

On the Philosophical Validity of the Concept of the Sacred

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Abstract

The concept of *the sacred* (*das Heilige*) as something mysterious and irrational, although at the base of mythological narratives and religious experience, was first theologially shaped by Rudolf Otto, and later by Mircea Eliade, in their texts on the philosophy of religion. Otto's work tries to lay the foundation of religion over Kantian epistemology, merging the rational construction of the first and second *Critiques* with the Theory of Genius of the third, but incurs in paralogsms and contradictions.

No less relevant than the epistemological objections to the concept of *das Heilige* are its anthropological difficulties. Anthropological experience shows that the qualification of an action or an object as sacred does not follow any universal principle -as Durkheim had already pointed out- and in fact, there are situations that could be considered sacred as well as profane depending on the tradition from which we make the interpretation.

The concept of *das Heilige* has neither philosophical nor anthropological validity as a universal category for human actions or objects. In conjunction with the concept of *the profane*, it is a dual semantic operator for the ordering of human experience that maintains its social function independently of the natural or supernatural content that we ascribe it, an operative relevance which is not due to some intrinsic property of the concept, but simply to the dual nature of the operator.

Introduction

In the foreword to his seminal work, *Das Heilige*, Rudolf Otto advised the reader not to venture in the investigation of the *Numen Ineffabile* before having devoted assiduous and serious study to the Ratio Aeterna.¹ Such recommendation advances the proposal stated at full length in chapter XIV of the book: the sacred (or the Holy) is an a priori category in the Kantian sense with both rational and irrational content.² With this thesis, Otto was reopening an old philosophical problem -which goes back to early Greek philosophy- about the rational or irrational nature of the Divine. In the VI century B.C., Xenophanes of Colophon noticed the inconsistencies of an ethic based on the amoral behavior of the Olympian gods, a theoretical question that shook the foundations of the Greek Polis and that was finally solved with the progressive and steady grounding of religion on rational philosophical bases. Moral consistency came with a price: the traditional social praxis of the cults, and religious experience in general, became little more than old superstitions of the ignorant masses. The tension was unsolved, and there was little need to solve it in a society which got progressively more complex and

¹ Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), vii.

² Otto, *The idea of the Holy*, 116.

could function with a split religious axis in which the intellectual elites held a philosophical metaphysics, and the masses the old agrarian cults. We find in other traditions equivalent theological tensions, like the one between philosophical and devotional Taoism,³ or between the Vedanta philosophical religion -developed by Sankaracharia from the Upanishads- and different traditional cults linked to the agrarian cycle,⁴ or again, in the European milieu, between the Medieval theological systems and the religious popular festivals and pilgrimages. The mysterious and irrational, the Numinous at the base of mythological narratives and rituals throughout the world, has never been reduced to the rational constraints of philosophy: the peasant nor less than the citizen needs a well-structured calendar of ceremonies and rites, but the drive for these is not exactly the need for apodictical argumentation. Devotional and popular cult ideas show a clear difference in relation to the postulates on the Divine expressed through philosophical rationality. However, if in theological ontologies the measure for *all things* is God, as Plato sustained in the *Laws* (716.c), and therefore is the principle of order and ground for rationality, *all things*, including non-rational religious elements, somehow should be explained by philosophical rationality.

On the epistemological and anthropological content of the concept of *the sacred*

Otto's thesis inherits this general problem as part of Schleiermacher's program for deepening the rational Christian concept of God with non-rational elements.⁵ The postulate holds two assumptions already implicit in Plato's philosophy and subsequently in the main philosophical tradition: the irreducible tension between the rational and the irrational in the experience of the Divine, and the conviction that the irrational part can be somehow rendered into rational terms, although never be completely reduced to human rational constructions. The term sought for was precisely the concept of the sacred, which, as a property of the Divine, could mediate in the valuation and understanding of the relation between the world of God and the world of man.

To Otto, the ground for this valuation is not merely moral, but transcendental,⁶ so the category of the sacred gives a universal standard for the general interpretation of human action. Nonetheless, such a claim does not hold neither on epistemological nor on anthropological grounds.

It is obvious that, in order to be a category of valuation of universal scope, the sacred should encompass both rational and irrational elements. However, as soon as Otto declared the sacred to be an a priori category in the Kantian sense, and adopted the basic frame of the

³ The Han Emperor built a sanctuary for Lao-Tzen 150 B.C. Eva Wong. *Taoísmo*. (Barcelona: Paidós, 1998), 46-55.

⁴ Whether Hindu or of other previous mythic-ritual axes.

⁵ Otto, *The idea of the Holy*, 112.

⁶ Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, 54.

Kantian system, he inherited as well its philosophical problems. In relation to the purposefulness of human life in the universe, Kant's system encountered the antinomy between the mechanical workings of nature and the moral idea of a free will, the contradiction between mechanical and teleological causation⁷, a Gordian knot that he quickly solved appealing to the idea of the human being under moral laws as the final end of the universe,⁸ a postulate that implied a deeper form of order behind the chaotic curtain of human affairs. From this point of view, the final purpose of the universe, the divine plan, is equated with what we consider unintelligible and irrational, and therefore, the irrationality of the sacred proposed by Otto simply would mean *rationality on a divine dimension*, an analogous ratio to the one expressed in the relation of the sublime to the beautiful.⁹ The works of the artistic genius would be an example of this moral meta-rationality of the divine plan, a proof of the mysterious but ordered processes of nature presented to our aesthetic intuition.

Otto's theory not only inherits Kant's problems but also contradicts the Kantian edifice in which it is based. Kant's categories, as pure concepts of the understanding, are simple conceptual units that cannot be reduced to simpler terms. The concept of the sacred elaborated by Otto is supposed to be a category in the Kantian sense, but it is, nonetheless, compound, and as such, does not qualify as category, it cannot be an ancestral concept with a universal scope. What is then the ontological status of the sacred within this Kantian-Ottian conceptual frame? It comes to mind the possibility of considering it a derivative concept, i.e., a predicable of the pure concepts of the understanding, derivative and subsidiary to them, like, for instance, *force*, *action* and *passion* in relation to the category of causality.¹⁰ As a derivative concept, the sacred could maintain its a priori character, and perhaps even work in the realm of the sensible, of experience, as the desired tool for valuation, just like the concept of *force* does for physics in our understanding of the connections amongst phenomena. Nevertheless, such a postulate would bring rather problematic epistemological consequences, for if the sacred is a derivative concept, it could only be derived or subordinate to the concept of God, which would imply that the Divinity is a category, a conclusion that would entail a number of ontoepistemological problems.

The epistemological difficulties of the double concept of the sacred are not limited to the Kantian-Ottian system but can be generalized to any system which contains rational elements for its foundation. The sacred as merely Numinous could function as a category for some sort of psychological experience, but as soon as we include in our system also the rational part of the

⁷ Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 258-259.

⁸ Kant, *The Critique of the Power of Judgement*, 308-311.

⁹ Already noticed by Otto, *The idea of the Holy*, 65.

¹⁰ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Trans. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 213-214.

Divine, and we must do so if we want to have a concept that has any use at all in the human world, we are faced with the antinomies and paralogisms already treated by Kant in relation to transcendental ideas, plus some extra contradictions. As a simple ancestral category, it would either have to be rational or irrational. If rational and simple, it would have to be analytical, for the simple cannot be an object of experience, and therefore, being analytical, would not be valid as a valuation of experience. On the other hand, if the sacred were an irrational and simple ancestral category, we would face the same problem, for it is the property of simplicity (inherent to the concept of category), not the one of irrationality what rules out the validity of the sacred as an account of human experience. The epistemological problems do not end here. Even if the sacred were a compound concept with empirical content we would need the grounds for the synthesis of the opposites of rationality and irrationality. But what kind of concept could produce such a synthesis or give a primitive concept for the derivation of both? It could not be any of the Kantian categories, not only because they are simple but because they are a priori conditions of rationality not of the irrational.

Our epistemological elucidation proved to be aporetic, but the concept of the sacred presented by Otto included also an anthropological dimension in which the category is confronted to its contrary, the profane. Such an anthropological opposition was further developed in the work of Mircea Eliade *The Sacred and the Profane*, who followed Otto's transcendental approach although not limiting his analysis to the opposition rational-irrational but extending it to what he called *the totality of the sacred*.¹¹ For Eliade the pair sacred-profane represents two opposed ways of being in the world, that somehow exhaust existence, for the sacred is the real, and the profane, the unreal.¹² Such an ontological statement is necessarily given as a definition, and supposes the construction of a semantic operator whose relevance can only be given by its use in describing anthropological experience. Nonetheless, Eliade goes beyond the practical use of the operator to maintain a transcendental content of its nature, for the interest of such opposition is precisely that it gives a universal procedure to identify what is real and unreal in human experience. But what are Eliade's grounds for the definition, what are the principles that sustain it? They are empirical; the whole investigation is based on the data offered by history of religions and anthropology, from a direct evidence of experience. Then, how could we construct a definition of transcendental concepts starting from historical experience if we do not already put a transcendental content into history? We step into basic epistemological contradictions, but even if we ignore them -by appealing to a higher way of understanding- we heedlessly create a system which requires a meta-religion, à la Schelling, to justify the validity of the operator in the different religious traditions.

¹¹ Mircea Eliade, *Lo sagrado y lo profano*, Trans. Luis Gil (Barcelona: Editorial Labor, 1985), 18.

¹² Mircea Eliade, *Lo sagrado y lo profano*, 20-21.

Eliade's theses present particular difficulties when maintaining that the opposition sacred-profane finds a parallel in the relation between the old world and the modern.¹³ Such a postulate expresses the well-known *mythologem* of the Golden Age of the World, how the universe changes from a moment of perfection in the distant past to the decay of the present, a hypothesis which implies a rather nonsensical conclusion: the modern world is unreal and devoid of meaning compared to the real and meaningful past.

Nonetheless, let us for a moment put aside all these problems and consider that the operator sacred-profane represents a transcendental way of being, that the world and human life can universally be explained by this opposition, that all our actions are either sacred or profane. Such a thesis would be contradicted if we can prove the non-universal meaning of the sacred in experience, the non-universal scope of the concept. Emile Durkheim, in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, already noticed that, although the distinction between the sacred and the profane is a distinctive trait of religious thought, the circle of sacred things cannot be determined once and for all.¹⁴ There are many examples of actions and objects which are considered sacred in one tradition and profane in another. Think for a moment in the self-emasculatation of the priests of Attis when they entered into the service of Cybele, a sacred action from the point of view of this mythical axis, for it was the enactment of the myth of Agdistis,¹⁵ but that from a contemporary moral vantage point could be easily dismissed as merely barbaric. Then, what about the emasculations within early Christianity, like Origene's or Saint Agustin's?¹⁶ Let us simplify the psychological reasons for this action and reduce them to a question of asceticism, and let us morally prefer ascetic actions over non-ascetic. Could we say then that all ascetic actions are sacred? If that is the case, some rituals of Tantric Buddhism should have to be declared profane, but on extra tantric grounds, i.e. on some meta-religious grounds for the concept of the sacred, and something similar would happen with a long list of the actions considered sacred in one tradition but profane in another. Consider, for instance, the case of the Ganesha temple in Annangar (Chennai) where after the cricket final of the World Cup of 2003, the head of the son of Shiva was substituted by the heads of the eleven heroes of the Indian team, and cricket mantras were developed as part of the regular cult.

Even when there is an agreement about the sacred character of an action or an object, the arguments for assigning the quality may not coincide, furthermore, they might be diametrically opposed to one another, as in the case of Holy Wars. And within these contexts of

¹³ Mircea Eliade, *Lo sagrado y lo profano*, 21.

¹⁴ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious life* (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1964), 37.

¹⁵ There is a reference to this castration in James Frazer, *The Golden Bough* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), 406.

¹⁶ Matt Kuelfer *The Manly Eunuch: Gender ambiguity and Christian Ideology in late Antiquity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). Published partially on <http://www.transchristians.org/archive/the-practice-of-self-castration-in-early-christianity>.

religious dualistic systems, how do we discern between evil and profane? If we say, for instance, that evil is sacred, we are implying that evil is either part of a divine plan or that it has an independent source, as in the ancient Zoroastrian tradition. In the second case, we would have two different kinds of sacred, one for the good and another for the evil, each with its own rationality and irrationality, an ontological multiplication which invalidates the practical use of the opposition sacred-profane. In the first case, if evil is part of the divine plan, it would meet the objections of Xenophanes to the amorality of the Divine, for what could be the rationale of the infliction of deliberate evil upon the innocent?

The question becomes more entangled when we discover that one and the same action can be considered sacred at one time and place and profane at another. For instance, a hunting party, or a sexual relationship are sacred actions when they are performed under proper customs and rituals, according to a calendar, but profane under some restricted conditions. We have even cases where the fetish which represents the supernatural being is beaten with discontent when does not respond to the petitions of the group, or ritual situations where stones are thrown against the divine pond to upbraid the gods and make them to come out and bring the rain,¹⁷ actions considered not only sound but also sacred under special circumstances and profane and disrespectful the rest of the times.

Therefore, the actions of consecration seem to be the application of a dual semantic operator which orders the general life of a human community according to specific economic and metaphysical purposes, both closely related. Through the dual operator, a general frame for the valuation of actions, persons and scenarios is established, although its operative relevance is not due to some intrinsic property of the concept of the sacred but to its dual nature. In fact, any pair of opposite symbols which favors one action, object or subject in relation to another can determine with the same effectiveness the ideological framework needed for the ordering of the group.

Conclusion

The category of the sacred is not a valid concept for the understanding of religious experience for it does not add anything new to our comprehension of the concept of the Divine, nor to the socio-psychological dimension of such human experience, whose homogeneity, both traditional and current anthropological studies seem to deny. The complexity of the religious phenomenon is no other than the complexity of our human nature. We still are a mystery to ourselves, but could say that today is a mystery under the noonday sun of science. By this, I do not mean to say that science and philosophy have final representations of human life, for they do not have a system that could encompass all human actions, nor that such a construction could be possible without epistemological contradictions. However, we do not need additional complexities in

¹⁷ Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious life*, 38.

the form of misty and phantasmagorical concepts, like the notion of *the sacred*. It seems to me rather doubtful that any clarity of thinking whatsoever could be obtained in philosophy of religion without the final reference of religious experience to the general phenomenon of life, not only human life. Life, as Aristotle understood well, is intelligence. Whether we call to the maximal expression of this life-intelligence *Godhead*, or *Ideal Regulative Principle*, is not as important as the intellectual honesty and innocence with which we are ready to discuss the genesis of such idea in the different symbolical constructions of identity developed by humankind.

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