



Open Research Online

Citation

Black, James (2023). To what extent was Jane Harrison's theory of Greek religion influenced by Emile Durkheim? Student dissertation for The Open University module YXM830 Advance your independent learning.

URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/92860/>

License

(CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from [Open Research Online \(ORO\) Policies](#)

Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding

James Black

Tutor: Christine Abbott

Course: YXM830

To what extent was Jane Harrison's theory of Greek religion influenced by Emile Durkheim?

INTRODUCTION

This essay will demonstrate that Emile Durkheim's (1887–1917) theory of 'anomie' was a critical influence on Jane Harrison's (1850-1928) account of Greek religion. While Harrison herself, and many scholars of her work, have noted the influence of Durkheim's theory of totemism on Harrison, the importance of anomie—loss of shared meaning—in her work has been neglected. It will be argued that this aspect of Durkheim's influence is critical both to understanding Harrison's theory and to understanding both Durkheim and Harrison's shared attempt to use their theories to answer the problem of meaninglessness and loss of collective life in their own time. However, given Harrison's personality, and her use of many thinkers and theories to inform her theory, the concept of 'influence' here will be qualified to mean 'catalyst' rather than 'direct indebtedness.'

TOTEMISM

Harrison drew on Durkheim to show that Greek religion was rooted in social ritual, which prolonged life and affirmed collective experience and values. For Durkheim (2001), all religion has its roots in human society, it emerges out of the primal emotional charge of collective experience and develops into a reflection of this experience, embodied by the totem, which is 'a sacred object or creature that serves as a collective emblem of the group' (Cladis, 2001, p.xviii). For this reason, Durkheim famously said 'religion is something eminently social' (Durkheim, 2001, p.11).

Ackerman (1991, pp.105-109) shows that Jane Harrison sought to explain the difference between the Olympian gods of mythic literature in all their polytheistic diversity and idealisation, and the increasing evidence which demonstrated a much earlier, ritualistic form of Greek religion. After reading the early work of

Durkheim she used his theory of ‘religion as group projection’ to claim that the many gods and representations in Greek religion were expressions of the ‘eniautos daimon’, the ‘year spirit’, which itself represents the continued life of the society. Harrison (1912, p.xiv) applied this model to a newly-discovered inscription of a hymn to the Kouretes, guardians of the infant Zeus of ancient Crete, which she said was an initiation song calling for abundance of life, harvest and the worship of Themis—the goddess of custom and social life.

In the introduction to her book *Themis* (1912), Harrison says: ‘among primitive peoples, religion reflects collective feeling and collective thinking’ (Harrison, 1912, p.xiii). And of the Kouretes hymn she adds that ‘we had in it a text that embodied this very group-thinking, or rather group-emotion towards life’ (Harrison, 1912, p.xiv). Durkheim’s theory allowed her to explain the relationship between earlier ritual forms of Greek totemism and the later polytheisms, which she said mark an evolution from a simple desire to increase life, towards worshipping the totems as actual separate gods with their own features.

It is this explanation that causes her to say of Themis, the goddess of ‘ordinance’ and ‘the force that brings and binds men together,’ that ‘she is “herd instinct,” the collective conscience, the social sanction’ (Harrison, 1912, p.485). Harrison adds that ‘she is not religion, but she is the stuff of which religion is made’ and ‘the substratum of each and every god’ (Harrison, 1912, p.485). All of this is very heavily Durkheimian and Harrison admits as much.

Because early ritual and later idealised Greek religion were so different, Harrison found in Durkheim a ‘usable social psychology’ that explains the roots of Greek religion in immediate feeling and action, rather than ‘primitive explanation’ or proto-science, which was the trend in Victorian anthropology (Ackerman, 1991, p.113). Csapo (2005) has noted that Durkheim allowed Harrison as a classicist to back up her intuitions with a close reading of the Kouretes hymn. In light of Durkheim, the code of the inscription not only made sense but could be linked to the wider social function of society. Csapo says: ‘Themis was the projection of the social order itself: society will emerge as both the beginning and the end of the dance, of the hymn, and of religion itself’ (Csapo, 2005, p.148). Robinson (2002) also notes that in reading Durkheim, Harrison made sense of a unifying social function while explaining the many polytheistic gods of Greek religion. Robinson says that for Harrison, ‘the group is primary, the god secondary’ and ‘whether Zeus or Dionysus is irrelevant’ (Robinson, 2002, p.224).

Ackerman (1991, p.73), Robinson (2002, pp.220-222) and Csapo (2005, p.145-152) all show, however, that Harrison’s attraction to Durkheim’s totemism sprung from her personality as a scholar and therefore

a pre-existing agenda. Ackerman (1991) says that Harrison's own intuitions as a scholar were to find holistic accounts of phenomena, rather than analyse things away, so she 'must have seen Durkheim's view of religion as a projection of group needs and wishes as not only in tune with her own intuitions but unifying rather than atomizing and therefore likely to be right' (Ackerman, 1991, p.78). And as Robinson notes, Harrison's quest was 'as much in search for personal meaning as for scholarly insight' (Robinson, 2002, p.220). Scholars also note that Harrison used Durkheim only among many other thinkers' ideas, and that she was a great synthesiser, most notably drawing on Henri Bergson alongside Durkheim. Wheeler-Barclay (2010) notes that the 'dynamism, intuition, creativity' of Bergson's theory of time 'resonated deeply with Harrison's own long-standing beliefs and values' (Wheeler-Barclay, 2010, pp.233-234). Csapo (2005, pp.150-155) also says that Harrison differed from Durkheim on where the original collective energy for religion comes from, arguing for a pre-ritual state, rather than a state of spontaneous ritual which Durkheim had argued for. And as Beard (2000) has noted, Harrison's use of thinkers such as Durkheim too often allows modern scholars to miss Harrison's unique methods of reading ancient vases. Beard says that Harrison's scholarship was 'founded on a commitment to reading visual images as part of an argument about ancient culture and religion more generally' (Beard, 2000, pp.98-99). Beard adds that Harrison's use of totemism must be seen 'not simply as a Ritualist tract or a Durkheimian exploration, but as a study in art history and archaeology' (Beard, 2000, p.108).

We can see then, that even in the case of totemism, which Harrison admitted she took from Durkheim, that 'influence' was not direct, but catalysed a pre-existing disposition to synthesise ideas and see Greek religion as a social phenomena, and also her Durkheimianism came as part of a much wider theoretical approach than any one thinker.

ANOMIE

Macfarlane (2022) says that anomie is 'a term used by Durkheim to mean a state of rootlessness, aimless and loneliness, where individuals feel unconnected to others and no longer able to depend on a stable framework of personal ties or ideas' (Macfarlane, 2022, p.253). Morrison (2005) says that Durkheim saw anomie happening when 'the collective grasp of society over the individual loosens' and 'there is individual divergence and society is divided into smaller compartments enclosing the individual' (Morrison, 2005, p.148). In *Division of*

Labour, Durkheim (1893 excerpted in Durkheim, 1973, p.173) himself states that anomie results when economic specialisation fails to give enough collective meaning during times of radical change. Unlike Marx, he did not think that specialisation on its own was the problem, but it causes anomie when society at large changes and the individual loses a direct picture of his or her place in the whole. Durkheim said that in this state individuals ‘can only devote themselves, without hope of satisfaction, to the pursuit of an end that always eludes them’ (Durkheim, 1973, p.173).

Though Jane Harrison never actually uses the word ‘anomie’, it is clear that she is preoccupied by the problems of solidarity and the challenge of maintaining common values in a changing society. For Harrison, the goddess of justice and order, Themis, ‘is the very spirit of the assembly incarnate’ and she adds: ‘She is... the collective conscience, the social sanction. She is *fas*, the social imperative.’ (Harrison, 1912, p.485). Harrison is not just borrowing Durkheim’s totemism, then, but arguing that the collective representation found in a totem has a *socially binding* effect. She says: ‘Religion has in it then two elements, social custom, the collective conscience, and the emphasis and representation of that collective conscience’ (Harrison, 1912, p.486). Making again an explicit reference to Durkheim, she notes his use of the word ‘*obligatoire*’ to mean the moral demands of collective experience. So Harrison (1912, p.487) clearly sees the moral force as being intrinsic to the totem, and is therefore concerned with more than merely the roots of religion but its socially binding function.

The preoccupation with obligation, collective custom and shared moral conscience, demonstrate that Harrison recognises what we lose without religion, and that religion can degenerate into individualism the further it is removed from collective ritual. She also notes (1912, p.xxii) that what we think about Greek religion opens up possibilities for what we think about ourselves today. Harrison (1912, pp.xxii-xxiii) adds that her studies have demonstrated a ‘new value’ to be found in the unifying powers of religious ritual, a unifying power that is not dependent on dogmatic theology or institutionalised religion but one grounded in universal human worth.

Harrison’s essay *Heresy and Humanity* (1915a) argues that in modernity, we prize heresy over orthodoxy, but this means a loss of collective conscience, a weakening of group values. She says that science ‘broke the binding spell of herd-suggestion’ and yet our ‘keenest emotional life is through the herd, and hence it was that, at the close of last century, the flame of scientific hope, the glory of scientific individualism that had blazed so brightly, somehow died down and left a strange chill’ (Harrison, 1915a, p.35).

Harrison (1915a, p.35) then goes on to cite Durkheim's *Division of Labour*, adopting his point that modern forms of solidarity provide group togetherness based on recognising shared individuality, rather than just homogeneity within a group. However, she adds that, though this might create a better form of solidarity, 'a harder incumbency is upon us' because we 'no longer believe in an unchanging moral law imposed from without' and 'we must work out our law from within' (Harrison, 1915a, p.39). Again, Harrison does not use the word 'anomie' here but her preoccupation with the volatility of collective conscience in modern forms of social relations, and her once more explicit citations of Durkheim, show that it is a concept which dominates a social and programmatic direction of her thinking.

In *Ancient Art and Ritual* (1913) Harrison argues that art and ritual have the same common root—the Durkheimian collective worship of the totem that embodies common life. Modern art has become purely secular, but she argues that it can return to its roots and perform the same anthropological role that it did in ancient Greece—a religious role—without the theological or metaphysical oppression that institutional religion comes with. She says: 'Art is, as we have seen, social in origin, it remains and must remain social in function' (Harrison, 1913, p.259). In the case of ancient theatre, she says it emerged from a ritual dance of initiation, 'the dance of a band, a group, a church, a community' and therefore 'reverence, devotion, collective emotion, is social in its very being' and that such communal celebrations were 'linked by a common name, rallying round a common symbol' (Harrison, 1913, p.259). She adds that while we cannot go back to the totally collective, all-embracing forms of ritual, 'Even to-day, when individualism is rampant, art bears traces of its collective, social origin' (Harrison, 1913, p.259). We can see here a programmatic agenda explicitly stated, with ancient rituals offering a model for modern artists to generate a collective conscience for an individualistic age.

In another essay called the *Study of Religion After Darwin* (1915b), Harrison says that a scientific study of religion makes us understand the profound needs that religious instincts satisfy in humans, and we can now move beyond the question of whether a certain belief is true or false, to understanding where the need to believe comes from and the function collective rituals play in maintaining human life. The need for this collective, highly ritualised activity remains in us. In this concept of the persistence of a collective, ritual need, Harrison may not be discussing a Durkheimian view of anomie explicitly, but she is affirming the need for its opposite—sacred, collective activity that preserves life. Her personal preoccupations alongside her citing of Durkheim, show that the concept of anomie is at play.

Harrison returns to this theme in *Unanimism and Conversion* (1915c), and argues that contemporary poets—calling themselves Unanimists—were using their art to affirm collective life, just as ritual did in antiquity. However, she recognises that the new collectivity she is advocating will be built on Durkheim's 'organic' solidarity, through which individual specialisation forces us to recognise the individuality in each other. Harrison says this new approach to art is a move away from recent individualist views of art as the product of the isolated individual, and rather seeks to affirm 'the oneness of life lived together in groups' and at the same time increasing solidarity through recognising 'the value of each individual manifestation of life' (Harrison, 1915c, p.58). Harrison further says that this new kind of art movement works by creating a sort of religious 'conversion' in each of us, a mystical recognition that we are all connected to life and each other. She even says that this Unanimism is 'the new religion for which the world waits' (Harrison, 1915c, p.70). And she adds: 'Only through that co-operation which is compelled by our modern specialization do we attain real freedom and full individual life, life based on sympathy and mutual interdependence' (Harrison, 1915c, pp.71-72). Here Harrison once again cites Durkheim, and her view of Unanimism mirrors her views of Greek religion as discussed above, only with an emphasis on 'the individual spirit socialized', rather than a total submergence of the individual, as in ancient ritual (Harrison, 1915c, p.65). Harrison's dislike of individualist movements, and her excitement about Unanimist poets affirming collective life, betray her preoccupation with collective conscience, and how re-ritualised art can solve the problems that occur when connections to collective life break down. We can see once again, that while not using the word 'anomie', Harrison sees Greek ritual as a model for modern artists to recreate collective life. She is, in effect, proposing a solution to anomie.

It must be noted, that not only does Harrison not use the word 'anomie', but the very concept itself changes as Durkheim offers varying solutions. Marks (1974) notes that the concept of anomie in *Division of Labour* is a very technical term for the lack of direct connection between fellow workers, whereas in later works, Durkheim uses it to mean a more broader sense of losing meaningful connection to collective conscience. Marks believes the different solutions to anomie Durkheim posited 'entailed too great a compromise with the theory of anomie' and took 'him further and further away from the very structural bases that his theory of anomie had led him to believe were necessary for a viable nomic process' (Marks, 1974, p.343). In other words, the solutions became too impersonal because the concept was too broad. Besnard (2001) has also noted that anomie is an unstable concept, and has 'become interchangeable with the notion of alienation' and too many scholars 'still use it rather vaguely to mean disregulation or disorder' (Besnard, 2001, p.512). It must be

conceded, then, that Harrison can only be said to be influenced by the strict, technical sense of anomie as used in *Division of Labour*, as this is the only work of Durkheim she cites, apart from his early work on religion. And even then, this concept of anomie is only at play in Harrison by implication. Nevertheless, she is clearly influenced by Durkheim's concept of anomie, as the very notion of collective conscience—which is so central to Harrison's view of Greek religion and the role art can play in modern life—makes no sense without her anxiety about its opposite. Given what has been noted about Harrison's worries about modernity, we can see that the concept of anomie is driving her views about the function of art and religion.

Harrison was not merely trying to explain Greek religion, but like Durkheim, she had a social programme, she saw her work as pointing to a way of solving the problems of individualism in contemporary life. As Jones (2003, p.194) has noted, Durkheim was concerned with how the loss of religion and changes in society make it hard to bind people together. This was not, as Jones emphasises, merely a question of egotism, but 'disregulation' (anomie), and Durkheim saw the study of society and religion as way of providing alternative ways of providing common value and meaning. It is clear from the essays above, that Harrison viewed her own studies in Classics in the same way. As Brunotte (2004) notes, 'Harrison's starting point was a critical view of the modern individualistic, rational and Christian-moralistic society' (Brunotte, 2004, p.172). And as Wheeler-Barclay (2010) has pointed out, Harrison's studies of Greek religion gave her 'a discovery that she believed had dramatic implications for her own culture' (Wheeler-Barclay, 2010, p.215). In other words, Harrison theory of religion was driven by contemporary concerns and at the root of these concerns was anomie.

CONCLUSION

It has been shown that Harrison was influenced by Durkheim's totemism and also in his attempt to solve the problem of anomie in modern society. However, the scholarship shows Harrison as a bold and original thinker, so she did not borrow Durkheim's totemism wholesale, but brought the social functionalism of Durkheim into her own vision. Additionally, with the concept of anomie, she does not use the same term at all, but her pre-occupation with collective conscience and finding an alternative form of it, show Durkheim's concept to be an active part of her thought. All this points to the fact while influence can definitely be identified, it is influence in the sense of activating pre-existing intuitions for Harrison, rather than being a direct borrowing.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ackerman, R. (1991) *The Myth and Ritual School: James Frazer and The Cambridge Ritualists*, London, Routledge
- Beard, M. (2000) *The Invention of Jane Harrison*, Cambridge, Massachusetts, Harvard University Press
- Besnard, P. (2001) 'Anomie' in Smelser, N.J. and Baltes, P.B. (eds.) *International Encyclopaedia of the Social & Behavioural Sciences*, Oxford, Elsevier
- Brunotte, U. (2004) 'Ecstasy and Initiation, Jane E. Harrison's ritual theories and their relationship to Nietzsche, Durkheim and Freud,' *Paragrana*, 13(2), pp.162-175
- Cambridge University (2005) *Alan Macfarlane: Lecture 6: Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)*, September 14, Available at <https://upload.sms.cam.ac.uk/media/1411484>
- Cladis, M.S. (2001) 'Introduction' in Durkheim, E., *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Cosman C., Oxford, Oxford World Classics
- Csapo, E (2005) *Theories of Mythology*, Oxford, Wiley Blackwell
- Durkheim, E. (2001) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Cosman C. and ed. with introduction by Cladis, M.S., Oxford, Oxford World Classics
- Durkheim, E. (1972) *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings*, Giddens, A. (ed.), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. doi:10.1017/CBO9780511628085
- Harrison, J.E. (1913) *Ancient Art and Ritual*, Project Gutenberg, [Accessed on iTunes e-reader]
- Harrison, J.H. (1915a) 'Heresy and Humanity' in *Alpha & Omega*, London, Sidgewick & Jackson Ltd
- Harrison, J.E. (1915b) 'The Influence of Darwinism on the Study of Religion,' in *Alpha & Omega*, London, Sidgewick & Jackson Ltd.
- Harrison, J.E. (1912) *Themis: A study of the social origins of Greek religion*, Cambridge, CUP
- Harrison, J (1915c) 'Unanimism and Conversion' in *Alpha & Omega*, London, Sidgewick & Jackson Ltd.
- Jones, R.A. (2003) 'Émile Durkheim' in Ritzer, G. (ed.) *The Blackwell Companion to Major Classical Social Theorists*, Oxford, Blackwell
- Kippenberg, H. (2002) *Discovering Religious History in the Modern Age*, trans. by Hardshaw, B., Princeton, PUP
- Lukes, S (1973) *Emile Durkheim: His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study*, London, Allen Lane, Penguin
- Macfarlane, A. (2022) *Enchantment and Modernity*, Cambridge, Cam Rivers Publishing
- Marks, S.R. (1974) 'Durkheim's Theory of Anomie', *The American Journal of Sociology*, 80(2), pp.329–363
- Mestrovic, S. (2010) 'Durkheim's Era: The Cult of Feeling Versus the Cult of Reason' in *The coming Fin de Siecle: An Application of Durkheim's Sociology to Modernity and Postmodernism*, New York, Taylor & Francis Group, pp.37-53

- Morrison, K. (2005) *Marx, Weber, Durkheim Formations of Modern Thought*, London, SAGE Publications
- Prof Alan Macfarlane - Ayabaya (2021) *Durkheim, his strengths and weaknesses - Alan Macfarlane*, September 2022, Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gexuBBzjIiI>
- Segal, R.A. (1999) 'Durkheim in Britain: The Work of Radcliffe-Brown,' *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford*, 30(2), pp.131-162
- Segal, R.A. (1998) *The Myth and Ritual Theory: An Anthology*, Oxford, Blackwell
- Segal, R. (2004) 'The Place of Religion in Modernity,' *History of the Human Sciences*, 17(4), pp.131-149
- Wheeler-Barclay, M. (2010) 'Jane Ellen Harrison: The Redefinition of Religion' in *The Science of Religion In Britain, 1860-1915*, Virginia, University of Virginia Press, pp.215-241
- Winick, M. (2016). 'Jane Harrison's Ritual Scholarship,' in Anderson, E., Radford, A., Walton, H. (eds) *Modernist Women Writers and Spirituality*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, pp.95-114 https://doi.org/10.1057/978-1-137-53036-3_6