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TRANSLATOR'S INTRODUCTION:

RELIGION AS AN EMINENTLY SOCIAL THING

[W]hat I ask of the free thinker is that he should confront religion in the same mental state as the believer. . . . [H]e who does not bring to the study of religion a sort of religious sentiment cannot speak about it! He is like a blind man trying to talk about colour.

Now I shall address the free believer. . . . Without going so far as to disbelieve the formula we believe in, we must forget it provisionally, reserving the right to return to it later. Having once escaped from this tyranny, we are no longer in danger of perpetrating the error and injustice into which certain believers have fallen who have called my way of interpreting religion basically irreligious. There cannot be a rational interpretation of religion which is fundamentally irreligious; an irreligious interpretation of religion would be an interpretation which denied the phenomenon it was trying to explain.¹

Emile Durkheim (1858–1917)

Easily the most striking feature of Emile Durkheim's 1912 masterpiece, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, is his insistence that religions are founded on and express "the real." The most casual skim through the book's very first pages—even through the Contents—will reveal that insistence. And it is continually present, like a heartbeat. At the same time, however, as a reader might well mutter, the most striking feature of religions is that they are full to overflowing with spectacular improbabilities. As if anticipating that thought, Durkheim challenges it from the start: "There are no religions that are false." More than that: "If [religion] had not been grounded in the nature of things, in those very things it would have met resistance that it could not have over-

come."² A hostile reviewer writing in the *American Anthropologist* said flatly that Durkheim's "search for a reality underlying religion does not seem to rest on a firm logical basis."³ Judgment about the logic of that search belongs to readers of Durkheim's greatest book, which I offer in its first full retranslation since Joseph Ward Swain's, in 1915.⁴

To gauge Durkheim's claim about the roots of religion in "the real," it will be necessary to follow an argument that is provocative through and through. Pressing that claim to its very limit, Durkheim announces that his case in point will be the totemic religions of Australia, with totemism's jarring identification of human beings and animals or plants—on its face, to readers in 1912, anything but a religious milieu with anything like credible roots in the real and, to some of them, not even a religious milieu. *Au contraire*, cautions Durkheim. Totemism qualifies as a religion; furthermore, all religions are "true after their own fashion," and all, including totemism, meet "needs" (*besoins*) that are part and parcel of human life.⁵ Then or now, anyone encountering the first pages of *Formes* for the first time must wonder straightaway what he intends by "the real," or by "needs" built into the human makeup that religion fulfills. Here are claims likely to draw the religiously committed and the religiously uncommitted to the edge of their seats. From the start, it is clear that the questions Durkheim has set himself about religion concern the nature of human life and the nature of "the real." (From now on I drop the quotation marks around the phrase, noting that part of Durkheim's agenda in *Formes* is to apply his conception of the real to all social forms of existence. Philosophers in Durkheim's milieu were reworking the old polarity of appearance versus essence, as handled by Immanuel Kant. We can flash forward to Edmund Husserl, and again, regarding the social world specifically, from Husserl to Alfred Schütz.)

It is equally clear from the start that received ideas offer Durkheim few intellectual park benches along the route toward the answers. The opening chapters (Book One) define religion and totemism. They then demolish two earlier families of theory, animism and naturism, certain of whose received ideas about what is fundamental to religion still have a certain currency—for example, naturism's thesis that religion arises from human awe before the grandeur of the natural world. Gone there and then (to many, maddeningly) is religion as "ultimate concern" and as encounter with a power transcending the human, or with "the holy."⁶ The middle chapters (Book Two) systematically examine what Durkheim calls *représentations collectives*: shared mental constructs with the help of which, he argues, human beings collectively view themselves, each other, and the natural world. Having adopted totemism as an especially challenging system of collective representations,

Durkheim develops a theory of how society constitutes itself, one that is simultaneously (and in his view, necessarily) a theory of how human mentality constitutes itself. That theory, in turn, encloses another, about those "unified systems" of *représentations* concerning nature and humanity that religions always contain.

The final chapters (Book Three) deal with forms of collective conduct that can be thought of as collective representations in action and, at the same time, as action that makes collective representations real in individual minds. Here are echoes of Marx, in *The German Ideology*, where reality is above all *done*: "Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence." As though hearing that echo, Durkheim cautions against understanding his thought as "merely a refurnishment of historical materialism."⁷ In fact, his common ground with Marx on the subject of religion is far from negligible and yet far from total. For Durkheim, religions exist because human beings exist only as social beings and in a humanly shaped world. Religion is "an eminently social thing."⁸

In the Australians' world, as we come to know it through *Formes*, to have the clan name Kangaroo is not merely to postulate an amazing inner bond of shared essence with animals, whose inherent distinctness from humans is obvious. It is also to postulate a just as amazing inner bond of shared essence with other humans, by sharing a name. Human individuals are inherently distinct from one another, and so the potential for mutually recognized identity is far from obvious. On this subject, the early critical voice is unamazed, settling for well-worn park benches of thought: "The experience of all times and places teaches that the rapport of the *individual, as such*, with the *religious object* is of prime importance in *religious situations*."⁹ But Durkheim's challenge in *Formes* is to detect questions, not self-evidences, in phrases like "individual, as such," "religious object," and "religious situation." His expedition goes to a place where "[t]he kangaroo is only an animal like any other; but, for the Kangaroo people, it has within itself a principle that sets it apart from other beings, and this principle only exists in and through the minds of those who think of it." On that expedition, "in a philosophical sense, the same is true of any thing; for things exist only through representation."¹⁰

By many, usually benchless, routes through Australian ethnography, Durkheim brings us to what he intends by the real that human beings in general come to know through the distinctively human means of knowing. Those means begin, he argues, with human sociability. Society is the form in which nature produced humankind, and religion is reason's first harbor. In *Formes*, we meet the mind as a collective product and science as an offspring of religion. In those very processes of abstraction that enabled the Australian

to imagine who he was by imagining his relationship with other Australians and with the natural world, we meet the beginning of abstract thought. And we meet the concept, ours via the social treasury of language, defined as "a beam that lights, penetrates, and transforms" sensation.¹¹ Durkheim's querying of the Australians and their totems is thus the point of departure for his investigation into distinctive traits of humankind: reason, identity, and community—three subjects that we tend neither to place under the heading "religion" nor to treat together. Few people today would end a sentence that begins, "Religion is . . ." in the way he does: ". . . above all, a system of ideas by which men imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it."¹²

If Durkheim's sustained insistence on religions' basis in the real is the most striking feature of *Formes*, his provocative, sharp-witted mode of exposition comes a close second.¹³ And if the book has a heartbeat about the nature of the real, it has a rhetorical body built to subvert received notions. As he admits in the Introduction, some readers were bound to find his approach "unorthodox."¹⁴ He chose to explore huge questions about humankind in general via the stone-tool-using specificity of Aboriginal Australia, and his argument moves in ways that could not fail to scandalize many readers, on various grounds. We can begin to feel the specific texture of *scandale* if we consider another hostile reviewer's observation about the academically orthodox view of totemism, in a long article titled "Dogmatic Atheism in the Sociology of Religion." There we learn that totemism, "[a]s currently taught in Anglican universities, . . . appeared to fit with the providential mission of the Jews and the possibility of Christian revelation."¹⁵ In other words, some scholars dealt with totemism by making it into a "Christianity in embryo." Being born and reared a Jew and the son of a rabbi, Durkheim lacked the nearsightedness that made totemism as embryonic Christianity seem a necessary lens. What is more, he doubtless had no investment in preserving high evolutionary rank for any religion at all. As a young man, he had rejected religious commitment outright, a fact to which the article's neon title alludes.

For the scholars referred to and addressed in that article, in any case, totemism was anything but well adapted to showing religion's roots in the real. It could be relegated to the category of magic, as the critic points out that Herbert Spencer did (which Durkheim disputed, since that amounted to disconnecting it from the real).¹⁶ Or it could be adapted to that role if imagined with an arrow on it, pointing forward in an evolutionist sense to religions whose connections with the real seemed a priori more credible than totemism's. But there stood Durkheim, firing argument in two directions: claiming that religion would not have survived if it had not been grounded

in the real and claiming to study religion in general by juxtaposing the allegedly lowest and highest. For many reasons, in that unself-consciously self-satisfied era, *Formes* must have been a shocker. Looking back, the French sociologist Raymond Aron described the immediate reaction to it in France as *violent*. Being highly sophisticated, Durkheim no doubt expected that. Notice the rhetorical sandpits in the quotations I used as an epigraph, taken from extemporaneous remarks he made in 1914 to the Union of Free Thinkers and Free Believers. Now picture the sinuous road to be traveled in any attempt to represent him in a comprehensive portrait as the great contributor to empirical science that he was.

Durkheim's commentators have often expressed dismay about the rhetorical mode in which *Formes* is written. Dominick LaCapra spoke of an "oceanic form of discourse" in a text "which has had the power to allure and repel at the same time."¹⁷ Steven Lukes wrote of Durkheim's style that it "often tends to caricature his thought: he often expressed his ideas in an extreme or figurative manner."¹⁸ I imagine that Talcott Parsons was reacting in part to some of those very qualities when he claimed, essentially, that in *Formes* Durkheim was feeling his way uneasily between the naiveté of positivism and something far smarter.¹⁹ Raymond Aron disliked the book, said so in no uncertain terms (including the term "impiety"), and professed to be so unsure in his understanding of it that he deliberately included long sections of verbatim quotation, to enable more sympathetic readers to do better than he.²⁰ I will not tarry over those who, finding the posture of *Formes* enigmatic, respond by characterizing the book as mystical, metaphysical, and even theological, charges that must make Durkheim's soul shake its head. If it is true that he rejected not only religion but also his family's intention for him to become a rabbi, in his father's and grandfather's footsteps, he must have paid full fare for a secular voyage through the mysteries and commonplaces of life.²¹ As far as I am concerned, it is sufficient to say that Durkheim was experimenting with ideas that deeply mattered to him, and there is every reason to imagine that he often ran up against the expressive limits of his medium. Up against those same limits, no less a sociological theorist than Talcott Parsons used the unsettling term "nonempirical reality."²²

Durkheim's rhetoric is often remarked upon but generally not built into the systematic commentary about him.²³ Traditional accounts usually stop at saying sociology was a new science at the turn of the century, Durkheim one of those battling to define a tenable version of its subject matter and method, and his mode (alas) polemical. But if polemic in the midst of developing something new is stigmatized as antithetical to systematic thought, then the very notion of systematic thought is impoverished. Left unimagined is the

sense of absorbing puzzles to be solved and a living sense of inspiration before it becomes "system." It is easy to see a calculated polemical edge in Durkheim's *Suicide*, where he tackles as a sociological puzzle an act that received notions even today hold to be quintessentially individual. Often noticed as well is the sinewy argument to be expected of a philosophically trained product of the Ecole normale supérieure, France's *crème de la crème* in higher education. But seldom imagined is what must have been the high humor of working against received ideas and toward fundamental truth. To miss those features is to miss the freshness of the work he did, at the time he was doing it: gone is the sense of experiment and excitement he shared with the many talented students he taught at the Sorbonne, and with the scholars who joined him in creating the celebrated journal *Année sociologique*; gone too is his wit on the page. If those elements are missed, *Formes* is by the same stroke uplifted as a classic and downgraded to a tome.

Durkheim breathed the air of turn-of-the-century Paris, a place that fizzed with experiments in artistic representation, and a time when philosophy, science, and art existed in nothing like today's isolation from one another.²⁴ Picasso painted his *Demoiselles d'Avignon* in 1907, launching cubism and, therewith, a new vocabulary for the art of the new century. It may turn out that illuminating connections can be drawn between Durkheim's transgressing the boundaries between "primitive" and "civilized" in the search for a vocabulary suited to comprehending, and then representing, the real, and Picasso's own encounters with those same boundaries as he reconceived perspective. To give attention to Durkheim's rhetorical leaps is not to show where he fell short as a systematic thinker; it is to amplify his voice and hear him better. In *Formes*, one of his tasks is to show how a kangaroo can be, at one and the same time, a powerful sacred being, a man or woman, and just a kangaroo—all in the real. His rhetorical tactics in representing these barely representable things are in themselves interesting to observe. That they have succeeded in some way accounts for the book's capacity over the years to motivate fruitful empirical work in a range of fields.

ANATOMY OF A CLASSIC

As a classic in the sociology and anthropology of religion, *Formes* is widely mentioned and characterized, if not so widely read. My purpose in undertaking a new translation is to re-present Durkheim's ideas about what he called the "religious nature of man" in the English of our own day while rendering Durkheim's French as faithfully as I can. I have undertaken this new

translation at a time when the serious study of religion has finally begun to return to center stage in our culture, after an unfortunate hiatus of many decades. My hope is that this book will be more widely read and studied, and not only by sociologists and anthropologists or scholars of religion. American postmodernist theorizers of discursive practices and representations will recognize through *Formes* the Durkheimian pedigree of Michel Foucault.²⁵ Psychologists will repeatedly glimpse old and not-so-old ways of thinking about phenomena that the scientific study of memory, identity, language, and intelligence must be able to account for. Philosophers will find old problems interestingly tackled, if not necessarily solved.²⁶

My hope for a broadened readership raises a larger question, about *Formes* in particular and the genus "classic" to which it belongs: Why read classics? Of late, that question and sundry answers to it have framed a sometimes poisonous debate over which ancestors should be so honored in memory. This conversation is largely impersonal, as short on "I's" as it is long on impersonal, puritanical "shoulds"; it is outspoken about discipline but inarticulate about individual pleasure, and mute as the grave about excitement. Like broccoli, classics are said to be good for one, even if swallowed unwillingly. My view is that dead ancestors should stay dead to us unless pleasure and excitement come from getting to know them. While in the midst of this project, I heard Wynton Marsalis, the virtuoso classical and jazz trumpeter, tell a cautionary tale of honesty about the point of classics and about the work involved in translating them for new audiences. His introduction to some new settings of old work by Duke Ellington brought out problems that both bedevil such work and inspire its product.

To begin with, Marsalis said, he was unenthusiastic about Ellington. His friend, the choreographer Garth Fagan, invited him to see a rehearsal performance set to an old piece by Ellington. A period piece, Marsalis thought. "That's just some boring old ballroom music. I know I *should* want to hear it but I don't." But Fagan pressed, sure about his rendering. Marsalis went, and then reconsidered: "Everybody said Ellington was great. But what made him so great? Nobody said. Well, that night, I understood." He, in turn, trumpeted some "old ballroom music" to us, his audience. As Fagan had interpreted to Marsalis, so Marsalis interpreted to his own audience, who were invited to discover Ellington's greatness, partly through the original work itself but also with Marsalis present as a "translator," with all the complexities that implies. It was Marsalis's "translation" that gave us access to the greatness of some out-of-style music, and irremediably so, for we had no access to the music except by hearing someone render it in sound (unless we decided to experience the music by sight, from Ellington's page). No two renderings

could be the same. None could be exactly what Ellington meant. We cannot know exactly what he meant. The only certainty was that rendering the music freed it to win the audience over, or not to.

But what is true about music that begins its public life with popular audiences is not true about the high culture of old books. When that seems at stake, the answer to the question, "Why read classics?" too often hides behind the busy boredom of Ecclesiastes: "That which has been done is that which shall be done." I think otherwise. Every classic should be free to win the right to be read again with pleasure, not just to be set to labor as a captive servant of tradition, trapped in the highbrowed storage of a museum display. The case for studying old works now needs to be made now, partly through the manner of their presentation. If the classics really are good enough to keep reading, in spite of their age and flaws, then they are due the respect of being allowed to win their audience over. "Because they are classics" amounts to saying, "Because they are there." And that is the unhappy fate of captives in those Smithsonians of the mind that college reading lists can be, on permanent exhibition to pedants, connoisseurs, and cranky tourists, indiscriminately. Every schoolchild learns that Mount Everest was scaled "because it was there" and can understand from a distance what makes it "great." But the superlatives about great books are not the same. To know there, as a character of Zora Neale Hurston says, you have to go there. I have taken it to be my task, in retranslating this classic, not only to make the way straight to go there but to say why go there at all.

I recommend this classic in sociology for reading today, even though the ethnography is outdated, and the outlook upon gender quaint, because it presents the opportunity to encounter a dazzlingly complex soul whose burden of life animates the work. It is this same burden that animates great art. *Formes* has not only the steady brilliance of a classic but also a certain incandescence. It is like a virtuoso performance that is built upon but leaps beyond the technical limits of the artist's discipline, beyond the safe striving merely to hit the correct notes, into a felt reality of elemental truth. To read it is to witness such a performance. The illuminations are public, the performance personal.

Durkheim is usually remembered as the no-nonsense advocate of *science positive*—"positive"²⁷ science—in the study of social life, as a man who set out to rescue social science from undisciplined subjectivity, from philosophical argument that delicately minuetted with facts or touched them not at all, from parochial sentimentality, and from the naive individualisms of his time. But the argument of *Formes* is markedly personal in both rhetorical style and scientific substance, revealing a man who was far more than the hard-nosed opponent of the second-rate and the sentimental in social science (although

he was that too). We hear the heartbeat of *Formes* in Durkheim's stunning theme throughout: that religious life (*la vie religieuse*) both expresses and constructs the logical life (*la vie logique*) of humankind. We hear it in the audacious claim he makes, ostensibly as a secondary issue but in fact throughout the book, that the elemental categories in which we think—time, space, number, cause, class, person, totality—have their origins in religious life.

It is gripping drama to see how a man of *science positive* could possibly make such claims, how he could go about arguing them in an era when science seemed to be dismembering religion, and most of all, why such a man would ever choose to. This drama is gripping for us still: The dispute between science and religion is at least as loud now as it was in his time. In the book, Durkheim's feet seem at one moment to be on the solid ground of immensely detailed scientific observation and at the next on the high wire of faith. But whose? His Aboriginal Australian subjects'? His contemporaries'? His own? Ours? We keep listening in order to find out which it is, when, in what, and in what capacity. People sleepwalk even in the company of the powerful, if they are uninteresting men and women of shallow dilemmas. Durkheim was an interesting man, because he had the capacity to sustain the manifold internal tension of his own ideas, and because he had a dilemma and a subject capable of earning prolonged attention.

Religion still arouses passionate interest, and passion too. If it is an opium of the oppressed, it is not only the opium that puts people to sleep but also the one that makes legions of people go to great lengths to get their own dose of it. If religion is incompatible with scientific rationality and secular political life, those conflicts are public and active ones, not the passive withering away into self-evident defeat that observers of right and left long imagined. Doom has not followed from religion's demonstrated setbacks in describing nature. Indeed, one cannot describe today's world without the collective identities that religions sustain: quietly worshipping churches in some places, churches militant in others. Religion is the steady, day-in-day-out reality of millions, their routine framework of everyday activity, their calm certainty of life and its steady, but sometimes racing, pulse.

In 1979, we watched as crowds shouting "*Allahu Akbar!*"—"God is great!"—destroyed the Iranian monarchy and consecrated Ruhollah Khomeini as Imam. In 1989, we saw the reconsecration of the People's House of Culture in Vilnius as the Cathedral of Vilnius, the replacement there of St. Casimir's bones after some forty years, and then the dignified filing past of Lithuanians reconstituting themselves as a religiously and ethnically defined nation-state. And who would have thought in 1912 that, three generations later in America, religion would be a hot button political topic, the object of

undignified excitement, the locus of dispute over where the authoritative designation of where right conduct lies and must lie?²⁸ As a scholar and teacher, I advocate the dignified excitement of studying religion with discipline—and Durkheim's shuttling between *science positive* and the high wire of faith exemplifies a sort of discipline that we can cultivate.

Yet discipline cannot be the whole point. Works of genius ultimately are disrespected by being touted as mere calisthenics for the mind. They are diminished to the extent that, like aids to physical exercise, they become tools fitted to known tasks, captive servants of mental "training" in the school years. The improvisational high-wire mode of the unexpected is lost thereby and, with it, the special work and worth of genius. In the end, *Formes* would not be worth reading again and again if all it did was help us cultivate intellectual discipline in our attempts to understand what we call "religion." In fact it does much more. In this sometimes sober, sometimes high-wire, exploration of what he calls "the religious nature of man," Durkheim carries his readers beyond ordinary ideas about what religion is and does. We meet the man who could say, to the sober assent of believers down the ages, that "the man who has communed with his god . . . is stronger"²⁹ but who could also say, to the boisterous dissent of true believers down the ages, "There are no religions that are false." We meet the man who said both—and in a work of *science positive*.

AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE SOUL

Little is known about Durkheim's personal life. I will not repeat the tidbits here but instead refer readers to W. S. F. Pickering's and Steven Lukes's compilations of what is known, and portray the man as we meet him in Book One, Chapter 2, in his mode of virtuoso play—and display. There, in the posture of demolishing mistaken theory, he takes up one of religions' elemental *représentations collectives*. I propose that we make our acquaintance with him by observing how he acquaints us with the great nineteenth-century scholar of religion, Edward Burnett Tylor.

Tylor put forward a very influential theory about the origin of an idea that a great many peoples have developed and variously conceived of as a singular thing (*the* or *a* soul), or yet as a generic substance (soul, period),³⁰ immortal yet sometimes susceptible to annihilation, attached to persons yet migratory despite such attachments, intimately known yet almost impossible to describe, personal yet transmissible to objects and animals, ethereal yet powerful, and much else, but above all conceived as mysterious, contradictory, and hard to conceive. Introducing us to Tylor, the man of *science positive* introduces us to the idea of soul. In Chapter 8, Durkheim returns to soul at

length, in a hauntingly beautiful construction of how human beings in the full dignity of reason might have come to postulate the idea of soul in order to theorize aspects of the real. In his view, those human beings were not, like St. Augustine, able to "believe precisely because it was absurd." He trained his heavy rhetorical guns against scholars whose logic entailed that they must have been able to do so.

By Durkheim's day, comparative studies on religion had long since revealed that soul, as a concept, is to be found virtually wherever religion is found. The question scholars asked themselves was why such an inherently confusing idea came to be such a widespread idea, even in societies nothing like those of the Australians. The existence of individual souls had to be accommodated even in the society inhabited by Descartes. And everywhere, accommodating their existence led to questions about where they might reside and about their relationship to those residences. Readers who remember their Descartes (who, of course, was at Durkheim's intellectual fingertips and those of his readers) will remember that, via his *Cogito, ergo sum*, the mind/body dualism, hence the soul/body dualism, was rooted in his search for that which cannot be doubted. Bear in mind, too, that Descartes conceived of a mechanics that held for all things that possessed "extension"—but not for God or soul, whose existence in the real included neither extension nor subordination to the laws of mechanics. Speculating about the soul's localization, Descartes postulated that it resides in the (still mysterious) pineal gland.

Durkheim addressed the matter of localization differently. Free from the hot breath of the Inquisition, as Descartes (1596–1650) was not, and freed also by his interpretive use of exotic materials, Durkheim repeated the solutions his Australian subjects gave the same empirical problem—for example, in many rituals, notably those conducted in the midst and aftermath of mourning. The practicalities of ritual doing localized the soul in certain organs and in the blood, which were thereby revealed, in his phrase, as "the soul itself seen from outside"³¹ (a formulation that may have suggested to Durkheim's audience certain philosophers of antiquity).³² The Australians' urge to localize the soul set them beside not only the Catholic Descartes but also the pagan Empedocles³³ and the Jewish writers of Leviticus and Deuteronomy (whom Durkheim cites), all solving it rather more like the Australians than like Descartes. By Tylor's more secularized day, the question was not merely where the soul might be but a more radical one that would surely have provoked the Inquisition into action: why people ever *imagined* any such thing. Tylor held that the idea arose from the universal but individual experience of dreaming. For Tylor, dreaming posed a theoretical problem that nagged nightly at earliest humanity's consciousness until it was solved

with the invention of a double, or a soul. Demolishing this argument was the Durkheim who had already pronounced religious ideas to be grounded in and to express the real. The solution Tylor imputed to "primitives" failed that test.

After reviewing the merits of Tylor's enterprise, Durkheim proceeded to carry out an intellectual death of a thousand cuts. According to Tylor, the idea of the soul, or double, explained ecstasy, catalepsy, apoplexy, and fainting; illnesses and health, good fortune, bad fortune, special abilities, or anything else that departed slightly from the ordinary; and on down an expanding list applied to an expanding population of souls. Thus did an idea of great import for religions everywhere come to explain everything. Thus did the power of souls increase. And thus did Tylor's primitive man, having come up with the concept of soul to solve a merely speculative problem, finally end up as "a captive in this imaginary world, even though he is its creator and model."³⁴ Here is Durkheim's *coup de grâce*: "Even if the hypothesis of the double could satisfactorily explain all dreaming, and all dreaming could be explained in no other way, one would still have to say why man tried to explain it at all. . . . [H]abit easily puts curiosity to sleep."³⁵ Indeed, even if curiosity had been awake, dreaming would not by any stretch have posed the most obvious problem: "There was something incomprehensible in the fact that a luminous disc of such small diameter could be adequate to light the Earth—and yet, centuries went by before humanity thought of resolving that contradiction." So, why should humanity, especially Tylor's materially hard-pressed primitive humanity, have invented an idea fundamental to virtually all religions, in order to solve the nighttime puzzle of dreaming, a trivial puzzle by comparison with the one they bypassed in the light of day? Durkheim then moves on to stiletto Herbert Spencer's amendments to Tylor's theory. He ends on his point about the real:

In the end, religion is only a dream, systematized and lived but without foundation in the real. . . . Indeed, whether, in such conditions, the term "science of religions" can be used without impropriety is questionable. . . . What sort of a science is it whose principal discovery is to make the very object it treats disappear?³⁶

Returning in Chapter 8 to treat the idea of soul according to his own principle about the roots of religion in the real, Durkheim gives his argument a striking end and then a still more striking coda. The idea of soul, he concludes, actually was needed to solve a problem that the daytime course of social life forced human reason to confront: the indisputable reality that there

is death, yet communities live on, and there is birth: "In sum, belief in the immortality of souls is the only way man is able to comprehend a fact that cannot fail to attract his attention: the perpetuity of the group's life."³⁷ Socially, he argued, it stood for that collective life; individualized, it stood for the social part of every human being, the human (as distinct from the animal) part. It is at once a discrete being and an ethereal substance, at once individual par excellence and yet social.³⁸

In the coda, Durkheim's evocations of Leibniz and Kant begin far from ethnography, but close to us. Using their ideas, he reminds us that soul, however slippery as a concept, is something humankind has come to know very well from our experience of the real: "The idea of soul long was, and in part still is, the most universally held form of the idea of personality."³⁹ At the very end, therefore, we arrive at the notion of soul as an utterly indispensable daytime concept by which humankind has expressed a vivid sense of "person" characterized by discreteness and yet by continuity through time. Despite the analytical prickliness for *science positive* of this reality, to call its reality "nonempirical" would be odd.⁴⁰ After all, we do not ordinarily have something nonempirical in mind when we think of "person" as a physical body plus something more. At the same time, however, to tackle the soul as an empirical matter is alive with difficulties. Perhaps for this reason, Durkheim's attempt to set study of it into the frame of empirical scholarship has been almost completely ignored. So far as I am aware, the only recent scholarship that puts to use Durkheim's elegant reconstruction of soul on secular terrain of the real is Michel Foucault's, in *Discipline and Punish*.⁴¹

I suspect that this reconstruction of the soul from the raw material of real experience takes us close to the intuitional sources of Durkheim's work on religion. I suddenly felt those sources nearby me one hot August afternoon as I contended with the chapter on mourning rites (Book Three, Chapter 5), which is full of evidence from Australia about sin, the soul, and the things that happen to or are done about both. At one point, the *Book of Common Prayer* phrase "remission of sin" suddenly came unbidden from depths of the heard but dimly understood formulas of my own churchgoing childhood. It came to me in a flash that Durkheim's mind must have had strata of the same sort. Consider the *Modeh*, a prayer of thanks said from early childhood every morning, even before washing, by means of which Jews thank God for the return of the soul after its departure each night.⁴² I suspect that, on an inherently elusive topic like soul, Durkheim's own personal archaeology, available consciously and unconsciously, enabled him to encounter religious notions other than as "a blind man trying to talk about colour." Consider this from Durkheim:

The soul is not merely distinct from its physical envelope, as the inside is from the outside. . . . [I]t elicits in some degree those feelings that are everywhere reserved for that which is divine. If it is not made into a god, it is seen at least as a spark of the divinity. This fundamental characteristic would be inexplicable if the idea of the soul was no more than a prescientific solution to the problem of dreams. Since there is nothing in dreaming that can awaken religious emotion, the same must be true of the cause that accounts for dreaming. However, if the soul is a bit of divine substance, it represents something within us that is other than ourselves.⁴³

Now consider this passage by a Jewish authority of our own day:

To be sure, the world as a whole may be viewed as a divine manifestation, but the world remains as something else than God, while the soul of man, in its depths, may be considered a part of God. . . . [W]e speak of only an aspect of God, or of a divine spark, as constituting the essence of the inner life of man. . . . Every soul is thus a fragment of the divine light.⁴⁴

Not to belabor a point that cannot be developed here, let me invite further study by noting that Durkheim analyzes Australian notions such as transmigration and an original fund of souls and that the passage just quoted from goes on to talk about *Knesset Israel*, "the pool in which all the souls in the world are contained as a single essence." If Durkheim's personal experience is part of *Formes* in this way and if religion's roots in the real preoccupy him, as I have shown they do, then we must take very seriously his remarks addressed to "free believers" about the injustice of anathematizing *Formes* as "irreligion." To make this point, however, is not to launch a silly search for correspondences between Durkheim's religious upbringing and his theorizing.⁴⁵ Rather, just as my own understandings of religion could unpredictably mediate my attempt to understand Durkheim, so too must his own early religious experience have given him an unavoidable—and yet invaluable—door into the subject of this work.

In justifying his methodological choice of studying totemism as a useful lens through which to study religion in general, Durkheim observes that sometimes "nature spontaneously makes simplifications."⁴⁶ Analogously, I suggest, Durkheim's own experience provided a "spontaneous simplification" that enabled him to move the topic of religion away from its capacity (or its confused and confusing incapacity) to give an account of the natural world, but instead to explore, and explore profoundly, its capacity to deliver a humanly shaped world to that very world's human shapers. As he says in the Conclusion, "[D]ebates on the topic of religion most often turn around and

about on the question of whether religion can or cannot be reconciled with science. . . . But the believers—the men who, living a religious life, have a direct sense of what religion is made of—object that, in terms of their day-to-day experience, this way of seeing does not ring true. . . . Its true function is to make us act and to help us live."⁴⁷

This once-practicing member of a tightly knit religious community who abandoned religion, but whose scientific work was enriched by the fact that certain core intuitions of religion did not abandon him, knew an off-the-mark theory of religion when he saw one. It is no surprise to find him scornful of writers who think they have undone religion merely by debunking its account of nature. To mix a metaphor, the human Kangaroo clan members we view through his lens had bigger theoretical fish to fry than the kangaroos leaping around them. And so it will not be Durkheim who discovers among the Australians "the thoroughgoing idiocy" that some authors ascribed to "primitives."⁴⁸ It will be Durkheim who again and again refutes that discovery, out of those same authors' own evidence.

But for my own chance encounter with a problem of translation, I would not have guessed the complex strata that underlie *Formes*. Most commentators walk back and forth on the ground directly above them. W. S. F. Pickering and Lewis A. Coser at least point out that those layers are down there and are important.⁴⁹ But consider Alvin Gouldner's stunning characterization of Durkheim's thought as "Catholic organicism."⁵⁰ And Aron, in his magisterial comparative portraiture of nineteenth-century masters, paints Durkheim first, ignoring the question of religious background altogether until he arrives at his second portrait, of Max Weber, a great sociologist of religion who, he observes, "belong[ed] to a profoundly religious family (although probably a nonbeliever himself)."⁵¹ But it is Weber who called himself religiously "unmusical," while Durkheim told an audience that he was not blind to religions' color. In general, I found little confirmation for my own sense that Durkheim's religious background mattered in what he said and wrote.⁵² Some writers apparently believe that truth can be arrived at from nowhere in particular, or from everywhere at once, and that the person is irrelevant. In the case of testing hypotheses, that view is doubtless correct. In the case of genius, however, it is self-contradictory. Creative genius is by its nature individual, and its sources are quintessentially personal.

INDIVIDUAL MINDS AND YET COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS: SOME KEY ARGUMENTS IN *FORMES*

Ordinarily my task would now be to render an account of Durkheim's intellectual world: the influences he inherited and passed on, the debates he waged with his contemporaries, the understandings he took for granted but that we cannot—in short, a world of texts into which *Formes* fits. There is, of course, such a world, but understanding it can be left for later without immediate loss to understanding the central arguments of *Formes*. One set of questions to be delved into elsewhere would certainly be Durkheim's conversations with Kant, about the problem of knowledge and about moral obligation, which merits a kind of attention that his traditional audience of sociologists and anthropologists has in general not given it; and so does his dialogue with Auguste Comte, a philosopher now remembered by most of us only via two or three canned characterizations—academic sound bites, so to speak.⁵³ Another would be the book's relation to the versions of psychology that represented the state of the art in Europe at the turn of this century.⁵⁴ Finally, there is a whole set of questions that are perennial and that have the same rewards as playing scales: whether *Formes* (like Durkheim's work generally) is or is not ahistorical⁵⁵—and, in connection with that, does or does not belong to the miscellany of theoretical notions that came to be called functionalism.⁵⁶ I leave all those questions aside for now.

I note but leave aside controversies about the use Durkheim made of the Australian ethnography available in his time (and, to a lesser extent, Native American and others), on the grounds that even furious and emotional academic debates of the past are not always riveting, or especially enlightening, in the present. This is not to say that the ethnographic details can safely be skipped. As we learn right from the introduction, Durkheim intends that his own route through the Australian ethnography should lead to “man in general”—and “more especially,” he says, “present-day man, for there is none other that we have a greater interest in knowing well.” Totemism seemed to him a usefully simplifying case that would reveal “the religious nature of man . . . a fundamental and permanent aspect of humanity.”⁵⁷ So although *Formes* displays his grasp of the ethnographies on totemism that were available to him, it is far less an investigation of how or why human beings come to imagine themselves as plants or animals than an investigation of how they come to imagine themselves as human beings. Since the fact jumps off the page that totemic communities must be imagined, their study enables us to

grasp the same fact in relation to our own: To exist at all, all communities must be imagined. What his intellectual descendant Benedict Anderson has so well shown for large-scale twentieth-century anticolonial nationalism is also true of any face-to-face community and of the smallest Australian clan.⁵⁸ But clearly, no one today should read *Formes* if he or she is only interested in the religions of Australia.⁵⁹

Finally, I will not repeat here what nearly three generations of critique have by now shown in great detail about where lie the shortcomings of *Formes* and of Durkheim's work more generally. I cannot do better than Steven Lukes's intellectual biography of Durkheim,⁶⁰ Robert Nisbet's analysis of his thought in its intellectual context,⁶¹ or W. S. F. Pickering's close study of his sociology of religion,⁶² to name only three quite different studies out of a long and often distinguished list. I make no attempt here to review the vast and growing literature. In addition, since I have made it my task to show why the book can still be read with excitement, I bypass many difficulties and legitimate qualifications. Instead, I focus on key bits and pieces of Durkheim's argument that are still immediately provocative, and that move through the world as canned characterizations of the book, part of an intellectual world *about* Durkheim's sociology of religion. After briefly considering the elements of his famous but contested definition of religion, let us turn to three such traditional academic sound bites, each of which has always implied potentially hostile queries: Durkheim's “equation” of religion and society, or God and society,⁶³ his use of collective concepts, and, foremost among those, his sacred/profane dichotomy.

This world *about* Durkheim contains a good deal of distortion, in part the legacy of Joseph Ward Swain's monumental 1915 translation. Distortions arise not only from inaccuracies in Swain's translating, but also from the challenges of an English text that discourages readers from tackling *Formes* under their own intellectual steam. Its difficult English invites reliance on interpretational clues from various “trots.” If we follow the out-of-context bites to their intellectual places in *Formes* itself, however, we gain keys to the book as a whole. Some of the most persistently troublesome of those bites are found in Book Two, Chapter 7. There, the ideas of totemic principle and force are derived as outputs of collective life, that is, as outputs of the mechanisms by which collective life is produced. If those ideas did not exist, they or something quite like them would have to be invented. I will turn to this centrally important chapter of *Formes* after examining Durkheim's manner of defining his overall subject.