

Functions of Religion

by Sophia Tutorial



WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover the functions of religion, through the definition and discussion of:

1. The Sacred and the Profane
2. Social Construction of Religion
3. Durkheim's Three Functions of Religion
4. Religiosity

1. THE SACRED AND THE PROFANE

Sociologist Emile Durkheim theorized religion in a functionalist fashion. Durkheim argued that the world was divided into two planes, the sacred and the profane, and each society constructs notions of the sacred and the profane for itself.

The **sacred** is used to describe objects and ideas that are treated with reverence, veneration, and awe. **Profane**, on the other hand, is used to describe everyday objects and ideas--mundane, commonplace ideas. Society constructs its own notions of the sacred and the profane.

🔗 **EXAMPLE** In India, the cow is sacred, but in America, the cow is profane. People eat it--it's an everyday, commonplace thing.



HINT

In this sense, profane doesn't mean vulgar, which is what you might commonly think of when you hear the term, but instead it means everyday, trivial, and commonplace.



TERMS TO KNOW

Sacred

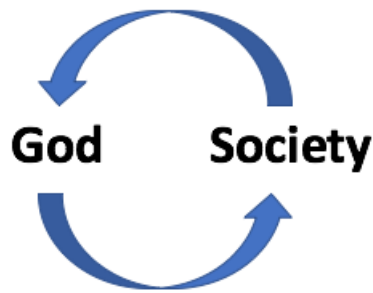
Objects and ideas in society that are treated with reverence, deference, and awe.

Profane

Everyday objects and ideas, or the mundane and the commonplace.

2. SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF RELIGION

Sociologists view religion is a social construction in the same way as gender, race, etc. People construct sacred and profane notions for themselves in each society, and Durkheim argued that God and the sacred equal society, that society constructs a religious cosmology in its own image.



How could society be God? How could society be what people worship when they engage in collective rituals and gather together? How could society be sacred? Durkheim, in his book *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, writes that, "In a general way, it is unquestionable that a society has all that is necessary to arouse the sensation of the divine in the minds of men merely by the power that it has over them. For its members, it is what God is to its worshipers."

Durkheim goes on to argue that, "We speak a language that we did not make. We use instruments that we did not invent. And we invoke rights that we did not found. A treasury of knowledge is transmitted from each generation to the next that it did not gather."

What this means, then, is that people owe these benefits to society. People didn't make them--they simply get them, by being born into society. Durkheim states that people could not escape feeling that outside of themselves are active causes from which they get the characteristic parts of their nature, which can arouse a feeling of divine, or something over and above the individual, that exerts power over them.



BIG IDEA

This was Durkheim's key insight into seeing that society had everything it needed, already in its possession, to arouse a sensation of the divine--God--in the minds of men.

If society constructs its notions of sacred and profane, it does so in its image, in a God-like worship of itself. Durkheim writes, "Since it is in spiritual ways that social pressure exercises itself, it could not fail to give men the idea that outside themselves there exists one or several powers upon which they depend." Since people cannot see these powers connecting to their lives in a clear fashion, they develop a religious cosmology, Durkheim maintained. If people could see these influences, then they would undoubtedly not have the religious interpretations that they do.



THINK ABOUT IT

If you construct the sacred and the profane, and society is God-like, then what is God-like in American society? Capitalism is sacred--you cannot challenge capitalism. Money and accumulation are sacred. The Constitution and the founding fathers are sacred items. Marriage between a man and a woman is sacred in this society.



EXAMPLE There is contest happening currently with people trying to advance equal rights to marriage for same sex couples. They're seen as challenging a sacred institution in American society: marriage.

Even the society's freedom to challenge itself--democracy--is sacred. Democracy and the freedom of expression are paramount American values that are also sacred items. Durkheim, in a famous passage, writes, "Society concentrates things, especially ideas. If a belief is unanimously shared by a people, it is forbidden to touch it, that is to say to deny it or to contest it. A man who should totally deny progress or ridicule human ideal to which modern societies are attached would, in effect, produce a sacrilege." That is a powerful way to say that society concentrates its ideas as sacred.



BIG IDEA

Society is God, Durkheim maintained.



THINK ABOUT IT

What would happen if you tried to challenge capitalism or democracy, or if you said that the founding fathers and the Constitution were wrong? You're going to be looked upon negatively, as if you're enacting a sacrilege. Likewise, the struggle of people trying to advance equal rights for same sex couples to marry, is challenging a belief and will be censured to a degree.

3. DURKHEIM'S THREE FUNCTIONS OF RELIGION

In the lens of functionalism, what might religion conceived of this way do for society? How might it benefit society? What functions might it have?

Durkheim's three functions of religion theorized that religion has three functions:

- **Social Cohesion:** Religion unites all people who share a culture. They have rituals and share the same norms, ideals and values. They have the same conceptions of what is sacred and what is profane, and these things help to create social and civic order and cohesion when everyone is in agreement. Durkheim argued that as members come together in groups to engage in religious ritual and worship, they collectively venerate the group and help to solidify the bonds.



LEARN MORE

For some fascinating reading, look at Durkheim's writings on tribal societies coming together in chaotic rituals.

- **Social Control:** Society uses religion as a source of conformity to encourage people to follow norms and customs. Religion can even be used in this way to control people and support oppressive political or economic regimes. To quote Karl Marx, "Religion is the opiate of the masses." He says this because rather than directing your angst and animosity at the status quo and trying to challenge it now, you are passive, because you think your salvation is going to come in the next life. In this manner, you cling to religion as an opiate for whatever negative thing is happening to you right now, and therefore religion can help to 'control' you.
- **Social Meaning:** Religion gives people a greater purpose in life and prevents them from overly despairing in the face of tragedy and adversity. Without the notion that there might be some other purpose in life,

Durkheim reasoned, some societies might fail and fall into chaos and general consternation. They wouldn't work, or have families, or fulfill their roles and duties—all the functions that keep society going. In this way, religion can provide meaning to life.



TERM TO KNOW

Durkheim's Three Functions of Religion

Durkheim highlighted three important functions of religion: 1) Social Cohesion; 2) Social Control; 3) Provides Meaning.

4. RELIGIOSITY

Religiosity is a measure of how religious a person is, or how much religion matters in their life. A person can be more or less religious, and this is called the measure of religiosity.



EXAMPLE Christians can strongly attach their meaning in life to religion. At the same time, the two other functions of religion, control and cohesion, will fall into place for them. Somebody else in society might not be very religious, yet they still obey and follow the same rules, with the same functions taking place, simply in less of a religious fashion. Religiosity, then, is meant to capture the extent to which religion is important in somebody's life.



TERM TO KNOW

Religiosity

A term meant to capture how religious a person is, or in other words, how important religion is in someone's life.



SUMMARY

Today you learned about the ideas of Emile Durkheim with respect to religion, including the concepts of the **sacred and the profane**, the **social construction of religion**, the **three functions of religion**, and **religiosity**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



TERMS TO KNOW

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Profane

Everyday objects and ideas, or the mundane and the commonplace.

Religiosity

A term meant to capture how religious a person is, or in other words, how important religion is in someone's life.

Sacred

Objects and ideas in society that are treated with reverence, deference, and awe.