

The Sacred and the Profane

by Sophia



WHAT'S COVERED

This lesson discusses the concepts of the sacred and the profane. You will look at what that meant historically for some religious societies as well as some of the contemporary uses. Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. What is Profane?
2. Tied to the Sacred

1. What is Profane?

The **sacred** and **profane** are contrasted with each other in the same way as words such as spiritual and worldly. The English word “profane” comes from two Latin words, “pro” and “fanus” or “fanum,” meaning outside the temple. A fanum was a sacred space, usually a plot of land where a temple would be constructed.

In classical Roman times, anything that was outside the temple, or the sacred space where one would commune and worship the gods, was considered profanus. It had to do with the more mundane and everyday aspects of life. The temple space was the first reference point for understanding the sacred and the realm of the sacred itself. It was also a reference point for the worldly and everyday.



TERMS TO KNOW

Sacred

That which is set apart from the ordinary, the worldly, and the mundane.

Profane

Anything that is “pro fanus” (outside the temple), not spiritual, worldly.

2. Tied to the Sacred

Scholars of religion, philologists, historians, sociologists, and theologians have all studied the idea of the sacred and the idea of the profane. They are concepts that live in the heart of almost every religious society

and exist in close proximity.

During much of the 20th century, Mircea Eliade, the Romanian philosopher and religious historian, began to identify the broad universality of these concepts in primitive, archaic societies. He was able to identify a universal drive toward the sacred. There is such a natural engagement with it that the mundane, or profane, aspects of everyday life—such as hunting, cooking, and courtship—were all infused with the sacred and considered to be manifestations of the sacred itself.

This separation between sacred and profane is really a characteristic of modern times and modern thinking. The word profanity is used now to mean cursing or to refer to something vulgar, gross, or impolite. In former times, however, profanity retained its strong association with the sacred.



THINK ABOUT IT

How could the profane and sacred be closely tied together?



Use cursing for an example. It was always understood with reference to its opposite, a blessing. A curse meant a request to god or gods for some kind of ill will or harm to be settled upon someone or something.



SUMMARY

What is profane is usually identified in relation to what is sacred. The profane refers to the mundane and worldly aspects of life. In modern times, the word profane has come to mean something vulgar or gross, but historically, it was closely **tied to the sacred**.

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TERMS TO KNOW

Profane

Anything that is "pro fanus" (outside the temple), not spiritual, worldly.

Sacred

That which is set apart from the ordinary, the worldly, and the mundane.