

Sacred

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In *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Durkheim defined a religion as a “moral community” with a “unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden.” Religious beliefs define a category of sacred things; religious rites set out the rules by which the sacred is to be protected from the profane. Durkheim meant the concept to be quite general. In principle, anything can be sacred: “sacred things are simply collective ideals that have fixed themselves on material objects.” It forms part of his argument that religion is a hypostasization of the social structure, the function of which is to represent the social group to itself, so to speak, generating social solidarity in the process. Both the ordinary business of economic life and the “cash nexus” of the market have often been seen (in theory and practice) as profane. In the simplest case, sacred things cannot be commodities. If they can be transferred at all, it must be by some more appropriate method, such as *gift exchange. Coming into contact with the market is a kind of ritual pollution that defiles the sacred object and requires some form of purification.

Many critics of capitalism have argued that the market undermines individual motives, corrupts social relationships or trivializes goods by measuring them in terms of money. While they may use the language of sacred and profane, or argue that society is undermined by the expansion of the market, they do not enter fully into the spirit of Durkheim’s view. The system of *classification that creates sacred things is an object of study from the Durkheimian point of view, not a means of argument. Cries of outrage or horror in the face of increasing commodification may be evidence that the moral order is being threatened, but from this perspective they must count as an aspect rather than an explanation of the process.

Although the details of Durkheim’s theory of the sacred pose severe problems, the core notion that people make systematic efforts to keep some things “set apart

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and forbidden” has proved very fruitful. Classically, sociologists examined how the sacred was protected from contact with the market. Since the late 1970s, interest has increasingly focused on the moral order of the market itself, in a way that deliberately dismantles the older contrast between economy and culture. At the level of whole societies, Durkheim’s emphasis on shared systems of classification and ritual action can be found in institutionalist studies of comparative economic organization (see *institutionalism, old and new). On a different scale, a growing body of research demonstrates that money in everyday life is subject to myriad distinctions, earmarked for special purposes, and restricted to particular circuits of exchange. Durkheim’s original insight about the persistence of the sacred can be seen behind much of this work, despite its application to an area he would have seen as profane.

Further Reading

Durkheim, Émile (1995 [1912]) *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, New York: Free Press.

Zelizer, Viviana (1994) *The Social Meaning of Money*, New York: Harper Collins.

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