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Q3(b)

How do you relate the concepts of 'Sacred' and 'Profane' in Durkheim's theory of religion with a focus on the role of totem?

UPSC Civil Services Mains 2015 · Anthropology GS 1 · 15 marks · Religion

5. Religion: Anthropological approaches to the study of religion (evolutionary, psychological and functional); monotheism and polytheism; sacred and profane; myths and rituals; forms of religion in tribal and peasant Societies (animism, animatism, fetishism, naturism and totemism); religion, magic and science distinguished; magico-religious functionaries (priest, shaman, medicine man, sorcerer and witch).

Core demand of the question

- How do you relate the concepts of 'Sacred' and 'Profane' in Durkheim's theory of religion with a focus on the role of totem?
- Write about 200 words for 15 marks

Revision summary

Sacred and profane are Durkheim's two worlds of ritual marking.

Religion unites a church around sacred things.

The Australian totem stands for the clan.

Ritual effervescence makes society felt as a force.

Lévi-Strauss later added classification; the social reading still holds.

Introduction

Émile Durkheim split the world into sacred and profane. The totem is the emblem that makes the clan visible as a sacred thing.

Body

Sacred and profane

- **Sacred** things are set apart and forbidden, protected by ritual. **Profane** things are the ordinary workaday world.
- The split is social, not a list of gods. A rock becomes sacred when the group marks it.
- Religion is the system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, uniting believers into a church.

Totem

- In **The Elementary Forms**, Australian totemism is the simplest case. The totem animal or plant stands for the clan.
- Worship of the totem is worship of society itself. The clan feels a force, which Durkheim called **mana**-like effervescence in the corroboree.
- Taboos keep the totem sacred. Eating rules and designs on churinga objects carry the emblem.

Relation

- **Sacred**/profane is the grammar. **Totem** is the noun that names the group.
- **Radcliffe-Brown** kept the social function. **Lévi-Strauss** later said totems classify, they do not only worship society.
- **The teaching point for anthropology remains:** god-talk is also group-talk.

Flow diagram

Religion -> Sacred set apart
Religion -> Profane ordinary
Totem -> Clan emblem
Clan emblem -> Sacred set apart

Conclusion

Durkheim's sacred is the marked, collective side of life; the profane is unmarked routine. The **totem** is the clan's flag, so totemic religion is society made visible.

Facts & figures

Durkheim

The Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1912) used Australian totemism as the elementary case.

Sacred

That which is set apart and forbidden, surrounded by ritual care.

Totem

Emblem of the clan; the god of the clan is the clan itself, in **Durkheim's** formula.

Lévi-Strauss

Totemism as a way of thinking in differences, not only as group worship.