Flags, Totem Bodies, and the Meanings of 9/11: A Durkheimian Tour of a September 11th Ceremony at the Flight 93 Chapel

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Abstract. Some four miles as the crow flies from the site at which United 93, which was the fourth plane involved in the 9/11/2001 terrorist attack on the United States, struck ground, there sits a small chapel dedicated to the passengers and crew. The Thunder on the Mountain Chapel is considerably less well known than the Parks Department memorial a few hundred yards from the crash site, but it is, arguably at least, equally important in the cultural production of the Flight 93 myth. This article draws from Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* as well as other theoretical sources to look closely at the chapel. I argue that what is going on at the Chapel contributes to a totemic myth that turns the American flag into a representation of the dead national hero and then places the totem object into the beliefs and rituals of an American civil religion.

Keywords: Durkheim, culture, civil religion, cultural sociology

Résumé. Quelque six kilomètres du site où le quatrième avion impliqué dans l'attaque de l'onze septembre, United 93, s'est écrasé, il existe une petite chapelle consacré aux passagers. La Chapelle "Tonnerre sur la Montagne" est beaucoup moins connu que le mémorial official situé quelques centaines de mètres du lieu de l'accident, mais il est sans doute au moins aussi important dans la production de la mythologie culturelle de l'United 93. Cet article s'inspire du célèbre livre de Durkheim sur la religion ainsi que d'autres sources théoriques pour tenter une analyse du symbolisme de la chapelle. Il est soutenu que ce qui se passe à la chapelle contribue à un mythe totémique qui transforme le drapeau américain en représentation du corps de l'héros national en situant cet objet totémique au milieu des croyances et rituels d'une "civil religion" américaine

Mots clés: Durkheim, la culture, la religion civile, sociologie culturelle

Introduction

A century after its publication, Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (hereafter *EFRL*), along with the powerful contributions of some of his collaborators who were deeply informed by its argument[1], remains a rich source for thinking about a wide range of cultural phenomena in the contemporary world. At the center of the book's argument is a framework for understanding the symbolic work done in clan societies by totem images of the collectivity and the ritual practices associated with the mythologies in which these symbols are put in narrative form. Although the book focuses largely on data from Australian aboriginal societies very different in many ways from modern societies, Durkheim's intent was to speak to realities in the social world he himself inhabited, and a hundred years later we can still fruitfully invoke the book in our own efforts to understand the cultural goings-on around us.

The work of expressing collective identity and national mythology that emerged in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, has been a fertile site of investigation for social and cultural theorists (see e.g., Abrams, Albright, and Panofsky 2004; Alexander 2006; Chermak, Bailey, and Brown 2003; Collins 2005; Denzin and Lincoln 2003; Heller 2005; Monahan 2010; Sather-Wagstaff 2008; Simpson 2006; Smelser 2004; Sturken 2007; Tiryakian 2005; and Zuber 2006, among others). However, no sustained scholarly attention of which I am aware has been focused on the part of that day's activity that ended not in New York City or Washington, D.C., but in Shanksville, Pennsylvania. In that tiny borough in the southwestern corner of that state, the fourth hijacked plane, United Flight 93, crashed into the earth after the passengers stormed the cockpit and attempted to retake the controls, thereby foiling the intended attack on a target in the nation's capital. Memorialization work has been going on at the site almost from the moment of the crash, first in a temporary memorial and currently in the form of a permanent memorial overseen by the US government and estimated at a cost of around $60 million US.[2] But the crash site is not the only location in the Shanksville area in which cultural work concerning the meaning of 9/11 is taking place. About eight miles away, along a stretch of a sparsely populated country road, sits a small chapel dedicated to the passengers of Flight 93. The Thunder on the Mountain Chapel was

1. I have elsewhere exhaustively mapped out the intricate connections in the thought on religion of Durkheim and several of his closest collaborators, namely, Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert, and Robert Hertz (Riley 2010).
2. In a forthcoming book, I discuss both the temporary and permanent memorials, in addition to the Flight 93 Chapel.

conceived in the immediate wake of the crash by Alphonse Mascherino, at the time an unassigned Catholic priest, and by the first anniversary of the crash, with substantial help from a local businesswoman, he was able to open it to the public. It has been receiving visitors and annually commemorating the crash ever since.

In this essay, I argue that the cultural work going on at the Chapel can be more deeply understood with reference to the argument concerning the power of the tribal/national totem in Durkheim's classic book. The symbolic material at the Chapel generates materials for the production and sustenance of an intricate myth about the meaning of the flight and the relationship between the passengers on the plane and the congregants who gather to commemorate its crash through rituals at the Chapel that embody that myth.

Between 2006 and 2011, I spent dozens of hours at the Chapel, cataloguing the material and symbolic culture there, talking with Father Mascherino and others assisting him at the site and visiting it, conducting ethnographic research during annual ceremonies there on September 10 and 11 and at various Sunday masses held there throughout the year. In what follows, I mine the data gathered during those research visits to try to give a sense not only of the symbols present at the Chapel, but also how they are used by visitors to the site. I apply Durkheimian tools from *EFRL* that are helpful in making sense of both. Before turning to an examination of these empirical materials, however, I must sketch a bit more fully the elements of the argument in *EFRL* used to interpret them.

Totems, Flags, Blood, and Ancestors: Durkheim's Case

The argument regarding totemism in *EFRL* can be summarized simply. Durkheim begins his examination of religion, in accordance with his theoretical principle of cultural evolutionism, by searching through the various possible candidates for the title of "most primitive variety of religion." He rejects animism and naturism for reasons that need not concern us here (*EFRL*: 45–78). He then turns to totemism, a variety of religions found in aboriginal Australia and, in a less pure form, indigenous North America; this, he argues, is in fact the most primitive form. The totem in this kind of society, which bears the form of an animal, plant, or elemental force, is argued by Durkheim to be the symbol of the social collectivity itself. The myth and ritual surrounding the totem constitute a misrecognised celebration of the group. The totem appears in three different manifestations: in the actual entity in the physical world that the totemic group believes to be its ancestor; in the human-made images of that totem that are carved into wood or stone for instance and used in related

rites; and in the actual human members of the totem group themselves. Owing to the fundamental power of symbols/collective representations in religious life, the images of the totem are taken as the most sacred of the three manifestations, in Durkheim's argument (*EFRL*: 132, 133). In this symbolic form the totem is effectively an "emblem, a true coat of arms," parallel in essence to the coats of arms that graced the castles, the shields and swords, and other key possessions of feudal European nobles (*EFRL:* 111,112). Members of Australian clans not only wear the image of the totem on their bodies in the form of drawings, tattoos, and scarrings; they seek to resemble it themselves in mimetic rites for instance (*EFRL:* 361–363), and hence bodily modifications of a specific variety with that goal as their end are often obligatory. When the totem is a bird, for example, the men may wear its feathers; in the tortoise clan, the men may shave their heads and leave six curls at appropriate angles to mimic the legs, head, and tail of the animal (Durkheim 1995 [1912]: 114, 115).

Durkheim provides several compelling examples of the sacred power of the totem image, largely drawn from the pioneering ethnographic work of Spencer and Gillen. In central Australia, clan religious life frequently involves an object called a *churinga*; Durkheim notes that similar objects exist in the north (the *nurtunja)* and in the south (the *waninga*), and he describes the latter as closely resembling a flag (*EFRL*: 123–125). The *churinga* are pieces of wood or polished stone, usually oval or oblong in shape. In some cases they produce noise when whirled through the air; these are known as bull roarers. The totemic group generally has a collection of these objects (*EFRL*: 118). They are kept in a special location, the *ertnatulunga*, generally a cave in some remote location unknown to those considered profane, i.e., boys who have not yet been initiated into manhood, and women, neither of whom are permitted to touch or even see them (*EFRL:* 119). The *ertnatulunga* itself is made sacred by the contagious touch of the *churinga*, so a man in danger of any sort who seeks shelter there is safe from harm. The *nurtunja* is kissed by initiates during their immensely exacting initiation ceremonies. They thereby enter into relations with the totemic principle in it; this enables them to endure the frightful ordeal of penile subincision without anesthesia (*EFRL*: 124). The *churinga* heals wounds and sickness by the merest touch, yet the only thing distinguishing it from other objects of wood and stone is the totemic mark it bears (*EFRL*: 120, 121).

The relationship between the totem and the clan member is complex and demanding in specific rules of contact and avoidance. One may not ingest or kill the totem animal or plant of the clan (*EFRL*: 131). There are some exceptions and mitigations for this harsh rule. For example, in cases of extreme hunger, or imminent danger from the totem animal, the rule may be broken, but a subsequent excuse for the offense is required to be made. In certain clans that have the water totem, obvious difficul-

ties are presented; clan members will die without water, yet they nonetheless cannot drink it unassisted but only from the hands of someone in another phratry (*EFRL*: 130).

This prohibition on contact with the totem may seem contradicted by the obligation of the clan member to wear the totem image. Still more complexity is seen in the fact that clans consider human beings by nature to be profane, and yet clan members are believed to *be* the totem (totem myths frequently depict original humans born surgically, by axe blows, etc., from animal ancestors), which is sacred (*EFRL*: 133, 135). The seeming contradiction has its resolution in the fact that in totemic systems humans, though in general profane, are nonetheless understood to have sacred energy (the totemic principle) concentrated in certain parts of their bodies, especially the hair and the blood (*EFRL*: 136). During ceremonies, the *nurtunja* is anointed in human blood, and some clans draw the totem during religious rites on soil that is soaked in the blood of clan members.

In a key chapter in the book, Durkheim addresses the totemic principle, that is, the source of its sacredness and its power. It is important to understand precisely what is being claimed when, for example, a member of the crow clan claims to *be* the totem. He does not mean he is literally a bird, but rather that both he and the crow are animated by the same fundamental source of power (*EFRL*: 191). Totemic societies see the whole universe as powered by forces that with a few exceptions take the forms of animals and plants (*EFRL*: 191). This force that resides in the totem is a moral force, arousing both fear and respect (*EFRL*: 192). Durkheim summarizes an account he cites from a member of a North American totemic group, the Dakota, regarding the nature of this "diffuse power," which the Dakota call *wakan*, as follows: "*wakan*… goes and comes through the world, and the sacred things are the places where it has alighted" (*EFRL*: 201). As a general term, Durkheim adopts the same Melanesian word for such power that was utilized by Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert in their 1902 *Année sociologique* essay on magic: *mana*.

The totem is essentially a representation or a symbol of something beyond it. What is the thing standing behind the totem? It is this power of *mana*, the totem being or god in its abstracted form, but it is also something else. The clan, that is, the social group, is also what is symbolized in the totem, which means the social group and the totemic principle are essentially one (*EFRL*: 208). We come now to perhaps the most famous of the key terms in *EFRL*: *collective effervescence*. When human groups are assembled together and driven by common aims, they become filled up with a certain kind of energy (*EFRL*: 212). This kind of phenomenon can be transitory, for example, a man exhorting a crowd, or it can be

more sustained, such as during "some great collective shock" e.g., the Crusades, or the French Revolution (*EFRL:* 213).

Durkheim describes a number of compelling scenes from aboriginal Australia in which clan members are gathered together, engaged in various moving and physically exciting rites, some sacrificial, some mimetic or imitative, and some commemorative, all of them involving mythic narratives of their descent from the totem ancestor and the requirement to regenerate its principle within themselves and in the world if the clan is to have the power to sustain itself. In the midst of this overwhelming barrage of physical stimulation and symbolic information, the clan members are made literally *ecstatic* (from the Greek *ek-stasis*, meaning "to move outside oneself").

Durkheim's argument as to precisely how the idea of the emotional, collective power that is generated at collective ritual ceremonies gets transferred to the totem symbol is a final theoretical piece that will serve us in what follows. The answer is not self-evident, since, as is made clear in Durkheim's description, this energy is actually generated by the simple phenomenon of the collectivity in proximity, ritually focused on rhythmic and intense activity, i.e., by what might seem a purely material, physical set of facts. But for the members of the clan, *the feeling of effervescence and the totem symbol are united by the omnipresence of the totem image at the moment of the experience of effervescence*. The actual phenomenon that generates the force, that is, society itself and the experience of the intoxication of vigorous collective exertion, is a complex, difficult thing to comprehend (*EFRL*: 221). The symbol of the totem simplifies and crystallizes this complex reality, and *in fact comes to replace it*. Durkheim returns here to the idea he had earlier presented, of the totem as an emblem. When a soldier at war is killed, he is often said to have "died for his flag," by which we mean that he died for his country. We moderns might think ourselves perfectly capable of sorting the two out and recognizing their distinction; after all, we know the flag is not the country, but only a scrap of cloth. And yet many a soldier in many a contemporary society has perished in combat while attempting to reclaim an actual flag abandoned in territory lost to the enemy, despite the fact that it is perfectly clear that the country will not perish if that one flag is lost, and the war will not be won simply because it is reclaimed. Just as the clan member with his totem, the soldier "forgets that the flag is only a symbol that has no value in itself but only brings to mind the reality it represents [and] treat[s it] as if it was that reality" (*EFRL*: 222).

The totem is a symbol of the whole society which can be thought of in the same frame of reference as a modern flag and it is embodied by the members, indeed often literally inscribed on their bodies in the form of tattoos and scarifications in addition to its presence in their physical being as the totemic principle in the form of their hair and blood. Its power

is generated through collective assemblies in which mythical stories of the relation of those present to the totem are told and reenacted, during which the symbol of the totem comes to be charged up with the residue of the emotional energy of the assembly. All this provides a penetrating lens for examining the workings of religious and national symbols, rituals, and collective identity and memory in modern societies, distant as we are from these totemic groups in many ways.

An Ideal-Typical September 11th at the Thunder on the Mountain Chapel

Let us turn now to empirical material from the Chapel.[3] Father Mascherino begins a typical September 11th commemoration by briefly and informally addressing the congregation of perhaps a hundred people who have crammed themselves into the small building that comfortably seats only about half as many bodies. The gathered generally consist of a combination of a small number of regular visitors to the Chapel who live in the area and a much larger contingent of first and generally one-time visitors from more distant destinations in the United States, many of whom have come in organized bus tours from hundreds of miles away. There are always members of a number of Christian motorcycle groups on hand as well, and they frequently hold their own services at the Chapel. Mascherino is eminently personable and charismatic, full of energy, wit, enthusiasm, and the sparkle of authenticity and authority; his personality is an absolutely crucial aspect of the overall atmosphere and cultural life of the Chapel, as is made clear the minute one talks to those in attendance, who are practically unanimous in their lofty praise of the man. He talks about September 11, 2001 as "the day that changed the destiny of man forever," as the heroes of Flight 93 "showed us how to live." The basic lesson they provided that day, he intones solemnly, was "never surrender." He closes his brief introductory remark with a vibrant invocation of the civil religious hybrid essence of the Chapel's symbolic life: "*We thank God for the blessings of freedom and democracy... patriotism and faith, one nation under God, no such thing as separation of Church and State, patriotism and faith are joined in our hearts*." The congregation listens respectfully, even dutifully.

Then the ceremony proper begins with the Pledge of Allegiance. Everyone stands and joins in the recitation of the Pledge, directing their gaze to one of the several American flags standing at either side of the

3. This section is a composite participant observation study of several different commemorative events that took place at the Chapel on September 11 and other dates between 2006 and 2011. Much of the September 11th ceremony is more or less repeated from year to year, with relatively little variation.

altar, after which they are told to remain standing to sing the US national anthem, “The Star Spangled Banner.” In visual terms, one of the most immediately striking aspects of the Chapel is the sheer number of images of the flag, of its red/white/blue/stars and stripes motif, and of related symbols present there. Such symbols seem to be everywhere one looks: a massive flag flies, elevated high on a pole outside the entrance; on either side of the altar, in addition to the two large flags, are many smaller flags etched on various memorial objects, ribbons, crosses, placards, and stones, in addition to a row of red, white, and blue candles; the small souvenir area at the left of the entrance is swimming in postcards, t-shirts, and hats with flag imagery, and the meditation room on the right of the entrance bears an eagle and a flag, as well as red, white, and blue trim lining the ceiling; visitors to the Chapel themselves often wear t-shirts, hats, and jackets emblazoned with the flag and similar symbolic material; the area above the altar is painted in a red, white, and blue sky theme with a large eagle at its center (see Figures 1–3).[4]

Figure 1: Area Left of Altar

4. All photos in this essay are my own.

Figure 2: Meditation Room

Figure 3: Area Above Altar

Mascherino then introduces a vocal group from a nearby town, the Senior Serenaders, who will provide the day's musical material. They launch into a rendition of Lee Greenwood's "God Bless the USA." This song has, by its peculiar cultural history, become a kind of nationalist political anthem. Originally recorded in 1984, it has been re-recorded and re-released a number of times, and experienced considerable popu-

larity, during moments of patriotic effervescence in the country: during the Gulf War of 1991; in the wake of the terrorist attacks of September 2001; and in 2003 at the beginning of the Iraq War. Virtually the entire congregation sings along enthusiastically, especially loudly during the chorus: "I'm proud to be an American, where at least I know I'm free, and I won't forget the men who died, who gave that right to me."

Mascherino next invites a woman to the pulpit. She sings a song titled "There She Stands," written by popular Christian singer-songwriter Michael W. Smith, who performed the song at the 2004 Republican National Convention, where he spoke of visiting with then President Bush in the aftermath of the 2001 attacks and being asked by the President to write a song about the day. "There She Stands" is even more drenched in traditional patriotic imagery than the song that preceded it, as a sample of the lyric demonstrates: "Just when you think, it might be over…someone will risk his life to raise her, there she stands…there she flies, clear blue skies, reminds us with red, of those who died." As the woman articulates key lines in the song, congregation members respond with vigorous energy. After the line "…someone will risk his life to raise her," a hearty "That's right!" is heard; a loud "Amen!" follows "…there she stands."

Mascherino retakes the pulpit and recounts the story of the Chapel's creation. The dramatic skills of this former Catholic priest are formidable, and the effect on those gathered is visceral, detectable in an instant both visually and aurally. In the days just after the attacks of 9/11, the idea came to Mascherino to build a religious memorial to the events. The temporary memorial site already existed, but "I knew," he tells those present, "the government was not going to build a place to pray or that was about God." During one of his numerous trips back and forth from Shanksville in late October 2001, he saw the "for sale" sign outside an abandoned chapel on Coleman Station Road. He inquired, but was disappointed to learn that an offer had already been made and accepted. Undaunted, he looked at two other sites, one in the immediate area, another some 30 miles away in Johnstown, but both were prohibitively expensive. His inspiration seemed to have met an abrupt, early demise. But about two weeks after his inquiry, he got a call from the real estate agency handling the property on Coleman Station Road; they told him the first buyer had backed out and that the property was again available. By selling a number of collectibles he had amassed over the years, he was able to make the deposit and later the settlement on the property.

In his description of the twists and turns involving the property's status and the constant struggle to acquire the money required at various

steps in the process of purchase, a discourse of the mystical and miraculous emerges. He emphasizes numerous events along the path to the purchase, reconstruction and opening of the chapel that he explicitly posits as supernatural in origin, and he is unrestrained in his praise of what he referred to as the "great generosity of the Power of the universe; you cry out to the universe your need and the universe responds; cry out to God and before you even ask Him anything, He already knows what you need…I just went along for the ride." He builds the story in a crisp, taut crescendo, bringing his listeners on a thrilling journey, expertly adding dramatic flourishes at just the proper moment. This story culminates in a moment that fairly crackles with the intensity in the room as he describes the entire Chapel being built in ten days with the aid of a seemingly divinely inspired gift from a local businesswoman.

A performing group made up of children, aged perhaps six to twelve called The North Star Kids then marches into the Chapel in exquisite precision and undertakes a carefully prepared presentation on the passengers of Flight 93. One by one, the children, wearing identical white outfits with clear blue vests trimmed in red, take the microphone and recite from memory a biographical fragment of one of the passengers; just prior to the start of the performance, their adult director says they have individually researched the information in their recitation. The collection of biographical recitations is enclosed in a lengthy version of the hymn "You are Mine." A bell tolls with the calling of each name; the reciting child then provides a brief narrative. The details provided are uniformly hagiographic, so carefully directed toward the project of the moral perfection of the passengers as to seem written by a single author with only that intention in mind: "He was always happy and had a big smile on his face...always put his family before himself… always saw possibilities in everyone and everything…before becoming a flight attendant she was a police officer but resigned because her heart couldn't take the pain of the job… airline worker who gave unused airline meals to homeless people." In some years, the delivery by the children of these biographical sketches is almost unbearably laden with emotion. Children weep as they say their lines, and the effect is magnetic, as tears and sniffles spontaneously come from the congregation in response.

Mascherino then brings to the attention of the congregation the presence among them of special guests, the family of LeRoy Homer, the plane's co-pilot: "Last year his dear mother Ilsa brought to you a special gift, the plane you see on display in a glass case in the corner of the chapel and on that occasion Ilsa said "I bring this plane to you, the people of this chapel, who come here to honor my son and pray for him." [A]nd

when Ilsa… put the plane in the case …she told me "Father, if you ever have to handle the plane, please wear rubber gloves, *my son's fingerprints and his DNA as well are still on this plane*" (see Figure 4). There is sustained applause from the congregation. Mascherino says "We love you" and Homer's mother thanks the congregation for their reception. More sustained applause.

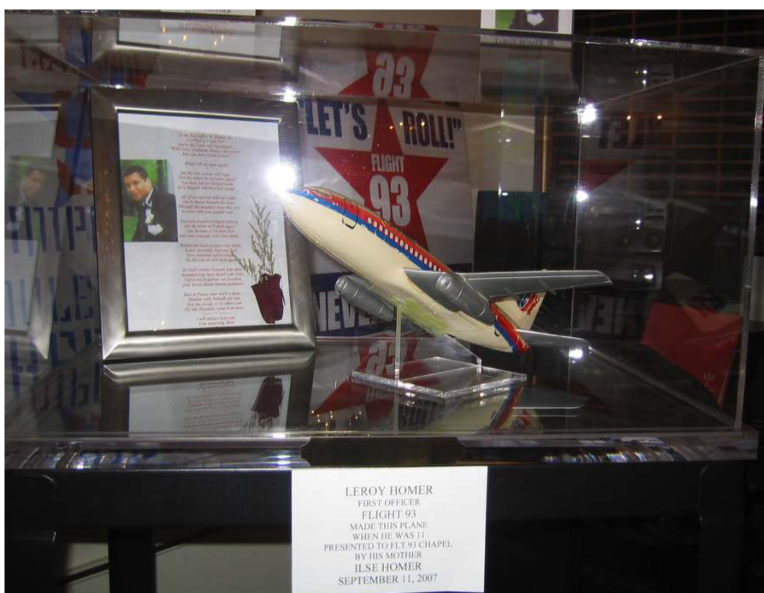

Figure 4: Flight 93 Co-Pilot LeRoy Homer's Model Airplane

Homer's red, white, and blue model plane is not the only gift by a family member of a personal item owned by a passenger on the plane to be found in the Chapel. Perhaps the most poignant of such items is a dress made by her mother and worn by Honor Elizabeth Wainio on her third Christmas. It is enclosed in a case along with a card identifying it and a photo of Wainio as a child wearing the dress (Figure 5). More recently, a rugby ball owned by Mark Bingham was donated to the chapel by Bingham's father; it currently sits in a sealed case atop the case protecting Homer's airplane (Figure 6).

Figure 5: Elizabeth Wainio's Christmas Dress

Figure 6: Mark Bingham's Rugby Ball

Mascherino makes his last address to the gathering after a brief musical interlude, and he effortlessly brings the congregation to an emotional pitch:

> "I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder.[5] "Thunder on the Mountain" is the message of Flight 93…as the plane crashed in the fields of Shanksville, it exploded and …people heard it for miles around…that's how powerful is the message of Flight 93. Once we understand it, it will explode upon our hearts. *Never surrender. On September 11th 2001, the old heavens and the old earth passed away and behold, God said "I create all things anew and this time I give you 40…new…stars* [he gestures grandly here to the span of red, white, and blue sky and stars above the altar, and there is spontaneous awed applause from the congregation] — *40 stars to guide you in the darkness of terror.*"

"What did you expect to find in this field?" Mascherino goes on, in a phrase that hints at the mistaken perception he has told me that some visitors have that the passengers rest in the graveyard adjacent to the chapel, "It's just an empty field. *Except in this field, heroes died.*" At the very conclusion of the events, he introduces another family member in attendance, Deborah Borza, who is the mother of passenger Deora Bodley. As the crowd disperses, a number of them gather around Borza, reverently shaking her hand and eagerly delivering their words of praise and love. The Senior Serenaders close the ceremony with a rousing version of "God Bless America."

Making Heroes in the Chapel: Flag as Totem, Flag as Body of the Heroic Ancestor

In the preceding section I endeavored to stick to description and to eschew theoretical interpretation to the extent that is possible. Now, though, let us see how we can use the theoretical tools from *EFRL* to ground the description in a broader framework of cultural meaning.

What is happening at the Flight 93 Chapel? At the surface, precisely what I just described in the section above. Seen in light of Durkheim's approach to religious life, however, we are able to dig below the surface to reach deeper structures of narrative and meaning. Members of what we might well call the "Stars and Stripes Clan" are congregating to replenish the totem and to collectively recall the totemic principle residing within themselves. The clan leader reminds them of the sacred power of their totem, which is too mighty and primordial to be contained by

5. He is likely quoting a lyric from the hymn "How Great Thou Art."

arbitrary distinctions between separated realms of the group's life such as "politics" or "religion." The clan sings emotional songs collectively and the lyrics, without fail, detail the mysterious, ineffable power of the totem which causes clan members to risk their lives to pull her from the rubble and raise her, gazing on her red bands that signify the sacred blood of the ancestors. The clan leader relates a myth to the clan that explains how the sacred place in which they gather to replenish the totem was established and describes the magical events that were produced by the totemic principle (*mana*) to sacralize this site in which they gather. The mythical deeds and personalities of heroic ancestors of the totem group are recounted and commemorated, in vivid song that heightens the clan's emotional frenzy. The clan leader brings forth before the assembled ordinary material objects — a plastic model plane, an item of clothing, a deflated ball — that have been elevated to the category of the sacred by the fact that they bear material traces (blood, DNA, fingerprints) of worshiped ancestors who collectively constitute the totem. He tells of the mythical deed of these superficially individualized ancestors, who collectively acted to preserve the totem from enemies, and in so doing died heroically and were returned to the totem. During all of this, as the clan members ecstatically commemorate the totem, they are surrounded by its image, which they come to see as the cause of their vitality.

What does the totem, the flag, stand for? Following Durkheim, it stands for the clan itself, for the nation-state in this case. But we can go deeper still. As noted in passing above, at least some of the visitors to the chapel assume, when they see the adjacent cemetery, that the passengers of Flight 93 are buried there. Of course they are not; most of the material that made up their bodies still lies scattered deep in the earth at the crash site. But it is a misperception driven, I suggest, by something of great significance culturally, worthy of further theoretical analysis. For, though there are no dead bodies at the Chapel, the cultural narratives at work there *require* dead bodies, and dead bodies of a particular kind, as their symbolic fuel.

In *EFRL*, Durkheim points out that the totem is a kind of symbolic manifestation of the collective body of the dead ancestors, and the nascent idea of the soul that is present in those Australian totem societies is seen as the spirit entity that ties the individual clan member into the collective of the dead; when s/he perishes, his/her soul becomes a spirit and goes to join the collected souls of the ancestors that make up the totem (*EFRL*: 251–252). In fact, the connection between the individual and the dead ancestors is already materially real for the clan member in the belief that every individual is the double of a deceased ancestor (ibid.,: 280). Durkheim's student and colleague Robert Hertz (2009[1907]) de-

scribed funeral rites in certain primitive Polynesian societies according to the Durkheimian categories of the pure (holy, venerated) and impure (blasphemous, horror-inspiring) sacred that are described in *EFRL*. The dead man or woman becomes sacred, that is, an entity separated from the profane realm and imbued with an extraordinary energy or power, but the valence of this sacredness varies depending on the particular state of the dead body. The body in the process of putrefaction enters the state of impure sacrality, becoming a transgressive force that is to be feared, capable of defiling, even destroying anything with which it comes into contact. When decomposition is complete and the dead body is transformed into a skeleton, it becomes a pure sacred object, still possessing massive power, but now commanding reverence and respect, even requiring ingestion by family or clan members as a means of harnessing the sacred power.

The institution of sacrifice brings other forces to bear on the dead body, but the duality of this sacred power (pure/impure) is also present there in the most obvious manner. Whether the sacrificed being is human or non-human animal, the act of putting it to death is an act that removes it from the realm of the profane definitively. In fact, the process of sacralizing the victim begins before the actual death blow. In a lengthy essay on which Durkheim relied heavily in his *EFRL* discussion of sacrifice, Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert showed that a whole series of ritual processes (bathing, the expression of laudatory praise toward the victim, the conferring of gifts of various types on him, including sexual favors and edible delicacies) take place "in the course of which the victim is progressively made divine" (Mauss and Hubert 1964 [1898]: 30). The sacred status of the sacrificial victim is neither clearly pure nor impure, though it is manifestly sacred, for the act of putting it to death is at once a sanctification and a sacrilege, and the act of sacrifice "can tend to both good and evil" and "the victim represents death as well as life, illness as well as health, sin as well as virtue, falsity as well as truth" (ibid.: 60).

There was no act of sacrifice in the proper anthropological sense on September 11, 2001 in the field in Shanksville, no officiants present, no sacrificer to apply the blow, although the term in its more generic sense is used constantly in talking about what befell the passengers. But in the aftermath of the events on the plane, in the way they were represented, commemorated, and understood by many people, basic principles of the Durkheimian anthropology of sacrifice are of use in the interpretive task. It is a special case of sacrifice to which we must refer here: the sacrifice of the *hero*. As Durkheim's student and colleague Henri Hubert wrote in a study of the hero steeped in the theoretical concepts articulated in *EFRL*: "[I]t has been and still is possible to compare fig-

uratively the death of the hero to sacrifice…The bloodshed by martyrs has been compared to sacrificial blood…But it is still a unique sacrifice and the one who sacrifices himself does not succumb as a victim; he sacrifices himself as a hero" (2009 [1919]: 57-8). I am interested in the specific manner in which the sacrificial death of the hero is present in a case like this, where there is no actual sacrificial rite and no physical body of the sacrificed to be worshiped. For religious sacrifice generally, bloody bodies are required. Congregants may even be required to ingest the flesh and the blood of the sacrificial victim, and the slain victim must be seen, adored, and feared in the physical form. With hero sacrifice, Hubert argues, it is only in representation, not in gruesome physical reality, that we engage with the dead body of the hero, who of course can only die once and therefore cannot be present at every meeting of his partisan clan to commemorate his martyrdom.

How then is the hero's lifeless body present in the cult of the Flight 93 heroes? He or she is present, in symbolic and pure guise, *in the form of the flag*. In Marvin and Ingle's fascinating study of the cultural workings of American nationalism, we find a compelling argument for American patriotism as a civil religion based in blood sacrifice. Borrowing explicitly from Durkheim's analysis of totemism in *EFRL*, and from subsequent thinkers themselves deeply influenced by Durkheim's conceptual framework, especially Bellah (1967), they see the American nation resting on a set of beliefs and practices that effectively take the American flag as a totem representing the national group. More specifically, in the sacrificial cult that is American civil religion, the flag is a representation not simply of the national collectivity, but also and more specifically of "the sacrificed body of the citizen" (Marvin and Ingle 1999: 63), i.e., of the national soldier killed in combat to defend the nation, and whose death is periodically required to replenish the vital energy of the totem. This all follows from axiomatic principles concerning religion, the purpose of which is "to organize killing energy" and "[t]he first principle of [which] is that only the deity may kill" (Marvin and Ingle 1999: 10). In civil religion, the deity is the state, "which does kill, [and which] allows whoever accepts these terms to exist" (ibid.). The "fuel," the "generative heart of the totem myth" is sacrificial violence and "the borders that a group will defend with blood ritually produce and reproduce the nation" (ibid.: 64, 66). This view is rooted in the Durkheimian literature in the sociology of religion that traces religious belief and practice historically back to primitive sacrifice, the ritual exchange with the gods that centrally involves violence and death, indeed, that may require the sacrificial death of the god himself, and often even the consumption of the god/totem by the members of the cult as a way of reestablishing their connection to it

and propagating the totemic principle (*EFRL*: 340; Mauss and Hubert 1964 [1898]). Religion is fundamentally concerned with the determination of the proper authorities to be turned to for the most serious of human acts. So, as Marvin and Ingle turn this bloody definition of religion to application on Durkheim's concept of the totem and Bellah's category of civil religion, the flag becomes a very serious element in cultural meaning construction surrounding, among other things, certain kinds of acts of violence and death that can be understood under the aegis of war. As a totem, the flag thus arouses the greatest emotional attachment.

With this Durkheimian interpretive framework in place, we can look anew at the symbolic work going on at the Chapel. The hero's body is present there and is engaged in effervescent interaction with congregants in abundance. The basic meaning of the American flags present, in original and altered forms, is tied into the sacrificial death and transfiguration of the hero in this optic. At all of the most recent September 11 commemorations I attended, in the makeshift parking area on the other side of Coleman Station Road, which is situated just behind the graveyard that visitors frequently imagine to be the final resting place of the Flight 93 passengers and crew, I noted a large number of American flags in a mass (Figure 7). I immediately guessed that there would be forty of them, and my count confirmed the guess. These forty flags, mounted in a cemetery, constitute the totem bodies of the forty passengers and crew of United Flight 93. Those totem bodies are individually represented in another key site at the Chapel: the number of painted stars in the red, white, and blue sky above the altar is also exactly forty. Each of the other flags situated around the Chapel is the representation of the entire group of clan ancestor-martyrs who at once played an already historically established role in the national hero myth, along with e.g., those killed in combat during World War II, and established by their act the unique cult of Flight 93.

Figure 7: 40 Flag Bodies in Cemetery/Parking lot During 9/11 Ceremonies at Chapel

Americans are "born under the flag" (Marvin and Ingle 1999: 21), in deeply structured relation to this totem. In this symbolic system, the totem body of the hero finds genesis and rebirth, and the dead body is purified in the same kind of ritual process we saw in Hertz's analysis summarized previously. The totem ancestor, brutally struck down in defending the totem, is, as a mere corpse, or, even worse, a fragmented mass of remains, something horrifying and impure. It could not be the object of an adoring cult. It must be made pure by turning it into the image of the totem itself, in which form it must be displayed and worshipped. We do not live in a totemic society, to be sure, but as a heuristic device, we profit from the concept as a means of organizing our analyses of the production and reproduction of meaning in culture systems such as our own.

Mascherino clearly understands the sepulchral nature of the totem myth. He sometimes distributes buttons to children visiting the Chapel with their parents that read "Future Hero" — indeed, he gave one to my daughter, personalized with her own name, on one of our visits to Shanksville. He once told me that he has seen tears come to the eyes of the parents on seeing the words of the button, as the realization of the true meaning hits. That meaning is stunning: *the child as potential future sacrifice to the grim symbolic needs of replenishing the blood totem of the flag*. He also frequently connects the chapel's symbolic work to the American military in ways that point with some clarity to the interpretive accuracy of the theoretical vision of Marvin and Ingle. On September 11, 2011, while dedicating a monument placed at the chapel by the Somerset Garden Club as a "a tribute to the armed forces," Mascherino asserted that the chapel had always been "intimately related" to "those who protect us from evil," that is, the military, the job of which is, in Marvin and Ingle's perspective, to create dead enemies, but even more importantly *to create dead heroes who can be turned into the clan totem*.

We can now return to Homer's model airplane, Bingham's rugby ball, and Wainio's Christmas dress with this interpretive material at hand, and the power generated in the congregation by these objects becomes clearer. The slight traces of blood and flesh present on them are of course only detectable with instruments of far more sensitivity than our human senses, and neither those nor any other merely material traces can serve as the explanatory root of the sacred power of the objects, but their status as the *symbolic blood of the martyred heroes*, as the *sacred relics of the dead ancestors*, stands out resolutely. We might also point to the fact that they connect us to the childhoods of heroes who died as adults, and thereby invoke an ancient symbolic connection between the child and rebirth, or defeat of death (Morin 1970: 127). They take visitors to

the pristine moments of the pure, innocent youth of these passengers (and indeed the holiday on which Wainio wore her dress is the birth of the child god of the Christians) and thereby conquer death, although only temporarily and although death is, as the twin of rebirth, necessarily invoked by them. It is to ensure their status on the side of the *pure* sacred that, in addition to their incorporation into the form of the totem, they are symbolically taken back to the vibrant perfection of childhood, as far as possible from the horror and impurity of dead and putrefying human flesh.

Conclusion

Durkheim's *EFRL* is, a century later, still a rich source of interpretive theory for the contemporary world. While it is clear that in some ways the Flight 93 Chapel congregation is worlds away from Australian aboriginal clan society, if we follow Durkheim's axiomatic principle that the most primitive incarnations of a form of social life bear key elements that maintain a presence in later historical descendants of that earlier version and thereby serve as evidence of a kind of familial relationship between the two, we can produce an interpretive sociology of the goings-on at the Chapel that is both rich in detail and consistent with what has been learned over the past several decades in the biological and cognitive sciences. Indeed, the entry into the discussion of religion by scholars with credentials in both the social and the evolutionary and cognitive sciences (e.g., Wilson 2002; Atran 2002; Boyer 2002) has done a good deal to bolster Durkheim's perspective. Perhaps Durkheim's most faithful American student, Robert Bellah, has just produced (2011), in perfect timing for the centennial of the *EFRL*, his own massive *magnum opus* on religion, *Religion in Human Evolution: From the Paleolithic to the Axial Age*, which unabashedly puts that evolutionary framework right into its title and throughout reasserts the central historical premise in *EFRL* that past religious forms live on in our times, if in complex ways that do not yield easy determinist conclusions. A significant challenge for the sociological study of religion and culture going forward is arguably to find, or rediscover, ways to bring interpretive social science, on the one hand, and evolutionary thinking in what Bellah might call its "non-fundamentalist" incarnations (Bellah 2011: xii), on the other, into the kind of fruitful dialogue they enjoyed in Durkheim's classic work.

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