

THE PROBLEM OF THE HOLY/THE SACRED IN HISTORIOGRAPHY

Abstract

The article discusses how the category of the holy / the sacred (the central notion of religion) is identified in cultures and how this category is reflected in historiography. For the mentioned purposes the discussion is unfolded in some basic concepts and theories associated with this problem, which are considered to be significant for the further development of the theories on the problem.

As is known, the terms used by different authors in different contexts over the time are covered with various layers and change in that degree that it becomes necessary to reconsider them and set boundaries between them.

Nowadays the discussion has been renewed on the concept of the sacred in different scientific centers of the world considering the fact that religion has not exhausted its nourishing sources in modernity yet.

The article focuses on the questions of how the basic ideas and terms associated with the concept of the sacred are once again understood in religious studies and how significant they are for the social life of humans.

Hierophany, *hierotopy* and *really real* are the concepts directly related to the problem of the holy/the sacred, the discussion of which was unfolded at the turn of the 20th century and is traditionally associated with the name of Rudolf Otto (an eminent German Lutheran theologian, philosopher, and historian of comparative religions) and his book – *Das Heilige* (the holy), which was issued in German in 1917 in Breslau. Since then, the exceptional interest, caused by the book has not ceased.

In the context of Otto, German *das Heilige* / *holy* is understood as the experience of the sacred of the *numinous* by the mysterious, majestic presence inspiring dread and fascination, that according to Otto derives a priory from sacred reality.

Arguing that the non-rational in religion must be given its due importance R. Otto found and introduced the wholly new concept – the *numinous* from the Latin *numen* (“god,” “spirit,” or “divine”) as a certain *sui generis* category of evaluation and interpretation – that preserved the specificity of the sacred and identified its diversity and stages of development.

According to R. Otto the form of the experience of *numinous* (as *ganz andere* or completely different) is the *mysterium* (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*), the mystery that is both awe-inspiring and fascinating) that can be experienced in feelings. This content presents itself under two aspects: (1) that of “daunting awfulness and majesty,” and (2) “as something uniquely attractive and fascinating.” From the former comes the sense of the uncanny, of divine wrath and judgment;

from the latter, the reassuring and heightening experiences of grace and divine love. This dual impact of awesome mystery and fascination was Otto's characteristic way of expressing man's encounter with the holy (B.Meland).

R. Otto analyzed the modalities of religious feeling and focused his research mainly on its irrational aspect. His work set a paradigm for the study of religion that focuses on the need to realize the religious as a non-reducible, original category in its own right.

After 40 years (1957) from the publication of Otto's work Romanian-American anthropologist M. Eliade (one of the most influential scholars of religions of the 20th century and the world's foremost interpreters of religious symbolism and myth) extended the problem of the sacred from the different perspectives.

His purpose became to present the phenomenon of the sacred in a complex way, as a whole, and not only from the irrational aspect.

M. Eliade developed all the views on the sacred space known for his time in the basic work *the Sacred and the Profane*. And expanded and expounded the phenomenological dimensions of the Sacred (Eliade 1959). In the aforesaid book, he explored how different cultures experienced and responded to the presence of divine power in places. For Eliade "each sacred place implied *hierophany* or the breakthrough of the sacred into human experience", i.e. a revelation (1959: 26).

Places are considered sacred because of the divine or supernatural power residing in them. Places charged and full of with the definite powers help societies to orientate and find their ways in the profane world. On the one hand, sacred places provide individuals and groups with a *vertical orientation* by creating spatial connections between heavenly forces and the place (earth). On the other hand – to horizontal orientation, by dividing the landscape into sacred centers and profane peripheries and by imprinting hierarchical values into the ground. The divine presence, the *axis mundi* or the center of the world, transmits spiritual meanings, that provide context for all other spaces and knowledge (Eliade 1959;) Kilde 2008).

The term *hierophany* was introduced by Mircea Eliade in the phenomenology of the sacred, and meant the creation of the sacred territory by means of the revelation /epiphany of the sacred, that resulted in transformation of the homologous space into the heterogenous one. Hierophany reveals absolute, fixed center. It reveals sacred places tradition, from where the communication with God is accomplished (carried out).

According to the biblical story, in Luz Jacob dreamed a ladder set up on earth, and the top of it reached to heaven; ... the angels of God were ascending and descending on it! And ..., the lord stood above it and said: I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Issac... (Genesis, 28: 10-13). Jacob awoke from his sleep and cried out:...

"How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of Heaven. ...And he took the stone which he put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called the name of that place Bethel (Genesis, 28. 12-19).

According to Eliade in the above brought example, the sacred space is ritually constructed. Hierophany (or the manifestation of the sacred), theophany (Epiphany of the God) and sign define the behavior. Which means that the term hierophany, simultaneously implies the sacred space construction techniques. By signing (marking) a place with a stone (Bethel) Jakob constructed the

sacred space which followed the manifestation of the sacred and making libation he performed a ritual, that was necessary for dealing with the supernatural.

At the beginning of the 21st century in the studies of sacred spaces a new concept – *hierotopy* – was introduced by the Russian historian of Arts Alexei Lidov. According to him, the phrase *the sacred space* cannot be used for every single, specific case, due to its general nature, and therefore (in 2001) based on the specificity of the research field, he introduced the term *hierotopia* (i.e. *hierotopy*), which consists of the Greek words *hieros* (holy) and from *topos* (place). Lidov, who is very familiar with both substantive and situational approaches, practically elaborated the same topic of hierophany and, through its segmentation, distinguished the second stage, in which he focused on the creation of sacred spaces by man himself. Accordingly, he distinguished divine and human projects.

As Lidov mentions, probably, the most serious problem of *hierotopy* is the category of the sacred itself, which surmises the actual presence of God and cannot be separated from the miraculous.

Using the same biblical example of Jacob's dream (by which Eliade highlights the specificity of Hierophany) Lidov tries to articulate the novelty of his approach by separating hierophany from hierotopy (2006, 10). As he notes, in the above mentioned biblical story, the description of the hierotopic project starts with the waking up of Jacob, who, inspired by his dream-vision, begins to make a sacred space, which would convert a particular place into „the house of God and the gate of heaven“ (Eliade). He took the stone that has been his pillow, and set it up as a monument, and poured oil on it. Jacob also renamed the place and took special vows. So, Jacob, and all his “successors” – the creators of churches and shrines – created a particular spatial milieu (Lidov 2014).

Thus, according to Lidov, Jacob and his “successors”, the creators, create a real spatial environment that had been resulted by the hierophany and contain in itself the revelation, but insofar as it is created by human hands it differs from the divine vision.

Accordingly, the term *hierotopy* in its essence is narrower and artificially segmented from hierophany is more useable and belongs to the specific art history sphere.

This kind of segmentation really makes possible to distinguish, so to speak, the Gothic space from the Orthodox one (for it really belongs to hierotopy, i.e. to the two different holy places), but they are integrated by hierophany or the entirety of both: divine and human projects.

In the above discussed category of the sacred (Otto, Eliade), the divine presence, with which the unexpected revelation is associated, has a central place. But in the western modernity signed under the sign of absence time and space are emptied of presence. As R. Orsi explains: absence is strictly enforced by language, by reigning aesthetics, and by a normative sensorium to which the gods are not available by touch, taste, sound, or sight (Orsi 2008, 12-18; 2012).

As the Professor of Religious Studies and History, R. Orsi remarks, the *presence* has not disappeared immediately in the modern world. By bringing forward the issue of often recurring events, R. Orsi reopened the discussion on the problem of the presence of the sacred by talking about the old model(s) of being, but already in a modern, presumably enchanted world (Orsi 2012, 1-13; 84 – 105).

According to the researcher (and this is important), this kind of reality fundamentally contradicts modern knowledge and the modern interpretation of the world. The boundaries that Mary's presence crosses are the boundaries that are so precious and fundamental to modernity and

modern thought. But nevertheless, Mary's apparitions and pilgrimages have effectively established themselves within the framework of modern historiography over the past few decades.

As R.Orsi thinks, despite the step forward in this direction, all this remains resolutely within the interpretive field of modernity. According to Orsi's arguments, from a certain perspective, it can be said that the experience of presence as a parallel history of modernity is not atavistic. Simply, as a pre-modern phenomenon, it does not fit into the linear narrative of modernity.

Orsi's discussion of the Lourdes event implies to show that the experience of presence has fundamentally nothing to do with modernity in general. Repeated (reoccurred apparitions) events do not constitute modern origin histories. Presence, not only in this particular case, but always, demands its own history and experience, and the experiences of presence offer us the outline of this history, the characteristic signs of this history: the forms of Mary's adoration show that the vocabulary of the practice, the understanding and the necessary experience, are neither identical to, nor derived from, modern historiography and that it needs to be expanded (Orsi 2008).

In modern academic religious studies, the sacred is *really real*. Actually, the really real is independent of cultural and social coordinates. The sacred, for Orsi, is a reality that is greater than the sum of its social parts and that has a life of its own independent of humans; It starts an independent life from whose imagination, heritage, and circumstances it arose (Orsi 2012).

The above said can be summarized as follows:

The revelation of the sacred is the breakthrough of the transcendent in time and space. It can be experienced not only in the original "real" initial place of its occurrence, to which collective memory or beliefs, different narratives can be related, but also in his replicas. (Here enters the theme of transformation of national into the international). It is experienced as really real category and has the history of its own, that might reoccurred always and everywhere. Accordingly, narratives are associated with the holy (sacred). The narratives imply holy scriptures, apocryphal legends, historiographical texts, also visual narratives and "real" experience accounts of pilgrims.

The term hierophany also implies construction techniques of the sacred space. It refers to the ritually constructed sacred spaces. Accordingly, it itself implies accomplishment of both the divine and human projects in culture.

All these allows us to emphasize the fact, that the term hierophany introduced by Eliade for religious studies compared with other above discussed terms is wider and implies much more than other terms. It in itself involves and implies not only the creation of the territory of the sacred place or hierotopy, but also belongs to the really real category. Accordingly, hierotopy in its essence is narrower and artificially segmented from hierophany and specifically belongs to the sphere of the history of arts. Such segmentation really enables to distinguish, let us say, Gothic space from the Orthodox one (this really belongs to hierotopy or belongs to two different sacred places) but what unites them is hierophany, that is, the unity of divine and human projects. We do not consider it appropriate to separate them in religious studies. Hierotopy is concrete and belongs to the arts sphere, and, consequently, is related to the human project, but it is inspired by hierophany which is general, represents the general basis for every hieotopical project and is entirely associated with the religious sphere. Hierotopy differs from culture to culture; hierophany works similarly in every culture and has the history of its own and is not limited by the linear modern time. Finally, we think that the difference should be made between the ritual experience, lived reality and analysis. Placing

the creation of a sacred space within the sphere of human activity cannot explain the motivation of this activity itself.

In the situational interpretation, the ritual really presents and identifies the legitimacy of the members of the group. Accordingly, it indicates the social structure of the group, but does not tell us anything about the sacred events themselves, which have a high degree of symbolic content in all times and in all cultures.

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