

The Plurality of the Sacred

—Critical Remarks on Mircea Eliade’s Conception of the Sacred

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Abstract

Mircea Eliade’s conception of the sacred, confining it to religious sacred, is criticized. A more comprehensive model of the sacred, which includes non-religious sacred, is developed and human love is suggested as a good candidate for non-religious sacred.

Keywords

Mircea Eliade, The Sacred, Love

1. Introduction

The sacred is commonly considered as the pivotal core of religions. It is claimed that religions are different ways to comprehend the sacred in such a way that religions are the exclusive ways to the proper comprehension of the sacred. However, this interpretation of religion is not to be taken for granted. For Durkheimians, for example, religion is ultimately about society and not the sacred in any transcendental meaning of the term, and for Jungians, it is about the psyche. But it seems that at least for a scholar such as Mircea Eliade (1907-1986), a Romanian historian of religion, according to the common interpretation of his works, religion is about the sacred. He, therefore, is not reductionist in such a way to explain religions merely in terms of economical, societal and/or psychological motives but he tries to explain religions by “their own terms”. In the last analysis, religion, in Eliade’s analysis, is the “unique”, “exclusive” and “genuine” source of the sacred. This implies, *inter alia*, that non-religious human of modern time cannot live sacredly.

2. Outline

In this essay after a brief elucidation of those aspects of Eliade’s conception of the sacred that are related to our purpose in this essay, it will be argued that Eliade failed to take full account of the sacred—as he claimed—“in its entirety” and “in all its complexity” (Eliade, 1957: p. 10). It is because it seems that the sacred, unlike his

claim, can be found outside the realm of religions. In order to show the kind of the sacred attainable beyond the realm of religion, some references will be made of some secular philosophers and scientists who have made effort to find something sacred independent of religions. Then it will be offered, in the light of what one might call “the plurality of the sacred”, that the characterization of the sacred must be revised and expanded in such a way that it can incorporate not only the “religious sacred” but also the “secular sacred”. Then, it will be suggested that “ultimate concern” can be taken as an appropriate criterion for calling something sacred. Finally, it will be argued that human love can be defended as a good candidate for the secular sacred.

3. Eliade on the Sacred

Eliade believes human is a religious creature, *homo religiosus*. In order to describe the characteristics of *homo religiosus*, he focuses on the archaic man, because modern human, according to him, lacks the values of the archetypal human of the archaic society. Religious archaic human, according to Eliade’s description, thirsts for reality and power. Such a human finds reality and power, unlike the non-religious human of the modern time, not in the tangible world, that is, the profane world. The profane world, for religious human of archaic cultures, does not bear reality, beatitude and power. Consequently for such a human neither place nor time is homogenous. There are some places and times that are qualitatively superior to other places and times. These are places and times that are, through special customs and rituals, sacralised, *i.e.*, they are in deep connection with the sacred “Every sacred space implies a hierophany” [manifestation of the sacred] (Eliade, 1957: p. 26).

Every sacred space and time is the manifestation of the sacred. Sacralised places and times are incomparable with profane spaces and times, incomparable in the sense that they are sacralised places and times that constitute the world in the real sense of the term for the archaic human. It is through sacralisation that world becomes the world, through that it becomes cosmos for him, otherwise it is only chaos, the profane world. Myths, rituals, festivals and so on are tools through which the religious human of archaic cultures recalls the sacred.

For Eliade sacred and profane is two modes of being, two kinds of *mudosvivendi*. For non-religious human of the modern time, neither time nor space is sacred. It is because for the profane human, world is empty of any message from another world. Time and space is homogenous and relative which means for him there is no supreme world beyond this world: “For non-religious man, all vital experiences—whether sex or eating, work or play have been desacralized. This means all these physiological acts are deprived of spiritual significance, hence deprived of their truly human dimension” (Eliade, 1957: p. 168).

At the same time, Eliade makes emphasis that completely desacralized human can rarely be found. Even non-religious human of the modern time still has retained in one way or another some traces of the sacred, the example of which can be found in commemorating New Year’s day which implies even for him some especial times are more valuable than others. Moreover, even non-religious human of the modern time has his own mythology:

A whole volume could well be written on the myths of modern man, on the mythologies camouflaged in the plays that he enjoys, in the books that he reads. The cinema, that “dream factory,” takes over and employs countless mythical motifs the fight between hero and monster, initiatory combats and ordeals, paradigmatic figures and images (the maiden, the hero, the paradisaal landscape, hell, and so on) (Eliade, 1957: p. 205).

Eliade holds, however, that the mythology of non-religious human of the modern time is by far not as rich as that of the human of archaic cultures. The significant question, which deserves arising here, is that why for Eliade the mythology and, generally speaking, the existential experience of the non-religious human is not valuable compared with that of religious human of archaic cultures. It seems that for Eliade the more comprehensive a mythology is, the more valuable it is and consequently the more it carries the true sense of the sacred (Daniel, 2006: p. 211). By this criterion Eliade evaluates the mythology of non-religious human of the modern time:

*But modern man’s “private mythologies”—his dreams, reveries, fantasies, and so on—never rise to the ontological status of myths, precisely because they are not experienced by the whole man and therefore do not transform a particular situation into a situation that is paradigmatic. In the same way, modern man’s anxieties, his experiences in dream or imagination, although “religious” from the point of view of form, do not, as in *homo religiosus*, make part of a *Weltanschauung* and provide the basis for a system of behavior (Eliade, 1957: p. 211).*

These phrases are very central in understanding Eliade’s *verstehen* of the sacred. It is due to the fact that for

Eliade, the fragmentary mythology of the non-religious human of the modern time has not yet become so comprehensive that can offer a worldview for him. Neither has it yet provided him with a system of behaviour that can be comparable in depth and width with the worldview and system of behaviour of the religious human of archaic cultures.

Now, the main question worthy of asking with regard to the difference between these two kinds of being according to Eliade is this: what is the implication of these two modes of being in practice? The answer Eliade offers is that the profane mode of being cannot be free from “the terror of history” and the terror “of the “evil” that is bound up not with man’s condition but with his behavior toward others” (Eliade, 1959: p. 151). Can the human of both modes of being endure the suffering and catastrophes they face in their individual and societal life? Eliade’s answer is that while the archaic ontology can provide the religious human of archaic cultures with a meaning that enables him to resist the terror of history, the atomistic and fragmentary ontology of modern philosophies and worldviews, whether Hegelian, Marxian or existential philosophies or any other kinds, cannot justify or give meaning to the terror of history for the non-religious human of the modern time. All solutions offered by the modern philosophies (the philosophies in order to account for history and its terror that try not to refer to the sacred) according to Eliade, collapse:

In our day, when historical pressure no longer allows any escape, how can man tolerate the catastrophes and horrors of history from collective deportations and massacres to atomic bombings if beyond them he can glimpse no sign, no transhistorical meaning; if they are only the blind play of economic, social, or political forces, or, even worse, only the result of the “liberties” that a minority takes and exercises directly on the stage of universal history? We know how, in the past, humanity has been able to endure the sufferings we have enumerated: they were regarded as a punishment inflicted by God, the syndrome of the decline of the “age,” and so on. And it was possible to accept them precisely because they had a metahistorical meaning, because, for the greater part of mankind, still clinging to the traditional viewpoint, history did not have, and could not have, value in itself (Eliade, 1959: p. 151).

For Eliade whether or not the sacral account of the terror of history and its theological justification is puerile and irrational is irrelevant and insignificant. What matters and counts is that

...by virtue of this view, tens of millions of men were able, for century after century, to endure great historical pressures without despairing, without committing suicide or falling into that spiritual aridity that always brings with it a relativistic or nihilistic view of history (Eliade, 1957: p. 151).

Then the emphasis has been made on the comprehensiveness of the traditional model of the sacred. As illustrated before, for Eliade the criterion for the genuineness kind of the sacred is its comprehensiveness.

Eliade’s conception of the sacred then can be summarized as follows: the archaic model of the sacred is more valuable than the modern kind of the sacred (if it can be called so), because the archaic model can fulfill the expectations of a great number of people who are not still modern, while the modern sacred cannot do so, since the archaic model can provide the religious human of the archaic cultures with a meaning which enables him to be resistant to the terror of history. The archaic model has been capable of providing such a meaning because it gives a transcendental meaning to the otherwise meaningless events of history and presents a meta-historical justification for the terror of history. The modern kind of the sacred and mythology is not successful in satisfying the non-religious human of the modern time exactly because it appeals to the historical rather than the meta-historical to justify or give meaning to the terror of history.

4. The Critique of Eliade’s Theory of the Sacred

Now the question which may arise is this: why, in Eliade’s analysis of the sacred, is it the case that the historical *per se* cannot be regarded as the proper sacred and cannot justify the terror of history for humankind? Eliade’s answer probably is that because the historical model of the sacred cannot satisfy the broad masses of people. It cannot explain why suffering and misery have happened and will happen for people all over the world and throughout the history. But again another question deserves posing is this: why comprehensiveness is considered as a criterion for the genuineness of the sacred? Even if comprehensiveness can be taken as a criterion for assessing the proposed models of the sacred, it is still unclear why comprehensiveness is considered in Eliade’s conception as an *exclusive* criterion for the sacred. Why not comprehensiveness plus some other things?

These are questions remaining unanswered and consequently unjustified in Eliade's analysis of the sacred. Some critics of Eliade's thought describe him as an anti-historical scholar (Douglas, 1988), since Eliade finds nothing in the history that can provide a possibility of escape from the terror of history for humankind. For Eliade, the sacred is something beyond the history. A critic of Eliade puts this critique in this way:

Eliade was on the side of those who thought that the inherently teleological nature of historical thinking contained within it elements that were fundamentally inimical to understanding religious experience. [...] If one bore in mind Croce's vital distinction between history (as something alive and relevant), and chronicle (sort of the phenomenal raw material of the historical imagination), Eliade's involvement with past issues seemed to be that of a chronicler. Past data existed to confirm the persistence of universal efforts to delineate a sacred realm immune to the vulgar (i.e., profane) time that, in its protean nature, constitutes both the realm and object of historical investigation (Pois, 1991: p. 99).

It appears that appealing to *a priori* criterion for distinguishing between genuine model of the sacred and its inauthentic model in Eliade's analysis, leads inevitably to suggesting an arbitrary criterion. The plausible way to make sense of the sacred, however, seems to be to take a *a posteriori* criterion, i.e., to take a look at the models offered and developed by philosophers, mystics, theologians, historians and others regarding the sacred and try to find a pattern common to all these models. The implication of taking this approach to the sacred is that we cannot in advance exclude the historical instances offered for the sacred from the process of understanding the sacred.

It is worth noting that some scholars have strived to reread Eliade's analysis of the sacred in a different way defending this alternative interpretation that Eliade's analysis of the sacred is phenomenological rather than theological and *a posteriori* rather than *a priori*. It is not theological, according to them, because his analysis does not take the sacred as a real and independent entity. These scholars agree that Eliade sometimes talks about the sacred as if it is an autonomous and real entity which manifests itself in the material world and mundane events, but they claim that by deeper rereading of his works it will become clear that Eliade is only describing the mind of religious human of archaic culture. They justify their interpretation of Eliade by quoting some passages from his works showing that Eliade's position of analyzing the sacred is phenomenological and he only makes an effort to make sense of what is believed by primitives (Studstill, 2000). In the light of this rereading they even criticized Willard Trask's translation of Eliade's works from French to English claiming accurate translation of his works would disclose to us that the language of Eliade is phenomenological rather than theological (Rennie, 1996: p. 19).

Even if we take Eliade's approach toward the analysis of the sacred to be phenomenological and not theological it is still problematic why he takes comprehensiveness and only comprehensiveness as a criterion for what can be considered genuinely as sacred. It is possible that one can suggest other criteria and instances for the sacred that are beyond, at least directly, the realm of religion.

5. The Non-Religious Sacred

An instance of finding something as non-meta-historical sacred within the history of humanity is the efforts of a group of agnostic or atheist philosophers and scientists published in a book entitled *Is Nothing Sacred?* (Routledge, 2004). For the one who has taken a *a posteriori* approach in characterizing the sacred it would be an effort worthy of taking seriously. The authors of the book confess that the term "sacred" is a quasi-religious concept but they try to utilize it in a non-religious way. The sacred in this context by no means signifies the meta-historical (as it was the case in Eliade's analysis) but it signifies the things that are intrinsically, categorically and inherently valuable. To understand what is inherently valuable is of significance for any kind of human ethics. Although the philosopher Nigel Warburton (2004) argues that the conception of the sacred inevitably has a religious connotation, and it would be preferable for an atheist or agnostic to avoid using that, most of the contributors of the book, however, preferred to use this concept giving it a secular nuance.

The question deserving arising is that: What are the specific instances of the sacred from the secular viewpoint of these agnostic or atheist philosophers and scientists? Richard Norman (2004) argues that natural world can hardly be taken as the sacred because we instrumentally manipulate the nature; furthermore, because "we cannot attribute purposive agency to nature" (Norman, 2004: p. 13). However, he provides the reader with a justification that by taking an aesthetical attitude we can take human life, rather than nature, as sacred.

But Allan Holand argues that we can still treat nature as sacred. His main argument is that because we are entitled to prize the nature, the nature is sacred (Holland, 2014). Alan Haworth also suggests that liberty is a principle that is perhaps sacred. It is because, he argues, without liberty the human life will be unbearable and immoral (Haworth, 2014).

6. Human Love and the Sacred

What we might learn from these efforts is that this question is worthy of raising whether the sacred can only be found within religions or can also be found beyond that. It seems that “comprehensiveness”, as a criterion for considering something sacred, can be substituted by “ultimate concern”. Phenomenologically speaking, what constitutes one’s ultimate concern can be regarded as sacred for the one, no matter if others share this concern. Ultimate concern is a kind of concern that the one who has this concern is ready to sacrifice all his/her belonging for the sake of that concern.

The case of human love is noteworthy for making sense of ultimate concern as a criterion for the sacred. In the case of human love what is happening is, roughly put, that someone becomes so significant for someone else that the lover cannot stop thinking of the beloved. The lover forgets him/herself as far as he/she is thinking of the beloved. In the process of falling in love what is occurring for the lover is that ‘other’ becomes crucial for him/her. If we take the sacred as one’s ultimate concern, then the beloved is sacred for the lover. Love, can also transform the life of lover. The lover can redefine his/her being in the light of his/her love. It can give him/her new meaning for living. The beloved is manifested in the mind of the lover as the wholly other, she is not like other people. Even profane here is meaningful. Someone might, however, criticize the lover by saying: “common! What have you found in this girl/boy that has made you madly in love with her/him? He/She is only an ordinary boy/girl whom you can find everywhere”. Such a critic is talking from the profane point of view about love. It is profane because the critic is talking about love by using the ordinary language, *i.e.* the language detached from love affair. The critic does not take into account this point that love gives the lover new sight and insight through which the lover sees the beloved different from those who do not have this sight and insight. This seems similar to the way a sacred stone is conceived by a religious human. She sees something in the sacred stone that is not seeable for the profane human.

Therefore, if epistemologically speaking, myth is important for understanding the religious reality then love is also of significance for understanding others. “If we genuinely wish to understand others and the world, then we need the virtue of love, because love (in its most basic orientation) entails an honest and faithful engagement with others” (Wirzba & Benson, 2008: p. 3). Therefore love is the epistemological source of knowing others, as myth is the source of knowing the work of gods. By the same token, if the sacred, in the religious application of the term, can make us immune to the terror of history, love can play the similar role. It can give a meaning to the life of lover and because of it the lover feels encouraged to live filled with meaning.

One might object that while religion-oriented sacred is deeply related to *weltanschauung* and specially the myth of creation, love-oriented sacred has nothing to do with ontology and worldview; it is only confined to the personal and emotional relationship between two persons and, one might conclude that, it is not comparable to the religious sacred that provides the religious human with a mythical narrative of creation and gods. As we have seen in Eliade’s analysis, the sacred is deeply related to the idea of creation as depicted in the mythological narratives.

One might rejoin that on the one hand it is not the case that all instances of the religious sacred produce a narrative of creation. For some religions, such as Buddhism, there seems to be nothing similar to the idea of creation as found in the Semitic religions and some other religions like Zoroastrianism and Hinduism. On the other hand, human love can be taken to be more than merely the emotional and personal relationship between two or more persons. As mentioned briefly before, love by taking other seriously makes the lover ready to understand other. Understanding other is one aspect of ontology because if ontology is the study of being, it also includes the study of human beings. In order to grasp the significance of the study of human beings in ontology one should bear in mind that any kind of ontology is a theory about the relationship between world and human beings and love can play a significant role in defining this relationship.

7. Summary and Conclusion

For Eliade the sacred is deeply interwoven with the meta-historical. For him nothing but the meta-historical is to

be regarded as the genuine model of the sacredness. However, it seems that a better way to comprehend the sacred is to take into consideration all instances historically regarded as the sacred, whether the meta-historical or not. It leads us, I argued, to recognise the plurality of the sacred. It requires the epistemological recognition of the plurality of the sacred. Moreover, it requires the ontological recognition of the plurality of the sacred that implies we find ourselves encountered with varieties of the sacred which one cannot dismiss them in advance. I, then, sketched a number of candidates offered from the secular point of view: nature, human life and liberty. I then suggested “ultimate concern” as an acceptable criterion for what can be appropriately considered as the sacred. Afterwards, I defended love as one instance of the non-religious sacred. I argued that the human love was phenomenologically similar to the religious kind of the sacred.

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