

## **SPIRITUAL SUICIDE: DURKHEIM'S UNDEVELOPED THEORY OF UNBELIEF**

by G. Alexander Ross

### **Abstract**

As part of the exposition of his theory of egoistic suicide, Durkheim explained that the breakdown of social bonds gives rise to a general disillusionment that spawns metaphysical and religious systems that promote suicide by weakening an individual's sense of life's meaning. If Durkheim's explanation is correct, the social factors which he demonstrated were correlated with suicide ought also to be associated with a weakening of religious belief: a spiritual suicide. Using General Social Survey data from 1988 to 2000, this paper examines unbelief as a function of several explanatory variables corresponding to the measurements Durkheim used in explaining egoistic suicide. Analysis of these variables confirms the explanatory power of Durkheim's variables. The paper discusses the implications of this undeveloped theory of Durkheim for an orientation to the sociology of religion.

Emile Durkheim is generally acknowledged to be one of the preeminent social theorists of religious behavior.<sup>1</sup> His theory of primitive religion is presented in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, yet religion also appears as an important explanatory variable in another of his major works, *Suicide*. One of his three main types of suicide, egoistic suicide, he defined as that which results from inadequate social integration or "excessive individualism."<sup>2</sup> Social groups function by integrating the individual members into a social whole. If the social bonds between the members of the group become too relaxed, not only does the group suffer but the individual members lose the salutary effects normally provided by group membership. One result of this loss is an increased propensity to suicide.

To test this theory, Durkheim methodically explored a variety of indicators of social integration, demonstrating that higher rates of suicide appear in social groups which lack strong group attachments. One of Durkheim's indicators of social integration was religious affiliation ("religious confession"). He focused primarily on the distinction between Catholic and Protestant, reasoning that Catholics, by virtue of their larger body of common beliefs and practices, possess a more cohesive society.<sup>3</sup>

Yet Durkheim's use of religion in his study of suicide was not merely as an indicator of social integration; he included it also as an important part of his explanation of the process by which the weakening of social bonds leads to higher rates of suicide. His explanation is worth quoting at some length:

Because society is the end on which our better selves depend, it cannot feel us escaping it without a simultaneous realization that our activity is purposeless. Since we are its handiwork, society cannot be conscious of its own decadence without the feeling that henceforth this work is of no value. Thence are formed currents of depression and disillusionment emanating from no particular individual but expressing society's state of disintegration. They reflect the relaxation of social

bonds, a sort of collective asthenia, or social malaise, just as individual sadness, when chronic, in its way reflects the poor organic state of the individual. *Then metaphysical and religious systems spring up which, by reducing these obscure sentiments to formulae, attempt to prove to men the senselessness of life and that it is self-deception to believe that it has purpose.* Then new moralities originate which, by elevating facts to ethics, commend suicide or at least tend in that direction by suggesting a minimal existence.<sup>4</sup> (emphasis added)

What Durkheim appears to be suggesting is that man relies heavily on the presence of society to provide a sense of purpose beyond himself. The loss of this presence, occasioned by the weakening of social bonds, so threatens his sense of meaning that he begins to entertain theories or systems of thought that corroborate his growing sense of meaninglessness. Such theories, by minimizing the transcendent importance of life, incline men to self-destruction.

Durkheim did not describe in detail these “metaphysical and religious systems” which he believed spring up in the context of weakening social attachments. However, their association with theories about “the senselessness of life” suggests that they refer to various nihilistic or atheistic philosophies which deny the purpose of human existence and contradict the conventional religious beliefs held by members of the society. Such theories were very common in Durkheim’s time, having been promulgated frequently since the eighteenth century by intellectuals seeking to denigrate religion.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, Durkheim’s own theory of primitive religion, claiming that gods were mere reflections of society,<sup>6</sup> could itself serve as an example of such systems of thought.

Nevertheless, Durkheim recognized the danger in such theories and saw them as contributing to suicide. Thus, in addition to constructing a theory of suicide, Durkheim was here also suggesting an explanation for the loss of religious belief. For it follows logically from his theoretical explanation that *not only should weakening social bonds lead to higher rates of suicide, they should also bring about an enfeebling of religious belief.* Recalling the characterization by Saint Francis de Sales of the loss of faith as self-destructive or suicidal, one might even say that Durkheim argues that social disintegration increases not only physical suicide but also spiritual suicide.<sup>7</sup> Durkheim’s measurements of social integration ought, therefore, to exhibit a similar association with measurements of spiritual suicide or unbelief as they did with rates of physical suicide. This paper will examine that association and explore some implications of this approach to the sociological study of religion.

### **Durkheim’s measurements of social integration**

In his measurements of social integration, Durkheim concentrated on three areas of social life: religious society, domestic society (the family), and political society. His principal indicator of social integration in religious society was, as stated above, religious affiliation (Catholic versus Protestant). He also included indicators of education because Durkheim believed that a person’s desire for learning was a symptom of “loss of cohesion in his religious society.”<sup>8</sup> He was careful to explain that it was not knowledge itself which was to blame. Rather, the desire for learning is a result of the weakening of group attachments and the “overthrow of traditional

beliefs.”<sup>9</sup> “Knowledge is not sought as a means to destroy accepted opinions but because their destruction has commenced.”<sup>10</sup>

Durkheim measured social integration within domestic society in several ways. Marital status was especially important among his measurements. He noted that marriage is an effective protection against suicide, and even widowhood offers a better defense against taking one’s own life than the unmarried state. Within this context, he also introduced the variable sex as an interaction factor, noting that marital status can have a different impact on propensity to suicide for men versus women.

Sex appears as a variable in its own right, however. Durkheim explained the consistently lower rates of suicide among women by referring to several factors, some extremely questionable. For example, he compared woman to primitive man, whose social nature, he believed, has fewer and simpler demands. “She lives outside of community existence more than man, she is less penetrated by it; society is less necessary to her because she is less impregnated with sociability.”<sup>11</sup> He also appeared to attribute the lower suicide rates to woman’s lower “intellectual needs” and more traditional outlook.<sup>12</sup>

What Durkheim called family density (family size) was another of his measurements of social integration within domestic society. The collective energy of large families was for Durkheim a powerful safeguard against suicide. As he explained, “In a family of small numbers, common sentiments and memories cannot be very intense; for there are not enough consciences in which they can be represented and reenforced by sharing them.... But for a group to be said to have less common life than another means that it is less powerfully integrated; for the state of integration of a social aggregate can only reflect the intensity of the collective life circulating in it.”<sup>13</sup>

Finally, Durkheim examined the impact of variations in social integration within political society. Contrasting different historical periods, he demonstrated that wars and significant political disturbances temporarily increase social integration and lower the suicide rate. “As they force men to close ranks and confront the common danger, the individual thinks less of himself and more of the common cause.”<sup>14</sup>

### **Measurement of variables**

To test his theory of suicide, Durkheim had to rely on statistics available in various government agencies throughout Europe. In this paper I rely on a different source: the General Social Survey (GSS).<sup>15</sup> The GSS is a personal interview survey of a probability sample of U.S. households conducted annually or biennially since 1972.<sup>16</sup> In several of the surveys from 1988 to 2000, the GSS included an identical question about the respondent’s religious faith. It also included a variety of measurements of social integration comparable to those employed in Durkheim’s original study.

The measurement of the dependent variable, unbelief, is a binary variable constructed from a GSS question about the respondent’s belief in God. The precise wording of the question is contained in table 1. The six response categories of the original question form an ordinal scale,

yet their collapse into a binary measure has both a methodological and theoretical justification. Methodologically the statistical interpretation of the multivariate relationships is less cumbersome with binary data. More importantly, however, a natural theoretical break exists within the categories reflecting Durkheim’s emphasis on the emergence of alternative belief systems. Categories 1 through 3 range from an outright rejection of belief in God to an acceptance of the existence of a higher power; yet all are denials of the conventional view of God as a “personal” God. As such they are appropriately labeled alternative religious systems. Categories 4 through 6 capture different levels in the strength and consistency of belief; nevertheless, none of these responses displays a rejection of the conventional belief system in favor of an alternative. Respondents who selected categories 1 through 3 were designated as “nonbelievers.”

Table 1. Question about religious faith, GSS 1988 - 2000.

Please look at this card and tell me which statement comes closest to expressing what you believe about God.

|   |   |
|---|---|
| I don't believe in God.....   | 1 |
| I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out..... | 2 |
| I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind.....   | 3 |
| I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others.....                   | 4 |
| While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God.....                                 | 5 |
| I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it.....                               | 6 |

Table 2 shows the values of the dependent variable in the survey years for which there was a comparable measurement. For the sample aggregated across all years, the portion of nonbelievers is just under 15 percent. Examining unbelief by survey year demonstrates a slight increase during most of the years covered. From a low of just over 13 percent in 1988, the level of unbelief rises to nearly 18 percent in 1998 before falling to about 14 percent in the 2000 survey. In the analysis to follow, the samples for all years are combined.

Table 2. Percent of Nonbelievers, by Survey Year

| GSS Survey Year | Percent Nonbelievers | N    |
|-----------------|----------------------|------|
| 1988            | 13.2                 | 1478 |
| 1991            | 13.8                 | 1327 |
| 1993            | 15.6                 | 1497 |
| 1994            | 15.2                 | 1326 |
| 1998            | 17.9                 | 1235 |
| 2000            | 14.2                 | 1164 |
| All years       | 14.9                 | 8027 |

One of Durkheim’s principal explanatory variables was religious affiliation. Although this is easily measured with GSS data, its use as an explanatory variable to account for levels of

unbelief is very questionable. First of all, Durkheim’s concentration on the distinction between Catholic and Protestant is founded on the assumption that Catholicism possesses a stronger communal authority.<sup>17</sup> The widespread refusal by Catholics in general to conform to many areas of Church doctrine (i.e. divorce, contraception, abortion, etc.) makes this assumption doubtful. Secondly, the mere choice to affiliate with a religious organization is itself powerfully affected by the degree of one’s faith. Thus, using religious affiliation as an explanatory variable to account for loss of religious faith would be, at least in part, tautology.

Another measurement of “loss of cohesion in religious society” employed by Durkheim was education. This measurement we can use. Following his assumption that people are more likely to turn to learning as they are less integrated in religious society, we can hypothesize that higher levels of education will be associated with greater loss of religious faith. In this study I use a binary variable indicating whether the respondent is a college graduate (*colgrad*).

The GSS offers several variables with which to gauge the extent of integration within the family or domestic society. Because Durkheim discussed at length the integrating influence of not only the married state but also widowhood, I constructed binary variables to identify respondents who were presently married as well as those who were widowed. I also included a measure of the respondent’s sex (*female*) both as an interaction term and a variable in itself. Family size (what Durkheim called “density”) was measured by binary variables indicating whether the respondent had three or more children (*chi3*) or had four or more siblings (*sibs4*). Other variables included a binary measurement of whether the respondent spent time with relatives at least several times per month (*kintime*), whether at age 16 he was living with both parents (*intact16*), and whether he still lived in the same city as he had at age 16 (*samecit*).

Measures of Durkheim’s degree of political integration were more scarce. The GSS includes a few variables relating to political activity and interest, but most of these were asked in only a very limited number of survey years. I was, however, able to construct a binary variable

| Variable name | Description                                | Hypothesized relationship with unbelief |
|---------------|--|---|
| nonbeliever   | R (respondent) is a nonbeliever            | n.a.                                    |
| colgrad       | R is a graduate of college                 | +                                       |
| married       | R is married                               | -                                       |
| widowed       | R is widowed                               | -                                       |
| female        | R is a female                              | -                                       |
| chi3          | R has 3 or more children                   | -                                       |
| sibs4         | R has 4 or more siblings                   | -                                       |
| kintime       | R spends time often with relatives         | -                                       |
| intact16      | R lived with both father & mother @ age 16 | -                                       |
| samecit       | R lived in same city @ age 16              | -                                       |
| voter         | R voted in last presidential election      | -                                       |

indicating whether the respondent had voted in the most recent presidential election (*voter*). Table 3 contains a listing of all variables measured as well as the nature of the association with unbelief hypothesized by Durkheim.

## Multivariate Analysis

The data available to him as well as the state of contemporary statistical knowledge forced Durkheim to rely on crude, though often innovative, methods of analysis. His “coefficient of preservation,” for example, was an effective device to reduce the complexity of multivariate contingency tables. Over the past few decades, statisticians have made significant advances in multivariate analysis of categorical data.<sup>18</sup> Contingency tables are intuitively meaningful, but they become extremely cumbersome as one increases the number of control variables. Yet the familiar techniques of multiple regression are not suitable when the dependent variable is categorical. The newer approaches, developed specifically for categorical data, permit the introduction of several explanatory variables simultaneously and produce a series of coefficients or odds-ratios that are easy to interpret.

Table 4 displays the maximum likelihood logit regression coefficients and odds-ratios for the full compliment of explanatory variables.<sup>19</sup> No interaction terms are included. These results show very high consistency with the hypothesized relationships outlined in table 3.

| Table 4. Logit estimates with all explanatory variables, no interaction terms |           |           |       |                 |            |
|---|-----------|-----------|-------|-----------------|------------|
|   |           |           |       | Number of obs = | 5239       |
|   |           |           |       | LR chi2(10) =   | 301.35     |
|   |           |           |       | Prob > chi2 =   | 0.0000     |
| Log likelihood =  | -2043.237 |           |       | Pseudo R2 =     | 0.0687     |
| Explanatory variable  | Coeff.    | Std. Err. | z     | P> z  *         | Odds ratio |
| colgrad   | 0.7050    | 0.0927    | 7.60  | 0.000           | 2.0238     |
| married   | -0.4581   | 0.0863    | -5.31 | 0.000           | 0.6325     |
| widowed   | -0.5267   | 0.1787    | -2.95 | 0.002           | 0.5906     |
| female  | -0.7641   | 0.0825    | -9.26 | 0.000           | 0.4658     |
| chi3  | -0.2388   | 0.0988    | -2.42 | 0.008           | 0.7876     |
| sibs4   | -0.3018   | 0.0863    | -3.50 | 0.000           | 0.7395     |
| kintime   | -0.4306   | 0.0825    | -5.22 | 0.000           | 0.6501     |
| intact16  | -0.2249   | 0.0889    | -2.53 | 0.006           | 0.7986     |
| samecit   | -0.1395   | 0.0875    | -1.59 | 0.056           | 0.8698     |
| voter   | -0.0470   | 0.0900    | -0.52 | 0.301           | 0.9541     |
| _constant   | -0.6717   | 0.1191    | -5.64 | 0.000           |            |
| * one-tailed probabilities  |           |           |       |                 |            |

As hypothesized, the data exhibit a positive association between education and unbelief. The logit coefficient of 0.7050 is equivalent to an odds ratio of 2.02, meaning that the odds that a college graduate is an unbeliever are twice the odds of someone with less education. It is important to keep in mind that within Durkheim’s theoretical model, this positive association does not demonstrate that education causes unbelief. Rather, he insisted that the desire for learning was the result of weakened ties to traditional society and it is these weakened social ties that are the causal agent. Following his approach we would explain the association by saying

that those who pursue higher education do so because they are less tied to traditional beliefs and are thereby more vulnerable to the acceptance of alternative religious theories.

The several variables measuring integration within domestic society demonstrate the predicted negative association with unbelief. Being married and being widowed both offer significant protection against unbelief. The odds ratios for both these explanatory variables are about 0.6 and highly significant statistically. The strongest association of all is between sex and unbelief. The odds ratio of .47 tells us that the odds of a female being an unbeliever are less than half the odds for a male. Rather than Durkheim's assumption about woman's "lower intellectual needs," I suspect that a woman's higher involvement in and greater sensitivity to daily family life may be the key to understanding this strong relationship.<sup>20</sup>

Other family variables also display a significant deterrent effect on unbelief. Both time spent with relatives (*kintime*) and number of siblings (*sibs4*) appear to be significant protections against unbelief. The odds ratios for these relationships are .65 and .74, respectively. Having at least three children of one's own (*chi3*) also deters unbelief (odds ratio = .79), as does having lived at age 16 with both parents (*intact16*) (odds ratio = .80). Finally, although not quite reaching the conventional level of statistical significance ( $p = .056$ , one-tailed), the association between living in the same city as at age 16 (*samecit*) and unbelief is also in the predicted direction.

The sole measure of integration within political society, whether the respondent had voted in the last presidential election (*voter*), failed to show a significant relationship with unbelief. Although such negative findings may indicate that social integration in political society has little bearing on unbelief, another possibility is that the measure employed is too weak in its effect. After all, Durkheim referred to "great social disturbances and great popular wars" as examples of significant change in social integration within political society.<sup>21</sup> Whether or not a respondent votes, particularly in a time when voter interest and participation is low, may be too feeble an indicator of political integration to register the hypothesized effect.

A recent event which, because of its consistency with major political events identified by Durkheim, would provide a better test of the hypothesis is the September 11 terrorist attack on the United States. The increased patriotism that followed the attack and the strengthened ties within the political order would lead us to expect a suppression of unbelief or, inversely, an increase in religiosity.

Although the GSS data are of no help in testing this specific hypothesis, data published elsewhere are useful. The Gallup Organization has for many years assessed the religiosity of the U.S. population by means of regular surveys of probability samples of U.S. adults. Ten days following the terrorist attack, Gallup polled its sample and found a significant rise in religiosity. From an earlier figure (in May) of 57 percent, the portion of the sample indicating that religion was very important in their lives rose to 64 percent.<sup>22</sup> Although the effect was short-lived (it had declined to a more normal 60 percent by December), the rise does support the hypothesis that increased integration within political society tends to suppress unbelief.

## Interaction effects

Much of Durkheim's discussion of sex as an explanatory variable related to its interactive effect on the relationship between marital status and suicide. He found, for example, that in France both marriage and widowhood conveyed a greater protection from suicide for men than for women. However, this interactive effect was reversed in parts of Germany (Oldenburg); there it was among women that marriage and widowhood were more effective deterrents to suicide.<sup>23</sup>

I constructed a series of variables to capture interaction between sex and marital status in their impact on unbelief. Two of these variables, *femaleXwidowed* and *femaleXmarried*," are introduced into the logit model described in table 5. This model retains all the variables that displayed significance at a one-tailed probability of at least 0.1.

| Table 5. Logit estimates with interaction terms |            |           |                 |         |            |
|---|------------|-----------|-----------------|---------|------------|
|   |            |           | Number of obs = |         | 5239       |
|   |            |           | LR chi2(11) =   |         | 304.98     |
|   |            |           | Prob > chi2 =   |         | 0.0000     |
| Log likelihood =                                | -2041.4212 |           | Pseudo R2 =     |         | 0.0695     |
| Explanatory variable                            | Coeff.     | Std. Err. | z               | P> z  * | Odds ratio |
| colgrad   | 0.6902     | 0.0901    | 7.66            | 0.000   | 1.9941     |
| married   | -0.4505    | 0.1110    | -4.06           | 0.000   | 0.6373     |
| widowed   | -0.0658    | 0.2825    | -0.23           | 0.408   | 0.9363     |
| female  | -0.7121    | 0.1182    | -6.03           | 0.000   | 0.4906     |
| chi3  | -0.2399    | 0.0988    | -2.43           | 0.008   | 0.7867     |
| sibs4   | -0.3001    | 0.0863    | -3.48           | 0.001   | 0.7407     |
| kintime   | -0.4310    | 0.0825    | -5.22           | 0.000   | 0.6499     |
| intact16  | -0.2254    | 0.0888    | -2.54           | 0.006   | 0.7982     |
| samecit   | -0.1439    | 0.0875    | -1.64           | 0.050   | 0.8660     |
| female X widowed                                | -0.7189    | 0.3626    | -1.98           | 0.024   | 0.4873     |
| female X married                                | -0.0289    | 0.1691    | -0.17           | 0.432   | 0.9715     |
| _constant                                       | -0.7160    | 0.1172    | -6.11           | 0.000   |            |
| * one-tailed probabilities                      |            |           |                 |         |            |

Only one of the interaction terms, *femaleXwidowed*, shows a significant effect on unbelief. The negative coefficient and the odds ratio of .49 have a one-tailed significance of p=.024. At the same time, the influence of the variable *widowed* virtually disappears, indicating that its effect on unbelief observed in table 4 was almost entirely interaction. That is, the effect of widowhood on unbelief appears to be limited to women. The other interaction term, *femaleXmarried*, shows no pattern of significance. All other explanatory variables maintain their strength as predictors of unbelief.

The interaction between sex and widowhood is more clearly seen by examining the relationship in a contingency table format. Table 6 shows that it is only among women that widowhood

offers protection from unbelief. The odds of female non-widows being unbelievers is .128 while the comparable figure for female widows is .066. The odds ratio for this association is a highly significant .514 ( $p = .0001$ ), meaning that the odds that a widow is an unbeliever are about half that of a non-widow. Among men there is very little difference in unbelief between widowers and non-widowers in the odds for unbelief. The slightly higher conditional odds for unbelief among widowers reported in table 6 yields a statistically insignificant ( $p = .70$ ) odds ratio of only 1.07. Widowhood is, therefore, an important explanatory variable in the theory, but it apparently acts as protection from unbelief only among women.

| Sex    | Not widowed     | Widowed        | Total           |
|--------|-----------------|----------------|-----------------|
| Male   | 0.259<br>(3346) | 0.277<br>(129) | 0.260<br>(3475) |
| Female | 0.128<br>(3870) | 0.066<br>(681) | 0.118<br>(4551) |
| Total  | 0.185<br>(7216) | 0.095<br>(810) | 0.175<br>(8026) |

We can now construct a more parsimonious model to test Durkheim's hypothesis about the impact of social integration on unbelief. Table 7 displays a logit model in which the superfluous explanatory and interactive variables are excluded. With the exception of voting in the last presidential election, all of the original explanatory variables display statistically significant relationships with unbelief consistent with the theory. The estimated  $R^2$  reported in table 7 (Pseudo  $R^2 = 0.0695$ ) indicates that much of the variance in unbelief is left unaccounted for by

| Log likelihood =     |         | -2041.4694 | Number of obs = |         | 5239       |
|----------------------|---------|------------|-----------------|---------|------------|
|                      |         |            | LR chi2(9) =    |         | 304.89     |
|                      |         |            | Prob > chi2 =   |         | 0.0000     |
|                      |         |            | Pseudo R2 =     |         | 0.0695     |
| Explanatory variable | Coeff.  | Std. Err.  | z               | P> z  * | Odds ratio |
| colgrad              | 0.6914  | 0.0901     | 7.68            | 0.000   | 1.9966     |
| married              | -0.4589 | 0.0843     | -5.44           | 0.000   | 0.6320     |
| female               | -0.7233 | 0.0836     | -8.65           | 0.000   | 0.4851     |
| chi3                 | -0.2408 | 0.0983     | -2.45           | 0.007   | 0.7860     |
| sibs4                | -0.3014 | 0.0862     | -3.50           | 0.000   | 0.7398     |
| kintime              | -0.4307 | 0.0825     | -5.22           | 0.000   | 0.6501     |
| intact16             | -0.2261 | 0.0887     | -2.55           | 0.006   | 0.7976     |
| samecit              | -0.1437 | 0.0875     | -1.64           | 0.050   | 0.8661     |
| female X widowed     | -0.7746 | 0.2265     | -3.42           | 0.001   | 0.4609     |
| _constant            | -0.7138 | 0.1104     | -6.47           | 0.000   |            |

\* one-tailed probabilities

the model. Nevertheless, the results confirm Durkheim's hypothesis that a weakening in social integration tends to undermine religious belief.

## Discussion

With these empirical results, we see how apt is Saint Francis de Sales' characterization of loss of faith as spiritual suicide. For the same patterns of social disintegration that weaken man's resistance to physical suicide also make him more susceptible to spiritual suicide and the loss of religious faith. The protection accorded the individual by an integrated social structure is apparently realized not only in the material but also in the spiritual realm. Although Durkheim did not develop this point, his theoretical approach has a much broader application than he realized.

It also entails an orientation to religious belief which is unlike most conventional approaches taken by social scientists, for it assumes that religious faith is the normal, ideal state for human beings. In contrast, prominent social scientists have often taken the opposite approach. August Comte, for example, placed religious faith and the theological understanding of reality at the most primitive level of societal development and assumed that it would inevitably be replaced by the positive or scientific stage. Comte was confident that for the good of mankind, the scientific perspective would supersede religion. As he wrote to a friend in 1851, "I am convinced that before the year 1860 I shall be preaching positivism at Notre Dame as the only real and complete religion."<sup>24</sup>

Social scientists who followed were less grandiose in their prediction that modern reason would supplant religious faith, yet many shared with Comte the view that human progress clashes with religious belief. As Evans-Pritchard has written, the social scientists whose theories about the source of religious faith have been most influential "have been at the time they wrote agnostics or atheists."<sup>25</sup> Durkheim is no exception to this as can be demonstrated by his allusions to religious faith as "erroneous" or "irrational."<sup>26</sup> Because they had little religious faith themselves, the ideal human condition for these theorists was apparently one free of religious doctrine.

Yet by presenting unbelief (along with physical suicide) as a pathological response to social disintegration, Durkheim appears (perhaps unknowingly) to assume that the most beneficial condition is one of religious belief. For him, a properly functioning, integrated social system will protect its members not only from physical self-destruction but also from spiritual suicide. That is, self-preservation, both physical and spiritual, is the normal, ideal state assumed by Durkheim.

Discussion of what is assumed to be normal, however, brings to mind another aspect of Durkheim's analysis which may offer insight when applied to spiritual suicide. In his work on crime, suicide, and other social deviance, Durkheim introduced the concept of the "normality" of deviance.<sup>27</sup> By this term Durkheim meant that social deviance is an ordinary characteristic of societies which has positive functional consequences for the social system. Present in all social systems, social deviance can first of all act to reinforce social norms when adequately sanctioned by agents of social control. Secondly, it can benefit society by stimulating valuable social change and preventing ossification and rigidity in the social world. These functions can be illustrated with examples not only of crime and physical suicide but also of spiritual suicide.

The first of these two positive functions is illustrated by the *Syllabus Errorum* and other papal warnings against modernism. Although frequently subjected to the scorn of secular thinkers, these warnings about the errors of modernism were attempts by the Shepherds of the Church to protect the faithful from the breakdown of traditional society in the Nineteenth Century. By forcefully condemning the worldly errors that had threatened the faith, Blessed Pius IX and subsequent popes reinforced Catholic teaching, attempting to encourage and guide Catholics in their attempts to live faithful lives. The deviation from the faith which was so visible in the modern world served as a means to remind the faithful of their obligations in faith. The recent sex-abuse scandal among the clergy provides another instance of the same functional consequence. The rejection by some priests of their vows of chastity has created a crisis of belief for many in the Church. Yet, while some Catholics have reacted to this crisis by denying the Church, many have responded by renewing their commitment to living holy lives and patiently enduring a period of purification.<sup>28</sup>

The second function is the stimulation of beneficial social change. Although an integrated, stable society may help to preserve its members from unbelief, social disintegration may show a positive result in the development of doctrine and Christian practice. The action of the Holy Spirit is certainly not restricted to stable or well-integrated societies. Many of the great saints of the Church have risen in times of great social turmoil and breakdown. Living singular lives and introducing radically new models of holiness, these men and women whom Hans Urs von Balthasar called “God’s prime numbers”<sup>29</sup> have enabled the Church to renew the faithful while protecting the deposit of faith from the challenges encountered in an ever-changing world. The response of these saints to the social disintegration around them illustrates in a dramatic fashion Durkheim’s claim that social deviance may benefit society.

## **Conclusion**

Although it was not his intention to offer a theory of unbelief, Durkheim’s analysis of suicide provides a useful though undeveloped theoretical approach to account for what Saint Francis de Sales called spiritual suicide. The examination in this paper of the association between his explanatory variables and unbelief demonstrates that his theory has empirical merit when applied to spiritual as well as physical suicide. Designed to replicate Durkheim’s own measurements, the variables employed here display an empirical pattern consistent with the hypothesis that weakness in social integration leads to a greater susceptibility to loss of religious belief.

Such a perspective offers a contrast to more typical analyses of the social basis of religious belief. Rather than viewing religious faith as a vanishing artifact of primitive social forms, this research suggests that the presence of a vibrant religious belief is an indicator that the society is healthy, maintaining an adequate level of integration and instilling in its members a sense of purposeful existence. Elevated rates of physical suicide are invariably understood as indicative of a serious social problem. Is it not reasonable to assume that higher levels of spiritual suicide are also problematic?

## Endnotes

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1. Robert Nisbet, "Introduction," in Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1976), v.
2. Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study of Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: Free Press, 1951), 209.
3. Durkheim, *Suicide*, 159, 374-5.
4. Durkheim, *Suicide*, 213-214.
5. Henri de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995); Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1959); and Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 28-31.
6. Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, trans. Joseph Ward Swain (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1976), 206.
7. The remarks of St. Francis de Sales which are most applicable to the idea of loss of faith as spiritual suicide are found in his discussion of scandal addressed to the Calvinists of Chablais as he endeavored to reconvert them to the Catholic faith. Cf. St. Francis de Sales, *The Catholic Controversy* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books, 1989), 5 - 10; and *An Introduction to the Devout Life* (Rockford, Illinois: Tan Books, 1994), 205. I am indebted to Fr. Roger Landry for calling attention to this concept in the work of St. Francis. Roger Landry, "One Priest's Answer to the Scandal," *National Catholic Register* (March 24-30, 2002); telephone conversation with Fr. Landry, November 4, 2002.
8. Durkheim, *Suicide*, 169.
9. Durkheim, *Suicide*, 158.
10. Durkheim, *Suicide*, 169.
11. Durkheim, *Suicide*, 215.
12. Durkheim, *Suicide*, 166.
13. Durkheim, *Suicide*, 202.
14. Durkheim, *Suicide*, 208.
15. National Opinion Research Center, *General Social Survey* {custom machine-readable cumulative datafile downloaded from <http://www.icpsr.umich.edu/GSS/>}, 1988-2000, Tom W. Smith, Principal Investigator.
16. James A. Davis and Tom W. Smith, *The NORC General Social Survey: A User's Guide* (Newbury Park, California: Sage Publications, 1992), 1-7.
17. Nisbet, "Introduction," vii.

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18. Daniel A. Powers and Yu Xie, *Statistical Methods for Categorical Data Analysis* (San Diego: Academic Press, 2000).
19. The large reduction in sample size from table 2 to table 4 is due to the practice in the GSS of administering some of the questions to subsets of the full sample.
20. A woman's particular sensitivity to the centrality of the family is sublimely expressed by John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter on the Dignity and Vocation of Women: "In God's eternal plan, woman is the one in whom the order of love in the created world of persons takes first root." *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 29.
21. Durkheim, *Suicide*, 208.
22. George Gallup, Jr., "Pearl Harbor to Sept. 11: Faith in Times of Crisis." Gallup Tuesday Briefing (www.gallup.com), January 29, 2002; and Gallup News Service, "Religion in the Aftermath of September 11." Gallup Tuesday Briefing (www.gallup.com), December 21, 2001.
23. Durkheim, *Suicide*, 179-180.
24. Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, 149.
25. E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religion* (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), 14-15.
26. Durkheim, *Elementary Forms*, 3; Durkheim, *Suicide*, 162.
27. Durkheim, *Suicide*, 361-2.
28. Landry, "One Priest's Answer"; and George Weigel, *The Courage to be Catholic: Crisis, Reform, and the Future of the Church* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).
29. George Weigel, *The Truth of Catholicism: Ten Controversies Explored* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 175-176.