



Research Paper

**Emile Durkheim. Karen E. Fields (translated).
The Elementary Forms of Religious Life. The Free Press,
New York, NY, c1995.**

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Abstract: *The Elementary forms of Religious Life is the magnum opus of Emile Durkheim. The book review examines the translated version by Karen E. Fields, published by The Free Press, New York. It explores how Durkheimian concept of religion contributed in the theories and how it has also been criticized from a sociological and anthropological vantage point. Despite all these why scholars of religion still need to read the book is also discussed.*

Key words: Religion, Durkheim, Totemism.

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I. The Review:

Emile Durkheim, one of the pioneers of modern sociology (being born and reared a Jew and the son of a Rabbi), through his last and arguably greatest work cherished a mixed reception within the discipline sociology since its original publication as *Les Formes elementaires de la vie religieuse: Le systeme totemique en Australie*, Paris, F. Alcan, 1912. The translation of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* by Karen E. Field gives the readers (who do not know French well) an understanding of the significance of it. It takes us to the threshold of that intellectual mesmerism where on the one hand we appreciate Collins and Makowsky's statement which considers the book to be the greatest of its kind in the twentieth century and on the other hand we are compelled to think of the relevance of Mauss's statement "It is easier to study the digestive process in the oyster than in man; but this does not mean that the higher vertebrates were formerly shellfish."

The book precisely consists of three main segments with an introduction of the subject of the study, that is, religious sociology and the theory of knowledge and with a conclusion on to what extent the results obtained can be generalized. The key concepts elaborated are definitions of religious phenomena and religion itself, animism, naturism, totemism, elementary beliefs, notion of soul spirits and gods, sacrifice, ritual conduct, the positive and negative cult and the ambiguity of the notion of the sacred.

If we consider early Durkheim in respect of his later form we clearly see that while early Durkheim argued that social facts are *sui generis*, later Durkheim was more keen to answer philosophically intractable questions rather than focusing on the scientific nature of the theory of religion. It cannot be neglected that Durkheimian theory of religion does not escape the fallacy of circular definition when he describes that a social fact can only be described by another social fact. And *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* clearly brings out the tension between his early positivism and later subjectivism. Even Parsons stated that the illegitimate teleology Durkheim spoke about was the trap for Durkheim himself which he always tried to avoid.

Durkheim's works on *Suicide*, *The Rules of Sociological Method* and *The Division of Labour* reflect a positive approach in sociology and had greater appeal for sociology as a scientific discipline, but within the Durkheimian corpus *The Elementary Forms* remained as a liminal text. The assertion of the reality of religion reflects a residual positivism in Durkheim's magnum opus. Religion, to him, inculcates a hermeneutic and cultural understanding of society. Researchers started working on *The Elementary Forms* in a changed intellectual climate within the discipline of sociology after the emergence of hermeneutics, semiotics, structuralism and postmodern sociological theories. We cannot neglect the fact that Talcott Parsons's

functionalist model owe little to *The Elementary Forms*. It is indubitable that the theory developed in the light of aboriginal totemism has its own relevance in the theoretical structure of that particular discipline. Shils discontended this issue with the concept of cultural theorizing within the light of Parsonian group. To some anthropologists it was more relevant to adopt a structural rather than textual preference from *The Elementary Forms*. It is important to mention that Louis Dumont's concept on the dialectic of purity and pollution always questioned Durkheimian notion of solidarity within religion. At the same time Claude Levi-Strauss's concept of binary opposition compels us to give a second thought on the centrality of sacred and profane dichotomy in our social life.

It is hard to find the cohesive nature of religion when religious riots happen to take place among different clans both internally and externally. The most disturbing and controversial feature of work in *The Elementary Forms* is Durkheim's treatment of ethnographic evidence. The particular choice of the case of Arunta lead him to overlook counter-instances among other Australian tribes. Even Durkheimian study of this aboriginal tribal group lacks the evidence that Australian totemism is the earliest totemism, and so to speak the earliest religion. Though the Australians are technically less advanced than the North American Indians, they have a more complex kinship system than that of the other. It will be too simple to deduce that the structural simplicity of a society is necessarily related to its religious beliefs and practices. It is also questionable that if there is, at all (in reality), any necessary and sufficient relationship between religion and totemism. In his analyses of primitive religion Durkheim demonstrated that the roots of religion is in the societal structure. He also showed that the root of religion in the analyses of totemism is in the social structure of clan. It is a wonder that the major potency of solidarity among the aborigines is not the clan but it is the tribe that acts as a cohesive force in this regard. And there are examples of clans that exist without totemism and the vice-versa. And the most important point is that majority of totems are not represented by inscriptions on which Durkheim put so much importance. What one finds among the Arunta are the beliefs and practices of the aboriginal group. If one states those beliefs and practices as 'religious' it would be similar to imposing the conventions of one's own culture and historical period. It may also be the case that the data of Arunta were introduced simply to illustrate Durkheim's theories, rather than the theories been constructed and adapted to account for the data. *The Elementary Forms* tried to establish the relationship of basic human thoughts and their root in social experience. It is questionable that if all the basic human thoughts have their root in social experience at all. Steven Lukes stated that Durkheim did not make a clear distinguish between what scholars distinguish as heuristics, structuralist, causal, functionalist, evolutionary and cosmological. And not putting an end to this writing we can go back to the point from where we started rethinking on *The Elementary Forms*. It is a matter of question if he became biased or 'religiously sentimental' while writing about religion, especially Arunta.

The relevance of *The Elementary Forms* lies in the fact that Durkheim's religious revival is certainly one of the important contribution of its kind during that period of the construction of the discipline sociology in general and religion in particular. It is the decision of Free Press to publish a new translation of 464-page work contributed by Durkheim. Of course, this decision implies and executes the existing interest of scholars for this particular work. The observable social fact lies behind it is the valid importance of Durkheim's magnum opus in the postmodern marketplace.

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