



Sacredness: A Sociological and Religious Perspective



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Abstract

Human beings, in their uniqueness, possess the capacities for language, art, and religion. Language serves as a fundamental means of communication, enabling individuals to express abstract ideas and concepts and to engage in discussions concerning theories and notions that transcend immediate sensory experience. In addition, human beings exhibit the remarkable capacity for artistic expression and creativity, distinguishing them from other forms of life. Furthermore, humanity is the only observable reality that has developed an understanding of the divine, whether conceived as gods, goddesses, spirits, or a supreme being. At the same time, human beings share certain characteristics with the mineral, plant, and animal kingdoms, reflecting their embeddedness within the natural world. As Martin Heidegger argues, the human person is fundamentally a "being-in-the-world," inseparably situated within the context of existence. Nevertheless, according to M. N. Roy, the primacy of reason is what fundamentally differentiates human beings from animals. Religion may be understood as humanity's search for meaning and purpose. Human beings are meaning-seeking creatures who strive to make sense of their existence and experiences. Because they seek order and coherence, they often find it difficult to cope with chaos and uncertainty. Consequently, situations that threaten their sense of meaning and stability can generate profound anxiety and existential insecurity.

1. Introduction

The most fundamental concept shared by all religions, including certain atheistic forms of religiosity, is the notion of the sacred. While some interpret the sacred as a deeper, often unexplored dimension of the human self, others regard it as a transcendent reality that exists beyond the material world and cannot be reduced to any finite or empirical object.

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Various scholars have proposed different explanations for the origin and nature of the sacred. Émile Durkheim argued that the sacred is essentially society itself endowed with supernatural qualities. He identified the concept of *mana* as a key element of sacred experience, suggesting that religion, God, and the sacred function as social mechanisms that promote cohesion, loyalty, and integration within tribal communities.

Other theorists have offered alternative interpretations. Makarius traced the origin of the sacred to the sense of awe and reverence associated with blood and the taboos surrounding it in primitive societies. René Girard, on the other hand, maintained that the sacred represents a sublimated expression of humanity's inherent violent instincts, concealed through religious symbols and rituals.

In contrast to these sociological and anthropological perspectives, Nathan Söderblom emphasized the centrality of the sacred within religion itself. He stated, "The sacred is the most important word in religion; it is even more important than God, for a religion can exist without a clearly defined conception of divinity, but no genuine religion can exist without a distinction between the sacred and the profane." Söderblom described the sacred as a mysterious power or reality associated with particular objects, persons, places, or experiences. He linked the sacred to the concept of *mana*, understood as a beneficial and efficacious power, as well as to the notion of taboo, which conveys ideas of danger, prohibition, and restriction. For Söderblom, however, the sacred is not merely an impersonal force; rather, it arises from a genuine encounter with the divine and reflects authentic contact with God.

2. Materials and Methods

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive, and interpretive research design to examine the concept of sacredness from sociological, phenomenological, anthropological, philosophical, and religious perspectives. The research is theoretical in nature and is based on the analysis of classical and contemporary scholarly literature concerning religion and sacredness.

Sources of Data

The study relies primarily on secondary data drawn from books, journal articles, and authoritative academic texts in the fields of sociology of religion, religious studies, philosophy, anthropology, and psychology. Key thinkers examined include Émile Durkheim, Mircea Eliade, Rudolf Otto, Karl Marx, Max Weber, Peter Berger, Sigmund Freud, Friedrich Nietzsche, and E. B. Tylor. In addition, religious traditions such as Jainism and indigenous Adivasi beliefs are discussed to provide comparative insights into the understanding of the sacred.

Data Collection

Data were collected through a systematic review of relevant literature. Scholarly sources were identified through academic databases, university libraries, and recognized publications related to religion and sacredness. Priority was given to peer-reviewed articles, seminal books, and foundational theoretical works that directly address the concepts of the sacred, religion, ritual, social order, and human meaning-making.

Data Analysis

The collected materials were analyzed using thematic and comparative analysis. Thematic analysis was employed to identify recurring ideas and concepts related to sacredness, including the sacred-profane distinction, ritual, symbolism, social integration, transcendence, and meaning. Comparative analysis was used to examine similarities and differences among the various theoretical perspectives and religious traditions discussed in the study. The analysis followed three main stages:

- Identification of Key Concepts: Major concepts and definitions of sacredness were extracted from each scholar and tradition.
- Categorization of Perspectives: The views were grouped into broader analytical categories, such as sociological, phenomenological, psychological, and religious perspectives.
- Synthesis and Interpretation: The findings were synthesized to develop an integrated understanding of sacredness as both a social and existential phenomenon.

Validity and Reliability

To ensure the validity and reliability of the study, the research utilized widely recognized academic sources and foundational theoretical texts. Cross-referencing among multiple scholars and traditions was conducted to enhance the consistency and credibility of the interpretations. The study also maintained conceptual clarity by carefully distinguishing between descriptive, interpretive, and evaluative claims.

Ethical Considerations

As this research is based exclusively on published literature and does not involve human participants, no formal ethical approval was required. Nevertheless, proper academic citation and acknowledgment of all sources were maintained throughout the study to uphold scholarly integrity.

3. Results and Discussions

Sociological and Religious Perspectives on Sacredness

The concept of the sacred occupies a central place in the study of religion and has been interpreted from diverse theological, phenomenological, anthropological, sociological, and psychological perspectives. Although scholars differ regarding its origin and nature, most agree that the distinction between the sacred and the profane constitutes a fundamental feature of religious consciousness.

The Sacred as Religious Experience

Mircea Eliade (1907–1986) maintained that the sacred forms the foundation of all religious experience. According to Eliade, human beings become aware of the sacred through its manifestation in the world as a reality that is qualitatively different from ordinary, profane existence. He referred to such manifestations as *hierophanies*—moments in which the sacred reveals itself through objects, persons, places, myths, or symbols. For Eliade, the sacred never discloses itself directly in its fullness; rather, it becomes accessible through symbolic forms and

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religious narratives. The mystery of the sacred lies precisely in its willingness to reveal itself through finite and historical realities while simultaneously transcending them.

Similarly, Rudolf Otto (1869–1937) argued that the sacred cannot be fully apprehended through rational inquiry alone but is encountered primarily through religious symbols, rituals, and institutions. He identified a universal religious experience that underlies the diverse beliefs and practices found across cultures, which he termed the *numinous*. Otto described the numinous as a profound encounter with the “wholly other,” characterized by both fascination and awe. He observed that individuals experiencing the numinous often become acutely aware of their own finitude and insignificance before an overwhelming sacred reality. This encounter evokes feelings of mystery, reverence, holy fear, and attraction toward what Otto described as the “All-Holy” and “All-Pure.”

Durkheim and the Sociological Interpretation of Religion

While phenomenologists such as Eliade and Otto emphasized the experiential dimension of the sacred, sociologists sought to explain religion in terms of social structures and collective life. Émile Durkheim challenged the prevailing definitions of religion that focused exclusively on belief in supernatural beings. One influential example was the definition proposed by E. B. Tylor (1832–1917), who described religion as “belief in spiritual beings.” Durkheim considered this definition inadequate because it failed to account for religious traditions, such as Buddhism, in which belief in a personal deity is either absent or secondary.

After critically examining existing definitions, Durkheim proposed that all religions distinguish between two fundamental domains: the sacred and the profane. For him, religion consists of a unified system of beliefs and practices related to sacred things—things set apart from ordinary life and regarded with special reverence. These beliefs and practices unite adherents into a moral community, which Durkheim called a “church.” Religion therefore serves not merely as a set of doctrines but as a social institution that promotes solidarity and collective identity.

Durkheim's sociological analysis led him to critique two dominant theories concerning the origin of religion: animism and naturism. The animistic school, represented by Tylor, argued that religion originated from early human reflections on dreams, death, and visions, leading to the belief in souls and spirits. According to Tylor, the concept of the soul emerged from attempts to explain the difference between living and dead bodies and the appearance of human figures in dreams. However, Durkheim argued that this theory failed to explain how a soul or phantom, initially conceived as an ordinary aspect of human existence, became transformed into an object of sacred reverence.

Durkheim was equally critical of naturistic theories, which attributed the origins of religion to humanity's awe before natural phenomena such as storms, celestial bodies, and other impressive manifestations of nature. Although such phenomena may inspire wonder, Durkheim maintained that the theory does not adequately explain how natural objects acquire sacred status. In both cases, the crucial question remained unanswered: what transforms an ordinary object or experience into something sacred?

Durkheim's answer was fundamentally sociological. He argued that sacredness originates not from supernatural realities but from society itself. Through collective rituals and communal experiences, social groups generate a powerful sense of unity and emotional intensity that becomes projected onto symbols, objects, and institutions. These symbols, such as totems in tribal societies, come to represent the collective identity of the group and are therefore invested with sacred significance. In this sense, the sacred is society symbolically worshipping itself.

Religion thus functions as a mechanism for reinforcing social cohesion, collective memory, and moral order.

4. Conclusion

Religion may be understood as humanity's enduring search for meaning, purpose, and order in the face of uncertainty and chaos. As meaning-seeking beings, humans continually strive to interpret their experiences and construct coherent frameworks through which life can be understood. Religious beliefs and practices have historically provided such frameworks, enabling individuals and communities to navigate existential questions and social realities.

The sociological perspectives examined in this study demonstrate that religion performs significant functions within society. Durkheim viewed religion as a symbolic expression of collective life that promotes social cohesion through shared beliefs, rituals, and moral values. Karl Marx, by contrast, interpreted religion as a response to human suffering within class-divided societies, arguing that it functions as a form of consolation for the oppressed. Max Weber emphasized religion's transformative potential, highlighting its capacity to inspire social change and shape economic, political, and cultural developments. Peter Berger further argued that religion serves as a "sacred canopy," providing a meaningful and legitimating framework that sustains social order and protects individuals from the threat of anomie and chaos.

Despite their differing interpretations, these perspectives converge in recognizing the central role of religion in human life. Whether understood as a source of social integration, ideological expression, social transformation, or existential meaning, religion remains closely connected to humanity's quest for order and significance. Consequently, sacredness may be viewed not merely as a religious category but as a fundamental dimension of human existence. It reflects humanity's persistent awareness of realities that transcend ordinary experience and expresses a deep-seated human inclination to seek meaning, value, and purpose beyond the immediate material world.

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