

## **Durkheim's Definition of Religion, Sacred, and Rituals**

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Durkheim established his own definition of religion. In his book Elementary Forms of Religious Life, he said: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them" (1954, p. 47). This definition of religion is considered a functional definition since it explains how religion affect social life.

Durkheim believed that religion was society and it was "God." That is, Durkheim believed that religion affected the establishment of society to such a degree that the two were inseparable. Durkheim thought society originated with religion. He also believed that religion was healthy for the society and that it helped people to become part of the society.

A totem is an object or a living thing which is revered or respected by a group. Durkheim believed that society uses totems to symbolize the society itself. Basically, they personified society and symbolized it as divine. To Durkheim, the worship of the totem is the worship of society itself. This was necessary because the society needed to reaffirm the idea of the society. Durkheim believed that religion presented the ideal type of society, what society should be. In our textbook, Religion in Society, John Wilson said that Durkheim believed that the soul itself is "a symbolic representation of the relationship between the individual and society" (2007, p. 31). The soul is an example of the society that exists within each person of that society.

The seven main characteristics of the sacred are objects or ideas that people have assigned special meaning or reverence. First, there has to be some sort of acknowledgment of the belief, character, or force. Second, there is an idea that power is indefinite and could be physical, positive, and so on. Third, the sacred is not have to have some useful purpose other than to be sacred. Forth, it is not a symbol of state power. Fifth, the defining character of it as sacred is not based on defining it by taste, texture, appearance, sound, or smell or containing some knowledge thereof. Sixth, the sacred has

to support the society as a whole. Seventh, the sacred has to have a moral ideal and lead a moral obligation.

Durkheim also pointed out four primary functions of religions and ceremonies. First, he said they served a disciplinary function, since self-discipline is necessary in society, and a proprietor function, helping people to just to society. Second, he claimed that ceremonies brought people together. Third, ceremonies and rituals have a revitalizing function; that is, it reminds people of their commonality and the past. Fourth, ritual gives people a good feeling of belonging to society; that is, it helps a group overcome difficulties and strengthens its people.