opposition to Comteanism was based on a number of issues but mainly on the fact that sociology, as developed by Comte, had become muddled up with a man-concocted religion.

At the second level we refer briefly to political parties based on humanistic ideals. As is well known Durkheim did not join any political party, though he claimed that socialist movements were closely related to humanist principles and he was a socialist at heart (*ibid.*). As a prominent member of the rationalist, humanistic élite, he was an ardent supporter of the Third Republic. To give that régime some form of scientific and philosophical foundation he hoped that sociology would be more than helpful, for it would provide some form of scientific, philosophical foundation (*ibid.*: 34 ff.). He held that the élite was leading the way in the establishment of a secular society and was pressing for ideals that he held were identified with democracy and science. He saw that these ideals bore the stamp of the sacred. The values were becoming an integral part of the life of the nation and were encapsulated in government policy and law.

The third level relates to beliefs and practices of people at large. Durkheim held that as the traditional Churches were losing their control over people's minds, so humanistic values were taking the place of Christian creeds (*ibid.*: ch. 24). Durkheim did not appear to consider that there was any need to examine carefully the situation amongst people at large. There were two reasons for this. The first was that, it seems, he was quite convinced that humanistic values were being accepted widely not only in France but in other Western countries. One did not have to prove the case by taking opinion surveys, which were in any case scarcely known in those days. The second was that, as he saw it, sociology was not dependent for its conclusions on the attitudes of individuals. Objective data could be more reliably obtained by examining the legal code, the religious institutions, education, family life, and so on, of a given society. And Durkheim's strongest evidence might be seen in what was happening in France in say, the matter of public education, where there was a deliberate attempt to inculcate humanistic values and where the ideology was not allowed to be haphazardly propagated. The policy of the Third Republic was to make the schoolmaster and school-mistress in every local school throughout the country teach humanistic and democratic ideals. By this means the teaching role of the Catholic parish priest was taken over by the state. Catholic France would now become humanist France. In England no parallel change occurred: schools, even to this day, be they state or private schools, have some kind of religious or Christian teaching, not one strictly geared to humanism or nationalism.

More recent developments: sacrilege and human rights

Just over seventy years have elapsed since Durkheim's death. A great deal has happened in western Europe since then — events which have had a direct bearing on his hopes and ideals. Some students of Durkheim maintain that he died of a broken heart, not only in facing the death of his much loved son, André, but also through seeing the collapse of the secular, optimistic, liberal ideology he supported, all of which occurred as a result of the carnage and the *de facto* anti-humanism of the First World War. The question which arises as a consequence is whether during this subsequent seventy-year period humanistic values have become stronger in society and whether or not they can be seen to be sacred.

It is true that we still do not know enough about the beliefs and moral values of large sections of British society. As we have said many people in England feel

they should do good to their neighbours, but clearly there are sections of society where such values are not prominent, and where self-aggrandisement and egocentricity are probably the order of the day. Scepticism is constantly lurking beneath the surface —something which Durkheim always feared might happen in France (see 1898c). Thatcherism is said to encourage such attitudes. Moral scepticism is ever near the surface. Traditional moral values and symbols which were abandoned mainly by young people in the late 1960s and early 70s have by no means been restored. There are also sections of society, again especially among young people where aggression is often sought for its own sake. Hooliganism and vandalism at football matches, which make other European countries tremble when English supporters arrive, are strongly stringent, positive reminders that humanistic values are far from being universally accepted. By and large, however, it might be said that there is general good will amongst large sections of the population and money is readily available for the poor in the Third World and numberless organizations seeking to help the underprivileged. But how strong the general feeling is, and how it would stand up to testing in the face of crisis, adversity or persecution, one cannot say. And if there appears to be a general concern for people's welfare, that concern seems to be more prominent in certain social groups than others, for example amongst the middle classes. Indeed, the conscious drive to uphold humanistic values, is, as we have noted, from those classes.

People in society believe and behave very much as they wish, provided they remain within the boundaries of what is lawful. Ideological issues are not of great consequence. In fact law seems to determine all: it is the firm embodiment of morals and ideology. And could it not be argued that human rights, of which freedom of the press is one of the most treasured, are convenient and mutually agreed ways of behaviour, of the same status as the rules of any game, which participants agree to accept for the sake of the game?

Durkheim maintained that one of the criteria of what is sacred is its association with taboo or sacrilege (e.g., 1898c: 12). In times past in western Europe the law of sacrilege protected doctrines and practices associated with Christianity. Thus, heretics and blasphemers were liable to prosecution in courts and the guilty were seriously punished. Christianity was the epitome of what was sacred amongst all sections of society. Continual secularization has radically changed the position so that the present status of Christianity is not that associated with universal sacredness. Furthermore, in England the law of sacrilege has virtually been eliminated from the statute book. As we have suggested, the underlying ethic of government legislation is humanism. This is now more clearly evident than in the various acts of Parliament which have helped to create the Welfare State. Where anything approaching sacrilege in the statute book is to be found, it is in legislation defending peoples' rights and personal freedoms. One clear example is in laws against racism. If today in Britain a person publicly suggests that Jesus Christ was a homosexual, —and such a case has been recorded (see *Times*, 5.07.77 *et seqq.*)— he or she is not likely to be charged with common law blasphemy. But if found guilty the person is not likely to be severely punished. Most legal experts are agreed that the present law relating to blasphemy is ineffectual and out of date. For this and other reasons there is a move to have it repealed. More recently, the film *The Last Temptation of Christ*, held by many to be highly offensive to Christians and condemned by Cardinal Basil Hume and the Archbishop of Canterbury was passed by the board of film censors. The issue has come to the fore more recently with the publication of *The Satanic Verses* by

Salman Rushdie. The ensuing threat of the assassination of the author by Islamic fundamentalists has raised a diplomatic uproar. It has also made many see, in the light of upholding the freedom of the press, the virtual impossibility of having laws to protect religious groups from being attacked at their most sacred points. To some extent it has been borne out by the attempt on the part of Muslims to appeal to the law of common blasphemy. They have brought a case to the court maintaining that both Christians and Muslims found the book sacrilegious, but the claimants case was rejected. Some Christian leaders do not want the law invoked and would like it completely removed from the statute book. There is in the country as a whole very little support for reactivating it.

But the notion of sacrilege appears to be working in another direction. If a person openly declares that negroes are lazy or that they should not be allowed to practice as doctors, or be barred from a specific club, that person is liable to prosecution by the state, according to laws against racism, and given a stiff sentence. Here is a complete reversal of the situation as it was a hundred years ago when derogatory statements about negroes were perfectly acceptable, whereas blasphemy against Jesus Christ was subject to severe penalties. The dominant value-system has thus switched from being traditionally Christian to being essentially humanist. Not without point is the fact that the change has been accompanied by an acceptance of religious pluralism.

Thus, humanistic values dominate the moral code of Britain — values which are protected by laws which function as laws of sacrilege. Yet of course the laws cannot by nature be repressive since they are determined by the values they set out to defend. The inevitable ambiguity is that in repressing anti-humanism they limit people's rights. So perhaps they are sacred? Ambiguity stands protected by the sacred.

Human rights: are they sacred?

Durkheim never dealt systematically with the subject of human rights, though he did refer to the rights and liberties of the individual (see, for example, 1906b/1924a: 106). But human rights are a reflexion on the status of the individual person and on the status of the individual Durkheim has much to say. In 1906 in one of his clearest assertions, he said:

La personnalité humaine est chose sacrée : on n'ose la violer, on se tient à distance de l'enceinte de la personne, en même temps que le bien par excellence, c'est la communion avec autrui (1906b/1924a : 51 ; see also *ibid.*: 100-06).

Again:

L'axiome fondamental, c'est que la personne humaine est la chose sainte par excellence ; c'est qu'elle a droit au respect que le croyant de toutes les religions réserve à son dieu ; et c'est ce que nous exprimons nous-mêmes, quand nous faisons de l'idée d'humanité la fin et la raison d'être de la patrie (1925a : 123 ; see also 1897a: 378-79).

Durkheim assumed that this constituted the prevailing ideology of contemporary France — the basis of all its morality. Man as an individual has replaced

God as the most sacred object in the universe. Durkheim was a neo-Kantian, who accepted Kant's abolition of God by turning man into God —an operation which was built on notions of conscience, personal judgement and reason.

But can human rights in themselves —can these human values— be seen as sacred? Philosophers of the Enlightenment argued that rights were natural. They were inferred from reason and from nature. They were not based on some notion of divine revelation, which is *ipso facto* sacred. Catholic theologians who supported the idea of natural law were careful to note that it had no supernatural base and was therefore not sacred. If natural laws were sacred, they would be sacred to the extent that creation was sacred. But what if those who subscribe to human rights define them merely as moral values? Can such values be labelled sacred? Or are they just highly acceptable propositions for human behaviour? They are derived from man for man and may well be changed in the future, since man's thought is always changing. If that is the argument, then the status of the sacred, which is always associated with the mysterious, cannot be applied to human rights. They are merely the best codes of behaviour man has thus far invented. There is nothing mysterious about them. True, Durkheim did not make mystery a key characteristic of the sacred but nevertheless it is clear that people themselves involved in behaving according to the rules of the sacred have always seen it as being shrouded in mystery and having something transcendental about it. Sociological analysis has allowed the scientist to break through the mystery by discovering that the sacred is a social product. Secularization and the sacred are antithetical in the same way as the sacred and the profane. One is not able to have it both ways —by accepting the epistemological claims of science *and* maintaining the persistence of the sacred. Durkheim admitted the possibility but seemed impervious to it, and doubtless felt he had answered his critics by boldly asserting that morality was subject to reason but was by no means desacralized (see 1906b/1924a: 69).

Recently it has been argued that humanism, expressed in such a statement as « la vie est sacrée », cannot be rationally or philosophically justified. V. Mathieu has argued along this line and although he is sympathetic to the notion of humanism, he sees it as « la foi en une valeur obscurément sentie » (1974: 383). Since humanism has very deep roots in Judaeo-Christian religion, it is a western concept and therefore culture-skewed. But its claim to be universally valid and to stand on its own right, rests on poor intellectual ground, like religion itself. Of course Durkheim asserted that rights and liberties were not inherently sacred but were added by society (1906b/1924a: 106). That does not, however, alter our argument: it strengthens it.

Could it not be asserted that Durkheim's position is upheld by the simple argument that human rights are at the very centre of today's moral system and that all moral systems are, according to Durkheim's thinking, sacred. He said:

Oui, certes, je tiens à conserver le caractère sacré de la morale, et je tiens à le conserver, non parce qu'il me paraît répondre à telle ou telle aspiration que je partage, ou que j'éprouve, mais parce qu'il m'est donné dans les faits. Du moment que la morale apparaît partout dans l'histoire comme empreinte de religiosité, il est impossible qu'elle se dépouille totalement de ce caractère ; autrement elle cesserait d'être elle-même... Ce sacré, je crois qu'il peut être exprimé, et je m'efforce de l'exprimer, en termes laïcs (1906b/1924a : 101-02).

Durkheim would thus argue that all moral statements are sacred. They are sacred because originally all morality was associated with religion which is

sacred. « Il doit donc y avoir du moral dans le religieux et du religieux dans le moral. Et de fait la vie morale actuelle est toute pleine de religiosité » (*ibid.* : 69-70). But religion is seen by most people to be no longer at the base of morality: it is thoroughly secular or *laïc*. The protected status which he claims for morality is considerably weakened by another claim that reason should have a full place in ethics, which of course is encouraged in science but which is absent in religion. So he argued:

Voilà comment il y a du sacré en morale. Mais devant ce caractère sacré la raison n'a nullement à abdiquer ses droits... La raison garde donc toute sa liberté ; tout en voyant dans la réalité morale quelque chose de sacré (*ibid.* : 104).

To defend the religious element in morality, Durkheim argued that « non pas que ce fond de religiosité morale tend à devenir tout à fait différente de la religiosité théologique » (*ibid.* : 70). In 1930 Essertier stated that Durkheim was above all a moralist, and one might go further and assert that he was so concerned about the uncertainty of the time that he strove to give morality a sacred or religious foundation to undergird its authority (Essertier, 1930: 34; and see Pickering, 1979: 12-14). This inclination to make morality sacred and to stress its religious base was strongly contested amongst French intellectuals of the time and Durkheim's sympathetic supporter on so many issues, Gustave Belot, did not follow him with regard to the deep bond between morality and religion (see Belot, 1913: 366).

To us Durkheim has not made out a case for asserting that modern moral ideas and principles are in themselves sacred. Indeed, to admit the control of reason within the realm of the sacred is to undermine the very thing which is being examined, for Durkheim himself stated that the sacred was inviolable. Did Durkheim try to do the impossible when he said: « Je m'oblige à la traduire en un langage rationnel, sans lui retirer pourtant aucun de ses caractères spécifiques [i.e., religieux] » (1906b/1924a: 102).

Human rights are clearly moral assertions which are widely held in the western world but they cannot be seen to be sacred merely on the grounds that they are moral. Such an argument would apply to any moral statement and would Durkheim accept that? He is caught in a relativist trap because not only is he describing what he considers to be the prevailing religion of his day —it constitutes a social fact— but he is implying that it is desirable and should be propagated. He admits that moralities and religions are a product of society, and that as societies vary so do their religions and moralities. Yet one religion/morality is superior —"truer"— the one to which he subscribes. He appeals to what is as being the ground for what should be. Humanists cannot be relativists; they have to find a way of breaking the relativist circle. And if reference to science and the law of non-contradiction offers the answer, this does not provide a foundation for humanism as a sacred ideology. In one place at least Durkheim stated that one *ought* to follow Kant in upholding respect for the human personality (1893b/1902b: 395). Interestingly enough he accepts moral individualism but rejects methodological individualism (see Miller, 1988).

But could one not look at the issue more sociologically? Is it not true that each society sees its moral assertions and principles as being sacred? This calls for an empirical examination of the societies involved and brings us back to where we started, namely, in questioning whether in Britain widely accepted moral princi-

ples, such as human rights and the freedom of the press are sacred. They are certainly moral assumptions which are seldom questioned and which are protected by laws which prevent their infringement. But that does not in itself make them sacred. They may well have the status of the sacred amongst some limited sections of British society. How far they are accepted as such amongst the general population is extremely difficult to say.

Supposing human rights are not sacred but are nevertheless extremely important socially, is it then not better to use some modified utilitarian argument which holds that moral rules are seen as expedient for the individual and groups in society to achieve their own ends. The rules are mutually beneficial but not by their nature inviolable.

But the other issued has now to be raised.

Is humanism a religion?

Supposing it is agreed that a number of humanistic values form a dominant ideology of western European countries, including Britain, and that as such the ideology is held to be sacred, does it constitute a religion (see Pickering, 1984: ch. 26)? Prades has rightly said that: « on pourrait dire enfin que l'humanisme durkheimien transforme le monothéisme yahvéique en un monothéisme sécularisé » (1987: 305). This turns Durkheim into the architect of humanism, which clearly he would deny. But the sentence does make very explicit the claims Durkheim made for what he held was in fact the religion of the new age. To many his claims were staggering and he seemed to assume the role of philosopher and theologian. His claims for religion and the sociology of religion with its bets placed on the religion of humanity alienated him from his fellow sociologists (see Pickering, 1984: ch. 28). Some thought that the religion of humanity was nothing more than a daughter of Comte's religion and, one might add, clothed in a more scientific dress. Such a critic was Gaston Richard.

But this alleged monotheism, might it not be a moral system and nothing more? For Durkheim religion was never just a system of beliefs: there was an equally, if not more important action-component.

Durkheim's definition of religion, which he took so long to reach, is well known but nevertheless needs to be stated here for the purposes on hand:

Une religion est un système solidaire de croyances et de pratiques relatives à des choses sacrées, c'est-à-dire séparées, interdites, croyances et pratiques qui unissent en une même communauté morale, appelée Église, tous ceux qui y adhèrent (1912a : 65).

In applying this definition to humanism, the issue of beliefs has already been dealt with. « Un système de pratiques » obviously meant for Durkheim and most students of religion, first and foremost, ritual. In *Les Formes élémentaires* the two major parts of the book were designated belief and ritual, admittedly, with slightly more pages given to belief than to ritual. Now it is true, as Randall Collins says, that for Durkheim ritual is associated with the characteristics of a society dominated by mechanical solidarity (1988: 110). In modern societies whose qua-

lities are those of organic solidarity, ritual is virtually absent. Durkheim, however, did not state in the definition that ritual was a variable within religion, which might or might not be present and could be absent in a modern religion. He put himself in an ambiguous position in asserting that religion continues to exist in contemporary society with very little ritual, or no ritual at all.

When he tried to make out a case for the cult of the individual being the new religion of his day, his mind was much exercised in delineating its ritual component. He had to fall back to a weak position by pointing to public holidays, such as Bastille Day, which celebrated the great events of the country (1912c: 494; 1898c; and see Tiryakian, 1988). But these are not holy days for humanism in general but national holy days for France. And he had nothing more to offer. Auguste Comte was far more realistic in prescribing rituals for his religion of humanity. He saw that leaders of his new Church had to involve followers in ritual as much as in doctrine. In this respect he was more Durkheimian than Durkheim. The same kind of "realism" of course can be found in the ceremonies and symbols which emerged with the religions of the French revolution.

Following trepidly in Durkheim's footsteps and examining the public ritual of national holidays in England, we see that most of the religious holidays with the exception of Christmas and Easter, have been abandoned. Religious names have given way to such secular names, as Spring Bank Holiday, Autumn Bank Holiday, which have nothing sacred about them at all and have virtually no meaning. They are merely convenient names for public holidays and are completely without meaningful or symbolic reference. Nor are there any festivals which might celebrate humanistic values. Such a possibility is United Nations Charter Day but this either does not exist or is not observed. Nor are there any national festivals which celebrate the great events of the past —turning-points in the glorious history of the country. Admittedly Remembrance Day lingers on, but it is not a fixed day in the year nor is it a public holiday. Battle of Britain Sunday, once universally celebrated, has virtually disappeared, except in one or two cathedrals. There is no longer any wide observance of a day to remember the dead of two world wars. Admittedly, the selling of poppies has regained some popularity but they are sold over a period of time so there is no one fixed day of communal recalling. Even national symbols have been conveniently forgotten or played down. The British flag appears only on a few public monuments. Individuals do not possess a flag, never display one outside their homes, and are indifferent to its display in public places. And, incidentally, what flags or symbols does humanism have? Indeed, one of the failures of its ideology is that it is totally without symbols. Yet, as Durkheim saw, symbolism is at the heart of religion, indeed at the heart of the sacred.

That there are no apparent rituals associated with humanism is very much in line with the thought of many intellectuals who support such values. To suggest that humanism should be invested with a number of frequently enacted rituals is to them anathema. The reason is quite simply that ritual savours of superstition, religion and irrationality. And it is precisely those things that many humanists stand opposed to, or are indifferent to. They certainly do not want to see humanistic ideology associated with them. They are thus pleased with the present ritual-less situation. Many French humanists at the turn of the century were of a similar inclination (see Pickering, n.d.).

Comparison at this point might be made with the Soviet Union in the decades which followed the Second World War. It proved to be a time when

national, ideological, social and personal rituals were deliberately introduced (see Lane, 1981). One reason for such social engineering was an attempt to bolster the general acceptance of the nation's ideology (*ibid.*: 281 ff.). Christel Lane in comparing the level of public ritual in democratic societies with that in the Soviet Union noted that the sacralization of the social order was markedly higher in the latter than in the former (*ibid.*). The more a society veers towards pluralism, religious and political, the less concrete is its ideology. Any ritualization, therefore, of that ideology becomes diffused and minimal. Rejecting the possibility of inculcating ritual and symbol as the accompaniment of their beliefs, western humanists are demonstrating that they do not consider that their ideology in any way constitutes a religion, as generally defined.

One way out of the problem is to argue that the action component of humanism is located in ethical behaviour, consciously embarked on in accordance with belief. This might be seen to exist at three levels. a) the government providing for the well-being of its citizens, as in the creation of a Welfare State, or in giving aid to other countries less well off or in special times of need or crisis. b) through national organizations giving money or help in other ways to underprivileged groups at home and abroad. c) by individuals acting humanely and by positively helping their friends and neighbours, or by supporting national organizations of the kind just mentioned. Action at these three levels abounds today in western European countries. But how is it to be interpreted? Can it be called the action-component of a religion or a potential religion? We might suppose that Durkheim would have argued that the "ritual" element of humanism was ethical behaviour, but *nowhere* does he specifically say so.

Supposing that humanism is virtually nothing more than a system of morality, can it be viewed not so much as a collection of sacred values but as a religious system? In his earlier attempt to define religion, Durkheim raised the question of the religion of the individual and its relation to ethics. He wrote:

Il en est autrement de l'éthique. *Dans la mesure où elle n'a pas de caractère religieux, elle n'a à sa base ni mythologie ni cosmogonie d'aucune sorte* (1899a(ii): 21).

First and foremost this implies that in Durkheim's own terms —and many other people's— a moral system *in itself* is *not* a religious system. To turn a moral system into a religious one requires the ingredient of mythology, even cosmogony.

Durkheim states in a footnote to the passage above that since morality rests on some dogmatic position, for example, relating to the human personality, it is not a secular system but a sacred one and therefore, he assumes, constitutes a religion. But he then undermines his position by asserting that the sacredness of the personality rests on the belief that it is created by God. But what if the existence of God is denied —a position he takes? On what then does the sacredness of the personality rest? The Christian would refer to God and his revelation to man. The secular humanist can only assert a dogma that he assumes is self-evident. But if it is self-evident, it is not sacred —it is "natural".

That humanism is without myths and a cosmogony is to a large extent due to the fact that although much of its thinking is Judaeo-Christian in origin it has no Bible, collection of myths or constitution on which to build its system. In all it stands in stark contrast to the ideology prevailing in communist countries. During the past year or two great changes have taken place in the ideology of these countries but it is too early to assess their long-term consequences.

What is often overlooked is that one of the characteristics of religion which Durkheim emphasized is its power to discipline its members, to call for ascetic acts, as a response to a realization of sin, of failure to live up to ideals. Indeed, one of the functions of ritual, the negative function, is to make devotees purge themselves of their failings and accept the demand for self-denial (see Pickering, 1984: ch. 18.2). In his book on suicide Durkheim stated categorically that the weakness of Protestantism was precisely here —it made very few demands on individuals (*ibid.*: ch. 23.4). But if Protestantism fails the test, humanism fails it even more so. It is true that some individual humanists may give money for charitable causes and for supporting oppressed peoples but this does not necessarily mean individual acts bordering on self-denial. It is true that some may sacrifice themselves for others in times of crisis. In the name of humanism they might suffer persecution, as in recent times in Russia. But in general no ascetic acts and no ascetic doctrines are to be found in humanistic ideology. There is always the danger that the cult of the individual will become mere egotism —a word much used by Stendhal and an idea which Durkheim tried to show had no part in the cult (see 1898c).

Finally, Durkheim's definition of religion contains the notion of a Church, *une Église*, a community or collectivity. The subtleties of the relationship, ontological or functional, between belief and ritual on the one hand, and the organization, the church, on the other, is of no consequence here, because in the case of humanism there does not appear to be any organization at all. For Durkheim the growth of the cult of the individual was something he saw as springing from grass roots. Yet, as we have seen, it was also imposed from above by "those who know", not by "priests and ministers" speaking in the name of a Church, as in the case of Comte's Religion of Humanity, but by agents of the state. Nonetheless, once early socialization had been achieved, Durkheim believed that individuals would continue to accept the ideology as being "rational". Other than that there was no need for any organization. So where is the Church of the people? It comes close to being identified with society itself. In the end it comes to being the nation and therefore what is at stake is some form of nationalism. In examining the attitudes and habits of the British in recent times, Kenneth Thompson has declared that those who watch the TV (more than 90 per cent of the country) constitute the "Church" needed to fulfil Durkheim's definition of religion (1988: 235). This is certainly one logical development of Durkheim's thought, perhaps to *reductio ad absurdum*, for we now have a Church without assembly and without the possibility of collective effervescence.

Conclusion

We have seen in this, perhaps rather simplistic approach to the sacred within modern European society that, according to Durkheim's terminology and definitions, the sacred is not to be found in any way which is convincing —at least according to expectations arising from his ideas.

But if the sacred does not lie on the surface, perhaps in Britain at least, it is hidden. The sacred is there but latent. And it will be revealed only through a social or political crisis, such as an attempted revolution, a Vietnam war, a Watergate, a great disturbance over social justice.

This line of argument raises a number of questions. For one thing it becomes a matter of futurology in which contending parties anticipate the future and place their bets. Certainly in dealing with the sacred such a procedure has no part in Durkheim's methodology. In embarking on a scientific analysis of social reality, Durkheim does not deem it necessary to introduce the notion of latent function or latent presence. If something is at work in society it is possible to identify it. This is the nature of reality as he saw it. Reality was empirically realizable. Yet on the other hand he saw the Dreyfus case as one which created a certain amount of effervescence and brought to light social ideals and values which were not so clear to society at large before that time.

But let us leave Durkheim's own position aside and return to the British scene and the necessity of a crisis in order to see if sacred values can be identified. Interestingly enough the miners' strike of 1974 did not reveal forgotten values of a sacred dimension. There was a fear that something approaching a revolution might occur. But it did not throw up deep-seated values. The same thing happened in the next miners' strike ten years later. On this occasion there was a greater general confidence in national stability under the prime-minister, Mrs Thatcher. The Falklands campaign roused no strong ideological issues, except some nationalistic noises in certain quarters. It did little to reveal what was sacred. As we have already indicated, other countries may well be able to identify the sacred in terms of a clearly enunciated ideology, as in the case of communist countries, or in a civil religion as may be found in the United States, with its "one Nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all". So is Britain an exception? Empirically this would appear to be the case. Dogmatic theorists would certainly want to deny it. But the criticism remains —the criticism so often levelled against Durkheim— that negative cases are repeatedly overlooked.

Yet as always Durkheim's position is never straightforward. The social present can be scientifically analysed but there is also a future which has to be anticipated. He believed he was living in a period of great change —it was a liminal period— and given time new gods would appear. He lived in a period of liberal optimism and, defined in various ways, was thought to be one of human progress. Under such circumstances he, like many others, could readily believe in a religion of humanity. That was up until the First World War, during which he died. The optimism of the day evaporated and his earlier hope became highly questionable. The period that followed has not turned out to be an interim period. The old gods have gone, blown to many pieces, but the new ones, preferably a new one, has still to emerge. The waiting must inevitably challenge the prediction. Is it just a question of Waiting for Godot? Do those who cling to the sacred and perhaps to religion, look for something which has gone, and will never reappear? Perhaps Durkheim was more a romantic than a rationalist.

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