

Chapter 10. Summary and conclusion; envoy

10.1. Summary and conclusion

This book may be read at two different though complementary levels. I will briefly discuss them serially.

10.1.1. Merits and demerits of *Les Formes* as a social-scientific theory of religion

In the first place, this book is a sustained argument on the merits and demerits of the most influential religion theory of the social sciences – Durkheim's *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse* (1912). At this level, the interdisciplinary nature of my approach is manifest. Starting out as a philosopher profoundly trained in the French and German philosophy of his time yet ending up as a Founding Father of sociology, Durkheim traversed a trajectory opposite from that of myself – I who, almost a century later, started out as a social scientist and ended up as a philosopher (without totally giving up my earlier passion for the empirical social sciences). Before assessing Durkheim's religion theory, and especially the place of the paired concepts *sacred / profane* therein, I try to situate him (Part I), not only in the context of the extensive critical debate around his work among social scientists and philosophers in the course of the past 120 years, but also in his philosophical (conservative, anti-individualist, idealist) and religious (Jewish / agnostic / atheist) milieu, all of which turns out to have exerted fairly decisive influences on his theoretical position-taking. This orientation made him uncritically depart from a logocentric, transcendence-centred view of religion without realising that, in space and time (worldwide, and across the several million years of human history), logocentrism (in brief: the socio-cultural package of writing, the state, organised religion and proto-

science) has been very much a minority option. Around 1900 CE, at the height of Durkheim's career, the social sciences including anthropology were going through their formative years. Ethnographic methods especially the insistence on prolonged fieldwork with day-to-day exposure to the host society and with very considerable levels of mastery of their language and culture, were still in the process of establishing themselves as the disciplinary norm. Beyond abstract textual acquaintance, personal practical experience of societies outside Europe was very limited among the scholars writing on religion at the time, and any awareness of the decisive theoretical and comparative relevance of such societies for humankind as a whole was even more limited. For, the turn of the 20th century CE marked the height, not only of the capitalist mode of production in its most classic form, but particularly of European expansion in the trappings of imperialism, colonialism and racism. Under such circumstances, Durkheim's felicitous methodological choices (even though handicapped by the absence of the slightest personal experience with living religion outside Western Europe) were truly amazing. Determined to explore the 'elementary forms of religious life' not just by thought experiments but by a painstaking empirical argument based on state-of-the-art ethnographic facts,⁴⁷⁶ and only after a preparatory period of more than one and a half decades in which he read, interpreted, and wrote part studies on, all the ethnographic materials that were then being published on the Australian Aboriginals and on totemism in general, Durkheim wrote his book on the sociology of religion with masterly control of the data; with obvious skill and confidence; with the benefit of his international colleagues's critical reactions to the preparatory instalments that he had already published in the meantime; and with a liberating lack of the Eurocentrism, evolutionism let alone racism that otherwise marred much of the anthropological output of his time. *An exemplary social sociologist was about to end his career with (what in the pre-fieldwork phase of anthropology could be considered) an exemplary research design, exemplarily executed. Whatever the inevitable shortcomings of Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse, it certainly has the makings of a masterpiece in terms of scope, profundity, empirical underpinning, and universalising orientation.*

Thus amply prepared, we set out, in Part II, to assess the continuing utility of what Durkheim cherished as the alleged central concepts of any religion: the opposition between *sacred* and *profane*. Along a number of converging paths (immanent criticism of Durkheim's own conceptualisations and operationalisations; considerations of such criticisms as were levelled against Durkheim's approach by prominent social scientists both in the theoretical field and in the specialist field of Australian ethnography; a brief consideration of structuralism; the – probably – specifically Jewish roots of the paired concepts), Part II leads to a dismissive conclusion: *whatever the overall theoretical merits of*

⁴⁷⁶ Let us assume for a moment that it is meaningful to speak of ethnographic facts instead of literary fictions of a genre called ethnography; cf. Clifford & Marcus 1986.

Durkheim's religion theory, the paired concepts sacred / profane cannot be considered a universal aspect of all religions nor the backbone of all societies – let alone that this pair could continue to constitute a lasting and heuristically valuable part of the social-scientific toolkit for the 21st century CE.

However, having liberated ourselves, with this negative conclusion, from a burden which the present writer, for one, has been carrying for over fifty years, this ushers in an altogether opposite movement, that of *the empirical vindication of Durkheim's religion theory*, which takes up most of this book's space, and justifiably features in its subtitle. Two main lines of approach are followed towards the aim of empirical vindication:

- A. In the first place such empirical tests as may be derived from the application of Durkheim's religion theory in concrete ethnographic settings. Three such settings are being offered in the course of Part III of this book:
 - a. the amazing, very detailed, *convergence of shrines and societal segments in the highlands of North-western Tunisia*, which illustrates in detail Durkheim's claim (even though it is more metaphysical than empirical-scientific) that it is the social group which is being venerated as the object of religion
 - b. *the solution to the problem of intrinsic sacrality* which – considering Durkheim's absolute rejection of the idea – offers an important test case of his theory, and again one that, with proper modifications, vindicates the latter
 - c. the ramifications and contradictions of *transcendence among the Nkoya people (hunters and petty farmers) of rural Western Zambia*, in a context which admittedly does greatly differ from that of the Australian Aboriginals, yet is eminently relevant in the sense that, also among the Nkoya, logocentricity is far less developed than in the society Durkheim took for granted (*i.e.* West European industrial urban society c. 1900 CE); in a low-logocentricity society like that of the Nkoya, can religion still play the social role here which Durkheim attributed to it, or is his theory implicitly confined to high levels of logocentricity? *Again the answer here is positive, in other words, vindictory.*
- B. In the second place, *substantiation by projecting Durkheim's views of the 'elementary forms of religious life' far back into the distant past, and assessing through long-range methodologies how the theoretical contents of concepts and beliefs as framed in Durkheim's theory, tally with the empirical historical reality on the ground.* This leg of the vindication process takes up Part IV. It requires the extensive introduction of long-range methods in linguistics and Comparative Mythology, after a

lengthy critical discussion of current debates within religious archaeology (in a bid to show that that subject is not in a position to answer, by its own impetus, the long-range historical questions which Durkheim's theory poses, since religious archaeology tends to tacitly rely on cultural analogies which cannot be ascertained by archaeological means alone, but which necessarily require the contribution from comparative ethnography, linguistics and Comparative Mythology). Part IV takes up nearly half of this book's main text, it frequently stops to consider the trajectory already covered and the trajectory still ahead of the reader, and moreover the argument there is too technical and too complex to lend itself to ready summarising here. *Our initial misgivings concerning sacred / profane are once more confirmed from this long-range linguistic perspective. On the other hand, the fundamental significance of the moral, i.e. good-vs.-evil dimension of religion emerges as a serendipity! And the setback concerning sacred / profane is amply compensated by the amazing confirmation of Durkheim's intuitions on many other points, concerning the soul, spirit, prohibition, purity, altered states of consciousness, perhaps divination, as aspects of elementary forms of religious life. By and large, the vindication attained in Part III is continued and sustained in Part IV, which confirms Durkheim's genius to an extent I myself certainly did not expect when setting out to write this book after half a century of grappling with Les Formes.*

10.1.2. *This book's implicit levels of methodology and thematic orientation*

Underneath the specific discursive and empirical arguments that make up the surface content of this book, what may particularly strike the reader are the, predominantly non-sociological, undercurrents of my argument.

This concerns in the first place the considerable place accorded to philosophy, as a major inspiration of Durkheim and as the proper domain of Durkheim's intellectual achievements. As the philosopher Anne Rawls has insisted, it is Durkheim's social epistemology, more than his religious sociology, that constitutes his claim to lasting fame. In the present book, the attention for philosophy shades over into one for the History of Ideas, and as a result a great many discussions and commentaries are packed into the argument with (I hope) a relevance rather beyond the immediate case of Durkheim's last book. Rich in observations and references, often to less current literature in a wide variety of subjects, I have preferred to spare these many mini-essays the inevitable fate of footnotes (*i.e.: not being read*), and therefore have issued them with short descriptive titles, distinctively lettered consecutive numbering (of the format: #12, #13), and a separate section in the *Table of Contents*. Of course, similar, more or less extensive general discussions are scattered all over the main text of the book, but these mini-essays, contrary to the footnotes, are easily identified in the final section of the extensive *Table of Contents*, and need no further signalling.

In the background there is, persistently throughout this book, the confrontation (hopefully stimulating and inspiring, but perhaps disqualifyingly off-putting and depressing) with my own unusual perspective on the social sciences, philosophy, world history, the diversity of humankind yet the latter's fundamental unity. In my transition (mid-1990s CE, towards the final third of my career) from empirical social science to intercultural philosophy, I have had to reconsider my analytical position and the (fairly hegemonic, Eurocentric and logocentric) prerogatives on which my scientific research had been naïvely based until then – by virtue of the academic training I had received, and of the disciplinary, paradigmatic and peer-group pressures I was under. I have often and at length given accounts of this autocritical process (e.g. 2003a, 2015b), have also made several passing allusions to it in the course of the present book, and do not need to repeat myself here.

On the positive side, what is essentially at stake is *a vision of coherence and unity*. In recent decades, molecular genetics, long-range linguistics, Comparative Mythology and comparative ethnography have shown us that underneath the (often politically, ethnically, religiously and academically engineered and manipulated) *appearance* of extreme fragmentation of humankind and its products in myriad tiny constituent parts, there is a massive undercurrent of *unity*, which makes that in the last analysis every specific item of language, culture and religion, no matter how much proclaiming its independence, irreducibility, originality, and authenticity *vis-à-vis* all others, is yet connected with every other item, within a geographic scope that ultimately spans the entire earth (and is about to take off into space), and within a temporal scope that goes back into the remotest Lower Palaeolithic (and from there even further down through the animal and mineral kingdoms – if such an expression would not smack too much of antiquarianism à la *The Great Chain of Being*; Lovejoy 1978 / 1936). This insight is the ultimate fruit of ever more intensified research of the last few centuries, is sufficiently documented (to some extent, albeit mainly secondarily, even in the present book), and need not be substantiated here.

At this point, a comparison with modern physics may be illuminating. Even though by now nearly a century separates us from Einstein, Planck, Schrödinger, Heisenberg, de Broglie, Dirac, Born, Pauli, and other great innovators of our world picture from the early 20th c. CE, yet the apparently self-evident, common-sense worldview taken for granted by even highly educated inhabitants of the North Atlantic region and its dependencies, still continues to rely (e.g. in all the myriad everyday tacit assumptions underlying people's experience of reality, and especially in such specific points as the denial and ridicule of telepathy, of veridical prediction in divination, of faith healing, of psychokinesis etc.) on the obsolescent mechanistic physics which was dominant throughout the 19th c. CE. Based upon Newton's genius, classic physics still appears to work at the human scale when measured in metres, seconds and kilogrammes, and by the order of magnitude and locomotion speed of the human body, *because at that meso level the subtle boundary conditions of relativity and quantum mechanics*

attending the excessively macro-level and the excessively micro-level do not yet produce obvious effects observable to the naked eye. The commonly accepted consensus about the structure and functioning of the world always lags behind several decades, even centuries, as compared to the topical insights attained by specialists at the frontiers of science. Let us now take these natural-science lessons and apply them to the socio-cultural sciences of our time. It then becomes conceivable that, even if the socio-cultural world picture underlying this book seems counter-paradigmatic, this does not necessarily mean that it is invalid. The insights it leads to are certainly interesting, innovating, and very carefully, not to say exhaustively, grounded in the very wide range of such empirical data as are within the present author's reach – , mediated by a vast body of scientific literature (also thanks to recent digital facilities worldwide).

This book therefore, beyond even a sustained argument on Durkheim's religion theory, is a demonstrative application of the new, coherent and all-encompassing world picture that is now emerging. It stresses the fundamental unity (despite obvious differences in genetic, linguistic and socio-cultural attributes) of all humankind through space and time, and allows us to look back in cultural history and in the history of thought, to a depth and with a precision that only decades ago we would still have considered sheer science fiction. The accumulating reinforcement of that overall picture which its application throughout the present book brings us, is – I think – more important even than the specific vindication of Durkheim's theory, and more important than our specific finding that theistic religion emerged in the Central Branch of desintegrating *Borean (among the proto-speakers of Sinotibetan, Eurasiatic, and Afroasiatic), probably in Western Eurasia, less than 25 ka ago. In particular, the essentialising of Australian Aboriginals as globally isolated primitives lost in space and time, is confronted with extensive discussions (especially in Chapter 2) of their Old-World cultural continuities, *e.g.* in divination and mythology.

But the emerging world picture it is not a neutral one, based once for all on a claim (an illusion) of scientific objectivity. Changing from scientific (scientistic...) anthropology to intercultural philosophy, for me has in the first place meant: *reflection on the prerogatives and pretensions, possibilities and impossibilities, of intercultural knowledge formation across social, cultural and geographic boundaries.* Where I most admire Durkheim is not in his identification and analysis of the 'elementary forms of religious life' (even though his merits on this point, as brought out by the present book, are manifest and impressive), but in his visionary capability of breaking free from White, North Atlantic, elite privilege,⁴⁷⁷ and demonstrating what he took to be the essence of religion and of society on specific local socio-cultural forms (those of the Australian Aboriginals) which, in his time, were among the most despised and marginalised on earth – a situation that, as far as the original inhabitants of Australia are concerned, has only marginally improved in the century that has since passed. The growth of social theory was not yet sufficiently advanced

⁴⁷⁷ Alas, the time was not yet ripe for him to fully shed a masculine bias! *cf.* Lehmann 1994.

for Durkheim to vocally adopt an actor's frame of reference and a thoroughly emic perspective, but at least he allowed himself to be guided by considerations of *cognitive, epistemological charity* (i.e. 'taking something seriously because *the other* takes it seriously'). In the meantime – after our movement, in the course of the 20th c. CE, through cultural relativism, decolonisation, human rights, globalisation, and counter-hegemonic conscientisation – cognitive charity has become a cornerstone of intercultural philosophy. One can barely believe that Durkheim never set foot in Australia and never shared a hunt, a meal, a bed, an annual ceremony, a famine, a local ritual with its historical inhabitants. One can remain dismissive of his paired concepts *sacred / profane*, sceptical of his utterly transcendent and anti-utilitarian theory of symbolism, shocked by his dogged insistence upon the *reality* of religion (as a proclaimed epiphany of *the social*, of all possible referents); one may even be profoundly disturbed by his obsolete, corporatist, potentially fascist and totalitarian suspicion of the individual as against his total, unconditional championing of the social and the collective – entirely overlooking the dark sides of manipulative power games, group violence, genocide etc. Let us regret his lack of identity self-reflexivity which prevented him from realising the striking Jewishness of his entire approach to religion, history, the *sacred*, and sacrifice. *Yet in taking other modes of thought as seriously as possible, and in trying to think them through to their utmost consequences, Durkheim was surprisingly, admirably, innovatively modern, committed, enlightened, intercultural, and a shining beacon to any student of human thought, society and history.*

10.1.3. Apologies and disclaimer: *The dangers of interdisciplinarity and of homelessness*

Ever since the late 1990s I have participated in the *Black Athena* debate as initiated by the late lamented Martin Gardiner Bernal. I have repeatedly published critical assessments of his work (van Binsbergen 1997b / 2011a; 2013b). I have demonstrated not to be blind to his considerable errors of method, perspective, and fact, yet I have gone out of my way to defend him because his merits have far outweighed his peccadilloes. Of course I realise that the methodological and transdisciplinary license he took, has informed my own approach in the last few decades, and has had a negative effect on my own academic credibility. Again I think that the gains outweigh the losses, but let me try to make my position clear to the sceptical, firmly paradigmatic specialist reader. Disciplines and paradigms are too firmly anchored in national and global power structures than that I can hope to bring them in motion, with the present book, or with my latest half-dozen of books. But the least I may hope to achieve is to instill the reader with an awareness that the many shortcomings of this book are due, not in the first place to my (admittedly considerable) ignorance, incompetence, laziness and incipient senility, but to my deliberate and studied choices in the global politics of knowledge.

With all the boundary-effacing transgressions and ambitions that lie at the root of the methodologies developed and applied in the present book, it admittedly often

becomes difficult to acquire and maintain a professional, disciplinary, paradigmatic standard by which to decide on right or wrong; truth or falsehood; empirically grounded conclusion of science-fiction fantasy; state-of-the-art knowledge or second-rate, obsolescent transdisciplinary appropriations for which our Internet Age is so notorious; clever criticism or recalcitrant hypercritique. No doubt, specialists (including philosophers, even anthropologists) will find many examples of all these ills throughout this book – however much I have tried to avoid such shortcomings. I regret them, but I am not ashamed of them. One cannot very well move towards a new paradigm without failing in the light of an earlier paradigm. I have done my best. The present argument is the best I could produce, given my limited resources of time and health, the nearly total absence of any institutional assistance or support in research and editing, and the intellectual and communicative isolation in which the nature of my argument – at the same time highly specialised and interdisciplinary, an impossible contradiction – has irretrievably plunged me *vis-à-vis* my colleagues. Even so, writing the present book was a great adventure, and one that I would not have missed for the world. It prevented me, once more, from attending to the considerable number of book manuscripts that have been sitting for years on my computers ready for publication, and instead to write something totally new again, exciting, revealing.

In *Intercultural Encounters*, my first major book as an intercultural philosopher rather than anthropologist, the following illuminating passage occurs (2003a: 198):

‘...This indicates the central tragedy of the classic anthropologist, the one who in the course of years of intensive fieldwork acquires the language and the customs so as to be able to understand and describe another culture as if from the inside. According to a sixteenth-century CE source⁴⁷⁸ there was, among the possessions of the Viking king Svyatoslav in ninth-century Kiev (south-western Russia), a drinking vessel made from a human skull mounted in gold; it bore an inscription:

‘In search of the exotic he lost what was more his own than anything else’

– his skull, and hence his life. This is a lesson that eminently applies to classic anthropologists. Their fieldwork commitment means that they die, at least figuratively, in their own original culture, in order that they may live in their adopted host culture; but can they still go back home? The idea of ‘dying in order to live’, while having acquired Orphic, Dionysian and subsequently Christian overtones, goes back at least to the agrarian cults of Osiris and of Dumuzi in the Ancient Near East as attested from the late third millennium BCE.⁴⁷⁹ We are also reminded of Victor Turner, one of the greatest anthropologists of the twentieth century, who towards the end of his life contemplated the idea of the ‘*thrice-born anthropologist*’: originally born in her own culture, then reborn into a different culture through fieldwork, and finally taking the lessons learned in that other culture back home for a renewed insight, a third birth, in

⁴⁷⁸ Schreiber n.d. (*original footnote*).

⁴⁷⁹ On Dumuzi (Tammuz, Adonis), cf. Frazer 1914; Jacobsen 1970; Scurlock 1992. On the Osiris cult: Barta 1978; Bianchi 1971; Bonnet 1971; Budge 1973; Cooke 1931; Griffiths 1980, 1975-1986; Helck 1962; Hopfner 1940; Otto 1966; Scharff 1948. (*original footnote*).

her culture of origin.⁴⁸⁰ In the South Asian religious tradition, it is having completed a major sacrifice that causes a person to be considered at least *twice-born*...

Never quite at home in my native Dutch culture and society (not so much for some in-born romanticism, and not even because of the transnational orientation of my family ties, but mainly because of devastating family dramas in my own childhood and throughout our anterior family history) I did passionately embrace the cultures and societies of my serial fieldwork locations, repeatedly made huge socio-cultural, psychological, and linguistic investments to acquire whatever I needed to pass more or less as a member of the host society. And thanks to the immensely welcoming, accommodating and tolerant attitude of my hosts, I was to some extent reborn there – not, needless to say, in all the ephemeral sites summed up in an early footnote in this book, but certainly in the sites that I would frequent and work on for decades: in Hjumiriyya, Tunisia; among the Nkoya, Zambia; and among the *sangomas* of Northeast Botswana and adjacent countries. My subsequent vagrancy from academic discipline to academic discipline, to which the present book testifies again, has meant that, back in Western Europe, I was never effectively thrice-born but instead became almost an African exile there, engaging in an African worldview and in magical practices, whilst – beyond my African *Wahlverwantschaften* ('elective affinities' – von Goethe 1809 / 1879) – I was meaningfully and gratifyingly tied only to: the family home I had established with my second wife Patricia, to my five children, to my library, computers, paraphernalia, shrines, and to my scholarly and academic writing – but not tied to a class, a nation, a religious movement, a country, a Northern continent, net even to 'a distant northern land' (Nabokov 1962 – vicariously and fictitiously writing on 'Zembla'). In the process I seem to have somewhat contributed to the rehabilitation of the position of Africa and Africans in the global politics of knowledge. But I must seriously consider the possibility that in the same process, like Svyatoslav's victim, *I lost my head*, in the sense of no longer being able to produce recognisably sound, paradigmatic, mainstream academic writing, and instead being condemned to produce texts that despite all their system, erudition, meticulous editing and tightening, painstaking checking and referencing, originality, flashes of erudite insight and flights of the imagination (if I may say so of my own work), yet fail to convince, not only because of the many factual errors and one-sidednesses they inevitably contain, but especially because even in our globalising world they are still counter-paradigmatic: they are built around a deeply felt and broadly documented awareness of humankind's fundamental unity, around the idea that we all radically share one space and one history, in ways that are increasingly open to systematic, intersubjective research.

If despite these shortcomings, of which I am only too clearly aware, the tutored, scholarly reader for whom this book is intended, still finds anything of value in it, I will be sufficiently rewarded. If the counter-paradigmatic vision that underlies this book and most of my other recent ones, can gain some support through my specific vindication of Durkheim, I will be more than thrilled. Ultimately, through whatever means (whose ontology I need not spell out here; given time, I will do so elsewhere), Durkheim's shade may have inklings of my work; and even though this book constitutes – in terms of

⁴⁸⁰ V.W. Turner, personal communication, 20 September, 1979. (*original footnote*).

time, resources, commitment, and health – a very substantial sacrifice, I have sacrificed to lesser ancestors in my lifetime, and with less reward.

10.2. Envoy: The reality of religion, but beyond Durkheim

When, nearly forty years ago, I wrote the introduction to my first major scholarly book *Religious Change in Zambia* (1979 / 1981), I was suddenly filled with misgivings. I had been writing, passionately, theoretically and innovatingly, about African religion, in which I had often participated and which had struck me as being among my research associates's profoundest existential expressions – but had my apparently reductionist, Marxist approach to ecological cults, royal cults, ecstatic cults of affliction, witchcraft eradication movements and Lenshina's tragic Independent African Church, brought me and the reader any closer to those existential dimensions – or had my argument merely trivialised them and obscured them from consciousness behind layers of estranging academic textuality? My answer then was to take recourse in the truism that religion is history and history religion – perhaps the beginning of a more empathic, less deconstructivist and less altering attitude towards African religion, a first step on the path towards the African diviner-healer-priest I was to become a decade later, and the inter-cultural philosopher I was to become after yet another decade.

Much in the same way, I still feel rather dissatisfied with the results, summarised in the preceding section, which over half a century of grappling with Durkheim's religion theory have brought me. Vindicating the classic religion theory by one of the greatest social scientists of all time – should that not have yielded far more fundamental insights than summarised so far – insights into the very essence of religion and into what it is to be human? Durkheim's own answers seemed to be of a sufficiently encompassing scope: *the essence of religion is that it allows us, brings us, to submit to the social, and thus makes human social life possible without which we could not be human*. However, although specific sociological hypotheses may be derived from Durkheim's theory, and although I did subject several of such hypotheses to empirical testing and – somewhat to my surprise – have confirmed them (Parts III and IV of his book), it is my conviction (both as an empirical scientist and as a philosopher) that the very statement italicised 5 lines up, does not belong to the realm of empirical social science, and is just as incapable of being empirically tested as the question as to the existence of God. It is in fact the same question.

I suspect that the enthusiasm which *Les Formes* has seldom failed to kindle in its readers, has much to do with its tacit and illicit yet apparently permissible smuggling of metaphysical claims, into a realm that had hitherto grown impervious and inimical to such claims: notably, the field of science. And that contraband came with all the attending existential hopes against all hopes, in a world where by general agreement God was dead.⁴⁸¹

⁴⁸¹ God had died in Nietzsche's works, several decades before *Les Formes* were published; but in fact – as Nietzsche could not help being aware, as a classicist; and as we have seen two foot-

My own personal solution to this dilemma (is it not the central dilemma of signification, of the creation of meaning, in the North Atlantic region and its dependencies ever since the Enlightenment?) has been to ironically accept the role of diviner-healer-priest, and to continue to identify with and discharge that role, even long after the initial commitment brought about by the cultic and initiatory brainwashing I had undergone had worn out. I playfully continued in my African role even though I fully realised that the spiritual beings venerated in the cult I served had no independent existence of their own, but were merely brought to life (and most effectively and undeniably so, as I experienced time and time again during my divining and healing activities) as a result of our human cultic actions. *I began to realise that religion is an amazing technology, difficult to master and to control yet often undeniable in its effects, for accessing and channeling the creative and communicative powers of the Universe as a whole.* And I began to design an ontology that would be commensurate to these shocking findings which came my way in the course of nearly thirty years of ironic ritual practice.

As a poet, a social scientist, a practising diviner-healer, and an intercultural philosopher, I did find inspiration for what I consider more satisfactory answers to my existential question, and I found it way outside the logocentric, upper middle-class, academic realm where Durkheim, and I myself, lived our adult lives. Presenting these answers, explaining how I arrived at them and why I take them more or less seriously, requires another book – and probably a different readership than the one that has (hopefully) followed me throughout the preceding four hundred pages of academic prose, to this point. That other book has already been a few years in the making, it is provisionally entitled *Sangoma Science, or The Reality of Religion*. I am tempted to take the risk of losing my academic audience, and to present a short preview here.⁴⁸²

‘10.2.1. Thinking about God and the universe

‘It were better to have no opinion of God at all than such an opinion as is unworthy of him.’ Francis Bacon, ‘Of superstition’, 1612 / 1625; Bacon 1852: 49.

...I am not in the least saying that it is nonsense to reflect on the existence or non-existence of God and on the meaning or lack of meaning of the universe. I have considered these questions all my life, during my devout Roman Catholic childhood, my loss of faith during adolescence, my passion for the natural sciences and for evolution, as a poet and novelist, during my periods as an existentialist and Marxist, in my becoming an anthropologist of African religion, an African diviner-healer-priest, and an intercul-

notes up – dying gods were common mythical matter in Ancient West Asia and Ancient Egypt; cf. Moret 1927-1932; Frazer 1906; Budge 1973 / 1911; Cooke 1931; etc.

⁴⁸² What follows is an excerpt from van Binsbergen 2018: an excessively long, and unexpectedly positive, review of Dan Brown’s masterly recent achievement in the field of science fiction: *Origin* (2017), in which the focus is on the debate between (popularised, media-appropriated) science and modern organised religion about creation, notably the origin of life on Earth.

tural philosopher. But as a result of this preoccupation for much longer than half a century, I have now come to the insight that we need a totally different logic to pose, debate, and answer, such questions.

The question whether God exists, is meaningless; so is the assertion that it / she / he does, or does not, exist. Such questions belong to the realm of binary oppositions in the attribution of truth and falsehood – a realm which scholarship has carved out ever since the creation of Aristotelian binary logic, but which is utterly insufficient to address the most fundamental existential questions humankind is facing. God exists and does not exist at the same time. God is dead, and (because of our own ritual actions, prayers, myths, offerings) is alive and kicking at the same time. God coincides and does not coincide with the material universe. Therefore

- life⁴⁸³ was *both* created out of lifeless matter by special divine intervention,
- *and* emerged from lifeless matter by the sheer play of natural laws governing matter, more or less, since the beginning of time.

By the same token, the Huygens-Newton debate over the true nature of light, either corpuscular or wave-like, ended in a draw: light is both, but now the corpuscular, now the wave element is more conspicuous to the human observer. This appears to be worlds away from the most basic quality of man-made symbols: the essence of a symbol is that it refers to an aspect of reality – yet also in this connection the same ambiguity obtains, for at the same time the symbol may occasionally and temporarily detach itself from that referent and take on independent life of its own. The first achievement in the invention of the transistor was a compact electronic switch which, without qualitative changes, could ‘flip-flop’ i.e. serially assume two essentially different and incompatible positions. Human life, thought, myth, culture, the interaction of cultures, human’s interspecies interaction with other life forms, life’s interaction with other material forms, the universe at large, may be seen as one continuous, immense complex circuit of such switches. The binary opposition is a great and relatively recent achievement of human thought and language, and has become the principal tool of scientific thought, but at the same time it is utterly artificial and deceptive: as can be demonstrated from the oldest reconstructed human language forms, those of the so-called *Borean language of the Upper Palaeolithic; and as has recently been stressed by post-structuralist philosophers especially Derrida, every given always carries inside itself, by implication, the very opposite of its contents.⁴⁸⁴ Considering both the contradictions and the interconnections of our human experience, the only way to conceive of a coherent and credible universe is by making allowance for all possible alternatives at the same time, contradictory and mutually exclusive as these alternatives may appear to be. So both Kirsch (the agnostic, Faustian protagonist in Dan Brown’s *Origin*) and his devout religious opponents are right, but neither can afford (for fear of annihilating the proper ground on which their own respective stand is based) to explain the underlying meta-logical mechanism, tell us why this joint applicability of apparently irreconcilable

⁴⁸³ The question as to the origin of life is at the heart of Dan Brown’s book and hence of my 2018 review of it.

⁴⁸⁴ Derrida 1967. On these issues, cf. van Binsbergen 2012d, 2015b; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011 – the operative concept is ‘range semantics’ as discussed there; and sporadic discussion of the same topic in the present book.

opposites should at all be the case; and neither side can firmly establish his truth as a result of scientific truth-finding procedures.

e 1 List of the principal propositions of Darwin's theory, extracted from the *Origin of Species* (Darwin 1859, 1872)

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1. Supernatural acts of the Creator are incompatible with empirical facts of nature
 2. All life evolved from one or few simple kinds of organisms
 3. Species evolve from pre-existing varieties by means of natural selection
 4. The birth of a species is gradual and of long duration
 5. Higher taxa (genera, families etc.) evolve by the same mechanisms as those responsible for the origin of species
 6. The greater the similarities among taxa, the more closely they are related evolutionarily and the shorter their divergence time from a last common ancestor
 7. Extinction is primarily the result of interspecific competition
 8. The geological record is incomplete: the absence of transitional forms between species and higher taxa is due to gaps in our current knowledge
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Not only were theologians his first and most critical interlocutors; also Darwin himself made theological pronouncements a pivotal element of his evolutionary statements, like in the first line of the above table (derived from Kutschera & Niklas 2004: 256). Further textual analysis is needed before it can be ascertained precisely why, for the self-made philosopher Darwin, 'supernatural acts of the Creator are incompatible with empirical facts of nature'; cf. Darwin 1859: 167). It would probably be more prudent, and more convincing, to say: 'attempted explanations in terms of supernatural acts of the Creator exist on a different plane from explanations grounded in empirical facts of nature, and therefore the two kinds cannot be considered to be mutually exclusive'.

Table 10.1. The theological dimension of Darwin's theory of evolution was conspicuous from the very beginning

I have recently bundled much of my life's work in religious anthropology (van Binsbergen 2017a), but that has been only the first leg in a more ambitious trajectory. One of my principal current writing projects is a book *The Reality of Religion*, also with the working title *Sangoma Science*, in which I seek to set out what I have learned from a life in which I have continuously straddled religious situations in Europe and Africa. If God can both exist and not exist at the same time, and if this seems to sum up the essence of religion, we may perhaps go one step beyond this already unusual and audacious position. In the prospective book I dwell on my extensive experiences as a Southern African *sangoma* (diviner-priest) since 1990 (many of these experiences have already been extensively described in van Binsbergen 1991, 2003a). Although I bring to these experiences my academic expertise as an internationally operating anthropologist of religion, and although the distancing debunking / deconstruction of religious beliefs was an implicit principle in religious anthropology during most of the hundred years of its existence, I was in for a very big surprise. Of course I knew full well that the powers of clairvoyance, divination and healing (not to speak of even more contentious claims such as levitation, bilocality, asity⁴⁸⁵ and other such extreme mystic achievements or claimed achievements) that are supposed to be the ancestors' gift to the *sangoma* as their chosen representative on earth, constitute a mere fantasy, performatively enacted so as to attract clients and to address their existential problems with imaginative but essentially invalid answers. Yet it has yet been my frequently repeated experience that when acting *ex officio* as the ordained and initiated *sangoma* that I have been since 1991, donning my ceremonial robes, wearing my strings of beads and casting my divination tablets which had been consecrated in the blood of my sacrificial animals, these

⁴⁸⁵ Levitation is the ability to scorn gravity and suspend one's body in the air without any physical supports; bilocality is the ability to be in two different places at the same time and interact there demonstrably with other humans; asity is the ability to live without food for a considerable time, exceeding normal limits. All have been common claims in the esoteric accounts of the lives of sages, mystics, saints and sorcerers, on a near-global scale.

powers which could not exist, would turn out to be at my disposal – I could heal, and I could make veridical pronouncements about clients and the details of their lives about which I had no previous ordinary sensory-based knowledge. The conclusion I reluctantly draw from this confusing lot is that the supernatural beings that do not exist unless as figments of our imagination, through our very ritual action (after all, the entire creative power of the universe self-reflexively flows through us as humans!) are sometimes, somehow, brought to independent life and are occasionally endowed with the ability to have their own demonstrable, material impact on our human reality – not just by virtue of an individual or collective *placebo* or otherwise deceptive illusion, but simply on the ground, on the level of ordinary sense reality.⁴⁸⁶ *The reality of religion is that through our rituals and prayers we create gods that subsequently have such a impact upon reality as we no longer control.*⁴⁸⁷ Again: God exists, and does not exist, at the same time. This, I suspect, is a truth even more shattering to organised religion, and to organised science, than anything Dan Brown has imagined in *Origin*; or anything Durkheim has thought up in *Les Formes*. It suggests even that, *because* Brown imagined it, what he describes in *Origin* is actually (does actually create retrospectively) one of the ways in which life has originated, and is actually (does actually create prospectively) one of the ways in which humankind is currently developing – as Brown’s protagonist Kirsch is predicting – into some amalgamated digital hybrid species. I fully realise that with such pronouncements, my writing on *Origin* as science fiction becomes in itself science fiction raised to the power two. The well-trained and experienced scientist in me revolts against such *Dreams of a Spirit-seer* (Kant 1766 / 1900), but the sum total of my life experiences leaves me little choice. What the strictest application

⁴⁸⁶ Of course it remains possible that my frequent subjective observations as to the unexpected and amazing effectiveness of my ritual actions, *in themselves have been delusions*. Sangoma training is an intensive and consuming affair, offered within specialist lodges which are (typologically as well as historically) continuous with South Asian Hinduist *aśrāms* – and as I have realised, and duly reported (van Binsbergen 1991), sect-like brainwashing through deprivation, shock and indoctrination is a standard technique here. However, I graduated as a *sangoma* in 1991. Fearing the intense and open envy which my position inside the lodge generated (I was supposed to be the lodge leader’s reincarnated brother and heir, the only member privileged to wear a leopard skin, and I had seen at close quarters to what homicidal extremes envy among *sangomas* could lead) I have not been even near a *sangoma* lodge since 1992. Working (like most of my fellow-*sangomas*) in isolation, as an independent ritual entrepreneur, the initial brainwashing conditions have no longer obtained, my critical ethnographic writings on the subject have helped me to disentangle the mechanisms of manipulation and deceit attending part of my training, and although I have kept going through the motions I have been fully aware of the non-existence of the spirits I am invoking – yet the effectiveness of my ministrations as a *sangoma* have largely continued.

⁴⁸⁷ This, I am afraid, is the real reason (beyond unfamiliarity with the latest literature – *Google Scholar* and digital libraries put paid to that – and with the neuroscience discipline in general) why I do not buy the recent neuroscience approach to religion and to religion’s emergence in the course of human evolutionary history: it is merely another, post-modern version of the old debunking strategy which has characterised the Western science of religion, including religious anthropology, from the late 19th c. CE. *‘African gods cannot exist, so please step aside and we shall explain to you to what delusions you have fallen victim’*. Unless neuroscience manages to turn around and address, not only the demonstrable impact of the world upon the brain, but also of the brain upon the world, and why the latter should be the case (it is merely what one would expect in a thinking universe) we are not going to find in the neuroscience discipline the answers students of religion have been searching for for centuries. There are certainly possibilities here, as generations of (habitually and facilely discredited yet statistically highly significant) parapsychological research have suggested; in particular the ability of the human mind to influence computers without any detectable physical intermediary has been established in hundreds of cases (Radin & Nelson 1989). But as long as such research remains completely counter-paradigmatic, it will easily be dismissed as belonging to the crackpot variety.

of my flipflop theory of religion would make of Durkheim's vindicated theory, the reader may easily imagine: If society is God, it is a God which we create through ritual action, and which thus does come into being and confirms the truth of Durkheim's theory...

For the contents of world religions such an insight, if taken seriously, is truly devastating. Today's religiously-orientated conflicts, such as those between Islam and the West, and between Creationism and science, are often interpreted as if people are fighting and killing over *doctrine*, over the contents of religious and cosmological statements and claims. This is also what appears to motivate Brown's many murderers and conspirators throughout his books. There are however reasons to seriously doubt such an interpretation (*pace* Whitehouse 2000). Most people who are engaged in such fights, have only a second-hand and imprecise knowledge of the doctrinal issues at stake. They are joining a band wagon much like others prefer particular forms of music, or brands of state-of-the-art clothing, home decoration or whisky: in a half-hearted quest for artificial belonging, now that post-modern globalisation and digitalisation have eroded such genuine (or nostalgic?) identification as might once have come with the sense of belonging to time-honoured social groups and identities. Their violence is not so much a means to an end (the proclaimed end being to let their supposed doctrine become triumphant), but (much as theorised in the work of René Girard and his followers) their violence is simply the most effective means of powerful group formation. Ideas and doctrines are primarily the dummy fillings of processes of group formation and group conflict, but any ideas or doctrines could have served that purpose, and in fact are often demonstrably interchangeable.'

So far my new book in the pipeline. But with such ideas as expressed in the last paragraph, the circle is closed and we are reaping, once more, the fruits of Durkheim's genius.