

(Download) The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

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Emile Durkheim

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Émile Durkheim
The Elementary Forms
of Religious Life

A new translation by Carol Cosman

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Emile Durkheim : The Elementary Forms of Religious Life before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Elementary Forms of Religious Life:

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. One of the Key Texts of Sociology By krebsman Durkheim was an original thinker with a great gift for logical analysis. When he was alive, anthropology was an exciting new science

that was perfect for his inquisitive mentality. His books *THE DIVISION OF LABOR IN SOCIETY*, *SUICIDE*, and this book are all key texts of social anthropology. (Durkheim is often referred to as the father of sociology.) I recently read William James's *THE VARIETIES OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE*, which was written only a few years before this book. James was examining the religious experience, but Durkheim was examining what all these varieties had in common. It was Religion itself that interested him. He sought to reduce religion to its most primitive form and show that its core characteristics were shared by ALL religions. It's a fascinating experience to follow his line of thinking which he elucidates in great detail with lots of examples. But ultimately the ideas in this book are bigger than that. It's not just about how humans think about religion, but how they think period! This book is about a hundred years old now, and several of Durkheim's arguments, especially those concerning totemism, have been successfully rebutted by subsequent social scientists. But the basic essence of the book has been supported without question. As stated at the beginning of this review, this is a key text, and for that reason alone, it is essential reading. This book provides a very strong foundation for further study.

3 of 3 people found the following review helpful. A classic
By Benjamin Juarez Echenique
Durkheim, one of the founding fathers of Sociology wrote an original and revealing way to look at religions, not from a Theological or Anthropological perspective, but asking what is religion's social origin and function. His ideas have been criticized from many sides of academia, but the book is still a classic and worth reading if you don't use it as a source of ethnographic research, but as a revealing sociological work. Collective consciousness is one of the terms Durkheim introduced.

7 of 8 people found the following review helpful. A Social Science Genius in Top Form
By not a natural
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. The same might be said of the crucifix for Christians, the Star of David for Jews, or a crescent and star on a green background for Muslims. As material artifacts the symbols are of little intrinsic value. However, as symbols of a collectively shared, morally binding world view they provide much-needed psychological sustenance, especially when invoked for aggregates gathered together to celebrate the rightness of a commonly held perspective. Readers of Durkheim's earlier work will recognize that such assemblages and displays of a totem will be most effective in simpler societies where experiential commonality gives rise to a well developed collective consciousness. In more complex societies, where a vast diversity of life experiences diminishes the content and efficacy of the collective consciousness, symbols that have totemic influence are hard to find. While the American flag remains one such symbol in the contemporary U.S., the rancorous social, cultural, and political differences that separate Americans make clear that the flag as a totem means different things to different people. This diminishes its value as a source of social cohesion that reminds us of shared beliefs and common outlook. The diminished value of the flag as a totem is both a consequence and a cause of exaggerated diversity, not to be found within simpler organizational forms such as the clan or tribe among Nineteenth Century aboriginal Australians. Having read *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, one can see the social provenance of commonly held, taken-for-granted ideas of space, time, number, cause and effect, and other fundamental categories. Moreover, Durkheim's conclusion that when people worship their totem they are, in effect, worshiping their clan or tribe is insightfully compelling. As already noted, however, one wonders if increasingly complex and diverse societies are foredoomed to dysfunction and dissolution because the cultural commonality that is manifest in the totemic principle is hard to find in highly differentiated social systems. Durkheim's genius, as manifest in his life-long commitment to finding intrinsically social explanations for a broad range of phenomena that are too often erroneously reduced to psychologisms, is abundantly evident throughout *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. His contribution to sociology as a discipline is enormous and typically under-valued. As an addendum, it is surprising that Durkheim did not use fundamental concepts such as mechanical solidarity, organic solidarity, and collective consciousness (used once), as well as anomie, egoism, altruism, and fatalism in a large number of perfectly suitable ways throughout *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Perhaps they were lost in this translation. Their absence works against establishing explicit continuity with his earlier work.

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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Language Notes
Text: English (translation) Original Language: French
About the Author
Carol Cosman has translated works by Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Balzac and Yasmina Reza
Mark Cladis is the author of *A Communitarian Defense of Liberalism: Emile Durkheim and Contemporary Social Theory* (Stanford, 1992) and editor of *Durkheim and Foucault: Perspectives on Education and Punishment* (1999).