

Durkheim: Sacred and Profane

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) explained the positive function of religion for society. His major argument about religion has been incorporated in his book, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

It was published in French in 1912 and was translated in English in 1915.

Durkheim wanted to demonstrate the social functions of religion by taking *totemism* as the test case. He studied Totemism among the central Australian tribes. He chose to study totemism for two reasons:

1. He considered totemism to be an elementary form of religion.
2. He considered that sacred-Profane distinction arose from the totemic practice.

Features of totemism were unique to itself. Durkheim rejected animism and naturism. Both assumed that religion arose out of primitive people's ignorance about nature.

Totemism is a system of beliefs and rites centered around totem. The totem is very often an animal or a vegetable spice or a mythical ancestor. The totem is the symbol of a community/tribe. The totem is sacred and it is held in respect and cannot be approached without proper rites and ceremonies. To approach the Totem, which is sacred, one has to purify oneself both internally and externally. The object at the centre of the totemic religion is the pictorial representation of the animal etc. which is worshipped. It serves as clan-identity.

Against the *sacred world* of Totem lies the profane world. The *profane world* includes human beings and all that is not related with the sacred totem.

Myths, legends, dogmas and beliefs represent the sacred totem, its power, virtues and relationship with the profane world. The sacred and the profane are entirely different and the lines of separation are clearly demarcated.

According to Durkheim, the distinction between the sacred and profane is "absolute". These two worlds are often hostile to each other. He argues that this type of sacred – profane dichotomy is common to all religions.

The **sacred** refers to those collective representations that are set apart from society, or that which transcends the humdrum of everyday life. The **profane**, on the other hand, is everything else, all those mundane things of our routine everyday life.