

We See The Sacred From Afar, To See It The Same

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Humans have many important but messy and complex behaviors associated with the words “religion”, “holy”, “sacred”, “revere”, and “awe”. After a careful examination, my judgment agrees with that of many social scientists: the core concept here is “the sacred”. Let us now focus on that.

Humans have long treated some especially important things in a distinctive special “sacred” way. For example, the following are widely seen as at least somewhat sacred: family, love, honesty, liberty, school, art, music, fiction, innovation, inquiry, religion, spirits, sky, space, nature, sport, talk, friendship, health, medicine, children, democracy, law, sex, death, war, royalty, and nation. While we see wide variation in who treats what as how sacred, almost all of us treat some of these as substantially sacred. Yes, we have many good reasons to value such things, but why value them in this special “sacred” way?

I see three obvious questions here:

1. What exactly is this distinctive “sacred” pattern of behavior?
2. Who tends to pick what when for this special treatment?
3. Is there a functional explanation for why we treat some things in this way, an explanation that accounts for as many as possible of the details in these patterns?

Over a century ago, Emile Durkheim, founder of the discipline of sociology, offered a few answers. He said that the main social origin and function of the sacred was to create camaraderie and solidarity, in part by inspiring awe, devotion and respect, and via creating an emotional state of “collective effervescence”. The sacred, he said, is “the feeling that the collectivity inspires in its members, but projected outside the minds that experience them, and objectified”. He also said that it is “set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite in one single moral community ... all those who adhere to them” (Durkheim 1912).

In this paper, I offer a variation on this thesis. I start by collecting 51 reported correlates of the sacred, and grouping them into seven themes. The first three themes are A) on the sacred being valuable, B) on our showing others how much we value it, and C) on shared views of the sacred binding groups together. Durkheim’s framework can make sense of these three themes, as groups seeking to bind together via a shared view of something should naturally try to get their members to value that view highly, and have those members show each other that fact.

The other four themes of sacred correlates seem harder to explain. These are D) on how sacred things are set apart, E) on how they are idealized, F) on how we are to feel not think them, and G) on how touching the sacred makes stuff more sacred. In this paper, I try to explain these other four themes by assuming that group members can better achieve social cohesion by seeing their sacred things more the same, via seeing such things as if from afar regardless of true distance. Let me explain.

“Construal level theory” from psychology says that we have different modes for thinking about things that seem near to us, relative to far away. Things can seem near versus far in space, time, sociality, hypotheticality, and plan or language abstraction. This variation presents an obstacle to groups trying to bind together by seeing sacred things the same, as often some of them will see those things up close, while others see them from afar. For example, if you see your upcoming personal medical treatment up close, and I see it from afar, we may as a result have different opinions on its value.

A solution here is for group members to change their usual seeing habits for sacred things. Instead of seeing near cases in near mode, and far cases in far mode, as we do for ordinary things, for sacred things we instead see both near and far cases in far mode. As a result, we are more likely to see those sacred things the same as others do. For example, if you and I both see your upcoming medical treatment as if from afar, we can more agree on its value.

Construal level theory clearly predicts that seeing things in far mode tends to cause us to idealize them, and also to intuit them instead of thinking about them. In addition, this strategy of seeing the sacred from afar regardless of distance seems most easily accomplished via a discrete mode switch, a switch which thus pushes us to “set apart” the sacred. Furthermore, always seeing a sacred thing from afar plausibly leaves us feeling a deficit of near contact with that thing, a deficit that we can fill by giving extra significance to concrete objects associated with sacred topics. Thus, this see-sacred-from-afar theory can, to varying degrees, plausibly explain all four of the remaining sacred themes listed above.

For example, by seeing our education or career as sacred, we can more see it the same across our lifetime. This lets us feel more strongly connected to a constant personal identity, and gives us an emotional distance that can help us stick to long-term plans in the face of emotionally-potent short-term obstacles. However, this added distance also makes it harder for us to say in as much detail why we prefer our school or career choices.

As another example, we usually see love as more sacred than sex; today sex mainly gets sacred by relating to love. While we are pretty clear on what is sex, our attitudes toward it vary greatly. Those directly engaged in a sex act see it in a near mode, and often see its value quite differently from distant observers. In contrast, we all tend to approve of love, in part because we all see it abstractly, as if from a distance. And this distance can help us stay committed to our love during difficult times.

However, even when we have been in love many times, and are currently in a long-term relationship, we often feel that we aren’t clear on how exactly that abstract concept applies to our current life. As Joni Mitchell says in *Both Sides Now*, “Its love’s illusions that I recall, I really don’t know love ... at all.” Thus, compared to sex, seeing love as if from afar helps us to unite by seeing it the same. Communities can unite by seeing love as sacred, lovers can unite in their shared love, and each person can feel unified across time in their constant stance toward love.

This paper will now first discuss the correlates of the sacred, then summarize construal level theory, and finally discuss how a see-sacred-from-a-far theory can help to explain key sacred correlate themes.

Correlates of the Sacred

Below I list 51 beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors that seem to correlate with things called “sacred”. Note that the strength of many of these correlations is modest; they often have exceptions. Note also that I’m trying harder here to be complete than to avoid redundancies. This section draws from many sources, including (Durkheim 1912; Righetti 2014; Streng 2000; Tetlock 2003), but draws most heavily from (Belk et al. 1989).

The fifty correlates are split into seven themes, regarding the sacred being valuable, our showing its value to others, groups being united by it, it being set apart, it being idealized, our feeling not thinking about it, and how touching the sacred makes stuff sacred.

A. It Is Valuable:

1. Sacred things are highly (or lowly) valued. We politely revere, respect, & prioritize them.
2. We revere sacred beliefs as well as acts. We feel dirty if thoughts go near illicit ones.
3. Sacred is big, powerful, extraordinary. We fear, submit, & see it as larger than ourselves.
4. Sacred things matter for our health, luck, courage, and other outcomes we care about.
5. We want the sacred “for itself”, rather than as a means to get other things.
6. Sacred things are either more homogenous, or more unique, whichever is better.

B. We Show That We See It:

7. Sacred induces strong emotions: e.g., awe, joy, serenity, devotion, repulsion, & fear.
8. We get emotionally attached to the sacred; our stance toward it is part of our identity.
9. We desire to connect with the sacred, and to be more associated with it.
10. To approach the sacred, we use self-control to purify ourselves, sacrifice, & commit.
11. We enjoy sacrificing for the sacred, to purify, & respect sacred, including via odd beliefs.
12. We often feel reluctant to feel sacred joy, awe, etc. if we have not sufficiently earned it.
13. We find it hard to imagine a utopia that we would like without sacred suffering.
14. Sacred brings us comfort & consolation in hard times; losing it can feel devastating.
15. We affirm & learn sacred via mythic stories & accounts of how we & it fit in a universe.
16. We find stories that share our sacred values and beliefs nicer and easier to understand.
17. We have rules regarding how to approach sacred stuff, in part to protect us.
18. The sacred isn’t for use by commoners, or for common purposes.

C. It Unites Us:

19. Shared views about the sacred bind, define, and distinguish social groups.
20. Shared rituals & festivals bind & emotionally charge us, & help us to see sacred.
21. We want our associates to share our view of and attachment to the sacred.
22. We get offended when others seem to deny our sacred views, and respond vigorously.
23. We feel more equal to each other regarding sacred things; status matters less there.

24. Either everyone (e.g. love) or very few (e.g. medicine) are entitled to sacred opinions.
25. Charismatic leaders motivate, get acceptance, in part via appeals to sacred connections.
26. Experts of the sacred are prestigious & trusted, & oft allowed to break sacred rules.
27. Sacrificing for the sacred is seen as pro-social.

D. Is Set Apart:

28. Sacred things are sharply set apart and distinguished from the ordinary, mundane.
29. Sacred things do not fit well with our animal natures, such as self-interest, competition.
30. We dislike mixing sacred and mundane things together.
31. We dislike money prices of sacred, & trades to get more mundane via less sacred.
32. We dislike for-profit orgs of the sacred, relative to non-profits or government agencies.
33. We prefer discrete rules re sacred over continuous goals to achieve (Berns et al. 2012).

E. It is Idealized:

34. Sacred things feel less limited by physics, & can seem to have unlimited possibilities.
35. Sacred things really matter, fill deepest needs, complete us, make us pure, make all one.
36. Sacred things last longer, and decay or break less. Sometimes eternal and unchanging.
37. Sacred things are purer and cleaner, and closer to the ultimate core of existence.
38. Sacred things have fewer random coincidences; their patterns mean something.
39. Sacred things have fewer value conflicts with each other; you can have them all at once.
40. It is harder to judge the relative value of sacred things, compared to mundane things.

F. Feel Not Think It:

41. We understand the sacred poorly using cognitive rational analysis, or numbers.
42. We understand the sacred better using intuition, flow, creativity, and aesthetics.
43. Talk of the sacred uses vaguer terms, focusing on general impressions not details.
44. We are less open to arguments that might criticize the sacred.
45. How sacred things seem is less misleading; you can more trust their appearances.
46. The sacred is mysterious, unlikely and even inconsistent. Who are we to question it?
47. Sacred makes us stand outside ourselves, feel ecstasy, transcendence, different reality.
48. We do not make or control the sacred; it makes and transforms us.

G. Touching Makes & Shows It:

49. Stuff (objects, dates, people, words, sounds) that touches the sacred gets sacred itself.
50. We connect to sacred themes better via more frequent contact with sacred stuff.
51. Over time, stuff that we often connect to tends to become sacred via nostalgia.

Construal Level Theory

Human brains seem to be organized in part by levels of abstraction. Input signals are passed first to layers that look at very local sensory features, and then on up through layers that examine increasingly wider-scale situation features. These then feed into high level decisions, which feed back down into increasingly concrete layers, layers which translate signals into increasingly specific directives, ending in very particular motor controls.

Construal level theory says that this affects how we think; we have different mental modes for thinking abstractly versus concretely, and a continuum of modes between (Adler & Sarstedt 2021; Liberman & Trope 2003; Liberman & Trope 2008; Trope & Liberman 2010). At any one moment, we typically consider only a few important things up close, and many less important things far away. For things close we can attend carefully to their many concrete details, but for things far away we make do with fast crude calculations using sparse representations using only a few broad descriptors per item. (Math “abstractions” are of a different sort; they are calculated exactly and carefully.)

Things can be close versus far in many ways, including via time, spatial distance, social distance, category breadth, chance (certainty is closer), plans (constraints are close, goals are far), and language (tone, style, general impressions are far). We presume that things which tend to be close (or far) in some ways are also close (or far) in others. We expect our theories to fit reality better for far things than for close. As we plausibly use near mode more to choose our literal direct actions, we plausibly use far mode more symbolically, and to make social impressions.

For example, if you think in detail about your plans for tomorrow, you can see many practical obstacles to those plans, and also how hard it might be to judge if your plans are ethical. But if you instead think about your plans for an event years in the future, you will less notice practical obstacles nor ethical complications. So you will instead see your plans as easier to execute, and apply to them simpler-minded moral judgments. These tendencies get even stronger if this event will also happen far away in space, be done by someone else, or only happen given some unlikely preconditions.

The following are some of the many distinctions and axes reported to correlate with near vs. far: here vs. there; now vs. then; me or us vs. them; important vs. unimportant; past vs. future; down vs. up; warm vs. cold; red vs. blue; bright vs. dark; awake vs. asleep; morning lark vs. night owl; taste or touch vs. see or hear; slang or grunt vs. polite speech; more vs. less politically polarized; fast detailed repetitive vs. slow echoey novel music; voice or picture vs. words or faces; more vs. less intense affect; fear or sadness vs. anger, guilt, shame, pride, or regret; dislike or low mood vs. like or high mood; sex vs love; tempted vs. self-restrain; dominance vs. prestige; unsure, persuadable, seek info vs. confident, stubborn; conforming vs. independent; support authority vs. support underdogs; low power via acts vs. high power via associates; math/logic analysis vs. creative analogy; case-based comparable how con reasons vs. feature-based unique why pro reasons; uncertain vs. overconfident; theory/trend breaking vs. following; common likely real local event consequences vs. rare unlikely unreal global event causes; concrete, contextual, detailed, incidental relations vs. abstract, schematic, context-free, core, coarse, goal-related properties; narrow vs. broad categories; familiar vs. novel task/event; feasible safe vs. desirable risky acts; buy vs. sell; conflicted secondary local practical plan constraints vs. coherent central global symbolic ideal moral plan concerns; means or obstacles vs. ends; strong female vs weak male emotions; socially-near folks with unstable traits in small groups vs. socially-far folks with stable traits in big groups.

Explaining Sacred Themes

We usually have good reasons to value the many things that we see as “sacred”. But we also have many good reasons to value other things that we do not treat as sacredly. So the key question is: why do we treat sacred things differently, as described by the seven sacred correlate themes listed above?

I suggest that we can, to varying degrees, explain all seven of these themes by assuming that we treat some things that we value in a sacred manner in order to better bind us together into social groups and personal identities, and to distinguish those units from others. (Such a functional explanation can allow for other kinds of coexisting explanations, such as byproduct, evolutionary, developmental, or mechanistic explanations.)

This hypothesis requires that different social groups see a somewhat different mix of things as sacred, and that individuals have ways to show each other what they see as sacred. And these facts seem, by themselves, sufficient to explain the first three sacred correlate themes: on seeing the sacred as valuable, on showing that fact to others, and on groups binding together via shared views of the sacred.

The four other sacred themes seem harder to understand in these terms: sacred things being idealized, being set apart, being intuited more than deliberately thought, and rubbing off on more concrete objects. Why could not groups bind together by using deliberate thoughts to value often-flawed things that are often mixed up with other things, and that don't rub off on objects?

Yes, we might see each of these themes as expensive demands made of our sacred behavior, where by paying such extra costs we show a stronger commitment to the sacred. But this seems a weak explanation, as it could “explain” most any expensive behavior. Can we find stronger explanations?

I say “yes”, in the human tendency, described by “construal level theory”, to think differently about things that are up close versus far away. Because this tendency seems to be a substantial obstacle to group members seeing the sacred the same. And so I suggest that, to avoid this obstacle, humans acquired an ability to more consistently see some things in a relatively far mode, even when those things actually seem near. When using such an ability to consider the sacred value of something nearby, we should experience an unusual ease in making confident overall abstract judgments, but also an unusual difficulty in connecting such overall judgments to the details of the cases before us. Such as when we ask ourselves if we are really “in love”.

This strategy seems easier to implement as a discrete change of habits, replacing our usual habit of seeing things via modes that match their distance. Thus this see-sacred-from-a-far hypothesis can at least weakly explain why sacred things are discretely “set apart” from non-sacred things. Also, using discrete categories better allows us to impose and enforce behavioral rules, and

seeing sacred things as not fitting with self-interest or competition can encourage pro-group behavior.

Things we see in far mode are given sparser mental representations, with fewer broad descriptors per item. They are thus naturally idealized. And as they are associated with large space and time scales, they are seen as varying less over smaller scales. They are given simpler descriptions with fewer varying details, details that would be needed to represent defects, limitations, random coincidences, deviations from theory expectations, and misleading appearances. So far-seen things have fewer of these features. And looked at from far enough away, even the differences between different kinds of sacred things may fade and seem negligible.

Furthermore, we naturally find it harder to compare the distances of what is far away, compared to what is close. As, according to construal level theory, non-instrumental values seem further than instrumental values, we naturally find it harder to judge the relative magnitudes of non-instrumental values. Thus seeing sacred things as if from afar can explain many ways in which the sacred is idealized.

Close things usually have more details available to study, and we usually care more about close things. Furthermore, there are usually more far things to consider, compared to fewer near things. We thus tend to pay closer deliberate calculating attention to the details of near things, while for far things we tend to make much cruder faster more-intuitive judgments (Torr & Craig 2013; Zhang et al. 2021).

This tendency of far mode thought to be more intuitive, combined with our hypothesis of seeing the sacred from afar, helps explain why the sacred is said to be better understood via intuition rather than via deliberate thought. And why we tend to talk about the sacred with more vague less analytic language. The act of seeing near things using far mode must also just feel different somehow from seeing near things using near mode. This habit should thus induce a sense that the sacred is a different reality, and that it induces us to “transcend” or “stand outside ourselves”.

Construal level theory says that more unlikely or impossible things are seen as further away. So a habit of seeing sacred things from afar will tend to make sacred things seem a priori unlikely or impossible. And so our see-sacred-from-afar hypothesis also helps explain why the sacred is often seen as able to defy the usual physical or animal constraints.

We expect to see types of things that vary in their actual distance also vary in how close they feel to us. And we like to be closer to things that we value. If so, a habit of seeing sacred things as if from afar, even when they are near, might plausibly make us feel a lack of near contact with such sacred themes. In which case we might plausibly seek to emphasize the occasions when we are near concrete objects (or people, rituals, dates, sounds, etc.) associated with sacred themes. So we might especially treasure near contact with a love letter or anniversary date, as icons of a sacred love, or contact with a flag or national holiday, as icons of a sacred nationalism.

Thus our see-sacred-from-afar hypothesis can help explain why sacred value often rubs off on associated concrete stuff.

If we are wary of seeing the details of sacred things, as that might result in our seeing those things differently from associates, then we should prefer to see “detached” details which less risk such conflicts. For example, our methods of collecting memory scrapbooks tend to avoid such conflicts, and we trust fiction authors to fill their stories with details that affirm our sacred far views.

Finally, here are some more reported correlates of far mode, relative to near mode, that are also reported to be correlates of the sacred: awe (Septianto et al. 2021), politeness, self-control, serenity, symbolism, high mood, confidence, creativity, novelty, sleep, prestige (vs. dominance), world/universe (vs. smaller units), and values (vs. decision constraints).

Conclusion

Humans have a distinctive pattern of attitudes and behaviors associated with “sacred” things. This paper lists 51 reported correlates of the sacred, and suggests that most of these can be plausibly explained via two key hypotheses. The first hypothesis, taken from Durkheim, is that the main function of treating some things we value as sacred is to bind groups together via a shared view of the sacred. The second hypothesis, suggested by construal level theory, is that humans acquired a habit of seeing sacred things as if from afar, even when they seem close, in order to more consistently see those things the same as others in their groups.

Hopefully, we can find empirical tests of this theory. Note that this account doesn’t yet much explain our widely varying choices to see what as how sacred when.

Note also that if we see the sacred concept as itself sacred, then the usual norms of the sacred would disapprove of our analyzing that concept using so much contextual detail, or explaining the sacred as an instrumental, rather than an ultimate, value. Thus to study the sacred, we must to some degree defy it.

The expert “priests” of a sacred area, such as religion or medicine, must often use deliberate thought to attend to details regarding that area. This raises the question: are such priests somehow able to still see their sacred area details usefully as if from afar, or do they fail to do this, and the rest of us either accept this failure or pretend otherwise?

The obvious policy tradeoff here is that treating an area of life as sacred adds more energy to that area, and binds groups who do so together more strongly, but all at the expense of hindering related tradeoffs, distorting via idealization, and discouraging change and thoughtful attention to detail in that area. While it seems we must treat some areas as sacred, we should try to direct that energy to areas where it does the most good, and the least harm.

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