

SPIRITUAL SUICIDE: DURKHEIM'S UNDEVELOPED THEORY OF UNBELIEF

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Abstract

In the exposition of his theory of egoistic suicide, Durkheim explained that the breakdown of social bonds gives rise to a general disillusionment that spawns metaphysical and religious systems that promote suicide by weakening an individual's sense of life's meaning. If Durkheim's explanation is correct, the social factors which he demonstrated were correlated with suicide ought also to be associated with a weakening of religious belief: a spiritual suicide. Using General Social Survey data from 1988 to 2000, this paper examines unbelief as a function of several explanatory variables corresponding to the measurements Durkheim used to explain egoistic suicide. Analysis of these variables confirms the explanatory power of Durkheim's variables. The paper discusses the implications of this undeveloped theory of Durkheim for an orientation to the sociology of religion.