**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 17: Durkheim: Religion and Ritual I**

\* Durkheim became interested in religion between 1902-1911. His focus on this aspect of the *conscience collective* emerged because:

1. It had become a leading theme in his journal, the

*Annee Sociologique;*

1. Anthropologists and ethnographers were coming to see it as the central subject matter of the social sciences;

(3) His nephew, Marcel Mauss, was pursuing these

interests and publishing articles on the topic.

\* Emile Durkheim’s *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912) was the result. A mature, comprehensive work that effectively established religion as a social phenomenon, it had five central aims:

1. To study “primitive” religion and explain its basic structure;
2. To help understand contemporary religion by going back to the most basic;
3. To undertake an examination of religion from the perspective of positivist science/observable facts to determine its “elementary forms”/social fundamentals;
4. To examine the relationship between religious ideas and socially organized knowledge about the world;
5. To show that, at bottom, religion is nothing more than the ‘expression of society consecrated.’

\* Durkheim begins by searching for a “positive” definition of religion (i.e. one that eliminates preconceived spiritual and psychological ideas, is based on observable facts, and is applicable to all religious life).

\* As such, he looked for what is common, concluding that all religions share:

(1) Systems of beliefs and rites (i.e. concepts/attitudes in relation to sacred things and actions directed thereto); and

(2) A tendency to divide the world into two regions: the sacred and the profane.

**Sacred and Profane:**

\* Durkheim felt these binary oppositions formed key bases of

religious life in several respects:

1. The sacred embodies not only gods, spirits and natural things, but beliefs as well;
2. A belief, practice or rite can have a sacred character when viewed as such by others;
3. Words, expressions, even combinations thereof can be sacred, often only available to certain people to perform;
4. A system of rites, beliefs, and social practices emerges from/radiates around sacred things;
5. The profane is linked to the sacred through radical opposition;
6. Because it may contaminate the sacred, rules/ precautions exist to regulate the separation between the two.

\* Thus, Durkheim listed six characteristics of the sacred and

the profane:

1. The sacred is always separated from all other objects/is set apart;
2. A system of rites and social practices arises which sets out how the sacred is to be approached and how group members are to conduct themselves in its presence;
3. Sacred things are protected by prohibitions or taboos that protect and isolate the sacred;
4. Sacred things are segregated from profane things/ thought to be superior in dignity;
5. The sacred and profane represent a unifying principle separating the natural from the spiritual and providing society with opposites like good/evil, clean/dirty, holy/defiled, etc.
6. Passage from the profane to the sacred must be accompanied by rites or rituals thought to transform one state into the other (e.g. baptism/initiation/rebirth).

\* After stating that the elementary forms of the religious life are *beliefs*, *rites*, and the *sacred/profane*, Durkheim defines religion:

“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 all those who adhere to them”

**The Most Elementary Form of Religion:**

\* Based on prior anthropological studies, Durkheim selected totemism as the most elementary form of religion. This is a religion where:

1. An emblem (e.g. an animal, plant, or inanimate object) stands for the social group, which binds itself together though not blood relatives;
2. It identifies members *as if* they were family members;
3. The totem used designates them as a social group;
4. It compels them to recognize duties and obligations towards one another (e.g. aid, mourning, vengeance, and prohibitions against intermarriage);
5. Beliefs involve taboos and prohibitions keeping the totem sacred, apart, and distinct from profane things;
6. Totemism represents the tribe as a whole descending from a mythical being with enduring beliefs/practices
7. These involve a tendency to move beyond group affairs to include ideas about the universe, human existence, and causal relationships

\* Durkheim stated that the totem may thus be seen as an institution which leads to three distinct kinds of religious activity:

1. A system of beliefs and rites which unifies and binds the social group together around a sacred object;
2. A system of rules which sets out what individual obligations are toward this sacred object; and
3. A system of rites for worshipping the sacred object

\* An emblem operating much like a badge, insignia, or coat of arms representing membership in a group today, in totemistic religions the totem:

1. Is implicated in virtually everything individuals do (e.g. in religious ceremony, in healing, in bestowing courage against enemies, etc.)
2. It is believed to have extraordinary sacredness, to be kept at a distance from the profane
3. Its sacredness is derived from its ability to represent the group (e.g. its customs, traditions, social practices, and members.

\* It is from this function of representing the group that the religious character of the totem emerges. This occurs in three important respects:

1. It represents the *collective beliefs and social practices* of the group to the individuals who make it up;
2. It represents the collective to itself *historically* in its *legends and myths*; and
3. It represents the collective to itself in the form of a *total social reality.*

\* In all of this:

* Rites/ceremonies can arouse passionate intensity

(“collective effervescence”) where individuals experience something larger than themselves

- Emotional responses cause people to identify their inner selves with this larger reality (the collective community in disguised form)

\* At bottom, Durkheim is arguing that religious organization is in fact group organization. The objects, practices, and experiences of religion occur in relation to society itself (though this is not recognized as such).

\* Durkheim saw religion as the medium through which shared social life is experienced. Yet, in his day, it was giving way to science and, he speculated, civic rites.