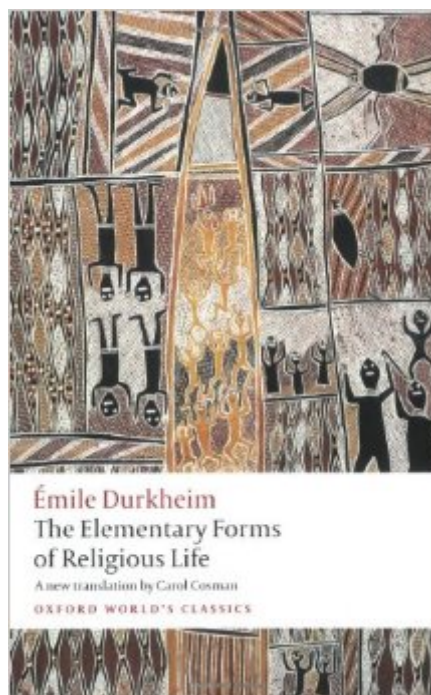


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The Elementary Forms Of Religious Life



Synopsis

In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), Emile Durkheim sets himself the task of discovering the enduring source of human social identity. He investigates what he considered to be the simplest form of documented religion - totemism among the Aborigines of Australia. For Durkheim, studying Aboriginal religion was a way "to yield an understanding of the religious nature of man, by showing us an essential and permanent aspect of humanity." The need and capacity of men and women to relate to one another socially lies at the heart of Durkheim's exploration, in which religion embodies the beliefs that shape our moral universe. *The Elementary Forms* has been applauded and debated by sociologists, anthropologists, ethnographers, philosophers, and theologians, and continues to speak to new generations about the intriguing origin and nature of religion and society. This new, lightly abridged edition provides an excellent introduction to Durkheim's ideas.

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Customer Reviews

This book is more than an explanation of the origins of religious belief; Durkheim was ultimately trying to show how religious thought lay the foundation for scientific thought, and how a priori knowledge was based on social norms rather than being "innate". I wouldn't say that Durkheim

successfully proved all these notions, but there is enough good material in this book to furnish a reader with starting points for explorations in a number of different directions. The most important concept in the book, from my perspective, is that of "collective consciousness", meaning the ideas, instincts, and general world-views that are formed by social cohesion. Social conventions are not external to people, they are internalized and appropriated emotionally, taking on the guise of "supernatural" or "divine" truth. Even outside of the religious sphere, one can begin to observe that much that is assumed as "truth" is a function of social convention. The process is organic, with individuals contributing to the process to create a greater whole--the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It opens up the question of what it means to be an individual in society, how much individuality of thought is truly possible, how resistance to collective "groupthink" is possible, and how much of individual identity is shaped by collective forces. Related to this are ethical questions: are good and evil just products of social convention? Is the idea that there is an absolute measure of good and evil just a result of a social group's elevation of its social norms to divine/sacred status (which is the usual process, according to Durkheim)?

Much of the taken-for-granted substance of contemporary sociology is due to Emile Durkheim. His influence is greater than that of Marx or even the often cited and much lauded Max Weber. Read the prominent contemporary work of Pierre Bourdieu, commonly characterized as a Weberian, and you'll find that he is a Durkheimian through and through, particularly with regard to his best known concepts, cultural capital and social capital. The question that guided Durkheim throughout his fruitful career was "how is society possible?" In other words, how do we explain social cohesion, avoiding the pathologies and divisiveness attendant to egoism (social isolation) and anomie (cultural deregulation), terms introduced by Durkheim in *The Division of Labor in Society* and effectively applied in his book *Suicide? The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* makes a profound contribution to answering questions as to the basis of social cohesion. Though limited almost exclusively to simple, largely undifferentiated societies based on a collective consciousness, Durkheim's account of the emergence and role of elementary religious influences has lessons applicable to contemporary times. Specifically, Durkheim's discussion of the totem, an animal, plant, natural physical force, or simple material artifact, used to represent a clan or tribe can be likened to the American flag in the U.S., a symbol that has quasi-religious significance. When the flag is displayed, especially to comparatively large aggregates of Americans, it elicits a shared emotional response reflecting a commonly held moral ideal and set of shared beliefs. The shared response, moreover, serves to reaffirm and rejuvenate the moral code and belief system on which the

response is based.

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