

COLLEGE GUILD
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Religion

Unit 3 of 3

Religion and Ritual

In the last unit, we looked at the ways people have attempted to control the influence religion has by studying the work of Karl Marx and Saba Mahmood. In this unit, we will be looking at the ways religion may feel omnipresent in our daily lives. Can we ever escape religion?

We will be focusing on rituals in this unit. Before we begin, let's consider the following questions:

1. **What is a ritual?**
2. **Do you have rituals that you practice regularly and when do you practice them?**
3. **What is the difference between a ritual and a habit?**
4. **Why do you think religions often have some sort of ritual or bodily practice associated with them?**

David Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) is a French sociologist and a colleague of Karl Marx famous for pioneering the academic approach of looking at the behavior of large groups and certain patterns they tend to follow instead of doing individual case studies as James, Smith and Mahmood have done. In his book *Suicide*, Durkheim compared the rate of suicides by Protestants and Catholics and concluded that Catholics tend to have a lower rate of suicide than Protestants because there is more social regulation fostered by the Catholic Church. In other words, in his view, Catholics have a greater sense of group identity because there are more traditions and a sense of shared culture fostered through the Catholic community. Because of this, Catholics are less likely to commit suicide from a sense of alienation or loneliness.

His findings are controversial based on where he got his data and whether he gathered enough information on the groups he was interested in. However, his bird's eye approach to human behavior has been made the standard for how sociologists carry out their research today.

5. **What are some disadvantages and advantages to Durkheim's sociological approach in comparison to the case-study approach? Please compare and contrast the two.**

In his "Introduction," Durkheim states: *Like every other human institution religions begin nowhere...The problem I pose is altogether different.* (7) Religion begins nowhere?!

6. **If Durkheim is not interested in the origin of religion, where do you think his interest in religion lies? What question drives him to carry out his study? Consider the methodological approach he uses.**
7. **Name one scholar from the previous religion units that you believe cared about the origins of religion. Please explain your choice.**

In Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), he studied the mourning rituals of a group in Australia that practiced totemism. In a nutshell, totemism is a term scholars use to describe a belief system based on the practitioners having a spiritual connection to a being that is embodied by an animal, plant or symbol. It is a practice that is often found in hunter and gatherer groups.

8. Why do you think Durkheim went all the way to Australia to study religious groups there? Why didn't he just study the Catholics and Protestants of Europe?

Durkheim states: *...primitive religions do not merely allow us to isolate the constituent elements of religion; their great advantage is also that they aid in its explanation. Because the facts are simpler, the relations between them are more apparent. (6).... I would like to find a means of discerning the ever-present causes on which the most basic forms of religious thought and practice depend. For the reasons just set forth, the causes are more easily observable if the societies in which they are observed are less complex. (7)*

9. What are some problematic assumptions Durkheim has in studying religious groups outside Europe?

By studying hunter and gatherer groups for the reason he states, he believes them to be less advanced or behind Europeans. There are clearly racist ideologies embedded into his research methodologies. Unfortunately, this was not an uncommon thought. This was shared by many scholars of the times and we can unfortunately find echoes of it in the work of some religion scholars today.

Durkheim never went to Australia to actually meet and interact with the religious group he was researching! This is called being an armchair scholar meaning that you rely solely on others for information to deliver information to you instead of taking the time and effort to truly get to know and understand the group on their own terms. This problematic style of a scholarship can be traced to early European imperialism when European countries started expanding their empires by colonizing parts of Africa and Asia. Colonizers became fascinated by the rituals and traditions they found in these places and jumped to terrifying conclusions that often dehumanized and other-ized the cultures of whole civilizations that made European societies look more advanced. It is disastrous to say the least and we feel the consequences of their actions today.

10. Furthermore, Durkheim refrained from having his imperial sources interview individuals who practiced these traditions. There are obvious problematic imperialistic reasons for not interviewing these individuals. But also consider the fact that Durkheim did not interview the Catholic and Protestants for his book *Suicide* as well... what might be a feasible reason Durkheim did not interview individuals?

11. What are alternative ways Durkheim could have conducted his study? What are some suggestions you would make to combat imperialist tendencies in academia today?

With this at the forefront of our minds, let's take a look at what he gathered.

In his chapter, "The Piracular Rites and Ambiguity of the Notion of the Sacred," Durkheim describes the mourning rituals, which ranged from loud crying to cutting oneself with knives—practiced by the religious group in Australia. What he found noteworthy was that almost everyone in the community participated in some way, even if they did not know the deceased very well!

Based on the descriptions he received, Durkheim wondered why people went to all this trouble to mourn, particularly people who were not particularly close to the dead. He reached a startling conclusion: *Mourning is not the spontaneous expression of individual emotions... The rite is over, the mourning done. (399-400).*

12. Do you agree with Durkheim? This a pretty controversial thing to say! Most people see mourning as a deeply personal and private thing that is different for everyone.

Durkheim defends his position with the following explanation:

When society is going through events that sadden, distress, or anger it, it pushes its members to give witness to their sadness, distress or anger through expressive action. It demands crying, lamenting and wounding oneself and others as a matter of duty. It does because those collective demonstrations, as well as the moral communion they simultaneously bear witness to and reinforce, restore to the group the energy that the events threatened to take away, and thus enables it to recover its equilibrium. (415-416).

He formulates a similar idea in another passage as well:

However complex the outward manifestations of religious life may be, its inner essence is simple, and one and the same. Everywhere it fulfills the same need and derives from the same state of mind. In all its forms, its object is to lift man above himself and to make him live a higher life than he would if he obeyed only his individuals' impulses. The beliefs express this life in terms of representations; the rites organize and regulate its functioning. (417).

13. Based on the above two passages, who does the mourning actually benefit, the deceased or the community the deceased left behind? Formulate in your own words how Durkheim views the role rituals play in human life.

Other scholars have taken a completely different approach to the role rituals play not only in religious practices, but in the everyday. In the book entitled, *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, professors Adam B. Seligman, Robert P. Weller, Michael J. Puett and Bennett Simon greatly depart from Durkheim's understanding of ritual.

They borrow heavily from thinkers we explored in our philosophy unit, Xunzi and Confucius! They quote Xunzi to look at the way ritual has been understood by Confucians long before Durkheim appeared on the scene:

The gentleman gives patterns to Heaven and Earth. The gentleman forms a triad with Heaven and Earth, is the summation of the myriad things, and is the father and mother of the people. Without the gentleman, Heaven and Earth have no pattern, ritual and righteousness have no unity; above there is no ruler or leader, below there is no father or son. This is called the utmost chaos. Ruler and minister, father and son, older and younger brother, husband and wife begin and then end, end and then begin. They share with Heaven and Earth the same pattern, and last for ten thousand generations. This is called the great foundation. (Wangzhi 9/39/3–6, 5.7a–7b)

14. "Unpack" the above passage. Where does ritual come from? Is it inherent to the natural world?

Seligman and his colleagues assert that rituals are not about re-shaping the external world into a coherent harmony as Durkheim asserts (20). For them, rituals actually exist at the border between our present social reality—with all its complications and rawness—and idealized reality—the world that activists and do-gooders everywhere strive for. They state that rituals exist in the subjective sense meaning that it operates in our everyday life as *if* the idealized reality exists.

Simply put, ritual is "an act of world construction" (24).

15. Explain what the above quote means in your own words!

Seligman et. al. draw upon the example of saying "please" and "thank you" to argue their point:

Ritual activity—and, with it, the construction of a subjunctive universe— occurs throughout many different modes of human interaction, not just religion. The courtesy and politeness of daily life are also modes of ritual action. The truth value of such ritual invocations (like saying “please” and “thank you”) is not very important. We are inviting our interlocutor to join us in imagining a particular symbolic universe within which to construe our actions. When I frame my requests with please and thank you, I am not giving a command (to pass the salt), but I am very much recognizing your agency (your ability to decline my request). Hence, saying please and thank you communicates in a formal and invariant manner—to both of us—that we understand our interaction as the voluntary actions of free and equal individuals. “Please” creates the illusion of equality by recognizing the other’s power to decline. (21)

16. Do you think their view of saying “please” and “thank you” is too cynical? When you say please and thank you in your daily life, are they said with sincerity or only because they are expected? What are the benefits of this kind of politeness?

In conclusion, through their creation of an illusion, rituals inadvertently make possible reality, (our ordered social world with unspoken rules and customs). (22)

17. Now that you’ve seen both sides, which theory of ritual do you ascribe to, Durkheim’s or Seligman and his colleagues’?

18. We started off this course by asking you how you would define or understand religion. Has it changed upon taking this course? If so, how so?

Congrats on completing College Guild’s religion course! Thank you for stepping out of your comfort zone and delving into the messy and controversial world of theorizing about religion! Since this is a new course, we would greatly appreciate your feedback on the course as it is now, what you liked about it and what you think can be improved. Thank you! 😊

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