Quotes of Durkheim on Religion

If religion has given birth to all that is essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion. (Bellah, 1973, p. 191 [excerpt from The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life])

For we know today that a religion does not necessarily imply symbols and rites, properly speaking, or temples and priests. This whole exterior apparatus is only the superficial part. Essentially, it is nothing other than a body of collective beliefs and practices endowed with a certain authority. (1973, p. 51 [excerpt from Individualism and the Intellectuals])

The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, the last major work published by Durkheim, five years before his death in 1917, is generally regarded as his best and most mature. Where Suicide focused on a large amount of statistics from varying sources, The Elementary Forms used one case study in depth, the Australian aborigines. Durkheim chose this group because he felt they represented the most basic, elementary forms of religion within a culture.

Durkheim's finding that religion was social can best be described by this excerpt from The Elementary Forms:

The general conclusion of the book which the reader has before him is that religion is something eminently social. Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain, or recreate certain mental states in these groups. So if the categories are of religious origin, they ought to participate in this nature common to all religious facts; they should be social affairs and the product of collective thought. At least -- for in the actual condition of our knowledge of these matters, one should be careful to avoid all radical and exclusive statements -- it is allowable to suppose that they are rich in social elements. (Thompson, 1982, p. 125 [excerpt from The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life])

Sacred things are simply collective ideals that have fixed themselves on material objects. (1973, p. 159 [excerpt from The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions])

Durkheim, concerned with social solidarity throughout his academic career, was primarily concerned with religion as a functional source of social cohesion. As said before, religion acts to pull people together (mentally and physically, in the form of religious services or assemblies). By doing so, religion is able to reaffirm collective morals and beliefs in the minds of all members of society. This is important, because if left to their own for a long amount of time, the beliefs and convictions of individuals will weaken in strength, and require reinforcement. Religion maintains the influence of
society -- whereas society represents the norms and beliefs held in common by a group of individuals.

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden -- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.\textsuperscript{1982, p. 129 [excerpt from The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life]}

This system of conceptions is not purely imaginary and hallucinatory, for the moral forces that these things awaken in us are quite real -- as real as the ideas that words recall to us after they have served to form the ideas.\textsuperscript{1973, p. 160 [excerpt from Emile Durkheim: On Morality and Society, Selected Writings. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.]

Since it is in spiritual ways that social pressure exercises itself, it could not fail to give men the idea that outside themselves there exist one or several powers, both moral and, at the same time, efficacious, upon which they depend.\textsuperscript{1973, p. 171 [excerpt from The Dualism of Human Nature and its Social Conditions]}

Since religious force is nothing other than the collective and anonymous force of the clan, and since this can be represented in the mind only in the form of the totem, the totemic emblem is like the visible body the god.\textsuperscript{1973, p. 184 [excerpt from The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life]}

But from the fact that a 'religious experience,' if we choose it this, does exist and that it has a certain foundation ... it does not follow that the reality which is its foundation conforms objectively to the idea which believers have of it.\textsuperscript{1973, p. 190 [excerpt from The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life]}

That which science refuses to grant to religion is not its right to exist, but its right to dogmatize upon the nature of things and the special competence which it claims for itself for knowing man and the world. As a matter of fact, it does not know itself. It does not even know what it is made of, nor to what need it answers.\textsuperscript{1973, p. 205 [excerpt from The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life]}

Sources:

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Durkheim, E (1951) Suicide, Translated by J. A. Spaulding and George Simpson. New York


