

# INTERPRETING ABORIGINAL RELIGION

## FROM NINETEENTH-CENTURY EVOLUTIONISM TO DURKHEIMIAN SOCIOLOGY

HENRIKA KUKLICK

I begin this paper with what may seem an unlikely starting point: the cordial relationship of the scientific polymath Herbert Spencer and the Liberal politician W. E. Gladstone. In the late 1870s and early 1880s, Spencer flattered the then-prime minister extravagantly, telling him that his Liberal Party programme was nothing less than the realisation of the ethical system that Spencer believed to be scientifically based.<sup>1</sup> And though the relationship surely mattered less to Gladstone than it did to Spencer, Gladstone would later indicate that he held Spencer in high regard.<sup>2</sup> Yet in 1873 and 1874, Gladstone and Spencer had conducted an epistolary feud, both in private correspondence and on the pages of the *Contemporary Review* (during the course of which Spencer's friends told him that he was being too much the gentleman, urging him to act to mobilise public support for his position).<sup>3</sup> Gladstone initiated the feud, writing a letter to the *Contemporary* that was critical of the last chapter of a new edition of Spencer's *The Study of Sociology*, which the journal had printed in advance of the book's publication. Spencer retaliated by reprinting Gladstone's letter in the book, presenting it as the expression of 'anti-scientific' sentiment.<sup>4</sup> But Glad-

stone would not allow Spencer to have the last word, and badgered Spencer until he eliminated his criticism and the reprinted letter from subsequent printings of *The Study of Sociology*; Spencer submitted three revisions of the offending portion of the book to the prime minister, finally producing an innocuous account of their dispute that met with Gladstone's approval.<sup>5</sup>

That Gladstone took such pains to censor a printed record of his debate with Spencer is remarkable, indicating just how seriously social scientific argument could be taken in the public discourse of the late nineteenth century. Of course, the internationally renowned Herbert Spencer was an extraordinary figure. Perhaps no other social scientist whose generalisations relied on evidence gathered among non-European peoples has ever achieved fame equivalent to his, although J. G. Frazer, a classicist-anthropologist more than thirty years Spencer's junior, arguably approximated it (on Frazer, more shortly). But Spencer and Gladstone's dispute became so intense because they were both certain of the immense importance of its subject—the role of God in human affairs.

In Gladstone's letter to the *Contemporary Review*, he had asserted that the force of 'Providence' could be seen in public

life, that God intervened in human affairs and raised up great men when the times required them. For Spencer, Gladstone's argument was fundamentally anti-scientific, suggesting that the steady operation of natural laws was occasionally suspended; as he stated in a draft portion of the text of *The Study of Sociology* that Gladstone managed to suppress, this view was

certainly incongruous with the conception entertained by scientific men; who daily add to the evidence, already overwhelming, that the Power manifested to us throughout the Universe, from the movements of stars to the unfolding of individual men and the formulation of public opinions, is a Power which, amid infinite multiformities and complexities, works in ways that are absolutely uniform.<sup>6</sup>

But note that Spencer had invoked the 'Power manifested to us throughout the Universe'. His dispute with Gladstone cannot be reduced to one episode in the supposedly long-standing conflict between science and religion. To be sure, the young Spencer had expressed hostility to religion. But no later than 1860, he proclaimed that he had to 'admit that there exist in the environment certain phenomena or conditions which have determined the growth of [religious] feeling', and that 'on the hypothesis of a development of lower forms into higher, the end towards which ... must be adaptation towards the requirements of existence; we are also forced to infer that this feeling is in some way conducive to human welfare'.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, among members of the Victorian intelligentsia, there was broad agreement that

religion and science had to be reconciled; the issue was not whether they could be, but how they should be reconciled.<sup>8</sup>

My point is that the debate between Spencer and Gladstone highlights the extraordinary importance of religious considerations in late-nineteenth century life. Disputes about the character of the supreme being, the proper relationship of the religious sphere to other social spheres, and the types of ritual that should be permitted in religious worship were vital matters in consideration of the conduct of affairs of both the state and civil society—throughout the societies of Euroamerica and their colonies, hardly just in Britain. Moreover, whatever their differences, figures such as Gladstone and Spencer agreed that religion supported social order.

We should not be surprised, then, when we find that late-nineteenth century anthropologists devoted a considerable portion of their intellectual energies to analysis of religion, and that they believed that the spiritual quality of religious beliefs and practices found in any given society constituted an index to its overall character.<sup>9</sup> Truly spiritual religion was among the highest of human achievements, along with the institution of monogamous marriage—developments that anthropologists believed were concomitant. Investigative efforts were driven by objectives: many anthropologists agreed that their enterprise was, as the Oxford professor E. B. Tylor was wont to say, a 'reformer's science', the findings of which would 'enable the great modern nations to understand themselves, to weigh in a just balance their own merits and defects, and even in some measure to forecast ... the possibilities of the future'.<sup>10</sup> The concep-

tual scheme that was most clearly articulated by Anglophone anthropologists made reformist ambitions seem practicable in Tylor's day. That is, anthropologists assumed that all aspects of human evolution—physical, mental, moral, and material—were highly (though certainly not perfectly) correlated, and that progress from the most primitive of human conditions to the most advanced entailed negotiation of an ordered sequence of stages of evolution. Anthropologists' expertise would permit acceleration of the course of evolution, identifying so-called 'survivals' of earlier evolutionary phases of a people's history in order that these might be eradicated.

When they considered the development of religious institutions and beliefs in particular, evolutionist social thinkers including, but hardly limited to, Spencer and Tylor judged that progress meant recognition of the solely spiritual purpose of religion. As humans learned to understand the natural world scientifically, they ceased to expect the deity to respond to worshippers' special pleading for one desired outcome or another—jettisoning magical thinking—and they abandoned ritual *per se* because it was irrational. Indeed, though it was more implied than explicitly stated in evolutionists' accounts of the spiritual progress of humankind, a host of Christian beliefs and practices were evident 'survivals'. (We must remember that Spencer and Tylor were representatives of a population of social thinkers who came, for the most part, from dissenting religious backgrounds.<sup>11</sup>)

If anthropologists' research programme was plotting the course of evolution, and accelerating evolutionary progress was their reformist mission, inform-

ation about the most primitive forms of humankind was vital to their tasks. This was why information about the peoples of Australia was so important for anthropologists, since it was axiomatic to many of them that the best, still-extant approximation of humankind in its most primordial condition was to be found in Australia, which had long been believed to be the home of archaic life forms of every description, a zoological garden of 'living fossils'.<sup>12</sup> I must stress that practitioners of anthropology were hardly unique. During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, various types of scientists and other educated persons were accustomed to render judgments predicated on the assumption that Australian Aborigines were a baseline of humanity, that they were exemplars of humankind at its most primitive in every particular—in spiritual, behavioral, and physical terms.

I give just a few illustrations of diverse pronouncements made at this time that expressed this view. The German Darwinian biologist Ernst Haeckel, whose index to a people's level of evolutionary development was teeth, not religious practices, characterised Australian Aborigines as 'distinctly pithecoïd', the closest of living peoples to a link between humans and apes.<sup>13</sup> The American psychologist John B. Watson, who sought to formulate covering laws that explained responses to stimuli among all living organisms, assumed that 'Aborigines' adaptive behavior was a limiting case of a mode of human responses, the simplest of human behavioral patterns, far less complex than Europeans'.<sup>14</sup> And an American professor of theology, B. L. McElroy, objecting to some physicians' recommendations that

seriously defective newborn babies be euthanised, pointed to infanticide among Aborigines and argued that eugenicists were advocating a base morality, attempting 'to Australianize our Ethics'.<sup>15</sup> Thus, J. G. Frazer was hardly alone when he proclaimed in 1899 that in Australia the 'scientific inquirer might reasonably expect to find the savage in his very lowest depths ... to mark the first blind gropings of our race after freedom and light'.<sup>16</sup>

Not only did the assumption that Australian Aborigines constituted 'living fossils' of early humankind have a long history, but it also, unhappily, proved remarkably persistent—and persistent in many quarters. Consider, for example, that in the post-World War II era, an eminent American physical anthropologist, William Howells, made this assumption in evaluating the significance of ancient skulls found in Java by Eugene DuBois. In his highly regarded *Mankind So Far*, Howells reasoned in nineteenth-century anthropological fashion, presuming that the living and the dead could be graded on a single scale of evolutionary development, pronouncing that the Java skulls resembled skulls found in Europe which dated to the Upper Paleolithic period, observing that they 'stand in relation to the living aborigines of Australia as the Upper Paleolithic Europeans do to living Europeans of the present day'.<sup>17</sup>

But the facile equation of Australian Aborigines with primitive humankind had long ceased to seem plausible to sociocultural anthropologists. By the era of World War I, these had disaggregated the physical, mental, moral, and material components of human evolution. And examination of Australian Aborigines' religion had played a prominent role in modifying their

position. For example, though R. R. Marrett, Reader in Social Anthropology at Oxford, stated in 1912 that Central Australian Aborigines were 'people with skulls inching toward the Neanderthal type', he had been persuaded by Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen's study of them that 'very plain living' did not preclude 'something that approached to high thinking', concluding that 'we must recognize in this case, as in others, what might be determined a differential evolution of culture, according to which some elements may advance, whilst others stand still, or even decay'.<sup>18</sup> Marrett was among the last of a breed that also included such figures as Spencer, Tylor, and Frazer, an 'armchair' scholar who did no field research, but relied on reports sent from the field by others, such as those that had been sent from Australia by European observers for two centuries. Of special interest to us, however, are nineteenth-century reports from the field, many of them informed by knowledge of the uses to which they were being put by social theorists in Europe and America. The judgments rendered in these reports were not unanimous, and observers' occupational positions shaped their interests and opinions. While an Australian police trooper might consider whether Aborigines were naturally deceitful,<sup>19</sup> a missionary was bound to ponder the quality of Aborigines' spirituality and morals. For example, in 1839, James Günther of the Church Missionary Society discerned belief in a high god in Aboriginal religion—and was the first European missionary to do so—though he did not see this as equivalent to Christian belief, conjecturing that Aborigines had once had a notion of the supreme being resembling the Christian god, but had degenerated and

lost their earlier revelation.<sup>20</sup> And in 1841, a German missionary in South Australia, who had had little success in making converts, reported that even though Aborigines had evidently the same mental aptitudes as Europeans, they had no religion whatsoever—not even ‘idolatry’—having neither ‘the idea of any being superior to themselves nor any kind of worship’; their morals were ‘in many instances almost upon a lower scale than the beasts’.<sup>21</sup>

Regardless, in the second half of the nineteenth century, there was evidence of a shift in opinion—which coincided with local investigators’ growth in confidence that their interpretations of Aborigines’ behavior, grounded in direct observation, were superior to those produced by arm-chair theorists. R. Brough Smyth, for one, criticised the stereotype of Aborigines as intellectually deficient, suggesting that they might have independently made progress toward the development of high civilisation had their country not been invaded by white settlers.<sup>22</sup> In particular, missionaries’ representations of Aboriginal religion grew more sympathetic. The Congregationalist George Taplin, for example, was certainly determined to convert Aborigines, but he judged that they traditionally believed in a supreme being, who made the world and prescribed religious rituals—though he insisted that their conception of God was different from the Christian one.<sup>23</sup> And by the end of the century, such figures as the missionary-ethnographer Lorimer Fison and his collaborator A. W. Howitt were arguing that native Australians were neither degenerate nor frozen in a truly primitive condition, but had made evolutionary progress, and that their development of precursors of

the idea of god as the All-Father testified to the progress they had made independently—without guidance from any putatively superior race.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, it was arguably a missionary, Carl Strehlow, who first produced evidence that belied the stereotype of the Australian Aborigine as the quintessential primitive.<sup>25</sup>

Certainly, late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century ethnographic writers drew on this stereotype. Consider J. D. Woods’s judgment in 1879: ‘Without a history [the Aborigines] have no past; without a religion, they have no hope; and without habits of forethought or providence they can have no future’.<sup>26</sup> Decades later, W. Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen described the Arrernte of Central Australia as ‘naked, howling savages, who have no idea of permanent abodes, no clothing, no knowledge of any implements save those fashioned out of wood, bone, and stone, no idea whatever of the cultivation of crops, or of the laying in of a supply of food to tide over hard times, no word for any number beyond three, and no belief in anything like a supreme being’.<sup>27</sup> To be sure, Spencer and Gillen observed Aboriginal practices that seemed to be religious—their totem ceremonies. But as J. G. Frazer, who brokered the publication of their works, stated, these ceremonies represented magic, not ‘religion, in the sense of a propitiation or conciliation of the higher powers’; totemism was ‘thoroughly democratic’, premised on an ‘imaginary brotherhood’ joining humans with things, whereas ‘religion always implie[d] an inequality between the worshippers and the worshipped’.<sup>28</sup>

Nevertheless, Spencer and Gillen’s first major work, *Native Tribes of Central Australia*, published in 1899, marked a turn-

ing point in the anthropological analysis of Australian peoples. Certainly, the quality of Spencer and Gillen's sympathy for Aborigines can be debated.<sup>29</sup> Consider that they judged the Arrernte way of life extraordinarily primitive, and by this token doomed to extinction—following the pattern observed 'in the case of tribe after tribe elsewhere in Australia'.<sup>30</sup> But consider that they insisted that it was 'necessary to put oneself into the mental attitude of the native'.<sup>31</sup> Their intention to persuade their readers that they had been able to do this explains Spencer and Gillen's false (or, at least, hyperbolic) and oft-repeated claim that they had been able to observe all features of Aboriginal life—including secret ceremonies—because they were 'fully-initiated' members of the Arrernte population; their participation in Arrernte life fell far short of this, since they had not undergone the ceremonial ordeals that rendered males social adults, but their claim bespeaks their intention to describe the Arrernte sympathetically.<sup>32</sup> Spencer and Gillen explained how Aborigines' remarkable survival skills—developed 'far beyond those of the average white man'—were applications of their 'mental powers along the lines which are of service to them in their daily life'. Moreover, their accounts contradicted long-established stereotypes in many particulars. Aborigines did not tolerate abuse of women and unregulated sexual behavior, but lived by a distinctive and rigorously enforced moral code, which should not be judged by a 'white man's standard'. If at least some Australian people practised 'group marriage'—a truly primitive mode of social organisation, allowing all men in one division of a population to have sexual relations with all women in another,

the existence of which had long been the subject of anthropologists' speculation—this practice provided the foundation for evolutionary advance, both because it led to the development of individual marriage and because it served 'to bind more or less closely groups of individuals who are mutually interested in one another's welfare', thus serving as 'one of the most powerful agents in the early stages of the upward development of the human race'. And though Aborigines were 'bound hand and foot by custom', they were not undeveloped because they were either degenerate or incapable of initiating progressive changes; indeed, they self-consciously adopted progressive recommendations suggested by the exceptionally talented persons among them.<sup>33</sup>

And to interpret the meaning that *Native Tribe* came to have for social thinkers, we must also note its impact on J. G. Frazer, who was largely responsible not only for its publication but also for making it the basis of an international debate.<sup>34</sup> To Frazer, the book's most important feature was its discussion of totemism, which he had sought to understand for virtually his entire anthropological career; thanks to Spencer and Gillen, he believed, he had found what had heretofore eluded him—an explanation of the origin of totemism—as well as evidence explaining the relationship of totemism to religious beliefs and marital practices.<sup>35</sup> In the first edition (1890) of his *Golden Bough*, Frazer had understood Australian totem ceremonies as a truly primitive form of religion, noting that Aborigines believed their totems to be repositories of their souls, and describing their initiation rites as 'a simulation of death and resurrection', effecting 'an exchange of life or souls between the

man and his totem'.<sup>36</sup> As he told his publisher, George Macmillan, 'The resemblance of many of the savage customs and ideas to the fundamental doctrines of Christianity is striking'.<sup>37</sup> Learning of Spencer and Gillen's findings, Frazer decided that Australian totem ceremonies represented magic, not religion; thus, they denoted an even lower order of spiritual development than he had previously imagined. But in Frazer's new understanding of Australian beliefs, he had a new basis for finding in them a precursor to an irrational element that survived in modern Christianity: 'conceptional totemism'. That is, Spencer and Gillen had found people who were so primitive that they were ignorant of the most basic fact of life, of the process of procreation, imagining that totem spirits were themselves responsible for conception, lying in wait in their particular habitats for likely female candidates for impregnation.<sup>38</sup> Apparently, Aborigines regularly entertained fantasies of virgin births. And Frazer suggested that the very association of the divinity of Christ with a virgin birth represented a survival in Christianity of the truly primitive thinking that Spencer and Gillen had reported.<sup>39</sup> Thus, as measured by Frazer's standard of superior religiosity, Aborigines were certainly primitive. But by this standard, so were many persons in the so-called civilised world, at least insofar as their religious notions were concerned.

For social thinkers all over the world, Spencer and Gillen's work was a revelation.<sup>40</sup> And Frazer could not control the reception of *Native Tribes*, however vigorous and sustained was his campaign to do so (which included acting to discourage re-analysis of Spencer and Gillen's subjects by other anthropologists).<sup>41</sup> In the inter-

national—and extremely heated—controversy it generated, Spencer and Gillen's empirical material was turned to various purposes by a congeries of theorists, Émile Durkheim and Sigmund Freud the most notable among them.<sup>42</sup> As E. Sidney Hartland observed in his 1900 Presidential Address to the British Folk-Lore Society—which would soon issue a questionnaire on totemism designed to elicit evidence on the phenomenon from potential informants everywhere—the debate over totemism had attracted such widespread interest, and prompted so much discussion, that 'The quiet non-combatant student is astonished to find himself in the theatre of war, and hardly knows where to seek a bomb-proof burrow that he may hide his head from the shells of [disputants'] polemics'.<sup>43</sup>

In Britain, Frazer faced various opponents. His chief antagonist was his erstwhile friend Andrew Lang. From 1900, when the second (Spencer and Gillen-influenced) edition of the *Golden Bough* appeared, to the time of his death in 1912, Lang waged sustained intellectual warfare against Frazer, accusing him of willful distortion of information about central Australian peoples. In sum, Lang argued that Frazer ought to have paid more attention to the findings of other authorities, particularly Carl Strehlow. Had Frazer done so, he would have recognised that 'conceptional totemism' was a secondary development; in the form of Australian totemism that Lang judged oldest, totemic affiliations were linked to rules of exogamy, which indicated knowledge of the biological facts of procreation. Equally important, while Lang agreed with Frazer that totemism was not initially a religious system, he believed that in time it became one, for 'certain low

savages are as monotheistic as some Christians'.<sup>44</sup> But many rejected Lang's assertion that Australian Aborigines had spontaneously developed a belief in high gods.<sup>45</sup> The Tylorian anthropological faction faulted Frazer's interpretation of totemism for reasons different from Lang's: totemism was just one social form, peculiar to specific peoples, but it had analogues among other peoples, all testifying to a universal pattern of social evolution; religious institutions developed because all humans were instinctive 'animists'—inclined to develop spiritual beliefs because their experiences of dreams and visions conduced to the notion that the world's animate and inanimate objects were inhabited by souls.<sup>46</sup>

Lang's ideas were well received in the German-speaking world, however—and possibly gained some attention because Frazer had a large audience there.<sup>47</sup> One of Lang's most vicious attacks on Frazer was published in a special issue on totemism of the journal *Anthropos*,<sup>48</sup> which was founded by Father Wilhelm Schmidt, who was trained and worked in Germany and Austria. Schmidt was loosely allied with a number of anthropologists inclined to 'cultural-historical' explanations,<sup>49</sup> whose concerns included tracing the origin of religion among those whom German-speaking anthropologists called 'natural peoples' (as opposed to 'cultural peoples'). Cultural historicists valued information about Australian Aborigines because they agreed with British evolutionists that some contemporary primitives were akin to (if not identical to) the earliest humans.<sup>50</sup> But they saw 'natural peoples' as a pure form of humankind. Perhaps 'natural peoples' were not fully evolved members of the human species in physical terms,

but they were fully evolved in spiritual terms, 'capable' as Schmidt said, 'of receiving a real primitive revelation'—indeed, possessed of 'interior purity and nobility' that was not sustainable under conditions of growing material sophistication. Schmidt agreed with Frazer that totemism began in efforts to establish beneficial relations with animals and plants. Unlike Frazer, however, he saw totemism as the basis of genuine religion, for its primitive practitioner not only believed himself 'protected by the animals' but also 'humbl[ed] himself to them in prayer'. And he agreed with Lang that the most primitive of peoples had not required contact with Christian missionaries to develop 'knowledge of a Supreme Being as Creator, Protector of the world, and Lawgiver to man'. But consistent with the German sociocultural anthropological tradition, Schmidt and his colleagues did not believe that there was a single pattern of evolutionary development, found among peoples everywhere, and argued that totemism figured in only one of the culture complexes that had diffused over the globe through the migrations of peoples—and did not emerge until the bearers of this complex had progressed beyond the hunting and gathering stage.<sup>51</sup>

Schmidt was a committed internationalist, maintaining correspondence with anthropologists worldwide and publishing a truly international journal. And the views of the cultural historicists had a family resemblance to the American diffusionism associated with the school of the German-trained Franz Boas, which supplanted evolutionism as the dominant model in American anthropology in the early twentieth century. The rise of the German cultural historicists and the



American Boasians denoted an international intellectual convergence: while social thinkers in different countries approached the debate over totemism from different vantage points, they came to join in repudiation of the evolutionist paradigm. Perhaps the only social scientific controversy that has been truly international, the debate had begun in the expectation that understanding of the role that totemism played in the evolution of religion—and of human social life entire—would provide the key to explaining the developmental trajectory of humankind from the species' earliest days to its development of high civilisation. Instead, attempts to explain totemism helped to discredit the evolutionist paradigm, for it was impossible to resolve such questions as whether totemism was a truly primitive social form, or had antecedents, or whether it was a form of religion, and, if so, if there were forms of plant and animal worship that were not totemism.<sup>52</sup> Participants in the debate became embroiled in controversies over methods and evidence, as well as theories. They were unable to decide which (if any) of anthropologists' informants had responded truthfully to fieldworkers' questions and fearful that researchers' interpretive biases contaminated their reports.<sup>53</sup> As Sigmund Freud observed, not only was 'the theory of totemism a matter of dispute' but there was also considerable confusion about 'the facts themselves. ... There [was] scarcely a statement which did not call for exceptions or contradictions'.<sup>54</sup> In sum, there were no generally accepted standards by which any of the issues raised in the study of totemism could be resolved.

If a consensus emerged in the debate over totemism, it was that totemism was neither a universal phenomenon nor one

that inevitably gave rise to a specific pattern of development, as Max Weber (among many) observed.<sup>55</sup> Perhaps, as Freud said, information about primitive peoples aided speculation about early humankind, but the first humans and contemporary primitives could not be equated. In *Totem and Taboo*, subtitled *On some Points of Agreement between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, Freud had used anthropological evidence (largely gleaned from Frazer's work) to construct an ingenious (and convoluted) argument that totemism was a source of religious belief and was grounded in the incest taboo that experience made instinctive. But though he believed that 'a well-preserved picture of an early stage of our own [mental] development' could be gained from knowledge about Australian peoples, as opposed to, say, Polynesians, because Aborigines were 'the most backward and miserable of savages', he recognised that each of the populations anthropologists had studied had its own 'long past history'.<sup>56</sup> Many social thinkers agreed with Bronislaw Malinowski that the attempt to discern different patterns of evolution was worthwhile. But, as the British psychologist-anthropologist W. H. R. Rivers stated, researchers had erred in equating the phenomenon of totemism entire with 'the nature of totemism as it exists among the aborigines of Australia'—'the chief reason' that discussion of the subject was plagued with 'doubt and difficulty'.<sup>57</sup>

By 1914, then, the Boasian anthropologist John Swanton was able to dismiss the debate over totemism entire. It had been predicated on the 'cardinal error' that 'totemism [was] one concrete thing', denoting a 'social condition ... normal to and universal in primitive society'. Some peoples de-

veloped totemic complexes through processes of independent invention, while others acquired them by diffusion, imitating the habits of peoples with whom they came in contact. And where totemism was found it had no necessary relation to the various features diverse thinkers had postulated as essential to it—no inevitable association with exogamous norms of any description; with belief in ancestral connections joining humans and beasts; with taboos; with differences of social rank; with calculations of descent from mothers rather than fathers; with allocations of title to conduct specific sacred ceremonies to specific groups or, indeed, with the very foundations of religious belief entire. Thus, the evidence gathered in pursuit of generalisations about totemism led to the generalisation that evolutionary development did not follow a predictable course.<sup>58</sup>

In the years immediately prior to World War I, then, social theorists whose goal had originally been calculation of the trajectory of human evolution began to articulate proto-functionalist arguments—analyses of the properties that all societies shared—at least when they considered religious phenomena. The title of Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (and subtitled *The Totemic System in Australia*), published in 1912, itself conveyed an emergent theoretical position. Largely based on the findings of Spencer and Gillen, whom Durkheim described as 'two remarkably astute observers', *Elementary Forms* presented totemism as the most primitive form of religion. But the primitive character of this religion meant that it was easy for the social scientist to analyse, presenting in stark outline the characteristics of religious beliefs and

practices that were found in all societies. All religions, said Durkheim, belonged to 'a species of delirium'—though he insisted that all religions were suffused with 'meaning and objective significance' that was grounded in experienced reality. That is, religious beliefs were not illusory for those who sustained them: they engendered intense emotions and had practical consequences.<sup>59</sup>

For Durkheim, religion was not defined by belief in a deity or the supernatural. The essence of religion lay in the understanding that the world was divided into sacred and profane realms, and in the organisation of a moral community joined by beliefs and practices about the sacred. Perhaps desire to control the food supply inspired totem ceremonies, but these ceremonies became associated with the special realm of the sacred by virtue of their special, non-routine character, as well as in consequence of the emotional pleasures participants derived from them (which conduced to belief that they were practically effective). And totemism was just one expression of a general social pattern: all social groups mobilised around symbols of their collective unity, and the totem was the symbol of the clan, just as the flag was the symbol of the nation-state. Accepting Spencer and Gillen's assertion that Aboriginal peoples were ignorant of the mechanism of human reproduction, Durkheim understood totem ceremonies as both creation and expression of celebrants' feelings of kinship for one another—so that society itself was the object of their worship.<sup>60</sup> As he wrote in his own (unsigned) review of *Elementary Forms*, published in his journal, *L'Année sociologique*, 'religion thus understood appears as consisting above all of acts which have the object of perpetu-

ally making and remaking the soul of the collectivity and of individuals'.<sup>61</sup>

In 1909 Frazer took a position on the place of religion in society that was similar to Durkheim's. Durkheim and Frazer had to a degree defined their positions in opposition. Though Frazer established relationships with the Durkheimians and made sure that review copies of his works were sent to *L'Année sociologique*, over time Durkheim and members of his school grew highly critical of Frazer, so that Frazer considered himself misinterpreted by the Durkheimians—and took Durkheim to task for according Australian totemism the status of religion.<sup>62</sup> Nevertheless, the argument Frazer made in his 1909 *Psyche's Task*, and repeated in 1910 at the conclusion of *Totemism and Exogamy*, bore a family resemblance to Durkheim's (as well as to Freud's): though religion was a 'superstition', it had generally had a positive effect on the development of human institutions.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, in *Totemism and Exogamy*, Frazer intimated that he doubted that evolutionary progress was marked by progression through a series of cultural stages, each exhibiting a coherent pattern of interdependent features.<sup>64</sup> But the next generation of social thinkers—and generations to follow—would read Durkheim, not Frazer.

And of Durkheim's works, *Elementary Forms* has been judged the most important. It is, indeed, the most sacred of foundational, classic social scientific texts, a work that is still read by both anthropologists and sociologists—as well as others.<sup>65</sup> And I think it extremely significant that the book's subtitle was dropped from its English and German translations (the first of which appeared shortly after its publication), if not from its French re-is-

sues. By this token, *Elementary Forms* ceased to be a work about Australian totemism. It became a theoretical text—a book understood as Durkheim wished it understood, as a book about the essential characteristics of religion, which were identical for peoples everywhere, regardless of the material circumstances in which they lived. Thus, the status accorded *Elementary Forms* denoted a fundamental change in social scientific opinion, which had been effected through consideration of Australian Aboriginal religion: religious beliefs were no longer to be examined in order to gauge their adherents' level of evolution. And, in general, qualitative judgments about the relative evolutionary levels of the worlds' peoples would subsequently disappear from polite social scientific conversation. The practical impact of changed social scientific opinion is another matter, of course—a subject for a different paper.

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Spencer to Gladstone, 17 June 1877, in Gladstone Papers, British Library (GP) 44454; Spencer to Gladstone, 21 June 1879 and 23 June 1882, GP 44460.

<sup>2</sup> Note Gladstone's letter to *The Times*, December 1896, in GP 44785.

<sup>3</sup> Spencer to Gladstone, 14 January 1874, GP 44442.

<sup>4</sup> Herbert Spencer, *An Autobiography*, Otto Zeller, Osnabrück, 1966 [1904], Vol. 2, p. 254.

<sup>5</sup> See the proofs of December 1873, GP 44441, and 15 January 1874 and 20 January 1874, GP 44452.

<sup>6</sup> See Gladstone's draft letter to Spencer, 12 June 1874, GP 44442; the quotation is from one of Spencer's proofs, and the underlinings are those Spencer inked onto the copy he sent to Gladstone in December 1873, GP 44441.

<sup>7</sup> Herbert Spencer, 'Religion and science', in *First Principles*, New York, D. Appleton, 1892 [1860], p. 16.

- <sup>8</sup> Bernard Lightman, 'Victorian sciences and religions: Discordant harmonies', *Osiris*, Vol. 16, 2001, pp. 343–66.
- <sup>9</sup> George W. Stocking, Jr, *Victorian Anthropology*, New York, Free Press, 1987, pp. 190–97.
- <sup>10</sup> E. B. Tylor, 'Introduction', in Friedrich Ratzel, *The History of Mankind*, London, Macmillan, 1896, p. v.
- <sup>11</sup> Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within. The Social History of British Anthropology*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 72.
- <sup>12</sup> Robert A. Stafford, 'Annexing the landscapes of the past', in John M. MacKenzie (ed.) *Imperialism and the Natural World*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1990, pp. 81–2.
- <sup>13</sup> Ernst Haeckel, *The Last Link. Our Present Knowledge of the Descent of Man*, London, Adam and Charles Black, 1898, pp. 17–18.
- <sup>14</sup> John B. Watson, 'Psychology as the behaviorist views it', *The Psychological Review*, Vol. 20, 1913, p. 168.
- <sup>15</sup> Quoted in Martin S. Pernick, *The Black Stork*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1996, p. 59.
- <sup>16</sup> J. G. Frazer, 'The origin of totemism', *Fortnightly Review*, Vol. 71, January–June, 1899, p. 648.
- <sup>17</sup> William Howells, *Mankind So Far*, Garden City, New York, Doubleday and Company, 1947, pp. 191–92.
- <sup>18</sup> R. R. Marett, *Anthropology*, London, Williams and Norgate, 1912, pp. 39, 121.
- <sup>19</sup> Samuel Gason, *The Dieyerie Tribe of Australian Aborigines*, edited by George Isaacs, Adelaide, W. C. Cox, Government Printer, 1874, p. 11.
- <sup>20</sup> Hilary M. Carey, *Believing in Australia*, London, Allen and Unwin, 1996, pp. 29–30, 66–68.
- <sup>21</sup> B. T. (or C. G.) Tiechermann, *Illustrative and Explanatory Notes of the Manners, Customs, Habits, and Superstitions of the Natives of South Australia*, Committee of the South Australian Wesleyan Methodist Auxiliary Missionary Society for the German Mission to the Aborigines, 1841, Adelaide, pp. 5, 10.
- <sup>22</sup> R. Brough Smyth, *The Aborigines of Victoria*, Melbourne, John Ferres, Government Printer, 1878, Vol. 1, pp. liv, xxxiii, liv.
- <sup>23</sup> Rev. George Taplin, 'The Narrinyeri', in *The Native Tribes of South Australia*, E. S. Wigg and Son, Adelaide, 1879, p. 55.
- <sup>24</sup> See: Lorimer Fison, 1892, quoted in Russell McGregor, *Imagined Destinies: Aboriginal Australians and the Doomed Race Theory, 1880–1939*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 1997, p. 35; A. W. Howitt, *The Native Tribes of South-East Australia*, Macmillan, London, 1904, p. 507.
- <sup>25</sup> Moritz Freiherr von Leonhardi, 'Preface', in Carl Strehlow, *The Aranda and Lorita Tribes of Central Australia*, edited by von Leonhardi, Part 2, Municipal Ethnological Museum, Frankfurt am Main, 1908, unpublished translation by Hans D. Oberscheidt, 1991, in the possession of the Strehlow Research Center.
- <sup>26</sup> J. D. Woods, 'Introduction', *The Native Tribes of South Australia*, op. cit., p. xxxviii.
- <sup>27</sup> Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *The Northern Tribes of Central Australia* (hereafter *Northern Tribes*), Macmillan, London, 1904, p. xiv.
- <sup>28</sup> J. G. Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy*, Macmillan, London, 1910, Vol. 4, pp. 5, 27; Frazer, 'The beginnings of religion and totemism among the Australian Aborigines', *Fortnightly Review*, Vol. 84, 1905, p. 162; and see Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *Native Tribes of Central Australia* (hereafter *Native Tribes*), Macmillan, London, 1899, p. 170.
- <sup>29</sup> For one discussion of this issue, see Patrick Wolfe, *Settler Colonialism and the Transformation of Anthropology*, Cassell, London, 1999, pp. 9, 11.
- <sup>30</sup> Baldwin Spencer and F. J. Gillen, *Across Australia*, Macmillan, London, 1912, p. 300.
- <sup>31</sup> *Native Tribes*, p. 48.
- <sup>32</sup> That Spencer and Gillen's 'fully initiated' status was a pretense—as Howitt's had also been—did not escape at least one critic; von Leonhardi, 'Preface', in Strehlow, op. cit., Part 3, 1910. And see *Native Tribes*, p. v.
- <sup>33</sup> *Native Tribes*, pp. 25, 26, 46, 108–9; *Northern Tribes*, p. 74; *Native Tribes*, p. 11.
- <sup>34</sup> See A. A. Goldenweiser, 'The views of Andrew Lang and J. G. Frazer and E. Durkheim on totemism', *Anthropos*, Vol. 11, 1916, p. 953; Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, p. 260.
- <sup>35</sup> J. G. Frazer to George Macmillan, 22 April 1898, Macmillan Papers, British Library (MP) 55135.
- <sup>36</sup> J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, Macmillan, London, 1890, Vol. 2, p. 343.
- <sup>37</sup> J. G. Frazer to George Macmillan, 8 November 1889, MP 55134.
- <sup>38</sup> J. G. Frazer, 'The beginnings of religion and totemism among the Australian Aborigines', *Fortnightly Review*, Vol. 78, 1905, p. 455; and see *Native Tribes*, pp. 265, 356, 124.
- <sup>39</sup> Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy*, Vol. 4, p. 63.
- <sup>40</sup> For some early assessments of the importance of Spencer and Gillen's work, see reviews of *Native*

*Tribes*—H. Ling Roth, *Nature*, Vol. 59, 1899, pp. 511–2; W. W. Newell, *Journal of American Folk-Lore*, Vol. 13, 1900, pp. 72–5—reviews of *Northern Tribes*—C. H. R. (Charles Hercules Read), *Man*, Vol. 4, 1904, pp. 143–4; W. I. Thomas, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 10, 1905, 700–1; N. W. T. (Northcote W. Thomas), ‘The Spencer-Gillen expedition’, *Man*, Vol. 1, 1901, pp. 82–3; Bronislaw Malinowski, Review of *Across Australia*, *Folk-Lore*, Vol. 24, 1913, pp. 278–9; and see Steven Lukes, *Émile Durkheim*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 1973, p. 452 fn., which quotes Marcel Mauss’s 1900 enthusiastic review of *Native Tribes* in *L’Année sociologique*.

<sup>41</sup> Frazer acted to prevent the British Association for the Advancement of Science from sponsoring an expedition to Central Australia to check Spencer and Gillen’s findings; see J. L. Myres to J. G. Frazer, 14 March 1909, and Frazer to Myres, 16 March 1909, MS Myres 15, Bodleian Library, Oxford.

<sup>42</sup> Spencer and Gillen’s evidence figured prominently in Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, translated by Karen E. Fields, Free Press, New York, 1995 (orig. 1912), as well as in Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, translated by James Strachey, W. W. Norton, New York, 1950 (orig. 1913).

<sup>43</sup> E. Sidney Hartland, ‘Totemism and some recent discoveries’, *Folk-Lore*, Vol. 11, 1900, pp. 57–8; Folk-Lore Society, *Notes and Queries on Totemism*, David Nutt, London, 1901.

<sup>44</sup> Andrew Lang, ‘J. G. Frazer’s “Totemism and Exogamy”’, *Anthropos*, Vol. 5, 1910, pp. 1092–1108; Lang, 1898, quoted in George W. Stocking, Jr, *After Tylor*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1995, p. 59.

<sup>45</sup> See E. S. Hartland, ‘The “high gods” of Australia’, *Folk-Lore*, Vol. 9, 1898, pp. 290–329.

<sup>46</sup> See Edward B. Tylor, ‘Remarks on totemism, with especial reference to some modern theories respecting it’, *Journal of the Anthropological Institute*, Vol. 28, 1898, pp. 138–48; see also R. R. Marett, *Tylor*, John Wiley and Sons, New York, 1936, p. 156, fn; Stocking, *After Tylor*, pp. 42–4.

<sup>47</sup> For Frazer’s cultivation of his German-speaking audience, see his letters to George Macmillan: 5 October 1890, MP 55134, 4 June 1898, MP 55135, 26 December 1902, MP 55135.

<sup>48</sup> Lang, loc. cit.

<sup>49</sup> Others included Bernhard Ankermann, Leo Frobenius, Fritz Graebner, and Father Wilhelm Koppers.

<sup>50</sup> Wilhelm Schmidt, *Primitive Revelation* (a compilation of Schmidt’s writings produced from 1912 on-

wards), B. Herder Book Company, London, 1939, pp. 108, 120.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 69, 107, 21, 121; and see pp. 100–5, 162, 214–5, 286.

<sup>52</sup> F. B. Jevons, ‘The place of totemism in the evolution of religion’, *Folk-Lore*, Vol. 10, 1899, p. 371.

<sup>53</sup> See E. S. Hartland, ‘Australian gods: Rejoinder’, *Folk-Lore*, Vol. 10, 1899, p. 48; Lord Avebury (John Lubbock), *Marriage, Totemism and Religion*, Longmans, Green, London, 1911, p. 19; *Native Tribes*, p. 108.

<sup>54</sup> Freud, op. cit., pp. 3–4, fn., italics his; and see Bronislaw Malinowski, ‘Totemism and exogamy’, in *The Early Writings of Bronislaw Malinowski*, eds Robert J. Thornton and Peter Skalník, translated by Ludwik Krzyzanowski, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993 [1911], esp. p. 280, fn. 18.

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Brian Morris, *Anthropological Studies of Religion*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 1987, p. 71.

<sup>56</sup> Freud, op. cit., p. 1 and see footnote on p. 4.

<sup>57</sup> W. H. R. Rivers, ‘The terminology of totemism’, *Anthropos*, Vol. 9, 1914, p. 640.

<sup>58</sup> John R. Swanton, ‘The social and the emotional element in totemism’, *Anthropos*, Vol. 9, 1914, p. 290; see also pp. 291–5, 297.

<sup>59</sup> Durkheim, op. cit., pp. 88, 85.

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*, p. 55.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Lukes, op. cit., p. 471.

<sup>62</sup> See Durkheim, op. cit., p. 88; Robert Ackerman, *J. G. Frazer: His Life and Work*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1987, p. 165; Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy*, Vol. 4, p. 100. For Frazer’s efforts to reach a French audience, see J. G. Frazer to George Macmillan, 2 May 1901, and 26 December 1902, MP 55135; Frazer to Macmillan, 26 May 1906, MP 55136.

<sup>63</sup> See Frazer, *Totemism and Exogamy*, Vol. 4, p. 169.

<sup>64</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 59–60.

<sup>65</sup> Philip Smith and Jeffrey C. Alexander, ‘Durkheim’s religious revival’, *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 102, 1996, pp. 585–91.