AKC 4 General - Spring Term 2010  Wonders and Challenges of Religious Diversity

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LIVING WITH PLURAL FORMS OF THE SACRED IN CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY

PROF GORDON LYNCH, BIRKBECK COLLEGE, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

Three understandings of the sacred

• sacred = religious (e.g. ‘The Sacred Made Real’, ‘sacred music’)

• Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane* (1957): ‘Homo religiosus’ – the human capacity to respond to transcendent reality through particular forms of expression (emotion, myth, construction of sacred space); loss of this sacred sensibility in modern society and the need for its recovery.

• Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* (1912):
  
  i) how do we understand the social nature of life? what is distinctive about modern compared to pre-modern forms of social life? Durkheim tried to answer these questions in the *Elementary Forms* by returning to simple forms of ‘primitive’ society.
  
  ii) sacred as ‘things set apart’; fundamental forms of power, meaning and purity qualitatively different to other aspects of social life
  
  iii) sacred shapes the categories through which people think about the world; people are bound to sacred forms through powerful emotional attachments, which are themselves generated through particular kinds of social/ritual activity. Attachment to sacred forms binds people into moral communities, characterised by particular ways of thinking, feeling and acting in the world.
  
  iv) some problems with Durkheim’s theory of the sacred; evidence, not a general theory of society, and the fact that modern societies are not generally organised around a single form of the sacred.

Why does this matter?

• fewer people may be active adherents of particular religions, but society is still powerfully shaped by sacred forms

• being able to identify those contemporary sacred forms might help us to understand better the ways in which individuals and groups think, feel and act in particular ways, as well as how the sacred is bound up with different forms of social conflict

• we can think about the way in which a much wider range of social institutions have sacred significance beyond traditional religious institutions (e.g. the media, the legal-system).

From this subsequent neo-Durkheimian work, three important points have emerged:

• the breach or pollution of sacred forms will be experienced as painful and shocking by their adherents, requiring some form of public restitution. Sometimes it is possible for social movements or public institutions to achieve this (e.g. the Watergate hearings), but such acts of restitution become harder in societies in which there are many different sacred commitments.

• the sacred is a morally-ambiguous phenomenon

• sacred forms are not universal and timeless, but emerge through specific social and historical processes
Understanding social conflict in terms of the sacred

- The Iraq War, the sacred ritual of protest marches (a temporary ‘coalition’ of sacred forms), and the failed ritual of restitution of the Chilcot Inquiry (“Responsibility, but not a regret for removing Saddam Hussein”; Tony Blair)

- The case of the BBC and the DEC appeal for Gaza

- The fluidity of sacred identifications (BBC/DEC Gaza and the BBC/Nick Griffin on Question Time)

- Are common forms of the sacred possible any more? Sacrality of the care of children. The Universe Story?

- Do we need the sacred? Can we live by more mundane, everyday social bonds? Or collective rituals with minimal sacred content (e.g. Christmas)?

Further reading


- **AKC informal Discussion at Denmark Hill**, 10th & 25th February and 11th & 24th March, Deanery Meeting Room, 1st floor, WEC, 17.15-19.00
- **AKC Forum**, with Dr Marat Shterin and others – will take place on Monday, 22nd March at the Waterloo campus (refreshments will be served).
- **AKC Exam Registration** (Exam: Thursday, 1st April 2010) has not begun yet but you will be invited to register via your OneSpace Student Record in March.
Background notes: Despite some of the problems of Durkheim’s original theory of the sacred, other sociologists have since taken this up to analyse powerful symbols and forces in contemporary social life. Edward Shils wrote about the ways in which the social role of public institutions was connected with the ways in which they succeeded or failed in maintaining core sacred values in a given society. With Michael Young, Shils wrote a widely-discussed article exploring how the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 represented a sacred ritual in which, for a time, much of British society was bound to a common sacred community. Robert Bellah later developed the idea of the sacred in his theory of American ‘civil religion’, a set of beliefs, texts, spaces and rituals based on the sacredness of human rights and freedom, maintained in a democratic society, which should be used to build just and peaceful societies. Bellah’s work on civil religion was as much concerned with exploring how and why American society failed to live up to this sacred vision, as with how this civil religion was actually practised. Steven Lukes, who has written one of the most authoritative summaries of Durkheim’s life and thought, criticised the way in which some neo-Durkheimians had simplistically suggested that modern societies were still organised around one common form of the sacred, and argued that social divisions meant that celebrations of the sacred were as likely to produce conflict and ‘mobilize bias’ as to produce harmonious, moral communities. More recently, Jeffrey Alexander has continued this tradition by using a neo-Durkheimian understanding of the sacred to interpret contemporary society, arguing that social life is still shaped by sacred emotions and meanings, that social institutions play a key role in maintaining different forms of the sacred, and that ideas of the sacred play a fundamental role in defining who is seen as falling within and beyond the boundaries of acceptable, civil society. These ideas have also been taken up in media studies. Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz developed a theory of ‘media events’, in which they argued that media coverage of particular public events had become key rituals through which members of a society became bound into a community of shared feelings and values. This theory has since been widely debated, generating discussions of what counts as a ‘media event’, and how public media succeeds and fails in binding audiences into shared sacred communities.