As a reductionist and a founder of modern discipline of sociology, Emile Durkheim’s main argument is that religion is really society. Durkheim believes that being religious is really engaged in a social activity.

Humans tend to classify things as either meaningful or not meaningful; a determination of whether to “belong” or not. Durkheim believes that religion can be reduced to society and that religious experiences can be explained by social forces because for Durkheim, “the defining essential of religion is the distinction that all societies make between things sacred and things profane (Pals, *Introducing Religion*, p100). Humans in their need to belong identify things as sacred and develop practices and prohibitions that create and bind a community.

Durkheim believes that religion is associated with society because humans as individuals experience society as a social norm and social conventions, practices that continue across generations. The practices or forces are so powerful that we think there is an external force outside of us directly above us, the divine. We as humans have a desire to follow the social norms and practices. We just follow them without thinking of it because this is what we have known our whole lives and to go against it you would be considered an outsider. At an earlier age, humans did not know that there were social norms so they thought it was “God” providing all the morals, our needs and food. Durkheim claims that society provides everything for you, since early humans were not aware of a divine.

Durkheim explains how religion can be recognized in society though the idea of “The Totem as Symbol of the Clan of God” (Pals, *Introducing Religion*, p111). He says the totem is a
human construct and that “the totem is before all a symbol, a material expression of something else...it is also the symbol of the determined society called the clan” (Pals, *Introducing Religion*, p112). The totem appears to be a symbol of God but for Durkheim the totem is not symbolic for God but a symbol of a society that worships it. Durkheim claims that the reason humans create these totems, or believe in different religions is all for the sense of belongingness. “For him, humans do not just exist; they belong” (Durkheim, Pals, *Introducing Religion*, pg 99). He believes the principle function of religion is for its believers to belong to a group. Durkheim says that society or belongingness is a reduced form of religion. To belong is to give up some of yourself, to be a member of community means to adapt and appeal to the needs of the broader community. For Durkheim you do not need to believe in a god to be considered religious, you just need to practice acts of belongingness. The human desire to belong is perhaps why there are different kinds of religion or the competitive activity of rooting for a sports team, for the sense of community.

Durkheim explains how religious experiences are identified by social forces through his text in Daniel Pals, *Introducing Religion* “Thus we have an occasion verifying the proposition which we laid down at the commencement of the work, and for assuring ourselves that the fundamental notions of the intellect, the essential categories of thought may be the product of social factors”(Pals,*Introducing Religion*, 110). Durkheim is suggesting that we are engaged in society and do so quite naturally. We are a member of society and feel apart from it at the same time. We were born into a society that had already made these classifications on what is sacred and what isn't. We didn't choose what is and what isn't sacred. “There is no way to pull yourself
out of society if you wanted too. We are either stuck in it or are “recoiling from it” says Durkheim.

Durkheim’s principle argument is “Society Frames Our Categories of Thought” (Pals, *Introducing Religion*, p110). In some ways for Durkheim, religion is a false consciousness. “Now society also gives us the sensation of a perpetual dependence” (Pals, *Introducing Religion*, p112). Durkheim believes that humans mistakenly see a powerful force outside of them as God when really it is just society. The relationship that God has to his worshippers is really a symbolic representation of the real external power that exists outside of you that existed before you and after you which is society. Society is to its members as what God is to his worshippers.