Godless Intellectuals? The Intellectual Pursuit of the Sacred Reinvented

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The second and still more adventurous section in aid of a convergent sense of emergence focuses on transhumanism. Here much space is dedicated to the radical version of the ‘singularity’ proposed by Ray Kurzweil, a pioneer in speech recognition technology, who is now a full-time transhumanist guru. When Kurzweil published *The Age of Spiritual Machines* in 1999, a call for humanity to enhance and even replace our sub-optimal biological bodies with purpose-made technology, he was quickly tarred with the theological brush of ‘Gnosticism’, the Christian heresy that holds the bodies of our birth in such contempt (as repositories of Original Sin) that the path to Salvation requires abandoning our animal natures altogether. Those who have been willing to follow Kurzweil down this route are promised that the endless struggle against material resistance and interference—whether called ‘pain’, ‘entropy’ or simply ‘noise’—will culminate in our morphing into infinitely powerful computers. The ‘omega point’ is the moment of ultimate efficiency, the capacity to do the most with the least, which as God’s own handiwork would be called creatio ex nihilo. Indeed, by this logic, when we finally come to meet our maker, we may find that the deity is an economist. The final chapter of this very worthwhile volume considers the extent to which native American Indian tribes can buy into such a transhumanist vision. Readers may not be as sanguine as its author that peoples whose modern history has been marked by repeated dispossession are so well disposed to give up their bodies in a great techno-spiritual venture.

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For a short period after 1968, and possibly in response to the unsettlements that era generated, sociology was subject to much soul searching in regard to its identity. All manner of insecurities emerged over the purpose of the discipline, whether it belonged to science or the humanities and also how idealism and praxis were to be reconciled. In response to the need to inspect its disciplinary soul, Robert Friedrichs produced a singular work where sociology, by means of sociology, reflected on itself. To enable him to characterise the discipline, Friedrichs deployed metaphors derived from
religion which cast the role of sociological practitioners in terms of prophet and priesthood. These unsettlements left a legacy to sociology, notably expressed in terms of reflexivity, disciplinary self-awareness, but more importantly, a realisation that the biographical cultural, political, and academic milieu of Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber needed inspection. The gestation of their ideas required contextualisation. Far from being reductionist, this approach greatly expanded understandings of the formation of the discipline and gave sociologists a secure sense of their disciplinary identity.

Cottage industries have developed around these founders of the discipline, generating treasure troves of archival material relating to correspondence, unfinished drafts, and the politics surrounding their efforts to characterise sociology at its point of modern invention. Two notable biographies of Durkheim and Weber recently emerged which have made these sociologists less Olympian, but also more credible, as the basis of their struggles with modernity is revealed. In addition, specialist journals, such as *Durkheimian Studies* have provided an outlet for scholarly reflection on a vast range of singular topics. An unexpected outcome of these introspective deliberations has been the realisation that religion had a central place in the mature works of Durkheim, Simmel, and Weber. As a result, the secularisation of sociology has been de-constructed, but in ways which undermine the need to attend to postsecularity. The notion that religion has disappeared in sociology is as illusory as is the issue of its return, which postsecularity signifies. From the inception of sociology, from Comte onwards, the place of religion in modernity has always been a conundrum for the discipline.

Against this background, Alexander Riley’s scholarly and highly stimulating work is unusually timely, not least in terms of the new vistas it opens out for sociological consideration. Even if inchoate and divided against itself, his study should not be pigeon-holed as a specialist work, which forms a long footnote in the history of sociology. Using a wealth of correspondence, archives, and primary source material, Riley explores the emergence of what he calls ‘mystic Durkheimianism’ and conceives of it as a means of examining the intellectual milieu in which Durkheim and the neo-Durkheimians (Hertz, Hubert, and Mauss) shaped their sociology. Riley seeks to connect their concerns with those of poststructuralists, in this study, notably Althusser, Baudrillard, Deleuze, and Foucault. While Riley is masterful in his use of material on the Durkheimians, his handling of the poststructuralists is less secure and the effort to treat their activities in terms of the sacred is not wholly convincing.

Using Bourdieu’s notion of reflexivity and with some debts to *Homo Academicus*, Riley seeks to map the field of interests which shaped the habitus of Durkheimians and the poststructuralists. Wisely, he treats habitus in terms of the cultural and individual factors effecting the construction of the identity of these intellectuals. But, between the Durkheimians and poststructuralists, the outcomes were different. In the case of the former, Riley suggests that their habitus predisposed them to thinking in quasi-religious categories (150). The latter had a far more equivocal relationship to the sacred and Riley becomes rather diffident about applying the term to their activities which seemed more concerned with de-sacralisation.

The author deploys a wide range of source material, notably unfamiliar French publications and correspondence to illustrate the networking arrangements of the
intellectuals he discusses. Chapter 3 on the scene of Durkheimian sociology is exemplary, not least in drawing attention to its imperialising tendencies in relation to philosophy (46–54). The rituals of production and the masters of ceremonies who influenced these thinkers are well explored in chapters 2 and 4. Riley is much concerned with the priestly metaphor which shaped understandings of the sacredness of the analytical undertakings of some of the Durkheimian intellectuals (71). If they were to replace Catholicism, for instance, in relation to education, they had to be worthy of the task of affirming the abstract individual as "the new sacred object of the secular age" (44). A legacy of this ambition flows into identity politics and its efforts to sacralise the dignity of individuals, no matter what religion might think of some of their iniquities.

In the chapters on the Durkheimians, Riley is especially good on the way they sought to find a middle way for their virtual religion, which faced the risk of either being drawn back to an incredible Catholicism or being dismissed by secularists with a positivist mandate and a cold eye for the future (55). Even though Durkheim, Hertz, and Mauss were Jewish (Hubert was Catholic by background), a notable aspect of the study—which Riley finds in Pickering—is the degree of sympathy the Durkheimians expressed towards Catholicism. A poignant example of this trait emerges in Riley’s reference to Hertz, who, in his service in World War I, was deeply drawn to religious language to express his feelings. He "felt throughout his whole life 'the nostalgia of the absent cathedral'" (133). Yet, at the same time, nihilism had attractions for Hertz, as illustrated in an excellent section on his interest in Nietzsche (174–82). Riley is especially good on the way the Durkheimians affirmed the significance of the sacred and deployed it as a means of hallowing their intellectual endeavours, even if the god was a mirage manifest in the social. In assessing the ascetic and mystic Durkheimians (chapter 9) Riley mentions the tragic properties of their responses to the crisis of modernity they sought to clarify and resolve. His use of the term 'tragic' relates to its duplex properties of joy and destruction, but, if amplified, the term might have secured a better means of characterising the link between the Durkheimians and the poststructuralists. The Durkheimians believed in their virtual religion, the poststructuralists sought to deconstruct it—that was their tragedy.

Many surprising and interesting points emerge in the study, one of which is the connection Riley makes between Weber and Durkheim in terms of their common interest in the ascetics of scholarship, the self-mastery it entailed, which demanded a discipline of life and a concern with higher thoughts which would enhance the credentials of sociology to speak with credibility on matters of morality (184–90). If there was to be a ‘mystic Durkheimianism’, it required sacrifices. The demands to be a Durkheimian seemed almost monastic, leaving Hubert to wonder whether he was becoming more and more Benedictine (189). The linkage of asceticism and mysticism regarding the Durkheimians is brilliantly explored in chapter 9. Yet the strength of that chapter undermines the application of a ‘mystic Durkheimianism’ to the poststructuralists. Bar reference to their effort to relate their intellectual endeavours to shifts in culture and politics, it is hard to see how the term could be applied to these deconstructing intellectuals.
Chapter 10 on the line of descent of mystics is clever and intellectually sensitive but unpersuasive. The meeting ground around Bataille and the journal *Critique* does not credibly sustain the thesis of an interconnection between the Durkheimians and the poststructuralists regarding a common concern with the sacred (216–19).

Riley ranges wide in tracking the influences, politics, personalities, and events that shaped the concerns of the poststructuralists and is, for instance, especially useful on the influence of Bataille who carried forward a Durkheimian inheritance, especially in relation to Mauss. The issue of the sacred was considered less in terms of reverence and more in terms of transgression by Baudrillard (250–57) and Foucault (247). While the Durkheimians treated Catholicism with reverence and unexpected respect, matters in relation to the poststructuralists were more complex. Catholicism was of little concern to Baudrillard, Deleuze or Derrida, but it seems that Althusser and Foucault were unable to escape its influence, a point Riley brings out well. Surrounding the poststructuralists was a property of hubris, which Riley touches on. Poulantzis, Deleuze, and Althusser committed suicide. Oddly, Riley notes the murder of Althusser’s wife but seems curiously coy about mentioning that he killed her.

It is not possible to capture here the richness, subtlety, and wealth of the well matured scholarship of this study which provides an unusual amount of material and insight to reflect on. While the work is peculiarly inconclusive, three particular points of importance emerge from the study. Firstly, Riley’s nuanced account of Durkheim and the Durkheimians dethrones the notion that they were simple-minded positivists with scant interest in the subtleties of religion. Secondly, his stress on the Catholic underpinnings of some of the poststructuralists brings into critical focus the realisation that, for some, their foil was not religion but theology. Thirdly, the study is invaluable in illustrating the way worries over the fate of religion in modernity were endemic in the foundation of sociology. In his conclusion, Riley suggests that the Durkheimians were responding to the problem of the disappearance of the sacred and endeavouring “to find a way to reconstruct it and thereby retain its primordial social energy, not simply to destroy it, as contemporary materialistic intellectuals suggested” (273). In the end, the study’s enduring value is to point to the self-reflexive properties of sociology which are necessary to cope with understanding the configurations of religion and the sacred which are peculiar to modernity but also endemic within it.

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