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**"Culture and Emotion in Christmas:
The Elementary Forms of the Spiritual Life"**

Paul G Schervish, Raymond J.Halnon and Karen Bettery Halnon

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CULTURE AND EMOTION IN CHRISTMAS: THE ELEMENTARY FORMS OF THE SPIRITUAL LIFE¹

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I think it's the most wonderful time of the year and the most difficult time of the year. I think it is the worst of holidays and I think it's the best of holidays. I really do. I think just because of all the depression and the mental illness and watching people react to it and the fact that people are alone and it's supposed to be this great get-together-bonding-experience. Supposedly here is the light of the world that's gonna make everything better. He's gonna take people and bring them together and all this kinda great stuff and it just isn't reality. I mean it's a nice little Hallmark card but it's not really reality. So I think that it's the best of times, it's the worst of times. And I think I can actually sit somewhere and say that truthfully, because for me it *has been* the best of times, and it *has been* the worst of times.

Respondent Elizabeth Chobit²

For this command which I enjoy on you today is not too mysterious and remote for you. . . . It is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts. . . . I have set before you life and death, the blessing and the curse. Choose life, then, that you and your descendants may live.
Deuteronomy 30.

Spiritual experience is the most silent and perhaps most silenced variable of sociological analysis. If sociologists pay attention to spiritual experiences at all, their usual approach is to *explain them away* rather than *explain* their content, causes, and consequences.³ This paper offers a novel theoretical and methodological framework for examining the most *deeply seated features of cultural and emotional life*, what in more common parlance is called spirituality. Our purpose then is to explore Christmas, while at the same time developing a mode of sociological analysis that takes people's spiritual experiences as seriously as the personal and social effects produced by those experiences.

In the first section of the paper, we examine a passage from the book of Deuteronomy about spiritual life and explore what sociological inquiry needs to add to its analytic arsenal in order to

adequately interpret profound meaning. In the second section of the paper, we analyze several passages drawn from among the sixty interviews we conducted in conjunction with the Boston College study, *The Contradictions of Christmas: Troubles and Traditions in Culture, Home, and Heart*. In the third section, we chart the rudiments of a social-psychological theory of spirituality, emphasizing the elementary spiritual contradiction between nurturing *mysterium* and debilitating *onus*.

An Adequate Understanding

According to Max Weber (1968, pp. 4-28) the goal of sociology is to obtain what he calls a causally *and* subjectively adequate explanation of human behavior. By this he means that sociologists can properly explain the trajectory of social life only by locating those variables that are *socially potent enough* to produce the chain of outcomes one wants to explain and *emotionally potent enough* to motivate actors to forge or move along the links in that causal chain. Our complaint about contemporary sociology is that it simply does not provide a causally and subjectively adequate explanation of deeply seated emotional life. It curtails its analysis just when things are getting interesting.

What, for instance, is the ability of current sociology to provide a causally and subjectively adequate explanation of verses 11-20 of Deuteronomy 30 (extracted in the second epigraph at the beginning of the paper)? Very little, we regret, unless it develops the theoretical capacity to deal with the following three realities. The first is the experience of ultimate concern. The passage clearly assumes that people experience at least some aspects of their lives as choices between the ultimate principles of life and death, blessing and curse, and not merely as choices for or against particular moral mandates. The second reality is that the metaphysical order is knowable. The passage asserts the epistemological position that ontological reality is neither disorienting nor alien but known to people's hearts and enunciated in their words. The third aspect of life that social science must be able to understand is those acts of human agency that individuals carry

out in order to advance blessing and deter curse. For according to the author of Deuteronomy, individuals are expected to exercise vigilance about and pursue strategies for seeking life and eschewing death.

One of the enduring insights of sociology is that it is possible to uncover the underlying institutional and cultural forces that explain why people think and act the way they do. Whether it is Emile Durkheim explaining social suicide rates by the level of group solidarity or Karl Marx explaining the dynamics of capitalism as deriving from underlying class antagonisms, sociology aims to produce a relatively adequate explanation of what people think, feel, and do. Sociologists claim to at least partially understand the dynamics of racism, poverty, crime, church attendance, social movements, gender relations, and family life—to name only a few areas of research. Nevertheless, when people reflect in their own hearts or with friends, spouses, ministers, or therapists on their daily round they think, feel, and speak in a language much more akin to the discourse of Deuteronomy than to that of contemporary social science. Also, as we will hear, the respondents in the Christmas study evince an intuitive and self-reflective understanding of the distinction between blessing and curse, the need for vigilance directed at discerning the boundaries between blessing and curse, and the need for a set of workable strategies for advancing happiness and deterring distress. In a word, how can sociology forge adequate explanations without excavating the elementary feelings that mobilize people's lives, or studying the strategies people take up to advance life and resist death?

This, it turns out, is similar to the challenge that Durkheim made to the thinkers of his day. To "succeed in understanding" the categories of knowledge and feeling, Durkheim wrote, "it is necessary to resort to other means than those which have been in use up to the present." We agree with Durkheim that "we shall profit by all the occasions which present themselves to us of catching at their very birth some at least of these ideas which, while being of religious origin,

still remain at the foundation of the human intelligence" (1965, pp. 32-33).

Fortified by Weber's and Durkheim's advisories, we contend that sociology and social science can provide an adequate understanding of cultural and emotional life *only* if it explicitly attends to the elementary forms of the spiritual life. This term is meant to be evocative of the purposes and accomplishment of Emile Durkheim's classic book on the social origins of religion with the English title, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. By elementary forms of the spiritual life we mean those units of intellectual, emotional, and kinetic knowledge that are consoling and attractive or disconcerting and repulsive. Life-giving ideas, sentiments, and behaviors are *mysterium*. Debilitating ideas, sentiments, and behaviors are *onus*. If *mysterium* is wisdom, compassion, and care; *onus* is deception, disregard, and negligence. If *mysterium* is modified, as Rudolf Otto (1958 [1923]) recommends, by the adjectives *tremendum* (worthy of worship) and *fascians* (enticing), *onus* is modified by the adjectives, *debilitans* (debilitating) and *conficiens* (destroying or terminating). *Mysterium* is represented by the chain of signification, life-blessing-virtue-sacred-good-consolation-joy-union-forgiveness while *onus* is represented by death-curse-vice-profane-evil-desolation-sorrow-estrangement-retribution. This conceptual scheme can be developed further by examining some passages from our Christmas interviews.

The Contradictions of Christmas

Eleanor Lindsey, a 38-year old married mother of three articulates the contradictory meaning of Christmas expressed by many respondents. Listen for her distinction between *mysterium* and *onus*, and how both of these contrasting knowledges emerge from the same realms, and how *mysterium* and *onus* exist in propinquity and encroach on each other.

I think back to the Christmases that I had as a child. They were so perfect and wonderful. And now without my father there, they're not the same. For me more than any time of the year, Christmas highlights his absence. The holidays

really are a family time. For me, that's the best part of Christmas, so the fact that my father isn't there is far more obvious.

For me the most bothersome part about Christmas is also the family that's so wonderful. It's a family time and, you've seen my house. You know that there's always family around, lots of family. And as much as that's really wonderful, to feel their love and to see everybody, there are times when that's difficult. So I think that Christmas really brings a mixed bag, and I think that Christmas is always a catch-22.

I think I notice some of that conflict in people just in going out Christmas shopping. There seems to be two extremes which happen to the people that I encounter trying to get my errands done. Either the people that you encounter will be very happy, very pleasant, will go out of their way to find you that one item in the store that you're looking for; or they're absolutely miserable. For me, I don't seem to notice an in-between.

When it's all over, one part of me is very relieved because it then means the end of a lot of people staying at my house, which, you know, then means less laundry, less cooking, less cleaning; and the house then is a little bit quieter. And that's refreshing. But it's also a little sad. It's a little sad to see people leave and realize that with the winter coming, we may not see them until the spring. It's a little sad to think it's another Christmas that has gone by without my father, it's another Christmas where the kids are getting a little older. You know, you look at those Christmas pictures and in one picture they're babies and the next year they're toddlers and then they're a little bigger and a little bigger and yeah, no [longer with pudgy] cheeks, and you know in next year's Christmas pictures, Tom will probably be almost as tall as me. And that's a little sad. It's one way you really notice the passing of the years.

What can be said about Lindsey's memoir? First, Lindsey concretely expresses her contradictory experiences. Second, Lindsey clearly knows the difference between which aspects of family and shopping bring happiness and those that induce distress, and she can express this dilemma with a good degree of self-reflection. Third, the deepest enjoyment and profoundest distress emerge from two sides of the same reality rather than from different realities. It is not that family brings consolation and shopping brings debilitation. Both family and shopping are inherently contradictory, each housing a trajectory to life and death. Fourth, Lindsey not only enunciates the contradictory tendencies of Christmas in her reflection that

Christmas is the "most wonderful" and the "most difficult time of the year." She also understands how the life-giving and death-dealing experiences of the holiday remain on either side of an emotional fissure. "I don't seem to notice an in-between," she observes. Finally, while the generative and debilitating aspects of Christmas are experienced as being on opposite sides of an emotional fissure, their domains encroach upon each other. Lindsey's greater enjoyment of her children as they get older is encroached upon by her dread of fleeting time. The happiness derived from decorating her house and making it a center of hospitality is invaded by the added drudgery of housekeeping. But then this latter feeling too is displaced by sentiments of affection directed toward friends and family whom she will not see until the Spring. In addition to Lindsey, several other respondents portray their experience of the radical difference between *mysterium* and *onus*. But we want to describe some other elements of our conceptual framework that also serve to fill out the picture of Christmas.

The Spiritual Life

Our basic unit of analysis or object of study is spiritual life. By this we simply mean what most people mean by symbolic life. But by speaking of spiritual life we emphasize the fact that life is simultaneously intellectual, emotional, and material and that at every moment of consciousness people are discerning between *mysterium* and *onus* and setting their course on the basis of what they discern. For this reason we speak of material realms of spiritual life rather than of separate material and spiritual realms. For instance, we consider all the social relations surrounding money, gifts, food, decorations, family, cards, music, travel, weather, death, time, work, and worship as material realms of spirituality which evoke experiences of *mysterium* and *onus*.

Convertibility of Mysterium and Onus

There are many ways in which what was once *mysterium* later becomes *onus*. "It just seemed like love was radiant in those days,"

says John Sommers recalling his childhood. "When you walked out of church at Christmas time it just seemed like everyone was radiant. Whereas today, it isn't the same" because people are so frazzled. Equally common is the transformation of *onus* into *mysterium*. For so many years, recounts Janet Eliot, nobody "acknowledged around Christmas time that it was Christ's birthday. Nobody really acknowledged God at Christmas until my grandmother was dead. Until this year. We sang the carols together. We sat around the tree, realizing what the Christmas tree really is. I've honestly found out it's a symbol of life. You bring it indoors so you have life inside the house. I remember reading that, but I was surprised [to finally realize it]."

Mysterium as Ineffable Yet Knowable

To say that people recognize the difference between *mysterium* and *onus* is not to claim that they are able to formulate this distinction discursively. Despite the effort to express *mysterium*, the experience often remains ineffable. For John Sommers, the glow of Christmas is hard to define but, for all that, no less real:

When family members walk in the house on Christmas, it just seemed like a halo. You can just see a halo. There's just something about them that's different, like somethin's hoverin' over 'em. The whole uh...I will just say it. They're...they seem like different, let's put it this way, they seem like they're different people, but they're not. You know, they're the same people, naturally, but it just seemed like they're different. Uh, I don't know. It seemed like they were on a pedestal. Sometimes it seemed like they're just um, walkin' on air, if that makes any sense. Like they're uh, light hearted. Just walkin' on a cloud, maybe.

Roberta Morrow also has trouble putting her finger on exactly what is moving about Christmas, and settles simply on the word "magic": "Everything about Christmas is good I think. I don't know, you see family, you get together, you have fun, you see friends you haven't seen, people are nicer. I don't know, its just a feeling. The Christmas spirit I guess. Goodwill towards men, I don't know. I don't know what it is. It's magic."

As we noted earlier, *mysterium* and *onus* exist in close proximity. But, interestingly, there is a somewhat better ability to describe *onus*. Patricia Leary is quite clear about what is bothersome about being single at Christmas time:

Christmas is a very lonely time for me and I think that maybe part of my cynicism comes from that. I hate the season, I hate the fact that I'm not with my family. I hate the fact that everybody else I know is, and I'm sick and tired of hearing people say "Holidays must be so hard on you."

But mothers surrounded by children are just as capable of locating Christmas's pernicious side. For Laura Hoban it is not just the commercialism that bothers her but how much things differ from the "actual spirit of Christmas":

I really hate all the advertising on the television leading up to Christmas. Giving children high expectations of things, putting tremendous pressure on their parents for them to go and spend a hundred dollars on this and a hundred dollars on that. It's something that parents just can't afford. And I think that is awful. Children are ungrateful, you know, and if you haven't got the money you haven't got the money. And I suppose that's where the actual spirit of Christmas has gone-into [buying presents] rather than being happy spending time with your family. You measure how good a Christmas you have by how many presents you've got, which is really awful.

Christmas Heightens Mysterium and Onus

In the end, the respondents may not be able to provide a discursive definition of *mysterium* and *onus*. But they do have what Giddens (1979) calls "practical consciousness," a working awareness about the difference between the experience of *mysterium* and *onus*, about their sources, and their consequences. Deuteronomy 30 is again correct. The command to choose life and eschew death, exhorts the biblical writer, "is not too mysterious and remote":

It is not up in the sky, that you should say, "Who will go up in the sky to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?" Nor is it across the sea, that you should say, "Who will cross the sea to get it for us and tell us of it, that we may carry it out?" No, it is something very near to you, already in your mouths and in your hearts; you have only to carry it out.

Indeed, we find that Christmas provides people with an enhanced awareness of *mysterium* and *onus*. Laura Hoban, for instance, experiences both acutely and in sharp contrast. She explains that "what Christmas does is it heightens everything":

All the bad things in society are heightened at Christmas, so there are lots of drives, giving Christmas parcels to the elderly, providing Christmas dinners, children's homes, funding shelter for the homeless. And there are lots of, you know, money-raising activities before Christmas. And don't forget that in those families where abuse is likely to occur, it's then [at Christmas] when it's going to occur. I mean, the kid is gonna get a thrashing over Christmas, when the parents are just really frustrated, or drunk, when they've had enough of their families. So, lots of families break down.

In contrast, Michele Taylor is as pleased by the intensifications of Christmas as Hoban is dismayed. You can almost hear Taylor saying "There's gold in them there hills." According to Taylor "There's magic about Christmas because it's one of the happiest days of the year. Everybody's happy—religiously. Families are happy and there's la . . ."

For her part, Julie Longo sees things from both sides. "Oh, it's a very emotional time of the year, so, it drags up a lot of emotion that I don't always want dragged up," she explains. "It drags up a lot of relationships gone sour, a lot of sadness as far as world problems—homeless people. I mean, it just seems like everything surfaces at that time of the year more so than at other times of the year. But, maybe that's why the holiday is so important to me for the sheer fact that the joy around it and the happiness override the severe sadness around it as well."

The Proximity of Mysterium and Onus, and the Need for Vigilance

As the passages from Deuteronomy exhort, and as our respondents intuitively know, we always have before us the dichotomies of life and death, prosperity and doom, blessing and curse. The contrasting concurrence of *mysterium* and *onus* is a defining aspect of the human condition, and to favorably negotiate this contradictory state of affairs

is one of the great challenges of individual and collective life. This formidable task is further complicated by the fact that many of the symbols, events, and relations of the world are opposed not only one to the other, but in themselves produce contradictory emotions, as we have already heard. The task is never simply to embrace blessing over curse, and thus conclude the matter. Rather, the challenge is to acknowledge the ineluctable presence of both blessing and curse, and to achieve a transformation to or enhancement of blessing.

To denote the opposed poles of blessing-curse and consolation-debilitation at the most fundamental level of experience, we have adopted the terms *mysterium* and *onus*. In addition, we note the instability of *mysterium* and *onus*. What is *mysterium* today can become *onus* tomorrow as a result of deeper insight or new circumstances. Indeed, the prophetic tradition strives to specify the Deuteronomic principles enunciated above. Prophecy is an historically concrete, novel discernment of *mysterium* accompanied by a pronouncement that what is commonly conceived of as *mysterium* is in fact *onus*, and what in the popular mind is considered *onus* is in fact *mysterium*. This does not mean that any and all prophetic statements, then or now, are equally valid; but the formal nature of all prophecy revolves around this task of discerning contrarities.

The proximity of intense contradictory emotions at Christmas results in the need for vigilance. Such vigilance is aimed at turning a potentially debilitating circumstance into a rewarding one. Care is taken to advance *mysterium* and ward off *onus*. Fortunately, even gloomy Michele Taylor appreciates this. "They say there's so much sadness. Lot of suicides and depression at that time. Well, I think if you keep yourself busy, you don't have time. I'm alone here. I could get depressed very easily." According to David Whitkens, vigilance means being careful to imbue the holiday with just the right amount of specialness. "We don't want to detract from the season, we don't want to overdo the season. It's a season. It's not *the* season. It's a season. So, not too much emphasis, not too little either. Make it

special without overdoing it. It's a hard balance. I've got to be honest with you, it's hard sometimes, it is hard."

Spirituality as Strategy

Spirituality is the ensemble of knowledge, sentiment, and behavior with which one carries out strategies to advance one's relationship to *mysterium* and curtail one's relationship to *onus*. Since *mysterium* and *onus* exist only as material incarnations, strategies for advancing *mysterium* never revolve around abandoning the material aspects of the holiday, but in transforming one's relationship to them. For instance, giving gifts can be nothing other than a material reality. The question is whether such gift giving brings happiness or debilitation. For Margaret Daniels authentic spirituality comes not from renouncing gifts but from appreciating them. Teaching this to her kids is her strategic spirituality:

I like to get things for my husband, I like to get things for my children, I like to get things for my family, I like to get things for my extended family, my husband's family. We all want to try to remember people at Christmas time. But the onslaught of the commercialism can really get to you. It really can. My mother-in-law and I had a really interesting conversation about a year ago about Christmas. She thought that because I now have children, the commercialism might change how I feel about [gifts]. And I said it doesn't, it doesn't. The biggest problem I have as the kids get older and they start attending school, is that everyone says "well gee, what are you going to get?" You want to make sure that you instill in the children's mind that this is not what it's completely about. There's a lot more to it. It's about family, it's very very much about family.

But still there is something very wonderful about seeing happiness in a child's eye. And the commercialism, as I said, is going to always be there. So it's a question of instilling into the children the fact that there is a difference between the religious aspect and the commercial aspect. And [I tell them] "we will celebrate some commercial aspects of Christmas, but I want you to realize what Christmas is all about." But there is that, that, that sort of look in a child's eye, the wonder of looking at a tree, the wonder of the lights, yeah—the wonder of looking at the presents underneath the tree, too. Yeah, there is that. Uh, then of course, there's, like I said, there's, there's hopefully that, as they get

older, they, they will learn what the meaning of Christmas is, and that as I see them grow, I'll see them grow spiritually as well.

Bill Wendt devises his Christmas strategy around making Christmas "a good day," "a good memory":

You have to make it the best day your family can have—no matter what. No matter how you're feeling, how you think. If you're up, if you're down. You have to make it a good day. You got to make a good memory. Cause if you make a bad memory, it's gonna bother you, it's gonna bother you. It'll be in your mind much more often than the good. That bad one there will keep recurring [in your mind] and you'll be sorry for it. Christmas is a day when what you do will affect you for the rest of your life. If a guy goofs up, if a guy comes home drunk on Christmas and he hits his wife in the head and he's any kind of a decent man, he'll regret it for the rest of his life—every year. Every Christmas is gonna come and he's not gonna think of what a great time he had as a kid. He's gonna think, wow, the year I hit that poor kid. I never did that, but I'm saying, I know. I know this. You gotta be careful cause that's one holiday when if you make it good, you've got it good forever. You make one bad, and you've goofed up bad, cause you live with it. You're gonna live with it. That's it. That's how Christmas is. They last forever. As long as they keep coming 'round, it's ok. That's what's important. So that's Christmas.

Lest one think this all a bit too ponderous, listen to how Elizabeth Chobit blissfully pursues a Christmas regimen that would weary the priestly elf. Obviously, what is *onus* for one person can be *mysterium* for another. The following illustrates how even a frantic shopping venue may be cast as bliss:

For me it was the thrill of the hunt. You should have seen what I did for Cabbage Patch Dolls—it was like crazy for me. I went to Maine, I went to Connecticut, I went everywhere, I was bound and determined that there'd be two Cabbage Patch Dolls under my tree that year, and I didn't care where I had to go. Black market, California, I didn't care. It was the thrill of the hunt, I mean adrenaline! I used to wake up at night and plan my map. Okay, we're gonna hit Zayres, and we're gonna do this and we're gonna do that. And by God, Christmas morning, there were two Cabbage Patch Dolls under there.

I think that whole thrill of the hunt thing is great. I mean, my kids have always from the time they were born wanted the one thing that is absolutely the hardest thing to get. And so it was like, what do you want this year? And they'd say, "Well, I want like a Strawberry Shortcake Doll, that has, you know, pink slippers, and the only place you can buy it is Venus." And I'd

think, "Right on. Call NASA, we're going." It really was great. So I had this Cabbage Patch underground at my house. It was unbelievable. I had people calling me in the middle of the night. "Hello, Elizabeth, Do you think you can get me two, one black-haired, one..."

Although much more analytical attention could be devoted to these and other things respondents report about their Christmases, we turn now to indicate what theoretical sense we can make about the spiritual sense people make of their lives.

Theoretical Reconsideration of Freud and Durkheim

Our attempt to formulate a sociological framework that takes people's spiritual experience seriously is akin to the goal of intellectual inquiry suggested in 1819 by Arthur Schopenhauer (1969, p. 383) *The World as Will and Representation*:

Intuitively, or *in concreto*, every [person] is really conscious of all philosophical truths; but to bring them into . . . abstract knowledge, into reflection, is the business of the philosopher [or sociologist], who neither ought to nor can do more than this.

Schopenhauer suggests an agenda and perhaps a vocation for social science. One that we embrace. It is to take the intuitive truths of our respondents and their incipient philosophical reflection and bring them into theoretical perspective.⁴ That is, to do what Howard S. Becker years ago advised the first author is the task of the sociologist: to say something more than a respondent would be able to say, but it should be something the respondent upon reflection would be able to recognize as instructive. In regard to the study of Christmas, this means bridging the gap between the intuitive spiritual experiences of people like those we have quoted above and the theology of Deuteronomy by developing a more adequate analytic framework for social-psychological investigation. What are the rudimentary elements of such a framework?

To begin, we believe our foregoing analysis suggests some modest yet important amendments to two theoretical frameworks. The first set of theoretical amendments entails a reformulation of Freud's notion of desire. We accept Freud's views on the mobilizing power

of desire as the yearning for completion. But we reject Freud's position that such desire is always backward looking, seeking fetal reunion with the mother, and that this yearning must be sublimated. Our position is that such perpetual desire is forward looking and worthy of encouragement as the inherent mobilizing force inclining people toward *mysterium* and away from *onus*. The second theoretical amendment is in regard to Durkheim's Kantian approach to the categories of sacred and profane. The distinction between *mysterium* and *onus* is fundamental to life in general just as the distinction between sacred and profane is fundamental to religious life. Stated differently, sacred and profane are a way to speak of the contradictory categories of reality in religious discourse while the categories of *mysterium* and *onus* are the way to speak of the elementary contradictions in the broader discourse of spiritual life.

Mysterium, Onus and the Unconscious

According to Freud, human consciousness is not social until the incorporation of the superego, or the internalization of the demands of the parental figure.⁵ Even while consciousness, as a social category, begins with the internalization of the superego, we wish to root our sociological analysis of *mysterium* in the presocial, psychoanalytic category of human consciousness, or in what Freud terms the id. It is through an elaboration and slight departure from Freud's conception of the id that *mysterium* can begin to be understood in its phenomenological implications over the life course. The liberty we take in theorizing a presocial and nonempirical id only can be validated in its results, or through what is referred to as the transcendental method: the validity of the premise is substantiated by its being the condition of possibility for more empirically discernible effects.

According to Freud,⁶ the id, the first psychic matter of human consciousness, over which all other components of consciousness are secondarily formulated, is plenitude, satisfaction, absolute unity; is prior to desire because desire implies lack. Id is pure pleasure. As the

demands and prohibitions of society are imposed over and against the raw psychic material of the id, the child enters society through the internalization of others, limitations, separation, and prohibition. At this point, the consciousness divides itself into the id (pleasure seeking in the form of desire for gratification or satisfaction); the superego (the internalized demands of parents, significant others, and society); and the ego (the sense of "self" which develops as a distinct reasoning faculty from the dialectical negotiation between id and superego, pleasure and prohibition).

According to Freud, this process of psychic development leaves behind only a small residue of id which remains free from reality testing or the demands of society. Phantasy, says Freud, is this free psychic fragment of pristine id. It emerges in such activities as art, music, theater, dreaming, and daydreaming. One possible approach to explaining the joy, ecstasy, consolation, sense of unity, *jouissance*, or pleasure that accompanies experiences of *mysterium* is to theorize *mysterium* as phantasy; as a momentary experiential glimpse of unrestrained and residual id. If such psychic experiences of phantasy are through socially normative and socially esteemed media, they are judged normal experiences of phantasy. On the other hand, such phantasy becomes psychosis or hysteria for Freud when it transgresses socially normative boundaries. For example, religiously ecstatic prayer is permissible in church but not in a shopping mall, and Picasso's work remains psychosis rather than artistic genius until the culture legitimates a new art form. Hence, pleasure-seeking through escaping the norms is perversion, superficiality, or madness in its social estimation, while pleasure-seeking within normative boundaries is socially estimated as legitimate, authentic, clear or heightened consciousness.

Although Freud's formulation possesses the benefit of pointing to the socially normative limits of phantasy, it reduces authentic pleasure/*mysterium* to something generally incompatible with, gratifying against, and escaping normative reality. Thus, if we were to equate

Freud's notion of phantasy to the experience of *mysterium*, we would be relegating *mysterium* to the realms of psychic regression and the presocial. Such a conclusion is at odds with our conception of *mysterium* that is based on an intimate continuity rather than discontinuity between the structure of rudimentary consciousness and its socialized existence.

Freud's division between pleasure and prohibition as separate categories in conflict with one another, precludes the understanding of a *split in pleasure itself*, of an elementary principle in the very act of pleasure-seeking as it is carried out through the life course. If this binary process is elaborated it makes less spacious the margin between pleasure and reality, and leads to our conceptualization of the psychic roots of *mysterium*. The first step in reconceptualizing Freud's id conceive it from its earliest potential as a *bifurcated and inberently psychic force with indeterminate trajectories*. In our view, the id's guarantee of pleasure is not confined to winning the battle with the superego. The pleasure drive *itself* is always at least potentially double, split, contradictory, binary in its outcome. On one hand, the dual trajectory of pleasure in social life may lead immediately or eventually to a deep sense of joy, fulfillment, ecstasy, satisfaction, meaning, unity, or consolation or what we refer to as *mysterium*; that is, the experience of grace, the sacred, the profoundly meaningful. On the other hand, the instinctual pleasure drive may lead immediately or eventually to constraint, displeasure, pain, unhappiness, or debilitation or what we refer to as *onus*; that is, the experience of the profane, mundane, or meaningless. Moreover, as we will argue further, these two trajectories always exist within and never outside of the material medium of institutions and culture.

The second step in a reconceptualization of Freud's psychic categories is a bifurcated superego, parallel to the bifurcated id. As the id is not singular in its trajectory, neither is the superego. Psychic prohibition, like psychic pleasure, is dual. That is, it introduces the potential for fulfilling commitment as well as debilitating constraint. On the one hand, it may lead immediately or eventually to the

sociologists it is both our legitimate and necessary task to provide an empirical description and theoretical analysis of the phenomenological divide between *mysterium* and *onus*, its sources, and its consequences. Having done so in our analysis of people's Christmas experiences, we conclude that by exploring people's emotional enticement by *mysterium* and aversion to *onus* we can excavate the emotional and strategic divides between genuine aspiration and misguided illusion, on the one hand, and between enabling asceticism and debilitating discipline, on the other.

Mysterium, Onus and the Category of Contradiction

Mysterium and *onus* are more than potential outcomes of the bifurcated psychic categories of pleasure and prohibition. They are elementary contradictions. The contradiction between *mysterium* and *onus* belongs among the essential categories of understanding described by Kant and amended by Durkheim in his epistemological discussion in the adroit introduction to *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Along with categories such as space, time, number and cause, our interviews suggest that contradiction is also a universal category that organizes human consciousness.

Contradiction, as we understand it, is the category of emotional and intellectual understanding according to which people recognize and express the co-existence of mutually constitutive, imperialistically impinging, and radically opposed realms of reality. Similar to every category delineated by Kant, the category of contradiction simultaneously enables and constrains understanding. The categories enable us to understand the phenomenal world but constrain us to understand it only along certain axes.

In regard to Kant's intellectual contribution, Schopenhauer says, "*Kant's greatest merit is the distinction of the phenomenon from the thing-in-itself*, based on the proof that between things and us there always stands the *intellect*, and that on this account they cannot be known according to what they may be in themselves" (1969, pp. 417-8). The intellect that stands between things and the knowing self

mysterium of deep meaning, joy, fulfillment, ultimate satisfaction, or consolation. On the other hand, it may lead immediately or eventually to the *onus* of impairment, debilitation, displeasure, dissatisfaction, unhappiness, superficiality, or desolation. Thus, the id and the superego in their material incarnations, as mediated through the discerning ego, are indeterminate and never unidimensional. The cavorting with the id's desire for pleasure can be as genuine a form of *mysterium* as it is of *onus*. Similarly, submission to the superego's governing prohibition can be as genuine a form of *onus* as it is of *mysterium*.

The implication of this reconceptualization of Freud's psychic topography is that each rendezvous with pleasure and prohibition is Janus-faced in its potential outcome. Pleasure and prohibition are not the two binary psychic categories battling it out in a conflict that at best results in "general misery." Rather they are both equally present and active in the omnipresent contest between *mysterium* and *onus*. The structural dyad of pleasure and prohibition is always present at the core of consciousness. This dyad does not just produce an outcome of *onus* (sublimated id, illusion, and resigned civilization), as Freud would have it, but of *mysterium* (fulfilled id, emotional insight,) as well. As such, the fundamental conflict is not between pleasure and prohibition but between the alternative pleasure/prohibition sets of *mysterium* and *onus*. All agency is located in the psychic and strategic navigation between pleasure/prohibition in its most authentic form as *mysterium*, and in its most debilitating form as *onus*.

Because *mysterium* and *onus* reside in close proximity as potential outcomes of any relationship, individuals can never say with absolute certainty "This experience is *mysterium*," or "This experience is *onus*." And yet, as we have seen, people do recognize the difference between the two experiences, and repeatedly make conscious choices to approximate a course toward *mysterium* and away from *onus*. As sociologists, it is not our task to settle whether any individual is in fact pursuing the path of *mysterium* or *onus*. Nevertheless, as

is, for Kant, represented by the categories of understanding. The categories include the ordering constructs such as unity, plurality, reality, causality, space, and time. These are the forms of thought by which we elaborate the raw material of cognition and, as we will suggest, emotion. The categories, says Kant (1929, p. 113), "specify the understanding completely, and yield an exhaustive inventory of its powers," and so by extension are the categories by which we experience the world. These concepts are the *a-priori* faculties of understanding by which all objects are known. Their origin is radically nonempirical, arising not from experience of the world. Rather they are prior to experience and applied by the mind to the world. Thus the specific qualities we attribute to phenomena are not innate to the things themselves, but only to our minds. We understand phenomena as being of a particular nature not because they impose their "reality" on us, but because our thinking mind projects its dimensional axes onto the perceived world. Consequently, we are prevented from ever knowing a created or phenomenal thing-in-itself.

Durkheim incorporated Kant's notion of the categories into his more sociological epistemology. Durkheim agreed with Kant that it was essential to account for the peculiar necessity and universality of the categories of understanding. For Kant, the categories exist *a-priori*; they are the conditions of experience and knowledge. In other words, the categories specify the conditions under which experience is possible. The categories are the conditions through which we experience the world, not the effects of experiences. As a philosopher, the categories exist at the highest level of abstraction. They apply to all human cognition, at all times, and in all circumstances. Durkheim agrees that the categories are the "pre-eminent concepts" that play a "preponderating part in our knowledge." The function of the categories is to "dominate and envelop" all the other concepts; they are "permanent molds for the mental life" (1965, p. 488). Rejecting empiricism, Durkheim also agreed with Kant that the necessity and universality of the categories could not be explained as effects caused by the material reality of the spatio-temporal world. Empirical data

are "diametrically opposed" to the categories since sensations or images of objects are "essentially individual and subjective" (1965, p. 26). Durkheim diverged from Kant in one crucial way. While agreeing with Kant that the categories "do not merely depend on us, but they impose themselves on us" (1965, p. 26), Durkheim disagreed with Kant about the source of that imposition. Durkheim directly rejected Kant's transcendental idealism and *a-priorist* argument. For Durkheim there was no basis and, hence, no justification for making the mind a reservoir of a transcendent reality. To claim, as Kant did, that the categories are inherent to the human mind and derive from participation in divine reason only begs the question, it does not provide an answer. The real question, Durkheim says "is to know how it comes that experience is not sufficient unto itself, but presupposes certain conditions which are exterior and prior to it, and how it happens that these conditions are realized at the moment and in the manner that is desirable" (p. 27). Durkheim rejects the notion that this external and prior force is God because it "does not satisfy the conditions demanded of scientific hypothesis" (p. 27).

Durkheim attempts a middle path between the *a-priorist* and empiricist positions. He explains the universality and necessity of the categories by arguing that they reflect the earliest forms of social organization. The categories are universal and necessary because society could not survive without them: "society could not abandon the categories to the free choice of the individual without abandoning itself" (p. 30). In this way, and unlike the *a-priorists*, he can identify the antecedent cause of the categories. Unlike the empiricists, he can thus account for the independence of the categories from individual perception. It is in society that idealism and materialism are reconciled. "There is one division of nature where the formula of idealism is applicable almost to the letter," writes Durkheim, "this is the social kingdom. Here more than anywhere else, the idea is the reality" (p. 260). Just as society as an external, enduring, and imposing reality is the source of the notion of God, it is also the source of the categories. In taking this step, Durkheim moves to a middle level of abstraction where he is able to account simultaneously for the

universality of categories such as space, time, and causality and their variation among different societies, just as he is able to account for the fundamental commonality and social variation in the notion of the sacred.

Just as Durkheim shifted the analysis of categories to a middle level of abstraction, we argue it is possible to ratchet the analysis an additional step down the continuum of abstraction. While Kant sought to account for the necessity and universality of the categories by placing their origin in divine reason, Durkheim placed their origin in social life. We place their origin in spiritual life. Our research has led us to identify a category-like concept that is suggested by observations of social life. Kant too easily resorts to God as the original source of the categories through the transcendental method of establishing the conditions of possibility for observed reality. Durkheim's designation of society as the source of the categories falters because it begs the question about their origin in society. If we were forced to choose between Kant and Durkheim, we would favor Kant's position to the extent that we are allowed to amend it with the sociological insights of Durkheim and the empirical insights of our research.⁷ That is, we believe that the categories exist in the very nature of human cognition where intellect and emotion intersect.

Just as, according to Schopenhauer, Kant's great contribution was showing that the intellect stands between us and things, Durkheim's great contribution was demonstrating that between us and things also stands society as the customizer of our intellect. Our modest amendment to this theoretical discussion is to specify the point at which Kant and Durkheim intersect. If Kant was philosophically universal and Durkheim social-psychologically particular, our insight is social-psychologically universal. In regard to Kant we agree that there are fundamental universal categories. But we wish to add the category of contradiction to that list. In regard to Durkheim we agree that the category of contradiction is socially specified as the sacred (*mysterium*) and the profane (*onus*). But we wish to add that the specific contradictory experience of sacred and profane originates not

from a primitive misattribution of social effervescence to the spiritual realm. Rather it originates from an experientially validated emotion and knowledge about *mysterium* and *onus*.

Mysterium and *onus* are fundamental experiential categories of life in general, not just of formal religious experience. Moreover, *mysterium* and *onus* are mutually constitutive of each other and always exist in fundamental contrast. At every moment of conscious agency people navigate the contradiction between *mysterium* and *onus*, just as at every moment they navigate space, time, and causation. Like other categories of understanding, *mysterium* and *onus* are authentic human experiences which are constructed and reinforced in particular social, personal, and psychic contexts. We have no argument with Durkheim's statement that "the social realm is a natural realm" (1965, p. 31), except to insist that so are the attendant psycho-social dynamics we discussed in the previous section. We conclude that the categories of *mysterium* and *onus* are organically related to the inherently contradictory conditions of social life, personal community life, and psychic life. But this conclusion is not mere speculation. It is grounded inductively in our discovery and discussion of the contradictions of Christmas as they reside in culture, home, and heart. In the end, we are in accord with Durkheim's insistence about the reality of *mysterium* and *onus*, adding only that the psychic dimensions are equally real. We have amended the following words of Durkheim to insist on the last point: "From the fact that the ideas of time, space, class, cause or personality [or contradiction] are constructed out of social [and psychic] elements, it is not necessary to conclude that they are devoid of all objective value. On the contrary, their social [psychic] origin rather leads to the belief that they are not without foundation in the nature of things". (1965, pp. 31-2).

Spiritual Life, Cultural Life, and the Sociology of Emotions: Toward a Sociology of Spirituality

As suggested by the analysis of the foregoing Christmas excerpts, consolation is neither mysterious nor remote, but is as close as

Christmas and our own mouths and hearts. Consolation is within and around us. So too, however, is debilitation. The blessing and the curse, feelings of consolation and debilitation, are equally near at hand; simultaneously, we take solace in the nearness of the blessing and take caution from the nearness of the curse. About the propinquity of blessing and curse the spiritual person is invariably aware and unceasingly vigilant. The guides to such discernment are the thoughts, emotions, and actions that attract us to *mysterium*—what theology calls actual grace. The destiny of such discernment is union with ultimate *mysterium*—what theology calls sanctifying grace. In order to adequately study these guides to and experiences of union with *mysterium*, sociologists must hammer out a new analytic rhetoric. This we have begun with our theoretical amendments to Freud and Durkheim.

The theoretical framework we propose for the study of spirituality—what we have called the *deeply seated features of cultural and emotional life*—can be summarized in eight propositions. First, as simple as it may seem, people know and record the difference between *mysterium* and *onus*, attempt to discern which is occurring in any particular circumstance, are vigilant about keeping the realm of *onus* from impinging on that of *mysterium*, and carry out strategies for advancing *mysterium* and diminishing *onus*. Second, *mysterium* and *onus* are authentic categories of human experience. They constitute the elementary forms of genuine spiritual experience from the point of view of Freudian psycho-social development as we have amended it. Third, the categories of *mysterium* and *onus* are contradictory. That is, they emerge from the very same circumstances and are mutually encroaching, imperialistically nibbling at each other's undefined borders. Fourth, the contradictory relation of *mysterium* and *onus* occur in culture, home (or everyday life), and heart. What we apprehend at the macro-level as a cultural contradiction, we perceive at the micro-level as a mixed emotion. Fifth, the dynamics of *mysterium* and *onus* are more fundamentally constitutive of our biographies and our societies than almost all the other variables social science, political discourse, or the popular media identify as

consequential. Sixth, because people not only know, feel, and act in regard to *mysterium* and *onus* but can express such experiences in words and other symbolic artifacts, social scientists are able to explore the workings of *mysterium* and *onus*. Seventh, while it is possible to study *mysterium* and *onus* in any situation, it is theoretically important and methodologically advantageous to study their workings in those symbolically dense and emotionally intense circumstances such as Christmas. Finally, by carrying out such explorations we learn about the elementary forms of spiritual life not just in and around Christmas but throughout “ordinary time” as well.

This paper has been about spiritual life, cultural life, and the sociology of emotions. It is about spiritual life because the key to learning what is going on in society and in the lives of individuals is to learn the nature of people's contradictory experiences of *mysterium* and *onus*, how they interpret them, and the strategies they learn and develop to deal with them. It is about cultural life because it is by studying people's experiences of *mysterium* and *onus* during the Christmas season that we learn about the contradictory character of that holiday and of our culture during “ordinary time.” Finally, the paper is about the sociology of emotions because it suggests new theoretical and conceptual directions for the study of motivation and desire in terms of aspiration (*mysterium*) and seduction (*onus*), and demonstrates how these new directions may be discovered and applied *in concreto*.

Notes

1. We are grateful to the T. B. Murphy Foundation Charitable Trust for its generous support of the research on which this article is based. We are also grateful to the Catholic Commission on Intellectual Affairs for permission to reprint sections from an earlier version of this paper (Schervish1995).
2. All names of respondents mentioned in the article are pseudonyms.
3. The most comprehensive effort to date by a sociologist to provide a theoretically sound account of spiritual experience as an authentic phenomenon in and of itself is provided in Peter Berger *A Rumor of Angels* (1969). But even here, Berger does not approach spiritual experience as a sociologist. Rather, for this task he puts on the disciplinary "hat" of a theologian.
4. Also Durkheim (1965, p. 492) writes, "The prudent man is the one who has a very clear sensation of what must be done, but which he would ordinarily be quite incapable of stating as a general law."
5. In more contemporary psychoanalytic terms, the Lacanian human consciousness becomes social first through the recognition of difference, the self-mother split in the "mirror stage" of development, and more elaborately social through the acquisition of language in which we simultaneously speak and enact the culture's codes or law.
6. The discussion of psychoanalysis below is based primarily on Freud's two works, *The Ego and the Id* (1962 [1923]) and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1959 [1920]).
7. Our position is similar to that of Paul Tillich (1959, p.42), who writes, "Religion as ultimate concern is the meaning-giving substance of culture, and culture is the totality of forms in which the basic concern of religion expresses itself. In abbreviation: religion is the

substance of culture, culture is the form of religion. Such a consideration definitely prevents the establishment of a dualism of religion and culture. Every religious act, not only in organized religion, but also in the most intimate movement of the soul, is culturally formed".

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