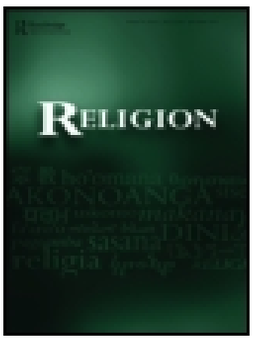

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Why Durkheim really thought that Buddhism was a 'religion' (in memoriam Massimo Rosati)

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ABSTRACT

In The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, and in 'On the Definition of Religious Phenomena,' Durkheim famously asserted both that Buddhism was a 'religion' and an 'atheistic' one at that. Why he did so is a problem long-considered settled. Of two possible answers, one is commonplace, while the other is uncommon and consequential. I shall attempt to explicate Durkheim's uncommon and far- reaching, but overlooked, reasons for declaring atheistic Buddhism a 'religion.' This essay concurs with Martin Southwold that Durkheim believed – wrongly – that religion was 'monothetic' class, when, in fact, it was 'polythetic.' In order to admit Buddhism as a 'religion,' Durkheim discovered that he had to apply different criteria for defining Buddhism as 'religion' than to theistic religions. Buddhism did not radiate dynamogenic force or induce a sense of existential dependence. Buddhism was a religion because it was an agent in making a meaningful life.

KEYWORDS

Making a life; dynamogenism; Buddhism

Durkheim's Audacious idea: Buddhism is a 'religion,' but atheistic

At a crucial point in his arguments about the definition of religion in 1912 in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, and earlier in 'On the Definition of Religious Phenomena,' (1899) Durkheim famously asserted both that Buddhism was a 'religion' and an 'atheistic' one at that. Why he did do so, and so emphatically, are questions long-considered answered. Of two possible answers, one is commonplace, obvious and uninteresting, while the other is uncommon, remarkable and far-reaching in its implications. In the present essay, I shall attempt to explicate what I take to be Durkheim's uncommon, remarkable and far-reaching, but overlooked, reasons for declaring atheistic Buddhism a 'religion.' In seeking these reasons, I argue further that Durkheim's efforts to define Buddhism as a religion required him to depart from his better-known definition of religion. Buddhism simply did not fit this better-known definition of religion as being a source of dynamogenic force, engendering feelings of dependence in its devotees. Durkheim solved this dilemma by offering a *secondary* definition of religion that would accommodate atheistic religions, like Buddhism, Jainism and so on. He, in effect, expanded his definition of religion to accommodate one fitting atheistic religions. As it happens, Durkheim's secondary definition of religion

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conforms more to South Asian notions of religion as *dharma*, as a ritually-bound forms of meaningful life.

The best-known answer to the question why Durkheim defined Buddhism as a religion is substantially that which he gives in The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. Durkheim baldly declares it as a matter of fact: ' … there are great religions from which the idea of gods and spirits is absent, or at least, where it plays only a secondary and minor rôle. This is the case with Buddhism' (Durkheim 1995, 28). But readers should not be deceived. Durkheim is really not *defining* religion here. Nor, is he even saying *why* Buddhism should be defined or classified as a 'religion.' He is engaging in a degree of conceptual legislation. Even though Buddhists of the day, such as Anagarika Dharmapala claimed that Buddhism was a religion, in the context of scholarship, Buddhism is a religion, because Durkheim says it is. The most charitable reading of these moves is that Durkheim is implicitly appealing to the alleged commonplace that Buddhism is a religion. Ordinary usage is his witness. This remains so even though Durkheim defines what makes Buddhis a religion rather formally – 'in the absence of gods it accepts the existence of sacred things' (Durkheim 1995, 35). But here Durkheim leaves open just what the material content is that makes things 'sacred.' The thrust of this paper is that he has more than one way of fleshing out materially what it makes things 'sacred,' and thus what defines the nature of religion.

One small problem stands in the way of interpreting Durkheim charitably here. In Durkheim's milieu, *both* his proposition that Buddhism was a 'religion,' and that something atheistic could be regarded as 'religion' did not conform to the scholarly consensus of his time. While it was true that anti-Christian religions flourished briefly during the French Revolution, they had long since vanished by Durkheim's day. And, in any event, most, if not all of them, such as the cult of the Goddess of Reason, were theistic anyway (Ozouf 1988). While it is also true that some French intellectuals of Durkheim's day espoused devotion to an often atheistic (Comtean) Religion of Humanity, their numbers were few. Only Brazil's Church of Positivism seemed to involve the full liturgical regime that distinguished them from intellectual clubs, such as the free thinkers of the Union de la Verité that Durkheim famously addressed in his 'Contributions to Discussion "Religious Sentiment at the Present Time"' (Durkheim 1975a).

Instead, the notion of an atheistic religion confounded the scholars of Durkheim's day, who insist upon classifying Buddhism as a 'philosophy' or 'ethic,' rather than a 'religion.' For instance, Ernest Renan asserted that, at best, Buddhism was a 'pure and lofty morality' (Renan 1886, 127). William Herbrechtsmeier observes that since 'a 'philosophy' is a system that lends perspective to reason, introspection, and community discourse … , the nontheistic aspects of Theravada and Zen would be better understood as 'philosophies … .' (Herbrechtsmeier 1993, 2) Other contemporary critics of Buddhism as a religion, such as Marco Orrù and Amy Wang, argue that Buddhist atheism misrepresents actual Buddhist theistic practice. Practical Buddhist acknowledges reverence for the *devatas* (superhuman beings) showing Buddhism to be theistic (Orrù and Wang 1992).

But Herbrechtsmeier observes that Buddhist authorities actively campaign against theistic tendencies, noting that 'many of those who do not worship spirits work strenuously against the practices of the spiritists who … have imported superstitions into the originally pure dharma as it was taught by the historical Buddha' (Herbrechtsmeier

1993, 2). Further, against those who would argue that Buddhists in practice treat the Buddha as deity, because of his super-mundane powers, Herbrechtsmeier further explains that they are not the kind of 'miraculous' powers deployed by a God-man like Jesus, but typically consist in the attainment open to 'any sentient being to have insight into the true nature of reality … .' In the end, the *arhat* attaining these powers does so 'without ceasing to be human' (Herbrechtsmeier 1993, 4). Even today, then, Durkheim's assertion of Buddhism's being an atheistic religion has a definite salience, if not audacity.

Buddhism isn't a 'religion' because it isn't good enough to be a Religion

Durkheim's boldness in declaring atheistic Buddhism a 'religion' was even greater when seen within the context of scholarly opinion of his own day. One principle governing the primarily Christian apologetic discourse of Durkheim's milieu was the necessary *goodness* of religion. 'Religion' functioned as an *achievement* or *status* word, like 'art' or 'literature.' Like them, 'religion' was necessarily something noble and good, while 'cults', 'magic', or 'superstitions' were neither. Instead, the various evolutionist scenarios of the day – both religious and secular – judged them 'foolish', 'primitive', 'ignorant' or 'benighted.' By contrast, a 'religion' was conceived as necessarily something *good* and special.

Therefore, Christian apologists who showed that Buddhism was not *good,* effectively denigrated or denied its religious character. An example of this polemic of denigration can be found in Pierre Daniel Chantepie de la Saussaye's *Manuel de l'histoire des religions* (1904). There, he specifically undermines the claims of Buddhism to having achieved the status a 'religion' by saying that 'Buddhists … were originally *nothing but* monastic orders' (my emphasis) (de la Saussaye and Daniel 1904, 184). In a similar vein, Alfred Loisy, recently appointed to a chair in the study of religion at the Collège de France, refused to declare Buddhism a 'religion,' because it just wasn't quite good enough to merit the appellation, 'religion.' Thus, Loisy says that Buddhism couldn't be a 'religion' because it stood opposed to the 'good' that was Enlightenment humanism. It stood opposed and 'in absolute contradiction with the living law of humanity,' says Loisy confidently (Loisy 1917, 51). Awarding Buddhism, the status of a 'religion' would have misled potential adherents into thinking that anything 'good' could come of Buddhism.

> Simply because Buddhism declares itself an economy of eternal salvation does not mean it is a religion. It claims to raise humanity to its highest potentiality. But, to the extent that it is a such program for conducting life, a regime of life, strictly coordinated with this higher goal, Buddhism is just a morality. But in this pure form, following its own rigorous principles, it wouldn't have any features of a religion [*culte*]. Besides, its morality – the way the individual attains the tranquility of non-being – is rather a discipline seeking advantage rather than something responding to the call of duty … . (Loisy 1917, 50)

This cool attitude to Buddhism prevailing among Christian theologians and religion scholars extended into mainstream secular scholarship as well. In the 1880s, France's most influential secular historian of religions, Ernest Renan might accept Buddhism as a 'religion,' but uneasily. 'This fact of atheism becoming a religion is so truly amazing' Renan says – so much so that 'we require the best authority on the subject before accepting it'

(Renan 1886, 91). Further, how could Buddhism be a 'religion,' if it did not contribute anything *good* to the lives of its adherents? At best, Buddhism was a 'pure and lofty morality,' regrettably married to the 'most absurd dogmas' (Renan 1886, 127). It remained for him a bewildering case of a putative religion commanding hundreds of millions of adherents, yet that stubbornly 'refuses to acknowledge the gods' (Renan 1886, 91). Brimming with contempt, Renan finally boils over, saying that an atheistic religion like Buddhism 'would seem among us the height of impiety' (Renan 1886, 96).

Like Loisy, Renan cannot comprehend the reason for Asia's embrace of Buddhism mostly because it is so unlike the *bourgeois* Enlightenment humanism. Unlike Buddhism, 'in our eyes, life is worth living … ' (Renan 1886, 82–3). Unlike his life-affirming humanism, Renan believes that Buddhism teaches a 'doctrine which finds the supreme end of life in nothing, or, if we prefer it, in a paradise in which man is reduced to the state of a mummy' (Renan 1886, 57). Buddhism is, then, a 'frightful nihilism', a 'Nihilistic philosophy' (Renan 1886, 62). 'It is the negation of negation' (Renan 1886, 82–3). So, even though Renan might concede that Buddhism could be classified as a 'religion,' typical of those many disparagers of Buddhism, he was not at all happy about it. It just wasn't really *good enough* to be awarded the status of being named a 'religion.'

Closer to the milieu of Durkheim's peers at the Sorbonne, the Liberal Protestant historian of religion, Albert Réville, also refused to classify Buddhism as a 'religion' – at least, in its own right. Durkheim famously observes that Réville makes a belief in the gods the principal criterion of a definition of religion, leaving no room for Buddhism to be classified as, 'religion.' Durkheim recalled words from Réville's *Prolegomena of the History of Religions* defining 'religion' in such a way as to exclude Buddhism, proper. Thus,

> According to M. Réville, 'Religion is the determination of human life by the sense of a bond joining the human mind with the mysterious mind whose domination of the world and of itself it recognizes and with which it takes pleasure in feeling joined (Réville 1884, 25) in (Durkheim 1995, 27).

Resorting to some peculiar theological contortions, Réville attacks the pretensions of Buddhism to be a 'religion' by arguing that Buddhism is a 'religion' because it is 'a polytheism' (sic)! (Réville 1884, 99) Explaining this paradox, Réville says that 'in order to become a religion, it [Buddhism] has been obliged to amalgamate with the polytheism in the midst of which it was propagated' (Réville 1884, 98). Otherwise, the Buddhism of which Durkheim and today's Buddhologists speak would only be an 'ascetic morality.' Buddhism is then a religion only by denying itself and becoming theistic. Given this discursive context, it should be easier, then, to appreciate what separates Durkheim's view of Buddhism from so many of his peers in the study of religion.

A scientific study of religion requires a scientific definition of religion

In light of such scorn for atheistic Buddhism's 'religious' identity, Durkheim's contrarian celebration of its religious nature demands explanation. Given that the issue of Buddhism as a religion figures centrally in a principal conceptual discussion in Book I, Chapter I of *The Elementary Forms*, discovering Durkheim's *theoretical* purposes there holds the key to our question. How and why, therefore, did Durkheim's definition of atheistic Buddhism as

a 'religion' advance Durkheim's *theoretical* aims? For one, consider how expanding the conception of religion to include atheistic Buddhism itself would have advanced Durkheim's *scientific* ambitions.

If William Herbrechtsmeier is right in observing that 'the nature of Buddhism as a religious system has been the linchpin in arguments for nontheistic definitions of religion' (Herbrechtsmeier 1993, 4), then broaching this subject would then have put Durkheim immediately into the good company of other scientists, seeking to produce a *scientifically* adequate concept of religion. As a scientist, Durkheim intended to approach religion in a way that he believed surpassed commonsense folk notions. In Book I, Chapter 1, Section i, with Albert Réville's conventional definition of the theistic nature of religion in mind, Durkheim states his aims, 'it is necessary to begin by freeing the mind of every preconceived idea.' Since these 'preconceived' ideas, Durkheim explains, 'are formed unmethodically in the comings and goings of life, they cannot be relied on and must be rigorously Accordingly, the scientist condemns them: they 'must be rigorously kept to one side (Durkheim 1995, 21–2). Classifying Buddhism as a 'religion,' then, moved Durkheim out of the realm of 'preconceived' ideas and into that of science.

Science demands overcoming theistic preconceptions

From our survey of prominent thinkers of Durkheim's milieu, we know that these 'preconceived ideas' of religion that Durkheim had in mind were largely, if not exclusively, theistic – the belief in what Durkheim calls 'Spiritual Beings' (Durkheim 1995, 45). What, then, was to replace this procession of conventionally 'preconceived' theistic concepts? Something that would at least serve the interests of a *science* of society (Alexander 1982, 255). That is to say, the notion of religion should not be restricted to that provided by conventional theism. Pickering neatly renders what may well have been in the back of Durkheim's mind for achieving such a 'scientific definition' of religion: 'There has yet to be a scientific definition of religion, but any such definition would not make god an essential element since Buddhism is without gods and many religious laws make no reference to gods' (Pickering 1984, 55).

This logic sets the stage for Durkheim's attempt to 'specify what one means by religion' a task he accomplishes by expanding the concept to include atheistic Buddhism within the class of 'religion' (Durkheim 1995, 27). Noting his progress in creating such a scientific definition of religion, Durkheim confessed that in 1893, he had had no idea what such a scientific definition of religion would be, but by 1895, he did! It would not be long until Durkheim published 'On the Definition of Religious Phenomena' (1899), where he first declared atheistic Buddhism a 'religion.'

But, why, a critic might ask, does this move not make Durkheim guilty of a gross *category error*? Durkheim's *extending* of the category of 'religion' to include atheistic Buddhism in the class, 'religion' makes nonsense of the word. Arguments of this form are common, today for example, against enlarging notions like 'marriage' beyond heterosexual conventions. To the critics, concepts like 'gay *marriage*' literally make no sense, because 'marriage' has conventionally presumed the heterosexual form, Thus, the notion of '*gay* marriage' is conceptually absurd. Proponents of gay marriage, on the other hand, claim they are merely *extending* the concept of 'marriage' beyond its conventional 'preconceived' heterosexual conceptualization. Homosexual unions, like heterosexual ones, are

conditioned by deep commitment, sexual exclusivity, natural affinities and so on. The only difference between hetero- and homosexual marriages is the inability of homosexual couples to procreate. But in a day when 'marriage' often means more than biological capacities, like procreation, other – equally traditional – features of heterosexual marriages, like intimate companionship, mean more.

Now, if my analogy is sound, we need to ask Durkheim what properties of atheistic Buddhism – other than those shared with theism – liken it to other, already accepted, members of the class 'religion,' like Judaism, Islam or Christianity? What, that is to say, makes sense of calling atheistic Buddhism a 'religion' in the same sense as other 'religions'?

Durkheim answers directly as Jeffrey Alexander and Michael Stausberg, respectively note with different emphases. In that early effort at such a definition, 'On the Definition of Religious Phenomena' (1899), Alexander quotes Durkheim defining religion as being 'an ensemble of practices which concern *sacred things*' (Alexander 1982, 237). Stausberg, however, calls attention to the use of the word '*culte*' instead of 'religion,' a difference of possible, but uncertain, significance (Stausberg 2017, 561). Later, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* we meet the fuller, better-known Durkheimian definition of religion as follows. Religion is

> a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them … . (Durkheim 1995, 44)

So, in sum, theoretically what should permit Durkheim to classify atheistic Buddhism as a 'religion'? Answer: it possesses traits common to other conventionally accepted religions as listed in Durkheim's better-known definition – even theistic ones. To be classified as a member of the category, 'religion,' atheistic Buddhism must have the same set of beliefs, practices, relative to a 'sacred,' where sacred is opposed to profane, and constitute a community – just like any other 'religion' – even a theistic one. Durkheim, in effect, apparently felt that with all the concurrent points in common between Buddhism and theistic religions, why do we require additional points of concurrence for Buddhism to be counted as a 'religion' – orientation toward a Superior Being? Appealing again to homosexual unions, they, like heterosexual ones, are characterized by deep commitment, sexual exclusivity, emotional affinities and so on. Why would one want to deny homosexual couples the status of naming their unions 'marriage,' just because homosexual couples do not procreate?

Religion as 'dynamogenic force': where does this leave Buddhism?

So far, so good. But Durkheim attaches a curiously redundant, but overlooked, post-script to his better-known definition of religion in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Book I, Chapter, 1, Section iv. He emphatically repeats the claim that religion has an essentially *social* nature. Thus, he immediately follows the passage cited above featuring religion's definition in terms of its being a 'unified system of beliefs … etc.', with the one below:

> The second element thus holds a place in my definition that no less essential than the first: In showing that the idea of religion is inseparable from the idea of a Church, it conveys the notion that religion must be an eminently collective thing. (Durkheim 1995, 44)

Durkheim does not explain why felt compelled to reassert the idea of the – 'no less essential' – collective nature of religion, but that is less important to my argument than that he does. Such emphasis tells us the that this reiteration carries special weight. Conceptually, the association of religion and society prepares the way in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* for a series of characteristically evocative passages characterizing religion/society. There, Durkheim fleshes out in emotional terms more about what he thinks religion/society is. But of course, since the two are identical, this is also to say what both are at least in terms of their felt or material reality. Thus, when we encounter one of those Durkheimian hymns to society such as in Book II, Chapter 7, Section ii, we must also imagine that the same would be true of religion:

> Society, in general, simply by its effect on men's minds, undoubtedly has all that is required to arouse the sensation of the divine. A society is to its members what a god is doing is faithful. A god is first of all a being that man conceives ofn superior to himself in some respects and one on whom he believes he depends. Whether that being is a conscious personality, like Zeus or Yahweh, or a play of abstract forces as in totemism, the faithful believe they are bound to certain ways of acting that the nature of the sacred principle they are dealing with is impose upon them. Society also fosters in us the same perpetual dependence. (Durkheim 1995, 208–9)

Perhaps recognizing how abstract his better-known definition of religion was in Book I, Chapter 1, Section iv, Durkheim accordingly complements it with a *material* definition of religion – 'religion' has all the properties of society, and society, logically, has all the properties of religion. What is seldom, if ever remarked, however, is the fact that those enumerated properties of religion/society have a distinctively *theistic* flavor – even if Durkheim is oblivious of the fact, as he says – 'Whether it be a conscious personality, such as Zeus or Jahveh, or merely abstract forces.' Yet, consider the theistic character of the list:

- 'the sensation of the divine … ',
- 'the power that it has over them',
- 'a being whom men think of as superior to themselves,'
- 'upon whom they feel that they depend',
- 'the sensation of a perpetual dependence.'

Buddhist *Nirvana,* however, has none of these properties – a fact Durkheim well knows. On page 32 of *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim notes that 'a god is first of all a living being on whom man must count in on whom he can count; *now the Buddha has died, he has entered Nirvana, and he can do nothing more in the course of human events*' (my emphasis) (Durkheim 1995, 28).

Such descriptions of society/religion in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* fitting naturally with theism resulted in 373 uses of the word 'force,' 226 instances of 'power' and 26 of 'energy.' In sum, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* lists 1088 occurrences in all of properties of religion/society that bespeak a consistent *dynamism*. (By contrast, 'society' only occurs 251 times.) 'Nirvana' occurs only 3 times in entire *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Jeffrey Alexander was early (1982) drawing special attention to these theistic-like descriptors by noting the key role of 'mana' as a power of 'diffuse energy' and electrostatic qualities in Durkheim's better-known definition of the sacred and religion. Further, Alexander notes, religious symbols

for Durkheim, drew their power from this 'powerful energy they embody' (Alexander 1982, 241). Not to diminish Alexander's insights, Robert Alun Jones may have been singular in underscoring the cardinal importance of this kind of language to Durkheim's characterization religion/society in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Jones collects these qualities under the common rubric of what he calls Durkheim's essentially 'dynamogenic' concept of religion (Jones 1986).

This is to say that Durkheim believes that dynamogenism constitutes a key aspect of what I have termed a *material* definition of religion. Jones is worth quoting at length here about the significance of religion/society constituting a source of 'dynamogenic force.' On 4 February 1913, Jones tells us, Durkheim addressed the *Société française de philosophie* to defend

> *the 'two principal ideas'* that '*dominate' The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912). The first of these … could not be discussed early in the book but appeared only gradually and could be emphasized only in the conclusion. This was what Durkheim called the *dynamogenic* quality of religion – its *power* to provide, not a speculative source of knowledge, but a real source of action … the forces on which such action relies. (Jones 1986) (my emphases)

But my purpose here is not just to bring out the conceptual dependence of Durkheim's idea of 'religion' upon the idea of its 'dynamogenic force.' It is certainly all that. But it is rather to underscore its specificity to *theistic* discourse. The idea of 'dynamogenic force' entailed in the mention of *power, superiority,* and *dependence,* such as found in this oft-repeated passage from Book II, Chapter 7, Section ii, fits phenomenologically with the idea of a powerful deity or substance – but not with Nirvana. Powerful deities command respect. They demand acknowledgement of creaturely dependence upon them. And, so as well does Durkheim's idea of religion/society. But Buddhist Nirvana does none of these.

Accordingly, this bias leaves the whole question of Durkheim's view of Buddhism as a 'religion' in an odd place. The problem is that Buddhism, or Buddhist Nirvana, do not at all conform to this model of religion/society as a source of dynamogenic force and creaturely dependence! Durkheim, in effect, admits that as an atheistic religion, Buddhism is a religion despite *not* radiating that electric 'sacrality,' despite conspicuously *not* generating dynamogenic forces upon which humans feel dependent, likewise *not* manifesting those creative occasions of 'effervescence' Durkheim saw as marking religion. However, this leaves us with the puzzle of how Buddhism can qualify as a 'religion' by Durkheim's criteria, since it does not generate a sense of dependence, radiate dynamogenic energy and so on?

Now that I have identified the deep problem of this essay, let me plot a course for solving the puzzle of how and why Durkheim claimed atheistic Buddhism was a religion – in light of the fact that it does not seem to conform to his better-known formal and material definitions of religion at all!

Thinking with Durkheim about Buddhism as a religion with Massimo Rosati

Over the course of some years, I have argued that Durkheim's thinking about religion can best be understood as formed in relation to his ideological affinities and antipathies with

thinkers and theories in his milieu (Strenski 1997, 2002, 2004, 2006, 2010). At the top of the list of antipathies, Durkheim opposed the Liberal Protestant concept of an unassailably private and internal understanding of religion. Durkheim's fierce opposition to such a methodologically individualist notion of religion is odd, given what Massimo Rosati has argued about such a definition being the culmination of individuating trends in Christianity that Durkheim himself celebrated in such works as 'Individualism and the Intellectuals' (Durkheim 1975b; Rosati 2007, 135).

Instead, Durkheim preferred a concept of religion fully *public and social* – underlined in the special pains taken to emphasize the collective nature of religion in the *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life,* Book I. Chapter 1, Section iv. Thus, 'religion must be an eminently collective thing,' says Durkheim in defining 'religion' (Durkheim 1995, 44). This is the same kind of a concept of religion that could cohabit comfortably with the science of society he was aggressively constructing. The public and social nature of this concept of religion, in effect, would eventually mean that the Durkheimian concept would show definite affinities with notions of religion taken for granted by the conservative Jewish scholars of their milieu – a view Rosati, incidentally, finds especially hospitable (Rosati 2012, 27–33). That perspective, in turn, favored looking at religion in terms of *ritual and liturgy,* both preeminently *social* in nature – as Rosati often reminds us(Rosati 2004, 2012).

Taken together with their antipathy to Liberal Protestant concepts, we can perhaps see why the Durkheimians ranked *ritual* over *belief*. Religion for the Durkheimians was concrete, active *force*, much as Sylvain Lévi described as the *sacred* in his great work on sacrifice. As scientists departing from conventional theistic notions of religion, such as having to do with the *gods,* meant that such everyday language was to be regarded *symbolically,* exactly as Catholic Modernists, like Alfred Loisy courageously argued against his own religious authorities. Thus, the 'god' of his Liberal Protestant colleagues was only a religious entity if he or she is considered 'sacred' – something Durkheim saw happening in two steps. Someone or thing becomes sacred by becoming the object of a *liturgy* or *ritual.* The preeminent ritual, as Hubert and Mauss argue at length, for making (or recognizing) someone or something sacred is 'sacrifice' – from the Latin, '*sacra-ficium*' – literally, making sacred (Hubert and Mauss 1964).

Concurring with Hubert and Mauss' insights to theists, Durkheim says, 'and since the object of religion will then be to order our relations with the special beings, there could be Religion only were there our prayers, sacrifices propitiatory rights, and the like' (Durkheim 1995, 27). That is to say, in being offered a sacrificial victim, the victim and receiver become 'sacred.' The object of sacrifice *becomes* a god; the victim the vehicle of salvation. The object of sacrifice becomes a *god* in the religious sense because he or she is revered or worshipped. In sum, it is this *relationship* to 'sacrality' that makes a god truly a 'god.' A god is not a *god* in the religious sense simply by being a superior being, but by being the exalted object of ritual, separated off from the quotidian, the profane. Indeed, Jeffrey Alexander notes how already in 'On the Definition of Religious Phenomena,' (1899) Durkheim said that 'no religious ideas can exist without reference to rites … ' (Alexander 1982, 237). Further testimony to Durkheim's conviction of the power of ritual in making religion itself was his view that 'Ritual association … creates sacred beliefs' (Alexander 1982, 241).

But, as I have noted, Durkheim soon provoked a problem by including atheistic Buddhism under the rubric, 'religion.' While such a move was logically essential for

Durkheim's overall theoretical project, its inclusion required some explaining. By including Buddhism as a religion, even though not conspicuously distinguished by the incidence of the dynamogenic kind of sacred, Durkheim, in effect, raised another question. Does *another* criterion of religiousness exist where the sacred involved differs from the sacred as an electrifying, dynamogenic force, generating a feeling of dependence and effervescence? Does 'sacred' name just one sort of referent, or *plural referents*? While Durkheim is quite clear that the dynamogenic kind of sacred makes something a 'religion,' might there be other qualities that materially define what is religious or 'sacred'? We already know that Durkheim recognizes that Buddhism traffics in sacred 'things,' such as the Four Noble Truths or Nirvana, and contrasts them with profane things, such as craving and egotism. But if Buddhism is to be classified as a 'religion,' there must be something fundamental to Buddhism's being a religion that does not involve the dynamogenic force or a being's commanding superiority typical of theism. This other conception of 'sacred' would then give Durkheim the right to include atheistic religions, like Buddhism, into the religious fold.

In *The Elementary Forms*, Durkheim seems to have recognized that definitions of religion tend to be biased in favor of theism. But Buddhism is different. 'Here,' in the case of Buddhism

> invocations, propitiations, sacrifices, and prayers properly so-called are far from dominant, and therefore did not exhibit the distinguishing mark by which, it is claimed specifically religious phenomena are to be recognized (Durkheim 1995, 31)

Durkheim does not stop with a theistically-biased conception of religion, even if he does habitually privilege theistic modes of religiosity by stressing power, dependence, superiority as key elements in, at least, part of his conception of religion. Taking on Réville, he writes, that Buddhism, though atheistic, is also a 'great religion.'

> But howsoever evident this definition [of Réville's] may appear, thanks to the mental habits which we owe to our religious education, *there are many facts to which it is not applicable*, but which appertain to the field of religion, nevertheless.
>
> In the first place, there are great religions from which *the idea of gods and spirits is absent,* or plays only a secondary and inconspicuous role. This is the case in Buddhism. Buddhism, says Burnouf, 'takes its place in opposition to Brahmanism as a morality without god and an atheism without Nature.' (my emphases) (Durkheim 1995, 28)

Establishing the fact that Buddhism counts as a religion, in effect, marks Durkheim's radical rejection of the (traditionally theistic) 'mental habits which we owe to our religious education.'

But that – to repeat – leaves in question how religion is conceptually generated in the case of Buddhism? Durkheim clearly observes in the case of theism, that 'there could be religion only where there are prayers, sacrifices, propitiatory rites, etc.' (Durkheim 1995, 27). But, since Buddhism rejects sacrifice and is inconsistent with propitiatory rites, those actions cannot establish Buddhism as religious. Worse still, he gives no extended account of how some other critically religious element, analogous to the dynamogenic *sacré*, defines Buddhism. The most we get is an obscure reference to 'salvation.'

> Buddhism consists first and foremost in the idea of salvation, and salvation only requires one to know and practice the right doctrine. Of course the doctrine would not have been

> knowable if the Buddha had not come to reveal it; but once that revelation was made, the Buddha's work was done. From then on, he ceased to be a necessary factor in religious life. The practice of the Four Holy Truths would be possible even if the memory of the one who made them known was erased from memory. (Durkheim 1995, 30)

It might be accentuated that, as Durkheim reminds us, Buddhism's rejection of sacrifice is no small matter. Since, according to Hubert and Mauss, sacrifice creates the dynamogenic, theistic-like sacred, the rejection of blood sacrifice, in particular, becomes part of the *raison d'être* of the central Buddhist *dharma* of non-violence and condemnation of suffering. Other than this, the logic of Durkheim's thinking does not seem to lend itself to deconstructing the religiosity of Buddhism into its components, as he does for theism – by way of sacrifice's making of the dynamogenic *sacré*. Durkheim keeps falling back into theistic modes of materially conceiving religion in terms dependence, dynamogenic force, and so on. I shall now argue that this means that taking Buddhism seriously requires, not the standard theistic-like *sacré,* but another component for materially defining religions of the Buddhist type. Durkheim's insistence upon classifying Buddhism as a religion demands another – a secondary – definition of religion.

Let me come at this point from another angle. Durkheim's arguments about the definition of religion in *The Elementary Forms* stand on Durkheim's citation of Buddhism. Citing Buddhism presumably shows that atheistic religions exist. But this gambit for defining religion is both merely negative as well as circular. Buddhism is species of religion – an atheistic one. Is there something *analogous* to the dynamogenic forces, ability to induce feelings of dependence in such religions, that mark them as religious in the way dynamogenic forces, source of absolute dependence and such do in theism? And if so, what?

How, then, does Buddhism fit a Durkheimian theory of religion, despite not conforming in the way the dynamogenic sacred so clearly does to the theistic model? Marxist anthropologist, Maurice Godelier, may give us a start with his novel talk of the 'sacred.' In Godelier's view, the sacred is *not* exclusively some source of dynamogenic force, *not* as something upon which people feel they depend. Instead, Godelier defines the sacred as what is 'inalienable [and] … kept out of exchange.' Quite unlike Sylvain Lévi, Hubert and Mauss – all of whom wrote of the sacred incited in sacrifice as unleashing an energy or electricity – Godelier wrote of the 'sacred' as a people's 'treasures … which are not given but which are kept' (Godelier 1999, 19). In Godelier's view, *the sacred* takes no part in any exchanges, and thus no part in any sort of sacrifice, which is itself a special mechanism of exchange. Instead, his 'sacred' embodies the central values around which people organize a meaningful life (Lévi 1898, 77; Godelier 1999, 12). Godelier will thus find his views of this other kind of sacred less well reflected in terms of Durkheim's sacred as source of dynamogenic 'forces,' than in views of a people 'might model their life on it and pass it on to their descendants' (Godelier 1999, 174). Like Godelier, Durkheim tellingly notes how believers 'sense that a true function of religion is not to make us think, enrich our knowledge, or add representations of a different sort and source to those we owe to science. Its true function is to make us act and to help us live' (my emphasis) (Durkheim 1995, 419). In 1906, Hubert and Mauss articulated a position in 1912 similar to Durkheim's, saying that 'behind ideas of separation, purity' – behind the old negative sacred – there are 'respect, love, and strong feelings … which translate themselves into gesture and thoughts … .' (Hubert and Mauss 1968). But what

is this aiding us 'to live,' this nexus of 'respect, love and strong feelings' – specifically as that may bear on Buddhism?

I argue that this appeal to life is, in effect, about making a *meaningful life*, and further that this conforms to the implications of the plenary meaning of the Sanskrit word 'dharma.' Such readings emerge when we shift focus to Buddhist practice and its 'legitimation' – to the *Buddhadharma* as a 'Way of life,' as Michael Pye notes (Pye 2014, 3). Thus, the *Sutta Nipāta* (1054) speaks of the dharma not just as instruction but as a veritable 'lofty state,' wherein the adept dwell and 'find delight,' because they have crossed over the state of mucky formlesness – 'the world's foul mire.' Leaning on the well-established medical metaphors of early Buddhism, Guy Welbon accordingly can say, 'The Way of the Buddha is, in a manner of speaking, the way from disease to health' (Welbon 1966, 301). The *Buddhadharma* or Way is what makes a life add up to something by providing the elements of a healthy life. At the far Eastern extreme of the Buddhist world lines 221–3 of the mid to late Heian (794–1185) *The Chronicle of the Fall and Rise of Komachi* (*Tamatsukuri Komachishi Sōsuisho)* tell a similar story of the *Buddhadharma* constituting a constructive alternative to futility. There a poor, bereft widow finds her voice and declares for the making of a life rather than succumb to meaninglessness.

> In the past, I heard about a widower left alone in the house. Now I find
>
> myself with no husband and no offspring, wandering along the roadside.
>
> Rather than remaining in this futile realm and bringing shame upon myself,
>
> I desire to enter the way of the Buddha and build good karma for the
>
> Afterlife. (Ryu 2014, 93)

Unlike what is usually thought, 'dharma' is then not simply some narrow sense of teaching, doctrine or moral duty, although the right beliefs and morality, of course, play key parts in the making a life. Rather, a 'dharma' is itself a particular '*way* of living' – such as in the Brahmanical tradition as well – the various dharmas prescribing what the life of members of certain *varnas* or *jātis* (castes) are. The *Buddhadharma,* in effect, offers an alternative to the classic Brahmanical *varnaśrāmadharma* system, which essentially defines hierarchical scheme of *dharmas* proper to the role of a given *varna* in the sacrificial liturgy. As the sacrificers, *brāhmins* are closest to the sacred center, while *kśatriyas* defend the holy precinct and are second in status, and so on down to the *Śūdras,* who actually lie outside the sacred precinct. Recall, for instance, in the well-known Chapters 2 and 3 of the *Bhagavadgītā* how Krishna exhorts the flagging Arjuna to join the fight in the great intrafamilial battle of the epic. He does so, in large part, by appealing to Arjuna to act according to his *dharma* – his warrior's *way of life*. *Dharma*, then, is about the stuff of the 'making of a life.'

As Oliver Freiberger has amply shown, what in the West one would call a 'religion' would be for Indians, a 'dharma.' (Freiberger 2013) For the Buddhist tradition, in particular, Freiberger notes how the Emperor Aśoka implies that all the many religions of his realm could be organized under the common rubric of 'dharmas.' Freiberger thus writes,

> Er spricht damit von „den Religionen' in seinem Reich, über deren Unterschiede in Lehre und Praxis er sich im Klaren ist. Und er entwirft das Ideal einer friedlichen Koexistenz

> der Religionen im Rahmen einer übergeordneten sittlichen Rechtsordnung namens "Dharma". (Freiberger 2013, 39)

Unlike what is usually thought, then, 'dharma' is not simply some narrow sense of morality or moral duty, although morality, of course, plays a key part in the making of a life. Rather, a 'dharma' is itself a particular '*way* of living – such as the various dharmas prescribing what the life of members of certain *varnas* or *jātis* (castes) are. Recall, for instance, in the well-known Chapters 2 and 3 of the *Bhagavadgītā* how Krishna exhorts the flagging Arjuna to join the fight in the great intrafamilial battle of the epic. He does so, in large part, by appealing to Arjuna to act according to his *dharma* – his warrior's *way of life*. *Dharma*, then, is about the stuff of the 'making of a life.' Both the indigenous name given Buddhism as the *Buddhadharma,* and also Durkheim's talk of religion/society creating a regime of moral obligation affording 'a perpetual uplift of our moral being' speak to this same focal idea of *making a life* (Durkheim 1995, 213). Buddhism is a religion, then, not because it radiates the dynamogenic force of Sylvain Lévi's 'electric' sacred, but because it embodies Godelier's ideal of an inalienable 'way' and treasured meaningful life – what I have likened to *dharma*. Buddhism is a religion because it is just such a system of beliefs and practices whose purpose is to administration sacred things, to maintain division of sacred and profane, but also that is dharmic – the making of a meaningful life, which is not exchanged or given, but which is kept faithfully in communion with others.

In saying this, I am lining up with those who argue that for Indian religions, activity regarding the gods was not ultimately as important as *dharma*. '*Dharma*' encompasses not only how to live among others, but how to live with the gods, to the extent that one will. Recall how Durkheim tried to convey a sense of the religion that Buddhism is: 'Buddhism consists primarily in the idea of salvation, and salvation supposes only that one know the good doctrine [*dharma*] and practise it' (Durkheim 1995, 32). Buddhism is a religion because it is focused around the sacred that gives life a definite meaning, a moral structure, that 'made a life,' that showed the 'way' in the midst of shapeless, amoral meaninglessness. Although he does not refer to *dharma* itself, or our more contemporary term, 'making a life,' Durkheim's talk of society entering into our very beings carries the same impact.

> … society's workings do not stop at demanding sacrifices, privations, and efforts from us. The force of the collectivity is not wholly external; it does not move us entirely from outside. Indeed, because society can exist only in and by means of individual minds, it has entered into us and become organized within us. (Durkheim 1995, 211)

> Adherence to and explication of *dharma* is what, then, makes Buddhism 'religious.' It is not religious in consideration of, the often bloody, sacrifices offered to a superior being that makes that being worshipful and hence religious. For Buddhists, it is the revelation of the superlative 'way' to make a life – the *Buddhadharma,* with all that implies for overcoming craving, desire and egotism – that makes what flows from that revelation 'religious.' As for Durkheim's concept of religion, this means that he saw religion as defined in, at least, two ways. The first conceives religion in terms of a sacred, strongly opposed to the profane, and secondarily as a source of powerful dynamogenic forces. But he also saw religions, like Buddhism, equally well equipped with strong sacred/profane structures, but as vessels of dharma – as embodying 'treasured' values giving ultimate meaning to the way one lives, rather than the sources of absolute dependence and dynamogenic energy.

Talal Asad makes a similar point by referring to an analogous condition in Islam. Asad first calls attention to the Occidental ideal of the '*self-owning*' individual. There, the self enjoys an autonomy, well understood as the basis of a Western liberalism, effectively the same as that celebrated by the French Liberal Protestants whose definition of religion Durkheim so strongly opposed. Even though anti-liberalism dominated Catholic thinking in Durkheim's day, as witnessed by Pope Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors,* Catholic spirituality was dominated by the individualized character imprinted upon it from at least the Council of Trent, and notably exemplified by the Jesuits and Ignatius Loyola's *Spiritual Exercises.* But Asad argues that Islam differs in its view of the person because it regards the self as *belonging to another*. And, here we access Godelier's sacred as 'a society's treasure' – that which ultimately 'matters.' For Muslims, Asad says that what is *sacred,* 'finally, is belonging to a *peculiar way of life* in which the person does not own himself.' (Asad 2013, 39) (my emphasis) For Muslims, the self has sacred value because it belongs proximately to the *ummah* and ultimately to Allah. Conceiving the human person as 'belonging to another' generates an entirely different morality from one dominated by the *self-owning* person. It also produces a different notion of *religion* from the Occidental one fixed on 'belief.' For 'other-belonging' Muslims, the most grievous moral and religious offense is not faulty belief, but alienating someone from their living relationships, from the networks of *belonging* that make whole the life of a Muslim self.

Rosati, limits, dharma and 'making a life'

Where, however, is Massimo Rosati in all this, as I have earlier claimed he would be? To start, some preliminary points of our mutual convergence might be noted. Both of us see Durkheim in tension with modernity, rather than leading a head-long charge in its vanguard. Rosati writes of Durkheim's concern about the 'pathologies of modernity' (Rosati 2008, 249; Strenski 1997). I have written of his reluctance to embrace hard-edged anti-clericalism, as evident in his remarks on the nature of religion to a joint meeting of free thinkers and free believers (Durkheim 1975a). And, both of us see Durkheim's skeptical attitude to modernity as well as his celebration of ritual as related to his affinities for the more conservative elements in the Jewish community, on the one side, and Durkheim's antipathy for Jewish Modernists like Salomon Reinach, on the other (Rosati 2012, 28–9; Strenski 1997).

But the convergence that I found most surprising is our sense of religion as defined materially in terms of the 'making of a life.' The association of religion with the formation of a collective existence, morality, kinship and such may be traced at least to William Robertson Smith, from whom Durkheim claimed to have learned so much in his turn to the study of religion.

> In rejoicing before his god a man rejoiced with and for the welfare of his kindred his neighbors and his country and, in renewing by a solemn act of worship the bond that united him to his god he also renewed the bonds of family social and national obligation. (Smith 1923, 260).

Durkheim apparently follows up Smith on this vision of the dynamic of religion and ritual in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, saying 'The rite not only expresses this kinship; but also makes or remakes it' (Durkheim 1995, 358; Alexander 1982, 241). I interpret this aspect of Durkheim's definition concept of religion, further, in terms of the Indian concept of *dharma.* Especially congenial to an atheistic religion like Buddhism

dharma represents a different aspect of religion than that having the trappings of theism. An atheistic religion like Buddhism, is conceived as prescribing a focused and defined – meaningful – way of life. An atheistic religion like Buddhism consists in establishing a meaningful life without benefit of the *sacred* of superior power, the feeling of dependence and so on essential to the theistic religions. It consists rather in establishing such a life upon a sound moral basis, and a properly ordered set of social relations, as evoked by Asad's talk of 'belonging to a *peculiar way of life*' (Asad 2013, 39). Or, it resonates with Godelier's idea of the 'sacred' as a people's 'treasures … which are not given but which are kept' (Godelier 1999, 19), the central values around which people organize a meaningful life (Godelier 1999, 12). Or, if I can venture comparison with Judaism, a covented life constituting a People.

Although Rosati does not use the same words, what he brings out about Durkheim's concept of religion consists of more than the theism-like sacred of dynamogenic force, dependence and effervescence. Recall how the first part of Durkheim's definition speaks of power, superiority, communion, and dependence, while the second part speaks only of reaffirming the cardinal importance of the collective life.

> The second element which thus finds a place in our definition is no less essential than the first; for by showing that the idea of religion is inseparable from that of the Church, it makes it clear that religion should be an eminently collective thing. (Durkheim 1995, 44)

I am arguing that we should read Durkheim's insistence upon religion's being seen as 'an eminently collective thing' as signaling identity with those things that add up to the construction of a meaningful human life. Or, in Rosati's words, 'Religious experience,' in fact, shows how the value and meaning of religion can be found in its practical virtues, in his power to help us live' (Rosati 2008, 239). This, no less than the 'man who sees new truths that the unbeliever knows not, he is a man who is *stronger*' – the man who has made meaningful life (Durkheim 1995, 419). But in an atheistic religion, like Buddhism, any *strength* felt by the Buddhist could not have arisen from a charge of divine energy, made possible by experiences of transcendent superior god-like forces. That Buddhist experience of strength must have other causes. It might, for instance, be the result of realizing one has achieved something of value, such as suggested by Godelier's sacred as 'treasure.' It such might come from realizing that one has 'made a life,' made a meaningful like – a something out of a nothing.

Such 'making of *a* life,' this making a *some*thing, rather than a nothing, depends upon living a life conditioned by morality and regulated by ritual. This is to say that a meaningful life is a life as a morally bounded reality – as is pre-eminently the case for the Buddhist morality of overcoming egoism. It is an existence in which rules constitute what this new life is. Rosati writes of this vision of life as constituting Durkheim's 'radicalism.' This radicalism 'has primarily to do with an understanding of the very nature of social norms and an understanding of their effects on the ways individuals are related to society and to each other' (Rosati 2004, 12). Playing, as it were, a variation on the themes of 'The Dualism of Human Nature,' Durkheim's radicalism 'involves recognizing the double meaning of the notion of 'limit.' That is to say that 'limits are not only limiting but also constitutive of morality and identity' – they make *a* life (Rosati 2004, 13). If nothing else, a *dharma* in the South Asian sense, is precisely such a ritually-constituted, limited/bounded way of life that makes for a meaningful existence. 'It is better to fulfil your own *dharma* badly,' the

Bhagavadgītā 18: 47 reminds any who would stray from the life that they've already set into motion, 'than another's well. … '

Being reminded of Durkheim's ritualized Jewish life at this point has particular salience. Indeed, both Rosati and I have called attention to the Durkheimian sympathies for their religiously more conservative Jewish colleagues, e.g., Israel Lévi, Sylvain Lévi, especially, and to the more traditional institutions of Jewish life they championed, e.g., the synagogue and Talmud. Now, in light of Durkheim's view of the '*pathos* in the dialectic of limits,' as Rosati puts it, with the positive and negative nature of limits, we can see why they should have had these sympathies (Rosati 2004, 15). Resisting assimilation by accepting the limits of the ritual obligations of more conservative forms of Judaism, in effect, they recognized that only by embracing limits could one enable and/or fashion an identity – make *a* life, fashion an identity among many possible identities, make 'society' real. *Dharma* stands for precisely the same principle of boundedness that *ipso facto* makes for an identity, a something, rather than a nothing, the making of *a* life, rather than just passing through.

In *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, Durkheim, then, designated atheistic Buddhism a 'religion' because, among other things, the making of a life conformed to at least one definition of religion that he entertained, however unwittingly. Had Durkheim, instead, begun his effort at defining religion, mindful of the polythetic nature of 'religion,' he would have avoided inconsistencies. If so, this implied that Durkheim actually understood religion as a 'polythetic' class, in Martin Southwold's words, even though he wrote as if it were a monothetic notion (Southwold 1978, 369). Citing philosopher Rodney Needham, Southwold contrasts 'polythetic' classes with what Needham calls a 'monothetic class.' In the case, where we have 'a set of phenomena such that there is some set … of attributes … common to all of them … possessed by each and every member of the class' Needham would term that 'monothetic.' For example, take the class, 'American citizens.' Since this class is defined with legal precision by the courts and congress, each and every 'American' will share at least one common attribute, such as those laid out in the Constitution. By contrast, 'a polythetic class' may be associated with a 'bundle of attributes, … but in this case it is not necessary that all the attributes in the bundle be possessed by a member of the class.' The class, 'religion,' is 'polythetic,' as the inclusion of different defining attributes, e.g., both theistic and atheistic, indicates. Not all instances of 'religion' are defined by the same single criterion(Southwold 1978, 369). Some religions are such by virtue of their being theistic, others by virtue of some other – non-theistic – attributes.

This essay, in effect, has argued that Durkheim generally believed – wrongly as I argue – that religion was 'monothetic' class. 'Since all religions may be compared,' says Durkheim reciting the standard monothetic creed, 'all being species within the same genus some elements are of necessity common to them all' (Durkheim 1995, 4; Southwold 1978, 369). But, in order to admit Buddhism into the class, 'religion,' he was pressed to apply different criteria for defining Buddhism as 'religion.' Buddhism did not qualify as a 'religion according to the criteria of radiating dynamogenic force or inducing a sense of existential dependence. But Buddhism was a religion for the same reason Hindus and Buddhist themselves considered religion as *dharma* – as an agent in making a meaningful life. In effect, Durkheim argued a case for Buddhism as a 'religion' on the basis of 'religion' being a 'polythetic' class, even though he may not have been fully aware of the fact.

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