

Durkheim as a Model for Religious Exiters

By Zalman Newfield

Émile Durkheim was profoundly influenced by his religious Jewish childhood. It continued to influence his view of the world and his work long after he had left the religious community. We who today are leaving similar communities can draw important lessons from his experiences and from his insights into the sociology of religion.

“You know professor, you’re just like Durkheim. You both grew up very Jewish and stopped being Jewish, and you’re both sociologists!”

I was told this by a young Latino student in a college class I was teaching at a maximum-security New Jersey state prison. At first, I was shocked by the comparison between the French intellectual Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) – who is known as the “Moses of sociology,” and is one of the modern founders of the field – and me. But my student had a point. Durkheim was the son of Moïse Durkheim, the rabbi of Épinal, France. He was the descendent of eight generations of rabbis and was raised in a traditional Jewish home. Durkheim went through a process of leaving the strict constraints of his upbringing that shares much with the journey of contemporary members of the Orthodox Jewish community who venture out, myself included. Although Durkheim became a deeply secular liberal thinker and a loyal son of the Third Republic of France, he shows clear signs of possessing the kinds of “residual effects” of his upbringing that I have discovered among the doz-

ens of Hasidic exiters I have interviewed.

Durkheim was criticized in a Jewish newspaper for having, “contributed to alienating more than one Jewish intellectual from Judaism,¹” an offense of which many of my interviewees are likewise accused.



Durkheim also felt “great remorse” the first time he ate pork,² a common enough experience among contemporary exiters. His work also reveals his Jewish roots. His scholarly writings on ancient religious practices are littered with constant references to Judaism and Jewish sources. This is par-

ticularly true of his first major work, *The Division of Labor in Society*. In fact, John Murray Cuddihy (1974) notes that forty-five explicit references to the Jewish Bible are indexed in that work, “more than to any other single topic or person.³”

Of even greater significance, it seems that Durkheim’s Jewish background influenced his scholarly perspective. He focused on the collective rather than the individual aspect of religion and he privileged religious practice over theology. The focus on practice has strong resonances to Judaism and, at least in the imagination of most Jews, stands in stark contrast to Christianity.

Durkheim consistently emphasized the collective aspect of religion. In fact, he distinguished religion from magic by arguing that magic is an individual, if not a solitary, practice—“There is no church of magic⁴—whereas religion is celebrated communally. Durkheim’s insistence that religion is fundamentally a social or group phenomenon, as opposed to the practice of an individual, is strikingly similar to traditional Judaism’s emphasis on religion as a

1. Qtd. in Birnbaum, P. (2008) *Geography of Hope*, Trans. Mandell, C., Stanford: Stanford University Press, pp. 90-91.
2. Lukes, S. (1973) *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work*, London: Penguin Press, p. 44, fn. 2.
3. Cuddihy, J. (1974) *The Ordeal of Civility*, New York, p. 151.
4. Durkheim, E. (1965) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Trans. Swain, J., New York: Free Press, p. 60.

communal enterprise. Judaism's emphasis on the collective is expressed in the requirement of ten adults to constitute a quorum for daily prayers and all "matters of holiness." According to traditional Jewish law as codified by the twelfth century scholar Moses Maimonides (Laws of Knowledge 4:23) there is a general prohibition against a Jew living in a city lacking basic Jewish communal infrastructures. These include a synagogue, religious teacher, Torah scribe, and Jewish court of law. The ancient rabbis of the *Mishnah* stated that when two people join together and study Torah, the divine spirit rests between them (*Pirkei Avot* 3:2). The rabbis' stipulation that this occurs only when more than one person is present reflects the communal nature of Judaism.

Durkheim insisted that the essential aspects of religion are the rituals that are practiced collectively and that produce what he called "collective effervescence." He believed these invigorate the community in a way that religious dogmas and supernatural beliefs do not. In a revealing passage Durkheim suggests, "Whoever has really practiced a religion knows very well that it is the cult which gives rise to these impressions of joy, of interior peace, of serenity, of enthusiasm which are, for the believer, an experimental proof of his beliefs."⁵ As Deborah Dash Moore states, "Durkheim's emphasis on action as central to religion suggests his Jewish intellectual heritage."⁶ This is because, as a rule, Judaism emphasizes the action of performing a commandment rather than the mystical intention (the *kavanah*) associated with that commandment. Durkheim himself expressed this insight as follows: for a believer, "the real function of religion is not to make us think...but

rather, it is to make us act."⁷ This is uncannily similar to the famous dictum of the rabbis from the second century: "The primary thing is not scholarship but action" (*Pirkei Avot* 1:17).

In his masterpiece on religion, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim refutes the idea that religion, the sacred, is based on supernaturalism or the belief in divine beings. According to Durkheim, religion, which is ancient, cannot be based on supernaturalism since in order to believe that something is supernatural—is above the rules of nature—there must first exist a known system of ordered rules for how the universe operates. However, such rules have only been discovered relatively recently, long after humans had already developed elaborate religious beliefs. As for the belief in a divine being,

Durkheim believed that religion draws on fundamental truths and realities about what it is to be human.

Durkheim argues that some major world religions, such as Buddhism, do not focus on the belief in a divine being in their religion. Therefore, such a belief cannot be central to the definition of all religions.

Surprisingly for someone who chose to live an avowedly secular lifestyle, Durkheim believed the division of the universe into the sacred and profane spheres was central to religion, and that religion was central to being human. He had abiding respect for religion. As Durkheim articulates it, "It is inadmissible that systems of ideas like religions, which have held so considerable a place in history, and to which, in all times, men have come to receive the energy which they must have to live, should be made up of a tissue of illusions."⁸ This assertion must be properly understood. It will be remembered that Durkheim argued that religion was

not based on theological beliefs in a divine being or a "higher power." Instead, Durkheim maintained that religion is about the rituals the faithful practiced, the powerful emotions it stirred up, and the feeling of collective unity it inspired. Durkheim appreciated these collective forces in society as both essential and inevitable. Thus, although the symbols and representations of religion may not accurately represent what it is they are trying to represent, the "thing" being symbolized and represented is in fact real. In other words, unlike some other prominent intellectuals of his day who argued that the essence of religion is misconception and falsehood, Durkheim believed that religion draws on fundamental truths and realities about what it is to be human and exist in society. Specifically, religion is central to the process of moving from being an individual to becoming a person conscious of the social.

Exiters today can take inspiration from our predecessors like Durkheim who managed to forge creative ways of joining the broader secular culture while dealing with their strict religious upbringing and training. We can also gain from reflecting on Durkheim's understanding of religion as something natural and not simply an illusion. Even if this does not resonate with our own sentiments, it may give us an added sensitivity when dealing with our religious family and friends.

Zalman Newfield is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the Borough of Manhattan Community College, CUNY. His book, Degrees of Separation: Identity Formation While Leaving Ultra-Orthodox Judaism, was published in April 2020 by Temple University Press. Visit him online at zalmannewfield.com.

5. Qtd. in Moore, D. D. (1986) "David Emile Durkheim and the Jewish Response to Modernity," *Modern Judaism*, vol. 6, no. 3, p. 296.

6. Moore, D. D. (1986) "David Emile Durkheim and the Jewish Response to Modernity," *Modern Judaism*, vol. 6, no. 3, p. 295.

7. Durkheim, E. (1965) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Trans. Swain, J., New York: Free Press, p. 417.

8. Durkheim, E. (1965) *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Trans. Swain, J., New York: Free Press, p. 70.