From socio-economic explanations of religion discussed in the previous chapter we move to an examination of sociological accounts of the phenomenon. We concentrate on what is undoubtedly one of the richest of all such theories in terms of the insights it offers and the explanatory power of some of its ideas: that advanced by the French sociologist Emile Durkheim (1858–1917). It is equally one of the most controversial sociological accounts. Here again, as in Marxism, the essence of the whole theory is to be found in a single artefact. Marxist theory, as previously indicated, is encapsulated in the idea of the commodity; how something is produced, exchanged, attains its value is the key to understanding capitalism and, by implication, religion. In Durkheim's theory of religion it is the Australian totem which constitutes the essence of the phenomenon.

We shall not focus exclusively on Durkheim. Some attention will also be paid to more contemporary sociological explanations of religion which, while seeking to go beyond Durkheim and avoid some of his mistakes, nevertheless owe a great deal to his insights.

Durkheim was not unusual among his contemporaries in dedicating so much of his time to the study of religion. Religion was a central concern of nineteenth-century sociology and this for many reasons of both a theoretical and practical kind. Such study was considered essential to the development of sociological theory. Moreover, sociologists became preoccupied with the problem of providing a 'scientific' understanding of the effects on 'traditional' patterns of authority, morality, community life and culture, of which religion formed part, of rapid social and economic change. For Durkheim and his contemporaries the central question was how would the increasingly differentiated society of their time and of
The future attain an adequate degree of solidarity, cohesion and consensus.

Religion it was generally agreed had provided the social cement of the 'old order' and for some nineteenth-century thinkers, including de Toqueville, it was also essential to freedom. Alexis de Tocqueville's *Ancien Régime* (1966) provides a classic example of that sense of everything breaking down that was so widespread in nineteenth-century social writings. There was serious doubt as to whether the old gods, myths, dogmas and rituals designed for a more integrated and simple world characterised by what Durkheim termed mechanical solidarity – that solidarity based on the common beliefs and consensus found in the 'conscience collective' – could operate effectively in the 'new' more industrially based and scientifically and technologically oriented world.

Industrialisation and urbanisation were accompanied by an increasing division of labour which, Durkheim believed, undermined mechanical solidarity and with it moral integration, thus rendering social order problematic. However, Durkheim was persuaded that a new form of order would arise in advanced societies the basis of which would be organic solidarity, a form of solidarity which would comprise the interdependence of economic ties arising from the differentiation and specialisation within the modern economy, a new network of occupational associations linking individuals to the state and the emergence within these associations of collectively created, moral restraints on citizens.

Durkheim remained concerned, nonetheless, about the danger to society of individuals who did not feel that social norms were meaningful to them and who, as a consequence, experienced that condition which he termed *anomie*, and embraced socialism not out of a desire to abolish private property but because it constituted a protest against the disintegration of traditional social bonds and values. Previously, religious culture consisted of the collective values which comprised a society's unity and personality, and religious ceremonies both reinforced those collective values and reaffirmed community among individuals. But in modern 'organically' integrated societies it was increasingly difficult to find such ceremonies and rituals and hence the far greater risk of *anomie*. Religion, however, would persist for, while he believed that its interpretative role had virtually come to an end with the arrival of modern science, Durkheim, nonetheless, was convinced that it remained indispensable. He wrote: