

Emphasizing that religion is less an indivisible whole than a complex system of parts, [Durkheim] began by dividing these parts into *rites* (determined modes of action) and *beliefs* (collective representations); and since rites can be distinguished from other actions only by their object, and the nature of that object is determined by the beliefs, Durkheim insisted on defining the latter first. "All known religious beliefs," he observed, "present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all the things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words *profane* and *sacred*. The characteristic by which the latter is distinguished from the former, moreover, is simply that it is distinguished *absolutely*: "In all the history of human thought," Durkheim emphasized, "there exists no other example of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or so radically opposed to one another." Durkheim thus arrived at his preliminary definition of the essential parts of any religious system: *sacred things* are those isolated and protected by powerful interdictions; *profane things* are those which, according to those interdictions, must remain at a distance from their sacred counterparts; *religious beliefs* are representations which express the nature of sacred things and their relations, either with one another or with profane things; *religious rites* are rules of conduct which prescribe how one should behave in the presence of sacred things; and finally, where "a certain number of sacred things sustain relations of co-ordination or subordination with each other in such a way as to form a system having a certain unity," the beliefs and rites thus united constitute a *religion*.

The seemingly insuperable obstacle to the immediate acceptance of this definition was its subsumption of a body of facts ordinarily distinguished from religion -- i.e., *magic*. Indeed, magic is also composed of beliefs and rites, myths, dogmas, sacrifices, lustrations, prayers, chants, and dances as well; and the beings and forces invoked by the magician are not only similar to those addressed by religion, but are frequently the same. Yet historically, magic and religion have frequently exhibited a marked repugnance for one another, suggesting that any definition of the latter should find some means of excluding the former. For Durkheim, this means was Robertson Smith's insistence, in his *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*, that religion was a public, social, beneficent institution, while magic was private, selfish, and at least potentially maleficent. "The really religious beliefs," Durkheim could thus argue, "are always common to a determined group or 'Church,' which makes a profession of adhering to them and of practicing the rites connected with them.... The individuals which compose it feel themselves united to each other by the simple fact that they have a common faith." The belief in magic, by contrast, does not result in binding together those who adhere to it, nor in uniting them into a group leading a common life.... Between the magician and the individuals who consult him, as between these individuals themselves, there are no lasting bonds which make them members of the same moral community, comparable to that formed by the believers in the same god or the observers of the same cult.

Hence Durkheim's definition: "A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden -- beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them."