

Topic 12 Belief Systems

Topic Questions

- What is religion?
- What are the primary functions of religion?
- What are the components of religion?

Defining Religion

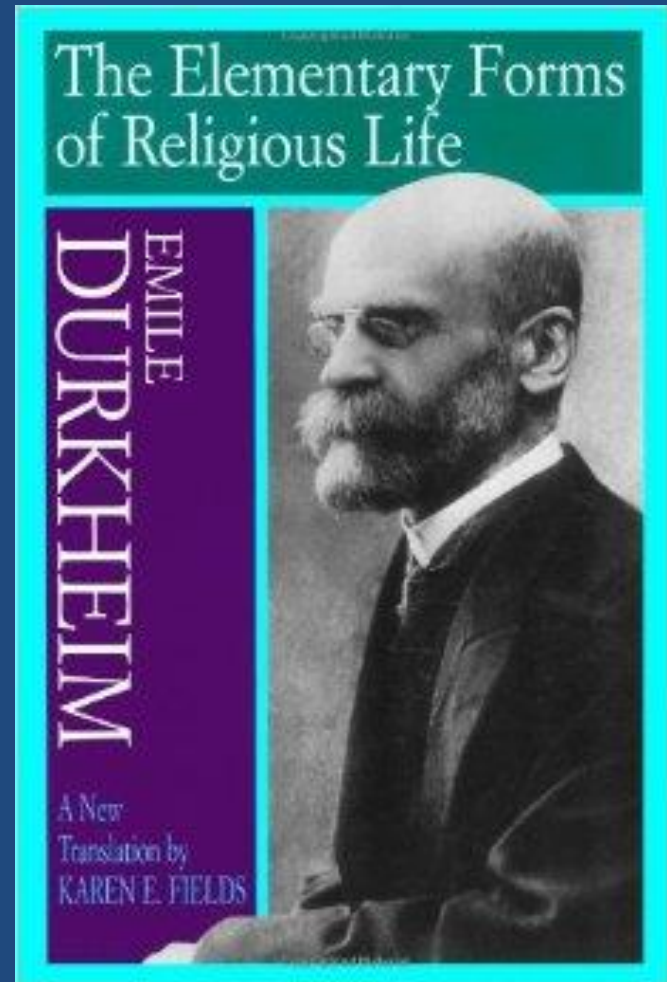
- **Religion**—an organized system of ideas about spiritual reality or the supernatural
 - beliefs about the nature and character of supernatural powers
 - teachings or traditions which tell of these supernatural powers
 - rituals intended to influence or direct those powers for the benefit of the group
- **Supernaturalism**—a belief system focused on any belief that transcends the observable, natural world

Another Way To Think About Religion

- “Religion seems to me to assume one aspect when considered as a special claim to knowledge, and quite another aspect when considered as a ritualized confession of ignorance.” —[Jack Miles](#)

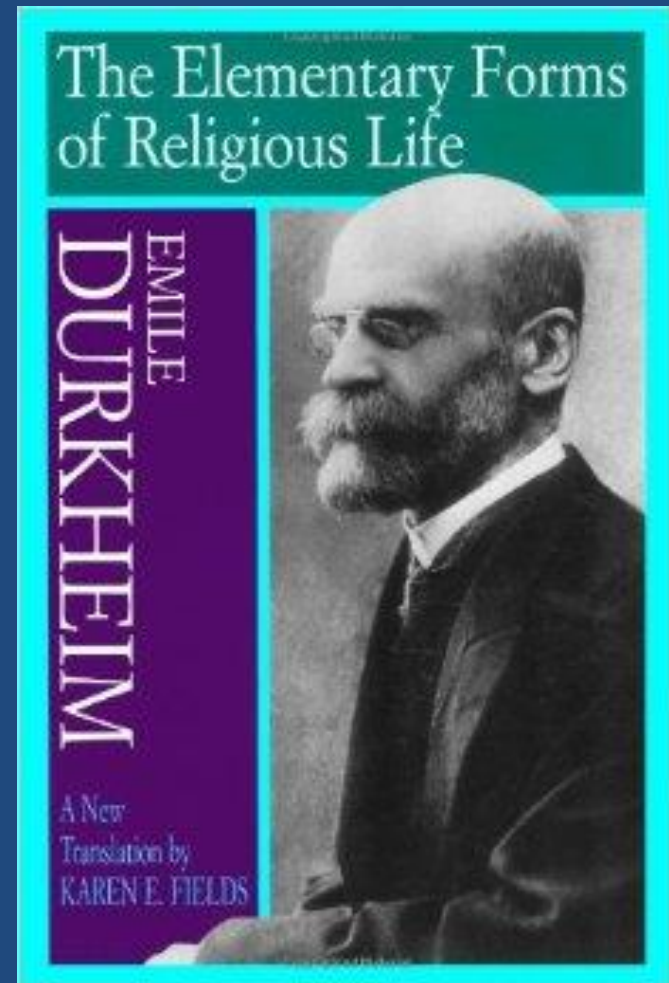
Durkheim and the Function of Religion

- Cohesion and Support
- Education and Discipline
- Revitalization and Euphoria
- Explanation



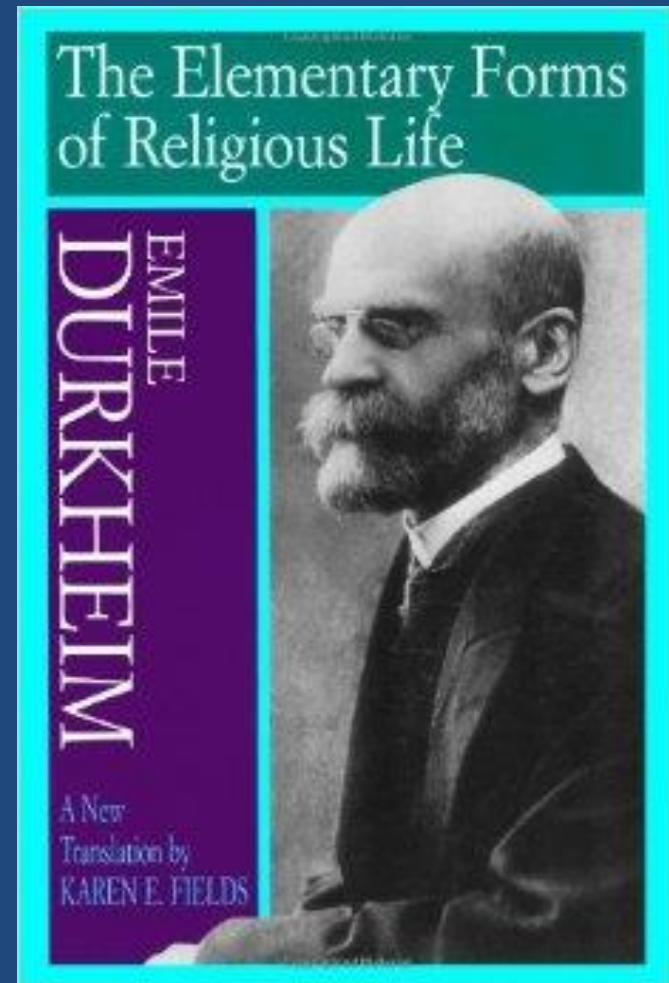
Durkheim and the Function of Religion

- Cohesion and Support (see also Sosis AE)
 - Provides social, economic, and political support
 - Unifies people around common set of beliefs, common sense of identity→common purpose, belonging
 - Group rituals serve to establish and strengthen ties→hold communities together
- Religious communities often collect money and goods for redistribution to members in times of need
 - *Zakat*—charity, one of the Five Pillars of Islam



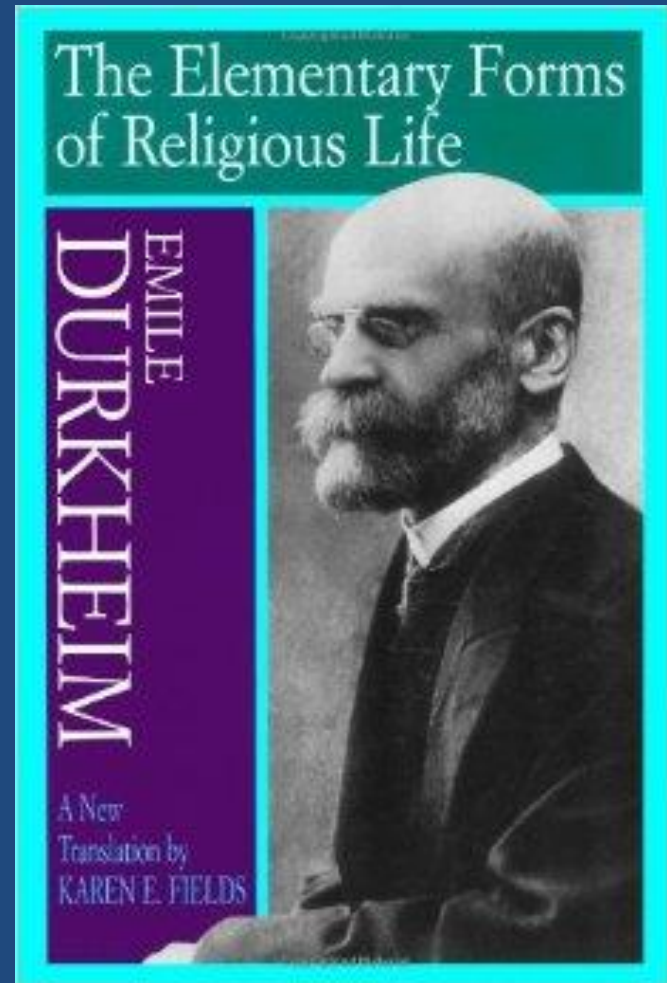
Durkheim and the Function of Religion

- Education and Discipline
 - Means of social control
 - Teaches people appropriate behavior in society
 - Sometimes offers defined punishment for violation of social norms while removing responsibility of creating and maintaining moral code from humans.
 - Can be used to justify the prevailing social order—subordination of women, caste system. BUT can also be used to *challenge* the prevailing social order.
- Five Precepts of Buddhism—I undertake to observe the precept to abstain from ...
 - ...harming living beings, taking things not freely given, sexual misconduct, false speech, and intoxicating drinks and drugs causing heedlessness.



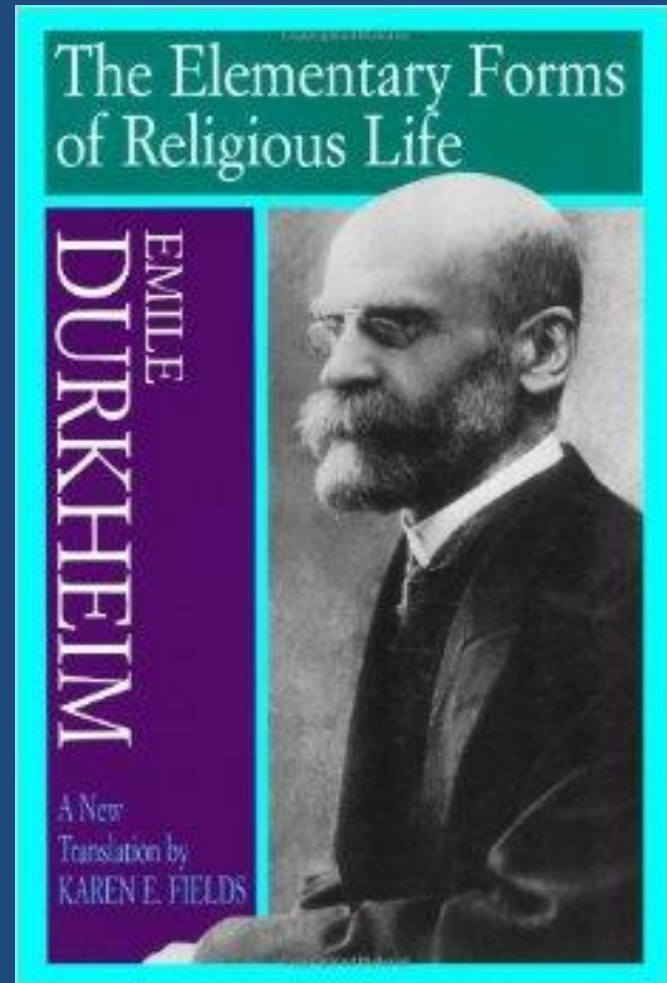
Durkheim and the Function of Religion

- Revitalization and Euphoria
 - Regular repetition of rituals and practices resulting in a renewal and revitalization of the belief system
 - Many revitalization rituals involve rhythmic music



Durkheim and the Function of Religion

- Revitalization and Euphoria
 - Ecstasy
 - Greek, ἔκστασις—*ekstasis*; stepping out of or transcending the
 - Mystical Experiences, Altered States of Consciousness



Characteristics of Mystical Experiences

- **Depersonalization**—loss of the sense of one's own *reality*, *detachment from self*
- **Derealization**—loss of the sense that the external reality is real; another reality prevails
- **Dreamy states**—sense that everything is a dream
- **Autoscopy**—sense of seeing the self from another point of view
- **Ecstasy**—profound sense of contentment, euphoria, loss of sense of external reality for an internal focus
- **Mental Diplopia**—simultaneous experience of two realities—one's "normal" consciousness and a new consciousness with an entirely different perception of reality

→ Cross-cultural ubiquity of these characteristics suggest a biological basis

Characteristics of Mystical Experiences

- Not necessarily religious or mystical in nature; people who do not subscribe to any particular religious beliefs report similar sensory experiences without labeling them religious
- Can be induced through meditation, dance, sex, exercise, social isolation or sensory deprivation, fasting, praying, ritual, music, fasting, and, of course, drugs.

Sufi Whirling Dervishes

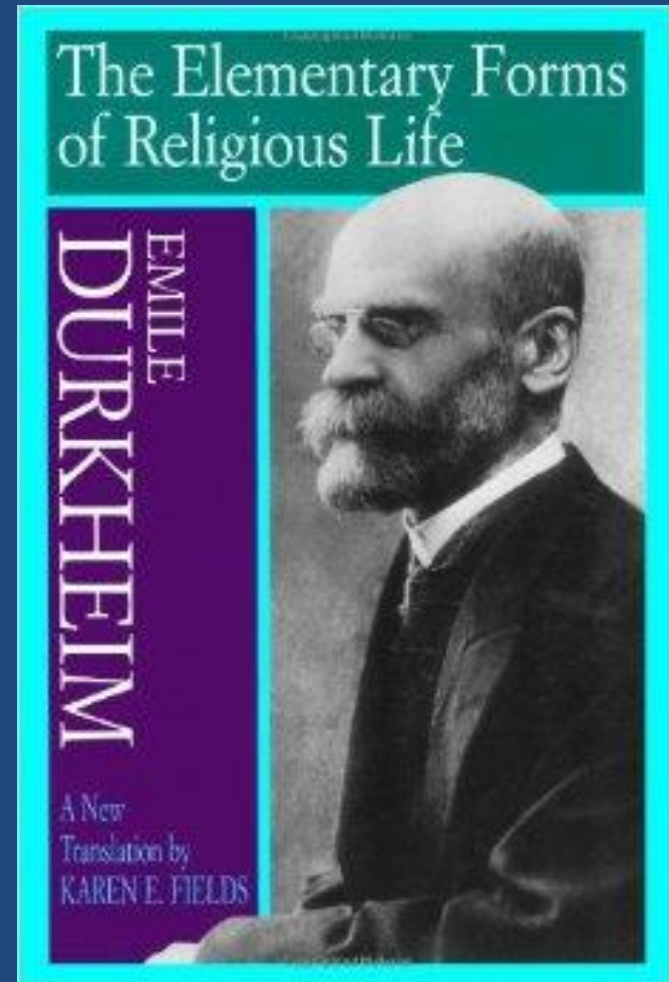
- [Whirling Dervishes](#)

Jonathan Haidt

- <https://youtu.be/2MYsx6WArKY>

Durkheim and the Function of Religion

- Explanation
 - Reduces fear and anxiety in the face of the unknown, explains the unexplainable, offers answers to difficult questions
 - Why bad things happen to good people—comfort
 - It is the will of Allah, Yahweh, God. Karma. Will of the forest.
 - Also may serve as a means to challenge the political authority; Hebrew prophets were social commentators, challenging the government to reform (Jeremiah is a great example of this in the years leading up to and during the Babylonian Exile).
 - *Bhagavad-Gita* (Hinduism)—karma



Components of Religion

- Not all religions have all or even any of these components.

Components of Religion

- Beings
 - Gods/Goddesses
 - Ancestral Spirits
 - Animism

Components of Religion

- Gods/Goddesses
 - Great and remote beings, superhuman
 - Often seen as controllers of the universe, cosmic order
 - Some gods subject to the same forces of the universe as humans—Greek Pantheon, Hindu gods
 - Characteristics of gods and goddesses usually reflect cultural attitudes toward men and women



Hanuman—the Hindu Monkey God

<http://www.shivmandirvancouver.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/hanuman-Ji1.jpg>

Components of Religion

- Agriculturalists and pastoralists usually have a supreme male deity
 - The female deity is either subordinate (Greek/Roman) or absent (Abrahamic traditions)
 - Horticulturalists and foragers tend to have more prominent and powerful goddesses or other manifestations of the female divine



https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kali#/media/File:Kali_lithograph.jpg

Kali—Hindu Goddess of Time, Change, Preservation, Destruction

Components of Religion

- Ancestral Spirits
 - Humans are made of two parts: a physical body and a spiritual/mental self (soul)
 - The spirit self is released from the confines of the physical self through trance, dreams, or death
 - Spirits retain active interest and membership in society; can be benevolent or malevolent forces



http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/cosmos/prb/images/paradise_img.gif

Components of Religion

- Ancestral Spirits
 - Link the present with the past and future—emphasized in descent-based groups
 - Ancestor Worship in China—Boys, particularly, are indebted to parents for life and must provide for them in the afterlife.



http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/cosmos/prb/images/paradise_img.gif

Components of Religion

- Animism
 - Belief that natural is animated by distinct personalized spirit beings
 - Spirits are not remote, part of everyday living
 - Can be malevolent, benevolent, or neutral
 - Manifest in humans, animals, plants, artifacts, stones, woods, or free-ranging—very diverse



Celtic Animism—Natural phenomena animated by spirits

<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/2/2d/Corryvreckan.jpg/300px-Corryvreckan.jpg>

Supernatural Forces

- Mana
- Magic

Supernatural Forces

- **Mana**—Polynesian societies
 - Force that can be harnessed by specialized practitioners, flows through people and objects, can be drawn into people and objects; it is a neutral force but can be used for good or ill, making it somewhat dangerous

Supernatural Forces

- **Magic**—knowledge of supernatural forces used to manipulate perceived laws of nature
- Frazer's Two Kinds of Magic
 - Imitative Magic—Law of Similarity—like produces like; objects that resemble a person can be used to affect the person, actions performed upon the object will befall the person
 - Contagious Magic—Law of Contact—power comes from contact; things that were once in contact with someone absorb elements of them and can be used to affect them through rites and spells

Ritual

- Organized performance of behaviors intended to influence or harness supernatural powers; always stereotyped, definite patterns of speech, movement, sequence of events, heavily imbued with symbolic meaning
- Often performed to aid people—make someone healthy, fertile, bring rain, make crops grow, save souls, bring back game, provide blessings, harm enemies, counteract harm from enemy rituals

Ritual

- **Rites of Passage**—specialized rituals associated with the life cycle
 - birth/naming rites—identifying when someone becomes part of the group
 - puberty rites—mark transition from childhood to adolescence or adulthood
 - physical trauma often associated with these
 - marriage rites
 - funeral rites
 - not always supernatural in character—graduation
- stages—separation, transition, reintegration

Ritual

- **Rites of Intensification**

- Rites that serve to reinforce group solidarity, values, and social and political status and relationships within the group
- Can help in transition from one season to another—mark change in the world
- Often take place during times of crisis—ease sense of danger, unite people, fear and confusion yield to collective action
 - Planting, harvest rites
 - Often funeral rites—El Dia de los Muertos
 - Thanksgiving as a Rite of Intensification

Specialized Practitioners

- Shamans
- Priests/Priestesses

Specialized Practitioners

- Shamans
 - Broadly defined category of supernatural specialist; part-time spiritual leaders, traditional healers
 - Intercede with the supernatural on behalf of the *community* or individuals
 - Have typically experienced and survived extraordinary event and/or do not conform to social norms in some way or other; these *personal characteristics* single them out for role
 - Functions to integrate social deviants by channeling difference into defined role
 - Typically access the supernatural through personal experiences—trance, altered states of consciousness

Specialized Practitioners

- Priest/Priestess
 - Full-time supernatural specialists with a define role in a bureaucracy that possess formal authority
 - Occur in stratified societies with centralized authority
 - Have official capacity to tell people what to do
 - Socially initiated, ceremonially induced member of an organized religion, hold a rank and defined function
 - Must learn to be functionary, formal training
 - Perform regular calendrical rites that serve the community
 - Priestesses usually only found in societies that recognize female manifestations of the divine