



<https://doi.org/10.26520/mcdsare.2018.2.102-106>

MCDSARE: 2018
International Multidisciplinary Scientific Conference on the
Dialogue between Sciences & Arts, Religion & Education

**THE SACRED AS A PRIORI ELEMENT IN THE “STRUCTURE OF
CONSCIOUSNESS”**

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Abstract

In this paper, I attempt to interpret one of the fundamental theses of phenomenology of religion, which states that “the sacred is part of the structure of consciousness” (Eliade). For archaic man, something can be acknowledged as real only if it possesses the determination of sacred. The category of sacred is, in fact, the determination that gives the possibility of something to be acknowledged as real. Eliade’s concept of sacred can be understood through the categories of reality (Kant) and being (Heidegger). With this starting point, we can consider that the cognitive science undertaking of religion cannot ignore what phenomenology of religion ultimately claims in reference to the sacred: it is a unifying principle and an objective reality.

Keywords: sacred; Dasein; a priori; real – reality; unifying principle;

1. INTRODUCTION

In the specialised literature, the attempts at bringing Eliade closer to the cognitive perspective of understanding the religious experience succeed in concluding that “Eliade’s understanding can be seen as complementary to recent cognitive theory, which demonstrates the coherence of that understanding” (Rennie, 2007). The same author asserted in *Reconstructing Eliade. Making Sense of Religion* that “Eliade’s thought is systematic, its internal elements referring to, being supported by, and reciprocally supporting its other elements. The rejection of any one element, for whatever reason, can then result in a rejection of the whole” (Rennie, 1996, 3).

The sacred, in Mircea Eliade’s view, is part of the structure of consciousness – this is, in my opinion, Eliade’s most important statement, which is the foundation of his entire epistemology and which can be cognitively valorised. My hypothesis, which I am trying to reason in this paper, using the tools of Philosophy is that, being a fundamental element in the structure of consciousness, the sacred can be assimilated with an a priori structure of experience and knowledge in general, in the sense defined by Kant – necessary and universal.

This is to say that experience, in the case of homo religiosus – the religious experience emerges at the encounter between this a priori structure and the matter received through senses. Henceforth, the

whole phenomenological epistemology which describes several fundamental concepts (religious phenomenon, religious experience, religious symbol, the sacred-profane dialectic) depends on the understanding of the sacred as an element in the structure of consciousness.

2. PRESENCE-AT-HAND, EXISTENCE, REALITY

In Kant's view, *Dasein* equates existence and refers to the way things are in nature; it corresponds to the scholastic term *existentia*. In Heidegger's case, the equivalent term is "present-at-hand" (Germ. *Vorhandenheit*). In Husserl's work, one identifies the same Kantian equivalence: *Dasein*: being present. For Kant, existence is the things' being in nature, for Heidegger, existence is *Dasein*'s being-there. In Heideggerian terminology, a body never *exists*, but is *present-at-hand*. Instead, *Dasein*, i.e. ourselves, is never present-at-hand, but exists.

Both the Kantian concept of *Dasein* and Heidegger's *presence-at-hand* must be discerned from the Kantian and scholastic concept of *reality*. Reality with Kant does not signify what is currently understood by the reality of the outer world.

The understanding of Kant's thesis depends on the understanding of his concept of reality: the being is not a real predicate – I will refer to this Kantian matter with profound scholastic roots in order to be able to further clarify the concept of sacred.

If we follow Heidegger's analysis closely, important for this context is the reference made to Thomas Aquinas's text *De veritate*, in which the scholastic theologian asserts, against the ontological proof of God and similarly to Kant, much later, that the being is not a real predicate: "For something to be known in itself, i.e. understood starting from itself, it is only required that the predicate, which is uttered about the respective existence, to be one of *ratio subjecti*, i.e. to belong to the concept of subject (Thomas Aquinas, *De veritate*, chap. 10). Starting from this point, Heidegger establishes the equivalence:

Ratio = essentia = nature = Reality,

and asserts that "the subject cannot be thought of without that something that is shown in the predicate. But in order to acquire such knowledge, that Kant was to name later analytic knowledge – which equates with unmediated getting its determinations out of the substance of an object – it is necessary for us to know *ratio subjecti*, i.e. the concept of the thing" (Heidegger, 2006, 66).

Kant argues the ontological argument, asserting that existence, *Vorhandensein*, in Heideggerian terminology, is not among the determinations of a concept. The structure of the Kantian argument is briefly outlined below:

About existence in general, with the theses:

1. Existence is by no means a predicate or a determination of a thing;
2. Existence is the absolute position of a thing and by this is different from any predicate which is placed every time, only relatively to another object.
3. Can I possibly assert that there is much more than mere possibility in existence? In other words, is existence the effectiveness of a thing, the completion of its possibility?

In *Critique of Pure Reason*, the first thesis is formulated by Kant as follows: "Being is obviously not a real predicate, that is, it is not a concept about something that could be added to the concept of a thing" (Kant, 2009, 459), it is merely "positing of a thing or of certain determinations in themselves". Heidegger reads "real predicate" as "predicate of a *res*": "our question must be more precisely shaped: Is existence a real predicate, or, as Kant says in brief, a determination? Determination, he says, is a predicate which is added *to* the concept of subject and goes beyond it, thus increasing it. The determination, the predicate, does not have to be contained in the concept. Determination is a real predicate which increases the thing, *res*, from the point of view of the content (Heidegger, 2006, 70).

Kant's concept of reality is not the same with effectiveness, existence, or *Vorhandensein*. Reality is the determination of the thing as *res*, real is that which belongs to *res*, and Heidegger goes as far as he assimilates the Kantian concept of reality with the Platonic concept of ἰδέα (the concept of what the thing is, what scholastics terms *res*).

3. SACRED, REAL, INTENTIONALITY

Powerful and effective, alive and real, true and significant, exemplary and creator, original, enduringness, eternal, organised, orderly, prestigious, supernatural, above-human, transcendent, absolute, divine, mysterious, “the one completely other” – this is the semantic field of the concept of sacred. Eliade aimed, in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, at studying aspects of archaic ontology, “the conceptions of being and reality that can be read from the behaviour of man of the premodern societies” (Eliade, 1999, 11), concluding that real becomes an object or an act insofar it *mimics* or *repeats* an archetype. For the archaic man, reality is exclusively acquired by repetition and participation in an archetype, in an exemplary model, in the sacred – because “the sacred is the real par excellence, it is power, effectiveness, the source of life and fecundity.

Religious man’s desire to live *in the sacred* is, in fact, his desire to position himself in objective reality, not to let himself be paralysed by the endless relativity of the purely subjective experiences, to live in a real and effective world, and not in an illusion. (Eliade, 2000, 24-25). The sacred is, in the end, equivalent to *reality*; it is saturated with *being*: “Sacred power means reality, enduringness and efficiency. The sacred-profane dichotomy is understood as an opposition between *real* and *unreal* or *pseudo-real* (...) Thus religious man’s desire to be, to participate in reality, to be saturated with power is perfectly natural” (Eliade, 2000, 14).

The structure of this archaic ontology is proven with facts which demonstrate the mechanism of traditional thinking and which “help us understand *how* and *why* an object becomes *real* for man of premodern societies (Eliade, 1999, 13). In this research, Eliade explicitly considers the facts that prove that, for archaic man, *reality* is function of mimicking a celestial archetype, and facts which show us how *reality* is bestowed on by participation in “the Centre’s symbolism: cities, temples, dwellings become real because they are assimilated to the “Centre of the World” (Eliade, 1999, 13).

In many parts in his work, Eliade asserts the intentional nature of the sacred in the construction of the religious experience of the archaic man and of the religious man in general, as well as the transcendent nature of this concept, understood as a universal structure of a religion, of any religion: “Religion entails a mode of man’s being in the world, in which there is an intentional, irreducible, unique relation to the sacred experienced as transcendent. Eliade equates the sacred with the real as an intentional object of faith” (Allen, 2011, 104-105).

4. THE SACRED – AN *A PRIORI* FORM OF UNITY

When the archaic man says that “the mountain is sacred”, this does not mean that it is *present-at-hand*. The sacred in Eliade’s view signifies existence, reality, and not presence-at-hand. The phrase “the mountain is sacred” is intended to say that “the mountain is real”. How does Eliade understand the meaning of this utterance and on what grounds? The religious nature is that utterance by which the intellect relates something along the lines of the presence-at-hand to something authentic, real, perennial, and powerful. The sacred nature of the mountain is that determination of the concept, in the sense that *this* determination is a real predicate that increases the thing, *res*, from the point of view of its contents. Not only does this statement have gnoseological value, not only is it a synthetic judgement, but it possesses an ontological value of world constitution, in that it expresses the way in which the archaic man invests the presence-at-hand with reality.

This is the reason why not only is the sacred determination descriptive, but it also speaks of the *res* nature of things, that is, of the being of the things that make up the world of the traditional man and, implicitly, of this world as a whole. This human type, when constructing according to the archetypal patterns, in fact, constitutes and consecrates a world in its entirety: “any world is a *sacred world* for religious man” (Eliade, 2000, 25).

The constitution and consecration mechanism described by Eliade emphasises the intentional, i.e. the *a priori* nature of the sacred; however, considering that the constitution process is one of founding the world (of bringing the world into *being*), Eliade “presents a conception on religion based on the experience of the sacred, a structure of consciousness and a way of being in the world which always reveals a sense of transcendence” (Allen, 2011, 107).

Maybe it is worth mentioning that Eliade himself noted that the traditional man's way of regarding the world is a Platonic one, at the risk of emphasising it in favour of an undifferentiated ontologism. In truth, the historian of religions notes that we deal with a 'primitive' ontological conception, in the sense that "an object or an act becomes real only insofar as it *imitates* or *repeats* an archetype. Thus, *reality* is acquired solely through *repetition* or *participation*. Everything that lacks an exemplary model is "depleted of meaning", that is, devoid of reality. Man would, then, tend to become archetypal and paradigmatic. This tendency may seem paradoxical, in that man of the traditional cultures acknowledges himself as *real* only to the extent that he ceases being himself (for a modern observer) and is content with *imitating* and *repeating somebody else's* gestures. In other words, he acknowledges himself as *real*, that is, as 'truly himself' only insofar as he ceases to be so. It could be said that this "primitive" ontology has a Platonic structure and that Plato could be considered, in this case, the philosopher of 'primitive mentality' par excellence, as if the thinker succeeded in giving philosophical validity to the modes of life and behaviour of archaic mentality" (Eliade, 1999, 38).

Although Eliade notes that the acknowledgement of the Platonic nature of archaic ontology does not make us go too far, I think it is important to stress that Heidegger's assimilation of the Kantian concept of reality with the Platonic one of *ἰδέα* is not irrelevant for the purpose of this paper, that is, for explaining the role of the concept of sacred in the architecture of Eliade's epistemology, and for my argument that the sacred can be assimilated with an *a priori* structure, in Kantian sense, one that constitutes the world. In Plato's case, *ἰδέα* is the real, it carries the entire being and determines the steadfast nature of knowledge.

Knowledge must be knowledge of what is true and steadfast and, thereby, real, because man, in Plato's view, only knows what is eternal and indestructible – that is, *ἰδέα*, which (in Heidegger's terminology) makes the emergence of any 'essent' (*das Seiende*, what is) in its aspect (*εἶδος*). Plato's *ἰδέα* is that which, similarly to Kant's concept of reality, has the same meaning, "apparent when, while referring to an essent, we wonder: τί ἐστὶ, *what* is the essent? The answer is provided by the content (the what) of what the thing is, a content that scholastics termed *res*" (Heidegger, 2006, 71).

If we have so far succeeded in assimilating, by their essence, the concepts of *ἰδέα* (Plato), reality (Kant) and sacred (Eliade), the argument should be taken further in order to highlight the fact that each one of them is, equally, a form of the unity of being. *Ἰδέα*, as being of essent, is that which brings together – it is *λόγος*, in the sense of a "steady and constant binding together" (Heidegger, 1999, 173). Kant's categories are, in their turn, forms of unity of the possible unifications in judgements, and reality (content of *res*), as category of quality, is one of them, as a form of unity of affirmative, positive judgement (Heidegger, 2006, 71). If the sacred is part of the structure of consciousness, then we are allowed to construe it the way we construe the *ἰδέα* unifying the logos in Plato's case or the way in which the concept of reality is considered a form of unity by Kant.

The function of the category of sacred is that of binding together. It is for archaic man the unity principle which, irrespective of the name it receives in various premodern cultures, has a function. The sacred is the unifying and organising principle of reality. When Kant speaks of the totality of realities, he does not refer to the totality of the things actually present; on the contrary, he refers to the totality of the possible determination of *res*, to the totality of the contents of *res*, and to the totality of the things possible. Analogically, the sacred is that totality of the real, the unifying principle of totalities. For the religious man, something can be acknowledged as thing only insofar as it possesses the sacred determination, that is, this principle of unity that places things in the reality of the sacred world.

5. CONCLUSIONS

When the archaic man's existence ('being-there') is bound by a "this or that thing is sacred" type of judgement, two conclusions could be drawn: 1. "any binding or unification takes place from the perspective of a possible unity" (Heidegger, 2006, 73), and 2. This reality (the sacred) is the only determination acknowledged as necessary by the archaic man for the thing – *res* nature of the bound existence. In the table of the Kantian categories, the sacred as a unifying principle of things, assimilated with reality, is part of the categories of quality. By virtue of this proposition, Heidegger's analysis brings

the reasons why Eliade's perspective has a Platonic nature to the fore (Heidegger, 2006, 71) and, more importantly, why certain commenters critiqued as being theologizing. These critiques aside, perhaps the present attempt succeeds in explaining why the sacred is not affirmed, in Eliade's case, as an autonomous reality, but rather, in Kantian terminology, as an a priori category, in order to indicate the objective unity of the world as the religious man's sacred reality.

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