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Article abstract

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The Religious Forms of the Elementary Life: Durkheim Revisited¹

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Dans la vision de Durkheim, la religion est évoluée cl-s la mesure où elle a cédé aux exigences de la science et du rationalisme. Je soutiendrai ici que la religion peut bien être définie par son emphase sur le sensationnel et l'imaginatif plutôt que sur le mental et l'intellectuel, et que c'est dans ces termes que la religion devrait être abordée. Cet article s'appuie sur l'idée que les aborigènes australiens, loin de la société et de la religion les moins développées tels qu'imaginées par Durkheim, devrait être vus comme ayant le plus grand développement religieux, de même qu'une extraordinaire forme de solidarité organique basée sur leur religion.

In Durkheim's view religion is advanced insofar as it has given way to the dictates of science and rationalism. I argue here that religion may well be defined by its emphasis on the sensational and imaginative rather than the mental or intellectual, and that it is in these terms that religious development should be measured. The article develops the view that Australian Aborigines, far from the least developed society and religion as Durkheim imagined, should be viewed as having the greatest development of religion, as well as an extraordinary form of organic solidarity based on their religion.

In a recent paper (*Studies in Religion*, 1992), I suggested that there might be an inverse relationship between religious development and economic development, and between religious development and conflict and violence. That is, the more one is realized the less chance there is of the other. The difficulty with this proposition, I pointed out, is that an adequate definition of "religious development" is yet to be formulated (p. 166). And so I attempted to formulate one, namely the degree to which a society transcends material determination, realizes determination through Transcendent Forms rather than concrete contents and the extent to which a society achieves peaceful co-existence through these means. In these terms, I suggested, Australian Aboriginal societies represent the apotheosis of "religious development".

But before elaborating on this proposition, let me point out that this is not the first attempt to define something called "religious development". Émile Durkheim does so in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. He writes

It is undeniably possible to arrange them (religions) in a hierarchy. Some can be called superior to others in the sense that they call into play higher mental functions, that they are richer in

ideas and sentiments, that they contain more concepts with fewer sensations and images, and that their arrangement is wiser.

p. 3

In Durkheim's view (not to mention that of the so-called "academic study of religion" school in general) religion is advanced insofar as it has given way to the dictates of science and rationalism. Religious development, then, is really "religious development" and is defined in terms of what is supposedly superseding it. I take a somewhat different view. Religion may well be defined by its emphasis on the sensational and imaginative rather than the mental or intellectual, but as I see it, the more it is, the more developed is the religion. In other words, the more sense-ational and imaginative, the more removed from material determination, the more practitioners tend toward peace and order over conflict and violence and toward economic stasis over technological and economic progress. I am not suggesting that there is an evolutionary movement toward religious development or toward peace and order and economic stasis. I am only suggesting that the tendencies in question work against rather than for each other. Nor am I evaluating the tendencies in moral terms; they are simply that — "tendencies".

In Durkheim's scheme, by contrast, monotheism supplants polytheism as science supplants monotheism and, on another level, as organic forms of social organization (social solidarity) will supplant mechanical. Durkheim's formulation is implicitly evolutionary, assuming as it does that some religious forms, some economic forms and some forms of social organization are "superior" (p.3) to others. And for Durkheim the prototype of what is "inferior", of what is supplanted, is Australian Aboriginal religion, society and economy. To him the Aborigines not only represent the elementary form of the religious life but the elementary form of human life in general.

The irony, this paper argues, is that in Durkheim's own terms, the Australian Aborigines come out on top of the evolutionary scale: Aboriginal society, in this writer's view, represents the epitome of the organic form of solidarity and, what's more, in the Australian case this form of solidarity has a religious base.

As Durkheim defines it, organic solidarity is social organization based on the interdependence of difference or specializations. Mechanical solidarity,

by contrast, is based on the unity of identities. As I posited in my paper in *Studies in Religion*, our own society exhibits an elementary version of organic solidarity, based as it is on the haphazard and negative outcome of marketplace competition as people withdraw into their specialized niches in the hopes of cornering a market. Among the Australian Aborigines, by contrast, organic solidarity seems to have been the result of careful, positive, planning. There, organic solidarity is an institutionally-established renunciative process of Forms expelling content in which one gives up one's exclusive identity, possessions and resources to others, thereby creating a difference between "you" and "me" that federates rather than divides or unites. By "federates" I mean that a part of me (or that over which I have jurisdiction) is placed in you and a part of you in me without loss of integrity of either.

In order to "federate" something must remain constant or "in place" and something must be variable or "move between". In Aboriginal society Forms are fixed and material contents vary or "go between" them. These Forms may be the Form of the Land (its bounded aspect), the Form of a natural species or the Form of a Person(s) emerging out of the Land. By Form I mean an aesthetic dimension to an "object" which defines it as "prototypical" or "archetypal". The perception of Form in this sense is to Aboriginal people an everyday reality which is taken as a window to, or mirror of, spiritual reality. That is, Form encloses or enforms spiritual substance or presence which exists on another plane again, a plane popularly referred to as the "Dreamtime". This Presence (really "these Presences") are believed to have been descended over the Landscape in the long, long ago, by prototypical human/natural species-beings to establish its differentiated, bounded nature.

Remarkably, boundaries seem to have been established in such a way as to isolate abundances of particular resources in an exclusive way and associate them with discrete lines of people, be these resources fresh water sources, fishing grounds or particular plant and animal habitats. These resource are then prohibited to those attached to the boundary to ensure interdependence between people associated with different jurisdictions (a process I have documented in my *Return to Eden: a journey through the Promised Landscape of Amagalyuagba*).

In Aboriginal terms, the association of both species and person with the same jurisdiction establishes a spiritual link between them. Thus, for a

person to consume his or her own "abundant resource" would be to consume a part of oneself. In other words, it would be to enact all that the Aboriginal design for life is not — an incorporating unity.

In this view, then, so-called "totems" are not only "good to eat" (that is, are economically useful as Radcliffe-Brown 1929:52 pointed out) or "good to think" (the relations between totems being homologous to the relations between units of social organization as in «Eaglehawk is to Crow as spouse-giving group A is to spouse-giving group B» as Levi-Strauss 1964 added). They are also "good to federate". Not only do "totems" signify the presence within a jurisdiction of an abundant resource, but, insofar as that resource is prohibited to those who control what is in the jurisdiction, they also set the "part-of-one-in-the-other", content-between-Form, process in motion. Of course not all "totems" are edible or even useful enough to be "expelled". Items such as "mosquito", "dangerous snakes" or the mythical "rainbow serpent" attest to that. Instead, some "totems" are selected because they create a pattern, that is, because they follow logically from those that are edible and useful.

Take, for example, those that proceed from the "totem" *Midjiyanga* or Ship, specifically Macassan Ship which belongs to the *Wurramarrba* people of *Amagalyuagba* or Bickerton Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria. The Macassans visited the northern shores of Australia in the pre-European past from Celebes bringing with them resources which were traded for trepang (a sea slug) and pearlshell. Under Ship in the *Wurramarrba's* "totemic" scheme of things are *Miya:dja* paddles), *Dumbala* (sail), *Na:ningumagadja* (Macassan sailor), *Djanadjana* (rooster), *Mamugilyigarrguwuruma* (airplane), *Brabella* (propeller), *Angwura* (fire), *Angwura* (smoke), *Amarnina* (ashes), *Ma:rra* (rope), *Dumunggarniyenda* (dragonfly), *Galugwa* (coconut), *Moarra* (driftwood) and *Yingabar-ranga* (cut-leafed palm).

Until you read this list you might have thought that all items introduced by foreign contact, including coconuts which are also not indigenous, come under the Ship heading and for obvious reasons. The Macassans were the Aborigines' first experience of overseas visitors before Europeans arrived and define the category "foreign". But Dragonfly? Palm? This is where "logic" comes in as well as a principle of classification fundamental to Aboriginal culture, indeed the whole way of life.

Dragonfly comes under Ship because Dragonfly has a "motor" — the way its wings move when in flight. Propeller comes in, not so much because it is a contact item but because it has Dragonfly Wings / a motor and assumes the shape of a Paddle. Dragonfly Wings are Paddles too. Now these are not *Yimendungwa* or Cypress Pine Paddles which are Sung first by the *Warnungwamalangwa* but are Ship Paddles which are made out of different woods. Paddle to Paddle, though, is one way the *Wurramarrba* connect to the *Warnungwamalangwa* people in the same Songstream of "totems" as themselves.

So even some items which appear to be lumped together because they are economically significant or useful are associated because they complete a logical pattern, a symbolic whole. And the principle that organizes this pattern is, "an aspect of one is fit to an aspect of another and vice versa". These may be real aspects, such as the propeller of a boat and the propeller of a plane, or they may be formal or symbolic aspects such as the shape of a paddle and the shape of a dragonfly wing. You can understand just how difficult it is to tell at any given moment in a Song just who is singing what. When is Propeller a Boat Propeller and when is it an Airplane's? When is Dove a Dove and when is Dove a Spider?

Dove and Spider are both called *Derarragwugwa*. The "new name" for Spider is *Dagwarargwa* which literally means "thread" and refers to the weave in a piece of cloth, *dumbala*. *Dumbala* brings us to Sail and Ship. Thread is like *Ma:rra*, String, and String is what Dove pulled around on her journey in the Dreamtime. But it wasn't really String; it was a piece of *Wurrumilya:a* or Burney Vine. *Wurrumilya:a* comes under Spider because Spider Webs are like clusters of vines. *Yimurralya* or Green Ants come in under Spider because vines are where you find them. Spider Webs are like the weave in a piece of cloth, are made of threads, are like the piece of vine pulled by Dove which is what Ship was pulled with. Dove String broke just like Ship "rope Broke" (an event which is Sung as such) and at the same place.

While this might seem to imply that Dove and Spider really are "one", in fact they differentiate in terms of what comes under them; under Dove come *Ma:rra* (String) strictly-speaking, and *Dumarnda* (Reef Heron, whose connection to the rest escapes me except to say that Heron made part of the same country as Dove). Under Spider come Burney Vine, Green Tree Ant and Dragonfly. Between them both are the Long and the Round Yam.

Angwura is Fire/Smoke and connects up to its complementaries by the same part-of-one-in-the-other logic. A part of the Shooting Star, the tail, is equated with the blaze of Fire. The Smoke from the Fire is carried on the South-South-East Wind, *Amarrrba*, which blankets all *Wurramarrba* country though being primarily associated with one country, namely *Rrararrarra*.

Why do the *Wurramarrba* of Bickerton island "come in on" the same Songstream as the *Warnungamagadjeragba* of adjacent Groote Eylandt? The latter sing *Miyarruma* which is a plant food that floats on the sea on the East Wind, all lined up like Macassan Ships returning home to Macassar.

But it would be a mistake to see a "totem" like Ship as a superordinate "totem" or Song streaming its bits and pieces down to create other "totems" and Songs like Spider and Dove below it. It is more that Ship and Spider/Dove are co-existent equals whose bits and pieces shift back and forth and occasionally down each line in search of correspondence and linkages. We could say the same thing about another "totem", Central Hill as well as the Stingrays associated with the *Warnungamadada* people and about Fresh Water and Rainbow Serpent associated with the *Wurramarrba*. Here, the reflection of Rainbow Serpent in the clouds links it to the rain that brought the lawgiver *Nambirrirrma* to earth in *Wurramarrba* country on Bickerton. Fresh Water Pools, *Amara*, are the Head of the Rainbow, and contain the Frogs, Leeches and Mermaids which are Sung when the Pools are in Flood after heavy rains, washing them all down toward the sea. Frog's eyes, when they blink, flash like Lightening, as do people's eyes when they cough. Hence the reason why the *Wurramarrba* and the extinct *Warnungmurugulya*, who sung Lightening, are on the same Songstream.

* * * *

The Australian Aborigines remained hunter-gatherers throughout their existence on the Australian continent until the arrival of Europeans in the late 18th century. Animals indigenous to Australia, such as the emu, could have been domesticated by Aborigines as they have been by Europeans, but they were not; root vegetables such as wild yams could have been cultivated, but they were not. Although their knowledge of the natural environment was as complex as ours, the Aborigines did not apply this knowledge to economic advancement. My thesis is that having solved the problem of living together

through transcendent Forms, material advancement seems to have been arrested at a particular stage, although material well-being was ensured under the arrangement.

Unlikely as it sounds to our ear, in their creation of resource specific countries and with the food prohibitions on those resources applied to those "owning" them, the Australians may actually have been *manufacturing* shortages or food crises in order to force the movement of resources (matter) between Lands and Peoples. It is also tempting to interpret the relatively high population densities amongst the Australians compared to other hunting and gathering peoples (2 to 3 people per square mile in parts of Arnhem Land) as another conscious plan to force interdependence between Lands and Peoples. It is the achievement of interdependence in these terms that seems to have eliminated organized warfare across the Australian continent. To do harm to "other" is to do harm to a part of "oneself". If you have "nothing", if what you have is "yours" to be renounced to others, then there is nothing to be taken from you.

In contrast are economically and technologically dynamic societies such as ours where warfare for the purposes of appropriating resources and eliminating other people has been the rule throughout our history. Perhaps this is more than mere coincidence and the two paths — peace and order on the one hand and economic development on the other — *are* inversely related. Perhaps the Aborigines realized this and their culture represents a conscious attempt to eliminate the more debilitating effects of economic progress.

There is no reason to believe that the ethnographic account which supports this contention is idiosyncratic or specific to one region of Australia. Tony Swain of Sydney University has located the "federative form" in the cultures of north Queensland and other parts of the Northern Territory once the effects of Christian Mission contact have been eliminated from the published or archival accounts (see his *A Place for Strangers*). And Deborah Bird Rose in her detailed ethnography of *Yarralin* in the Victoria River Valley of the Northern Territory has located the outlines of a very similar framework there (see her *Dingo Makes Us Human*). Indeed, Swain suggests that the entire Australian ethnographic record needs to be re-examined and rewritten in terms of the mutually-renunciative, "federative" model.

This said, we can now return to Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* and evaluate other aspects of his theses in more detail.

"The distinctive trait of religious thought," he writes, is "the division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other that is profane." (p. 37). We can immediately see that this is an adequate definition of religion in contemporary Western societies with their separations of church and state, marketplace and morality and so on. But in Australian Aboriginal society the sacred is intertwined with the profane, the profane with the sacred, the one (the sacred or Formal) animating and moving the other (the profane or material).

Another defining feature of religion, according to Durkheim, is the presence of a church. He defines a church as "a moral community formed by all the believers in a single faith" (p. 45). Do Aborigines have a church? Yes, but in the plural. They divide and federate as moral communities of believers in exclusive bounded jurisdictions, each knowing a part of, but not all of, a larger whole. Again, Durkheim's definition applies well to the nature of the church (specifically the Christian church) in his own society but not in Aboriginal society.

In Durkheim's view, the elementary form of the religious life is represented not so much by Australian Aboriginal religion as by "totemism". In totemism, he says, the objects of nature become sacred "not because of their imposing forms or the forces which they manifest" (p. 86), for if so, the sun, the moon, the sky and mountains would have been the first to be divinized. Rather the objects of nature become divinized because of their accidental involvement in the euphoria of cult activity. During ceremonial activities, insists Durkheim, participants experience a sense of collective effervescence for which they have no explanation outside the context of the activities themselves. This they come to associate with external objects present in the immediate environment such as "kangaroos, lizards, rabbits, ducks" and the like. It is these ordinary objects that are divinized by Aborigines, says Durkheim, and not the more imposing forms of nature.

We now know, of course, that is not the case and that the form of the celestial bodies, hills and the like are revered by Aboriginal people along with the less imposing phenomena. And we now realize how spurious (some would say silly) is Durkheim's claim that totemism owes its origins to certain animals accidentally stumbling across Aborigines' secret/

sacred ceremonial activities. But rather than reject Durkheim's interpretation out of hand, let us instead return to the thesis he seems to reject, namely that natural phenomena are sacralized because of the imposing *form* or *forces* they represent.

Form is an important dimension in Australian Aboriginal perception and cosmology, locating for them, as it does, the transcendent, and differentiating it from material content which is then moved between Forms to create interdependent relations between people. Form here is an aesthetic appreciation of person, species or natural phenomena which sees the subject in illuminated outline as well as in terms of its specific material features. Aborigines see this outline as a kind of window to yet another dimension (the so-called Dreamtime of afterlife existence) constituted of spiritual substance as such which, like aesthetic Form, both en- and in-Forms matter. To Aborigines both dimensions have to be seen (and in some cases heard) to be believed and initiation consists of teaching initiants how to perceive them. They are not simply told to *believe* that they exist.

Durkheim is also correct to assert in an Australian context that "totemism is the religion not of such and such animals and men or images, but of an anonymous and impersonal forces(s) found in each of these beings but not to be confounded with any of them. No one possesses it entirely and all participate in it" (p. 188). This could be taken to mean the force of spiritual substance which en- and in-Forms matter and moves it between them. Durkheim continues

We are now in a better condition for understanding what the native means when he says that men of the Crow phratry for example, are crows. He does not exactly mean to say that they are crows in the vulgar and empiric sense of the term, but that the same principle is found in all of them which they have in common with the animals of the same name and which is thought of under the external *form* of a crow. (p. 189, italics mine)

This is actually a very accurate view of Aboriginal spirituality as we now know it where person and species are seen as reflecting the same archetypal Presence on two levels, namely Form and spirit (I might add that Aborigines also find the kinds of forces alluded to by Durkheim at the source of things that we do not consider life, such as so-called "inanimate" objects).

If we substitute FORM for “collective consciousness” in Durkheim’s writings on religion, we come to an understanding consistent with the perspective offered here:

FORM is something more than a mere epiphenomena of its morphological basis... In order that the former may appear, a synthesis *sui generis* of a particular consciousness is required. Now this synthesis has the effect of disengaging a whole world of sentiments, ideas and *images* which, once born, obey laws all their own. They attract each other, repel each other, unite, divide themselves and multiply, though these combinations are not commanded and necessitated by the condition of the underlying reality. *The life thus brought into being* now enjoys so great an independence that it sometimes indulges in manifestations with no purpose or utility of any sort, for the mere pleasure of affirming itself. (p.424, italics mine)

If we abandon Durkheim’s psychological reductionism and implicit evolutionism and affirm the alternative thesis he initially rejects, we can see that there is much more to *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, than we might have been led to expect (see Morris 1987:113-122 for a balanced discussion of Durkheim’s ideas on religion in the history of ideas). And there is much more to Australian Aboriginal religion than we have been led to expect. In its achievement of peaceful co-existence over many thousands of years Aboriginal religion would seem to have accomplished what many other religious traditions such as Christianity only aspire to.

If we were to apply the criterion of “peaceful co-existence” rather than technological or economic development as our measure of humane social evolution, then the Aborigines would be situated toward the top of the scale, peoples like ourselves near the bottom. In this connection, if we wish to examine the elementary form of the religious life we should examine religion in our own society. If, however, we wish to examine the religious Forms of the elementary life, we should examine the religion of the Australian Aborigines and others like them — if there are any others like them.

How would we know? The genius of the first Australians and others like them is also their fatal weakness. For when attacked their tendency is to separate and withdraw while searching out the basis of an accommodation. This leaves them fragmented and defenceless when that accommodation fails to materialize. Being material-less, when they vanish, they vanish with barely a trace.

Notes

1. This paper was presented at the International Congress for Biblical and Religious Studies in Melbourne, Australia in July of 1992.

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