

# Straight out of Durkheim? Haidt's Neo-Durkheimian Account of Religion and the Cognitive Science of Religion

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## Abstract

Jon Haidt, a leading figure in contemporary moral psychology, advocates a participation-centric view of religion, according to which participation in religious communal activity is significantly more important than belief in explaining religious behaviour and commitment. He describes the participation-centric view as 'Straight out of Durkheim'. I argue that this is a misreading of Durkheim, who held that religious behaviour and commitment are the joint products of belief and participation, with neither belief nor participation being considered more important than the other. I further argue that recent evidence from the cognitive science of religion provides support for Durkheim's balanced account of religion and counts strongly against Haidt's participation-centric view of religion. I suggest that Haidt's adherence to the participation-centric view of religion is better explained by his desire to accept an account of religion that is consistent with his social intuitionist moral psychology than by his desire to accept an account of religion that accords with available scientific evidence about religion.

**Keywords:** Cognitive Science of Religion, Durkheim, Haidt, Religious Belief, Religious Participation

This research was supported by Australian Research Council Grant DP130103658.

## 1. Introduction: new atheists and neo-Durkheimians

Jon Haidt is one of the most influential figures in contemporary moral psychology. He is also a persistent advocate of the view that participation in religious communal activities is much more important than belief in explaining religious behaviour and commitment. Haidt contrasts his view with one that he attributes to ‘new atheists’, including Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett. He tells us that they place far too much emphasis on the role of religious belief in explaining religious behaviour and commitment (2012, 249-51). According to Haidt,

The new atheists treat religions as sets of beliefs about the world, many of which are demonstrably false. Yet, anthropologist and sociologists who study religion stress the role of ritual and community much more than of factual beliefs about the creation of the world or life after death. (2009, 286)

And according to Haidt and his co-author, Jesse Graham,

... the shared rites, shared movements, shared calendar, and shared mental maps of sacred versus profane space are more important in creating this community than are the shared factual beliefs about the nature of god and the origin of the world. (Haidt and Graham 2009, 379)<sup>1</sup>

Haidt does not claim to be the originator of the participation-centric account of religion he champions. He attributes it to Durkheim. Indeed, in a discussion of Putnam and Campbell (2010), who he counts as intellectual allies, he describes his favoured account of religion as being ‘straight out of Durkheim’ (2012, 267).

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<sup>1</sup> In another paper the same authors inform us that ‘... shared social practice is a more important determinant of religious conversion than specific beliefs’ (Graham and Haidt 2010, 142).

Haidt's contention that the new atheists overemphasise the role of belief in explaining religious behaviour and commitment strikes me as right, so I won't dispute it.<sup>2</sup> However, I will take issue with the participation-centric account of religion. I will also take issue with his assertion that the participation-centric account of religion is 'straight out of Durkheim'. As I read him, Durkheim is an advocate of a balanced view, according to which religious behaviour and commitment are the joint products of both belief and participation, with neither belief nor participation being considered more important than the other. As I will go on to demonstrate, recent evidence from the cognitive science of religion provides strong support for Durkheim's balanced account of religion and appears incompatible with the participation-centric view. The paper will proceed as follows: In the next section, I make the case that Durkheim championed a balanced account of religion. In the following section, I show that Durkheim's balanced account accords far better with recent evidence from the cognitive science of religion than the participation-centric view. In the final section of the paper, I attempt to explain why Haidt has advocated the participation-centric view of religion, despite the lack of evidence for it.

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<sup>2</sup> Haidt quotes from Harris's *The End of Faith* to illustrate the new atheist view of the importance of belief (2012, 249-50). According to Harris, 'A belief is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life' (2004, 12). Dawkins, as the title of his 2006 book suggests, is centrally concerned to oppose a particular belief which he regards as delusional, and which he locates at the heart of religion: *The God Delusion* (2006). Dennett's views are more nuanced than either Harris' or Dawkins' views. However, as Haidt points out, Dennett (2006) is primarily concerned with the consequences and causes of religious belief (Haidt 2012, 366, n10).

## 2. Straight out of Durkheim?

### (i) *Durkheim on religion*

To demonstrate that Haidt's characterisation of Durkheim's account of religion is inadequate I will focus on the ideas expressed in Durkheim's hugely influential *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). This work appeared late in Durkheim's career, and is generally considered to encapsulate his most mature thinking about religion. There is no place in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) where Durkheim asserts that religious activities are more important than religious beliefs in creating and maintaining religious communities.

Durkheim sees religious beliefs and practices as irrevocably intertwined. In a discussion of Australian and North American totemic religion, which he regards as a template for the explanation of all religious behaviour,<sup>3</sup> he writes:

Since all religion is composed of conceptual representations and ritual practices, we must deal successively with the beliefs and rites peculiar to totemic religion. Of course, these elements of religious life are too closely allied to separate them entirely. While in principle the cult derives from the beliefs, it also affects them; the myth is often modelled on the rite in order to explain it, especially when the meaning is not, or is no longer, apparent (1912, 87).

His assertion that religious beliefs and practices are deeply intertwined, and not practically separable, is backed up by a detailed examination of ways in which the two work together to

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<sup>3</sup> See Cladis 2001, xvi.

create religion. To better enable appreciation of Durkheim's reasoning it will help to introduce some of the most significant details of his account of religion.

For Durkheim all religious thought rests upon a primary distinction between the sacred and the profane.<sup>4</sup> This is not a distinction between natural kinds. People, places, buildings, objects, relics and texts can all be considered as sacred, and they can also all be considered as profane. Items which communities consider sacred are ones that they believe to be imbued with mysterious forces. These forces come in two forms, which Durkheim refers to as 'pure' and 'impure' (1912, 306). These '... are not two separate genera but two varieties of the same genus that includes all sacred things' (1912, 306). Pure religious forces are '... benevolent, guardians of the physical and moral order, dispensers of life, health, all the qualities that men value'. Impure religious forces '... produce disorder, cause death and illnesses, and instigate sacrilege. Man's only feeling for them is fear usually tinged with horror' (1912, 304).

Churches, holy books, and representations of good supernatural beings, such as God, are examples of items which are often thought of as instances of the pure sacred. Cursed people, such as India's Untouchables, cursed animals, such as snakes, which are subject to a Biblical curse (Genesis 3:14), and representations of evil supernatural beings, such as Satan, are examples of the impure sacred.

There are distinctive and properly religious attitudes, according to Durkheim, which involve revering the pure sacred and fearing the impure sacred. When groups of people adopt these attitudes they are motivated to set up, observe and enforce rules governing behaviour in relation to sacred items, people and places. Most such rules are prohibitions. The properly

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<sup>4</sup> In this context 'profane' means mundane or ordinary, rather than irreverent or idolatrous.

religious may regard it as impermissible to behave in certain ways in a Church, which would be acceptable outside of Church, or to eat the meat of a sacred animal, or to deface or otherwise demonstrate disrespect for a sacred text. Not everybody adopts these attitudes and observes the stipulated prohibitions. Some people try to control sacred forces and use them for their own benefit. Durkheim refers to such people as magicians (1912, 223).

There is something that the religious can do which magicians cannot, according to Durkheim, and that is form sustaining communities. He tells us that, ‘... magic does not bind its followers to one another and unite them in a single group living the same life. *A church of magic does not exist.*’ (1912, 43, italics in text). Magicians can, of course, associate with one another. But because they are motivated only by self-interest they cannot form sustaining communities. By contrast, religious communities that share attitudes of reverence for the same pure sacred items, people and places are able to bond over their shared reverence for the same items, people and places; and are able to form sustaining communities based around the shared acceptance and observation of religious prohibitions. When they conduct religious rituals together, expressing their shared attitudes of reverence for the sacred, they are able to experience ‘collective effervescence’, which has the effect of strengthening communal ties. Such rituals are often conducted when a community perceives itself to be under threat, in some way. According to Durkheim:

Just by being collective, these ceremonies raise the vital tone of the group. Now, when people feel the life within them – whether in the form of painful irritation or joyous enthusiasm – they do not think of death; thus they are reassured, they take heart, and subjectively it is as though the rite really had repelled the dreaded danger (1912, 303).

(ii) *Durkheim on ritual and belief*

According to Durkheim, religious rituals cannot even be conceived of in the absence of belief. In his words:

... to characterize the rite itself, the object of the rite must first be characterized. Now, the special nature of this object is expressed in belief. The rite can be defined, then, only after defining the belief (1912, 36).

On Durkheim's account of religion, beliefs about what is sacred, what is pure or impure, and beliefs about the various prohibitions that ought to be respected, in regard to the pure and/or the impure sacred, must all be in place before it is even possible to conduct religious rituals. Once an appropriate set of beliefs is in place, religious communities build up traditions about how rituals are to be conducted, when rituals ought to be conducted, and who ought to play what role in particular rituals. It is possible, of course, for some participants in some religious rituals to participate without having the required beliefs. A casual church-goer might simply imitate the person next to her in a congregation and be able to get through a weekly church service without having any of the appropriate beliefs. But the ritual of a weekly church service would not take place unless significantly many participants held the appropriate set of beliefs.

Nineteenth century anthropologists who studied the religions of the world noted that these always seemed to involve complicated beliefs and complicated rituals.<sup>5</sup> Many of these

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<sup>5</sup> This finding is confirmed by recent studies of religious rituals. See for example, McCauley and Lawson (2002), Henrich (2009) and Norenzayan (2016).

anthropologists were surprised by this finding, as they had presumed that ‘primitive’ people would have rudimentary religious beliefs and would conduct very simple religious rituals. Some of them, including Tylor (1892), refused to believe that ‘primitive’ people, such as Australian Aborigines, could develop complicated theologies by themselves, and suggested that the elaborate religious beliefs they held, and the complicated religious rituals they conducted, were the result of recent intellectual cross-fertilization with the Christian beliefs and practices of early European settlers, explorers and missionaries in Australia (Durkheim 1912, 212). Durkheim rejects this view and considers that Australian Aborigines (and, indeed, all indigenous peoples) create their own complicated religious beliefs and rituals (1912, 213).<sup>6</sup>

One of Durkheim’s examples of a complicated set of religious beliefs and rituals concerns the tribal deity Bunjil, who was considered to be the creator of humanity by the members of the Aboriginal tribes that inhabited much of the area in south-eastern Australia now known as the State of Victoria. Bunjil ‘provides the faithful with everything necessary to their existence’ and is the ‘guardian of tribal morality’, punishing those who behave immorally. He is also a ‘gatekeeper to the land of the dead’ (1912, 211). Initiation rites are associated with Bunjil. In many such rites, people dance around an image representing Bunjil, singing and reciting prayers. Young initiates are taught about Bunjil and are told his secret name, which they are

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<sup>6</sup> He puts this point in language that sounds very politically incorrect a century after he wrote:

Even the crudest religions made familiar to us by history and ethnography have a complexity that belies the common notion of the primitive mentality. They display not only an elaborate system of beliefs and rites but such a variety of different principles and a wealth of basic ideas that they seem to be the recent products of a rather long development (Durkheim 1912, 47).

instructed not to reveal to women or to the uninitiated. Bunjil is thought to watch over initiates throughout the initiation process. He protects those who observe the prescribed rituals. However, Bunjil is not a tolerant deity. He is particularly concerned that rituals be conducted correctly. When mistakes occur, or when the required rituals are not conducted, 'he wreaks a terrible vengeance' (1912, 212).

Would the Aboriginals of Victoria have conducted the required rituals if they did not believe in Bunjil and did not fear his fury? The answer to this question is complicated. Some ritual performances are motivated by a felt need to experience 'collective effervescence' and it does not require much in the way of belief to prompt those who have the need to experience this feeling to act on it. Furthermore, most religious rituals involve enjoyable communal activities, such as singing, dancing, chanting and clapping, and enjoyment of these activities may be enough to motivate some people to undertake them. However, many religious rituals involve the elaborate coordination of different activities, there are different roles that people play in rituals, and rituals often involve the carefully timed use of props.<sup>7</sup> Without motivating beliefs, such as the belief that failure to conduct required rituals will lead to supernatural punishment, many people would lack sufficient motivation to make the efforts needed to 'stick to the script' when performing those rituals.

Some religious rituals lack enjoyable features such as singing, dancing, chanting and clapping. Ascetic rites, as Durkheim notes, can involve starving, mutilating and torturing (1912, 295-300). Durkheim believes that those who choose to conduct such rites are

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<sup>7</sup> Props can include incense, fire, music, costumes, weapons, and animal (sometimes human) sacrifices.

motivated not by emotion *per se*, but by the belief that they ought to try to overcome the motivating power of the emotions that usually deter them from conducting these activities. According to Durkheim, ‘the ascetic tortures himself to prove to himself and to his peers that he is above suffering’ (1912, 295). Clearly, such rites would not take place unless participants held the belief that they ought to try to overcome the motivating power of particular emotions. Durkheim has similar views about mourning. It is often believed that funereal ceremonies occur because people have a need to express their feelings of loss. Durkheim disagrees. According to him:

Mourning is not a natural impulse of the private sensibility bruised by a cruel loss: it is a duty imposed by the group. They lament, not simply because they are sad, but because they are obliged to lament. This is a ritual attitude that they are compelled to adopt out of respect for custom, but which is in large measure independent of the affective state of individuals (1912, 295).

He also claims that people’s feelings of loss do not explain why they perform the funereal rituals that they perform.

If the relatives weep, lament, and beat each other and themselves, it is not because they feel personally touched by the death of their kinsmen. No doubt it may happen, in particular cases, that the sorrow expressed is sincerely felt. But more generally, there is no connection between the feelings experienced and the gestures performed by the actors of the rite. If, at the very moment when the mourners seem most overcome by pain, you speak to them about some secular interest of theirs, it often happens that they instantly change their expression and tone, take on a cheerful air, and talk with all the gaiety in the world. (1912, 295)

Durkheim makes the point that participation in at least some Australian Aboriginal funereal rites is motivated by belief in supernatural intervention: ‘... when a relative does not mourn as

he should, the soul of the dead person dogs his steps and kills him' (1912, 295-296).

Durkheim also notes that the Aboriginal peoples of Victoria have not always been content to wait for supernatural beings to mete out punishment for ritual lapses. Sometimes they have applied their own punishments for ritual lapses, in an attempt, *inter alia*, to head off the wrath of the supernatural. He points out, for example, that there are instances where:

If a son-in-law does not perform the funerary duties owed to his father-in-law, if he does not cut himself in the prescribed way, his tribal fathers-in-law reclaim his wife and give her to someone else (1912, 296).

Of course, the tribal fathers-in-law would not do this unless they also believed that supernatural beings existed who punish those who failed to conduct required rituals.

Participation in religious rituals is crucial for maintaining the cohesiveness of religious communities. However, religious rituals would not and could not take place were it not for religious beliefs. Religious beliefs play an indispensable role in structuring religious rituals. They also play crucial roles in motivating participation in religious rituals. Contra Haidt, Durkheim does not hold that religious practice makes a more important contribution to religion than religious belief. Given the crucial roles that belief plays in his account of religion he is right not to do so.

### 3. The cognitive science of religion

Durkheim's project of trying to find features that were common to all religions fell out of favour amongst scholars of religion for most of the twentieth century. However, since the 1990s a growing number of academics working in the 'cognitive science of religion' – an

emerging interdisciplinary grouping that draws on findings from cognitive science, psychology, anthropology, sociology and evolutionary biology – have argued that there are key aspects of human religion that are universal.<sup>8</sup> Participation in every known religion involves participation in ritual activities (Wade 2009, 40). Every known religion postulates the existence of supernatural beings (Atran 2002; Boyer 2002).<sup>9</sup> Also, every known religion shapes the moral beliefs and behaviour of its practitioners, although the ways in which different religions shape morality and the degree to which they do so seem to vary significantly (Boyer 2002, 27-8 & 192-8).

Scholars working in the cognitive science of religion often also mention another generalisation about religion. This is that in every known culture at least one religion has been practiced (Winzeler 2008, 3). Why should religion be ubiquitous and why should the aforementioned aspects of religion repeatedly appear in a diversity of cultures? The answer most scholars working in the cognitive science of religion give to this question is that

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<sup>8</sup> Scholars working in the cognitive science of religion include Atran (2002), Boyer (2002), McCauley and Lawson (2002) and Barrett (2004).

<sup>9</sup> It is sometime said that Buddhists and Jains do not postulate supernatural beings. But this is not the case. What is true is that neither Buddhists nor Jains postulate a supreme being. Mainstream Buddhists postulate supernatural 'devas', which are more powerful than humans, but not as powerful as a supreme being (Sadakata, 1997). Also, mainstream Jains accept the existence of various less-than-supreme supernatural beings (Dundas 2002, pp. 212-214).

religiosity emerged spontaneously in different human cultures and then evolved.<sup>10</sup> There are various ways in which religion may have evolved. The view that the majority of scholars working in the cognitive science of religion, including Boyer (2002), Atran (2002) and Barrett (2004), favour is that religion is a by-product of our evolved cognitive structures. An alternative view, favoured by Haidt (2012) and Wilson (2002), is that religion is a group-level adaptation that enabled some human groups to outcompete other human groups.<sup>11</sup>

Haidt may consider belief to be relatively unimportant in shaping religious behaviour, but his views are not shared by leading scholars working in the cognitive science of religion. These scholars emphasize the importance of a specific type of belief – belief in the existence of supernatural agents – for the creation and maintenance of religious commitment (Atran 2002, 145-6). Religions that involve belief in supernatural agents are more likely to be accepted and more likely to spread than other possible forms of religion which do not attribute supernatural agency to the world (Barrett 2004, 120).

Much research in the cognitive science of religion is focussed on understanding the cognitive structures of our minds that, it is argued, predispose us to attribute supernatural agency to the world. It is argued that from a very early age we find teleological explanations especially compelling and this tendency predisposes us to accept belief in supernatural beings (Keleman

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<sup>10</sup> For further discussion of the case for religion having evolved, as well as an argument dismissing an alternative hypothesis, that religion spread from a common source and so may not have been subject to the influence of evolution, see Powell and Clarke (2012, pp. 457-459).

<sup>11</sup> The byproduct and the group-level adaptation account of the evolution of religion are not incompatible. For discussion of the possibility of mixing the two, see Powell and Clarke (2012, pp. 478-480). For an example of a mixed view, see Atran and Henrich (2010).

2004). It is also argued that our minds are structured in such a way that we find beliefs in agents that can exist without natural bodies highly intuitive – many supernatural agents are supposed to be able to exist without a natural body. We are, in Paul Bloom’s words ‘natural dualists’ (2004). It is also argued that our cognitive structures dispose us to transmit and accept assertions about the existence of ‘minimally counterintuitive’ agents – agents that are able to violate some of our ordinary assumptions about what is naturally possible (Boyer and Ramble 2001). Our dispositions to transmit and to accept assertions about the existence of minimally counterintuitive – supernatural – agents is, it is argued, a consequence of our possession of a particular cognitive structure: a ‘hypersensitive agency detection device’, or HADD (Barrett 2009).<sup>12</sup> Scholars working in the cognitive science of religion do not deny that participation in religious activities, such as ritual, is important for the ongoing cohesion of religious communities, but they also stress the importance of cognitive factors in enabling members of religious communities to acquire the sorts of beliefs that dispose them to participate in religious communal activities. They seek to show how religious beliefs and participation in religious communal activities work together to create, maintain and transmit religious commitment (Barrett 2004, 61).

Specific developments in cognitive science of religion vindicate Durkheim’s views about the interconnectedness of ritual and belief. McCauley and Lawson (2002; 2007) are advocates of, and provide evidence for, the ‘ritual form hypothesis’, which emphasises the importance of cognitive representations in explaining religion. According to them religious rituals are usually understood by participants as transactions between those participants and supernatural beings. Religious rituals are organised around beliefs about the desires and dispositions of

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<sup>12</sup> The HADD hypothesis is hugely influential, but the current evidential basis for it is thin (Clarke 2014, 43).

supernatural beings and are intended to bring about change in the world (McCauley and Lawson 2002, 8-35; Lawson 2005; McCauley 2011, 189-207). For example, an initiation ceremony is performed when community members seek supernatural approval to make an initiate a fully-fledged member of a religious community. Participants in the initiation ceremony need to believe in the existence of the relevant supernatural being, who they seek approval from, to conduct the ritual effectively. They also need to hold beliefs about the sequence of ritual activities required to obtain supernatural approval for initiation, as well as beliefs about the effectiveness of that sequence of ritual activities at attracting supernatural attention and winning supernatural approval.

Another body of work in the cognitive science of religion – on ‘costly signalling theory’ – stresses the role that hard-to-fake, ‘costly displays’ have played in spreading religion (Sosis and Bressler 2003; Irons 2004; Henrich 2009). When someone is observed making a costly donation to a religious charity, or undergoing a painful religious ritual, they send a powerful message to others. The message is that they aren’t merely participating in religious communal activities because they wish to obtain the benefits that come with membership of the religious community in question. They are participating because they genuinely believe the key tenets of that community’s religion. In sending this message they encourage others to embrace that religion.

Work in costly signalling theory helps explain why some people are motivated to conduct painful ascetic rites. An underlying motive many of them have is to encourage others to adopt, or maintain, belief in the key tenets of their religion, as well as membership of the relevant organisation, or organisations, that represent that religion. This line of explanation is consistent with Durkheim’s insistence on the important role belief plays in motivating the conduct of ascetic rites. It suggests that people who conduct ascetic rites often do so because

they believe that they ought to try to recruit others to their religion, and that they believe that conducting such rites is an effective way of making recruits. What is transmitted to converts to the religion are ‘belief-practice combinations’ (Henrich 2009, 245). Religious converts inspired by costly displays do not merely observe and then imitate rituals. They accept core beliefs of the religion they are converting to, along with beliefs about the structures of the rituals that they ought to conduct.

Durkheim’s stress on the role of supernatural punishment in motivating the religious to conduct prescribed rituals, and do so properly, is echoed in recent supernatural punishment theories, promulgated by Johnson (2016) and Norenzayan (2013), as well as others. Both Johnson and Norenzayan argue that fear of wrathful Gods evolved in human communities, as a key component of religion, because it helped solve free-rider problems. Gods are usually thought of as all seeing and very powerful. The belief that people who fail to act in appropriately pro-social ways will be observed and then punished by a vindictive God, provides a powerful incentive for members of religious communities to act in pro-social ways and resist the temptation to free-ride on their community. Fear of supernatural punishment, and fear that supernatural benevolence may be withheld, are considered by Johnson to be a powerful means by which the religious become and remain motivated to conduct prescribed rituals (2016, 240-2).

In this section, I have briefly surveyed contemporary work in three areas of the cognitive science of religion: the ritual form hypothesis, costly signalling theory and supernatural punishment theory. Findings in all three of these areas provide evidence for the importance of belief for religion. This evidence fits well with the balanced account of religion, which has it that both belief and participation make important contributions to religion. However, it

appears to be incompatible with Haidt's participation-centric account of religion which downplays the importance of belief to religion.

#### 4. Haidt on Durkheim and on religion

Haidt's participation-centric account of religion is not supported by Durkheim and appears to be incompatible with recent scientific work on religion. So why does Haidt hold the participation centric view of religion, and why does he interpret Durkheim the way he does? I am not in a position to give definitive answers to these questions. However, the following observations may go some way to answering both of them.

##### (i) *Haidt on Durkheim*

Haidt's interest in Durkheim is primarily a 'big picture' interest. Haidt refers to himself as a 'Durkheimian' and he has a good reason for doing so. Durkheim was a functionalist about religion. He held that religion exists because it functions to strengthen community bonds. Haidt is also a functionalist about religion. He holds that religion evolved because it served the function of strengthening community bonds and thereby enabled religious communities to flourish (Haidt 2012, 246-73). The case for functionalism about religion does not depend on facts about the relative contribution of belief and participation to religion. It is concerning that someone as influential as Haidt adheres to an interpretation of Durkheim that appears inconsistent with Durkheim's writings, as many of Haidt's many readers may accept, rather than question, his interpretation of Durkheim. However, because Haidt's overriding interest in Durkheim is a 'big picture' one it is perhaps not surprising that he might not have attended

to details of Durkheim's work. So, it is not surprising that he is unaware of the important roles that Durkheim accords belief in the formation of religious behaviour and commitment.

(ii) *Haidt on religion*

In his *The Righteous Mind* (2012) Haidt provides an overarching theory about moral psychology, politics and religion, which draws on a wealth of evidence about religion, along with evidence about moral psychology and political behaviour. But while Haidt (2012) demonstrates an awareness of an impressive range of studies of religion, he does not consider evidence for either McCauley and Lawson's (2002) ritual form hypothesis, or for costly signalling theory. Haidt does discuss supernatural punishment theory, but he does not focus on the point that belief is a key component of this theory – belief in, and about, punishing supernatural beings (2012, 256).

The evidence about religion that Haidt (2012) does discuss is sufficient to demonstrate, contra the new atheists, that participation is a necessary component of any explanation of religious behaviour and commitment. However, it is not sufficient to give us reason to prefer the participation-centric view of religion to a balanced view. So why does Haidt endorse a participation-centric view of religion rather than a balanced view? The most plausible answer to this question, I think, is that Haidt's preference for the participation-centric view over a balanced view is driven by a desire for consistency with his account of moral psychology, rather than by examination of the relevant evidence about religion. In *The Righteous Mind* (2012) Haidt effectively treats religion as an extension of morality. He describes religions as 'moral exoskeletons' which serve to extend the ability of evolved morality to regulate individual self-interest and thereby enable cooperating societies to flourish (2012, 269-270). To appreciate why this way of understanding religion leads Haidt to deny belief a significant

role in the generation of religious behaviour and commitment, we need to look at some of the details of his moral psychology.

For most of the twentieth century moral psychology was dominated by rationalists, such as Piaget (1932) and Kohlberg (1969). According to them we typically make moral judgments consciously and deliberately. In the early part of the twenty-first century anti-rationalist views gained ascendancy in moral psychology (Monin, Pizarro and Beer 2007). The recent decline of rationalism in moral psychology is part of a broader trend to recognise the importance of non-conscious automatic cognitive processing for ordinary human psychology (Bargh and Chartrand 1999; Moors 2016). As non-conscious automatic cognitive processing has come to assume greater importance in psychology, conscious deliberative processing has come to be seen as correspondingly less important.

Haidt has played an important role in the recent rise to prominence of anti-rationalism in moral psychology. He has done this, *inter alia*, by articulating and defending the very influential ‘Social Intuitionist Model’ of moral judgment (Haidt 2001; 2007). According to the Social Intuitionist Model, ordinary moral judgments are primarily made intuitively. Haidt, and other anti-rationalists in moral psychology, understand moral intuitions as messages transmitted to the conscious mind by non-conscious components of the mind. The moral intuitions transmitted to the conscious mind are, in all except rare instances, accompanied by emotions (Haidt 2001, p. 825).<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Haidt (2001; 2012) focuses on moral intuitions and it could be that while moral intuitions are, almost invariably, accompanied by emotions, non-moral intuitions, some of which may be the result of very different cognitive processes from the cognitive processes that underpin moral intuitions, are

The Social Intuitionist Model, as its name suggests, has a social dimension. Haidt argues that moral reasoning principally occurs in ‘lawyer mode’ and is usually intended to provide *post hoc* justifications for the moral intuitions that are transmitted to the conscious mind by non-conscious components of the mind. These justifications are usually directed at persuading others to accept the moral judgments that we accept on intuitive grounds. In Haidt’s words:

Moral reasoning is usually an ex post facto process used to influence the intuitions (and hence judgments) of other people. In the social intuitionist model, one feels a quick flash of revulsion at the thought of incest and one knows intuitively that something is wrong. Then, when faced with a social demand for a verbal justification, one becomes a lawyer trying to build a case rather than a judge searching for the truth. (2001, 814) <sup>14</sup>

Haidt’s conviction that participation in religious activities is more important than belief, in explaining religious behaviour and commitment, appears to be driven by his social intuitionist account of moral psychology. According to Haidt (2009; 2012), and according to

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not almost invariably accompanied by emotions. For a recent survey of work in psychology on intuitions, see Thompson (2014).

<sup>14</sup> Haidt does not argue that deliberative conscious reasoning *never* plays a direct role in the formation of individual moral judgment. When he sets out the Social Intuitionist Model he specifically allows for ‘reasoned judgment’ and ‘private reflection’ (2001, 815). Our reasoned judgments can override our moral intuitions, and our private reflections can reshape the moral intuitions that generate our moral judgments. Haidt’s view, however, is that these possibilities are not often instantiated. In his words ‘... moral reasoning is rarely the direct cause of moral judgment’ (2001, 815).

many other commentators, including Durkheim (1912), participation in religious communal activities engages the emotions. When people participate in communal religious activities, especially religious rituals, they are disposed to experience powerful emotions that play an important role in shaping their subsequent behaviour. A crucial way in which participation in communal religious activities shapes behaviour, according to both Haidt and Durkheim, is by promoting feelings of belonging to a larger community. When people participate in communal religious activities, especially religious rituals, they often feel a powerful sense of connectedness to their fellow participants. When this happens, their sense of individual identity can be sublimated, at least temporarily, as they come to identify with their ritual-conducting community. They become more inclined to act in ways that promote the ends of their community and less inclined to promote their own individual ends (Haidt 2012, 221-45). Haidt sees emotion as almost always covarying with the moral intuitions that drive the formation of moral judgments, leading to moral action (2001, 823).<sup>15</sup> He also sees emotion as the principal driver of religious activity. It should not be surprising that he conceives of religion in ways that are consistent with his account of moral judgment, given his ‘moral exoskeleton’ characterisation of religion.

I have attempted to explain why Haidt’s favoured social intuitionist account of moral psychology leads him to downplay the role of belief in religion. The explanation I have provided prompts the question whether we should follow Haidt and accept the participation-centric model of religion, on the grounds of its consistency with anti-rationalist moral psychology. There are (at least) three reasons not to follow Haidt. First, this would be to

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<sup>15</sup> Why should moral intuitions covary with emotions? One explanation for this covariance is that moral intuitions are constituted by moral emotions. For a recent philosophical defence of this view, see Kauppinen (2013).

disregard the evidence discussed in the previous section of the paper, which provides strong support for the view that belief plays a crucial role in generating religious behaviour and commitment. Second, this would involve uncritical acceptance of Haidt's Social Intuitionist Model of moral judgment. While the Social Intuitionist Model has been extremely influential, there has been a steady stream of critics who have pointed out ways in which it fails to properly account for the various roles that conscious, deliberative moral reasoning plays in shaping moral judgment.<sup>16</sup> So there are good reasons to reserve judgment about the Social Intuitionist Model. Third, Haidt's characterisation of religions as 'moral exoskeletons' may be misleadingly simple.<sup>17</sup> Religions are very complicated and while it is clear enough that there is a great deal of interaction between religion and morality, it is far from clear that the two enjoy the close relationship that Haidt (2012) attributes to them. Even if it were to be established that conscious deliberation plays no significant role in the formation of moral judgment, we should not infer that belief plays no significant role in the formation of religious behaviour and commitment.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> These critics include Pizarro and Bloom (2003), Saltzstein and Kasachkoff (2004), Fine (2006), Clarke (2008), Sauer (2012), Hindriks (2015) and Greenspan (2015).

<sup>17</sup> Kiper and Sosis (2014) argue that Haidt's account of the relationship between religion and morality is overly simple.

<sup>18</sup> Earlier versions of this paper were read at a one-day philosophy of religion conference held at the University of Birmingham in 2016, and at the workshop 'Explaining Religion: Cognitive Science of Religion and Naturalism' held at VU University Amsterdam in 2015, as well as at staff seminars held at the Australian Catholic University and Charles Sturt University. Thanks to audience members for helpful feedback. Thanks also to Daniel Cohen, Matt Kopec, Yujin Nagasawa and two anonymous

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