

Lecture 3 Sacred and Profane

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Emile Durkheim

"religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to *sacred things*, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden."

Religion exists when the sacred is distinguished from the profane.

Émile Durkheim and Joseph Ward Swain. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology* (George Allen & Unwin, 1915).

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Emile Durkheim: sacred

- Sacred is ideal and transcends everyday existence; it is extraordinary potentially dangerous, awe-inspiring, fear inducing.
- The sacred refers to things set apart by man including religious beliefs, rites, duties or anything socially defined as requiring special religious treatment.
- Almost anything can be sacred: a god, a rock, a cross, the moon, the earth, a king, a tree, an animal or bird.
- Once established as sacred they become symbols of religious beliefs, sentiments and practices.
- Eating the totemic animal or plant is usually forbidden and as a sacred object the totem is believed to have divine properties.

Émile Durkheim and Joseph Ward Swain. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology* (George Allen & Unwin, 1915).

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Emile Durkheim: profane

- The profane is the realm of routine experience.
- The profane or ordinary or unholy embraces those ideas, persons, practices and things that are regarded with an everyday attitude of commonness, utility and familiarity.
- It is that which is not supposed to come into contact with or take precedence over the sacred. The unholy or the profane is also believed to contaminate the holy or sacred.
- The attitudes and behavior toward it are charged with negative emotions and hedged about by strong taboos.

Émile Durkheim and Joseph Ward Swain. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life: A Study in Religious Sociology* (George Allen & Unwin, 1915).

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E.E. Evans-Pritchard

"Surely what [Durkheim] calls 'sacred' and 'profane' are on the same level of experience, and far from being cut off from one another, they are so closely intermingled as to be inseparable. They cannot, therefore, either for the individual or for social activities, be put in closed departments which negate each other, one of which is left on entering the other."

E.E. Evans-Pritchard, *Theories of Primitive Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969), 65. See also, Jack Goody, "Religion and ritual: A definition problem", *British Journal of Sociology* 12 (1961): 143-164.

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Mircea Eliade

Religion centers on his concept of hierophany (manifestation of the Sacred), similar to the concept of theophany (manifestation of a god).

A hierophany amounts to a "revelation of an absolute reality, opposed to the non-reality of the vast surrounding expanse."

(Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, p.21.)

Hierophany is a moment of standing on the "Sacred Space" being invited to take off one's shoes (Ex 3).

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Sacred & Profane in African Perspective

“The physical and the spiritual are but two dimensions of one and the same universe. These dimensions dove-tail into each other to the extent that at times and in places one is apparently more real than, but not exclusive of the other. To African peoples this religious universe is not an academic proposition: it is empirical experience, which reaches its height in acts of worship.”

Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*, p.57

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Sacred & Profane in African Perspective

The five categories of the “religious ontology”:

1. God - the ultimate explanation of the genesis and sustenance of both man and all things
2. Spirits – superhuman beings and spirits of men;
3. Man – alive and those yet to be born;
4. Animals and Plants
5. Phenomena and objects without biological life

Mbiti, *African religions and philosophy*, p.16

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Sacred & Profane in Hinduism

The dichotomy of profane and sacred proposed by Durkheimian sociology of religion is hardly relevant to the Hindu context.

- Concept of Advaita.

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Gordon Lynch

The Sacred in the Modern World

- *‘the central values system around which a particular society is formed, and also to the values held sacred by specific revolutionary, ideological, and religious groups’ (p. 35).*
- Difference between the sacred (i.e. ‘good’), profane (i.e. ‘evil’) and mundane (i.e. everyday life) is cogent and informative.

The Sacred in the Modern World. Gordon Lynch. Oxford University Press. February 2012.

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four ‘theoretical foundations for a cultural sociology of the sacred.’

1. As a social phenomenon, the sacred is morally ambiguous (p. 47). While true believers may see what they are committed to as unambiguously good, it is obvious that religions and sacred commitments have had mixed (and that’s probably putting it generously) impacts on social and political life.

2. Sacred forms are historically contingent (p. 48). What’s sacred for a particular people in a particular time or place *varies*, putting lie to the perception that the sacred is eternal and unchanging.

The Sacred in the Modern World. Gordon Lynch. Oxford University Press. 2012.
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four ‘theoretical foundations for a cultural sociology of the sacred.’:

3. Modern society is characterized by the emergence of multiple sacred forms (p. 49). While it might once have been possible to imagine a ‘sacred canopy’ of unified belief and practice encompassing society, increased religious and ethnic pluralism means this is no longer the case. Managing these competing sacred forms within societies thus becomes central for maintaining relatively harmonious social relations.

4. The presence of the sacred in social life needs to be contextualized in relation to the mundane logics, practices, emotions, and aesthetics of everyday life (p. 49). The banal, as Lynch rightly notes, can also produce forms of evil and getting caught up in the ‘every day’ can blind people to social and political injustices. In other words – people aren’t thinking about the sacred all the time; it becomes important for them in response to particular events, promptings, and so on.

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An Assessment

- Distinction and separation!
- Mbiti talks about physical and the spiritual, are they equivalent to secular and sacred.

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