



ARTICLE

Solidarity, Religion, and the Environment: Challenges and Promises in the 21st Century

Mark S. Cladis

Brown University, Providence, USA

ABSTRACT

The relation among solidarity, religion, and the environment is a timely and pressing topic—or cluster of related topics. It has become clear that religion plays a salient role in forging social solidarity and, in the process, of shaping cultural perspectives that pertain to politics, education, the economy, and the environment. In this article, I do the following: (1) I argue that religion and solidarity should not be treated as anomalies in modernity, and that both religion and solidarity continue to play a significant role in local and global events; social solidarity in particular remains an essential condition for addressing many challenges that confront the globe today, including social justice and environmental degradation. (2) Drawing mainly on the work of the social theorist, Emile Durkheim, I show the role solidarity plays in establishing freedom of conscience and individual rights (moral individualism), moral pluralism, moral education, economic justice, and political community; this broad discussion will constitute the greater part of this article. Finally, (3) I discuss the relation among religion, solidarity, and environmental degradation; I argue that religion and solidarity can provide important cultural resources to combat global trends that threaten the environment.

KEYWORDS

Durkheim; social solidarity; religion; freedom of conscience; environmentalism; moral pluralism

1. Introduction: scope and qualifications

The relation among solidarity, religion, and the environment is a timely and pressing topic—or cluster of related topics. Many of today's pressing political

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mark_cladis@brown.edu

and social concerns are illuminated by an understanding of the religious beliefs and practices that lie beneath and within the news headlines. Whether one ventures into the religions of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, the Americas, and Europe, one sees how the formation and transmission of beliefs, behaviors, values, rituals, texts, institutions, and forms of community have a considerable influence on global and local events. In particular, it has become clear that religion plays a salient role in forging social solidarity and, in the process, of shaping cultural perspectives that pertain to politics, education, the economy, and the environment. In this article, I will do the following:

- I will argue that religion and solidarity should not be treated as anomalies in modernity, and that both religion and solidarity continue to play a significant role in local and global events; social solidarity in particular remains an essential condition for addressing many challenges that confront the globe today, including social justice and environmental degradation.
- Drawing mainly on the work of the social theorist, Emile Durkheim, I will show the role solidarity plays in establishing freedom of conscience and individual rights (moral individualism), moral pluralism, moral education, economic justice, and political community; this broad discussion will constitute the greater part of this article.
- Finally, I will discuss the relation among religion, solidarity, and environmental degradation; I will argue that religion and solidarity can provide important cultural resources to combat global trends that threaten the environment.

Before I turn to these sections, I wish to make a couple of qualifications. First, I need to make it clear that both religion and solidarity can act as double-edged swords. That is to say, religion can contribute to healthy social reform and wise environmental practices as well as to reactionary social oppression and rapacious environmental practices. And solidarity, for its part, can sustain efforts for peace, justice, and environmentalism, but it can also support militaristic agendas and oppressive social and environmental practices. In this article, I do not wish simply to celebrate religion and solidarity. Religion and solidarity assume a variety of socio-historical forms, some admirable, some deplorable. But in either case, religion and solidarity are worthy of our attention, and they are necessary topics for a better understanding of the state of the social and physical environment today.

Finally, I wish to say something about the scope of this article. Although I will often allude to a variety of global developments, most of my references will be rooted in North Atlantic democratic social and intellectual traditions. It is in these traditions that I have been trained; it is in these traditions that my own normative, social vision has been shaped. Still, I hope and I believe that my claims in this article have broad implications for the world in which we all live.

2. Religion and modernity

It would be naïve and probably dangerous to fail to attend to the religious aspects of life together and life alone. The manner and language of religion—so familiar in

society, so alien in the academy—is gaining critical consideration. Scholars in the social sciences and in political and legal theory are turning their attention to the relation among religion, law, and politics. If our attention was once diverted from this triad, it was in part, due to what are now largely discredited theories about the inevitable march of secularization. There was an assumption that the world would increasingly abandon religion that the actual state of the world would come to match an ideal of the European Enlightenment, namely, an enlightened age free of strife, free of religion.

The assumption was doubly flawed. First, it was based on an erroneous interpretation of the Enlightenment as a monolithic force that discounted religion (as opposed, for example, to the Enlightenment itself having religious origins and objectives). And second, it was based on the view that modernity would necessarily usher in secularism, that is, an age in which religion had no significant standing. Yet sociologists and religious studies scholars, among others, have come to realize that religion as an intellectual, cultural, and political force is not, in fact, waning on the globe. Today, this realization should be clear to anyone even vaguely familiar with current events. Among the majority of the planet's inhabitants, including those in North America, religion is thriving.

And by religion I do not here mean a broad, Durkheimian notion of religion—that is, religion as any set of beliefs and practices that forge moral community. Don't get me wrong: I like Durkheim, and later in this article I will rely heavily on Durkheim's work. But here when I claim that religion is still very much alive, I mean religion as it is commonly understood, that is, such historical traditions as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. I would like to suggest that religion is alive not in spite of modernity, but rather because modernity and religion are not necessarily antagonistic. It is simply no longer useful to think of religion as an anomaly in the modern age. The same claim could be made of community, tradition, and *solidarity*. In other words, neither religion nor *Gemeinschaft* should no longer be considered a *relic* of a by-gone era.

3. Emile Durkheim, solidarity, and twenty-first century democracy in a global age

In this section, I consider the nature and place of solidarity in the work of Durkheim, and what lessons that work may hold for pluralistic, democratic societies at the outset of the twenty-first century. In particular, I explore Durkheim's notion of solidarity in his work on moral individualism, democracy, pluralism, moral education, economic justice, and globalization. I look to Durkheim because I believe he can help us think critically about the obstacles we face in achieving a genuinely multiracial, multicultural democracy. Such an achievement, I believe, is the hope—but thus far, not the reality—of the democratic experiment that has been taking place in the U. S. This is an experiment that has global consequences, and hence it is worthy of our consideration. It is a worthy challenge to endeavor to fashion a democratic republic in which individual rights are protected and the public life is inclusive, lively, and just.

Solidarity, I will soon argue, need not be construed as sameness or uniformity. Rather, it can be akin to what Cornel West has expressed using the metaphor of the jazz band. “The interplay of individuality and unanimity,” West declares, “is not one of uniformity and unanimity imposed from above but rather of conflict among diverse groupings that reach a dynamic consensus subject to questioning and criticism. As with a soloist in a jazz... band, individuality is promoted in order to sustain and increase the creative tension with the group—a tension that yields higher levels of performance to achieve the aim of the collective project.” (West, 2001, pp. 150–151) Honoring both individual rights and common projects—these twin poles, with all the tension between them—mark Durkheim’s work, his vision, his challenge. And this may capture a challenge of democracy in the twenty-first century. My fundamental question of Durkheim, then, is this: How can he assist us in formulating a model of solidarity that includes and supports freedom of conscience and diversity? Also, how can his work help us envision paradigms of co-operation on such shared projects as eradicating racism, protecting the environment, and achieving social justice?

3.1 Durkheim and solidarity

We associate the concept of social solidarity with the life and thought of Durkheim, and for good reason. He was committed to it, both theoretically and practically. In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* ([1912] 2001), arguably his most important book, Durkheim set himself the task of discovering an enduring source of human social identity and fellowship—*solidarité*. Durkheim treated religion, broadly understood, as dynamic social ideals, beliefs, and practices that shape a shared perception of, and therefore life in, a society’s moral universe. One finds religion wherever public, normative concepts, symbols, or rites are employed. Religion, in this view, is variously found in modern and in (what we once called) postmodern societies. The upshot of this, morally and epistemologically, is that human life is, in a significant sense, life together. This is Durkheim’s response, and challenge, to a long tradition of Cartesian and Spencerian individualistic thought.

Elementary Forms was Durkheim’s last book, but from the start of his career, the task of solidarity can be found: the task of understanding its various sources and forms, and of evaluating its appropriate shape or type for a society in light of sociohistorical circumstances. Durkheim’s own sociohistorical circumstances account, in part, for his life-long interest in and commitment to solidarity. As a French Jew raised in the warmth and security of a tightly knit Jewish community, David Émile Durkheim was early on exposed to the complex, often conflicting values of the Third Republic—liberty, equality, and solidarity. It is not much of an exaggeration to say that every major subject Durkheim investigated became for him a lens through which to examine the nature and condition of solidarity in contemporary democratic society.

In *Elementary Forms*, for example, Durkheim claimed that totemism among the aborigines of Australia was not in itself his principal object of study. Rather, it was an avenue “to yield an understanding of the religious nature of man, by showing

us an essential and permanent aspect of humanity.” (Durkheim, 2001, p. 3) This “permanent aspect of humanity,” as it turns out, is the human need and capacity to relate socially. Another example: Durkheim’s sophisticated epistemology, or what is sometimes known as his sociology of knowledge, provided a way for philosophers and others to let go of the idea that reason is a transcendent, ahistorical faculty, yet without having to jettison all notions of objectivity. In Durkheim’s mind, his work on epistemology—socializing the idealists and the empiricists—was especially significant insofar as it contributed to the view that there can be no radically private human existence. To exist in a world is to understand that world, and understanding is comprised of shared, collective representations. This is not only an empirical description of human cognition, but is also a normative position, for it challenges the atomistic assumptions of a methodological individualism that Durkheim found morally unacceptable. Epistemology, then, permitted Durkheim to feature once again the profoundly social nature of humankind.

Even Durkheim’s investigations of modern individualism became a vehicle to explore social solidarity. Durkheim made the surprising claim that there is a form of contemporary individualism, what he called moral individualism that emerges from the solidarity that marks North Atlantic democracies. Think of moral individualism as a cluster of dynamic beliefs and practices, symbols and institutions that support the dignity and rights of the individual. This modern cult of the individual has all the attributes of traditional religion. It possesses robust, sacred symbols that express collective sentiments; it reaffirms and protects itself by means of both positive and negative rites, for example, public celebrations of defenders of individual rights or the prosecution of those who would violate such rights. Commitment to the rights and dignity of the individual is a principal thread, Durkheim argued, in the moral fabric that weaves together the diverse citizens of a modern democracy. It provides the shared moral identity of “we, the people.” Moral individualism—as opposed to atomistic or utilitarian individualism—became for Durkheim an answer to the question: What can provide the basis of a common good in the democratic societies of his day?

The important task before me is to consider whether Durkheim’s work on solidarity is still germane for reflection on present-day democratic societies—especially democracies marked by pluralism, multiculturalism, and globalization. My challenge is not to defend Durkheim’s work—I am not dedicated to him—but rather to investigate his relevance for what I am dedicated to: robust, just, and inclusive democracies in an age of diversity and globalization.

3.2 Solidarity held in suspicion

Solidarity is a concept widely held in suspicion today and often for good reason. On epistemological grounds, many doubt that there is a shared, universal human nature that could provide common ground among diverse human communities and individuals. And when solidarity does seem to emerge, it is often interpreted as either a contingent confluence of individuals with a shared cultural or ethnic inheritance, or an enforced uniformity that merely gives the impression of solidarity. In this latter

view, solidarity is a form of imperialism or colonialism. Alien norms, practices, and symbols of identity are imposed by the powerful on those lacking power. Solidarity turns out to be hegemony. Debates in the U.S. over multiculturalism, diversity, and what have come to be known as “cultural wars” have focused our attention on many insidious practices carried out in the name of solidarity. Yet these debates also have had the unintended consequence of leading us to think, once again, about the social significance and merit of solidarity. As we wrestled with the importance of respecting “difference,” we also asked about the shared context in which these debates took place. Who is the “we” engaged in these contests and disputes? Focusing on difference led to discussions about the possibility of common ground or solidarity. Moreover, as the language of human rights increasingly became something of a shared—though vague—global vocabulary, many social activists began speaking of a global or world solidarity centered on such goals as eradicating torture, hunger, racism, and the exploitation of women and children. Solidarity, today, is a contested concept. But this much is clear: solidarity is not simply a quaint term unworthy of our consideration. For better for worse, it remains a powerful notion. To think otherwise borders on self-deception.

Recent debates over the role and significance of solidarity are not without precedent. When Durkheim championed the need for solidarity and strategies to enhance it, he was addressing the entire French republic, but especially his fellow intellectuals, socialists, and other progressive peers. Solidarity, in Durkheim’s vision, was to embrace all citizens, but it was based on a particular—far from neutral—set of goals and ideals: the protection and extension of human rights; an economy accountable to human welfare (as opposed to the maximization of profit); the freedom of critical inquiry; and a secular state that respected yet was not based on religion. Not long after Durkheim’s death, however, his work was placed in a conservative canon of sociologists who, motivated by a nostalgic sense of by-gone days of community and uniformity, advanced solidarity for the sake of social control and order. It was Durkheim’s commitment to solidarity, along with his historicist approach, that placed him in this conservative legacy.

This regrettable placement continues to distort our view of Durkheim’s fundamental commitments and goals. Durkheim investigated the webs and patterns of social order for the sake of establishing social justice. Many have attributed conservatism to Durkheim because of his commitment to viewing humans and their moral principles and practices as ineluctably rooted in their social milieus. The logic here goes something like this: social theorists who begin and end with human situatedness can never rise above present or past social ideals, customs, and institutions. These allegedly conservative theorists are bound to the stagnant status quo. Yet Durkheim’s sensitivity to the historical, far from tying him to a status quo, exposed him to social change and diversity. That exposure helped him to envision progressive social change, and also to recognize the fragility of many cultural and legal accomplishments. The rights and dignity of the individual, for Durkheim, are important pieces of moral, social progress. They are not, however, immutable. They are subject to immoral threats as well as to moral amelioration. Durkheim maintained

that moral progress requires a social solidarity that is willing to wrestle with social problems and achieve social change. Human rights, for example, cannot be realized by the law or the courts alone, but rather they require shared social beliefs and practices that support the legal system.

The “fact of diversity,” then as Durkheim and Rawls roughly call it, need not entail moving beyond solidarity, as if solidarity and diversity were oppositional, or as if “justice for all” could be accomplished by leaving solidarity behind. The often-assumed incompatibility, then, between social diversity and social solidarity deserves to be examined. What is solidarity? What does it mean to live in a shared social and geographic setting? What are the basic requirements of social life? What are the social implications of our shared need for shelter, nutritious food, clean air and water, work, repose, and safety? What kind of social cooperation is needed for citizens to move about unencumbered, to have access to public transportation, to drive or walk in peace? What are the requirements for achieving such collective goals as economic justice, environmental practices, and the eradication of discrimination based on race, gender, or sexual orientation? Why should pluralism or globalization negate the need for cooperation in achieving basic, daily, shared human goods and future collective aims?

Durkheim affirmed that solidarity, in some form or forms, is all but inevitable for any society. The question for us, then, is not: “Solidarity—*should* we have it?” The question is, “What kind of solidarity—or *solidarities*—do we *already* have, and what kind should we have?” My own view is that an appropriate form of solidarity for democratic, political communities must not only tolerate diversity but also celebrate diversity as a precious public resource. Solidarity, in Durkheim’s account, embraced all citizens, but it was based on a particular—far from neutral—set of democratic ideals, beliefs, and practices, including: the protection and extension of human rights; an economy accountable to human welfare (as opposed to the maximization of profit); the freedom of critical inquiry and reform; and a secular state that respected yet did not privilege religion.

3.3 Moral individualism, pluralism, and education

In 1835 Tocqueville wrote, “individualism is a word recently coined to express a new idea. Our fathers only knew about egoism” (Tocqueville, 1969, p. 506). This provocative claim about “a new idea” is not entirely correct (think of the celebration of “individualism” in Montaigne’s *Essays* or Rousseau’s *Reveries of the Solitary Walker*). Moreover, it was not the case that everyone in Tocqueville’s age would have agreed that there are forms of individualism that are not synonymous with egoism. Even in Durkheim’s age—and still today—some identified individualism with egoism. “Individualism is the great sickness of the present time... Each of us has confidence only in himself, sets himself up as the sovereign judge of everything...” This quotation is not from MacIntyre’s *After Virtue* but from Ferdinand Brunetière’s “After the Trial,” which appeared in the *Revue des deux mondes* (Brunetière, 1898, p. 445). Brunetière, a Catholic literary historian and critic, denounced individualism

and claimed that it was debilitating France's moral foundation and solidarity. It is the "intellectuals" who carry this disease, and if they are not checked, he warned, traditional virtue and values will wither as moral relativism and hedonism spread. In the same year, Durkheim published a response entitled "Individualism and the Intellectuals." In it, Durkheim discussed "the argument, always refuted and always renewed," that "intellectual and moral anarchy would be the inevitable result of liberalism" (Durkheim, 1973, p. 49). Some varieties of liberalism, Durkheim conceded, are egoistic and threaten the common good of societies by encouraging the individual to become excessively consumerist and preoccupied with narrow self-interest. But there is a strand of liberalism, Durkheim argued, which is moral and social. This strand, I noted, Durkheim called moral individualism, and he claimed that "not only is [moral] individualism not anarchical, but it henceforth is the only system of beliefs which can ensure the moral unity of the country." (Ibid., p. 50) In liberal, democratic nations such as France, the people's character and their solidarity are promoted by the liberal practices and ideals of moral individualism.

This turns out to be a surprising and powerful defense of democratic liberalism. Durkheim did not appeal to universal principles derived from natural reason or from any other tap into an "objective," ahistorical moral reality. He situated his defense in history, specifically French history. France's modern, moral traditions, Durkheim argued, are largely constituted by liberal, pluralistic institutions and values that protect the rights and dignity of the individual. To neglect these traditions is to court moral anarchy. It is Brunetière then, the conservative who speaks of "solidarity above all" who, according to Durkheim, threatens the moral fabric of society.

This argument, like most of Durkheim's work, belongs to a distinctive French narrative, a narrative of struggle and accomplishment, of the Revolution and the Constitution. His arguments are not for all societies, even if they can be applied to many—certainly to our own. Mostly, however, his is an insider's argument: written for the French, by a Jewish Frenchman. Durkheim provided a distinctive reading of Rousseau and Kant, among others, attempting to locate them in a republican tradition that describes rights and duties as the result of a commitment to public, not only private, concerns. He worked to piece together his own account of his favorite varieties of liberalism (as well as offering complex criticisms of his least favorite forms of liberalism, for example, of what he called economic individualism and crass utilitarianism). This was no invention from scratch. A set of liberal, democratic traditions already existed. But Durkheim was well aware of competing liberal traditions, such as those of the classical economists and utilitarians, as well as competing solidarity traditions, such as those of the Royalists and the conservative Roman Catholics. Durkheim wanted to establish the authority of moral individualism by arguing that it, in fact, represented France's most morally progressive and legitimate traditions.

We can think of moral individualism as having two components. Moral individualism is characterized by (1) a set of social beliefs and practices that constitute a pervasive shared understanding, which supports the rights, and dignity of the individual; and (2) a plurality of social spheres that permits diversity and individual autonomy, and furnishes beliefs and practices, which morally associate

individuals occupying a particular sphere. The first component, briefly mentioned and then rejected in *The Division of Labor* (1893) was developed in the Dreyfusard article, "Individualism and the Intellectuals," after having been initially proposed in *Suicide* ([1897] 1951) the preceding year. The second component was explored in *The Division of Labor* and later enhanced in *Suicide* and especially in Durkheim's lectures published as *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* ([first French edition, 1950, published posthumously] 1992) – lectures written around the same time as the Dreyfusard article.

A robust social defense of democratic liberalism requires both components. The first element ensures that a diverse citizenry cares for a common political community that is sustained by, among other things, beliefs pertaining to the sanctity of the individual. The second element ensures that as individuals pursue their rights, they reside within a multitude of relatively distinct and protected social spheres that provide shared meanings and identities. We can label this second component as Durkheim's understanding of moral pluralism and a plurality of morals, especially as described in *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals*. A plurality of morals refers to the diverse sets of goals and values, and the varying levels of homogeneity that characterize groups in the domestic, occupational, civic, and international spheres. Moral pluralism, in contrast, pertains to the relation between the beliefs and practices of the political community and the beliefs and practices of such associations or groups as churches and synagogues, ethnic organizations and activist alliances. This can include associations that can be said to rest upon comprehensive religious, moral, or philosophical doctrines. The solidarity of the political community, in Durkheim's view, does not require broad agreement from these associations on every issue. Social solidarity, in other words, does not require social homogeneity. On some issues, however, such as the protection of diversity, widespread agreement is desirable. Moral pluralism, then, refers to a plurality of communities and associations that promote distinctive practices and beliefs, and yet also contribute to – or at least do not threaten – common public projects and goals.

Think of Durkheim's moral pluralism as standing in opposition to three models of society: society as (1) a group of disparate individuals; (2) a group of disparate, morally self-sustaining, homogeneous communities divorced from the larger political community; and (3) a single, national, homogeneous community. The moral pluralism that Durkheim envisioned captures the merits and avoids the limits of the three models. It sustains a multitude of diverse communities (model two), all sharing a common, albeit limited, set of obligations and goals (model three), including individual and group rights and liberties (model one). Durkheim would have agreed with progressive communitarians that human association is a social good that is necessary for well-being. With progressive liberals, however, he also would have agreed that no one community, including the political one, has a monopoly on virtue or the good life. Happiness and an ethical life are not contingent on participation in any single, privileged community, but are procurable in a variety of spheres and groups.

Nonetheless, moral pluralism, as Durkheim conceived it, does support the solidarity of a shared political community, a community that encompasses all others. This social realm aims for inclusion and open critical reflection. At times, the most salient thing that needs to be agreed on may be what needs to be discussed. We can agree on the need to debate such pressing issues as how to pursue economic justice and environmental safeguards, balanced budgets and social services, citizens' security and global peace. Potential agreement rests on the fact that diverse citizens share a common history and future, and often care about the problems and promises that are germane, not only to a particular community, but to the broader community in which all participate. No secondary group should attempt to block its members from taking part in this wider life of common pursuits.

One of the best—and most misunderstood—examples of Durkheim's capacity to connect social solidarity with pluralism and conflict is his work on moral education (Durkheim, 1956–1961). Its heterogeneous character, embracing critical thought and shared traditions, autonomy and community, human diversity and social solidarity, offers a nuanced description of and challenge to liberal, democratic institutions. Durkheim championed various perspectives of society's shared understanding as a means to cultivate students' dispositions for critical thinking. Critical thought and the stories a people tells about itself go hand in hand, in Durkheim's view, because social critics, faced with changing circumstances, draw deeply from their social inheritances as they forge new paths and criticize old ones.

Durkheim held that future citizens of democracies need to know about styles of belief and practices other than those of the family or local group. He emphasized the need to accustom students to the unfamiliar in order that they can appreciate otherness and to identify the stranger as a fellow human. The study of history and literature are especially helpful in developing democratic skills and virtues, according to Durkheim. Studying history, for example, enables students to have an appreciation for the rich complexity of social life, and to develop a critical understanding of their own society's place in history. The study of history promotes critical thinking because it both discloses to students their society's distinctive shared understandings and exposes them to unfamiliar ways of life. Accustoming students to the unfamiliar enables them to value diversity and "the richness of life," and to acquire novel ways to cope with suffering.

History, then, plays a critical role in moral education:

It is by learning to become familiar with other ideas, other customs, other manners, other political constitutions, other domestic organizations, other moralities and logics than those which he is used to that the student will gain a sense of the richness of life within the bounds of human nature. It is, therefore, only by history that we can give an account of the infinite diversity of the aspects which human nature can take on. (Durkheim, 1938, pp. 208–209)

Awareness of such pluralism is an essential aspect of moral education, because it thwarts the desire to designate a parochial moral vision as universal and then

impose it on all humanity. Literature also figured importantly in Durkheim's approach to moral education, and for many of the same reasons. General and abstract talk about the practices and hopes of a people will not make a vivid impression on students. Thick descriptions are required, and literature can deliver these. The detail found in literature allows the student "to touch [the manners, ideas, and institutions of a people] with his own hands," to "see them alive." (Durkheim, 1977, p. 332)

Moral education, then, in Durkheim's view, takes place at the junctures of the familiar and the unfamiliar, the past and the present. Schools are to foster in students the capacity to evaluate contemporary practices in light of alternatives found in foreign or past cultures, in new developments taking place within contemporary society, and in longstanding ideals that need to be more fully realized in social practices.

3.4 Economic justice, the political community, and globalization

I have rehearsed Durkheim's notion of moral individualism and moral pluralism, for these concepts are foundational for grasping Durkheim's basic position on solidarity and diversity. Further, I focused on his complex approach to moral education as an example of how he combined his commitment to both solidarity and diversity. I now wish to explore briefly how this pair of commitments informs his substantive positions on economic justice; the relation between secondary groups and the state; and globalization. My chief question of Durkheim, however, remains the same: Can he assist us in formulating a model of solidarity that acknowledges pluralism and globalization?

Durkheim's commitment to enhancing social solidarity was fueled, perhaps above all, by his worry over a private economy that put the maximization of profit above human social welfare. His multifaceted study on professional and civic ethics was motivated by his belief that economic institutions should be accountable to a society's civic life—at both the regional and national level. His worry was that as modern societies become increasingly individualistic, shared aims lack the strength to guide the economic life in light of prevailing conceptions of justice. So he imagined ways to broaden or extend democratic practices that could bring a moral influence to the economic life. This move is entirely consistent with Durkheim's belief that there are moral dimensions to our shared civic life. The economy, in his view, should not be understood as a discrete, amoral, private realm, but rather as an integral moral component of the public life. Hence, in Durkheim's lectures on professional ethics and civic morals, he concentrated on the economic sphere, for he believed that "the greater part of its existence is passed divorced from any moral influence." (Durkheim, 1992, p. 12) The classical economists, Durkheim claimed, failed to see that "economic functions are not an end in themselves but only a means to an end; that they are one of the organs of social life and that social life is above all a harmonious community of endeavors." (Durkheim, 1992, p. 16)

To make matters worse, the ethos of the economic sphere, marked by individual and corporate egoism, threatened to dominate other social spheres: "This amoral

character of economic life amounts to a public danger.” (Ibid., p. 12) Durkheim’s fear was that, due to the prominence of the economic sphere in modern societies, its amoral character would spread to other spheres.

How did Durkheim account for this “moral vacuum” in the economic sphere? Social institutions, given their historical character, change. “For two centuries,” Durkheim claimed, “economic life has taken on an expansion it never knew before.” (Ibid., p. 11) While this sphere grew and began to dominate society, a new “ethic” emerged that sought to deliver society from the traditional regulation of popes and monarchs and guilds. These old monitors were to be replaced by a new, impartial one: the guiding hand of the spontaneous market. Durkheim, however, considered this spontaneous regulation as essentially no regulation. In *Suicide*, for example, he stated that “for a whole century, economic progress has mainly consisted in freeing industrial relations from all regulation... and government, instead of regulating economic life, has become its tool and servant.” (Durkheim, 1951, pp. 254–255)

In his lectures on professional ethics and civic morals, while discussing the economic world, which seems to lie “outside the sphere of morals,” Durkheim asked,

Is this state of affairs a normal one? It has had the support of famous doctrines. To start with, there is the classical economic theory according to which the free play of economic agreements should adjust itself and reach stability automatically, without it being necessary or even possible to submit it to any restraining forces. (Durkheim, 1992, p. 10)

Yet Durkheim went on to note that a stable and just economic sphere “cannot follow of itself from entirely material causes, from any blind mechanism, however scientific it may be. It is a moral task.” (Ibid., p. 12) Why a moral task? Because we should not expect just economic social practices to emerge spontaneously from private contracts or “supply and demand” or from any other liberal market devices. A moral task is at hand because people must do something to bring peace and justice to the economic sphere. Human effort and planning are required, but this in turn depends on some sense of shared purpose and common aims.

I will not discuss at length the most famous of Durkheim’s solutions to the moral bankruptcy of the economic sphere, namely, his call for the formation of occupational groups—a new democratic space located between private lives and large, civic institutions. I do want to comment on, however, the premise of Durkheim’s hope for the establishment of occupational groups. His premise was that ethical practices are a product of human association; that practical moral reasoning emerges from working together, from shared practices. Workers, isolated from each other and from the shared purposes of their work, cannot create for themselves a healthy working environment, for example, fashioning practices pertaining to workers’ dignity, treatment, and fair compensation. Durkheim’s solution was to infuse the economic sphere with moral principles internal to the various, particular activities of the various occupations—whether they be farming, banking, or factory work. The role

of occupational groups, then, is to provide moral connections between vocational practices and the internal goods and external goods relevant to them.

In order that external goods support – as opposed to vitiate – internal goods, various economic activities that a Spencerian would call private would need to be viewed in a more public light. First, the workers involved in a particular occupation would have a greater voice concerning its just operations. Second, the economic sphere in general would no longer be seen as a radically private one but as a realm subject to the political community. This is not necessarily a call for socialism. But it is Durkheim's warning that moral economic practices will not develop under the present conditions of a Spencerian free market.

From one perspective, occupational groups are centers of moral life, which, although bound together, are distinct and relatively autonomous. In order that moral principles internal to each group emerge, the groups should, as Durkheim noted, "develop original characteristics." Together these groups form the economic sphere. From another perspective, however, these groups are tributaries fed by shared traditions and institutions, by common projects and interests, by social solidarity. This latter perspective needs mentioning lest we lose sight of Durkheim's conviction that the economic sphere needs to be accountable to the wider political community.

Without a sense of ourselves as a people with shared perspectives, problems, and goals, we will not be able to tackle such a pressing and massive problem as an economic sphere unaccountable to democratic institutions. Durkheim himself was not sanguine about the emergence of morally sustaining spheres of economic justice. He often wrote as if liberal society is taking on the character of a Hobbesian war of all against all. At such moments, he seemed to doubt the possibility of robust shared commitments and aims. This pessimism, however, did not lead to moral paralysis but to increased commitment to the tasks at hand.

There is a social sphere, Durkheim tells us, which is greater in scope than the various secondary groups. It is the political community. Inquiry into the nature of this sphere and its relation to other social spheres and to the state is necessary for an intelligent reading of Durkheim's notion of a plurality of social spheres that are nourished by solidarity. If, for example, the domestic or the economic spheres are entirely independent of the political one, or even dominate it that might suggest a precarious *laissez-faire* pluralism that could lead to a society's domination by a single sphere. On the other hand, if the other spheres are dominated by the political community or the state, that might suggest an open door to nationalism or fascism.

The political community, according to Durkheim's normative understanding of it, encompasses a plurality of secondary groups without becoming one itself. It includes all without being dominated by any. In Durkheim's idiom, the political community and the state are not the same. The state refers to "the agents of the sovereign authority," while the political community refers a shared public space which includes all secondary groups. Far from being in radical opposition to the various secondary groups contained within the political sphere, Durkheim contends that "the state presupposes their existence... No secondary groups, no political authority, at least no authority which can legitimately be called political." (Durkheim, 1992, p. 45) In his

lectures on professional ethics and civic morals, Durkheim championed a model of the state that is neither laissez-faire liberal nor nationalistic. The state, if legitimately representing the ideals and goals of the democratic political community, supports moral individualism and pluralism.

There is a dialectical relation between the state and its plural secondary groups. From this dialectic, in Durkheim's view, emerges the social solidarity of the political community, and such solidarity, in turn, sustains the dialectic. Solidarity is not the result of state sponsored coercion, nor of a natural harmony among secondary groups. Rather, it emerges from, and contributes to, the dialectical relation between the democratic state and its various secondary groups. Solidarity of the political community, then, does not work against pluralism, but rather is constitutive of its very existence. And the health of the political community requires a rich variety of secondary groups. Unlike Rousseau who feared secondary groups, Durkheim did not support the Social Contract model of the state in which diverse individuals have a direct relation to the state, but not to each other. Not only did Durkheim not fear secondary groups and the pluralism that they represent, but he defended their vital role in providing a variety of moral homes for individuals and in contributing diversity and dynamism to the political community.

What is the relation between the solidarity of the democratic nation-state and what some call the global community or village? Did Durkheim have a position on globalization or on the possibility of a social sphere larger than the nation's political community? Durkheim maintained that there is an international sphere that, in a limited sense, encompasses the political community. The political community, according to Durkheim, has no sovereign above it except that of the state. This sovereign, however, is relative and needs to be qualified. It is accountable to the political community, and Durkheim also insisted that it is also accountable to the international community (Durkheim, 1915). In *Elementary Forms* Durkheim claimed that

... there is no people, no state that is not involved with another society that is more or less unlimited and includes all peoples, or states with which they are directly or indirectly in contact. There is no national life that is not dominated by an inherently international collective life. As we go forward in history, these international groupings take on greater importance and scope. (Durkheim, 2001, pp. 321–322)

Durkheim provided two different yet related accounts for the rise of what could be called global ethics. In one account, global ethics emerges from the recognition of duties that apply to all individuals, regardless of national boundaries. In his lectures on professional ethics and civic morals, he claimed that there are "duties independent of any particular grouping... This is the most general sphere in the whole of ethics, for it is independent of any local or ethnic conditions." (Durkheim, 1992, p. 110) These duties pertain to protecting the rights and dignity of humans – for example, protection from cruel humiliation, mutilation, murder, or theft.

The second account is closely related to the first, for it is a sociohistorical explanation for the development of international human rights. He claimed that “the group no longer seems to have value in itself and for itself: it is only a means of fulfilling and developing human nature to the point demanded by the current ideals.” (Ibid., p. 112) For example, increasingly nations justify their existence by their efforts to protect individuals from unnecessary suffering – “a hateful thing” – as opposed to in the past when the nation – a personification of God or the sacred – was the object of highest regard. Durkheim claimed that increased pluralism accounts for this transfer of sacred regard from the pride of the individual nation to the dignity of the individual – wherever she or he lives. He wrote, “with the increase of diversity among the members of all societies, there is no essential characteristic in common except those derived from the basic quality of their human nature. It is this quality that quite naturally becomes the supreme object of collective sensibility.” (Ibid., p. 112)

We have already seen this logic in Durkheim’s communitarian defense of moral individualism: our shared understanding is centered on the dignity and rights of the individual. Now, however, Durkheim has taken this logic from a national to a global level. Given the high level of human diversity in the international realm, shared beliefs and practices are thin, except for the overlapping commitment to the global ethic of human rights. Durkheim’s prediction is that as members of diverse nations associate and work on common issues, international ethics will become more substantive. Increasingly, “national aims do not lie at the summit of the [moral] hierarchy – it is human aims that are destined to be supreme.” (Ibid., p. 73)

Yet Durkheim was not entirely sanguine about what we today call globalization. He feared anomie on an international scale as the global economy increasingly sought the maximization of profit above all else. He noted that what might look like a promising “world state” may in fact turn out to be but another form of “egoistic individualism.” (Ibid., p. 74) His worry was that unregulated concentrations of power would subvert the sovereignty of citizens and their ability to work for normative domestic and global aims. Durkheim, of course, knew nothing about the environmental costs of a global economy unleashed from normative beliefs and practices. Yet he did anticipate the social harm and suffering that would flow from a global economy modeled on anomic, national economies.

Does Durkheim’s suggestion for how democratic moral reasoning can govern national economies apply to today’s *global* economy? A Durkheimian approach to economic globalization would require a modified version of Durkheim’s complex normative account of the dialectical relation among the state, secondary groups, and individuals. The revised Durkheimian model would entail an augmented dialectic that included the global realm more robustly. In this model, the democratic nation would attempt to foster within the nation-state a social order that properly arranges and regards the domains of local community, the wider civic community, and global institutions.

Durkheim held that if global justice is to be achieved, nation-states and local communities need to cultivate in their members a commitment to global, moral

issues. Hence Durkheim claimed that the way to avoid a clash between national and global perspectives is for “each state to have as its chief aim... to set its own house in order and to make the widest appeal to its members for a moral life on an ever higher level... If the state had no other purpose than making humans of its citizens, in the widest sense of the term, then civic duties would be only a particular form of the general obligations of humanity.” (Ibid., p. 74)

Global justice, then, requires just states, and just states require sufficient solidarity to work jointly toward the common aims of justice at the local, national, and global level. The Durkheimian lesson is that if we want to achieve social and economic justice, whether we are living among domestic or global diversity, we must remain committed to some form of solidarity. To neglect solidarity is to risk having our most cherished ideals, including the celebration of diversity, drained of their capacity to shape our lives, institutions, and communities.

4. Religion, solidarity, and environmental degradation

Consider the following state of affairs: calculated conservatively, the extinction rate of mammals is now 1,000 times greater than during the last great age of extinction, the ice ages of the Pleistocene epoch (Ehrenfeld, 1993, p. 180); between 1900 and 1965, one half of the forests in developing countries was cleared for log export and for cattle grazing to supply the U.S. hamburger industry, and such logging is not slowing down (Khor, 1996, p. 52); tropical forests are being destroyed at the rate of 168,000 square kilometers per year (Goodland, 1996, p. 214). Although there is disagreement on the exact numbers, few fail to concede that, due to contemporary economic and industrial practices, we are witnessing an unprecedented loss of wetlands, crop diversity, top soil, and fisheries. Such catastrophic losses are matched by the inordinate pollution of the air, water, and land from the massive use of fossil fuels, ozone depleting gases, herbicides, pesticides, industrial chemicals, and heavy metals, among other toxicities. This is a short list of the material and tangible dangers that threaten those who, having forgotten about the basic sources of life, are cutting, polluting, and despoiling the frail ecological systems that sustain human existence.

There is a clear correlation between accelerated environmental degradation and the increased power and wealth of transnational corporations. With little or no concern for the health of local areas but rather for maximizing profits, transnational corporations are usually indifferent to, and sometimes contemptuous of, environmental considerations. The entire food production and distribution system has become dependent on heavy usage of fossil fuels and agricultural chemicals—pesticides, herbicides, and fertilizers—and such usage is devastating the planet’s ecosystems. Few believe these practices are sustainable. Yet the global agri-food industrial complex is increasingly operating without government supervision, without citizen consent, without assurances to protect the environment. These are some of the challenges that face the globe today.

4.1 Religion and solidarity: double-edged swords

What do religion and solidarity have to do with environmental degradation? Religion and social solidarity have both combated environmental degradation and have contributed to it. Such world religions as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have fostered wise, sustainable environmental practices; but they have also at times (or even at “the same time”) undermined such wise practices. The relation between religion and the environment is a complicated topic.

The relation between solidarity and environmental practices is equally complicated. Social solidarity has been at the root of many strong and helpful environmental movements today. But forms of social solidarity have also brought much environmental destruction. The determination to build dams, develop and use chemical pesticides, construct coal-fire and nuclear power plants, build fleets of cars—such developments often require great collective resolve. Although such developments are not necessarily socially irresponsible, they do often lead to problematic environmental outcomes. And in any case, these developments require much collective commitment—social solidarity—to be achieved. In many contemporary cases, social solidarity is not homogenous, and we find one segment of a population committed to environmentally sustainable practices and another segment working toward unbridled economic growth—the kind of growth that may raise the “standard of living” while simultaneously causing great environmental destruction. So once again, the relation between solidarity and environmental practices is a complex one.

For the remainder of this essay, I will focus on religion and the environment. It should be kept in mind that, most of the time, religions generate strong solidarity, and hence much of what I have to say about religion and the environment could equally apply to a discussion about solidarity and the environment.

In my research, I have found evidence that religious commitment that pertains to environmentalism can serve as an occasion for individuals to experience a deepened private life and a more participatory public life. I have analytically organized this evidence—based on social scientific studies, social and political theory, religious studies, and personal interviews—into four categories that represent public and private religious responses to the environmental crisis. The four categories are as follows:

1) Environmentalism as Religion. In many ways, contemporary environmental groups and ecological movements function as a form of religion. That is, sociologically speaking, much contemporary environmentalism exhibits characteristics of religion. There are, for example, a host of environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club, Greenpeace, or Earth First! that can be said to function (from a sociological point of view) as religions. These groups offer a robust vision or way of life that can transform their members’ lives.

2) Theological Perspectives on the Environment. This second category pertains to the relation between a religious tradition’s beliefs and its perspectives on the natural world. Christianity and Buddhism, for example, have distinctive religious depictions of creation, nature, and the position of humans in the natural world.

3) Organized Religion and Eco-activism. Closely related to the second category, this third category pertains to the relation between religious belief and social practice. Many traditional and new religious groups—churches and synagogues, mosques and temples, Wiccan and other new religious movements—are actively engaged in environmental issues. From involvement in environmental justice to sustainable agriculture to active lobbying, many religious communities are evincing deep environmental commitments. This development has led to the creation of such new organizations as the North American Coalition on Religion and Ecology, the National Religious Partnership on the Environment, and the Coalition on the Environment and Jewish Life. It has also animated a wide range of existing religious organizations—from Christian churches to Jewish synagogues to Buddhist retreat centers.

4) Private Spirituality and Nature. In nature writers such as Annie Dillard and Barry Lopez, in religious authors such as Thomas Berry and Terry Tempest Williams, and more generally in popular culture, there is a growing regard for what can be called the sacred sense of nature. This spirituality of nature tends not to be tied to particular religious traditions, although it is compatible with most of them. It may not be formulated in traditionally theological ways. But there is something traditional about the religious vocabulary that is employed to describe encounters with nature—concepts like healing, wonder, awe, enchantment, transcendence, reverence, immortal beauty, silence, bowing, witnessing, and mystery. There is often a connection between this spirituality of nature—the sacralization of the secular—and heightened civic participation at both local and national levels.

These categories represent opportunities for enhanced commitment to, and affection for, joining together and fostering the social, economic, and natural landscapes that sustain us. However, as I have said, religion can also promote destructive environmental practices.

5. Concluding comments

“Solidarity, religion and the environment”—these three separate yet related topics together form both a promise and a challenge. The challenge is how solidarity and religion can contribute to wise social, economic, and environmental practices for the planet. The promise is the collective strength and wisdom that solidarity and religion potentially offer us as we struggle with twenty-first century challenges.

In this article, I have attempted to do several things:

- I have argued that religion and solidarity should not be treated as anomalies in modernity, and that both religion and solidarity continue to play a significant role in local and global events; indeed, social solidarity remains an essential condition for addressing many problems that confront the globe today, including social justice and environmental degradation.
- Drawing mainly on the work of Durkheim, I have attempted to show the role solidarity plays in establishing individual rights (moral individualism), moral pluralism, and moral education.

- Still drawing on Durkheim, I illustrated the relation between solidarity and economic justice, political community, and globalization.
- Lastly, I attempted to outline the relation among religion, solidarity, and environmental degradation.

Envisioning alternatives to disturbing current global trends may appear to be an exercise in quixotic thought. Yet I firmly believe that quixotic is the view that there are no ecological limits to an extractive economy that fuels exorbitant production and anomic consumption. Fatalism, the belief that the worst aspects of globalization are inevitable, is not an especially reasonable position. Hope is more sensible, if only because it is more likely to bring the needful changes that are becoming increasingly conspicuous. This logic of hope applies to the other concerns I have raised in this article pertaining to social and economic justice. More and more people are recognizing that social and ecological dangers will persist and grow if local populations and global organizations do not work for healthy change. But in order to begin the work of change, one must hope for change. Those who care about a place will do much to protect it, and in the process they will experience the joy of working together with others, and their love of place and fellows will grow still more. My hope is that such affections are contagious. This is solidarity at its best. This is religion at its best.

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