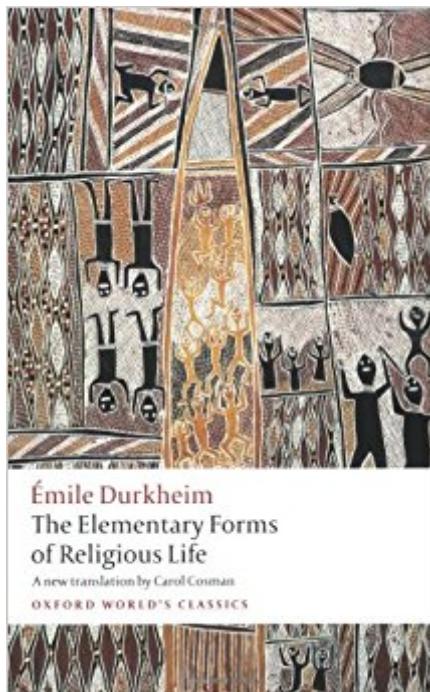


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The Elementary Forms Of Religious Life



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

Text: English (translation) Original Language: French --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

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).

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.

Not finished reading it, of course, but already is providing the background that I had hoped for

Durkheim's "Elementary Forms of the Religious Life" is one of the deepest books I've ever read, but I will leave others to speak of that. I would like to complain about this particular edition, the "Oxford's World Classics" edition. (This review has apparently been published elsewhere. The edition I'm talking about is a yellow-and-red "Oxford's World's Classics" paperback with a black-and-white photo of Durkheim looking off to his left.) I have long been looking to replace my worn-out edition, and thought this offering (published 2001) would answer nicely. (Is it just me, or has this book been plagued with editions that have flimsy binding?) Unfortunately, it buries an important piece of information in its "Editorial Reviews" section: this edition is abridged. Now, it's lightly abridged. The original, which I have a hand, is only slightly longer than what you're getting here. Which is what puzzles me: why did they bother to abridge this at all? Printing the entire text would only have added

about 30 pages to the thing. The lines they have discluded seem, at least upon my examination, no more irrelevant or abstruse than what they've decided to include. Puzzling. There are some good things about this edition, though. There are explanatory footnotes at the end of the text: useful glosses, not those "textual comparison" kind. (The footnotes on the bottom of each page are Durkheim's own.) There is a 29-page introduction. There is also an ethnographic map of Australia. But the biggest plus for me is that the (paperback) binding is super-sturdy and promises to last through many reads. This is the translation by Carol Cosman, done in 2001 specifically for this edition.

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