Unlike quantitative studies designed for laboratory settings and experimental controls that objectify the measurement of failure, the sociology of actual NRMs in the field is a phenomenological endeavor in which researchers must try to understand the meanings that group members themselves construct for making sense of their predicaments. This requires that researchers take seriously the “cognitive work” or rationalizing processes that group members undertake in responding to events that seemingly contradict their beliefs. Relatively successful NRMs (that develop an identity and sustain or increase their membership) employ effective “dissonance management” strategies; in particular, prophetic millenarian groups that sustain themselves over time cultivate a religious culture of both prophetic expectation and prophetic adaptation. Within this culture, prophetic leadership and guidance become important variables in shaping the ways that groups socialize their members to receive prophecy, prepare members for prophesized events, respond theologically to disconfirmations, and mobilize in-group social support. Ineffective management of the group’s organization and, especially, ineffective theological interpretation of disconfirming events impair group morale, making it difficult for an NRM to sustain its identity or membership over the long run.

Besides focusing on religious culture, leadership variables, and what might be called the social construction of prophecy, the chapters in this volume remind us that there are always additional “contingency factors”—historical or developmental circumstances peculiar to particular groups—that must be taken into account if we wish to understand the relative success or failure of NRMs to survive, or even thrive, in spite of temporary defeats and disappointment. Among other things, authors in this volume argue that the sociology of prophecy needs to move beyond case study attempts to confirm or refute Festinger et al.’s very limited, pioneering study; pursue more longitudinal and comparative studies; and study more systematically prophecy in the context of mainstream, institutionalized religions.

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Godless Intellectuals? offers readers a tour of twentieth-century French intellectual history by one of the finest Durkheimian scholars writing today. At the heart of the book is Durkheim’s concept of the sacred. Yet despite the seemingly familiar starting point, Riley’s book sparkles with creative ideas, intriguing concepts, and introductions to a broad class of characters. Riley is not a historian of ideas but a sociologist and social theorist. Consequently, he frames the telling of this history with key theoretical categories, which help order a broad range of material.

The key protagonists of his story are the Durkheimians: Emile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, Robert Hertz, and Henri Hubert. Riley provides close readings of some of their texts, but also a helpful contextualization of this school, connecting it to the realities of fin de siecle France, noting especially the importance of the Dreyfus Affair (1897–1899), the search for a secular morality built on the corpse of Catholic morality, and the changing nature of education and the role of the intellectual in the face of the re-structuring of French society. The other protagonists are the post-Structuralists, especially Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze, and Baudrillard. Again, Riley situates these figures in relation to their contexts: the collapse of the Marxist moral order, the events of May 1968, and the Algerian war, especially.
The conceit of the book is that the post-Structuralists and the Durkheimians are connected by their mutual preoccupations with the sacred. Both schools exhibit intellectuals working to re-invent and re-locate the sacred for their contemporary world. Drawing on Edward Shils’s characterization of the vocation of intellectuals as the makers and managers of the sacred in modern life, Riley notes, “intellectuals orient themselves [toward what] Shils calls the sacred, which is broadly consistent with the Durkheimian conception of the sacred as defined centrally by its opposition to the profane, or what is mundane, quotidian, not separated from the everyday and vulgar by a particular atmosphere of reverence and potency” (7). The intellectual is the modern answer to the shaman and priest, so it is not surprising that French intellectuals especially serve as high priests of the modern sacred.

Riley observes that “the durkheimian cluster contains two kinds of durkheimian calling that involve two ways of pursuing the sacred and that two clearly differentiable Durkheimian habitus produce them” (183). This distinction is at the heart of Riley’s argument and is itself born from Durkheim’s discussion of the sacred. In his famous definition of religion, Durkheim characterizes the sacred as involving “things set apart and forbidden.” Yet Riley reminds us that Durkheim’s discussion of the sacred involves another important distinction, less commented upon, viz., that between the pure and impure, between the sacred’s ordering and transgressive expressions. It is this distinction that gives rise to the ascetic and mystic roads. The sacred combines two realities: its elements are dread as well as devotion, fear as much as love. There are sacred forces of interdiction that maintain physical and moral purity, order, health, and vitality (the pure sacred), but there are also sacred forces that are realized in sacrilege, death, disruption, contamination, and horror (let the devil have its due). While the ascetic durkheimians (Durkheim and Hubert) focused on the pure sacred, understanding themselves as tools of the sacred in the service of moral order and function, the mystic durkheimians focused on the aesthetics of the impure sacred, understanding themselves as vessels of it, and defenders of the outcast and outsider. It was the “impure” approach embodied in Hertz and Mauss, that was picked up by Bataille and later by the poststructuralists, who sought to re-construe the sacred through explorations of the contaminated, the disdained and the violated, the mad, the incarcerated, the horrifying other. For Riley, however, both durkheimian trajectories shared a preoccupation with the reinvention of the sacred in modern life, though they manifest different foci and different understandings of the role and purpose of the intellectual life in relation to it. In the beginning was Durkheim.

Riley’s book will be especially interesting to those concerned with Durkheim and his influence on contemporary thought. The book ranges so broadly at times that it is easy to get lost in the details, and it introduces so many concepts that their plethora sometimes adds to the confusion rather than clarifying it. Yet, part of the book’s (mystic) charm is its comprehensive and suggestive nature. When I finally put it down, I felt like Riley had taken me to a Salon in Paris, introduced me to EVERY significant French intellectual of the twentieth century, and then, on the way out the door, whispered in my ear, “They owe it all to Durkheim.” I suspect he is right.

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In recent years, scholars and diplomats have been addressing the issue of human