

## DURKHEIM'S IDEA OF RELIGION

Durkheim saw religion as a part of the human condition, and while the content of religion might be different from society to society over time, religion will, in some form or another, always be a part of social life. **Durkheim also argues that religion is the most fundamental social institution, with almost all other social institutions, at some point in human history, being born from it.** For these reasons he gave special analysis to this phenomenon, providing a philosophy of religion that is perhaps as provocative as it is rich with insights.

According to Durkheim, religion is the product of human activity, not divine intervention. He thus treats **religion as a *sui generis* social fact** and analyzes it sociologically. Durkheim elaborates his theory of religion at length in his most important work, *Forms*. In this book Durkheim, uses the ethnographic data that was available at the time to focus his analysis on the most primitive religion that, at the time, was known, the totemic religion of Australian aborigines. This was done for methodological purposes, since Durkheim wished to study the simplest form of religion possible, in which the essential elements of religious life would be easier to ascertain. In a certain sense, then, Durkheim is investigating the old question, albeit in a new way, of the origin of religion. It is important to note, however, that Durkheim is not searching for an absolute origin, or the radical instant where religion first came into being.

Rather, as Durkheim says, **he is investigating the social forces and causes that are always already present in a social milieu and that lead to the emergence of religious life and thought at different points in time, under different conditions.**

It is important to look at the starting point of Durkheim's analysis, his definition of religion: **"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 in one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them"** (Durkheim; 1995: 44). There are, thus, **three fundamental elements** to every religion: **sacred objects, a set of beliefs and practices, and the existence of a moral community.**

Of the three, perhaps **the most important would be the notion of the sacred**, which is the point around which any religious system revolves. It is that which inspires great respect and admiration on the part of society and what is set apart and keeps believers at a distance. Durkheim contrasts the sacred with the notion of profane, or that which desecrates the sacred and from which the sacred must be protected, making the opposition between sacred and profane a central element of Durkheim's theory.

According to Durkheim, a religion comes into being and is legitimated through moments of what he calls **"collective effervescence."** Collective effervescence refers to **moments in societal life when the group of individuals that makes up a society comes together in order to perform a religious ritual.** During these moments, the group comes together and communicates in the same thought and participates in the same action, which serves to unify a group of individuals. When individuals come into close contact with one another and when they are assembled in such a fashion, **a certain "electricity" is created and released**, leading participants to a high degree of collective emotional excitement or delirium. **This impersonal, extra-individual force, which is a core element of religion,** transports the individuals into a new, ideal realm, lifts them up outside of themselves, and makes them feel as if they are in contact with an extraordinary energy.

The next step in the genesis of religion is the projecting of this collective energy onto an external symbol. As **Durkheim argues, society can only become conscious of these forces circulating in the social world by representing them somehow.** The power of religion must therefore be objectified, or somehow made visible, and the object onto which this force is projected becomes sacred. This sacred object receives the collective force and is thereby infused with the power of the community. It is in

this way that a society gains a tangible idea, or representation, of itself. When discussing these matters, Durkheim is careful to use the word “sacred object” to describe what is traditionally understood in the West as a god. This is because sacred objects can be very diverse and do not necessarily refer to supernatural deities. For example, God is a sacred object for Christian societies, Thor was a sacred object for Viking society, but the four noble truths are also sacred objects for Buddhists.

**Such views on religion allow Durkheim to make the radical claim that a society’s sacred object is nothing but the collective forces of the group transfigured. Religion is society worshipping itself, and through religion, individuals represent to themselves society and their relationship to it.**

An object’s status is determined by the meaning that society attributes to it, or by its status as **a *représentation collective***. Importantly, this analysis goes beyond what is strictly considered the religious realm, since all socially derived meaning operates in the same way. For example, a stamp, a flag, or the sport of football are by themselves just a piece of paper, a piece of cloth, or a group of padded men chasing a leather ball; they all have no value in themselves and derive their value from the *sui generis* collective forces they represent and embody. The more important a society determines an object to be, the more a group infuses an object with prestige, the more valuable it will be in the eyes of an individual.

If these moments of collective effervescence are the origin of religious feelings, religious rituals must be repeated in order to reaffirm the collective unity of a society, otherwise its existence is at risk. Durkheim remarks that if the societal forces central to the religious life of a society are not re-animated, they will be forgotten, leaving individuals with no knowledge of the ties that exist between them and no concept of the society to which they belong. This is why religious ritual is necessary for the continued existence of a society; religion cannot exist through belief alone-it periodically needs the reality of the force behind the belief to be regenerated.

This takes place through various religious rituals, in which collective beliefs are reaffirmed and the individual expresses their solidarity with the sacred object of society, or with society itself. The form the specific ritual takes can vary greatly, from funerals to rain dances to patriotic national holidays, but its goal is always the same. Through these rituals, society maintains its existence and integrates individuals into the social fold, exerting pressure on them to act and think alike. While Durkheim’s analysis is of explicitly religious contexts, it is important to note that the ritual interaction processes he describes take place in different and less formal contexts as well. Ritual processes can be considered a part of daily life and are instrumental in regulating group solidarities and interpersonal relationships in different social institutions and at different levels of formality.

### **The Death of the Gods**

In 1912, Durkheim wrote: “the former gods are growing old or dying, and others have not been born” (Durkheim; 1995: 429).

There are two parts to Durkheim’s declaration that need to be de-compacted. On the one hand the old gods are dead. Because of the massive transformations taking place, European society became profoundly destructured. The institutions animating medieval life disappeared. As a result, individuals were having a hard time finding meaningful attachments to social groups and society as a whole lost its former unity and cohesiveness. Not only this, but the transformations that led to modernity also rendered former beliefs and practices irrelevant. The big things of the past, the political, economic, social, and especially religious institutions, no longer inspired the enthusiasm they once did. With former ways of life no longer relevant and society no longer cohesive, the collective force so vital for

the life of a society was no longer generated. This would have an important impact on the religion of medieval society, Christianity. Because society no longer had the means to create the collective force that exists behind God, belief in God weakened substantially.

To begin, such a society is incapable of generating social forces that act on the individual. It is unable to create an authority that exerts pressure on individuals to act and think in a similar manner. Without these forces acting on the individual from the outside, individuals are dispersed from their commitment to society and left to their own. Duties are no longer accepted *carte blanche* and moral rules no longer seem binding. As such, individuals increasingly are detached from group obligation and act out of self-interest.

Essentially, Durkheim's analysis of the death of the gods concentrates on the underlying disorganization of European society that led to the demise not only of Christianity, but of a number of other economic, political, and social institutions as well. This same underlying disorganization was preventing European society from generating the collective force necessary for the creation of new institutions and a new sacred object. The death of the gods is a symptom of a sickened society, one that has lost its internal structure and descended into an-archy, or a society with no authority and no definitive principles, moral or otherwise, to build itself on. In spite of such a glum analysis, Durkheim did have hope for the future. Out of the chaos he saw the emergence of a new religion that would guide the West, what he termed "the cult of the individual."