

Durkheim's account of the importance of rituals in modern society essay sample

[Religion](#)



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Durkheim's theories on ritual are an integral part of his work on religion, outlined in his book 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life'. Rites are defined by Durkheim as 'determined modes of action' (Durkheim, 1915, pg. 36). They are ceremonies that are active expressions of particular beliefs or aspects of a religion. It is necessary to consider and assess the theories on religion before examining and assessing those on rites and ritual specifically. Durkheim studied Australian totem tribes in order to uncover the 'elementary forms of religious life' and to gain something of an insight into the origins and functions of religion. He believed that religions served a function; to maintain social cohesion and solidarity. However, he also theorised that with the increase in industrialisation and modernity, such traditional forms of religion would be replaced with nationalism and communism; which, he argued would have more or less the same functional effects as the traditional religions. As a positivist, Durkheim believed that the use of science in sociology involves studying 'social facts' (Giddens, 1993, pg. 707) and through studying society in the same way as one would the natural sciences, realities and truthful, valid knowledge could confidently be gained.

His observations and method used for the totem tribes of Australia went some way to achieving this confident knowledge. However, some criticisms have been raised concerning the limitations of his sole use of the totem tribes in order to theorize about the function of religion and ritual; especially when it came to validating his theories on religion and social change and the rise of modernity. As an atheist, Durkheim sought for secular reasons for the existence of religion. He thought that religious belief arose from

psychological and individual explanations. For example, 'mistaken apprehensions of natural phenomena' (see Cuff et al). However, he argued that because of the universal nature of religion and the fact that it has prevailed over time, religion cannot simply be cast off as 'false' (Durkheim, 1912, pg 37). As a functionalist, Durkheim argued that religion served to provide some form of function in society. His approach rejected individualism. He held that 'society creates the individual, not the other way around' (Cuff et al, 2006). Durkheim conceived the function of religion in society, as serving as a means of maintaining social solidarity. Members of a religious group or church, share a 'common faith' (Durkheim, 1912, pg. 44) and likewise share similar values and morals.

Durkheim referred to this as the conscience collective and it was seen to create feelings of 'moral unity' in the society. (Durkheim, 1912 cited in Giddens, 1972, pg223). The benefit of these sentiments being shared in the society, as opposed to individual autonomy of values, is that the latter has a greater propensity for conflict between individuals with differing values.

Durkheim's theories were drawn from a study of Australian totemic tribes; therefore, it is necessary to explore and assess this, as his reasoning behind the effects of solidarity caused by religion. In an attempt to uncover the elementary forms of religious life, Durkheim looked to the aboriginal totemic tribes of Australia. He believed that these were the most similar to other religions, in terms of 'finding a common principle underlying the practices and beliefs that unify them' (Morrison, 2006, pg. 236). His aim was to try to understand what material effects rites had on the common society. Such rites included the adherence of all members of the religious community to a

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set a rules or norms of practice towards the worshipping of the sacred totem. The ' sacred' refers to the aspects of belief or spirits, which are seen to be special and above the profane. The ' profane' on the other hand, refers to material objects, which do not have this distinguished quality ascribed to them.

A national flag is perceived by the nation it represents and is special and ritualised so it can be seen as sacred. However, a flag is also an example of the profane; it has a material existence. The sacred is thus projected onto this profane object and despite it merely being a piece of fabric it represents much more to the people. It represents the feelings of patriotism and community and closeness (Cuff et al. 2006). A totem is a profane object or animal that is seen as sacred, and is worshipped by all members of a religious society. Because all the individuals of a religious society follow the same duties and rituals associated with the totem, they are ' morally bound to one another' (Giddens, 1972, pg. 227). He theorised that religion and ritual produced ' categories of understanding'; the basic categories, which cover the ways in which objects are perceived; for instance all objects can be seen to occupy time and space. These categories are also perceived in the same way by all the members of the society, so religion also influences the very basis by which people think about the world. The concept of moral unity is still observable in religious communities today, especially in smaller cultures.

However, larger industrialised societies tend to be more divided and there are more varieties in belief in a given society. Furthermore, the increase in

secularisation has meant that the functional aspects of religion, as outlined by Durkheim have not had an effect on those who are not religious. The example, of the national flag; however, indicates that Durkheim's theories can also work in a secular society, just as he predicted would happen.

Morrison (2006) drew a distinction between religion and rites. Religion refers to a person expressing the sacred and its relation to other sacred things, or the profane. Rites on the other hand are an expression of the belief; particular actions and also the rules of conduct that prescribe how man must conduct himself with sacred objects. Furthermore, rituals were seen by Durkheim as a physical, active means whereby, cohesion and a sense of closeness are maintained in a society. Rites are an expression of the sacred and according to Durkheim, are symbolic of the common values shared in the society. A good example can be taken from Durkheim's study of what he called 'effervescence assemblies' amongst the totem tribes.

These were religious rituals, which he argued, served to reunite the members of the society who live isolated from one another together. This refreshed and sustained the moral bonds and religious order. A more specific example of this would be the 'corrobree'. This is an exciting festival, wherein the individual enters into a new 'world', which T. S. Elliot (1916 cited in Menand and Schwartz, 1982, pg. 5) describes as 'sacred, intense, a world into which he escapes at regular intervals, a world in which he is released from the fetters of individuality'. The 'corrobree' also encourages 'people to congregate in the face of totemic representations of what they consider to be sacred' (Shilling and Mellor, 2011). Effervescent assemblies; therefore, serve to replenish the shared values and beliefs held by the society. They

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also avoid the neglecting of sentiments, which would otherwise weaken. Rituals still occur in modern, industrialised societies. For instance, those associated with Christmas; even if the religious aspects are lost, it is still a ceremony that brings family and friends together. It is therefore, works towards maintaining solidarity and fits Durkheim's theories. Durkheim outlines 2 different types of ritual in his theories.

These are the 'negative cult' and the 'positive cult'. The 'negative cult' refers to particular rules and expectations of the members of a society. These involve abstentions such as, sexual abstinence and the avoidance of interdictions, or taboos. These codes of conduct are adhered to in order that the individual can rise above the profane and enter the realm of the sacred. The negative cult can thus be seen as a means to an end because it is only temporary. The result is a more long term aim; that the individual can access the 'positive cult' and to change to become purified and sanctified. (Durkheim, 1912 cited in Giddens, 1972). If the rules created concerning the sacred are broken, then the sentiment will have a harmful effect. It will become as if the individual were 'marked with a stain or blemish' (Durkheim, 1912 cited in Giddens, 1972).

An expiatory rite could ease the subsequent feelings of anger and result in the purifying of the individual. Durkheim argued that the negative cult served as an effective way to keep the members of the society conforming to the same beliefs; more specifically the codes of conduct adhered to, in order to access the sacred. Positive cults were significantly different to the negative cults, in that they were more relaxed and did not demand the

conforming to abstentions and regulations. Instead, they were ceremonies, which were anticipated with excitement. Effervescent assemblies (as examined before) are a good example. 'Piacular' ceremonies are anticipated with sorrow or fear. The central idea associated with these concerns the notion of 'expiation'; 'sacrifice in order to appease' (The new Oxford Dictionary of English, 1998); for instance, due to the presence of an evil omen. However, Durkheim puts more significance on their effects of moral unity. The collective suffering has an effect of appeasement; anxieties switch to confidence.

Durkheim's theories of religion have been criticised on a number of different levels. In his conclusion to 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life', he was hopeful that his theories could be generalised to other religions; as 'when a law has been proven by one well-made experiment, this proof is valid universally' (Durkheim, 1915, pg. 415). Durkheim's theories on religion; however, seemed to be based only on religions containing the aspects of theology and ritual. In his critique of Durkheim's theories of religion, Goldenweiser argued that Durkheim failed to account for all religions; 'Buddhism and Confucianism represent conceptual edifices with but little faith and practically no ritual, whereas the religion of the Todas stands for pure ritualism with faith and theology attenuated to scarcely appreciable forms (A. Goldenweiser, 1917, pg. 117). In order to provide an over-arching theory on the function of religion across the globe, Durkheim's theories must take into account the multitude of religions. Furthermore, Durkheim's approach can be seen as a 'static, ahistorical approach' (Geertz, 1957, pg. 2), which fails to account for the concept of social change.

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For example, if social relations were to change over history and conflict arises, the functional aspects of Durkheim's theory on religion could cease to work (Geertz, 1957, pg. 2). As an attempt to explain the global phenomenon of religion, Durkheim's theory and study of religion are therefore, arguably too limited and narrow to be fully relied on. Durkheim's work on religion is also often criticised for being overly reductionist. The criticism can be summed up as thus: 'Reductionists are those who insist that religion is best understood by going out-side religion to explain it..... Our own century, by contrast, has seen the emergence, even triumph, of a very different spirit. In this view, the religious life is something unique and irreducible, an entity all its own, not a mere expression of something else' (Pals, 1986). Durkheim therefore reduces religion; which is a complex way of life for many and governs all their beliefs, world views and actions, to mere functions for the maintenance or control of society.

Criticisms have been posed concerning the use of studying totemism, based on its limitations as a means by which one can understand the functions of religion. The study doesn't account for historical relativism and change. For example, due to new forms or functions of religion and ritual, which have emerged from the rise of modernity. This change in the nature of religion, was theorised by Durkheim himself and is closely associated his theory that societies were evolving; there could be seen a transition from traditional societies to modern societies. He argued that mechanical solidarity was a key feature of small, traditional societies. This was where families in a community attended independently to their own needs; the families had a relatively homogenous way of life and shared similar values. Modern

societies, on the other hand are characterised by organic solidarity; due to population growth and the rise of industrialisation, there is increased specialisation of roles and division of labour, leading to more individual autonomy and differences in beliefs and values between individuals.

This, Shilling and Mellor (2011) argue had a negative effect on rituals and their function and could be seen as a 'development that reduced opportunities for effervescent assemblies and stigmatised stimulants that undermined individuality'. Durkheim argued that with the rise of modernity, and the decline of traditional religion, secular forms of ritual; nationalism and communism, would take the place of this traditional religion. One such example is the notion of a 'civil religion'. Bellah (1967) explained this by arguing that the addition of religion into political addresses in America, serves as 'only a ceremonial significance'. In other words, Bellah was arguing that the religious aspects were for social cohesion, rather than necessarily representing genuine beliefs. The use of Australian totem tribes alone is limiting and it is unconvincing to generalise across the multitude of religions and progressive history. Clifford Geertz (1957); for example, conducted a similar study of religion in Java and observed that rituals often had an effect of confusion and conflict, because for example, political and religious notions interfere with one another (Geertz, 1957, pg. 21).

Durkheim's theories of religion appear rational in that they serve a function to maintain social solidarity. However, the rise of modernity and industrialisation and the decline in traditional societies, has led to more diversity in beliefs and a greater degree of individual autonomy in societies.

In addition, with the rise of industrialisation, religion has become less of a centre-piece in society. Durkheim's theories of religion were based on those traditional societies. Just as Durkheim theorised, secular rituals have replaced religious rituals and these can still achieve the same functional effects as the religious kind. However, examples of rituals appear to be fewer in modern societies and it can be argued that many of the rituals that are still practiced by society have lost their gravity and the real meanings attached to them are given less significance.

Christmas for many could be seen as a period in which people enjoy and receive presents but for many, the meanings surrounding Christmas, as a Christian ceremony, have been lost. Furthermore, the basing of Durkheim's theory of religion on his study of totemic tribes is overall inflexible, and cannot necessarily account for other religions and historical change.

Although Durkheim theorized that religion is subject to social change, his methodology, or study of totemism does not do anything to address this. Or in other words, the theories based on his study of totemism cannot confidently be applied to modern society; a society that is evolving, is multi-cultural and changed due to the process of 'secularization'.

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