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Q8(c)

Elaborate the views of Durkheim on "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life"

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · Sociology GS 1 · 15 marks · Sociology

Sociology - The Discipline: Modernity and social changes in Europe and emergence of sociology; Scope of the subject and comparison with other social sciences; Sociology and common sense.

Core demand of the question

- Elaborate the views of **Durkheim** on "The Elementary Forms of Religious Life"
- Keep the elaboration within a 15-mark length

Revision summary

- **Religion:** beliefs and practices toward the sacred, uniting a **church**.

Sacred/profane, totem as clan emblem, collective representations, and effervescence are the core views.

Categories of thought are socially born in ritual.

Magic lacks a **church**; religion is solidarity in sacred form.

Weber, **Marx**, and gender-caste critique limit the clan-mirror model.

Introduction

In The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, **Emile Durkheim** sought the elementary structures of religion in Australian **totemism**, treated as a simple case. Religion is a system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, uniting believers into a **church**. God is society transfigured.

Body

Sacred and profane

- The sacred is set apart and forbidden. The profane is the everyday. This classification, not a supernatural being, is the core.
- Ritual maintains the boundary. Interdicts and ceremonies teach the group's force.

Totem, clan, and collective representations

- The totem is the clan's emblem. In worshipping it, the clan worships its own ideal.
- Collective representations are shared, constraining ways of thinking, in line with social facts in the Rules.
- **Collective effervescence** in assembly generates the feeling of an external moral force.

Church and moral community

- **There is no religion without a church in Durkheim's sense:** a moral community, not necessarily a Christian parish.
- Magic lacks that lasting community of believers.

Knowledge and society

- Categories of time, space, and class are socially originated in ritual life. Sociology of knowledge is already here.
- The book is also a theory of solidarity, completing mechanical solidarity with a sacred core.

Limits he did not close

- **Max Weber** asked about meaning, theodicy, and inner-worldly ethics that a clan-mirror model underplays.
- **Karl Marx** asked about domination inside the "church".
- Gendered and caste priesthoods show a stratified sacred.
- Contemporary pluralism and private belief strain the one-church picture, yet rallies and nations still show effervescence.

Flow diagram

Elementary Forms -> Sacred profane
Elementary Forms -> Totem as clan
Elementary Forms -> Effervescence
Elementary Forms -> Church moral community
Totem as clan -> Society transfigured

Conclusion

Durkheim's Elementary Forms treat religion as the sacred-profane split, totemic emblem of the group, effervescence, and the church as moral community. Society is the real object of worship. Use the book for solidarity and ritual; pair it with **Weber** and **Marx** for meaning and power.

Facts & figures

Sacred and profane

Durkheim's basic religious classification, marked by ritual interdicts.

Totemism

His elementary case: the emblem of the clan as the first god.

Collective effervescence

Heightened assembly in which the group feels a force beyond the individual.

Church

A moral community of believers; required for religion in his definition.