

# Religion, Realism and Social Theory

Making sense of society

Philip A. Mellor

---

# Contents

Acknowledgements	vi
1 Introduction: Real Society	1
2 Complex Society	27
3 Contingent Society	53
4 Necessary Society	80
5 Temporal Society	108
6 Tacit Society	133
7 Resurgent Society	160
8 Conclusion	182
Bibliography	192
Index	211

## Introduction: Real Society

The purpose of this book is to develop a theoretical account of society that will not only help illuminate important dimensions of the transformations and developments that are shaping many contemporary forms of social life, but will also make a contribution to broader debates about the general characteristics of human societies. Contrary to those who argue that 'society' is now an outmoded basis upon which to develop sociological analysis, the argument of this book is that the idea of society needs to be re-examined, and developed, rather than abandoned. It may be an exaggeration to say, as Anthony Giddens (1987a: 25) has done, that 'society is a largely unexamined term in sociological discourse', but it is clear that there has been a lack of theoretical clarity about the term, that the significance of historical and religious influences on notions of society has rarely been grasped fully, and that there has often been a failure to address ontological questions about social life directly. A sociological tendency to overemphasise the unique features of modern and postmodern social life has exacerbated these problems, as have those 'post-societal' and 'post-social' sociologies, philosophies and cultural theories that urge the abandonment of 'society' as an abstract, archaic and arbitrary construction of sociological discourse. Against these, a systematic reassessment of the nature of society, which illuminates its key dimensions and characteristics, can help reconnect contemporary social theory to its classical tradition, draw more creatively and constructively from developments in other disciplines, and refocus the sociological project upon real human beings in their embodied being-in-the-world.

This reappraisal of society is built on a form of social realism: contrary to some influential forms of the 'cultural turn' in sociological theorising it takes seriously the reality of people, society and the world. Postmodernism has been particularly influential in promoting the idea that any notion of reality is arbitrary and culturally specific, but such an implication is evident in a broad range of sociological and cultural theories. In fact, Berger and Luckmann's (1966: 14) argument that sociologists cannot possibly remove the quotation marks from 'reality', since the meaning of this term is always socially and culturally constructed in specific contexts, seems to have become a widespread norm in sociological theory, even if, like Berger and Luckmann, an appeal to 'empirical evidence' is often used to forestall a slide into complete cultural relativism. Taken to their logical extreme, such arguments severely limit the possibility of understanding any society or culture other than our own, and certainly deprive us of any solid ground on which to challenge social or cultural practices that seem to us oppressive, immoral or dehumanising. They also suggest a wildly dualistic view of humans: on the one hand, humans are incapable of having any contact with, or grasp of, any-

thing real or true because they are so firmly in the grip of a specific culture; on the other hand, human powers are so immense that the world has no reality apart from the ways in which we conceive it. Against such arguments, which reduce sociology to a philosophically incoherent form of cultural interpretation, this book frees reality from its quotation marks, and seeks to develop a view of humans that depicts them as neither feeble dupes of culture nor masters (or mistresses) of the universe. What it rejects is the widespread tendency to conflate questions of knowledge with questions of being, and a related tendency to judge both in relation to what is empirically observable: it builds upon the recognition that the real and the empirical are not identifiable (Archer, 1995), and that social realities are far more complex than extreme forms of constructionism suggest (Byrne, 1998).

The social realist position developed here draws on a critical analysis of Émile Durkheim's sociology, conducted in dialogue with a broad range of contemporary social and cultural theories, and it is focused on the elementary significance of religion for how we make sense of society. Durkheim has often been singled out as offering a particularly unsatisfactory and 'archaic' understanding of society in our 'post-societal' age (Touraine, 1989; Lemert, 1995; Urry, 2000; Bauman, 2002). None the less, attempts to consign his understanding of society to a 'classical' stage of sociology look hasty and ill judged. It can be noted, for example, that Durkheim's work resonates with some of the most radical scientific developments of recent times, since his focus on the inherent complexities of social realities as emergent phenomena has intriguing parallels in chaos and complexity theory (Byrne, 1998), post-Newtonian reconceptualisations of the temporal dimensions of the world (Adam, 1990), and contemporary non-reductionist philosophies of the mind (Sawyer, 2002). Furthermore, in contrast to the implicit cognitivism of much postmodern philosophising, it can be noted that Durkheim illuminates social theory's need to get to grips with social complexity in a way that accounts for the embodied potentialities and limitations of human beings, prefiguring many recent developments in the sociology of the body (Mellor and Shilling, 1997). Durkheim's (1995: 315) suggestion that a 'society will die' if the idea of it is not kept alive within individual minds offers a particularly valuable point of departure from which to begin a reassessment of the concept.

In the late modern West, where the 'beliefs, traditions, and aspirations of the collectivity' no longer seem to be felt and shared by many individuals, it is pointless to deny that society is, in some respects, 'under siege' (Durkheim, 1995: 315; see Bauman, 2002; Freitag, 2002). In Durkheim's view, however, this would not legitimate the notion of a 'post-societal' form of sociology. For Durkheim, *particular* forms of society may die if their beliefs, traditions and aspirations are no longer alive within individuals, but there can be no question of a post-societal form of human existence since society is not, in the first instance, a *particular* set of institutions, practices or beliefs, but a collective way of being emergent from, and expressive of, what it is to be human (Durkheim, 1982a: 57). Viewed in this light, as Karl

Polanyi (2001) emphasised in his magisterial account of the inhuman consequences of trying to obliterate society in the name of free market economics, questions about the nature and reality of society have unavoidable moral dimensions. It is in this sense, at least, that Durkheim's sociology remains of immense value for contemporary social theory. For him, society is the necessary context for the development and flourishing of human potentialities, a view that reflects his vision of sociology as a moral project. In a world increasingly characterised by the imperialism of market forces, dehumanising technological developments, global conflicts and religious violence, questions about a common human basis for the emergence of society look more, not less, important today than in the periods in which Durkheim and Polanyi sought to explore them. It is in the light of these concerns that the four main arguments developed throughout this book originate. These are as follows.

First, social theory must be built on sound ontological arguments concerning the human beings who populate those social forms that social theorists seek to understand and explain. In postmodern thought in particular, but also in other areas of social theory, there is a tendency to argue that humanity (along with 'society' and more or less everything else) is a cultural construction with no essential characteristics or potentialities. This ignores the fact that a common human species exists across different social and cultural contexts, characterised by the same embodied condition, even if human embodiment is engaged with through a multiplicity of different social and cultural forms. The specific argument developed here is that humans are endowed with embodied capacities for an emotional, cognitive, moral and religious engagement with others and the world, and that these capacities constitute the embodied basis upon which the emergence of distinctively social realities, and the development of humans as social beings, occurs. In the light of this argument, 'society' cannot be evacuated from social theory any more than human beings can, since human embodiment not only acts as a medium for its emergence but, in a sense, necessitates this emergence: humans' practical engagement with the world stimulates the collective development of emotional, cognitive, moral and religious capacities, gives rise to collective representations of human ideas and experiences, and produces collective social arrangements for the satisfaction of human needs and desires.

Second, however, as an emergent phenomenon, society has *sui generis* qualities and powers that cannot be reduced to the individuals who constitute it or be understood simply as the aggregate of its individual constituents. This is not simply because all individuals confront an already existing social reality, or that the shape of the social reality we help to constitute bears a tangential, or even contradictory, relationship to our goals, projects and intended actions (Archer, 1995). Rather, a society has qualities and powers all of its own because human relations stimulate and develop distinctively social forces that have the power to reshape individual and collective actions, identities and experiences in specific ways. Reflection upon

these forces helps us to understand why it is that individuals, who have the same human capacities and potentialities, can, because of their participation in different societies, grow up to have radically different views of themselves and their place in the world, and divergent understandings of the moral obligations and religious duties they have towards others. In short, society has a holistic character transcendent of the individuals who constitute it. As Byrne (1998: 3) has noted, although 'holism' is currently an unfashionable concept in the social sciences, one of the most significant aspects of post-Newtonian science has been the recognition that 'the whole is greater than the sum of its parts'. Such recognition is also implicit in many critical realist accounts of the 'emergent properties' of social realities (Archer, 1995, 2000), but Durkheim's vision of society as a *sui generis* phenomenon makes this explicit, and demands that contemporary accounts of social 'networks and flows' (Urry, 2000) are placed in a more holistic context.

Clarifications of the precise nature of those social forces that circulate within social life, and examinations of how these give rise to the emergent, *sui generis* reality of society, have, none the less, often proved elusive. Sawyer (2002), for example, while embracing Durkheim as a theorist of emergence, offers a structuralist analysis of different levels of emergent strata without actually seeking to clarify the precise nature, and broader societal context, of social currents and forces. A third key argument of this book, however, is that a useful and illuminating way of understanding the character of these distinctively social forces is to examine them in relation to what Durkheim (1974a) has called a 'hyper-spirituality' specific to collective life. Throughout Durkheim's work he attempts to make sense of what have aptly been called the 'compulsions that order the social', those forces that precede and are given form in social life (Jenkins, 1998: 85). The notion of hyper-spirituality, which has been neglected by social theorists until now, can be used to capture a sense of how these *sui generis* social forces, which are emergent from the embodied potentialities and characteristics of humans, come to constitute a specific ecology within which the social aspects of our humanity are nurtured and developed. Furthermore, it directs our attention to the fact that fundamental dimensions of social life cannot be understood within the framework of empiricism, since social reality is not a one-dimensional phenomenon to be apprehended only through 'hard data', but is complex and multi-layered, with some non-empirically observable elements which can be known only through their causal effects (Archer, 1995: 50; Sayer, 2000: 15). In this respect, the notion of hyper-spirituality also draws attention to the importance of social theory: society cannot be understood entirely through empirical studies.

The fourth key argument of this book is that grounding social theory in an engagement with society as a phenomenon emergent from the relations of embodied humans, and characterised by a specific hyper-spirituality, allows for the development of a fresh understanding of the sociological importance of religion. Focusing especially upon the historical and contemporary significance of Christianity for how we make sense of society in the

Western world, I shall argue for a non-reductionist understanding of the social significance of religion. Although Durkheim (1995) went on to develop his arguments about the *sui generis* aspects of society in his account of the fundamental importance of the 'sacred' in all societies, it is possible to move beyond his view that religions are simply symbolic expressions of social energies, and to understand that religion, as a phenomenon *emergent from but not reducible to* the hyper-spirituality of society, also expresses a broader human engagement with what Zygmunt Bauman (2002: 53–4) has called the 'transcendental conditions of human togetherness'. In this regard, a social realist approach can establish a rapprochement with those forms of theological realism that have, more than many forms of social and cultural theory, grasped the significance of chaos and complexity theories for illuminating the ontologically stratified nature of the world, where 'an immanent structure comprises a hierarchy of levels of reality which are open upward but not reducible downward' (Torrance, 1998: 20). From a sociological point of view, this approach opens up the possibility of engaging with the real significance of religion for society rather than 'explaining' it as an epiphenomenon of, or mask for, something deemed to be more important, such as economics, power interests or psychological needs.

This focus on religion may look odd to those who have come to take modern assumptions about 'secularisation' for granted (even if the post-September 11th world suggests the need for a more complex picture of the relationship between religion and society), but, as Charles Lemert (1999: 240) has commented, 'It is possible that social theory's troubles are, in part, due to its refusal to think about religion.' What I shall argue, in fact, is that many of the social and cultural conflicts of the present, including those surrounding the 'decline' of society, can properly be understood as religious conflicts, despite their apparent secularity. In this regard, I build on Kierkegaard's suggestion, dating from the revolutions of 1848, that 'What looks like politics and imagines itself to be politics, one day will show itself to be a religious movement' (Hollier, 1988: xxv). Indeed, I shall suggest that while Western societies, following the Reformation, became *post-Christian* societies, they have never become fully *post-Christian*. Secularisation theorists tend to concentrate their arguments upon factors such as the decline in church attendances (Bruce, 2002), the disappearance of certain types of Christian discourse (Brown, 2001) or, more broadly, patterns of structural and functional differentiation, wherein religion becomes restricted to a socially insignificant 'sub-system' of contemporary societies (Dobbelaere, 1999). What such studies do not engage with satisfactorily is the fact that social realities are complex, multi-layered phenomena with religious aspects that are so deeply rooted that they not only tend to be unacknowledged, but may also be expressly denied (Durkheim, 1977; Taylor, 1989; O'Donovan, 1999; Siedentop, 2000). In Western societies, these roots have a specifically Christian character and I shall argue that this not only helps make sense of many contemporary characteristics of, and conflicts within, these contexts, but also throws fresh light upon conflicts

with those Islamic social movements that appear to manifest an endemic hostility to Western societies.

Throughout this book a large number of different visions of society, together with various 'post-societal' or 'post-social' theories, will be examined critically in relation to the four core arguments outlined above. The purpose of the rest of this chapter is to introduce these core arguments in more detail, and to establish the theoretical necessity of focusing on society as a *real* phenomenon. This necessity is evident not only with regard to the wide range of sociological perspectives (considered in detail in the following chapter) that see society as, in various senses, an 'inhuman' or 'hyper-real' phenomenon, but also with regard to some broader sociological misconceptions about the nature of society. These include the tendency to identify society with the historically and culturally specific phenomenon of the nation-state, and, at another extreme, the tendency to reify 'Society' as something independent of all human beings. A brief account of some of the problems with these views can help establish the importance of focusing on society as a real, human phenomenon.

### **(Un)real society**

The infamous declaration, in the 1980s, by the then British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher, that 'There is no such thing as society' reflected her indebtedness to a liberal philosophical heritage, and to neo-classical economics, where 'society' is, at best, an aggregate outcome of individual actions or, at worst, simply an empty piece of rhetoric (see Strathern, 1998: 65). Although in other respects they make unlikely bedfellows, Thatcher's rejection of society found support from theorists of postmodernity such as Baudrillard (1983, 1990a, 1990b), Deleuze (1979), Lyotard (1984) and Derrida (1991). Rather than rejecting the notion of society in favour of a strong view of the individual, these theorists directly or indirectly challenged both notions on the grounds that they do not refer to *real* phenomena, but are simply culturally relative constructions masking the endemic plurality and indeterminacy of the world. Attempts to eliminate the notion of society from sociology by writers such as Alain Touraine (1989, 1995, 2003) and John Urry (2000, 2003) offered a further challenge to sociology's traditional object of study: rather than offering philosophical objections to society in general, they simply suggested that its time had come and gone, that what we used to call society has vanished into the global networks and movements of a new era, thus necessitating a new 'sociology beyond societies'.

These attacks on the reality of society stem from diverse philosophical and sociological traditions, and offer a range of different explanations as to why society is a concept best abandoned. All of them, however, tend to promote the idea that sociological conceptions of society are not only historically and culturally specific, but also, in some cases at least, abstract products of the imagination rather than reflections of anything real. In this regard,



these contemporary social theories are succumbing to a broader tendency evident within Western societies where, as Slavoj Žižek (2002) has suggested, the inability to grasp any sense of the real apart from specific cultural constructions of it seems to have become a defining feature of contemporary life. In its sociological form, this involves unmasking the social realism of writers such as Durkheim as a myopic cultural imperialism that confuses historically and culturally contingent modern phenomena with general social characteristics. In self-consciously 'post-societal' forms of sociology, and others that attempt to grapple with some of the social and cultural changes that are central to the arguments of post-societal approaches, this is narrowed down further to a mistaken identification of society with the nation-state.<sup>1</sup>

Norbert Elias (1978: 241) may have been correct in noting that 'Many twentieth century sociologists, when speaking of "society", no longer have in mind ... a "bourgeois society" or a "human society" beyond the state, but increasingly the somewhat diluted ideal image of a nation-state' (see Billig, 1995: 52–4). Although Urry (2000: 8–9) builds on Elias's insight by drawing attention to the historical and cultural specificity of this particular association, he then compounds the problem identified by Elias in linking their mutual decline. Amongst other things, this identification of society with the nation-state robs it of any reality independent of this historically specific form or, at worst, simply reduces it into modern sociological imaginings about that form. Bauman (2002: 43), for example, associates Durkheim's emphasis on the reality of society with an act of imagination supported by the empirical data of the time ('the threshold of the now bygone century'). Aside from the fact that this reduction of society to an imaginative act serves to endorse the individualistic rhetoric of Thatcher's attack on the notion, which would surely make Bauman uncomfortable, it also depends upon some questionable assumptions concerning the contemporary and historical development of society. Here, two points are particularly worth noting.

First of all, arguments concerning the decline of the nation-state, which see it as being 'eroded from without' by globalisation and 'eroded from within' by pluralism, tend to have a highly speculative character (Habermas, 1996). Giddens (1987b: 256) has noted that nation-states have, for a long time, been reflexively constituted through a global system of relations, while Robertson's (1992) influential account of globalisation balances recognition of the continuing significance of nation-states with an analysis of global developments transcendent of them. A number of recent detailed studies of the changes wrought by globalisation have also emphasised the continuing importance of the nation-state rather than its decline (for example, Albrow, 1996; Fulcher, 2000), while Tiryakian's (2003) Durkheimian account of the effervescent revitalisation of the post-September 11th USA suggests the still powerful emotional, symbolic and moral vitality of the nation-state for many. It can also be noted that the USA's current, unparalleled global

political influence is hardly suggestive of a world in which nation-states are no longer important.

With regard to 'internal' threats to the nation-state, which see its decay as a result of increasingly diverse ethnicities, religions, values and lifestyle choices, it can also be noted that these are often wildly overstated. It is now customary to refer to Britain, for example, as a 'pluralist', 'multicultural' society, or even as a 'loose federation of cultures' (Commission, 2000; see Beckford, 2003: 91). Such views, however, are often expressive of commitments to a post-Christian and post-national vision of how Britain ought to develop, rather than an objective account of what it currently is. In fact, according to the Office of National Statistics (2001), nearly 70 per cent of the population of England and Wales defines itself as white and Christian, while 71 per cent of black people also define themselves as Christian. In the light of this data, the limits of claims about the decline of the nation-state because of pluralism look fairly clear and, indeed, it is not surprising that studies have shown how, globally, pluralism within societies is often more apparent than real (for example, Hjerm, 2000; Gvosdev, 2001). It is also easy to leap to the conclusion that immigration weakens nation-states, but, again, there is little evidence for this so far. In a detailed empirical study of immigration and multiculturalism in Britain and Germany, Koopmans and Statham (1999), for example, found little to support arguments about the decline of the nation-state and found that immigrants and ethnic minorities had to adjust to specifically *national* models of citizenship. From such studies it is not unreasonable to conclude that the nation-state remains an important institutional expression of society (see also Alexander, 2001; Beaman, 2003; Beyer, 2003).

A second point worth noting, however, is that, regardless of the strengths or weaknesses of nation-states, the sociological focus on society cannot be tied inextricably to these particular forms anyway. Contrary to the post-modernist idea that sociology simply invented its object of study, it has to be acknowledged that reflections upon society predate modern sociology: they are found in the writings of Plato and Aristotle (Frisby and Sayer, 1986), for example, and form a significant component of medieval theology too (Beckwith, 1993). Indeed, Milbank (1990) has suggested that theological reflections upon, and attempted radical reconstructions of, society predate, and will postdate, modern, sociological interpretations with their focus on 'secular' and political dimensions of social life. More radically, Bossy (1985), Taylor (1989) and O'Donovan (1999) have illuminated how modern conceptions of society actually have their origins in theological visions of social life rather than representing a clear break with a religious past. The Protestant assumptions also lurking behind Thatcher's prioritisation of individuals above 'society', perhaps reflecting her Methodist upbringing, are of significance in this regard. None the less, it is also important to note that premodern reflections on the nature of society are not specific to Western social and cultural contexts. Thousands of years ago Indian religious philosophy also became engrossed with the nature of individuals' commitments

to, and duties within, society, despite also pre-figuring the postmodernist idea that much of what we take to be reality is actually illusion (Dumont, 1970). In fact, it is difficult, if not impossible, to think of a single example of a social, cultural or religious context where some sort of reflection upon the nature of society is not apparent.

The pervasiveness of reflections upon society across different times and cultures not only calls into question the restriction of the term's significance to modern nation-states, however, but also raises doubts about a contemporary sociological tendency to overemphasise the distinctiveness of present social realities in relation to the past. Writers such as Giddens (1990, 1991a) embody this tendency to stress the radical disjunction between (future-oriented) modern and (past-oriented) premodern societies, while postmodernism's key defining feature is the idea of an end to modernisation processes and the appearance of some sort of new age. The spiralling development of various other 'post-isms', all of them eager to mark out some new radical disjunction from the past, exacerbates the sense that sociology has an increasingly flimsy grasp upon the notion of historical development. As Kumar (1995: 17–18) has noted with regard to information society and post-industrial theorists, they tend to work with a very short-sighted historical perspective that attributes 'to the present developments which are the culmination of trends deep in the past'. In this respect, it is also worth noting that Urry's (2000) 'post-societal' sociology draws extensively from Adam's (1990) account of temporal complexity, but ignores her arguments about the need for historical factors to be examined in a vast, evolutionary perspective. As Byrne (1998: 44) has suggested, although postmodernists have adopted some of the language of complexity theory, particularly in relation to temporality, there is something fundamentally *atemporal* about their understanding of the world, since the location of something in the past is often apparently sufficient to render it outmoded: the past is always *passé*.

Interestingly, however, such short-sightedness was not, in general, a characteristic of the classical sociological theorists. Indeed, while they were attentive to the specific characteristics of modern societies, they were also rather more circumspect about these than many contemporary writers, and certainly did not use the term society only, or even largely, with regard to modern nation-states. In Marx's writings, society tended to be a 'residual category' rather than a fully developed concept, but it is clearly central to his vision of communism and not confined to modernity (Gouldner, 1980: 12; Burawoy, 2003:197). For other major classical theorists, the notion of society is used in relation to a broad range of social and historical contexts. Weber (1965), for example, while having a particular interest in modern societies, also studied ancient Indian, Egyptian, Chinese and Babylonian societies. Similarly, although Simmel (1997), of all the classical theorists, expressed the most reservations about the term 'society', he was able to identify and examine distinct religious patterns of interaction within society in Christian and early Islamic contexts. It can also be noted that Bauman's (2002: 43–4) association of Durkheim's conception of society with the

empirical existence of the coercive power of the modern nation-state ignores the fact that his greatest book concerns Aboriginal societies, not nation-states (Durkheim, 1995). Consequently, while it is one thing to acknowledge that the sociological focus on society (and what it has understood as society) emerged out of a specific historical, social and cultural context (Shilling and Mellor, 2001), it is another thing entirely to suggest that it is meaningless to talk about society outside this context.

While challenges to the idea that sociology is the study of society have focused on the contextual specificity of Durkheim's account of society, however, they have also offered the (somewhat contradictory) argument that he promotes a 'reified' vision of society (Lukes, 1973: 20–23). Here, rather than the sociological vision of society being too context-specific, it is deemed to be far too general. Touraine (1989, 1995), Lemert (1995) and Urry (2000) single out this reification of society as *the* most influential source of sociology's 'anachronistic' concern with society. In each case it is understood as something insensitive to the dynamic patterns of contemporary change. For Touraine (1989: 7), Durkheim's understanding of society crystallises the classical sociological concern with integration and order. For Lemert (1995: 48), Durkheim's vision of an organic, ordered society ignores the divisions and differences of modernity: it is, simply, 'a lost world he constructed in his sociological imagination'. Similarly, Urry argues that the central organising principle of sociology has been Durkheim's identification of an autonomous realm of the 'social', distinguished from the 'natural', as the core object of sociological analysis (Urry, 2000: 10). For Urry (2000: 26), the fluidity, sensuousness and positive embrace of *différance* characteristic of contemporary social life render the 'static' Durkheimian concept of society redundant.

Yet the Durkheim such writings reject is often something of a sociological parody, wherein his arguments are characteristically reduced to a neo-Parsonian concern with the Hobbesian 'problem of order' (see Mellor, 1998, 2002; Morrison, 2001). This understanding of Durkheim appears to be an established part of sociology's collective memory, but is unsustainable on the basis of a direct and detailed reading of his work. Contrary to the view that Durkheim identifies society as a realm entirely autonomous from nature (Urry, 2000: 10), he actually, for example, argues for sociology being focused on society as 'a specific reality', but also notes that this has to be contextualised within a recognition that 'man and society are linked to the universe and can be abstracted from it only artificially' (Durkheim, 1995: 432; see Jones, 1997: 154). Furthermore, it can be noted that, in his inaugural lecture at Bordeaux in 1887, he emphasised that an abstract, reified conception of 'Society' (such as he associated with Comte) should not be the focus for sociological analysis (Durkheim, 1974c: 197; Strenski 1997: 158–9). Instead, sociology should concern itself with the constitution and development of societies in the dynamic interrelationships of people in their everyday lives and across time; an understanding reflected in a wealth of sociological, anthropological and philosophical works by his followers, many

of which demonstrate a good sense of the complexity, dynamism and fruitfulness of his conception of society (for example, Caillois, 1950; Hertz, 1960; Mauss, 1969; Turner, 1969; Bataille, 1991, 1992; Maffesoli, 1996).

In fact, although Durkheim is often accused of promoting an abstract conception of society, it is the post-societal view, with its dissipation of questions about embodied being into cultural processes and flows, that tends towards an abstractionism Durkheim can help prevent. In particular, it is the Durkheimian tradition that expresses most forcefully the idea that being part of society is inextricably tied to our humanity, offering a vision of the irrepressibly vital social energies that characterise human encounters and relationships, nurturing and sustaining solidarities, bonds, moral obligations and collective symbols. It is on this basis that it is possible to see how a critical engagement with this tradition can prove an invaluable source of assistance if we are to continue to study what societies really are.<sup>2</sup>

### Human society

As Margaret Archer (2000: 2) has observed, constructing a social theory that takes sufficient account of the actions, cares and concerns of embodied human beings has become a defensive project in an academic environment where modernity's 'Death of God' has now been matched by postmodernism's 'Death of Humanity'. This death has been announced, and often celebrated, in a broad range of post-structuralist and postmodern philosophy (Foucault, 1970; Baudrillard, 1983; Rorty, 1989; Derrida, 1991), but is also apparent in many other influential forms of social theory. Manuel Castells's (2000: 21) account of a contemporary 'culture of real virtuality', for example, where the 'autonomous ability to reprogramme one's own personality' becomes the dominant mode of identity-construction, exemplifies the implicit evacuation of the human from sociological theory. A similar evacuation is evident in Urry's (2000: 40–1) 'post-societal' presentation of the Internet as the principal metaphor for the fluid character of contemporary social life, and in Donna Haraway's (1991) promotion of the biotechnological image of the 'cyborg' as a liberating way of making sense of social life in an age of global networks constructed through systems of electronic communication.

Turner and Rojek (2001: 228) have challenged such dehumanising perspectives on the empirical grounds that their appeal for certain social theorists is not matched by their relevance for the majority of people. A more crucial challenge, however, rests on the question of ontology, the theory of being underpinning them. Often, the most basic of ontological questions – are human beings *really* like this? – is not even addressed directly. Rather, Richard Rorty's (1991) argument that we must avoid the 'embarrassments' of foundational claims about the inherent, natural characteristics of human beings seems to have been widely accepted. In particular, the epistemological focus of postmodernism, which precludes the possibility of access to a real world or to truth because of its overriding concern with culturally spe-

cific constructions of meaning, renders basic ontological questions pointless. None the less, such perspectives manifest what Bhaskar (1979) has called the 'epistemic fallacy', where epistemology (the theory of knowledge) becomes conflated with ontology. Against this fallacy, it can be emphasised that while human knowledge, meaning and identity may indeed be characterised by a great deal of contingency, it is an entirely different thing to say that this means there is no real world (and real human beings) of which we can have any knowledge. This is important for two reasons.

First, despite cultural differences, our embodied being-in-the-world means that all humans share certain basic capacities to feel hunger, pain, joy, desire and a broad range of other emotional and sensual phenomena. We also have the capacity to act, to do things, and to think reflexively about ourselves, our actions and the world around us. It is clear, of course, that the development of these capacities, the individual and collective experience of them, and the theories we construct to account for them can all vary significantly between different cultures. Even so, the failure to take them seriously, along with the unavoidably mortal character of humans, does not look like a very sound basis for social theory. Even in the global information age envisaged by Castells, it may be the case that a 'global elite' can imagine itself as inhabiting 'cyberspace', and that it has the cultural and financial resources to minimise the territorial identifications, economic burdens and social commitments that might otherwise constrain its life-projects (Bauman, 2002: 235), but the ability to access computers, use satellite information systems and build 'virtual communities' depends on a physical body that feels pleasure and pain, that has cognitive capacities, and that, at some point, will inevitably die. The reduction of humanity and society to virtuality by writers such as Castells and Baudrillard seems to ignore this.<sup>3</sup>

Second, and following from this, an attention to ontological issues is important because, without it, visions of the endlessly constructible characteristics of humans encourage moral concerns to lose all substance. In his discussion of environmentalist ethics, for example, Urry talks about the extension of rights from humans to animals, but does not explain how such rights can be 'extended' if humanity, as he claims, has no essence, inherent potentialities or emergent powers worth respecting and protecting (Urry, 2000: 169). More broadly, Bauman's (1993: 243) suggestion that the vociferousness of contemporary appeals to 'human rights' often masks what is simply a self-interested appeal to 'the right to be left alone', illuminates the dissipation of moral concern into cultural relativism that tends to accompany a failure to ground notions of rights in anything real. Furthermore, as Turner and Rojek (2001: 109) note, 'Arguments about cultural relativism can be, and have been, manipulated and abused by authoritarian governments to justify various forms of state violence under the banner of cultural authenticity.' As they suggest, a vision of universal human rights must start with the ontological reality of the body, otherwise there is no solid basis upon which to challenge the violence, degradation and oppression inflicted upon people across different cultures.

The grounding of social theory in a satisfactory account of what it is to be human has to extend further than paying attention to the body in a narrow sense, however, and must also involve an engagement with the collective contexts that humans, as *social beings*, live and develop within. Urry's (2000: 187) discussion of the obligations and duties of contemporary citizenship recognises the importance of collective contexts, but he does not associate them with 'society', only with patterns of 'global homogenisation, consumerism and cosmopolitanism'. Leaving aside the question of how extensive and influential such processes actually are, it is clear that Urry is denying society any ontological reality. In fact, although there is some ambiguity about what he means by 'society' (he sometimes implies it existed in the past), he tends overall to refer to it as a 'metaphor' for social patterns and processes that should now be abandoned in favour of metaphors of fluids and flows. When Urry (2000: 22) seeks to resist relativism through his argument that the 'productivity' of various metaphors can be assessed in relation to empirical evidence, however, he proposes an essentially *anthropocentric* view of the world, despite his rejection of the idea of an essential humanity. The conflation of the empirical with the real is, as Bhaskar (1998: 42) states, anthropocentric in that it equates what humans experience with what actually exists. As Archer (1995: 69) notes, however, the reality of some things might only be established by the effects they have on other things. It is in this regard that Durkheim's notion of society as a *sui generis* reality is particularly important and useful.

### *Sui generis* society

Robert Bellah (1973) has suggested that there is no word more widespread and yet more difficult in Durkheim's work than 'society', and grasping 'the many meanings of that word and its many levels of meaning would be almost equivalent to understanding the whole of Durkheim's thought'.<sup>4</sup> In fact, rather than simply accepting the reality of society as an empirical fact, Durkheim's entire body of work can be read as an attempt to get to grips with the irreducible complexity of social life, and the many levels of social, psychological and material forces, observable and non-observable, that constitute its reality. This is why it has been suggested that, for Durkheim, society constituted a 'research horizon', a 'problematic', rather than 'a positively determined given' (Karsenti, 1998: 71). This conception of society as a research problem has, perhaps, been lost in much subsequent sociology, which might explain Giddens's (1987a: 25) comments about society being a 'largely unexamined term'. In the work of Durkheim, none the less, society is examined and reconsidered repeatedly, contrary to suggestions that Durkheim never actually defines the term (Lemert, 1995: 26; Poggi, 2000: 84).

As Steven Lukes (1973: 21) observes, Durkheim defined it in a number of ways: society was the social or cultural transmission of beliefs and practices, the existence of association, the imposition of socially prescribed obli-

gations, the object of thought, sentiment and action, and, sometimes, a concrete society (such as nation-state), or groups or institutions within it. In general, however, and linking all Durkheim's different uses of the term, the concept of society is used to address the 'supra-individual' elements in social life relating to social actions, feelings, beliefs, values and ideals (Lukes, 1973: 115). As Bellah (1973: ix) suggests, 'Not only is a society not identical with an external "material entity", it is something deeply inner'. Durkheim's (1995: 12–18) critique of empiricism is significant in this regard, since he argues that reducing reality to experience inevitably results in a denial of the truth, meaning or value of anything outside the specific individual or social constructions placed upon phenomena: in other words, the deepest strata of human, social and natural forms of life are simply argued away. Contrary to such reductions, he identifies society with 'an immense cooperation that extends not only through space but also through time', combining ideas and feelings in a rich and complex set of processes through which we become 'truly human' (Durkheim, 1995: 15–16).

For Durkheim (1973: 149, 162), since society arises from human *relations* it cannot be explained as 'the natural and spontaneous development of the individual', but it also cannot be conceived of in isolation from the individuals who constitute it. Society depends on the individuals who constitute it, but it is not reducible to them because, as an emergent *sui generis* reality, it has the power to transform human beings in significant ways.<sup>5</sup> Acknowledging this power is important, because, otherwise, it is easy to overestimate the scope and potentialities of individual agency, and thereby to underestimate the challenges and constraints that face individuals in their day-to-day lives.

It is notable that, in this respect, Giddens (1976, 1984) has criticised Durkheim's notion of a *sui generis* reality above and beyond individual agency, believing that it encourages an unsupportable vision of societies as clearly delimited entities characterised by high levels of integration. As Stephen Turner (1983) has shown, however, this involves a misinterpretation of Durkheim's realism, and the reduction of his position to functionalism. When Giddens (1990: 64) suggests that sociologists have placed far too much emphasis on 'society' he is identifying it with functionalist notions of a 'bounded system', to which he contrasts his own concern with the chronically reflexive processes through which patterns of modern social life are endlessly reconstructed. Like Durkheim, he aims to offer an 'ontology of social life', but he rejects notions of any 'reified' emergent properties or *sui generis* realities to propose a focus on recurrent social practices and their transformations (Giddens, 1991b: 203). Consequently, his vision of social life is essentially processual, with everything in 'fluid process of becoming', but he sees nothing emerging out of these processes other than some unintended consequences of actions (Archer, 1995: 95–6). Even 'structural properties', the 'rules and resources' that enable and constrain agency, have no existence outside their instantiation by agents, having only a 'virtual existence' in the heads of social actors (Archer, 1995: 97–8; see Craib, 1992: 42).



Kilminster (1991: 101) has argued that this vision of social life tends to underestimate the affective dimensions of humans that allow us to bond with others, endorsing a highly rationalistic view of humans as reflexively monitoring actors, but it also attributes humans with immense powers in terms of shaping social realities (whose existence is 'virtual' outside their actions).

In contrast to Giddens, Bhaskar (1989: 77) and Archer (1995: 139) emphasise that 'society pre-exists the individual': 'the church-goer or language user finds their beliefs or language *ready made at birth*' (emphasis in original). With regard to religion, rather than something such as Christianity having only a virtual reality 'instantiated' through actions, Christians find themselves *constrained* by the systems of belief and practice that may date back thousands of years. Some, of course, can feel repulsed rather than attracted by the demands these might place upon individuals, and seek to 'pick and mix' from available traditions or even seek to invent new forms, but this can only be done within already existing constraints that, minimally, allow the use of the term 'Christian' at all. Furthermore, as Durkheim (1982a: 51) suggested, 'I am not forced to speak French with my compatriots, nor to use the legal currency, but it is impossible for me to do otherwise ... Even when in fact I can struggle free from these rules and successfully break them, it is never without being forced to fight against them.' Here, Durkheim is establishing the reality of social facts through their causal effects upon action (Bhaskar, 1998: 220). However, the idea that society is an emergent reality is not simply dependent upon notions of constraint: the emergence of society is also expressed through the stimulation of ideas, feelings and moral bonds that transcend the utilitarian calculation of self-interest (Durkheim, 1995: 209). This is where the notion of 'hyper-spirituality' is particularly useful.

### Hyper-spiritual society

Durkheim's dynamic picture of social life is reflected in his interest in the pre-contractual foundations of the 'organic solidarity' that, in his earliest book, he believed to be characteristic of modern societies (Durkheim, 1984).<sup>6</sup> What he was suggesting was that the more formal contractual and institutional dimensions of society depended on the circulation of pre-existing social forces, energies and obligations, an idea that Rowan Williams (2000: 58–9), via an assessment of the continuing value of Bossy's (1985) notion of the 'social miracle', has recently emphasised as being crucial to a satisfactory understanding of what societies essentially are. Although Durkheim later abandoned the distinction between 'mechanical' and 'organic' forms of solidarity, his interest in these pre-contractual forces continued, and they are at the heart of what he means by 'hyper-spirituality'. What is of particular note about this notion is that it expresses the idea that, emerging from the relations between individuals, there is a specific social ecology within which individual identities are reshaped and developed in far-reaching ways.

Durkheim's argument is that the simple aggregation of the biological and mental components of an individual human cannot account for the distinctive consciousness, predispositions and personality of that individual: rather, these distinctive characteristics are aspects of an individuality emergent from the processes and interactions, in totality, of all the different components of individual life. Anticipating twenty-first century philosophies of the mind (Sawyer, 2002), Durkheim argued that these *sui generis* characteristics constitute the particular 'psychic life', or 'spirituality', of the individual. By analogy, he argues that society, as a *sui generis* phenomenon emergent from relations between individuals, has its own specific hyper-spirituality and that this represents the distinctive object of sociological study (Durkheim, 1974a: 27–8, 34). In short, what we call 'society' is not simply an empirical or pragmatic phenomenon constructed with the aim of meeting certain economic, political or philosophical needs, but a *sui generis* 'enhancement of being' that imbues social life with its transcendent character (Freitag, 2002). Consequently, the notion of hyper-spirituality is of fundamental sociological importance because it helps illuminate the ontological depth of social reality, pointing towards a holistic context for human action, belief and experience that escapes empirically focused sociologies.

Georges Gurvitch (1964, 1971) expanded upon Durkheim's work in this regard by developing a form of 'depth level analysis' that aimed to study observable social phenomena in relation to what Korenbaum (1964: xiii) calls 'the very deepest, most obscured and veiled layers of social reality'. These deepest layers were found in emergent forms of collective consciousness, characterised by an inherent dynamism that shaped societies in subtle but far-reaching ways (Thompson, 1971: xvi). In more contemporary studies such a systematic approach to these deeper layers of social reality is notably absent, though there are some intriguing suggestions that such phenomena remain significant. Indeed, a useful way of expanding upon the importance of Durkheim's notion of hyper-spirituality is to note the presence, in a range of social theories, of an under-theorised reference to a holistic substratum of social energies or forces that underpin a society's more institutionalised dimensions. Virilio, for example, identifies a subterranean 'social drama' within everyday life that often eludes institutionally focused forms of sociology (Armitage, 2000: 43). This idea is also found in the work of de Certeau (1984: xi), who talks of 'the obscure background of social activity', as well as in the Durkheimian arguments of Maffesoli (1996) concerning the 'social divine'. Bauman (2001: 3–4), in fact, also refers to the 'life-juices' of society, which provide a sort of 'metacapital' that binds individuals into particular social orders. In each case, the nature and significance of this social substratum are not articulated in a developed way, and in Bauman's work, in particular, this substratum appears to be of decreasing sociological significance.

While Gurvitch's (1964: 1) focus on the 'pluri-dimensional' characteristics of social phenomena is a great deal more systematic than many of these more recent studies, however, and clearly focused upon their

enduring sociological importance, what his work lacks is a detailed engagement with the moral and the religious implications of these 'veiled' layers of social reality. More helpfully, though, the philosopher of science Michael Polanyi (1958, 1967) has also talked of a social substratum of knowledge, a 'tacit dimension', that not only shapes human thought but also projects it beyond the empirical towards a fuller grasp of the nature of reality. Here, as Torrance (1985: 113) suggests, it is possible to appreciate how human life has an inherently social and moral character that reveals to us the world in its ontological depth. Our human embodiment, which enables us to transcend the limits of individual existence through our interactions with others in society, integrates us within a 'spiritual reality' that thereby builds an open-ended transcendent relation into our personal and social reality (Polanyi, 1967: 53ff.; Torrance, 1985: 111; see also Bossy, 1985, Williams, 2000).

Polanyi's notion of an emergent, tacit 'spiritual reality' and Durkheim's notion of an emergent societal 'hyper-spirituality' have a great deal in common, as is clear in relation to Durkheim's account of the *homo duplex* character of humans. He emphasises this *homo duplex* nature in two senses: first, human identities have individual and collective sources; second, their 'rational' dimensions arise out of a 'non-rational' stimulation and circulation of social energies within the *sui generis* reality of society (Durkheim, 1974b). The causal significance of hyper-spirituality within his vision of societal complexity is manifest in this power of society to suggest, and, indeed, impose, certain ways of acting and thinking upon individuals (Durkheim, 1982b: 248). It is also manifest, however, in the fact that this fundamental 'coerciveness' of society co-exists with the stimulus to an open-ended investigation of social reality in all its ontological depth. It is in the context of this duality that sociology, which is rooted in the attempt to investigate this ontological depth, becomes possible: it is itself emergent from hyper-spirituality, but comes to explore this hyper-spirituality systematically (Durkheim, 1953; Lukes, 1973: 416).

Postmodernist theories, however, even if they do not reject the idea of the social *per se*, tend to reject the idea of any holistic dimension to social relations, focusing on processes of fragmentation or segmentation. Deleuze and Guattari (1988: 208), for example, return to Durkheim's fiercest contemporary critic, Gabriel Tarde, to help emphasise their key principle of the segment taking precedence over any notion of an organic whole (Gane, 2003: 148). None the less, it is important to note that, for Durkheim (1974b: 24), the hyper-spirituality of collective life is not only manifest in the relations between individuals and a 'total society', but between individuals and 'secondary groups' within a larger social whole. This is evident even in relation to small-scale social groupings such as families, where enduring social relations can produce distinctively collective realities which have a profound effect upon the consciousness and actions of the individuals within them, for good or ill.<sup>7</sup> The notion of hyper-spirituality is not, therefore, meant to refer to *one* form of overarching collectivism that contains all

individualities within its vast embrace. On the contrary, it refers to a quality of human relations emergent from our embodied being-in-the-world, facilitating the birth and flourishing of the distinctively social aspects of our humanity at various emergent levels that embrace intimate relations, small groups, nations and even global relations.

This is not to say that such a flourishing is in all respects desirable, however, since social energies and forces have an *ambiguous* quality. This helps us understand how it is that social forces can promote heroism, loyalty and self-sacrifice as well as racism, fascism and barbarism (Durkheim, 1995: 213; Fields, 1995: xlii). As something that arises from the hyper-spiritual dimensions of society, religion too has often manifested this ambiguity, stirring up violence and war as well as nurturing profound insights into the nature of life and human destiny. Even so, as an emergent phenomenon concerned with the transcendental conditions of human togetherness inherent within humanity's embodied being in the world, religion is a uniquely important social phenomenon worthy, as Durkheim recognised, of very serious sociological attention.<sup>8</sup>

### Religious society

There has been a recent upsurge of academic interest in a range of phenomena that have been labelled 'religious'. In fact, many writers are now beginning to draw attention to the spread of religious factors across many social and cultural domains, including 'techno-science' (Virilio, 1996), everyday social interactions (Maffesoli, 1996), consumerism (Featherstone, 1991; Ritzer, 1999), communications media (Lyon, 2000) and postmodernist philosophy (Wernick, 1992). The fact that many studies of these new religious phenomena draw on Durkheim's work suggest the continuing value of his view that 'the religious life of a people is a manifestation of its profoundest being' (Hertz, 1983: 87). Like Luckmann's (1967) notion of 'invisible religion', however, these uses of Durkheim tend to work with very broad conceptions of what can count as 'sacred', so that more or less anything can be seen in 'religious' terms. This has the advantage of illuminating common features between apparently 'secular' phenomena and more traditional religious forms, and of highlighting the hyper-spiritual context from which both forms emerge. Maffesoli (1996: 73), for example, using Durkheim's notion of the 'social divine', associates the effervescent solidarity exhibited in sexual networks, Internet groups and various sporting and musical groupings with the Christian concept of the 'communion of saints'.

The disadvantage of such approaches, however, is that a focus on common features can ignore fundamental differences: sexual networks come into existence with the utilitarian purpose of facilitating the gratification of specific desires, and do not tend to look further than that; the notion of the 'communion of saints', on the other hand, embraces all sorts of beliefs, arguments and experiences developed over centuries, concerning issues of life and death, human potentiality and limitations, and the nature of the uni-

verse. Simply to equate the two is to adopt a sociological strategy that cannot distinguish between the fairly unreflective gratification of immediate desires and serious attempts to grapple with questions about human destiny and the nature of life. In fact, such studies conflate religion with the hyper-spirituality of society when they should be seen as distinct, though related, phenomena.

In this respect, it is notable that Lemert (1999), drawing on Durkheim's theories, supplemented by historical studies of Greek society, offers an account of religion that sees it, as Durkheim did, in relation to 'the serious life'.<sup>9</sup> His argument is that the value of an engagement with religion for social theory rests on its illumination of the contingency and finitude of human existence, grounded in the human experience of family and community. As he suggests, religion is a source of social and political realism, in the sense that it reminds us that hope, and the feelings of fellowship and identity that bind us into a society, are inextricably tied to the brute facts of human mortality and interdependence. For Lemert (1999: 260), as for Charles Taylor (1994: 73), the value of religion in this sense is particularly apparent in relation to conflicts surrounding the 'politics of redistribution' and the 'politics of recognition': by accepting that issues of social injustice and cultural difference are rooted in a religious engagement with human finitude, at societal and individual levels, then some of the social, cultural and political conflicts of contemporary societies can be placed in a new, more constructive context.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, Lemert's focus on religion as a reminder of human contingency and finitude robs its emergent cosmological dimensions of any real ontological significance, and reduces it to a pragmatic means of curbing dangerous forms of social and political utopianism. In contrast, the understanding of religion developed throughout this book holds that it is a phenomenon that expresses, through actions and beliefs, a collective engagement with the possibilities of transcendence emergent from the contingencies, potentialities and limitations of embodied human life. As already noted, Durkheim's notion of an emergent hyper-spirituality suggests that an open-ended orientation towards transcendence is a defining feature of our embodied relations with others in society: it is this orientation that facilitates the emergence and development of those distinctively religious actions, beliefs and forms of knowledge that, with varying degrees of systematisation, subtlety and complexity, reveal further aspects of the world's ontological depth, and thereby place human social life within a broader, characteristically cosmological perspective. It is this 'revelation' of ontological depth that accounts for the social power of religions, evident in the embodied commitment of individual persons to morally, practically and intellectually demanding forms of life (Archer, 2000: 186), and in the structuring of societies according to religious principles. Given that the latter might be regarded as the more problematic of these two examples, since sociology has for a long time taken assump-

tions about secularisation for granted, it is worthwhile introducing two key points, to be developed later in this book, concerning the specifically Christian influence upon Western societies.

First, assumptions about contemporary Christian decline can all too easily encourage a failure to take seriously the Christian influence upon the historical evolution of Western societies, resulting in a general, and unsupportable, neglect of the immense importance of religious issues. As Trigg (1998: 5) suggests, 'the instant dismissal of the beliefs on which our Western civilisation was founded is neither very sensible nor very scholarly'. In contrast to such short-sightedness, which rests on a simplistic understanding of historical development, writers with a broader grasp of history have demonstrated the central significance of Christianity for the development of Europe (Rémond, 1999), the natural sciences (Torrance, 1984), the social sciences (Shilling and Mellor, 2001; Gane, 2003), and even of modernity itself (Kumar, 1995).

Second, however, the Christian influence upon social life is not only historical but evident in the present too, even if this influence is to a large degree concealed by a discourse of secularity. As Oliver O'Donovan (1999: 247) notes, although the modern liberal technological society appears to be thoroughly 'secular', and often seems to operate as a 'quasi-mechanical system' devoid of specific moral and religious dimensions, this ostensible secularity rests on a 'false self-consciousness': the distinction between the religious and the secular has a specifically Christian character, expressed historically in the separation of the spiritual and the temporal and notions of 'two realms' or 'two cities' (see Taylor, 1989). Further to this, even some of the most distinctive manifestations of modern Western secularity have been underpinned by specifically Christian beliefs. Thus, the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which enshrines the principle of the separation of church and state, 'can usefully be taken as the symbolic end of Christendom' (O'Donovan, 1999: 244). None the less, this doctrine was shaped by ardent Christians who believed that the First Amendment would facilitate the development of 'authentic Christianity', rather than by self-conscious secularists (O'Donovan, 1999: 245).

The sociological significance of the Christian influence upon modern notions of 'secular' society is apparent when we consider that, in contrast to Christianity, Islam, for example, does not have a distinction between 'two realms', which is why Muslims do not tend to see Western secularity as religiously neutral in the way that Westerners tend to (see Rémond, 1999: 196; Siedentop, 2000: 208). This underlines the importance of specifically *religious* differences for the development of society, and points towards some of the dangers in trying to explain away religious factors through forms of economic or political reductionism. In this regard, it is notable how, in post-September 11th assessments of conflicts between Islam and the West, Turner (2002), Fukuyama (2002) and Kellner (2002), following the example of Barber (2001), can all underplay distinctive elements of Islamic belief and practice, and concentrate instead on economic and political issues relat-

ing to relative poverty and the global spread of Western consumerism. As Huntington's (1996) 'clash of civilisations' thesis suggests, however, religious differences can have very deep roots within, and immense influence upon, societal forms that are civilisational in scope. Ignoring the religious assumptions underpinning our own 'secular' accounts of society cannot put sociologists in a good position to comprehend societies outside the modern West.

In the light of these arguments, it is possible to appreciate the wisdom of Durkheim's (1995) contention that, at an elementary level, society is always a religious phenomenon, though it also necessary to reject his reductionist understanding of religion as a symbolic expression of social forces, just as he rejects the idea that the *sui generis* reality of society can be reduced into its individual constituents.<sup>11</sup> It is only by embracing the idea that 'downwards reductionism' is theoretically unacceptable that the real social significance of religion, as a causal power affecting people's views, choices and actions, can be appreciated. Although emergent from hyper-spirituality, an idea that has traditionally been addressed by theologians through the subject of 'natural theology' (see Trigg, 1998: 175–182), religion's capacity to engage productively with the orientation towards transcendence that characterises social relationships not only ensures that religion is always 'a fundamental and permanent aspect of humanity' (Durkheim, 1995: 1), but also ensures that religious influences are located at the heart of all societies rather than in the private or epiphenomenal 'sub-systems' envisaged by secularisation theorists. Further to this, a non-reductionist understanding of religion helps clarify the meaning of MacIntyre's (1955: 260) claim that different religions offer 'mutually exclusive ontologies', since the reality of the world's ontological depth is not only revealed in, but inseparable from, the social and historical specificity of particular traditions of belief and practice (see Moore, 2003).<sup>12</sup>

### Multi-dimensional society

In the course of this chapter, I have considered some key aspects of the contemporary critique of the notion of society, arguing that the mistaken identification of classical sociological notions of society with the modern nation-state ignores their sensitivity to the historical development of diverse societal forms. In particular, I have argued that such critiques tend to misrepresent Durkheim's thought, and have emphasised the value of building upon his social realism in order to develop a more satisfactory understanding of society. Following this, I have suggested that this new understanding must take account of the following four arguments: first, that society is dependent for its emergence on the embodied characteristics and potentialities of human beings; second, that, as an emergent form, society has a *sui generis* character, transcendent of the individuals who constitute it; third,

that this transcendence can be conceptualised as a distinctive ‘hyper-spirituality’ that offers a specific ecology within which the social aspects of our humanity are nurtured and developed; and fourth, that the hyper-spiritual aspects of social reality imbue it with an open-ended orientation towards transcendence that allows for the emergence of those religious forms that come to exercise a defining influence upon social life.

These arguments will be developed throughout the rest of the book with reference to six dimensions of society that, properly explicated, can help revitalise its sociological study, and reveal the over-hastiness of those who seek to abandon it for post-societal forms of sociology. Each chapter is focused on one of these dimensions, examining society as a *complex, contingent, necessary, temporal, tacit* and *resurgent* reality.

Chapter 2 is concerned with society as a *complex* reality, and contains a more detailed examination of post-societal perspectives, focusing upon how the underlying ontological assumptions specific to various contemporary social and cultural theories are able to deal with moral and religious issues satisfactorily, and investigating the degree to which the ‘hyper-spirituality’ of social realities as emergent phenomena is dealt with adequately, if at all. Through a critical discussion of various forms of postmodern theory, sociological visions of the technological reconstruction of social and cultural life, and contemporary theories of consumerism, individualism and market processes, it is argued that many of these theories engage with social realities in a highly partial manner through various forms of reductionism that take insufficient account of enduring human characteristics and potentialities. In contrast, it is argued that societies must be seen as complex, non-reducible phenomena emergent from human relationships.

Chapter 3 extends these arguments further by focusing on the *contingent* character of society. As Archer (1995, 2000) has emphasised, society is not a self-subsistent reality, but one that is dependent for its emergence upon the human beings who constitute it. In this regard, the arguments constructed in this chapter emphasise the importance of developing an embodied understanding of society, and seek to demonstrate that the hyper-spiritual and religious forces that are key features of social life are emergent phenomena contingent upon, but irreducible to, human individuals who possess particular potentialities and powers. The arguments of this chapter are developed through a critical discussion of a broad range of theorists but are focused specifically upon the social theories of Turner and Rojek (2001), Archer (1995, 2000), Durkheim (1995) and Bataille (1987, 1991), all of which offer illuminating, though sometimes problematic, accounts of the embodied basis of society. Bringing them into dialogue, I suggest, offers a fruitful way forward for developing a social realist account of the contingent relationship between embodiment, society, hyper-spirituality and religion.

Chapter 4 complements the discussion of the contingent nature of society by focusing on the fact that it nevertheless imposes itself as a *necessary* reality. In contrast to theories focused on the plurality of choices and options



facing modern individuals, the first part of this chapter is focused on the analysis of taboo, which, despite the postmodern concern with transgression, can be considered as a central manifestation of the impact of society as a *sui generis* reality upon individuals, in the sense that taboos express some of the obligatory aspects of hyper-spiritual dynamics. Following this, Mauss's (1969) account of gift exchange is considered as a key study of how patterns of reciprocal obligation come to circulate within various types of society, while Bataille's (1991) development of Mauss's arguments in his own account of the 'general' and the 'restricted' economy is discussed as a direct challenge to those postmodern theorists who seek to co-opt Bataille for their own ends. What both Mauss and Bataille demonstrate is that the economy is always embedded in society, an idea that is also the cornerstone of Polanyi's (2001) contribution to the study of modern economic systems. Consequently, the rest of the chapter examines Polanyi's thoroughgoing critique of the market model of humanity and society, which, though originally published in 1944, illuminates tendencies towards an economically driven dehumanisation of social realities that are particularly relevant to the contemporary era of globalisation.

Chapter 5 extends the reappraisal of society further by focusing on the broad *temporal* context within which societies develop, and the distinction between the temporal and the spiritual that has had a major influence upon the development of various theological, philosophical and sociological notions of society. After discussing the value of a social realist account of the significance of time for how we conceptualise society, it is argued that Christian history has provided Western societies with certain cultural contradictions, concerning the temporal and the spiritual, that continue into the present and still affect how we make sense of social life. Following this, it is argued that these contradictions run through influential philosophical accounts of social bonds and contracts, and are present in some key sociological visions of modernity. Throughout, it is suggested that many conventional assumptions about contemporary secularity tend to confuse the way we think about things with the way things really are, and that in this respect the distinction between the temporal and the spiritual can be more analytically precise and useful than that between the secular and the religious.

Chapter 6 is concerned with how the *tacit* dimensions of society are embedded within individual and collective forms of consciousness. The first part of this chapter is devoted to exploring Durkheim's notion of 'collective representations' with regard to this 'embedding' process. Following this is a critical assessment of Serge Moscovici's 'social representations' theory, which adds to Durkheim's work a valuable account of the persistence of certain 'core themata' within the fluid, shifting configurations of social forms and processes that characterise modern life, and the role of social representations in the world-views of even those who claim not to believe in them. The rest of the chapter focuses on three different strata within social reality that are dependent upon tacit forms of knowledge resistant to reflexive deconstruction. First, various attempts to explore the sociological signif-

icance of 'everyday life' are discussed in relation to what Bourdieu has referred to as the 'doxic', or taken-for-granted knowledge enfolded in the social habitus (Fowler, 1997: 2). Second, the presence of a tacitly Christian way of structuring conceptions of social life within various modern notions of 'public' and 'private' life is discussed as a key example of how a core sociological dichotomy can rest on a religious substratum. Third, the role of tacit assumptions in inter-societal relations is considered, looking at the different role of Christian and Islamic representations in Said's (1978) thesis on 'Orientalism'. In conclusion, it is suggested that a focus on how the tacit dimensions of societies continue to shape the consciousnesses of individuals calls into question those sociological visions that too readily assume 'a disappearance of the social bond and value breakdown' (Lash and Featherstone, 2001: 17).

Chapter 7 is concerned with society as a *resurgent* reality. Through a critical discussion of the various strategies employed by contemporary social theorists to ignore the specifically religious dimensions of contemporary conflicts between Islam and 'the West', which are, for example, often reduced to economic factors or debates about modernity and its discontents, this chapter argues that a neo-Durkheimian form of social realism is best placed to illuminate the real nature of these conflicts, and to help make sense of the return of theological factors to the social theory of writers such as Virilio. The key point stressed here is that, viewed within a 'stratified ontology' sensitive to emergent hyper-spiritual and religious forces, a fresh analysis of contemporary conflicts between Islam and the West can help us to grasp some of the key challenges facing social theory today; challenges that do not reveal the demise of society, but, on the contrary, its resurgence. Following this, Chapter 8 draws together all the preceding arguments and offers some concluding comments upon why sociology must remain focused upon the study of society.

## Notes

1. Bauman (2002: 11, 43), for example, identifies sociology's understanding of 'society' with the emergence of the modern nation-state; an identification reinforced by his description of society as an 'imagined community' in the manner of Anderson's (1991) well-known analysis of the nation-state. Urry's (2000) account of the history of the term 'society' also focuses on its emergence with the rise of the modern nation-state and its subsequent incorporation into European and American visions of the sociological project under the influence of Durkheim and Parsons. None the less, this not only underestimates the subtlety and complexity of many sociological theories of society, including that of Durkheim, but also offers a highly selective account of the history of 'society' as a concept, even within sociology itself.

2. Contrary to the common sociological view of the bold claims Durkheim makes for society, the Durkheimian tradition also offers a useful basis for thinking about society because it can illuminate society's *limits*. The common view ignores the extent to which Durkheim was deeply concerned with philosophical questions of freedom, necessity and determinism, and the fact that he developed a realist rather than idealist form of social theory that sought to take these into account, emphasising that social facts should be studied as real things not as concepts (Jones, 1999: 77). His concern with the embodied character of human beings, and there-

fore of social life, is crucial in this respect, and is the proper context in which to assess his stress on the socially creative role of phenomena such as 'collective effervescence' (Durkheim, 1995: 221). Consequently, I shall argue that, although Durkheim is often held to exemplify what Archer (1988, 1995, 2000) has called 'downwards conflation' (reducing everything into society), he actually proposes a realist form of social theory close to Archer's own (even if her arguments help illuminate certain limitations in Durkheim's thought), and that this offers a productive basis upon which to explore the relationship between society and humanity's embodied being-in-the-world.

3. Furthermore, as Archer (1998: 193) notes, we should remember that the privileges of Western societies have to be placed in broader human context: 'The postmodern experience is not on globally for those needing bread not circuses and seeking freedom of expression not expressive freedom. There are transcendental material requirements for the existence of the Collège de France and for the privileged practice of "playing with the pieces".'

4. Even though this was not his intention, Bellah's (1973: ix-x) comment that 'Durkheim uses the word "society" in ways closer to classical theology than to empirical science' would no doubt be taken as a damning condemnation by those sociologists who believe he reifies society. None the less, Bellah's comment touches upon Durkheim's attempts to invest social realities with sufficient ontological depth.

5. Bhaskar (1998: 211) has sought to distinguish his own 'critical realism' from Durkheim's social realism on the basis that Durkheim associates society's emergent powers with *collective* rather than *relational* phenomena. He argues that, in contrast, collective phenomena must be 'seen primarily as the expressions of enduring relationships'. This misunderstands Durkheim's position, however, which is actually very close to what Bhaskar is proposing.

6. Durkheim's model of society has been described as 'a social body which suffers all the processes of life and death and rebirth' (Gane, 1983a: 229), under the impact of *sthenic* and *asthenic* cycles of social forces (Mauss, 1973: 292). The dynamism inherent to it has also been developed by Victor Turner (1967, 1974) through his notion of *communitas*.

7. This is an especially significant point, however, in relation to contemporary Western societies, which are characterised by such diversity that Touraine (1989: 15), amongst others, can argue that the complex and changing fields of social relations seriously compromise any simple association between individuals and an overarching totality. Here, social groups of many sizes and strengths manifest diverse forms of practical action and varied representational systems that can have a complex and often conflict-ridden relationship with others, as well as with nation-states and global forces and institutions (see Yeatman, 2003). Hyper-spirituality may be an inherent feature of all social relationships, then, but the forms it takes not only vary enormously but can also overlap in different emergent strata, and can thereby provoke social and cultural conflict.

8. The hyper-spiritual substratum of a society is a 'domain of uncertainty', in the sense that all sorts of phenomena can emerge from it to reflect upon the transcendent conditions of human togetherness, such as sociology, philosophy and political theory. The persistent emergence and endurance of religion, however, suggests that this uncertainty and indeterminacy has boundaries, and that religion is, as Durkheim (1995: 1) suggested, a 'fundamental and permanent' feature of social life.

9. Although, as I have already noted, Lemert (1995: 48) has, in the past, been highly critical of Durkheim's understanding of society, his more recent writings have revealed an appreciative and far deeper engagement with Durkheim's thought than many other contemporary critics. This is evident not only in his (1999) discussion of religion and contemporary social theory, but also in his (2003) arguments concerning the presence of Durkheim's 'ghosts' in many contemporary social and cultural theories that ostensibly reject his arguments. For Lemert (2003: 315), Durkheim's enduring legacy rests on the honesty and rigour with which he investigates the tension between the socially constituted character of knowledge and the common human basis upon which different social and cultural forms develop.

10. Anne Warfield Rawls (2001), again drawing on Durkheim's account of religion, also offers an argument that emphasises the value of returning religion to the centre of social the-

ory. She identifies a 'fallacy of misplaced abstraction' that has characterised twentieth-century sociology, exacerbated by the 'cultural turn' in sociological theorising. This fallacy, manifest as the prioritisation of ideas and beliefs over practices, has led, inevitably, to the conclusion, evident in much postmodern theorising and cultural studies, 'that there is no escape from the relativism of competing sets of beliefs, and competing sets of meanings, each of which defines a competing reality' (Rawls, 2001: 63). For her, conflicts concerning phenomena such as oppression, racism and sexism, which, in the light of the 'fallacy of misplaced abstraction', come to be reduced to systems of representations, need to be understood *primarily* as phenomena 'enacted and experienced concretely by real people in real time and in real places' (Rawls, 2001: 63).

11. It is for this reason that social theory must not only engage with theology, but must also resist the temptation to reduce theological realism downwards into social realism: the reality of God, for example, cannot be explained away as a mere symbol of distinctively social phenomena (see Soskice, 1987; Torrance, 1998: 20; Patterson, 1999; Moore, 2003).

12. Further to this, it is inappropriate to suggest that, for example, Christianity and consumerism are comparable 'religious' forms: they may share certain characteristics (e.g. the generation of powerful emotions in relation to shared 'sacred' symbols), but that is because of an analogous hyper-spiritual substratum, not because they are ultimately the same sort of phenomenon. Their engagements with the philosophical, moral and spiritual aspects of the human lot are hardly commensurable, and, of course, phenomena such as consumerism are devoid of any cosmological dimension. It is also inappropriate, however, to assume that religions such as Christianity and Islam are commensurate social forms, given the profound differences in their origins, theology and development over huge periods of time. Consequently, a social realist account of religion, centred on the analysis of emergent dimensions within a 'stratified ontology' (Sayer, 2000: 12), cannot, even if in other respects it is much indebted to Durkheim, adopt the very broad model for what counts as 'religion' that has come to be associated with Durkheimianism: it offers a reductionist interpretation of emergent phenomena that too readily flattens out very significant differences under the weight of purportedly common social functions, and thereby limits the degree to which contemporary differences and conflicts are comprehensible.