



## Classical Sociological Theory and Foundations of American Sociology



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# I. Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912)

“Religious representation of the world are collective representations that express collective realities.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from Durkheim's *Les Formes Elementaires de la Vie Religieuse: le systeme totemique en Australia*, published in 1912 in Paris by Alcan Press. It was first translated as *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* in 1915 by Joseph War Swain and published by the Free Press. It was retranslated in 1995 by Fields. The section here is a short form of the introductory chapter, entitled “The Object of the Research.” It corresponds with pages 3-21 in the Carol Cosman translation published by Oxford in 2008 (recommended version).

## Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

Although Durkheim's 1912 book may appear to be about religion, it is actually much more than that. As the introduction to the book makes clear, Durkheim is interested in the very deepest elements of human mentality and society. When reading this introduction, pay attention to the claims Durkheim makes about the origins of human thought and the connections to his conception of people as inherently social beings. Durkheim is really seeking to present an entire new (sociological!) theory of knowledge, one that is rooted in people as social beings. He asks us to explore why we developed the categories of thought we did – e.g., what value was there in designating a “left” side versus a “right” side? or, in designating an eight-hour work session once every rotation of the sun, but only in five out of seven rotations? *The Elementary Forms* is an attempt to contribute to what Durkheim saw as a new science, understanding society itself.

## The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (Introduction)

### *Part 1: The Sociological Study of Religion*

In this book, we propose to study, the most primitive and the most simple religion known to us, to analyze and explain it. What makes a religious system simple? In the first place, it is found in societies whose social organization is simple. In the second place, we can study it without having to refer to anything borrowed from an earlier religion.

We shall try to describe all the elements of this system with the exactitude and fidelity of an anthropologist or a historian. But that is not all. Sociology sets for itself problems other than those faced by the anthropologist or historian. Like all positive science, our real object is us, us as we live now. We don't study old religions to discover its bizarre attributes, but because we think studying it will allow us to say something, to reveal something important, about the enduring aspects of our religious nature.

That proposition, that we study old religions to discover something about who we are today, will likely raise objections among some of you, for various reasons. Some might say we are using these older religions as a weapon against religion itself. One could argue that current religions, such as Christianity, rest on the same kinds of superstitions that these earlier religions appear to do. But that is not what we are saying here. To the sociologist, any human institution cannot survive for long if it is based on error or lies. The most barbarous or bizarre rituals, the strangest myths, respond to some human need, some aspect of life, individual or social. The reasons given by the believer to justify these myths and practices may be erroneous, but there are reasons for their existence. It is the job of science to discover these reasons.

After all, there are no false religions. All are true in their own fashion. All are responses, in different manners, to the human condition.

*[Durkheim next discusses his choice of studying religion by studying the simplest religion possible. In this case, this will be the totemic religion followed by the aboriginal peoples of Australia. In Durkheim's time, several anthropologists had been doing fieldwork in Australia and had published rich descriptions of the practices and beliefs of these people. Although we now know that some of these descriptions were biased and deeply flawed, Durkheim takes great care to sift through the evidence to find reliable data. In the introduction, he defends his choice of object of study.]*

There are several reasons to study religion in its simplest form. First, we can understand religions today only by following how religions developed over time. Whenever we wish to understand a human thing at a period in time, such as a religious belief, a moral regulation, a legal precepts, an aesthetic technique, an economic regime – we must start at the beginning, when it was most simple. It is very difficult to figure out what is fundamental in complex systems. There are simply too many variables! When studying religion, it is hard to see what is in common to them all when we take as our object of study modern religions, because they are so different, so complex, and often include elements that were historically contingent.

It is very different when we look at inferior<sup>1</sup> societies. Because these societies show less individualization and more overall homogeneity, there are fewer variations to contend with. The group exhibits a level of intellectual and moral uniformity rare in modern society. Everything is common to everyone. People do the same things, in a particular manner, over and over again. Thus, “primitive” civilizations are our best cases for finding what is common to all, because they are simple. Not only do primitive religions allow us to separate

1. Durkheim uses the word *inférieure*, which can mean “inferior” but also “lower,” in the sense of simpler, less complicated, and having come before. One can take issue with how Durkheim and others of his era characterized the non-European world, but one should also acknowledge how this characterization fits with his overall theory of the increasing division of labor (see Passages 2c-f).

out the constituent elements of religion, but they also help us explain it. Because the facts are simpler, the connections between the facts are more obvious. Like the physicist, who simplifies the laws of phenomena she studies by getting rid of secondary phenomena, we take as our object of study early simple religions.

## *Part 2. Theories of Knowledge*

But our study is not only of interest as a study of religion. All religions convey ideas and phenomena that are more than merely religious. These ideas can furnish us with ways of understanding problems that we have so far only debated philosophically.

For a long time, we have known that the first systems people devised to represent the world and themselves arose from their religion. There is no religion which is not at the same time both a cosmology and a speculation about divinity. If philosophy and science in general developed out of religious thinking, it is because religion itself began as a way of knowing and thinking about the world.

*[Durkheim goes on to argue that religion has contributed to the formation of the way we think and the very categories we use to think about the world. What Aristotle called our “categories of understanding” – concepts of time, space, number, cause – all had their origins in early religion: This, indeed, is why Durkheim is interested in religion and why he wrote this book.]*

*The general conclusion of this book which you are reading is that religion is a thing eminently social. Religious representations of the world are collective representations that express collective realities.*

For example, we can only think of time by thinking of the ways we measure it and each of those measurements – minutes, hours, weeks, years – correspond to social arrangements. They are borrowed from social life. A calendar expresses the rhythm of collective activity at the same time that it functions to ensure its regularity. A similar thing is true of space. In order to arrange things spatially, we have to set some above, some below, some beneath, some above, some on the left, some on the right, etc. – all of these divisions arise out of social divisions. *[In Durkheim’s words, these distinctions (up, down, left, right) come from different emotional values that people attribute to various spatial regions. In other words, the category of space is relational, and arises out of the relations within society. Different societies attribute different values to the arrangements and relations.]*

*Thus, social organization has been the model of spatial organization, which is like a tracing of the former. There is no distinction between left and right in human nature – the distinction is in reality the product of religious (collective) representations.*

*[Here Durkheim is weighing in on an area of philosophical debate. Some have held that “categories of understanding” such as time and space are logically prior to our own experiences. They come ready-made to us, from who knows where. They are a priori. Others hold that there are no such categories of understanding that exist outside of our experience. Individuals experience the world and come up with ways of describing it, and this is where our notions of time and space come from. Durkheim thinks both sides are missing*

something. Durkheim agrees with the latter group that categories of understanding emerge from experience, but he disagrees that they are the result of the experience of individuals. Categories originate in the social world. We would not have a sense of time or space if we were not social beings.]

If, as we believe, these categories are essentially collective representations, they translate relations of the collective. They depend on the way this collective is constituted and organized, on its morphology, and its religious, moral, and economic institutions. Between these two types of representations is all the distance that separates the individual from the social, and you can no more derive the second from the first than society from the individual, the whole from a part, or the complex from the simple. Society is in reality its own thing. It has its own characteristics which are not found, or not found in the same form, in the entire rest of the universe.

Collective representations are the product of an immense cooperation that extends across time and space – an accumulation of generations of experience and knowledge. Each of us is an individual, yes, with our own private sensations and thoughts. But each of us is also part of society. Because we participate in society, we naturally go beyond our individual selves when we think and when we act. Categories (of time, space, etc.) allow us to do this. In order to work, society needs some minimal level of logical conformity. We cannot easily slip out of these ways of understanding the world. They exert a pressure on us, a kind of moral necessity.

### *Questions for Contemplation and Discussion*

1. Do you agree with Durkheim's suggestion that it is easier to study something in its simplest form? Is there such a thing as a "simple" religion? What does Durkheim mean by this?
2. What can we say about Durkheim's *method* for sociology?
3. Do you see a connection between our (human) social organization and our (individual) categories of thought? What is this connection, according to Durkheim?