

# The *Elementary Forms* in the Archives: Filiation, Revision, Reference

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Pierre Lassave

## **The *Elementary Forms* in the Archives: Filiation, Revision, Reference**

In a “Note sur la sociologie religieuse dans *L’Année Sociologique*” that appeared in *Archives de Sociologie des Religions* in 1966, Gabriel Le Bras provided an account that recalled the filiation between these two journals and the *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*.<sup>1</sup> Founded in 1896 by Émile Durkheim, *L’Année Sociologique*’s initial aim was indeed to “extract, year by year, from research in religious history, and from the history of moral and legal institutions, moral statistics, and economic history, those facts which appeared to be of particular interest to sociologists” (Durkheim 1975a [1915], 115). “Religious Sociology,” the second heading after “General Sociology,” was displayed in various subsections relating to representations, practices, and organizations divided between universalist religions and particular beliefs. When classifications were revised in 1902, Durkheim proposed to insert under the heading of “Elementary Forms of Religious Life,” religious systems “like totemism, rites, beliefs, and the religious organization of so-called uncivilized peoples, as well as all the fragmented elements which constitute the ‘folklore’ of so-called civilized peoples” (Durkheim 1968 [1902], 90). Ten years later, this heading would become the title of his major work.

The note in question recalls the principal phases of *L’Année*’s publication: first came the ten preliminary volumes, published annually from 1896 to 1906, which included original theses and analyses of works; then there were two triennial volumes (1906–1909 and 1909–1912) of the same style; after World War One and the founder’s death in 1917, two volumes appeared under the aegis of his main successor, Marcel Mauss (1925, 1927); and finally there was the annual resetting of the journal after 1948, with articles and reviews. Apart from interruptions caused by the turmoil of war, the publication’s development followed a series of phases: these involved the primary accumulation of knowledge from what

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1. ASR, 1966, 21-1: 47–53. The author was a professor of Roman and canonical law, before specializing in “religious morphology” from the viewpoint of Maurice Halbwachs. A renowned academic, close to Catholic circles, he founded the journal in which he was writing.

Mauss called its “fostering disciplines” like history and ethnography (Mauss 1969 [1927], 179); then the defining of its aims; and finally the production of original theoretical work from first- or secondhand investigations. Extending his survey back to the period just before World War Two, Gabriel Le Bras focuses on four themes: the definition of religious phenomena, so-called primitive religions, the relationships between myths and rites, and the organization of religious systems. As early as volume 2 of *L'Année* (1897–1898), Durkheim had in fact attempted an initial definition: “So-called religious phenomena consist of obligatory beliefs, connected to defined practices which relate to given objects in these beliefs.” And he immediately added: “As for religion, it is a more or less organized and systematized set of phenomena of this kind” (Durkheim 1969 [1899], 15).<sup>2</sup> The Church form of this, gathering together the moral community of beliefs and practices in question, would only come later, in the first chapter defining *Elementary Forms* to be precise.<sup>3</sup> Regarding the first development, Le Bras notes the role of intellectual matrix which Durkheim accords to religion, thus making modern science or the poetry of myths and legends, as well as the law, and morals of collective cults, a derivation of it. The *Elementary Forms* were to take up these questions in a kind of theory of knowledge. On the second theme of so-called primitive religions, the author notes Mauss’s uneasiness, wondering whether the heavy investment agreed to regarding these alleged elementary forms, does not run the risk of making people lose sight of the work required on the great historical religions or those with a universal vocation.<sup>4</sup> But on the following theme of the relationships between myths and rites, Mauss notes that, from its first issues, the journal did not fail to review works relating to worship and to Christian festivals.

Finally, Le Bras refers to the creation in 1924 of the Institut français de sociologie, of which he himself was a young member; the tone is playful: “A ‘tala’ could breathe easily there, as well as an agnostic. Mauss, our patriarch, knew everything, through charisma, and spread his gifts around without expecting anything in return. The continuous meditation, the boundless modesty of Halbwachs made him seem like a supernatural being. The exquisite culture, the overwhelming kindness of Bouglé, the powerful and austere thinking of Granet,

2. On this initial attempt at definition and its significance, see: Hervieu-Léger (2004).

3. See the following canonical definition of religion as a sociological subject: “A religion is a shared system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred things, that is to say separated, forbidden; beliefs and practices which unite all those who adhere to them in the same moral community, called the Church.” (*Elementary Forms*, 65)

4. Le Bras does not mention that this question is linked to the one which E. E. Evans-Pritchard raised in his famous Oxford lectures: “[Anthropologists] probably left the great religions aside in order to avoid embarrassing controversies in the rather delicate circumstances which then existed, but the essential thing for them was to discover the origin of religion and they thought they could find it in primitive societies.” (Evans-Pritchard 1971 [1965], 22). [Translator’s note: Quotation back-translated from the French-language version of this article.]

the generous prophecy of Massignon all charmed us. Simiand knew the mathematics of the gods, Henri Lévy-Bruhl their legal contrivances, and he stole from them treasures of goodness.<sup>5</sup> This institute, which functioned more as a learned society than a research laboratory, in 1934 and 1939 published the *Annales Sociologiques*, which prolonged the collection of *L'Année* in the form of five thematic installments. Although the one on “Religious Sociology” (series B) was taken over by a voluminous study by Marcel Granet on “Matrimonial Categories and Relations of Proximity in Ancient China,” the one on “Social Morphology” (series E) contained a study by Maurice Halbwachs on “Religious Morphology” and another by our author (G. L. B.) on “The Religious Transformations of the French Countryside since the Late Seventeenth Century.”

We know that in 1954, after World War Two, Le Bras founded the Groupe de sociologie des religions as part of the CNRS Centre d'études sociologiques, which was then in its infancy.<sup>6</sup> It was thanks to the work of a new member of the CNRS, the ex-Dominican Henri Desroche, in gathering together the work of Le Bras that the idea of assembling a team arose. François-André Isambert, Jacques Maître, and Émile Poulat, then young intellectuals newly emerged from various conflicts with the Catholic hierarchy,<sup>7</sup> quickly joined the first two to form the “five fingers of the hand” and founded the journal *Archives de Sociologie des Religions* (which in 1973 became *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions* in order to better indicate the interdisciplinary approach to religious matters). In its inaugural issue of 1956, Le Bras, who was then honorary president of the religious sciences section of the École pratique des hautes études, did not hide the fact that this new journal was part of the tradition of the Durkheimian school, in “a lineage whose strength will uphold us.”<sup>8</sup> The idea of bringing together original studies in this publication, side by side with “as complete as possible a survey of all works and articles” relating to knowledge of religious matters in the world, was inherited from *L'Année Sociologique*. Although this latter journal resumed its annual rate of issue after World War Two, it only dealt with religious topics as a sideline: it was as though the *Archives*, through the new and continuing abundance of its bibliographical bulletin, had taken over the installments of the religious sociology section of *L'Année*'s early years. These were precisely the years which had laid the ground for the *Elementary Forms*.

5. ASR, 1966, 21-1: 52.

6. ASR, 1969, 28-1, “Le Groupe de sociologie des religions,” fasc. Spécial. Dernière retrospective: ASSR, “Cinquantenaire,” 2006, 136 (Special number accompanied by a documentary film, *Les Archives*, made by S. Eloy and N. Luca, available on the journal's website). More generally: “Reconstructions de la sociologie française,” *Revue Française de Sociologie*, 1991, XXXII-3.

7. Following missionary commitments in lay or clerical contexts which no doubt merit an explanation.

8. Le Bras, “Sociologie religieuse et science des religions,” ASR, 1956, 1-1: 5.

Over and above this direct filiation which one might call institutional, how did the *Archives* subsequently honor the Durkheimian heritage? The complete digitization of the journal now makes it easier to obtain returns from this link: an interrogation of the search engines Perseus (1956–1999) and Revues.org (2000 and later), using the associated terms “Durkheim-formes-élémentaires-vie-religieuse,” produced more than a hundred precise references.<sup>9</sup> A detailed examination of them led to a selection of over thirty contributions (articles, critical notes, reviews, plus the republished transcription of a lecture by the author) which refer explicitly to the *Elementary Forms* (list attached).<sup>10</sup> This corpus of around three hundred pages follows a certain thematic development over time. Broadly speaking, from the first edition until the 1970s, the *Elementary Forms* were associated with epistemological questions posed by the subject of the sociology of religion; after this period of defining the area and subject of knowledge, many possible themes become evident, in particular issues of the sacred, morality, and secularism with, notably in 1990, a special issue devoted to “Re-reading Durkheim.” After this, contributions of substance become rarer. It is only through a few book reviews that the journal reflects the different work being done on the intellectual history of the Durkheimian school, which we shall refer to later.

Although it is not difficult to recall the links between the Durkheimian project and the birth of *Archives*, it would be both too ambitious and rather risky to attempt to state here how this journal developed in relation to the early heritage. Since the 1970s, other intellectual filiations have in fact become apparent as the issues have been published, even if it is only the imposing legacy of Weber—not to mention the diversification of disciplinary standpoints and investigative fields across cultural worlds which are both finely differentiated and increasingly interdependent. It goes without saying that the disparate assortment of authors resulting from this can only loosely connect with the research program initiated by the “five fingers of the hand,”<sup>11</sup> a program which was already very diverse to begin with. We will, however, limit ourselves to noting the most obvious uses made of the Durkheimian heritage which emerge from the thirty or so selected texts,

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9. This first series of key words was further complemented by two adjectives: “Durkheimien” and “Durkheimian,” a term which is both English and German.

10. Over and above explicit mention of the *Elementary Forms* in the titles or bodies of articles, notes and reviews, we have retained contributions concerning the Durkheimian heritage which involve knowledge of religious matters, both in terms of theoretical construction and of intellectual history. To avoid overburdening the dossier, we have on the other hand not retained contributions which are limited to mentioning *Division du travail social*, *Règles de la méthode*, or *Suicide* in order to explore contemporary phenomena. The selected corpus represents thirty-three documents, totaling 285 pages of hard copy.

11. To borrow this hyperidealized image, whose aspiration to solidarity deserves to be seriously nuanced, even if only in terms of individual research trajectories which are very different one from another and fairly competitive in an academic area where the subject of religion is nothing less than problematic (Bourdieu 1987).

while at the same time submitting our corpus to the rereadings of *Elementary Forms* in the academic world. Three types of use appear immediately: the restoration of an intellectual filiation through defining the domain and object of the reemerging sociology of religion from the 1950s onwards; its conceptual contribution to the troubling question of the sacred and the still-more pressing one of secular morality at a time when, from the 1970s onwards, society was becoming ever more multicultural and transnational; and the return to a classical benchmark from the 1990s onwards, either as a sociology of beliefs undergoing full renewal, or as a movement of genealogical reflection on the discipline.

## Domain and Object

In his 1956 inaugural article, “Sociologie religieuse et science des religions,” Le Bras marks out the boundaries of research within a three-dimensional landscape: “The sociology of religion proposes to study the structure and life of organized groups for whom the sacred is the principle and the end. In this brief sentence three worlds appear: the communal one, the assembly of the members; the supranatural, where hidden powers reside; and the secular, in the midst of which the company is established. It is the first of these worlds that is of main interest to sociology, which describes and attempts to explain its composition and coherence; to measure its strengths and deficiencies; and to understand its relationships with the other worlds, the image which it forms of itself and of them. So the sociologist does not undertake to explore alone either the mysteries of the supernatural or the underground of the terrestrial city.<sup>12</sup>” This limitation is made manifest in the disciplines: the second world relates mainly to the theologian, and putting it into perspective may occasionally be the business of the historian; the third world is more concerned with political science in its broad sense. But sociology, because of the special purpose it sets itself in focusing on the relationships between society and the sacred, has the task of giving an explanatory synthesis of all religious phenomena. Hence it has a central role within the sciences of religion.

Joseph Sumpf thus recalls (in “Durkheim et le problème de l’étude de la sociologie de la religion”) the now-famous letter in which the founder had the “revelation” in 1895 of the “essential role played by religion in social life.”<sup>13</sup> He then traces the route which led to *Elementary Forms* via the “germinal principles” of Robertson Smith, the Scottish anthropologist and theologian who was the first to describe the sacrificial mechanism running through the Hebrew Bible (*Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, 1894). It was thus necessary to make an intensive study of the part for the whole or the simple before the complex:

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12. *ASR*, 1956, 1-1: 6.

13. *ASR*, 1959, 8-1: 63.

for Durkheim, the secondhand study of the so-called totemic cults of Australian aboriginals was his principal support for developing a theory of knowledge in which the relationship to the sacred is at the foundation of our categories of thought.

The first fifteen years of the journal were in the end quite rich in epistemological reflections, firstly on the domain belonging to the sociology of religion, then on the knowing subject's relationship with its object. It was the republication in 1969 of a brief lecture which Durkheim gave in 1914 to the Union de libres penseurs et de libres croyants (Union of Free Thinkers and Free Believers, a grouping of progressive and Protestant intellectuals) which introduced the second theme.<sup>14</sup> In this lecture, Durkheim delivered a dual message to his listeners. He asked the free thinkers to see in any religion not so much a system of ideas relating to what is beyond the human condition and understanding, as a system of forces which lends dynamism to the assembled consciousness. He also added these sentences, which the *Archives* would pass on to posterity: "To sum up, what I ask of the free thinker is to confront religion with the state of mind of the believer. It is only on this condition that he can hope to understand it. Let him feel it as the believer feels it, for it is only truly what it is for the believer. Therefore, whoever does not bring to the study of religion a sort of religious feeling is unable to speak of it! He would be like a blind man speaking of colors!" In parallel with this plea for empathy, which contrasts strongly with the image of a narrow positivism, he asks the free believers to suspend their personal convictions of faith for a while in order to accept religion as the natural fusion of a collective consciousness which fills the world with gods similar to "magnified ideals."

In "Retour à Durkheim? D'un texte peu connu à quelques thèses méconnues," H. Desroche testifies to this moment of rereading the great ancestor to redraw the parameters of the research program in the late 1960s.<sup>15</sup> He recalls that this return to sources goes beyond his own laboratory, pointing to the work of Terry N. Clark, of Chicago University, on the institutionalization of sociology in France, and the first critical editions of dispersed fragments of the Durkheimian oeuvre (*Journal Sociologique*, edited by Jean Duvignaud in 1969, then *La Science sociale et l'action*, edited by Jean-Claude Filloux in 1970, and, soon afterwards, the collection of *Textes* in three volumes gathered together in 1975 by Victor Karady). The turn of the 1970s was a time of great critical activity in

14. C. Hamès, "Le Sentiment religieux à l'heure actuelle. Un texte peu connu de Durkheim. A propos de la parution des *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*," *ASR*, 1969, 27: 71–72; É. Durkheim, "Le Sentiment religieux à l'heure actuelle," *id.*: 73–77; (text republished by J.-C. Filloux under the title "L'avenir de la religion," in Durkheim, 1970: 305–313); H. Desroche, "Retour à Durkheim? D'un texte peu connu à quelques thèses méconnues," *ASR*, 1970, 30: 79–88; É. Poulat, É. Durkheim, "La Conception sociale de la religion. Retour à un texte peu connu de Durkheim," *id.*: 87–90.

15. This moment was also marked by the death of Le Bras in 1970, when Desroche officially took over as editor of the journal.

a discipline which had been undergoing radical revision nationally since World War Two, as testified, for example, by the publication in 1968 of “Préalables épistémologiques” in *Le Métier de sociologue* (P. Bourdieu, J.-C. Chamboredon, J.-C. Passeron), in which the break between the sociological object and common sense was cultivated. By exhuming Durkheim’s text on the empathetic approach to religious feeling, the *Archives* team was directing its questioning precisely at these ruptures, at the very moment when it was clearly departing from the reductionist limits formerly laid down by its most senior member, Le Bras.<sup>16</sup> In a note comparing the sociology of knowledge with the sociology of religion, Jean Séguy wonders, for example, whether the very choice of religion as a specialty does not suggest a position with regard to religious values—“testifying, contesting, or fascinating-refusal”—“How can the man of science, who is inevitably engaged by the science itself, hold a discourse that is not praxeologically contaminated, whereas the theologian, when he deduces a theology or pastoral approach from a scientifically conducted sociology, cannot do the same?”<sup>17</sup>

Desroche, on the other hand, is not afraid to evoke the religious dimension of Durkheimian theory “through the centrality accorded to the principled moments of collective religious experience, through its overlapping of social phenomena and religious phenomena, through its latent or declared Adventism, . . . through the analogy of diagnosed behavior . . . between religion, morality and science: three rings interlinked with one another.”<sup>18</sup> Consequently, there is a whole series of “unrecognized theses” which the rereading of *Elementary Forms* brings to the fore like so many new epistemic horizons being offered to the group and its journal: the logics of collective ideation, of transfiguration of the experienced world, and of coalescence of mental powers; the ambivalence of the sacred object, which is both desired and feared; the dual platform of the religious act, involving both experience and knowledge, feeling, and institution (F. Schleiermacher, W. James, E. Troeltsch, H. Bergson, J. Wach, and R. Bastide are invoked here); and the logic of the complementarity between religion and science (“Science is fragmentary, incomplete; it advances slowly and is never completed; life, on the other hand, cannot wait. Theories which are designed to help people to live, to act, are therefore forced to outstrip science and to complete it prematurely,” [*Elementary Forms*, 615]).<sup>19</sup> This is the case with some epistemic coordinates forged by *Elementary Forms* for a rapidly expanding research group working in the fields of de-Christianization of Western societies, the recognition of messianisms and millenarianisms in past and present worlds, and the development

16. On the distancing from the “pastoral sociology” initially supported by Le Bras and on the criticism of its epistemic self-limitations, see: Desroche (1968).

17. *ASR*, 1970, 30: 91–107. The author was Desroche’s successor as editor of the journal, from 1981 to 1989.

18. *ASR*, 1969, 27: 81.

19. Probably here the fifth edition of Presses universitaires de France (1968) whose pagination is identical to that of the 2008 edition mentioned in the bibliography.

of sects and do-it-yourself religions in various continents.<sup>20</sup> One would need to explore here how the comprehensive perspective of Max Weber simultaneously provided this research program with its second major framework of knowledge. But the rereading of *Elementary Forms* already offers new keys to exploring the sacred in modern life, whether it is untamed or domesticated, hierarchized or participatory.

## The Persistence of the Sacred

The work on sources bore fruit: in 1976, Isambert returned to “L’Élaboration de la notion de sacré dans l’École durkheimienne.”<sup>21</sup> He starts from the variance between Durkheim’s two successive attempts to define religion: the first, in 1899, was focused on form (“essential beliefs,” *supra*); the second, in 1907 (carried over from a course given at the Sorbonne), focuses on content (“relating to sacred things”). But what do these sacred things, which form the gravitational point around which so-called religious phenomena revolve, consist of? Isambert traces the line of research linking the “master” to his “disciples” (mainly M. Mauss and H. Hubert) in dialogue with “the English anthropological school” (R. H. Codrington, J. Frazer, F. J. Gillen, F. B. Jevons, A. Lang, R. Smith, B. Spencer, and E. B. Tylor), which was confronted by the issues of sacrifice, totem, taboo, and magic in so-called primitive societies. From a sustained presentation which is richly nuanced, we can identify six markers along the way:

1. all sacred things distinguish themselves by the prohibition to which they are subject—“The two sexes must take the same care to avoid one another as the profane takes to elude the sacred, and the sacred the profane” (Durkheim 1969, 73); they are “tabooed,” writes Hubert;<sup>22</sup>

2. the separation of the sacred and the profane expresses the beginnings of an organization of the world well before any idea of divinity, the first term reflecting a collective development, and the second ordinary experience;

3. ambiguity is in the principle of the sacred, as Hubert and Mauss have shown in relation to sacrifice, inspired particularly by Smith’s analyses of the Hebrew Bible, in which the boundaries between the unclean and the holy remain imprecise (the sacred is contagious like impurity, hence the commandments in Leviticus to keep the two states well apart from one another);

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20. ASR, 1969, 28, “Le Groupe de Sociologie des Religions. Quinze ans de vie et de travail (1954–1969):” 3–92.

21. ASSR, 1976, 42: 35–56.

22. Introduction to the *Manuel d’histoire des religions* by Chantepie de la Saussaye (1904: XLVI), of which H. Hubert also edited the translation (with Isidore Lévy) of the second German edition.

4. casting out this in-between, the sacrificial rite sets itself up as “a means for the profane to communicate with the sacred through the intermediary of a victim” (Hubert and Mauss 1909, xvi); from this follows a series of expiatory or propitiatory actions to create an equivalence between beings and things in order to pass alternately from one state to the other;

5. adopting Codrington’s analyses of Melanesian *mana*, this same Hubert and Mauss charge the sacred with particular force: “*Mana* is the force par excellence, the true efficacy of things, which corroborates their mechanical action without destroying it. It is this that gives the net its haul, the house its strength, and makes the boat stay afloat on the sea” (Hubert and Mauss 1904, 111). But, they warn, the sacred cannot be identified with this force, for it is more “a species of which *mana* is the genus;”

6. an essential category in the same way as time, space, or cause, the sacred describes society: “If the gods, each in their own time, emerge from the temple and become profane, we see a countermovement of human, but social things—nation, property, work, the human person—enter the temple one after the other” (Hubert and Mauss 1909, xvi).

It is the task of the author of *Elementary Forms* to bring together these stages in a theory of administration of the sacred. This is done first by insisting on the asymmetry between sacred and profane as this later note does in a colorful way: “The sacred is the seat of a power, an energy which acts on the profane, as an electrified body acts, or a coiled spring, whereas the profane only has the power to cause the discharge of this energy, or in certain cases to invert it, by making it pass . . . from a pure and salutary form to an impure and evil form.” (Durkheim 1975b [1917], 64) Then, concluding that this energy, which the totemic cult focuses on this animal or that plant, is of a social nature, he states: “The religious force is simply the feeling which the collectivity inspires in its members, but projected outside the collective consciousness experiencing it, and objective. In order to become objective, it focuses on an object which then becomes sacred.” (*Elementary Forms*, 327). Finally, he sees in the “communion between each individual consciousness” the collective state which gives rise to religion, and “their fusion in a resulting consciousness which absorbs them momentarily,” for example in ceremonies where energy is communicated, such as Australian corroborees.

By assembling the elements of this progression, Isambert emphasizes the nuances of perspective between the master and his disciples. If Hubert and Mauss finally arrive at the idea that it is society which is sacred, they do not, like Durkheim, make the experience of the sacred that of a duality between society and the individual. Besieged by modernity, the individual becomes precisely the locus of what remains of the sacred, a subject examined in the first thematic issue devoted in 1990 to the rereading of Durkheim (no. 69). What remains of

the sacred in a society of individuals? What moral theory should be advocated in a secular age? These are two complementary questions in a bilingual (English-French) dossier assembled by José A. Prades and Paul Ladrière.<sup>23</sup> In “Personne et sacré chez Durkheim,” J.-C. Filloux thus returns to the cult of the person as the horizon of modernity, where what makes the individual’s humanity is set up as a universal value in a world of accelerating cultural exchange. The rights of man and humanitarian action manifest their reticular organization—a strength made up of weak links which Robert N. Bellah in fact questions (“Morale, religion et société dans l’œuvre durkheimienne”), wondering whether moments of collective effervescence are not a thing of the past. More radically still, William S.F. Pickering (“The Eternity of the Sacred: Durkheim’s Error?”) examines the cult of the rights of man in the light of contemporary Britain which is in the process of dismantling its welfare state. Of the conquering humanism of the Enlightenment and its providential achievements, there remain only institutions in crisis in a disenchanted society which is stretched to breaking point by the polytheism of values, to quote Weber. The analyst concludes that the founding father was a romantic in that, immediately before World War One, he was talking about a popular uprising being a possible factor for moral improvement.<sup>24</sup> But rather than expatiating on the learned or half-learned uses of the word sacred in contemporary society, the dossier embarks on a second section, focusing on the moral act in a secular regime.

## From Religious Matters to Moral Matters

The end of Catholicism’s moral hegemony in French society at the time of the separation between Church and state posed the question of the common good to be promoted and transmitted. For Durkheim at that time, elucidating religious matters could not be dissociated from elucidating moral questions, for the two were consubstantial. Again, Isambert returned to the terms of this transfer in an article which was also memorable (“Durkheim: une science de la morale pour une morale laïque”<sup>25</sup>)—in his own work he himself, moreover, goes from the issue of the sacred in its popular and festive manifestations to the question of ethics in its committees of the wise (Isambert 1982 and 1992). The author thus recalls the constancy of Durkheimian questioning on the sociological substance of the moral act, from *Division du travail social* (1893) to the last book on morality which the sociologist was working on just prior to his death, with, in between, his lectures

23. The first is the author of *Persistence et métamorphose du sacré* (1987); the second is the author of *Pour une sociologie de l’éthique* (2001).

24. “What is important is to feel, below the moral chill which occupies the surface of our collective life, the sources of warmth that our societies carry within themselves. One can even go further and state with some precision in which particular part of society these new forces are taking shape: it is in the popular classes.” *ASR*, 1969, 27: 77.

25. *ASSR*, 1990, 69: 129–146.

on *L'Éducation morale* (1898–1903) and the finishing of *Elementary Forms*. He sets out the main propositions which marked out this trajectory:

1. the moral act lies in the sanction arising from any infringement of the rules of behavior, whether this sanction is formal and entails a physical punishment or whether it is subject to more diffuse social censure;

2. any moral obligation is shared between two types of predisposition: the disciplinary tendency which bows to constraint and the power of authority; or attachment to the group which reflects desire and enthusiasm. These two polarities are in tension with one another, taking the place of the ambivalence between fear and desire in relation to the sacred;

3. the variations in behaviors and value judgments belonging to the domains of family, civic, or professional life, tend to bring the justifications attached to each of them face to face. This produces a third moral tendency consisting in putting obligations up for discussion: this is the path of the collective understanding of duty and autonomy of will in which sociological reasoning is inscribed;

4. unlike the utilitarianism of moral philosophies which have taken the place of Christian theology, the sociological reconstruction advocated by Durkheim is founded on a recognition of the creative power of society, an essential step for the necessary objectification of the moral act in a secular society.

In an illuminating “Note sur Durkheim et la laïcité,” Jean Baubérot recalls, in fact, that the moral theory then being constructed by Durkheim was not unconnected with the debates concerning secular education, which was introduced in the 1880s. For Durkheim, the elimination of all religious elements from the new schoolbooks on civic and moral education could not take place without reducing the moral content to a few mechanical rules of behavior without any motivating foundation. For him, “the moral gospel of secularism” still needed to be invented, even though the speculations of anticlericals on the privatization and extermination of religious beliefs presented an obstacle to this, in a period of “transition and moral mediocrity.” Durkheim was not therefore an unconditional supporter of the separation between Church and state, as he sometimes appears to be in polemics between the two sides.

Twentieth-century history has certainly delivered its verdict on the totalitarian extremes which resulted from ideologies based on a rising up of the common people, and Durkheimian romanticism was certainly not exempt from placing its hopes in this. But at the end of the century and in the same country, the issue of secular morality returned in the form of the presence of religious symbols in schools. As Pierre Hayat shows in “Laïcité, fait religieux et société. Retour à Durkheim?”<sup>26</sup>, one of the rare articles in recent times to refer to Durkheim’s

26. ASSR, 2007, 137: 9–20.

topicality, “moral mediocrity” persists in a globalized context. Following others, the author treads the path of sociological theorization of morality developed by Durkheim, pausing at certain of his aporias—for example, the private direction taken by personal beliefs and the difficult reconciliation between the desirable replacement of one major narrative by the other with a view to enthusiasm, cohesion, and creativity. The individual as the central agent of social life remains, moreover, one of the burning epistemological questions of a rereading of Durkheim. Thus, returning to the “Durkheimian dilemma in moral sociology,” Bruno Karsenti demonstrates, for example, how Durkheim related the concept of society to a meaning “where the life of individuals is truly engaged, and which, while it cannot be reduced to its components, only becomes a reality through them, by their capacity to constantly nourish, according to a constant movement of innervation shown by the value judgments and moral acts which they command” (Karsenti 2006, 90). We are here obviously moving outside the fixed context of the *Elementary Forms* legacy in the *Archives*. But the journal cannot ignore disciplinary concerns which are broader than the return to Durkheim.

## From the Sacred to Belief

Acknowledging the worldwide resurgence of religious issues, in 2003 Alain Caillé assembled a star-studded gathering of philosophers and sociologists in the *Revue du MAUSS (Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales)*, of which he was the editor, in order to ask them what religion is exactly. For him, “the sociological tradition has never managed to produce a more or less accepted and shared conceptualization of religion” (Caillé 2003, 6). At best the definitions jostle with one another according to whether they stress the nature of the relationship to the sacred or to transcendence, or whether they emphasize its functions of social cohesion or exclusion. At worst, the religious object is not such if it is attributable more generally to symbolic activity or if it is no more than the residue of ever-more individualized beliefs. Any recent manual of the sociology or anthropology of religion gives an account of this flourishing diversity of points of view (Lassave 2008). It has been a recurring question since the origin of *Elementary Forms*, to which Danièle Hervieu-Léger returned in 1987 in an “anniversary” edition of the *Archives*. In “Faut-il définir la religion? Questions préalables à la construction d’une sociologie de la modernité religieuse,” this sociologist sets three types of aporia back to back: that of the common opposition between the content of beliefs and their historical forms; that of an object of knowledge which is both irreducible in itself and solvable in its determinants; and that of a definition which is an obstacle to the sociological imagination or which goes against history. Pleading for a necessary definition according to the route marked out by Durkheim, and at the same time an “ideal type” according to Max Weber’s model, Hervieu-Léger assigns to her discipline the role of

revealing the shared features of manifestations through which “human groups fulfill their need to identify, to order collective experience, and to forecast—needs which arise from the structurally uncertain nature of all social life, reinforced by this utopic tension, this projection towards a future completion which the modern world is chasing.”<sup>27</sup> It is on these bases and after her book of revision (*La Religion pour mémoire*, 1993) that in the *Revue du MAUSS* she resumes her working definition of religion as “an ideological, practical, and symbolic device through which the individual and collective sense of belonging to a particular tradition of belief is constituted, maintained, developed, and controlled” (Hervieu-Léger 2003, 151). Imperceptibly, sociological thinking has passed from the question of the sacred to that of “belief” via the study of secularization (leaving the first question for anthropology and history to deal with).<sup>28</sup> One of the main objections to any attempt to define religious matters comes precisely from “this Copernican revolution” according to which, “in the universal belief system, it is not religion which is at the center, with belief gravitating around it, but the planet “religion” which orbits around the sun of “belief,” of which it is only ever the satellite” (Michel 2003, 163). Without necessarily validating the objection, it should be said that, during the 1990s, the problem of belief encroached more widely on the human sciences and philosophy, not to mention the emerging “cognitive sciences.” By way of a return to basics, *L'Année Sociologique* consequently assembled a variety of contributions dealing with “collective beliefs” (2010). Although, as Gérard Bronner, the issue’s coordinator notes, no professorial chair in “sociology of beliefs” exists in the academic environment, the “theory of ordinary rationality” developed a few years ago by the journal’s honorary president, Raymond Boudon, for him occupies the forefront of the disciplinary stage (Bronner 2010). We cannot here go into the details of this theory except to recall that, according to it, all actions, beliefs, or attitudes have their cause in the personal or impersonal reasoning systems which underlie them in the subject’s mind (Boudon 2012). We will simply state below to what extent the *Elementary Forms* were an essential reference for Boudon in developing his theory, along with the work of Weber. But it was in this issue of *L'Année Sociologique* that D. Hervieu-Léger, the former editor of *Archives* (1989–2005), continued her reflections on religious modernity by indirectly answering the objections which came from “the radical individualization of belief.” In “Le Partage du croire religieux dans des sociétés d’individus,” she thus shows how the individual Balkanization of representations does not take place without links to the community. The ritual and mythical referents of traditions shore up individual

27. ASSR, 1987, 63: 28.

28. A “belief” defined as “the set of convictions, individual and collective, which do not relate to the area of verification or experimentation and, more broadly, methods of recognition and control which characterize knowledge, but which find their reason for being in the fact that they give meaning and coherence to the subjective experience of those who hold them” (Hervieu-Léger 1993, 105).

fulfillment at the same time as the subject's values of autonomy transform religious institutions and groupings. Three registers of collective validation of belief are identified in this dialectic of subjects: the mutual and reticular type which favors quests for a progressive truth; the community and sectarian type which experiences itself in the sentient revelation of the absolute; the institutional and ecclesial type whose authorization to lay down a uniform regime of belief has been partially dismissed but which remains a reference for other groupings. We are now back with Weber's ideal types; let us return to the Durkheimian forms.

## Genealogy of a Classic

When, in 2008, Boudon set up an international conference for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Durkheim's birth, he insisted that rereading of the founder should avoid popular ideology; hence the provocative title "Was Durkheim a Durkheimian?" He personally saw *Elementary Forms* as a self-evident masterpiece based on a fundamental principle, namely that "the ultimate causes of the fact that we believe in what we believe reside in the reasons which we have to believe in it" (Boudon 2011, 147). Thus Durkheim, according to Boudon, challenges theories which see belief in the soul as a simple transposition of dreams and find in this a universal category of thought: in other words a duplicate of the subject, who overcomes his natural division between unique individual and member of society. In the same way, magic has nothing to do with an irrational practice relating to a claimed "primitive mentality" because its various performances are surrounded by hypotheses similar to those which accompany any modern scientific experiment. These are realistic explanations of beliefs which also cast light on the fact that in the midst of the quarrel over secularism, Durkheim was able to challenge those who wanted to see in "today's enlightened Catholic, a sort of retarded barbarian."<sup>29</sup> This realistic perspective was present from the beginning, as Michael C. Behrent (Appalachian State University) points out in an article for *Archives*—"Le Débat Durkheim-Guyau sur la théorie sociologique de la religion. Une nouvelle querelle des universaux?"<sup>30</sup>—which returns to one of the early texts written by the newly qualified *agrégé* in philosophy. Contrary to the image which has become almost legendary, according to which Durkheim only recognized the central nature of religion after his "revelation" in 1895, Behrent recalls that in one of his first reviews in 1887 of Jean-Marie Guyau's book *L'Irréligion de l'avenir*, Durkheim was already sketching out the early contours of his realist theory by pointing out in particular the limits of nominalist

29. "Does not any consecration by means of unction or lustration consist in transferring to a profane object the sanctifying virtues of a sacred object? It is nevertheless difficult to see, in today's enlightened Catholic, a sort of retarded barbarian, who continues to be misled by his associations of ideas, without anything, in the nature of things, explaining and justifying these ways of thinking." (*Elementary Forms*, 460).

30. ASSR, 2008, 142: 9–26.

conceptions: far from being a projection of the individual imagination, religion, and the society which supports it, are *sui generis* realities which are very concretely expressed in the “perpetual sacrifices which we bear.” This is a rare recent contribution by *Archives* to international thought on the intellectual origins of the Durkheimian school, work which takes over from the first republications of texts mentioned above at the turn of the 1970s.

In his *Études Durkheimiennes*, Philippe Besnard in fact maps out the increase in historicizing approaches by the Durkheimian school from the 1980s, together with the escalation in biographies of the master and theoretical exegeses which aim to reconstruct his fundamental intuitions (Besnard 2003). After the premature death in 2003 of this “great Durkheimologist,” as Marcel Fournier, author of a biography of Durkheim, calls him, the work of archiving, interpretation, and rereading continued, notably at the initiative of W. S. F. (Bill) Pickering of the British Center for Durkheimian Studies at Oxford which, since the 1990s, has published the bilingual journal *Durkheimian Studies/Études durkheimiennes* (Fournier 2007). The *Archives* mention very few aspects of this recent genealogical activity—they are just limited to a few reviews. Thus, for example, in relation to Robert A. Jones (*Emile Durkheim: An Introduction to Four Major Works*, 1986), José A. Prades identifies the need for a closer link between historiographical erudition and theoretical thinking; the author of *Métamorphoses du sacré* (*supra*) regrets in particular that Jones has laid claim, without any critical detachment, to the shortcomings of *Elementary Forms* that were pinpointed by Steven Lukes, who wrote Durkheim’s first reference biography (Lukes 1972). Regarding Donald A. Nielsen (*Three Faces of God: Society, Religion, and the Categories of Totality in the Philosophy of Emile Durkheim*, 1999), Jean-Christophe Marcel is glad that through this book the reader can have access to numerous Anglo-Saxon sources, especially relating to the question of substantialism, or even Spinozist influence, which permeates the Durkheimian theses on religion as sociological epicenter. Enzo Pace reviews the book by the Italian critical editor of *Elementary Forms*, Massimo Rosati (*Ritual and Sacred: a Neo-Durkheimian Analysis of Politics, Religion and the Self*, 2009), who sees *Elementary Forms* as the keystone of Durkheim’s work, rites and the sacred constituting the generative grammar of the social world; for Enzo Pace, however, the Durkheimian edifice is not sufficient to account for the polytheism of values which runs through contemporary societies both here and elsewhere. Over and above the reviews, we should finally indicate several pages of the 1990 special edition which anticipate the historical thinking that has since developed around the issue of Durkheim’s Jewishness.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, in a “Note sur la judéité de Durkheim,” Alexandre Derczansky links the

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31. A theme very much present in the papers given at the 2008 international conference in Épinal on Durkheim’s youth in the Lorraine region of France (proceedings to be published).

rationalist, rigorist, and antimystical choices of Rabbi Moïse Durkheim with the rational and moralist construction of sociology by his son Émile.<sup>32</sup>

## Filiation, Revision, Reference

The three types of use of *Elementary Forms* revealed in the *Archives* (filiation, revision, reference) follow a development of the journal, for which the explanation goes beyond the limits of this exercise. The articles we have referred to are indeed only tenuous indicators of a wider movement affecting research subjects, programs, structures, and careers since World War Two—a period of sociology and anthropology of religion which doubtless remains to be studied in terms of the history and sociology of sciences. To end this limited analysis we should, however, note a few salient features which emerge from these various uses of a founding work.

The claim to a direct-line filiation from the Durkheimian school by the founders of the *Archives* and the Groupe de sociologie des religions in the years 1950–1960 manifestly contrasts strongly with the desire to break with this burdensome heritage which the discipline's reformers were then proclaiming in France. Among these latter, Jean Stœtzel asserted at the end of the war that Durkheim had “invented a sociological phlogiston theory, sterile and paralyzing” to the extent of “wondering whether it is not better to shelter the young generations of future researchers from his influence?”<sup>33</sup> In the same way, does the playful evocation of the prewar Institut de sociologie by Le Bras not contain an element of delight, in view of what we know about the fragmented state of French sociology between the wars, particularly within what then remained of the Durkheimian group? (Heilbron, 1985). Certainly, thanks to a young team gathered together by Le Bras and led by Desroche, the *Archives* revived the flickering torch of religious sociology installments published by *L'Année sociologique* in its early days. Extremely detailed bibliographical activity has continued over the years, and still goes on today despite everything, testifying to the vitality of the scholarly community.<sup>34</sup> As to a permanent “research formula” (Chapoulie 1991) linking subject, program, journal, and laboratory, it has to be said that since the group's origins, the disciplinary frameworks, fields of investigation, and methods of approach have continued to diversify and to differentiate themselves one from another, despite the fact that someone like Desroche was able to see in this the positive expression of an ecumenism of concepts and methods. Within half a century, as André Mary shows in a recent intellectual retrospective of the

32. A conjecture taken up by I. Strenski (*Durkheim and the Jews of France*, 1997), a work reviewed in a critical note in the *Archives*: M. Löwy, “Judaïsme et politique,” *ASSR*, 1999, 106: 25–29.

33. *Revue française de sociologie*, XXXII-3: 451.

34. Hervieu-Léger, 2006: 53–61.

journal (which he edited between 2005 and 2010), sociology has come to the point of no longer occupying center stage, any more than does the subject of religion, the scientific relevance of which is continually called into question, at least since Lévi-Strauss's critical work on totemism and primitive thinking.<sup>35</sup>

It remains the case that next to continuous rereading of the most enduring thinkers on religious phenomena of the last century (James, Freud, Simmel, and Bergson), and especially of the sociology of Weber and his emulators, the critical reprise of the Durkheimian group's socio-anthropological theories on the ambivalent power of the sacred and on moral obligation makes the *Archives*, particularly through the fundamental contributions of Isambert, an essential route for current working approaches, both as regards anthropological investigation and sociopolitical reflection on the "society of persons."

Knowledge of Durkheimian categories can be gained from the journal, which seems to have lost some of its vigor since the special Durkheim edition of 1990, when the field of social sciences of religion, much in demand due to the "return" of religious themes in world affairs, began to redeploy its energies under the impact of multiple centrifugal forces. The passing of the generation who were the journal's pioneers was accompanied by an increased diversification of intellectual themes and disciplinary perspectives with, in particular, a twofold upward movement involving both ethnographical experiments in more and more varied fields, and thinking related to political philosophy. At the same time, research teams and programs were dividing and intersecting, to the extent that the problems raised by the subject of religion were now far from being the prerogative of a single recognized group, however "ecumenical" it may be.<sup>36</sup> Thus, as we have seen, philosophy and the sociology of beliefs have taken over the issue of secularization, whether or not accompanied by occasional outbursts of religiosity—a sociological aporia which has now faded. In the same way, the study of the symbolism of gifts has led its defenders to put the question of religion under the microscope.<sup>37</sup> It is not surprising, then, that the *Archives* should have followed from a distance, by means of a few reviews, the genealogical work of the "Durkheimologists" on both sides of the Channel and the Atlantic. It is as though the special edition, of which the present article forms a part, wanted to reduce some of the gap now separating it from the early heritage, and for which the commemoration offered an

35. Mary, 2006: 9–24.

36. In the mid-1990s, the GSR split in this way into the Groupe de Sociologie des Religions et de la Laïcité (CNRS-EPHE) and the Centre d'études interdisciplinaires des faits religieux (CNRS-EHESS).

37. It is of note that the first epistemological work by C. Tarot to attract attention (*De Durkheim à Mauss*, 1999) did not lead to a review in the *Archives*, even though the journal subsequently made amends by opening a file containing a selection of different reviews of the second important work by the same author (*Le Symbolique et le sacré*, 2008).

opportunity.<sup>38</sup> It was an ancestral debt to be honored after a period of time shaped by memory. An irony of history is that in their early years, the *Archives* wished to be part of the Durkheimian filiation, going against a movement in the discipline which was relegating the great author of *Elementary Forms* to the museum of sociological thought; yet in their final years, they had difficulty keeping up with the forceful international trend for reflexive and historiographical revival of the founding work. We can, however, rest assured in the observation that between these two periods, some theoretical contributions were there to honor the filial link between *Elementary Forms* and *Archives*.

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38. If we agree with Giovanni Paoletti (1999) that the centenary commemorations of Durkheim's work provided an opportunity to rectify reading errors and to test the relevance of his aims, it is to be feared that the celebration of *Elementary Forms*, the author's last work, represents the end of a cycle of historiographical erudition and epistemological thinking.

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## Abstract

*The journal Archives de Sociologie des Religions, created in 1956 under the auspices of Gabriel Le Bras, emulated from the outset the “Religious Sociology” section of the journal L’Année Sociologique originally founded in 1896 by Emile Durkheim. The peer review of the Archives de sociologie des religions (then of sciences sociales des religions since 1973) that refers explicitly to Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life, from 1956 until today, reveals three successive types of use of the founding work: 1. an asserted affiliation to L’Année Sociologique despite the disciplinary context before the second world war particularly unfavorable to the durkheimian tradition; 2. Durkheim’s explicit theory of the sacred, of magic, religion and morality, for the purposes of analytical uses at a time when secularism matters are back in the public arena; 3. the relative echo given to studies of “durkheimology” developed for the last 30 years.*

*Key words: history of sociology, sacred, magic, religion, morality, durkheimology.*