

Theories of Death

Explanations of mortuary rituals

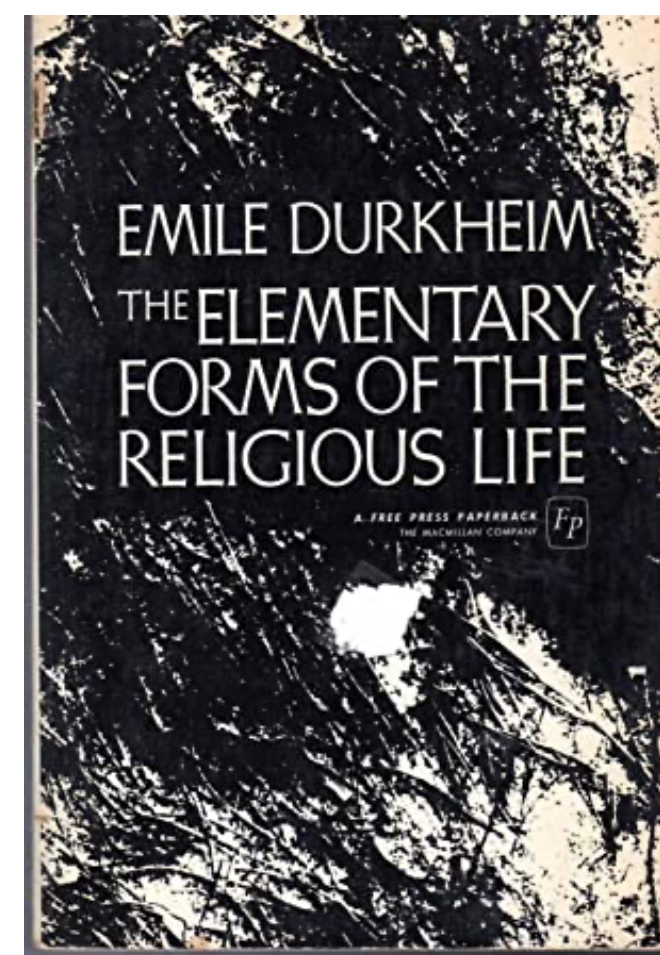
- Compensation of fear of death
- Means of avoiding disruption and disorder and affirming value by sacrifice of life for life
- Strategy of man against the nature/ binary opposition of nature and culture (Ph. Aries)
- Death is part of environment to which humans have to adapt (D. Davis)
- The nature of mortuary ritual as behaviour assisting the living through the stress of death, helping to re-form disrupted social networks and reassigning new identities both to the dead and their survivors (Durkheim, Hertz, Malinowski and van Gennep)

Words against death

- Emotion - Idea - Value - Belief
- Person's sense of destiny - religious belief
- Death and identity
- Doubting death (contradiction between fact of death and assertion that that something of the individual continues after death)

Statements

- (1) humans are self-conscious; (2) language is the key medium of self-consciousness; (3) death is perceived as a challenge to self-consciousness; (4) language is used as the crucial response to this challenge; (5) funerary rites frame this verbal response, relating it to other behavioural features of music, movement, place, myth and history; and (6) having encountered and survived bereavement through funerary rites and associated behaviour, human beings are transformed in ways which make them better adapted for their own and for their society's survival in the world



Emil Durkheim

- Idea of ritual as a force for community integration framing an individual sense of transcendence
- Social ritual yielded a sense of transcendence which was, in effect, the human experience of 'society'
- Positive function of death rituals
- The idea that society existed before us and will exist after us, and must be maintained through all periods of potential fragmentation, including loss of members through death.

Robert Hertz

- Hertz 'The Collective Representation of Death'
- Society imparts its own character of permanence to the individuals who compose it: because it feels itself immortal and wants to be so, it cannot normally believe that its members ... in whom it incarnates itself should die. (Hertz, 1960: 77; first published 1905–06)
- Rituals related with 'wet' medium of the body and 'dry' medium of the body
- The identity of the body is not extinguished; it is simply transformed and revealed in its new state
- Body - society, microcosm - cosmos

Bronislaw Malinovsky

- Death as touching deeply the private lives of people
- The whole of mortuary ritual must, he thinks, serve some 'biological function of religion', one that 'saves man from surrender to death and destruction', and reinforces 'the desire for life
- Through death ritual the afflicted feel the support of others, many of whom are not so directly affected by the death, until such time as they gain a sense of their own ability to cope. Communal support overcomes the sense of hopelessness of the individual who might otherwise have to stand alone

Zygmunt Bauman

- Hidden death
- Control of death via rituals
- Death rituals serves the purpose of removing the dead from the world of the living so as to enable the survivors to give their minds to life issues as soon as is possible.

Rites of Passage

- A. Van Gennep (1908)
- Change of status
- These rites consisted in a separation from the old status, a period of transition to help in learning aspects of the new identity and, finally, a reincorporation into new status.

Moris Bloch

- Life to death and death to life
- Bloch add a new, existential dimension to these rites because he thinks that through them individuals gain a sense of having encountered some sort of transcendent power or dimension (overcoming death in Christianity)
- Rituals a source of energy to step further

Z. Freud

- Fear of death, not diseased body
- Ego-instincts as death instincts
- Eros and Thanatos

Hope and survival

- The importance of hope and optimism in motivating people and society
- If there is no hope, it is a sign of death
- Death can be coped with if it is not seen as senseless and meaningless.

Cumpsty (1991)

- 'the modelling of survival after death' classification:
- 1) 'nature religion' in which the dead become ancestors,
- 2) 'withdrawal religion' where they are reincarnated and
- 3) 'secular world affirming religion' where they go to a distinct heaven.

Chidester (1990)

- 'four characteristic ways of symbolizing the transcendence of death' as ancestral, experiential, cultural and mythic patterns of transcendence.

Grief

- Grief (biology and evolutionary frames) and mourning (social reality) (J. Averill)
- Grief as a payment for strong social bonds
- Tears as relieving
- Theory of catharsis (Danfort)
- Is grief a norm or disease?