

# The sense and sensibility of religion: Retrieving spiritual experience as an authentic sociological variable

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# BOSTON COLLEGE *SOCIAL WELFARE RESEARCH INSTITUTE*

**The Sense and Sensibility of Religion:  
Retrieving Spiritual Experience as an Authentic Sociological Variable**

Paul G Schervish

Presented at

joint session of the American Sociological Association

and the Association for the Study on Religion

"New Theoretical Directions in the Sociology of Religion"

New York, August 15-20, 1996



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The Enlightenment gave birth to sociology. In doing so, it removed spiritual (or religious) experience as an authentic variable. As an antithesis to the analytic primacy of church, theology, and theodicy--a primacy that reached its zenith in Hegel--Enlightenment social science turned religious consciousness from phenomenon to epiphenomenon. Beginning first as a form of Deism, as with Adam Smith, social science embraced the assumptions of Enlightenment progressivism. Feuerbach, Marx, Durkheim, and Freud (just to mention the classical progenitors) all recapitulate the Promethian vocation to steal the fire of the gods and hand it over to human custody. For these writers and their descendants, human consciousness reaches maturity to the extent that it substitutes analytic knowledge for belief. Whether viewed as an innocuous opiate (as with Marx) or as an infantile illusion (as with Freud), spiritual experience was a misguided by-product derived from class struggle, psycho-social dynamics, self-interest, or social cohesion. Contemporary considerations of race, class, and gender as determinants in the last instance are only the latest incarnation of the dominant Enlightenment perspective.

In this paper, I seek to transcend the Enlightenment treatment of religion. My goal is to return spiritual experience to its rightful place as an authentic cause and consequence in the unfolding of what Anthony Giddens calls the duality of structure. Drawing on 60 intensive interviews with a broad range of people in the Boston Metropolitan area about their Christmas experiences, I tender a dialectical retrieval of spiritual experience as an authentic sociological variable. In setting forth my theoretical and conceptual synthesis, I take seriously *both* the spiritual knowledge that people report as framing their lives *and* the Enlightenment insight that the spiritual is materially embedded and humanly constructed.

In the first section of the paper, I review the intellectual and cultural dialectic of the Enlightenment in which the apotheosis of theodicy represented by Hegel gave way to the apotheosis of humanism represented by Feuerbach, Marx, Durkheim, and Freud. In the second section, I define the categories of *mysterium* (sense and sensibility of the sacred) and *onus* (sense and sensibility of the profane) as the fundamental categories of social-psychological experience, and demonstrate their methodological accessibility in my study of people's Christmas spirituality. In the third section, I elaborate the sociological sense and sensibility of religion which I am proposing, and indicate the implications for retrieving spiritual experience as an authentic variable in research.

In the first section of the paper, I define the categories of *mysterium* (sense and sensibility of the sacred) and *onus* (sense and sensibility of the profane) as the fundamental categories of social-psychological experience. In the second section, I connect *mysterium* (the awesome and enticing) and *onus* (the awful and seductive) to Giddens's notions of memory traces and structural contradiction. In the third section, I elaborate the theoretical and empirical implications of the concepts of *mysterium* and *onus* for the sociology of religion, especially in regard to retrieving spiritual experience as an authentic variable in research.

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**Introduction**

In this paper, I seek to transcend the Enlightenment treatment of religion as an epiphenomenon. In this view, religious consciousness and practice conceal more fundamental and authentic social and psychological determinants of human existence. My goal is to return spiritual experience to its rightful place as an authentic cause and consequence in the unfolding of what Anthony Giddens calls the duality of structure. Drawing on 60 intensive interviews with a broad range of people in the Boston Metropolitan area about their Christmas experiences, I tender a dialectical retrieval of spiritual experience as an authentic sociological variable. In setting forth my theoretical and conceptual synthesis, I take seriously *both* the spiritual knowledge that people report as framing their lives *and* the Enlightenment insight that the spiritual is materially embedded and humanly constructed. Why, after all, do sociologists accept the depth of meaning in people's expressions (verbal and behavioral) of oppression, but do not accept the full depth of their expressions of spirituality? Why do we accept the sense and sensibility of racism, sexism, and so forth, but not of religion? Why do we have an arsenal of supposedly more fundamental variables to account for religious experience than we do for other realms of internalized emotions? And, finally, what new understanding of religious experience will elevate such experience to the same level of intellectual legitimacy as other deeply seated emotions?

In the first section of the paper, I review the intellectual and cultural dialectic of the Enlightenment in which the apotheosis of theodicy represented by Hegel gave way to the

apotheosis of humanism represented by Feuerbach, Marx, Durkheim, and Freud. In the second section, I define the categories of *mysterium* (sense and sensibility of the sacred) and *onus* (sense and sensibility of the profane) as the fundamental categories of social-psychological experience, and demonstrate their methodological accessibility in my study of people's Christmas spirituality. In the third section, I elaborate the sociological sense and sensibility of religion which I am proposing, and indicate the implications for retrieving spiritual experience as an authentic variable in research.

### **From Theodicy to Humanism: The Promethian Vocation of Behavioral Science**

The Enlightenment gave birth to sociology and its kindred behavioral sciences. In doing so, it removed spiritual (or religious) experience as an authentic variable. As an antithesis to the analytic primacy of church, theology, and theodicy--a primacy that reached its zenith in Hegel--Enlightenment social science turned religious consciousness from phenomenon to epiphenomenon. Beginning first as a form of Deism, as with Adam Smith, behavioral science embraced the assumptions of Enlightenment progressivism. Feuerbach, Marx, Durkheim, and Freud (just to mention the classical progenitors) all recapitulate the Promethian vocation to steal the fire of the gods and hand it over to human custody. For these writers and their descendants, human consciousness reaches maturity to the extent that it substitutes analytic knowledge for belief. Whether viewed as an innocuous opiate (as with Marx) or as an infantile illusion (as with Freud), spiritual experience is viewed at best as a by-product and indicator of something more fundamental: a wrong-headed projection of positive human attributes unto God, a primeval attribution to God of the social fact of social cohesion, or the puerile retention of pre-scientific psycho-dynamics.

Contemporary elevation of the social- and psycho-dynamics of race, class, and gender as determinants in the last instance is only the latest incarnation of the dominant Enlightenment perspective that relegates the religious variable to the dust bin of history, to coin a phrase. There are myriad treatises on the theories of Hegel, Feuerbach, Marx, Durkheim, and Freud, some of the most prominent being the critical commentaries written by later members of the foregoing authors about their intellectual predecessors on the list. My purpose here is to provide an indication rather than a definitive treatment of my thesis that the critique of Hegel's strong theory of theodicy established the conventional wisdom of contemporary behavioral science about the status of religion as an authentic independent variable.

### Hegel's Apotheosis of History and Consciousness

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's practical philosophical grand synthesis of the workings of Providence, civil society, and popular consciousness is the last non-theological (see Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Pierre Teilhard de Chardan, and Karl Rahner) thinker to propose a unified theory of the heavenly and earthly domains. As is frequently the case with general theoretical systems, the fullest presentation of a worldview occurs near the end of an intellectual epoch when alternative paradigms have already begun to forge their challenges. I contend, but do not here demonstrate, the reasonable thesis that Hegel's philosophy was the epitome of practical religious theodicy and reflected a cultural consciousness that subsequent behavioral science explicitly or implicitly rejected. Hartman for instance, claims that Hegel "was the one philosopher who decisively changed history" (1953, p.ix), and quotes Ernst Cassirer (1946, p.248) who maintained that "no other philosophical system has exerted such a strong and enduring influence upon political life as the metaphysics of Hegel. . . . There has hardly been a single great political system that has resisted its influence" In a word, says Hartman (p. xi) "as the greatest conservative,

[Hegel] unchained the greatest revolution” (p.xi). Just what is the provocative Hegelian perspective that our classical predecessors took as their vocation to vanquish and, in doing so, engendered the enlightenment consensus that now pervades the treatment of religion in contemporary social science?

Hegel’s university lectures published as *Reason in History: A General Introduction to the Philosophy of History* is a relatively straightforward presentation of his practical metaphysics. Hegel’s point of departure is that the Divine is internal to the workings of nature and history. The presence of Providence is not an intervention but an initial condition permeating nature and actually inviting/requiring transformative human agency in the co-creation of history, morality, and religion. There is an unfolding dialectical relationship between God (the divine thinker or the Idea) .Nature.<sup>1</sup> Nature reaches its pinnacle in the form of conscious human life, because through human consciousness, the Idea becomes conscious of itself. World and history are components of the expressive totality emanating from God, but not in a derivative or mechanical way. Yes, human agency of self-construction and world-building play out within the individual self and the world of Nature issued forth by God or Reason. (Marx was not the first to suggest that people create their own history, but not under conditions completely of their choosing.) At the same time, human agency carries out its innate mandate as a natural inclination within the realm of freedom it derives from the self-consciousness that God/Idea/Reason has embedded in all individuals.

God or Idea is the thesis, Nature (especially in the form of conscious human agency working on self and world) is the antithesis. Spirit is the newly forged synthesis combining the uncreated Idea issuing forth the “infinite power” (p. 11) of reason and energy with the self-conscious human agency shaping material nature. As such, Spirit closes the circle of knowledge/energy and brings the Idea to a new level where it is “actualized and realized” (Hegel 1953 [1837] p. 20). Spirit is thus the self-aware synthesis



of outflowing Idea and its material incarnation in nature mainly through conscious human agency creating society, history, morality, culture and so forth. As a result, says Hegel, “Spirit knows itself” (p. 23).

In terms that may be more familiar, Hegel is providing a religious cosmology akin to Anthony Giddens’s humanistic sociology. What for Hegel is the dialectic of Idea, Nature, and Spirit, is for Giddens the dialectic of structure and agency which he calls the duality of structure. Idea is structural condition of enablement and constraint--freedom and dependence, as Hegel puts it. Nature is the material realm of conscious human agency carrying out transformative reproduction within the enablements and constraints of structure as embedded in what Giddens following Freud calls memory traces. “Spirit is essentially Energy,” says Hegel, that results from the “actual self-determination” of the Idea as it manifests itself “in the form of states and individuals” (p. 51) and religion. In Giddens’s language, Spirit is the reproduced/transformed outcome that in his dialectics becomes structural condition for further agency.

As the reader can already tell, there are several red flags that an Enlightenment thinker would find vexatious. One of which is *not* that Hegel is optimistic about human nature and the progressive teleology of history. The irksome ensigns have more to do with Hegel’s notions about (1) the genesis and destiny of history flowing from and returning to the Divine; (2) the almost exclusive emphasis on self-consciousness and comprehension as sufficient causes for advancing the actualization of history and human existence rather than actual acts of agency and the scientific laws of political-economic, cultural, and personal evolution; and (3) in general elevating the speculative operations of God above the demonstrable operations of the human species, classes, society, or personality. An additional red flag is Hegel’s discussion of the State, especially for those who have seen authoritarian or, later, Fascist foundations in Hegel’s political philosophy. Others (e.g., Hartman 1953) have written persuasively that, while Hegel may have been used to justify

such regimes, neither in disposition nor in his writings did Hegel actually propose such a view. Rather, his notion of the State is akin to what Marx and now we call civil society. As Hegel explicitly says (sounding like Durkheim) the State is the composite “spiritual individual, the people, insofar as it is organized in itself, an organic whole (Hegel 1953, pp. 51-52). He goes on to clarify that “by ‘state’ . . . one usually means the simple political aspect as distinct from religion, science, and art. But when we speak of the manifestation of the spiritual we understand the term ‘state’ in a more comprehensive sense, similar to the term *Reich* (empire, realm).” The state, then, is the “concrete actuality” (we would say, institutionalized form) of “*the spirit of the people*.” Furthermore, when looking not at its “external form” but at its “consciousness of itself,” this spirit of the people is “the *culture* of a nation” (p. 51, all italics are in the text). In the discourse of Giddens, the spirit of the people is virtual structure (the rules and resources embedded in memory traces), the State is the concrete actualization of virtual structure in society, and culture is the shared consciousness (practical and self-reflective) of virtual structure.

### Feuerbach’s Idealist Antithesis

Ludwig Feuerbach’s *The Essence of Christianity* presented a prominent and influential response to Hegel’s metaphysics. Indeed, in praise seldom bestowed so generously on his intellectual adversaries, Marx said that Feuerbach’s critique of Hegel and religious theology was the “fiery brook” of purification through which all philosophy of political economy must wade. Feuerbach’s critique provided the antithesis to Hegel’s contention that *comprehension* of the divine Idea’s expressive creation was the purpose and fulfillment of humanity. Feuerbach did not dispute Hegel’s notion that comprehension was the central task of praxis. But he did dispute the content of what was to be comprehended. For Feuerbach, all theological formulations, including Hegel’s, suffered from a profoundly mistaken reversal of subject and object. The mistake of Hegel and his predecessors was to attribute to God instead of to the human species all positive attributes

such as knowledge, creative power, and love, and then to assert that any presence of these predicates in human beings was the result of the creative and redemptive work of God. Feuerbach claimed the opposite. Feuerbach argued that although theology says that God is subject and humans the object of creation, the fact is that the human species is the subject of history and God its object of creation. The reason for this is clear. Individuals authentically experience the origin and destiny of their positive attributes as coming from and going toward a reality larger than themselves. But under the alienating mystification of church and theology they fail to realize that the true origin and destiny of their lives is the human species and not God. In this way, authentic spiritual and religious inclinations to honor the source and content of their cherished characteristics results in inauthentic consciousness and practice. As such, Feuerbach's enlightenment vocation was to stand history back on its feet and send it more steadfastly on its way by dethroning God and returning the human species to its proper dignity as world-historical agent. Henceforth, religious consciousness, as noble as it may be, was a retarding false consciousness.

### Marx's Materialist Synthesis

If, among the Young Hegelians, Feuerbach is the antithesis of Hegel, Marx is the synthesis, a creative tertium quid emerging from the point, counter-point of the previous controversy. Marx recapitulated much of the progressive, evolutionary, and teleological perspective of both Hegel and Feuerbach. At the same time, Marx ardently chastened his two predecessors for the same sin: they substituted speculative contemplation for social contention. For Hegel and Feuerbach, the antidote to misguided history was comprehending their ideas. By doing so, people would be (re)aligned to the pulse of history and advance its flow. If for Hegel and Feuerbach, the aphorism is "read ideas, learn, and be transformed" for Marx it was "read history, learn, and transform."

Hegel understood that humans create history, but saw his role and the role of philosophy as striving to “to recognize the content, the reality of the divine Idea, and to justify [explain] the spurned actuality; for Reason is the comprehension of the divine work” (pp. 47-48). Marx, of course, focused on the comprehension of the historical conditions of class relations, but only in order to direct the praxis of liberating struggle in order to change history. Still, Marx never abandoned his Hegelian heritage. For despite all his rejection of idealism (in which comprehension was the primary road to actualization) Marx retained a world-historical overview in which origin and destiny, genesis and teleosis, were mutually endogenous.

It is much the same story with Feuerbach. In calling Feuerbach the “fiery brook” of understanding, Marx applauded the former’s Copernican revolution that fixed the human species at the core of the social solar system. But despite the fact that Feuerbach had correctly returned the human species to center stage, Feuerbach remained trapped within an idealist social strategy. For Marx, the key was not just to correctly contemplate history, but to change it. Yes, Feuerbach caught the historical inversion of subject and object, but he was not correct about its materialist origins. The mistaken centering of religion was not due to a mistake in consciousness, as Feuerbach insisted, and could not be corrected by undoing that cognitive error. Rather, the religious “halo” elevating God and subordinating humanity arose from the desire of the superordinate class to justify its exploitative ways, and the need of the subordinate class for the consolation of meaning-giving hope. Neither religion nor its theologians were to blame for the indefatigability of hegemonic theodicy. The culprit was exploitative class relations.

In his negation of Feuerbach’s negation Marx was less accusatory than Feuerbach of religion. He was, however, equally steadfast about removing religion from the list of authentic independent variables. Religious feelings and institutions, even when they act as relatively autonomous culprits, are at worst historically derivative intermediate variables,

and at best inconsequential epiphenomena. Although some Marxists may disagree, Marx contends that religious life isn't causally potent enough to be the source of alienation, much less the source of liberation. We must keep attuned to the laws of historical materialism whereby theoretically informed praxis pursues the class struggle rather than the task of understanding. An individual taking religious experience seriously, then, may not be the cause of exploitative relations of production, but keeping political economists and the working class struggle from taking religion seriously is the noble goal of scientific socialism.

### Durkheim's Societal Displacement

Emile Durkheim is less disconcerted than Marx about the *existence* of religious feelings and practice. But in his scientific dispassion, he deals a more devastating blow to the sense and sensibility of religion among mainstream social scientists. Durkheim readily refers to religion as a *natural* phenomenon, for it is humanly created and reasonably so at that. Searching for the origins of the religious life, Durkheim is not looking to defend or criticize the metaphysical etiology of religious ontology. On this score Durkheim remains agnostic. He would not be particularly disquieted to learn upon his death that religious life is an *a-priori* category of human consciousness because there is a God. What he does argue, in concert with his extrapolation of Kantian epistemology in the Introduction to *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, is that the social countenance of religion, in general, and its specific characteristics in each society, derive from and continue to be reinforced by social interaction. Whether "true" or not, religion and religious experience are inherently linked to and find expression in an effervescent experience of social cohesion. It is not by accident that the characteristics of God as external, enduring, coercive, and general are the same as the attributes that can be scientifically shown to be those of collective consciousness (culture) and society. It is not that the further step to

metaphysics is necessarily wrong, it simply doesn't matter to the sociologist. All the necessary analytic power needed for explaining whatever it is that educates us to mores, and sanctions our compliance and deviance can be found in the socializing dynamics of social cohesion. What Weber refers to as the requirement to produce explanations with sufficient subjective (motivational) and causal (behavioral) adequacy can in Durkheim's view be provided without reference to a religious metaphysics. In a word, as Durkheim frequently repeats, the realm of sociology is a distinctive form of understanding in which social facts are explained by other social facts. Thus began the multiple-hat compartmentalization of knowledge that characterizes sociology to the present. There is no need to deny or advocate an ultimate footing for the religious life. Sociologists may, indeed, *should* bracket (as Giddens would say) such a question if they are to ascertain the distinctive knowledge that sociology has to offer. While for Hegel bracketing the expressive presence of God in the human formation of culture and civil society would invalidate any proffered explanations, for Durkheim it was the precondition of authentic scholarship.

[Although, to my knowledge Max Weber argues that ascetic religious consciousness provides a subjectively adequate explanation for the rise of capitalism in Western Europe, he never addresses the methodological and theoretical issues surrounding the metaphysical authenticity of religious experience. It is enough for social scientists to subjectively understand (*verstehen*) such emotional dynamics and to analyze their social causes and consequences. Explaining how my position can provide explanations with even greater subjective and objective causal adequacy than Weber's discerning treatment of religious faith, is one good test of the adequacy of my notions.] {It provides more adequate understanding precisely because instead of bracketing or dismissing the connection to the divine, it excavates the experience of such connection and allows us to study how such a connection actually influences the transformative reproduction of daily life.}

### Freud's Psycho-analytic De-mystification

What may be described as an increasing nonchalance about the ultimate reality of the Divine comes to an end in the thinking of Sigmund Freud. Freud thoroughly shares with Feuerbach, Marx, Durkheim and Weber the taken-for-granted notion that for the social scientists religious experience is an epiphenomenon. But Freud, more akin to Feuerbach than to Durkheim, is dedicated to the metaphysical displacement of religion. Religious consciousness is an illusory consciousness. Freud is not indifferent about whether a person or a culture comes to this conclusion. It is not sufficient for him that behavioral scientists in exercising their craft treat religion as illusory. It is a crucial matter of psycho-social and cultural development that religious conscious actually be replaced and not just analyzed. Freud, so to speak, is the Marx of consciousness. The object is not just to analyze illusions, but to change them.

Freud offers at least three variations on the origins of religious consciousness. All of these share the notion that religion is a reaction to helplessness in the face of the perceived dangers of nature, fate, and society. God is constructed in the image of the Father-protector. This illusion is made potent and enduring because of the deep seated guilt arising from the memory of the killing of the primal father. In reaction, humans vow to never do it again, and so fortify ever more deeply their profession of faith and allegiance to God, the primal father. The injunctions--personal and social-- accompanying this belief are the basis of civilized social behavior. But because religious belief--for all its positive functions--is essentially the perpetuation of a repressed childhood neurosis, civilization fails to advance. Only when the functions served by religion are replaced by reason and science, will the true sources of improved civilization be revealed. At that point, human personality and society will begin again its ascent to authentic maturity. Once again,

removing religious consciousness from the repertoire of authentic independent variables becomes a moral duty of the scientist--an historical obligation, a methodological requisite, and a theoretical postulate.

### **The Other Side of the Fiery Brook: *Mysterium* and *Onus* and Fundamental Experience**

To this point, I have attempted to explain part of the reason why spiritual experience is the most silent and perhaps most silenced variable of sociological analysis; and why if sociologists pay attention to spiritual experiences at all, their usual approach is to *explain them away* rather than *explain* their content, causes, and consequences.<sup>2</sup> In this section I take some modest first steps in setting out an understanding of religious experience that coalesces the thesis of Hegel and the antithesis of the foregoing representatives of Enlightenment social science into a legitimate sociological synthesis that can take spiritual experience seriously. I wish to depict an understanding of spirituality that is as emotionally and culturally endogenous as Hegel believed and as purified by the fiery brook of criticism as enlightenment social science insisted. By spirituality or religious experience I mean the most *deeply seated features of cultural and emotional life that are the condition and outcome of agency*. In other words, as one of my undergraduate students put it, spirituality is “the way the world gets into your heart and the way your heart gets into the world,” if by heart we mean, among other things, the locus of the connection to the divine.

To put it baldly, I want to show how it is possible to make legitimate sociological sense out of the kinds of feelings our sixty respondents describe in the course of the intensive interviews we conducted in conjunction with the study funded by the T. B. Murphy Foundation entitled *The Contradictions of Christmas: Troubles and Traditions in Culture, Home, and Heart*. For instance, how can we begin to consider the deeply seated emotions of respondent Elizabeth Chobit<sup>3</sup> expressed in the following passage as authentic spiritual



variables in themselves rather than as representative of more conventional conceptual categories?:

I think it's the most wonderful time of the year and the most difficult time of the year. I think it is the worst of holidays and I think it's the best of holidays. I really do. I think just because of all the depression and the mental illness and watching people react to it and the fact that people are alone and it's supposed to be this great get-together-bonding-experience. Supposedly here is the light of the world that's gonna make everything better. He's gonna take people and bring them together and all this kinda great stuff and it just isn't reality. I mean it's a nice little Hallmark card but it's not really reality. So I think that it's the best of times, it's the worst of times. And I think I can actually sit somewhere and say that truthfully, because for me it has been the best of times, and it has been the worst of times.

### An Adequate Understanding

According to Max Weber (1968, pp. 4-28) the goal of sociology is to obtain what he calls a causally *and* subjectively adequate explanation of human behavior. By this he means that sociologists can properly explain the trajectory of social life only by locating those variables that are *socially potent enough* to produce the chain of outcomes one wants to explain and *emotionally potent enough* to motivate actors to forge or move along the links in that causal chain. Our complaint about contemporary sociology is that it simply does not provide a causally and subjectively adequate explanation of deeply seated emotional life. It curtails its analysis just when things are getting interesting.

What would be an adequate explanation of the following quotation from Chapter 30 of the Book of Deuteronomy which is essentially a generalized version of the previously cited passage from respondent Chobit?

For this command which I enjoin on you today is not too mysterious and remote for you. It is not up in the sky, that you should say, "Who will go up in the sky to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?" Nor is it across the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross the sea to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?" No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out.

Here, then, I have today set before you life and prosperity, death and doom. If you obey the commandments of the Lord, your God, which I enjoin on you today, loving him, and walking in his ways, and keeping his commandments, statutes and decrees, you will live and grow numerous, and the Lord, your God, will bless you in the land you are entering to occupy. If, however, you turn away your hearts and will not listen, but are led astray and adore and serve other gods, I tell you now that you will certainly perish. . . . I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live.

There are several themes to note. First, this passage is about ultimate concern, both because it is a religious statement speaking about the ultimate principles of life and because its directives are formulated in language urging a choice of life over death in general terms rather than in terms of concrete injunctions. Second, the passage asserts the epistemological position that the metaphysical order is knowable. It is neither distant nor alien but known to people's hearts and enunciated by their words. Third, the choice set before people is a fundamental one between the blessing of life and the curse of death. Finally, the passage assumes human agency such that individuals must exercise vigilance and pursue strategies for seeking life and eschewing death.

One of the enduring insights of sociology is that it is possible to uncover the underlying institutional and cultural forces that explain why people think and act the way they do. Whether it is Emile Durkheim explaining social suicide rates by the level of group solidarity or Karl Marx explaining the dynamics of capitalism as deriving from underlying class antagonisms, sociology aims to produce a relatively adequate explanation of what people think, feel, and do. Sociologists claim to at least partially understand the dynamics of racism, poverty, crime, church attendance, social movements, gender relations, and family life--to name only a few areas of research. Nevertheless, when people reflect in their own hearts or with friends, spouses, ministers, or therapists on their daily round they think, feel, and speak in a language much more akin to the discourse of Deuteronomy than to that of contemporary social science. Also, as we will hear, the respondents in the Christmas study evince an intuitive and self-reflective understanding of the distinction between blessing and curse, the need for vigilance directed at discerning the boundaries

between blessing and curse, and the need for a set of workable strategies for advancing happiness and deterring distress. In a word, how can sociology forge adequate explanations without excavating the elementary feelings that mobilize people's lives, or studying the strategies people take up to advance life and resist death?

This, it turns out, is similar to the challenge that Durkheim made to the thinkers of his day. To "succeed in understanding" the categories of knowledge and feeling, Durkheim wrote, "it is necessary to resort to other means than those which have been in use up to the present." We agree with Durkheim that "we shall profit by all the occasions which present themselves to us of catching at their very birth some at least of these ideas which, while being of religious origin, still remain at the foundation of the human intelligence" (1965, pp. 32-33).

Fortified by Weber's and Durkheim's advisories, we contend that sociology and social science can provide an adequate understanding of cultural and emotional life *only* if it explicitly attends to the elementary forms of the spiritual life. This term is meant to be evocative of the purposes and accomplishment of Emile Durkheim's classic book on the social origins of religion with the English title, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. By elementary forms of the spiritual life we mean those units of intellectual, emotional, and kinetic knowledge that are consoling and attractive or disconcerting and repulsive. Life-giving ideas, sentiments, and behaviors are *mysterium*. Debilitating ideas, sentiments, and behaviors are *onus*. If *mysterium* is wisdom, compassion, and care; *onus* is deception, disregard, and negligence. If *mysterium* is modified, as Rudolf Otto (1958 [1923]) recommends, by the adjectives *tremendum* (worthy of worship) and *fascinans* (enticing), *onus* is modified by the adjectives, *debilitans* (debilitating) and *conficiens* (destroying or terminating). *Mysterium* is represented by the chain of signification, life-blessing-virtue-sacred-good-consolation-joy-union-forgiveness while *onus* is represented by death-curse-vice-profane-evil-desolation-sorrow-estrangement-retribution. This

conceptual scheme can be developed further by examining some passages from our Christmas interviews.

### Mysterium and Onus in the Spirituality of Christmas

#### The Contradictions of Christmas

Eleanor Lindsey, a 38-year old married mother of three articulates the contradictory meaning of Christmas expressed by many respondents. Listen for her distinction between *mysterium* and *onus*, and how both of these contrasting knowledges emerge from the same realms, and how *mysterium* and *onus* exist in propinquity and encroach on each other.

I think back to the Christmases that I had as a child. They were so perfect and wonderful. And now without my father there, they're not the same. For me more than any time of the year, Christmas highlights his absence. The holidays really are a family time. For me, that's the best part of Christmas, so the fact that my father isn't there is far more obvious.

For me the most bothersome part about Christmas is also the family that's so wonderful. It's a family time and, you've seen my house. You know that there's always family around, lots of family. And as much as that's really wonderful, to feel their love and to see everybody, there are times when that's difficult. So I think that Christmas really brings a mixed bag, and I think that Christmas is always a catch-22.

I think I notice some of that conflict in people just in going out Christmas shopping. There seems to be two extremes which happen to the people that I encounter trying to get my errands done. Either the people that you encounter will be very happy, very pleasant, will go out of their way to find you that one item in the store that you're looking for; or they're absolutely miserable. For me, I don't seem to notice an in-between.

When it's all over, one part of me is very relieved because it then means the end of a lot of people staying at my house, which, you know, then means less laundry, less cooking, less cleaning; and the house then is a little bit quieter. And that's refreshing. But it's also a little sad. It's a little sad to see people leave and realize that with the winter coming, we may not see them until the spring. It's a little sad to think it's another Christmas that has gone by without my father, it's another Christmas where the kids are getting a little older. You know, you look at those Christmas pictures and in one picture they're babies and the next year they're toddlers and then they're a little bigger and a little bigger and yeah, no [longer with pudgy] cheeks, and you know in next year's Christmas pictures, Tom will probably be almost as tall as me. And that's a little sad. It's one way you really notice the passing of the years.

What can be said about Lindsey's memoir? First, Lindsey concretely expresses her contradictory experiences. Second, Lindsey clearly knows the difference between which

aspects of family and shopping bring happiness and those that induce distress, and she can express this dilemma with a good degree of self-reflection. Third, the deepest enjoyment and profoundest distress emerge from two sides of the same reality rather than from different realities. It is not that family brings consolation and shopping brings debilitation. Both family and shopping are inherently contradictory, each housing a trajectory to life and death. Fourth, Lindsey not only enunciates the contradictory tendencies of Christmas in her reflection that Christmas is the “most wonderful” and the “most difficult time of the year.” She also understands how the life-giving and death-dealing experiences of the holiday remain on either side of an emotional fissure. “I don’t seem to notice an in-between,” she observes. Finally, while the generative and debilitating aspects of Christmas are experienced as being on opposite sides of an emotional fissure, their domains encroach upon each other. Lindsey’s greater enjoyment of her children as they get older is encroached upon by her dread of fleeting time. The happiness derived from decorating her house and making it a center of hospitality is invaded by the added drudgery of housekeeping. But then this latter feeling too is displaced by sentiments of affection directed toward friends and family whom she will not see until the Spring. In addition to Lindsey, several other respondents portray their experience of the radical difference between *mysterium* and *onus*. But we want to describe some other elements of our conceptual framework that also serve to fill out the picture of Christmas.

### The Spiritual Life

Our basic unit of analysis or object of study is spiritual life. By this we simply mean what most people mean by symbolic life. But by speaking of spiritual life we emphasize the fact that life is simultaneously intellectual, emotional, and material and that at every moment of consciousness people are discerning between *mysterium* and *onus* and setting their course on the basis of what they discern. For this reason we speak of material realms of spiritual life rather than of separate material and spiritual realms. For instance,

we consider all the social relations surrounding money, gifts, food, decorations, family, cards, music, travel, weather, death, time, work, and worship as material realms of spirituality which evoke experiences of *mysterium* and *onus*.

### Convertibility of Mysterium and Onus

There are many ways in which what was once *mysterium* later becomes *onus*. “It just seemed like love was radiant in those days,” says John Sommers recalling his childhood. “When you walked out of church at Christmas time it just seemed like everyone was radiant. Whereas today, it isn’t the same” because people are so frazzled. Equally common is the transformation of *onus* into *mysterium*. For so many years, recounts Janet Eliot, nobody “acknowledged around Christmas time that it was Christ’s birthday. Nobody really acknowledged God at Christmas until my grandmother was dead. Until this year. We sang the carols together. We sat around the tree, realizing what the Christmas tree really is. I’ve honestly found out it’s a symbol of life. You bring it indoors so you have life inside the house. I remember reading that, but I was surprised [to finally realize it].”

### Mysterium as Ineffable Yet Knowable

To say that people recognize the difference between *mysterium* and *onus* is not to claim that they are able to formulate this distinction discursively. Despite the effort to express *mysterium*, the experience often remains ineffable. For John Sommers, the glow of Christmas is hard to define but, for all that, no less real:

When family members walk in the house on Christmas, it just seemed like a halo. You can just see a halo. There’s just something about them that’s different, like somethin’s hoverin’ over ‘em. The whole uh...I will just say it. They’re...they seem like different, let’s put it this way, they seem like they’re different people, but they’re not. You know, they’re the same people, naturally, but it just seemed like they’re different. Uh, I don’t know. It seemed like they were on a pedestal. Sometimes it seemed like they’re just um, walkin’ on air, if that makes any sense. Like they’re uh, light hearted. Just walkin’ on a cloud, maybe.

Roberta Morrow also has trouble putting her finger on exactly what is moving about Christmas, and settles simply on the word “magic”:

Everything about Christmas is good I think. I don't know, you see family, you get together, you have fun, you see friends you haven't seen, people are nicer. I don't know, its just a feeling. The Christmas spirit I guess. Goodwill towards men, I don't know. I don't know what it is. It's magic.

As we noted earlier, *mysterium* and *onus* exist in close proximity. But, interestingly, there is a somewhat better ability to describe *onus*. Patricia Leary is quite clear about what is bothersome about being single at Christmas time:

Christmas is a very lonely time for me and I think that maybe part of my cynicism comes from that. I hate the season, I hate the fact that I'm not with my family, I hate the fact that everybody else I know is, and I'm sick and tired of hearing people say “Holidays must be so hard on you.” But mothers surrounded by children are just as capable of locating Christmas's pernicious side. For Laura Hoban it is not just the commercialism that bothers her but how much things differ from the “actual spirit of Christmas”:

I really hate all the advertising on the television leading up to Christmas. Giving children high expectations of things, putting tremendous pressure on their parents for them to go and spend a hundred dollars on this and a hundred dollars on that. It's something that parents just can't afford. And I think that is awful. Children are ungrateful, you know, and if you haven't got the money you haven't got the money. And I suppose that's where the actual spirit of Christmas has gone--into [buying presents] rather than being happy spending time with your family. You measure how good a Christmas you have by how many presents you've got, which is really awful.

### Christmas Heightens Mysterium and Onus

In the end, the respondents may not be able to provide a discursive definition of *mysterium* and *onus*. But they do have what Giddens (1979) calls “practical consciousness,” a working awareness about the difference between the experience of *mysterium* and *onus*, about their sources, and their consequences. Deuteronomy 30 is again correct. The command to choose life and eschew death, exhorts the biblical writer, “is not too mysterious and remote”:

It is not up in the sky, that you should say, "Who will go up in the sky to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?" Nor is it across the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross the sea to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?" No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out.

Indeed, we find that Christmas provides people with an enhanced awareness of *mysterium* and *onus*. Laura Hoban, for instance, experiences both acutely and in sharp contrast. She explains that "what Christmas does is it heightens everything":

All the bad things in society are heightened at Christmas, so there are lots of drives, giving Christmas parcels to the elderly, providing Christmas dinners, children's homes, finding shelter for the homeless. And there are lots of, you know, money-raising activities before Christmas. And don't forget that in those families where abuse is likely to occur, it's then [at Christmas] when it's going to occur. I mean, the kid is gonna get a thrashing over Christmas, when the parents are just really frustrated, or drunk, when they've had enough of their families. So, lots of families break down.

In contrast, Michele Taylor is as pleased by the intensifications of Christmas as Hoban is dismayed. You can almost hear Taylor saying "There's gold in them there hills." According to Taylor "There's magic about Christmas because it's one of the happiest days of the year. Everybody's happy--religiously. Families are happy and there's la la. . . ."

For her part, Julie Longo sees things from both sides. "Oh, it's a very emotional time of the year, so, it drags up a lot of emotion that I don't always want dragged up," she explains. "It drags up a lot of relationships gone sour, a lot of sadness as far as world problems--homeless people. I mean, it just seems like everything surfaces at that time of the year more so than at other times of the year. But, maybe that's why the holiday is so important to me for the sheer fact that the joy around it and the happiness override the severe sadness around it as well."

#### The Propinquity of Mysterium and Onus, and the Need for Vigilance



As the passages from Deuteronomy exhort, and as our respondents intuitively know, we always have before us the dichotomies of life and death, prosperity and doom, blessing and curse. The contrasting concurrence of *mysterium* and *onus* is a defining aspect of the human condition, and to favorably negotiate this contradictory state of affairs is one of the great challenges of individual and collective life. This formidable task is further complicated by the fact that many of the symbols, events, and relations of the world are opposed not only one to the other, but in themselves produce contradictory emotions, as we have already heard. The task is never simply to embrace blessing over curse, and thus conclude the matter. Rather, the challenge is to acknowledge the ineluctable presence of both blessing and curse, and to achieve a transformation to or enhancement of blessing.

To denote the opposed poles of blessing-curse and consolation-debilitation at the most fundamental level of experience, we have adopted the terms *mysterium* and *onus*. In addition, we note the instability of *mysterium* and *onus*. What is *mysterium* today can become *onus* tomorrow as a result of deeper insight or new circumstances. Indeed, the prophetic tradition strives to specify the Deuteronomic principles enunciated above. Prophecy is an historically concrete, novel discernment of *mysterium* accompanied by a pronouncement that what is commonly conceived of as *mysterium* is in fact *onus*, and what in the popular mind is considered *onus* is in fact *mysterium*. This does not mean that any and all prophetic statements, then or now, are equally valid; but the formal nature of all prophecy revolves around this task of discerning contrarities.

The propinquity of intense contradictory emotions at Christmas results in the need for vigilance. Such vigilance is aimed at turning a potentially debilitating circumstance into a rewarding one. Care is taken to advance *mysterium* and ward off *onus*. Fortunately, even gloomy Michele Taylor appreciates this. "They say there's so much sadness. Lot of suicides and depression at that time. Well, I think if you keep yourself busy, you don't have time. I'm alone here. I could get depressed very easily." According to David Whitkens, vigilance means being careful to imbue the holiday with just the right amount of specialness. "We don't want to detract from the season, we don't want to overdo the

season. It's *a* season. It's not *the* season. It's *a* season. So, not too much emphasis, not too little either. Make it special without overdoing it. It's a hard balance. I've got to be honest with you, it's hard sometimes, it is hard."

### Spirituality as Strategy

Spirituality is the ensemble of knowledge, sentiment, and behavior with which one carries out strategies to advance one's relationship to *mysterium* and curtail one's relationship to *onus*. Since *mysterium* and *onus* exist only as material incarnations, strategies for advancing *mysterium* never revolve around abandoning the material aspects of the holiday, but in transforming one's relationship to them. For instance, giving gifts can be nothing other than a material reality. The question is whether such gift giving brings happiness or debilitation. For Margaret Daniels authentic spirituality comes not from renouncing gifts but from appreciating them. Teaching this to her kids is her strategic spirituality:

I like to get things for my husband, I like to get things for my children, I like to get things for my family, I like to get things for my extended family, my husband's family. We all want to try to remember people at Christmas time. But the onslaught of the commercialism can really get to you. It really can. My mother-in-law and I had a really interesting conversation about a year ago about Christmas. She thought that because I now have children, the commercialism might change how I feel about [gifts]. And I said it doesn't, it doesn't. The biggest problem I have as the kids get older and they start attending school is that everyone says "well gee, what are you going to get?" You want to make sure that you instill in the children's mind that this is not what it's completely about. There's a lot more to it. It's about family, it's very very much about family.

But still there is something very wonderful about seeing happiness in a child's eye. And the commercialism, as I said, is going to always be there. So it's a question of instilling into the children the fact that there is a difference between the religious aspect and the commercial aspect. And [I tell them] "we will celebrate some commercial aspects of Christmas, but I want you to realize what Christmas is all about." But there is that, that, that sort of look in a child's eye, the wonder of looking at a tree, the wonder of the lights, yeah-- the wonder of looking at the presents underneath the tree, too. Yeah, there is that. Uh, then of course, there's, like I said, there's, there's hopefully that, as they get older, they, they will learn what the meaning of Christmas is, and that as I see them grow, I'll see them grow spiritually as well.

Bill Wendt devises his Christmas strategy around making Christmas “a good day,”  
 “a good memory”:

You have to make it the best day your family can have--no matter what. No matter how you're feeling, how you think. If you're up, if you're down. You have to make it a good day. You got to make a good memory. Cause if you make a bad memory, it's gonna bother you, it's gonna bother you. It'll be in your mind much more often than the good. That bad one there will keep recurring [in your mind] and you'll be sorry for it. Christmas is a day when what you do will affect you for the rest of your life. If a guy goofs up, if a guy comes home drunk on Christmas and he hits his wife in the head and he's any kind of a decent man, he'll regret it for the rest of his life--every year. Every Christmas is gonna come and he's not gonna think of what a great time he had as a kid. He's gonna think, wow, the year I hit that poor kid. I never did that, but I'm saying, I know. I know this. You gotta be careful cause that's one holiday when if you make it good, you've got it good forever. You make one bad, and you've goofed up bad, cause you live with it. You're gonna live with it. That's it. That's how Christmas is. They last forever. As long as they keep coming 'round, it's ok. That's what's important. So that's Christmas.

Lest one think this all a bit too ponderous, listen to how Elizabeth Chobit blissfully pursues a Christmas regimen that would weary the spriest elf. Obviously, what is *onus* for one person can be *mysterium* for another. The following illustrates how even a frantic shopping venue may be cast as bliss:

For me it was the thrill of the hunt. You should have seen what I did for Cabbage Patch Dolls--it was like crazy for me. I went to Maine, I went to Connecticut, I went everywhere, I was bound and determined that there'd be two Cabbage Patch Dolls under my tree that year, and I didn't care where I had to go. Black market, California, I didn't care. It was the thrill of the hunt, I mean adrenaline! I used to wake up at night and plan my map. Okay, we're gonna hit Zayres, and we're gonna do this and we're gonna do that. And by God, Christmas morning, there were two Cabbage Patch Dolls under there.

I think that whole thrill of the hunt thing is great. I mean, my kids have always from the time they were born wanted the one thing that is absolutely the hardest thing to get. And so it was like, what do you want this year? And they'd say, “Well, I want like a Strawberry Shortcake Doll, that has, you know, pink slippers, and the only place you can buy it is Venus.” And I'd think, “Right on. Call NASA, we're going.” It really was great. So I had this Cabbage Patch underground at my house. It was unbelievable. I had people calling me in the middle of the night. “Hello, Elizabeth, Do you think you can get me two, one black-haired, one...”

Although much more analytical attention could to be devoted to these and other things respondents report about their Christmases, we turn now to indicate what theoretical sense we can make about the spiritual sense people make of their lives.

### *Mysterium, Onus and the Category of Contradiction*

*Mysterium* and *onus* are the elementary contradictions of structure and agency. The contradiction between *mysterium* and *onus* belongs among the essential categories of understanding described by Kant and amended by Durkheim in his epistemological discussion in the adroit introduction to *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Along with categories such as space, time, number and cause, our interviews suggest that contradiction is also a universal category that organizes human consciousness.

Contradiction, as we understand it, is the category of emotional and intellectual understanding according to which people recognize and express the co-existence of mutually constitutive, imperialistically impinging, and radically opposed realms of reality. Similar to every category delineated by Kant, the category of contradiction simultaneously enables and constrains understanding. The categories enable us to understand the phenomenal world but constrain us to understand it only along certain axes.

In regard to Kant's intellectual contribution, Schopenhauer says, "*Kant's greatest merit is the distinction of the phenomenon from the thing-in-itself*, based on the proof that between things and us there always stands the *intellect*, and that on this account they cannot be known according to what they may be in themselves" (1969, pp. 417-8). The intellect that stands between things and the knowing self is, for Kant, represented by the categories of understanding. The categories include the ordering constructs such as unity, plurality, reality, causality, space, and time. These are the forms of thought by which we elaborate the raw material of cognition and, as we will suggest, emotion. The categories, says Kant (1929, p. 113), "specify the understanding completely, and yield an exhaustive inventory of its powers," and so by extension are the categories by which we experience the world. These concepts are the *a-priori* faculties of understanding by which all objects are known. Their origin is radically nonempirical, arising not from experience of the world. Rather

they are prior to experience and applied by the mind to the world. Thus the specific qualities we attribute to phenomena are not innate to the things themselves, but only to our minds. We understand phenomena as being of a particular nature not because they impose their “reality” on us, but because our thinking mind projects its dimensional axes onto the perceived world. Consequently, we are prevented from ever knowing a created or phenomenal thing-in-itself.

Durkheim incorporated Kant’s notion of the categories into his more sociological epistemology. Durkheim agreed with Kant that it was essential to account for the peculiar necessity and universality of the categories of understanding. For Kant, the categories exist *a-priori*; they are the conditions of experience and knowledge. In other words, the categories specify the conditions under which experience is possible. The categories are the conditions through which we experience the world, not the effects of experiences. As a philosopher, the categories exist at the highest level of abstraction. They apply to all human cognition, at all times, and in all circumstances. Durkheim agrees that the categories are the “pre-eminent concepts” that play a “preponderating part in our knowledge.” The function of the categories is to “dominate and envelop” all the other concepts; they are “permanent molds for the mental life” (1965, p. 488). Rejecting empiricism, Durkheim also agreed with Kant that the necessity and universality of the categories could not be explained as effects caused by the material reality of the spatio-temporal world. Empirical data are “diametrically opposed” to the categories since sensations or images of objects are “essentially individual and subjective” (1965, p. 26). Durkheim diverged from Kant in one crucial way. While agreeing with Kant that the categories “do not merely depend on us, but they impose themselves on us” (1965, p. 26), Durkheim disagreed with Kant about the source of that imposition. Durkheim directly rejected Kant’s transcendental idealism and *a-priorist* argument. For Durkheim there was no basis and, hence, no justification for making the mind a reservoir of a transcendent reality. To claim, as Kant did, that the categories are inherent to the human mind and derive from

participation in divine reason only begs the question, it does not provide an answer. The real question, Durkheim says “is to know how it comes that experience is not sufficient unto itself, but presupposes certain conditions which are exterior and prior to it, and how it happens that these conditions are realized at the moment and in the manner that is desirable” (p. 27). Durkheim rejects the notion that this external and prior force is God because it “does not satisfy the conditions demanded of scientific hypothesis” (p. 27).

Durkheim attempts a middle path between the *a-priorist* and empiricist positions. He explains the universality and necessity of the categories by arguing that they reflect the earliest forms of social organization. The categories are universal and necessary because society could not survive without them: “society could not abandon the categories to the free choice of the individual without abandoning itself” (p. 30). In this way, and unlike the *a-priorists*, he can identify the antecedent cause of the categories. Unlike the empiricists, he can thus account for the independence of the categories from individual perception. It is in society that idealism and materialism are reconciled. “There is one division of nature where the formula of idealism is applicable almost to the letter,” writes Durkheim, “this is the social kingdom. Here more than anywhere else, the idea is the reality” (p. 260). Just as society as an external, enduring, and imposing reality is the source of the notion of God, it is also the source of the categories. In taking this step, Durkheim moves to a middle level of abstraction where he is able to account simultaneously for the universality of categories such as space, time, and causality and their variation among different societies, just as he is able to account for the fundamental commonality and social variation in the notion of the sacred.

Just as Durkheim shifted the analysis of categories to a middle level of abstraction, we argue it is possible to ratchet the analysis an additional step down the continuum of abstraction. While Kant sought to account for the necessity and universality of the categories by placing their origin in divine reason, Durkheim placed their origin in social

life. We place their origin in spiritual life. Our research has led us to identify a category-like concept that is suggested by observations of social life. Kant too easily resorts to God as the original source of the categories through the transcendental method of establishing the conditions of possibility for observed reality. Durkheim's designation of society as the source of the categories falters because it begs the question about their origin in society. If we were forced to choose between Kant and Durkheim, we would favor Kant's position to the extent that we are allowed to amend it with the sociological insights of Durkheim and the empirical insights of our research<sup>4</sup> That is, we believe that the categories exist in the very nature of human cognition where intellect and emotion intersect.

Just as, according to Schopenhauer, Kant's great contribution was showing that the intellect stands between us and things, Durkheim's great contribution was demonstrating that between us and things also stands society as the customizer of our intellect. Our modest amendment to this theoretical discussion is to specify the point at which Kant and Durkheim intersect. If Kant was philosophically universal and Durkheim social-psychologically particular, our insight is social-psychologically universal. In regard to Kant we agree that there are fundamental universal categories. But we wish to add the category of contradiction to that list. In regard to Durkheim we agree that the category of contradiction is socially specified as the sacred (*mysterium*) and the profane (*onus*). But we wish to add that the specific contradictory experience of sacred and profane originates not from a primitive misattribution of social effervescence to the spiritual realm. Rather it originates from an experientially validated emotional knowledge about *mysterium* and *onus*.

*Mysterium* and *onus* are fundamental experiential categories of life in general, not just of formal religious experience. Moreover, *mysterium* and *onus* are mutually constitutive of each other and always exist in fundamental contrast. At every moment of conscious agency people navigate the contradiction between *mysterium* and *onus*, just as at every moment they navigate space, time, and causation. Like other categories of understanding, *mysterium* and *onus* are authentic human experiences which are constructed

and reinforced in particular social, personal, and psychic contexts. We have no argument with Durkheim's statement that "the social realm is a natural realm" (1965, p. 31, except to insist that so are the attendant psycho-social dynamics we discussed in the previous section. We conclude that the categories of *mysterium* and *onus* are organically related to the inherently contradictory conditions of social life, personal community life, and psychic life. But this conclusion is not mere speculation. It is grounded inductively in our discovery and discussion of the contradictions of Christmas as they reside in culture, home, and heart. In the end, we are in accord with Durkheim's insistence about the reality of *mysterium* and *onus*, adding only that the psychic dimensions are equally real. We have amended the following words of Durkheim to insist on the last point: "From the fact that the ideas of time, space, class, cause or personality [or contradiction] are constructed out of social [and psychic] elements, it is not necessary to conclude that they are devoid of all objective value. On the contrary, their social [and psychic] origin rather leads to the belief that they are not without foundation in the nature of things" (1965, pp. 31-2).



## The Sense and Sensibility of Religion

As suggested by the analysis of the foregoing Christmas excerpts, consolation is neither mysterious nor remote, but is as close as Christmas and our own mouths and hearts. Consolation is within and around us. So too, however, is debilitation. The blessing and the curse, feelings of consolation and debilitation, are equally near at hand; simultaneously, we take solace in the nearness of the blessing and take caution from the nearness of the curse. About the propinquity of blessing and curse the spiritual person is invariably aware and unceasingly vigilant. The guides to such discernment are the thoughts, emotions, and actions that attract us to *mysterium*-. The destiny of such discernment is union with ultimate *mysterium*-. In order to adequately study these guides to and experiences of union with *mysterium*, sociologists must hammer out a new analytic rhetoric.

The theoretical framework we propose for the study of spirituality--what we have called the *deeply seated features of cultural and emotional life*--can be summarized in eight propositions. First, as simple as it may seem, people know and record the difference between *mysterium* and *onus*, attempt to discern which is occurring in any particular circumstance, are vigilant about keeping the realm of *onus* from impinging on that of *mysterium*, and carry out strategies for advancing *mysterium* and diminishing *onus*. Second, *mysterium* and *onus* are authentic categories of human experience. They constitute the elementary forms of genuine spiritual experience from the point of view of Freudian psycho-social development as we have amended it. Third, the categories of *mysterium* and *onus* are contradictory. That is, they emerge from the very same circumstances and are mutually encroaching, imperialistically nibbling at each other's undefined borders. Fourth, the contradictory relation of *mysterium* and *onus* occur in culture, home (or everyday life), and heart. What we apprehend at the macro-level as a cultural contradiction, we perceive at the micro-level as a mixed emotion. Fifth, the dynamics of *mysterium* and *onus* are more fundamentally constitutive of our biographies

and our societies than almost all the other variables social science, political discourse, or the popular media identify as consequential. Sixth, because people not only know, feel, and act in regard to *onus* and *mysterium* but can express such experiences in words and other symbolic artifacts, social scientists are able to explore the workings of *mysterium* and *onus*. Seventh, while it is possible to study *mysterium* and *onus* in any situation, it is theoretically important and methodologically advantageous to study their workings in those symbolically dense and emotionally intense circumstances such as Christmas. Finally, by carrying out such explorations we learn about the elementary forms of spiritual life not just in and around Christmas but throughout “ordinary time” as well.

This paper has been about new venues for the study of spiritual life, cultural life, and the emotional life. It is about spiritual life because the key to learning what is going on in society and in the lives of individuals is to learn the nature of people’s contradictory experiences of *mysterium* and *onus*, how they interpret them, and the strategies they learn and develop to deal with them. It is about cultural life because it is by studying people’s experiences of *mysterium* and *onus*, for example during the Christmas season, that we learn about the contradictory character of that holiday and of our culture during “ordinary time.” The paper is about the sociology of emotions because it suggests new theoretical and conceptual directions for the study of motivation and desire in terms of aspiration (*mysterium*) and seduction (*onus*), and demonstrates how these new directions may be discovered and applied *in concreto*. Taken together, the elements of the paper suggest not only a novel but also a crucial direction for the sociology of religion and for sociology in general. If we have failed to ascertain subjectively and causally adequate explanations--because of our reaction to the overbearing theodicy of Hegel and his ilk, or complicity with the reactions of enlightenment social science--it has not been necessary. Even more importantly, it has been profligate. For perhaps without realizing it, we squandered much time and effort. Under the guise of rejecting piety and pursuing the truth, post-modernists and modernists alike have missed the undergirding dynamics of emotion and culture they

purport to study. Acknowledging mysterium and onus as the authentic sense and sensibility of religion among knowledgeable agents, as the well of culture and emotion, and as a methodologically available object of research, will transpose religious experience from epiphenomenon to phenomenon.

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<sup>1</sup>. In setting out Hegel's metaphysics, I draw heavily upon Hartman's (1953) introduction to his translation of *Hegel's Reason in History*, as well as upon Hegel's text itself.

<sup>2</sup> The most comprehensive effort to date by a sociologist to provide a theoretically sound account of spiritual experience as an authentic phenomenon in and of itself is provided in Peter Berger's *A Rumor of Angels* (1969). But even here, Berger does not approach spiritual experience as a sociologist. Rather, for this task he puts on the disciplinary "hat" of a theologian.

<sup>3</sup>. All names of respondents mentioned in the article are pseudonyms.

<sup>4</sup>. Our position is similar to that of Paul Tillich (1959, p. 42), who writes, "Religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-giving substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself. In abbreviation: religion is the substance of culture, culture is the form of religion. Such a consideration definitely prevents the establishment of a dualism of religion and culture. Every religious act, not only in organized religion, but also in the most intimate movement of the soul, is culturally formed."



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