

# Meaning and value in contemporary society sociology essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

(Part B): Evaluate the usefulness of Durkheim's concept of the sacred for understanding important forms of meaning and value in contemporary society. Emile Durkheim was a French positive sociologist and structural functionalist. During his lifetime, he devoted himself to studies and research on sociological phenomena including religion (*The Elementary Forms of The Religious Life*), suicide (*Suicide*), crime (*On the Normality of Crime*) and war (*Who Wanted War?*). This paper will concentrate on how the Durkheimian concept of the sacred (as opposed to the profane in his dichotomy) should be evaluated in the modern society and its impact on contemporary academic research and discussion. Therefore, I will deal with the following issues respectively:

The Durkheimian definition of the sacred: the sacred-profane dichotomy;

The value of the concept of the sacred and critique;

The sacred since Durkheim: recent development and perspectives.

The Durkheimian definition of the sacred: the sacred-profane dichotomy

At the beginning of his manoeuvre *The Elementary Forms of The Religious Life*, Durkheim proposed a theory of religion based on a sacred-profane opposition, which consists of the separation of different aspects of social life, tangible objects and human behaviours into two antithetical broad categories. Focusing on the concept of the sacred alone, Durkheim defined it as 'things set apart', more precisely, as "fundamental forms of power, meaning and purity qualitatively different to other aspects of social life".

Hence, it seems that the profane is defined in a residual way, as the absence

of the opposite of the sacred. He then formulated a radical argument that such dualism is present in all known religious beliefs. Therefore, it appears that the dualist theory lies at the heart of any religious belief and without it, no religion can ever come into existence: “ Religious beliefs are those representations that express the nature of sacred things and the relations they have with other sacred things or with profane things ... rites are rules of conduct that prescribe how man must conduct himself with sacred things”. Thereby, the sacred is the only phenomenon capable of uniting all religions.

It is interesting to compare the “ scared” of Durkheim with the “ holy” in the eyes of Rudolf Otto, author of *The Idea of the Holy* (1917). According to Otto, the holy is rooted in people’s emotional attachments and apprehension of something indefinitely superior. In contrast, the Durkheimian sacred is an utterly “ fluid”, unimaginable or unthinkable concept, which might include anything: after all, what truly distinguishes the sacred from the profane is a social act of separation or division: “ The soldier who fall defending his flag certainly does not believe he has sacrificed himself to a piece of cloth”.

Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that the concept of the sacred remains highly ambiguous. It is clear that the sacred cannot be simply replaced by “ the divine”, the “ pure” or “ the good”. Rather, Durkheim referred to another aspect of the sacred encompassing “ misfortune, anything that is ominous, and anything that motivates feelings of disquiet or fear” and even “ evil and impure powers, bringers of disorder, causes of death and sickness, instigators of sacrilege”. Hence, the antithetical concepts such as the fortunate and the unfortunate, the pure and the impure are both constituting elements of sacredness. Furthermore, Durkheim observed that the

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borderline between these different facets of sacredness was blurred, but did not feel any necessity of reconciling the conflicting aspects, since “[The] two poles of religious life correspond to the two opposite states through which all social life passes. There is the same contrast between the lucky and the unlucky sacred as between the states of collective euphoria and dysphoria.”

The value of the concept of the sacred and critique

Significance of the concept of the sacred

By grounding on the division between the sacred and the profane, Durkheim elaborated the Australian totemism which is recognised as one of the most primitive religions: “ Totemism places figurative representations of the totem in the first rank of the things it considers sacred; then come the animals or plants whose name the clan bears, and finally the members of the clan”. However, Durkheim formulated a further proposition that the totem and the sacred are inextricably linked with each other. In other words, the totem is the symbol of some supernatural force which he named mana. In his view, the sacred should be the form in which the society reveals itself to individuals.

We now examine what renders Durkheim’s view on the sacred so attractive.

There appears to be a set of reasons:

Firstly, the sacred which transcends the society in division in terms of ethnicity, social class and religious belief seem to be the key to the understanding of social conflicts and the role played by social institutions in resolving these conflicts. Being a common feature displayed in all religious

beliefs, the sacred is also essential to a better understanding of different religions, despite their diversity and divergence.

Secondly, Durkheim argued that the sacred is a necessity for human existence. As human beings are social and political animals in Aristotle's view, there must be some socially bonding force which provides a deeper meaning of life (i. e. a spiritual meaning) and thereby binding different groups of individuals to common sacred society. More particularly, Durkheim refers to ancient Rome which was characterised by corporations offering people collective representations. Through rituals and ceremonies, these corporations play a fundamental role in unifying community members and linking them to the state. Concerned about the adverse impact brought about by modernity within a capitalistic system, Durkheim emphasised on the importance that individuals must reconnect with each other and re-establish some self-identity and meaning of life.

### Critique

The Durkheimian concept of the sacred is equally subject to criticism. Firstly, it must be borne in mind that his view is far from being a general or universal theory of the society. Nowadays, most modern societies are no longer organised around a single form of the sacred and there is no set of institutionalized values and morals to guide people. It is even questionable whether there are some common forms of sacredness any more. More importantly, sacred forms are not "timeless", but emerge through specific historical processes. Hence, the divergence of sacred commitments in the contemporary world even renders it harder for social institutions to play their

role of public restitution after a breach of sacred forms (e. g. BBC and the DEC appeal for Gaza).

Secondly, as has been seen, the sacred is a morally ambiguous phenomenon and it is extremely difficult to separate the “ pure” and “ impure” aspects of sacredness. G. Lynch radically questioned about the necessity of the sacred: “ Do we even need the sacred? Can we live by more mundane, everyday social bonds? Or collective rituals with minimal sacred content?” We must admit that Christmas is, unfortunately, a more commercial than sacred “ ritual”.

What appears more problematic is the distinction between the sacred and the profane. Quoting Durkheim: “ Religious and profane life cannot coexist in the same space” and “ religious and profane life cannot coexist in the same time”. This is highly debatable, since such mutual repulsion between the two poles of religion is not self-evident. Some scholars went further and suggested that the Durkheim antithesis is fundamentally flawed: Evans-Pritchard does not hesitate to say that he has “ never found that the dichotomy of sacred and profane was of much use for either purpose”. Moreover, British anthropologists challenged the applicability of the Durkheimian theory to the real-life situations. W. E. H. Stanner found that it was impossible to apply the distinction unambiguously. Jack Goody argued that “ it was very much a product of European religious thought rather than a universally applicable criterion”.

Nevertheless, the Durkheimian theory should be understood in light of the context of his writing, which is a time when the society was undergoing

constant change and general disorder. Thereby, Durkheim felt the necessity of reorganising the society around a strong center of sacred norms and ideologies. Interestingly, in his *Emile Durkheim, His Life and Work*, Steven Lukes suggests that Durkheim was “obsessed” with dualisms. As we see, Durkheim elaborated the concept of the sacred alone and merely defined the profane in a residual manner, as the opposite of the sacred.

The sacred since Durkheim: recent development and perspectives of neo-Durkheimism

In his *The Living and the Dead*, W. Lloyd Warner analysed Memorial Day rites which united the society as large with sacred national heroes such as Lincoln and Washington. In his eyes, the rites “are a modern cult of the dead and conform to Durkheim’s definition of sacred collective representations”. By referring to the Durkheimian sacred, R. Bellah developed his concept of “American civil religion”-“a collection of beliefs, symbols, and rituals with respect to sacred things and institutionalized in a collectivity”.

(1615 words inclusive footnotes exclusive bibliography)