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RE:THINKING THE ELEMENTARY FORMS OF THE RELIGIOUS LIFE

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In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (hereinafter referred to as *The Elementary Forms*), published in 1912, French sociologist Emile Durkheim addresses… religious life. But not only. *The Elementary Forms* stands out for four core theses that speak to social life at large.

First, religious feelings are the transfiguration of feelings of social belonging, which the related rituals come to express and reinforce:

While religion seems to dwell entirely in the innermost self of the individual, the living spring that feeds it is still to be found in society. (Durkheim, 2001 [1912]: 320)

Second, religious life involves a fundamental separation between the sacred and the profane:

There is no other example in the history of human thought of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another. The traditional opposition between good and evil is nothing by comparison; good and evil are opposite species of the same genus, namely morality, just as health and sickness are merely two

different aspects of the same order of facts – life. By contrast, the sacred and the profane have always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as separate genera, as two worlds that have nothing in common. The energies at play in one are not merely different in their degree of intensity; they are different in kind. This opposition is conceived differently in different religions. In some, localizing these two kinds of things in distinct regions of the physical universe seems sufficient to separate them; in others, sacred things are cast into an ideal and transcendent setting, while the material world is left entirely to others. But while the forms of the contrast vary, the fact is universal (Durkheim, 2001 [1912]: 38).

Third, religion is essentially collective. Durkheim provides a definition:

We have arrived, then, at the following definition: a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church (Durkheim, 2001 [1912]: 46).

Fourth, far from being a source of error, religion is at the origin of scientific knowledge and cognitive classifications.

* * *

Now let us flip that around. What if Durkheim were still interested in offering theoretical contributions, but not through the lens of religion? What if he still investigated religion in primitive societies, but without theoretical ambitions, that is, for the sole sake of producing knowledge on religion in primitive societies?

In this think-piece, I envision to revisit the ethnographic material that undergirds *The Elementary Forms*, but with different empirical foci and theoretical objectives. I develop this project referring to *The Elementary Forms*, Durkheim's other works, and Durkheim scholarship. I discuss the rationales in revisiting *The Elementary Forms*, propose two ideas of revisits, and sketch an inventory of the sources to undertake them.

* * *

The Elementary Forms can be understood, criticized, and enjoyed on many different fronts. As outlined by Durkheim scholar Mark Cladis:

The book, then, can be and has been read in many ways: as a monograph on Australian totemism, a general theory of religion, an epistemology, a sociology of religion, a contribution to the hermeneutics of suspicion and interpretative theory, an account of social dynamics and solidarity. We show fidelity to the book by allowing it to speak to its different audiences; we dishonour it when, terriorially, we surround it by rigid disciplinary boundaries. By putting The Elementary Forms to many uses we acknowledge that Durkheim did likewise with his Australian material. Its mark as a classic is its ability to speak in more than one voice and to more than one generation (Cladis, 2001: ix).

The multifold, flexible form of *The Elementary Forms* provides leeway for revisiting. So let us disentangle the many forms of *The Elementary Forms*. The first lies in the connection between empirical materials and theoretical objectives. Durkheim's ethnographic data consists of secondary sources: ethnologists' and anthropologists' field data in several primitive societies, especially the Australian Aboriginal and the Melanesian. This material is not restricted to religious life, but rather covers social life with an emphasis on religion. Several authors were indeed missionaries, for instance, German clergyman and anthropologist Carl Strehlow and his Die Aranda und Loritja-Stämme in Zentral-Australien. Yet, Durkheim privileges theory over this massive empirical material (Lévi-Strauss, 1983 [1960]). I may thus take advantage of this voluminous ethnographic data, but interpret it again, either without theoretical pretensions, or with other theoretical pretensions.

Second, within sociology, *The Elementary Forms* not only offers theoretical inputs for the sociology of religion, but also the sociology of knowledge, classifications, and morality. Further, two major fields in sociology, cultural sociology and microsociology, appraise *The Elementary Forms* as a founding classic. I may then twist *The Elementary Forms* so that it contributes to other topics and fields in sociology.

Third, within the social sciences, *The Elementary Forms* refutes two woes of anthropology: first, evolutionism, second, the thesis of a primitive mentality. In a similar vein, *Suicide* (1897) debunks

psychological explanations of suicide. For Durkheim, religion and suicide are mere topics to make the case for sociological analysis, rather than phenomena that would need to be documented. Durkheim may then have turned to other cases to pursue his grand endeavor to build sociology as a science. I may then seek in *The Elementary Forms* other intriguing cases for the sake of sociology.

Last but not least, Durkheim scholars have questioned the intellectual coherence in Durkheim's works. Notably, both 1912's *The Elementary Forms* and 1897's *Suicide* depart from several basic principles of 1895's *The Rules of Sociological Method*, in which Durkheim elaborates a scientific method for sociology (Dubet, 2013). Some scholars, as Jones (1986) explains, went as far as to argue that there were two Durkheim: the mature and fine Durkheim of *The Elementary Forms*, the unripe and hesitant Durkheim of *The Rules of Sociological Method*. I would say, if Durkheim himself was not Durkheimian, then I am entitled to do something Durkheimian while not being Durkheim.

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The first revisit would be a theoretically understated, grounded ethnographic description of religious life in the primitive societies covered in *The Elementary Forms*. I would title this revisit "An Inquiry into Religious Life in Australian Aboriginal Societies", or "An Inquiry into Religious Life in Melanesian Societies".

The second revisit would have theoretical purposes, like *The Elementary Forms*. I would take other lenses to tackle the richness and variety of Durkheim's sources. If social life is to be divided between religious life and non-religious life, I would thus focus on the latter rather than the former, on the profane rather than the sacred. I would title this revisit "The Elementary Forms of Everyday Life".

This second revisit would be riskier, more unpredictable than the first. What kinds of theoretical contributions would that yield? Certainly not to knowledge, classifications, or morality, to the extent that *The Elementary Forms* compellingly demonstrates that they stem from religion. "The Elementary Forms of Everyday Life" would offer theoretical contributions to the substantive areas of human and social life that would originate in the everyday, the profane, and the ordinary. In any case, I would stay true to Durkheim's lifetime endeavor: demonstrate that even the most intimate things are deeply bound to society, uncover the mechanisms through which society weighs on the individual, and make the case for sociology as a science.

* * *

To carry out this revisit project, I would rely on four kinds of sources. First, for sure, I would use *The Elementary Forms*. I would gather all editions ever published, and all prefaces and forewords ever written. Second, I would retrieve the secondary sources culled by Durkheim. Third, I would comb his correspondences, seeking hints on himself in the process of writing *The Elementary Forms*. Fourth, I would get additional insights by investigating how Durkheim's contemporaries appraised *The Elementary Forms*, especially the 74 reviews published between 1912 and 1917 curated by Stéphane Baciocchi and François Théron (2012) in a special issue of the *Archives de Sciences Sociales des Religions*.

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