GUIDE TO THE STUDY OF RELIGION

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WILLI BRAUN AND RUSSELL T. McCUTCHEON

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SACRED

Veikko Anttonen

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Notwithstanding the subtleties of theological exegesis, there is no mystery or secrecy concealed in the term "sacred." It is obvious that the concept needs its own peculiar logic of understanding, according to the particular system of belief where it is used; but it also has a common-sense aspect, which is readily observable to anyone who bothers to give the concept a second thought. The religious and linguistic .conventions of Western societies, which we have internalized as an inseparable part of our cognitive makeup, have given us the competence to recognize the sacred (or the holy) in our cultural environment wherever we perceive and experience the various forms whereby it is expressed. Sanctuaries and cemeteries are set apart from other buildings and spaces because they are marked as qualitatively different in the value they have for a particular religious community. The competence to decode their cultural value, however, is not restricted only to members and believers of similar faiths. Non-believers and foreign visitors too have the capacity to read their cultural significance from various information sources. The patterns and schemes of perception of their own culture make them competent to decipher the signs and symbols, architecture and behavioral rules by which the sacrality of these locations is marked. In any society anywhere, it is generally expected that the difference that the sacred makes will be respected and not violated also by people not familiar with the thought-worlds and narrative traditions of the specific ethnic or religious group.

The difference that the sacred makes is also immediately recognized when, for instance, we dress carefully for Christmas dinner and gather together as a family. We know that not only the soteriological idea of Christmas is sacred—the incarnation of God in human flesh—but the set-apartness of the whole temporal period makes us participate in its various forms of cultural representation: in the lights and other decoration of public and private spaces, in Christmas carols, gifts, foods, and in the diverse symbolism. The temporal period commemorating cosmogonic episodes in Christian mythical thinking—combined with local forms

of popular traditions concerning the end of the agricultural year—are held to be qualitatively different from non-sacred times characterized by the daily routines of labor and travel. Compared to average postmodern consumerists with their secular cosmology, who may create their own "sacred" moments or whose rationality and lifestyle is safeguarded from any intervention from institutionally defined forms of transcendence, there are millions of adherents of cultural and religious traditions in the world for whom the sacrality of times and places is not only a relic from the past. Setting specific times and places apart as sacred is a fundamental structure in human cultures, without which no religion, nation-state or political ideology can insure the continuity of its power, hierarchy and authority. Such universally distributed forms of religious behavior as fasting, pilgrimage, asceticism, celibacy, religiously motivated forms of seclusion and reclusion and various forms of meditation can also be comprehended in terms of the category of the sacred. These forms of religious behavior are culturally constituted on the idea of marking one's physical and mental self as separate from the routines of everyday social life. An analytical comprehension of their sacrality cannot, however, be approached within the conceptual frames offered by religious traditions themselves. In dealing with the theory of religion, we need a special explanatory perspective in order to display the logic governing the sacred-making characteristics of these forms of activities.

Phenomenological Approaches to the Sacred

In recent scholarship, students of comparative religion have become somewhat critical in employing the sacred as an analytical category (see, e.g., Penner 1986, 1989; Lawson and McCauley 1990: 13–14, 1993: 209–210). This criticism has been due to its use as a covertly theological term in the scholarly history of comparative religion. The theological understanding of the notion of the sacred has played a more prominent role than an anthropological and what might be called a cognitive-semantic approach. Such historians and phenomenologists of religion as Nathan Söderblom, Rudolf Otto, Gerardus van der Leeuw, Joachim Wach and Mircea Eliade have held sacrality (or holiness) to be not only the hallmark of religion, but its very essence. According to these theorists, cultural systems of belief and practice cannot be given the title "religion" if there is nothing which is deemed sacred by their adherents. In their methodological approaches, the sacred has been treated as a *sui generis* ontological category, culturally schematized in human experience in the form of subjective feelings of the presence of *mysterium tremendum et fascinosum*. For the phenomenological school of thought, the sacred is comprehended as *numen*, a dynamic force that manifests itself in feelings of religious awe, in inexplicable sentiments of horror and dread, on the one hand, of overwhelming ecstasy and fascination, on the other.

The concept of the sacred has been an inseparable part of the interpretative project in hermeneutically oriented scholarship aimed at "bracketing" the transcendental element as it is experienced by a religious person. The method of bracketing (*epochē*, bracketing out and suspending judgment) has been validated by the intentional waiving of the rationalization of any psycho-dynamic or contextual condition present in such religious states. The primary goal in phenomenological research has been an urge to understand religion from within the subjective experience and to avoid issues of value-judgment and truth. The level of analysis has not been the culture, society, ideology, history, tradition or world-view, but—in Mircea Eliade's terms—the ahistorical religious individual, *homo religiosus* understood as a total, that is, "sacred" human being (see McCutcheon 1997b: 37–38). Although Eliade was interested in human symbolic behavior, he did not deal with methodological issues concerning gender, the human body and the contextual factors and values influencing behavior. His methodology rested on the religious conviction that beneath the historical consciousness of human beings there is a sacramental view of nature (see Morris 1987: 178–179). Eliade's scholarly work was motivated by the view that

> [w]hatever the historical context in which he is placed, homo religiosus always believes that there is an absolute reality, the sacred, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real. He further believes that life has a sacred origin and that human existence realizes all of its potentialities in proportion as it is religious—that is, participates in reality. (Eliade 1959b: 202)

The essentialist arguments of the phenomenologists concerning the scholarly goal of finding the core-meaning of the sacred in human emotion or in consciousness have been heavily criticized on both philosophical and anthropological grounds. According to W. Richard Comstock, the dominance of emotion or other introspection in the discourse on the sacred in the study of religion is methodologically untenable. Comstock writes that "there is no entity called an emotion which can be examined when separated from the actor, his act, his symbolic vehicles and his goals" (Comstock 1981: 633). Rejecting the invalid distinction between external body and internal soul, he emphasizes that feeling and behavior are not distinct modalities of human expressions, but parts of the same totality. Suggesting a new behavioral approach to the sacred, Comstock advises scholars not to treat "feeling" and "behavior" as though they refer to two kinds of things on the same level of discourse. Behavior should be seen as a category that includes all kinds of activity. He says that

> much activity involves bodily movements that can be directly seen, like walking, running, kneeling, etc. Other processes also refer to bodily activities. No one will deny that thinking involves brain activity, that

perceiving involves acts of physical sensing, that feeling involves activity of the body (blushing, the dryness of the mouth, external movements like running away or embracing someone, etc.). Behaving and acting are then generic terms under which feeling is to be subsumed. (Comstock 1981: 633)

The question, "What is sacred?" should be answered, according to Comstock, in terms of a methodological shift "from the sacred as a feeling-state of the subjective mind to a distinctive kind of behavior determined by rules and open to public observation" (Comstock 1981: 636).

By emphasizing an introspective understanding of emotions and numenal structures in subjective religious experience, the phenomenologists have detached the sacred from the social matrix in which all human experience, including religious experience, takes place. By keeping the notion of the sacred detached from the cultural and cognitive processes constraining human thought and action and from socially transmitted systems of meaning, these scholars can be criticized for taking part in the very cultural process that they were supposed to study. Comstock's behavioral model, on the other hand, is a proposal to treat the sacred as "an empirical category that is as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture" (Comstock 1981: 631).

Comstock is pointing the way towards a conceptualization of the sacred as a theoretical construct, not as a category with a supernatural or transcendent referent. Employing the sacred as a methodological tool, scholars are better equipped to explicate why "humans have a capacity to behave in certain carefully prescribed ways in respect to their environment" (Comstock 1981: 630). What the concept can reveal about the human mind, and why and in what sense it should be retained in the study of religion as a technical term, are questions I shall elaborate on more closely in what follows. The criticism of phenomenological theory, however, has resulted in a cutting of the age-old bond between the categories of "sacred" and "religion." The sacred is no longer conceptualized as a dependent variable of so-called religious experience. As William E. Paden has pointed out, the sacred is not a uniquely religious category, although its religious meanings and the history of its use dominate the popular as well as scholarly discourse (Paden 1991, 1996b: 16). This is due to the so-called "prototype effect." The category of the sacred has graded membership; most persons brought up in Western societies hold that things that pertain to the category of the sacred in Judeo-Christian religious traditions are "more sacred" than things in Polynesian folk religion, for instance, which are glossed by terms denoting "sacred" in the Austronesian languages (on the theory of the prototype see Saler 1993: 202–226).

Structural-Functional Frameworks

It is within the tradition of sociology of religion, and the structural-symbolic school in anthropology, that a critical methodology based on naturalistic and explanatory theory-construction has been advanced in an attempt to unravel the constitutive factors of human cultural behavior. Such scholars as Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss have assessed the sacred as a category of value according to which any social, religious, ethnic or national group creates its cognitive boundaries and categorizes itself as distinct from others. For Durkheim the sacred exists only in contrast to things in the profane sphere of social life. It is the social collective that makes things sacred with regard to the symbolic representation of values which their members reaffirm and redefine in rituals in order to enhance their sense of integration as a community.

Durkheim and Mauss, in their book *Primitive Classification* (1963 [1901–1902]), were the first to suggest that the sacred should be dealt with in reference to culturally dependent classificatory systems and conceptualized in connection with the specific social constraints that generate a collective consciousness. They treated the sacred as a symbolic representation of collectivity, which unites divisions, distinctions and oppositions into a meaningful whole and gives legitimacy to the behavioral norms connected with the specific representation. Things set apart as "sacred" transcend the individual consciousness and act as a divinely legitimated source for sentiments that bind together the members of a social group. If the taxonomic status of any object which has a specific value for the local community is about to change, its category within the overall system of classification needs to be dealt with in relation to sacred things, times and places. Ritual is the only proper context for category transformations, since in ritual society creates an in-between boundary space within the social system of categories (see Leach 1976). Since ritual is the social system of behavior that makes a difference in showing the flexibility of distinctions and oppositions between social categories, it is the prime locus that in the final analysis also creates the sacred (see, e.g., J. Z. Smith 1987b; Bell 1992). The sacred and the ritual can be treated in the study of religion as analogous theoretical categories, and can be approached as symbolic vehicles whereby ethnic or other social groups maintain, secure and reorder the boundaries that generate their social edifice.

Claude Lévi-Strauss, who took structural linguistics as his point of departure, developed the Durkheimian notion of the sacred into a more general theory of the human mind. While Durkheim had a social-deterministic conception of the opposition between the sacred and the profane, Lévi-Strauss transformed the idea of oppositions into a more semiological and symbolic approach. Cultural symbolic structures and models are not grounded in specific forms of social organization, but vice versa: all social categories have a symbolic origin (Traube 1986: 2).

According to Lévi-Strauss, human beings process information on three categorical levels: the real, the symbolic and the imaginary. He treated culture as a system of communication in which thought is carried back and forth across these three structural levels by means of language (see Sullivan 1984: 152–153; Morris 1987: 266). According to Lawrence E. Sullivan,

> [the] processes of thought transform elementary structures of the mind by building symbolic bridges between contradictions. These symbolic bridges become in turn the focus of the same unceasing formal processes and are recycled as images which, in their turn, become object (or victim) of processes which reorder their relations in the attempt to give them meaning. (Sullivan 1984: 152–153)

Things, animals, persons, times and spaces set apart as sacred are in Lévi-Straussian terms symbolic bridges that carry thought back and forth on these three structural levels and become represented not only in ritual, but also in myth, epic and fiction.

In Lévi-Straussian terms, the idea of the sacred is like the numerical value zero. In itself it signifies nothing, but when joined to another number it is filled with differential significance (see J. Z. Smith 1987b: 108). In religious systems the idea of the sacred as a numerical value zero becomes evident when we think for example of the symbolism in Christian rituals. Jesus Christ can be compared to a numerical value zero: in himself he signifies nothing, but acquires meaning and acts as a source of meaning when joined to different aspects of value in Christian category systems. We need only think of Christian rites of passage. The idea of Jesus as an embodiment of sacrality is represented in liminal boundary states such as rituals of birth and baptism, confirmation, marriage and death. Jesus is used as a culturally established symbolic bridge whereby oppositions such as male / female, life / death, pure / impure, inside and outside of the sanctuary, inside and outside of the human body are brought into differential relationships. Let me here quote Jonathan Z. Smith's description of the logic of the sacred:

> Here (in the world) blood is a major source for impurity; there (in the ritual) blood removes impurity. Here (in the world) water is the central agent by which impurity is transmitted; there (in the ritual) washing with water carries away impurity. Neither the blood nor the water has changed; what has changed is their location. (J. Z. Smith 1987b: 110)

Ritual exhibits the religious system and its differences by focusing attention on one or more aspects of the systemic elements. Arnold van Gennep had a special expression for this logic: he called it the "pivoting of the sacred" (van Gennep 1960: 12–13).

In order to understand why certain values and their ritual performances receive their sacred character, it is important to conceptualize the sacred as a

category-boundary which becomes actual only in social situations when the inviolability of such categories as person, gender, marriage, nation, or justice, liberty, purity, propriety, are threatened and are in danger of losing their legitimating authority as moral foundations of society and social life. By employing the sacred as an analytical category, we can, for instance, approach the heavily debated issue concerning the legalization of homosexual marriages, in particular, and the religious meanings assigned to the institution of matrimony in Judeo-Christian cultures, in general. It is not only the importance of marriage for reproduction and thus for the continuity of the human species that matter. What is primarily at issue is the fundamental significance that gender difference has as the moral foundation of society. It is not only the myth of the divine origin of matrimony which makes it sacrosanct. Likewise it is not that sexual intercourse is a sacred act and should be performed only in the context of marriage. Homosexual marriages are opposed and seen as sacrilegious and impure because an acceptance of intercourse between spouses of the same sex is seen as threatening gender difference as a fundamental category-boundary in Judeo-Christian cultures. The idea of God and the idea of the sacred can be used as arguments for either opposing or approving legalization. The absence of a gender difference in gay marriages blurs the boundary between the female and the male and is seen as threatening because— applying Lévi-Strauss's idea of the sacred—if taken out of its place, even in thought, the entire order of the universe would be destroyed. According to Lévi-Strauss "being in their place is what makes things sacred" (Lévi-Strauss 1966: 10; for an analysis of gender difference as the sacred category-boundary in public discourses on homosexual marriages see Charpentier 1996).

Connecting the Cognitive and the Cultural

It is largely agreed today that the phenomenological notion of the sacred as a dynamic force originating in another world blurs the boundaries of religious and scientific discourses. By emphasizing subjective religious experience as the primary topos of the sacred, phenomenologists have ignored the cognitive and empirical aspect, the fact that the sacred is first and foremost a cognitive category, the representations of which are culture-dependent. The scholar of religion cannot take a theological stand and address the sacred as an aspect or an agent of a presumed other-worldly reality, but must view religious categories as symbolic constructions and representations of human cognition.

Even though Durkheim tried to understand religion in connection with the operation of the human mind, he could not create a theory of the sacred separately from social organizations. Durkheim assumed that the opposition between the sacred and the profane stems from social sentiments. In Rodney Needham's words, "if the mind is taken to be a system of cognitive faculties, it

is absurd to say that the categories originate in social organisation ... the notion of class necessarily precedes the apprehension that social groups, in concordance with which natural phenomena are classed, are themselves classified" (Needham 1963: xxvii).

In post-structural anthropology, as in recent work in cognitive psychology, linguistics, philosophy and the study of religion, the "border area between the cognitive and the cultural" has received more serious attention (see Boyer 1993, 1994; Lawson 1993; Lawson and McCauley 1990, 1993; Lakoff 1987, 1989; M. Johnson 1987, 1991). The religious and other socially transmitted concepts and categories that constitute and organize culture-specific knowledge structures, which in turn guide and shape human behavior, do not float in the air as abstract entities, but are inseparably connected to the corporeality and the territoriality of human beings.

It is my conviction that scholars of comparative religion will have an empirically more tractable methodological tool in the notion of the sacred when it is theorized at the border between the cognitive and the cultural. The sacralities of things, objects and specific forms of behavior are to be understood as symbolic representations in which corporeality and territoriality function as constraining structures of knowledge. To behave in a sacred, culturally prescribed manner depends on the capacity to make adequate judgments about the well-formedness and relationships of cultural practices as well as the capacity to understand these as part of a larger aggregate of practices (Lawson 1993: 191). The sacred is due to the human capacity to make judgments about the ideal norms and boundaries defining and transforming the taxonomical statuses of persons, animals or objects in a specific cultural category, and to assess their cultural significance in relation to ultimate, unquestionable and unfalsifiable postulates (see Rappaport 1979: 228).

Even though there are specialists in every culture, whose competence to make the necessary judgments and whose possession of knowledge of the systemic elements in ritual practices is relied upon, any adult person has tacit knowledge of the constraints that guide and shape her or his behavior. Ethnographic evidence suggests that the human body and its locative dimensions, the notion of place, forms the cultural grammar on which sacred-making behavior is based. From this perspective the sacred can be defined as a relational category of thought and action, which becomes actualized in specific value-loaded situations when a change in the contextually interpreted boundaries of temporal, territorial or corporeal categories takes place. In traditional hunting and agricultural societies it has become operative in social situations where patterns of metaphoric and metonymic relationships between the notions of human body and territory have been linked together in order to express values that a group of people place on the strategic points of their communal life, that is, marking the qualitative difference between the inside and the outside of the human body and the territory.

George Lakoff and Mark Johnson argue that the structures of human understanding have their origin in the body. According to Johnson, patterns of conceptual significance and symbolic import are prefigured in the imaginative patternings of bodily experience. Our conceptions of reality cannot be separated from what we experience in our embodied interactions. Perceptual capacities and recurring image schemata that constrain both idiosyncratic and socially shared systems of knowledge—schemes of containment, part–whole, source–path–goal, link, cycle, scale and center–periphery—depend on the nature of human body (Lakoff 1987: 271–275, 1989: 121–123; Johnson 1987: 30–40, 1991: 6–8, 13).

The ethnographic literature shows that human life has always been a concept that is bodily confined. Just as the body is an entity with boundaries, the bodily openings are border zones (Douglas 1989: 12), through which life flows in or out, in a manner similar to people moving across international borders at entrance and exit sites. The consciousness of a living person, and the formation of conceptual categories, on which the manifestations of religion also depend, is fundamentally a corporeal consciousness. The idea of the sacred based on bodily boundaries has been developed by Mary Douglas. For her the idea of the sacred is based on the precariousness of the cultural categories guiding human thinking and behavior. The sacred is the universe in its dynamic aspect; its boundaries are inexplicable, "because the reasons for any particular way of defining the sacred are embedded in the social consensus which it protects" (Douglas 1978: xv). Sacrality does not, however, merely mean that all members belonging to a category have to conform with the prototypes defining the properties according to which membership is determined, so that the sacred order, unity, integrity or ideal norm will be maintained (see Douglas 1989; Paden 1996b; Sperber 1996b). There is also another side to the idea of sacrality, as exemplified by the French sociologists Roger Caillois (1959) and Georges Battaille (1988a, 1988b), and to which Douglas's own studies on the taxonomic status of Pangolin as an anomalous animal also bear witness (Douglas 1978). Impurity, forbiddenness and dangerousness are also characteristics of things classified as sacred. The term sacred refers here to a more general semantic concept, comprising both its positive and negative, its right-hand (religion) and left-hand (taboo) dimensions (see Burnside 1991). Menstruation, pregnancy, the post-parturition period and also the manipulation of corpses in mortuary rituals have almost universally been connected with the semantic field of the category of the sacred, in other words, with the idea of a boundary that sets socially impure members and elements apart from pure ones in the category systems of the community. The growth of things with social value (the "religious" aspect of the sacred) is to be protected against the contagious impact of substances that are not confined within the socially defined boundaries of the human body, society and territory, and which have exhausted their capacity to produce growth for the benefit of society (the "taboo" aspect of the sacred).

The categorization of social space is another major cognitive structure on which various population groups have traditionally based their symbolism of categorial boundaries. One of the most common ways of conceptualizing territorial and other spatial boundaries, as anthropologists have found, is to distinguish inhabited from uninhabited areas—and to create spiritual entities in the process. In myths and epic narratives, the supernatural world of gods and spirits is regularly located "beyond" or "beneath" the spaces and territories of human habitation (Tarkka 1994). These "other-worldly" places are situated in deserts, forests or lakes; or they are placed in some vertical relation to trees, mountains and celestial bodies. The human dwellers in the inhabited area discover evidence of this "other world" beyond in anomalous objects, times, places and phenomena which contradict and "threaten" the normal categories in terms of which the world is perceived in the flow of everyday life.

Terms denoting the "sacred" in various languages can be viewed as linguistic indices, the semantic scope of which has varied in time according to the systems of meanings whereby distinctions between persons, animals, things, objects, phenomena, topographical points in the landscape, events, experiences and so forth are made. In the Finnish language, the term *pyhä* (denoting "sacred") was originally used to designate both territorial borders and the intersections of waterways, allowing groups of settlers to separate themselves from one another and to mark the boundary between the shared inner domain of the territory claimed by them and the outer domain. In place names, *pyhä* signified the outer border of the inhabited area (Anttonen 1996). V. N. Toporov (1987) has shown how those features of the phenomenal world which contain a motive of growth have been glossed in Indo-European languages by terms denoting "sacred." The motive of growth as a condition for marking something off as sacred is manifested especially in topography and natural processes. A mountain, a hillock, or a flat treeless hilltop takes on a special meaning as "swollen," raised land; its power and substance is stronger than that of a territory which does not contain any fixed points for a dividing boundary. Likewise, sacrificing by cutting into pieces, burning or shedding of blood implies the idea of growth: a form that has cultural value (an animal, a human) is being dissolved into non-form, something that lacks fixed boundaries. The power that has supported its substance, the soul, is then regarded as a blessing for the growth and reproduction of existing or future form. The motif of growth is also connected to the symbolic value and the definition of sacrality of trees, stones, light, luster, radiance, moon and sun (Toporov 1987: 193–219).

Changing Paradigms of the Sacred

The sacred is a special quality in individual and collective systems of meaning. In religious thinking it has been used as an attribute of situations and circumstances

which have some reference to the culture-specific conception of the category of God, or, in non-theological contexts, to some supreme principle of life such as love, freedom, equality or justice. Sacrality is employed as a category-boundary to set things with non-negotiable value apart from things whose value is based on continuous transactions. The difference that the sacred makes is based on culturally transmitted myths and forms of ritual representation whereby symbolic constructions of individual and collective life-values are renewed at times and in locations where contact between human beings and God or a supreme life principle becomes actual. People participate in sacred-making activities and processes of signification according to paradigms given by the belief systems to which they are committed, whether they be religious, national or ideological. Paradigms of sacralization may originate unequivocally in the mythic history of organized religions, national traditions or political ideologies, or ambiguously in conflicting and multivalent symbolic constructions of syncretic world-views and life strategies. The logic of sacralization does not necessarily have to follow the linear model from cosmogony to eschatology or from childhood to old-age, as in the mythical traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Although there have emerged both Christian and Islamic fundamentalist and anti-modern movements in the Western world, there are millions of people in Christian countries who no longer accept the whole religious tradition as a grand theory for their lives. At the same time that the number of non-affiliated people has grown in Europe in both Protestant and Catholic countries (see Dobbelaere 1993), the old religious structures have become desacralized and new or non-religious forms of sacralization are being invented.

Suggested Readings

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