

An Analysis of the Phenomenon of the Sacred From the Durkheim-Eliade Perspective

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Abstract: The Phenomenon of the sacred is central to any religion or religious studies. Given the need to study a reality from a multidimensional perspective, this article reflects on the phenomenon of the sacred as illustrated by an eminent sociologist Emile Durkhiem and a renowned historian of religion, Mircea Eliade, and would analyse its relevance in the present context.

Keywords: Durkhiem, Eliade, sacred, secular, secularization, inter-sacral, inculturation.

The sense of the sacred is vital to any religious studies and it has been a subject matter of interest to all those concerned with religion and with those who have a deeper quest in life. The phenomenon of the sacred has been studied from multiple perspectives. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel who has investigated it in popular Hinduism proposes two ways of studying the sense of the sacred.¹ One is to study people's beliefs, myths, rites and festivals from the historical perspective in the context of their sacred scripture and traditions. This is the classical approach adopted in the science of the History of Religions. Following this way, the religion of the Hindus

¹ Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, *The Sacred in Popular Hinduism*, Christian Literature Society, Madras. 1983.

can be studied in the light of the Vedas and the Upanisads, the Puranas and the writings of the Acharyas and Gurus, both ancient and modern. The implicit assumption in such an enterprise would be that these literary sources will reveal the way in which the Hindu apprehended life and the world. The other approach is empirical. It studies the religion of a people in the context of religious consciousness. In the case of Hinduism, it would mean that the Hindu beliefs, myths, rites and festivals are studied as they are understood, experienced and articulated by the followers. The study of popular religiosity can be done through this method effectively.² Yet another way of looking at the concept of the sacred is to analyse how scholars have studied this phenomenon and have drawn insights from their study. The current interdisciplinary venture looks into the phenomenon of the sacred as illustrated by Emile Durkheim, a sociologist, and Mircea Eliade, a historian of religion, to draw some insights from their study for our world today.

Emile Durkheim ((1858-1917), a French sociologist, made a significant breakthrough in the concept of the sacred in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.³ He takes a look at the phenomenon of religion, paying special attention to the interconnectedness of religion and society. In this process, he touches upon the aspect of the sacred, so significant to religion.

Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), a historian of religion, was influenced by Durkheim and also by Rudolph Otto. In his

² Lawrence Fernandes, *The Sacred in Popular Religiosity*, in Asian Journal for Priests and Religious, Vol 52 No 3, May 2007, p. 14-21.

³ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Tr. Joseph Swain; Allen & Unwin Lt. London, 1976.

analysis of religion, he looks at the reality of the sacred in its entirety. In the process, he touches upon different areas of sacredness and its effects.

Concept of the Sacred in Emile Durkheim

Durkheim's interest to study the concept of the sacred came from his interest to study the phenomenon of religion which was influenced by the writings of Robertson Smith⁴ which resulted in Durkheim studying the primitive religion. To know which is a primitive religion, Durkheim used a two-fold criterion, viz., that it should surpass others in simplicity and be able to explain it without borrowing elements from other religions.⁵ So he chose the Arunta tribes of Australia. His basic aim was to study the most primitive and simple religion which is actually known.⁶ In his study he discovered totemism as the original form of religion, the sacred as the important aspect of religion, and *Churinga*, the significant feature of totemism. He defined religion as

a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things, that is to say, thing set apart and forbidden, beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a church and those who adhere to them. The second element is that religion should be eminently a collective thing.⁷

An important aspect of the totemic religion is *churinga*. Illustrating *churinga*, he said,

They are pieces of wood or bits of polished stones, of a great

⁴ Smith, Robertson *Religion of the Semites*, New Jersey, Transaction Publishers, 1889.

⁵ Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. p 13.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 13

⁷ *Ibid.*, 63

variety of forms but generally oval or oblong. Upon each of these is engraved a design representing the totem of this same group. Every *churinga* for whatever purpose it may be employed is counted among the essentially sacred things. It has marvelous powers. By contact it can heal wounds; especially those resulting from circumcision, useful to make a beard grow. It helps reproduction of totemic species and gives victory in war. The fate of the clan is bound up with *churinga*. Loss of it is the greatest misfortune⁸

The carving of the totem on wood, body or on other beings is called *churinga*. The carving of the animal/plant was more sacred than the signified object. People knew the limitation of the animal or plant which they must have seen almost daily. The thing chosen was definitely not one which would inspire fear, awe or reverence. Yet when the community decides to bestow sacredness on a totem, that very act changes the perspective of looking at it. What was so far a mere animal now becomes a sacred animal. This sacredness is superimposed by the society. So, sacredness is not an inborn quality of any reality.

It is not only the *churinga*, but also the very place where the *churinga* is placed, gets a sacral status. The sacredness of an object is not because of power within it but is conferred on it by the society. Thus objects get a religious value which is really not inherent in them but conferred from without. By doing this Durkheim deconstructed the sacred. Durkheim however, failed to explain at what point of time a particular society accepts a particular animal/plant as its totem and who takes the final decision in the choice of its totem. It is also not very clear whether a clan can change a totem or whether, once chosen, it remains forever.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 140

Now the sacred character of objects can come from only one source: that is, they represent totems materially. Because they have the emblem of totems *churingas* get significance. The totem is at once the symbol, the vital principle (referred to as *mana* in some simple societies) and the society, because god and society are the same.

Durkheim calls the sacred power *mana*, the distinctive character of every sacred being.⁹ Durkheim calls it also the totemic principle, cause of the sacredness of things. Totem is the material representation of this principle.¹⁰ This principle of *mana* is personified in the totem.

Some Features of the Sacred

For Durkheim the sacred is irreducible. It cannot be explained or adequately viewed by reference to anything else. Sacred things form a group of phenomena which are irreducible to any other group of phenomena. The sacred cannot be broken down into constituent parts, or explained at another level.

Sacred is the ultimate category and the progenitor of gods. The sacred stands above the gods themselves. The object or idea does not become sacred because it is said to come from the gods, or because it is associated with the spirit or is said to be of divine origin. Rather, it is the reverse. Certain deities receive extremely high status because sacredness is bestowed upon them. The idea of the sacred is independent of the idea of god and is prior to it. The primacy of the sacred over the deity Durkheim saw exemplified in Buddhism. Classical Buddhism pays scant

⁹ *Ibid.*, 79

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 506

or no attention to spiritual beings. A lack of gods is also evident in totemism and agrarian cults. In all these cases, Durkheim assumed, there was a sense of the sacred.

Two consequences emerge from subscribing to the primacy of the sacred. The first is the corollary that what is ultimate or of the highest value in a society is sacred. Therefore what actually constitutes the sacred within a society is boundless, although subject to time and change. Durkheim postulated a large number of items held to be sacred by given societies, but which in some people's eyes are not religious. What is ultimate in a society can thus be viewed as its most sacred idea or object. This is its *summum bonum* – its religion. The second consequence is that the sacred, since it has primacy, 'creates' what is spiritual, the gods or God himself. It is probably too strong to say that Durkheim held that the sacred is the progenitor of God and the gods. Thus the deity is established by first passing through the stage of being a human person and gradually being raised to the status of the sacred. In the *Division of Labour*, he wrote:

In the beginning, the gods are not distinct from the universe, or rather there are no gods, but only sacred beings, without their sacred character being related to any external entity as their source (animals, plants) but little by little religious forces were detached from the things of which they were first attributes, and become hypostatized.¹¹

As for the location of the sacred, in Durkheim's terminology, the sacred is a social fact and part of the collective conscience. For Durkheim and for those who follow his path, the sacred is to be located in collective

¹¹ Emile Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*; Translated by George Simpson, London, The Free press, 1984. p. 288.

beliefs and ideals, in the institutional religion itself, in its creeds, in its official statements and declarations. Similarly, it is determined by negative commands, prohibitions and interdicts and in negative ritual.

Durkheim considers sacred as indivisible. When the sacred is subdivided, each of its parts remains equal to the thing itself. In other words, as far as religious thought is concerned, the part is equal to the whole; it has the same powers, the same efficacy.¹² Sacredness is, therefore not dependent on crude physical laws. This, argues Durkheim, is an additional reason why the sacred virtue, which a thing is said to possess, is not dependent on its intrinsic or physical properties. The virtue comes from sentiments which the object calls forth and symbolizes. The notion of the sacred is obtained through a mental process and therefore a 'spiritual,' non-material process.

Any sacred character is to a high degree contagious; it therefore spreads out from the totemic being to everything that is closely or remotely connected with it.¹³ The extraordinary contagiousness of a sacred character demands that it be ritually protected, lest it affect indiscriminately other areas and objects.

The sacred has an emotional content and the emotion associated with the sacred are of two opposite kinds. The sacred commands respect and is also an object of love and devotion – the sacred is something that is earnestly sought after, and on the other hand, the sacred is also something to be feared.

¹² *Ibid.*, 261

¹³ *Ibid.*, 254

The concept of sacred in Mircea Eliade:

Mircea Eliade was influenced by the writings of Emile Durkheim and Rudolf Otto. Speaking on the phenomenon of the sacred, Eliade said, 'We propose to present the phenomenon of the sacred in all its complexity, and not only in so far as it is *irrational*. The concern is not the relation between the rational and non-rational elements of religion but the sacred in its entirety. The first possible definition of the *sacred* is that it is the opposite of the profane.'¹⁴

Eliade identifies the sacred as something real, yet he states clearly that the sacred is a structure of human consciousness. The sacred is identified as the source of significance, meaning, power and being, and accordingly its manifestations are referred to as *hierophanies*, *cratophanies*, or *ontophanies* (appearances of the holy, of power, or of being).

Eliade speaking of the sacred, states that one becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself as something wholly different. He calls this *act of manifesting* the sacred as *hierophany* (from the Greek *hieros*, meaning sacred, and *phanein* meaning to appear).

To perceive the sacred, one needs to have a background of religious experience. A person brought up in a non-religious environment may not be able to perceive the manifestation even when it reveals itself. In this context, he speaks of *sacral* (religious persons who have a positive attitude towards religion) and *desacral* persons (non-religious persons to whom religion does not matter)

¹⁴ Mircea Eliade *The Sacred & the Profane, the Nature of Religion* (New York, Harvest Book 1959). p.10

Eliade insists that the non-religious humanity in any pure sense is a very rare phenomenon.

The hierophanies, i.e., manifestations of the sacred expressed in symbols and myths are grasped as structures, and constitute a pre-reflective language that requires special hermeneutics. Eliade's extraordinary knowledge of the history of religions, including the little-known primitive and archaic religions, has enabled him to compare a rich variety of spatial and temporal manifestations of the sacred and to comment on their significance.

In the process of manifesting the sacred, a being manifests something beyond its natural self; it becomes 'something other' even though there would be no changes in its physical properties. E.g., the sacred can manifest itself in a stone. But, then, the stone will be venerated, not for its physical properties but for its ability to reveal something beyond its physical properties. There will be no change in physical properties, yet the stone moves on to a higher realm of being in the eyes of a religious person. Even though the sacred is revealed in a local context and for a local purpose, it in no way reduces its universal quality.

All *hierophany* is always a historical event (that is to say, always occurs in some definite situation) does not lessen its universal quality. Some hierophanies have a purely local purpose; others have, or attain, worldwide significance. The Indians, for instance, venerate *asvatta tree*: the manifestation of the sacred in that particular plant species has meaning only for them, for only to them is *asvattha* anything more than just a tree.¹⁵

¹⁵ Mircea Eliade, *Patterns in comparative Religion*, trans. R. Shred, London, Sheed and Ward, 1958, p.2

One of the important assertions of Eliade is that the realm of the sacred is not limited to any particular group. It can be manifested anywhere and everywhere. He goes on to say that all beings in the society are capable of manifesting the sacred; and in fact, all beings, some time or the other did manifest the sacred. Not only that, every activity at one time or the other was deemed sacred. So the whole universe is charged with the grandeur of the sacred, though due to human choice, at a particular moment only few beings would be given sacral status by the society.

In every society there are some beings considered sacred and some profane. The question that may naturally arise is that if all beings have been hierophanies at one time or the other, then, how can there be any profane being at all? The dialectic of a hierophany implies a more or less clear choice, a singling out.¹⁶ A thing becomes sacred, as already stated, when it reveals something other than its material self.

Here one need not be concerned with whether that something other comes from its unusual shape, its efficacy, or simply its “power”, or whether it springs from the thing’s fitting in with some symbolism or other, or has been given it by some rite of consecration, or acquired by its being placed in some position that is instinct with sacredness. It is basically a matter of choice. What matters is that *hierophany* implies a *choice*, a clear-cut separation of this thing which manifests the sacred from everything else around it. The thing that becomes sacred is still separated in regard to itself; for it only becomes a *hierophany* at the moment of stopping to be mere profane something, at the moment of acquiring a new “dimension”

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13

of sacredness.¹⁷

By manifesting the sacred, the object becomes *something else*; yet it continues to remain itself, for it continues to participate in its surrounding cosmic milieu. A sacred stone remains a stone; apparently (or more precisely, from the profane point of view) nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality. In other words, for those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. The cosmos in its entirety can become a *hierophany*.

Eliade does state that believers for whom the *hierophany* is a revelation of the sacred must be prepared by their experience, including their traditional religious background, before they can apprehend it. To others the sacred tree, for example, remains simply a tree. It is an indispensable element of Eliade's analysis that any phenomenal entity could be apprehended as a *hierophany* with an appropriate preparation. The conclusion must be that all beings reveal, and at the same time conceal, the nature of being.

Manifestation of the sacred are not always closed. They can develop, change, disappear, and lose its importance in due course of time. Eliade narrates with the example of a sacred stone, that the stone will manifest the sacred at one time directly, and at yet another time indirectly.¹⁸

For Eliade the sacrality is an experience that is manifested in time, space and nature as well. According to

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.13

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.25

Eliade the experience of time is not the same, for the primitive man and the modern man.

Every religious festival or any liturgical time represents the reactualisation of a sacred event that took place in a mythical past, “in the beginning”. Yet, these feasts and festivities make the whole mythical reality present, here and now. Explaining the significance of festival Eliade states that ‘the festival is a periodic reactualisation of divine acts. Structure of the sacred time actualized in festival and in this a person becomes contemporary with gods.’¹⁹ There is a sacred time—time of festivities and celebrations and also there is profane time; which is ordinary mundane time. Between these two kinds of time there is, of course, the solution of continuity; but by means of rites, religious man can pass without danger from ordinary temporal duration to sacred time.²⁰ Myths are a means to reactualize the past.

As in time, so also in space. For a religious man space is not homogeneous; some parts are qualitatively different from others. There is a sacred space caused by *hierophany* in contrast to the profane space of our daily activities. Revelation of a sacred space makes it possible to obtain a fixed point and hence to acquire orientation in the chaos of homogeneity. Every sacred space implies a *hierophany*, an eruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different. At times a mere sign would suffice to indicate the sacredness of a place. The sign with

¹⁹ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane, The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard R. Trask, New York, Harper & Row Publishers, 1959. pp. 87,91

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.68

religious meaning introduces an absolute element and puts an end to relativity and confusion.

When no sign manifests itself, it is *provoked*²¹. For example, a sort of evocation is performed with the help of animals; it is they who show what place is fit to receive the sanctuary or village. A sign is asked for to put an end to the tension and anxiety caused by relativity and disorientation. "The sacred site is not chosen by men. Men are not free to choose the sacred site that they only seek for it and find it by the help of mysterious signs."²² So the sacredness is derived of a place from the fact that the site is either revealed by signs that are mysterious, or through a ritual action it is provoked.

The ritual through which one constructs a sacred space is efficacious in the measure it reproduces the work of the gods.²³ For a religious person every world is a sacred world.

For Eliade the whole nature reveals the sacredness. The element of sacredness is able to pervade in all realities both in animate and in inanimate beings. An aspect of this is presented by Eliade in sacredness in nature.

For a religious person, nature is never merely 'natural' it is always filled with a religious value. The world is not only filled with objects which, through consecration or through rites, receive the 'sacred' status, but also is a place where the divine expressed itself in many ways.

Durkheim and Eliade: An Appraisal and Implication:

²¹ Eliade, *Sacred & profane* p.27

²² *Ibid.*, p. 28

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 29

The sacred, in ordinary language is associated with religion and religious experience. The presence of the sacred, evokes in the believer a sense of wonder, awe, reverence and even fear. The sacred is something which is above the ordinary and set apart from mundane things and use, set apart for special functions. By stating that the sacred is beyond the sphere of organized religions, gods and goddesses, they stressed more on the human element and on the role of human beings in making a thing sacred.

It is Durkheim who deconstructed the sacred. He said that it is not any spiritual force that makes a thing sacred, but the human beings choose something that would symbolize them (in his study, it was the totem), which as a result gets a sacral status. The sacred, according to Durkheim, has a major role of maintaining social order. By saying so, he in fact, desacralised the sacred.

Eliade has been a bit ambiguous in his presentation of the sacred. He fails to pinpoint where exactly the sacred is located in a society. He attributes, to some extent, its origin to humans, but doesn't rule out the possibility of non-human elements in making a thing sacred. He stresses more on the different manifestations of the sacred and by doing this he tries to bring out the basic need of humans to live in a sacral world.

The presentation of the sacred by these thinkers, especially by Durkheim, as a social reality has raised questions of wider implications. His analysis poses a serious threat to those religions that claim divine origin and attribute their source of sacredness to gods. It would also challenge many a custom, tradition and behavior that claim to have their roots in gods or goddesses or at least seem to have the divine sanction, e.g., the caste system.

This understanding of the sacred also would give impetus to challenge many oppressive structures that are perpetuated in the name of religion. The whole question of mystery would fall apart when the sacred is considered as a reality constructed by the society for maintaining social order.

The illustrations of sacred as a social reality has its far reaching implications on our society even to this day. Some of them are discussed below.

Sacred, a source of unity

Durkheim spoke of the sacred as one, having the capacity to unite the society and maintain it as one body. It can also strengthen, build and bind a society. The totem becomes a rallying point for the whole community to remain united. A human being, as a social animal, has a need of the other, and has a desire to be a part of the group and to draw strength and sustenance from the group. This is provided by the clan members who worship the totem, which symbolizes the society and provides a sense of solidarity, unity and fraternal bond among them. Durkheim thus has shown the uniting power of the sacred in a society.

The totem, which is sacred, need not necessarily be a material object. Even a value, like *ahimsa*, truth or even patriotism, could as well be a totem. The sacred being has also within it the power to enthuse people for sacrifice. Sometimes totems are created by the leaders to unite its members. It has been noted, that the Ganesha festival in Maharashtra popularized by Bal Gangadhar Tilak had more than mere religious importance. Tilak used this as a means to unite the Hindus against the British.

A factor to be remembered is that, there should be a constant recourse to the totem, be it by way of narrating a myth, performing a ritual or celebrating a festival, where the totem is given prominence. If not, the sacred would lose its significance and then it would be replaced by a new totem.

Sacred, a source of power

The sacred being is powerful because its presence evokes in believers a sense of surrender. So, control over the sacred realm brings along with it, to some extent, control over persons who believe in that sacred reality. The priest, *poojary* and mullah are considered sacred people for they perform ritual sacrifices, hence in the society they exercise power in their respective communities. There are times when religious leaders decide on matters which are not purely of religious nature.

It is interesting to note that *kratophany* (sacred as power) many times goes along with economic, political and social power as well. In India the Brahmins, the high caste people had access to education and they were allowed to perform sacrifices, but the shudras were to be content with doing menial jobs. In medieval Europe, the clergy almost always enjoyed the political patronage and benefits. Subalterns, who have seen religion and the sacred as a source of power, are now learning to use it as a means to fight against oppression. The emergence of local gods and the rise in popular religiosity is one such sign.

Sacred, a hope for the better world?

Eliade speaks of sacred time, sacred place and sacred space. In each instance, he says, either through myths, rituals or festivals the individual goes back to the time of

gods and relives in the 'original' time/space or place of gods. Today when we speak of the 'time of gods', what comes to our mind (whether Eliade intended it or not), is a time when there is peace, plenitude and prosperity, when truth and good are victorious. By recalling the mythical events through narration, rituals and festivals, one is enthused to recreate (or rather rebuild) the society based on such values. For example, the ideals like the Kingdom of God and *Ram Rajya* could, thus, be a force to build a better society. To build a society like that of gods seems to be the dream of religious person. The myths and festivals provide impetus to make this dream a reality.

This tendency to go back to the time of gods also has its disadvantages. The tendency to look back on the 'glorious past,' to the age of gods can make people remain in a dream world and forget their responsibilities and situations in the changing society today. This may also lead to escapism, when the people are carried to the dream world, and the hard facts of the present day life are not paid attention to. The desire to go back to the time of gods, without paying attention to the social changes that have come about in the society, can cause serious harm to the society as well. For example, in some scriptures women are depicted as inferior to men. Such attitudes in the present would hamper the feminist movements that are trying to restore dignity to female children and women.

Secularization of the sacred

According to Eliade, a non-sacral being is a rare phenomenon²⁴, even in modern times. For, humans give special importance to the place they are born in, the time

²⁴ Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, p.210

they met their beloved, etc. Eliade considers this tendency in human beings as a sign of their craving for the sacred. Given this understanding of the sacred, the phenomenon of secularization is a question worth considering.

Secularization relates essentially to a process of decline in religious activities, beliefs, ways of thinking and institutions that occurs primarily in association with, or as an unconscious or unintended consequence of, other processes of social structural change.²⁵

In the traditional society religion provided the overall meaning system for different institutions. In the secularization process religion will no more enjoy the same status. In this process religious consciousness, activities and institutions lose their social significance. Religion becomes marginal to the operation of the social system, and the essential functions for the operation of society become rationalized passing out of control of agencies devoted to the supernatural.

Durkheim and Eliade share the possibility of the existence of the sacred without recourse to the supernatural. Both feel the need to express the whole concept of the sacred without any reference to god and religion. They think the sacred sphere is much wider than the sphere of religion.

Will secularization sweep out the element of the sacred from our society? This is the question one would ask today. According to Durkheim, the sacred is bound to survive, for the core of the sacred is the society itself and as long as it exists, the sacred aspect in it is bound to be there. Eliade seems to have a different opinion. Though he

²⁵ Mircea Eliade, (Editor-in-Chief) *Encyclopaedia of Religion* 1987, Vol 13. p.159.

doesn't directly speak of secularization, he thinks that throughout history there will be always elements that would manifest the sacred; and, based on the time, situations and culture, people would give some elements the sacral status.

Inter-sacral dialogue

Durkheim, who speaks of each tribe having a totem, doesn't mention the interconnectedness or dialogue among tribes regarding totems. Each tribe seems to have an independent existence. Tribe, in the Durkheimian analysis, didn't feel the need to dialogue. However, as we live in this pluralistic society with multiple experiences and expressions of the sacral reality, there seems to be a need of dialogue among people on important aspects of life, especially on the sacred. For a harmonious society, to exist there seems to be a need to respect, understand and learn from each other which is possible only through dialogue. Dialogue not to destroy the sacred sphere nor to ridicule the sacral aspects of the other, but to learn, appreciate and respect what is so central to the living of faith. In India, which is the home of many religions, it is essential to dialogue for the peaceful co-existence and for the removal of built-in prejudices against other religions and beliefs.

The content of dialogue can take different forms. It could be a sharing of one's experience of the sacred; it can also take the form of a joint social action; or it can also take the form of theological reflection on the sacral reality of each other.

Inculturating the sacred

Durkheim and Eliade in their analysis see the sacred as one which is not imposed by outside factors but as that

which originated from within and is accepted by the social group. In that case, can the sacred be transplanted from one culture to the other? Can something that is sacred to one society at one time be sacred to another society later on in a different cultural milieu?

Durkheim and Eliade do not speak directly of inculturation. But, according to them, for the sacred to be meaningful to a society, it has to speak the language of the people and represent the society. That which is 'foreign' cannot form a sacral core of a society. For Durkheim, the totem symbolises the society. It is very much part of the life of the people. That which is not part of them cannot find a home in them. This is seen clearly in the case of Christianity in Asia.

Christianity, which came to Asia in a Western garb, could not make any dent on the Asian masses partly because the questions it claimed to answer were not their questions. It did not vibrate with their spirit, nor could it capture their soul.²⁶ Hence, it remains a challenge for Christianity to find its roots in Asia to be meaningful and relevant for its people.

This leads to the question of inculturation of the sacred. According to Michael Amaladoss, "inculturation is a process through which a particular community in the context of its reality, culture and life, responds to the word that is proclaimed."²⁷

²⁶ Cf. Felix Wilfred. *Sunset in the East*, University of Madras, 1991. p.170

²⁷ Michael Amaladoss, *Becoming Indian, The Process of Inculturation*, Rome, Centre for Indian and Inter-religious Studies, 1992. p.10

The concept of the sacred as a reality is not exhausted by the writings of Durkheim or Eliade. Durkheim and Eliade have studied the reality as a non-religious phenomenon and their reflections are still relevant and meaningful even in this post- modern world.