In the French sociological tradition, the idea of a universal secular religion can be traced back to Henri de Saint-Simon and Auguste Comte, but its full crystallization is found in the mature work of Émile Durkheim (Featherstone 1990, 4). Durkheim’s ideas were shaped by a number of political and military events that shook the very foundation of French society. The military defeat in the war with Prussia in 1870 and the losses of Alsace and Lorraine the following year affected him deeply. Durkheim hoped to implement a new moral and universal regulation of society and contribute to the regeneration of the French nation. The latter was essential for providing a solid base for the Third Republic (1870–1940) and helping France recover, morally and politically, from the defeat and humiliation of the Prussian affront. Patriotism and nationalism, as sources of moral and social coherence in modern society, were for him important aspects of the process of recovery. Robert Bellah has aptly referred to Durkheim as a great philosopher of moral order, and as “a high priest and theologian of the civil religion of the Third Republic”. He sees him as a prophet “calling not only modern France but modern Western society generally to mend its ways in the face of a great social and moral crisis” (Bellah 1973, x).

Bryan Turner has rightly noted that sociology, since its emergence in the nineteenth century, has been characterised by “a tension or contradiction between a science of particular nation-states and a science of global or universal processes” (Turner 1990, 343). In this respect, Durkheim’s sociological approach is no exception. A number of commentators, however, have characterised classical sociological theory as lacking a “global” vision, being “blind to globalisation processes” or as having an entirely “methodologically nationalist” orientation (Inglis and Robertson 2008, 6–7). It is thus claimed that classical sociology’s assumptions are no longer relevant to postmodern societies
Given the fact that the key unit of sociological analysis, “society”, has been “ipso facto” equated with the study of a given national state, the classical model has become inapplicable to a globalised world (Smith 1983, 26; Beck 2000, 24).

In this chapter, I challenge these claims by examining Durkheim’s ideas on civil religion, nationalism and internationalism. I begin with a brief definition of the concept of civil religion, tracing its roots to the works of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Emile Durkheim and Robert Bellah. This is followed by a discussion of Durkheim’s ideas on patriotism, which he perceives as the civil religion of modern times. While it would be inaccurate to deny that Durkheim’s writings were intended to serve nationalist objectives, I show that his political sociology was not circumscribed by problems affecting France alone. Rather, he is open to a global and cosmopolitan vision, which he expresses in his notion of moral individualism, a notion that transcends both the individual and a given nation-state. Next, I examine his ideas concerning the morality that ought to regulate modern international relations, and his hope for the formation of a supra-national community and universal morality. Durkheim assigns a fundamental role to the state, not only as protector of public morality, but also as the institution entrusted with the implementation and furtherance of individual rights. I finish this chapter by addressing two issues that, in my opinion, have not received adequate attention in the literature, namely the use of civil religion as a political resource and the relationship between civil religion and nationalism. While many have denied the claim that civil religion and nationalism can be equated, I hold that they cannot easily be dissociated, and reject the idea that only “less advanced” types of civil religions can be linked with nationalism.

*Genesis of the Civil Religion Concept*

Civil religion consists of a set of social and cultural principles, values and rituals oriented toward the civil and political order. The religious aspect might be derived from attempts to infuse the civil order with a transcendent

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1 For more on the notion of methodological nationalism, see Chernilo (2008, 2007, 2006), Inglis and Robertson (2008), Turner (2006), and Robertson (2000). These scholars present a defence and a reassessment of classical sociological theory.