

## **Durkheim's Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (1912)**

Study of religion of Australian Aborigines

The necessary component of religion: division of the universe into the sacred and the profane

The sacred: “extraordinary, transcendent and outside the everyday course of events”

The profane: everything else

Rites (ritual): rules governing how to behave toward sacred objects

Church: members united by common ideas and rites regarding the sacred

Religion: “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices, which unite into one single moral community called a church, all those who adhere to them.”

Sacred object of Aborigines: totem (representation of animal or plant)

Totem is also representative of some segment of society (e.g., clan)

Symbol of god & society are same because god & society are same

How is society like a god?

1. Superior to us
2. We depend on it
3. We must submit ourselves to its rules (which we haven't made & don't desire)

## **Durkheim's Theory of Religious Gatherings**

Answers question of how sacred/profane division arose

Three crucial components

1. Periodic assembling
2. Establishing a common focus (e.g., sacred object)
3. Engaging in collective ritual actions regarding the object

Effects of these gatherings:

1. Periodic gatherings make the social group real

“It is by uttering the same cry, pronouncing the same word, or performing the same gesture in regard to the same object that they become and feel themselves to be in unison... So it is the homogeneity of these [common] movements that gives the group consciousness of itself and consequently makes it exist”

2. Feelings of emotional solidarity, excitement, exhilaration & comfort
3. Feelings are attributed to common focus/group symbol
4. Makes symbols of the group sacred

Research using Durkheim's theory of religious gatherings

Pevin (1968): Tupperware as sacred object

Schweingruber (1999): periodic gatherings of door-to-door salespersons