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THE PERSISTENCE OF THE SACRED IN THE PROFANIZED CONTEMPORANEITY

The sacred at the basis and the basis of the sacred

Despite the topic of the conference being mostly about society, the point of view in this text is not sociological, but rather focuses on a broader area: the reality of the contemporary religious man, or of man experiencing some form of sacred manifestation in our (predominantly) disenchanted, profanized world.

The sacred is believed to be ontologically and axiologically superior to the profane (the non-sacred, the quotidian, the ordinary) in primordial religions and in the religious life of today. In archaic settings, the need for self-determination and the affirmation of the sense of belonging to a group (its identity, its values, its customs), is fulfilled through the sacred, through intense social cohesion within the religious cult and the community. The community confirms itself (its constellation, its sacredness), therefore establishing its role in the world: survive, keep safe, persist, succeed. The primordial belief in the sacred is essential to the way of life – it structures reality, it gives directions, it orders time and space, it governs relations. The sacred reality, when believed to be infinitely more important than the profane, exhibits performative powers in establishing ways and patterns of subsequent beliefs and behaviours, and in affirming the position of the religious man (*homo religiosus*) in the world. The sacred has an unknown, otherworldly power and majesty, and it has performative strength. According to the religious archaic man, the sacred allows for things to exist, and on the basis of the power of sacred myths and rituals, the rules, relations, values and concepts of the community are established and developed. This means that custom law, interpersonal relations, health practices, lore, art, and proto-metaphysics are all in some, direct or mediated way, established in virtue of the sacred.

The sacred and the profane share a relation of double mutual dependence, which is the basis not only of religious belief, but the entire structure of the

expression of belief – the religious cult and the connections and practices which stem from it. The sacred is powerful, but fragile. While it renders the profane possible, safe and ordered, it is susceptible to corruption, to impurity, to desacralization. The profane is ontologically inferior, which means that it is dependent on the ineffable power of the sacred reality, (it is believed that) it cannot sustain itself. However, while the profane realm does not sustain itself if no sacred foundation, persistence and intervention is constantly involved, it is responsible for the sacred. The profane reality - ordinary, unexceptional, weak and dull - lends itself to the sacred, preventing it from (severely) declining. The profane reality ceases to be when it gives rise to the tools necessary for the proper functioning of the religious cult. The sacred, susceptible to the corruption of the unholy and the impure, is protected within the beliefs and the practices of the cult. Since the community is organized around the strength and meaning of the sacred, even in its least religious aspects (seemingly removed from it), it is indirectly connected to it. The need for the sacred to be safe and protected, so that it can keep the profane safe and nicely ordered, is expressed through the sets of prohibitions of the negative cult, and through the constant dedicated engagement by the believers to keep the sacred reactualized, intense, refreshed, powerful. These are the crucial elements of the fruitful functioning of this basic, sacred-profane dichotomy.

For the religious man, who unwaveringly believes in the sacred reality, hierophany is always an exteriorization of power unlike any pertaining to the profane realm. Hierophanies make things work; they make them fruitful and prosperous. However, the belief in the sacred includes the belief in its decline through the passage of (profane) time: most of the primordial religious cult is dedicated to the (partial) reactualization of the initial sacredness of the world, and most of the contemporary religious behaviors follow this need. The intensity of the sacred in the world has subsided through time, and the modern way of life lacks the constant fascination by a superior reality. This decline is also staved off in the contemporary context of self-deliberation, thanks to the different ways of displaying religiousness and of communicating faith in the (post)modern world. The belief in the sacred perseveres: transformed, adapted, and incorporated in the contemporary societal, emotional, aesthetical, and ritual needs and ways of expression. For those willing to seek out meaning, wonder and awe, the sacred is there.

There are various modalities through which the sacred has persisted: through myths that have turned into allegories and legends and fables, to

contemporary super heroes and moral authorities; through rituals that have lost their numinous value, but have acquired profane significance; through instances of collective exaltation or individual admiration that have found new grounds for expression. The new human rites are stemming from the old rituals; the motives in popular culture develop from the mythical models. The persistence of the sacred is ineluctably apparent in the constant human need for dedication to something, fascination by something, and the engagement with the extraordinary.

“There is not even solitude”

Homo religious is a descendant of his sacred ancestors; he believes that the sacred can be exteriorized through any person, event, object, phenomenon. The dedicated believer thinks that through communal action, through the religious actions of the society, the initial manifestation of the sacred can be reactualized. This means that the original time of profound sacredness can be at least partially and briefly brought back, so that the superior reality, transposed in the “now” of the sacred time in the cult, can ensure the continued preservation and safety of the world. However, this homo religiosus speciation seems somewhat anachronistic in the contemporary world.

While many advantages of the loosening of the constraints of organized, or even compulsory religiosity are obvious, like the possibility for genuine, authentic faith, untainted by the pressure of pious appearances, or the deeply personal, completely intimate and unmediated connection to God, still, this insistence on autonomy, on self-deliberation, resonates as a disadvantage of the secular age. While liberating, the lack of referral to higher instances to regulate social and interpersonal relations and personal decisions can be troubling. Any such yearning for a deferred responsibility can be seen as escapism in the secular age, which exhibits a permeating distrust for the need to commune with the sacred, or the need for solace by the divine.

The inspirational ideas about man’s ability to find and maintain meaning in life, the striving for emancipation from external and supernatural forces, the enhancement of critical thinking and the freedom of choice also mean that there is less place for the divine. The power of humanity is sufficient to keep a world that is a true cosmos and not chaos, that is known and illuminated, and not a mess of wildly under-researched ineffability. Kant’s “sapere

aude!”¹ means that immaturity (a result not of ignorance, but of the lack of courage for autonomous use of reason and wisdom), can be overcome. The enlightened man needs no authorities, he is capable of self-determination. Since freedom has always come with the burden of responsibility, and the abundance of options with the confusion of choice, it is no surprise that life is complex and filled with anguish.²

Of course, this does not mean that spiritual endeavors and religious feelings are non-existent, or repressed by an external disapproving authority. For Taylor, the explosion of religious lives, this radical proliferation of religiosities and spiritualities is a main attribute of the modern age.³ Obviously, our modern perspective of the sacred differs immensely from that of the sacred in its “golden age” (or rather, the age where the reactualization of the “golden age” of the sacred origins was a *raison d’être* of religious and societal life). As it was previously mentioned, the fact that religiosity is now a deeply personal choice, persuasion and pursuit, makes it authentic and free. This, however, entails that the sources of the experience of the sacred are much more difficult to find, compared to the past when they were constantly around, although not easily accessible. The objects of religious sentiments and cultic behavior are not connected to the very existence of the community, like it used to be at the beginnings of religion and of custom law, nor are they as strictly defined as in the later religious institutions and systems. It is hardly true that the contemporary world lacks meaning, however, meaning is to be discovered or created.

The rediscovery of fascination

The sacred in the world, as it was previously mentioned, is prone to declining. The beginning of philosophy meant that myths were slowly transformed from sacred tales into allegories, didactic stories; from a sacred narration of the Beginning and the sacred ancestors, into fun little anecdotes about imaginary creatures. The rituals slowly changed from cultic, sacred activities, to

¹ I. Kant, *Was ist Aufklärung?: Ausgewählte kleiner Schriften*, hrsg. von Horst D. Brandt, Hamburg, 1999, 20-22.

² Besides in the works of the existential philosophers, the attention to the human lostness in the world (and to man as thrown into the world), is characteristic of the artworks of the early twentieth century. Dreyfus and Kelly list Eliot, especially “The Wasteland” and Beckett, especially “Endgame”, which testify to the dark fate of living in the modern age, H. Dreyfus, S. D. Kelly, *All Things Shining*, Free Press, New York, 2011, 28-29.

³ C. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Harvard University Press, Boston, 2007.

profane, repetitive actions, like customs, or habits. According to Eliade, when the feeling of the need for religiosity towards the cosmos fades, the perspective of the participation into sacredness and into infinity, and the idea of the responsibility for the continual safety of the world completely changes. This development of the communities outside of the necessity of sacred dedication, means that deities stop being accessible through the participation in the cosmic rhythm. The religious significance of the repetition of paradigmatic acts is forgotten, which is, for Eliade, a direct introduction into a pessimistic worldview of existence. The cyclic time becomes frightening when it is desacralized, when it stops being a way to reintegrate the primordial situation, and with this, a way for the reactualization of the mysterious presence of the divine, Eliade claims.⁴ Celebrations turn from dominantly sacred to profane. Ordinary (profane) actions are less defined and conditioned by their sacred background.

The sacred, however, persists. Myths do not simply disappear; they are transformed (into allegories, fables, stories, novels, comic books, television series), desacralized, but still here. Rituals persist as well, transformed into contemporary forms of initiations, remembrances, celebrations adjusted to the conditions of the world today. Certain traces of the nostalgia for the Origin, for the Beginning, typical for the primordial religiosity and the lengthy period of the human connection with the sacred, and the desire for ritual recreation of the world in the cultic actions are clearly visible in all the repetitive celebrations, in intentional and organized group activities, in the jubilees in the arts, in the sporting events etc.

A large portion of the ways and forms in which the sacred manages to survive and thrive is due to the amalgamation of Christianity with the pagan mythical characters and events, and into customs and narratives we still have today, further desacralized. The reconciliation of characters and events is quite obvious in persons like saint Elijah, or the god of thunder and lightning; saint George, or the dragon-slayer; saint Nicholas, or the Traveler, the Sea-fearer, the Messenger etc. The sacred in Christianity is multiplied: like in the primordial contexts, not only persons are sacred, but also their symbols, the things they represent (like portraits on icons, frescos, sculptures). Their remnants are believed to have special powers (some bring fertility, some good health, courage, fecundity etc.); sacred are the places in which they moved

⁴ M. Eliade, *Le sacré et le profane*, Gallimard, Paris, 1965, 95.

and worked. The need for veneration, for a connection to a reality beyond what is known, the need for assimilation by an ontologically and axiologically superior reality, the need for hope and comfort remain: the cult of the saints is the cult of the sacred ancestors or lesser deities, the cult of the heroes is the cult of the gods, on a lower level of adulation.

Mythical characters served (and still continue to do so) as an inspiration for the arts, especially starting during the renaissance.⁵ The opinions and stances of these authors could not significantly differ from the primary mythological sense, since the mythological themes and meanings could not be truly separated from their form. In this sense Meletinsky purports that in the boundaries of the traditional stories, some non-traditional literary forms with enormous generalizing force were created. These forms would determine not only the social characters of their time, but some of the basic human ways of behavior through characters like Hamlet, Don Quixote, Don Juan, Misanthrope etc., so-called “eternal characters”, which became special patterns (similar to the mythological paradigms) for the future literature (17th-20th centuries).⁶

Of course, there should be a distinction between the structure and the mythical origin of literature, and the mythological function that reading serves. Mythical types of adventures are present in many novels of the modern age, including the temptations and tribulations the protagonists need to overcome, modelled after the mythical hero, and transformed from versions of the stories of the mythical water/plant, the paradise island, the quest for some sacred object, or from sacred initiations, from ineffable mystical experiences, and so on. Any contemporary story can be analyzed through Propp's five categories of elements in the fable,⁷ and through his (or Greimas') list of narratemes. The twentieth century, through Tolkien and Lewis, as well as a great number of science-fiction authors, abounds with attempts at contemporary mythopoesis, or the introduction of “contemporary mythology” into literature (and later in film and other media).⁸

⁵ Out of thousands of examples, just the briefest of glimpses: Sacred and profane love (Titian), Leda and the Swan, painted by Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Rubens; the works of Caravaggio, who painted Narcissus and two versions of the Gorgon Medusa, and Bacchus (whom Michelangelo sculpted). The first lyrical opera, *Daphne*, tells the story of Apollon and Daphne the nymph, the oldest extant opera (also by J. Peri) is *Euridice*.

⁶ Е. М. Мелетинский, *Поэтика мифа*, Наука, Москва, 1976, 278-281.

⁷ Я. Пропп, *Морфология "волшебной" сказки*, Лабиринт, Москва, 1998.

⁸ An excellent example of the survival of mythical characters and situations are Joyce and T. Mann. Meletinsky counts them among the pioneers in the discipline of the poetics

The perspective of sacred things, those that pulsate with an external, unknowable power, which exteriorize inexplicable strength (if the belief that any manifestation of the sacred is a an exteriorization of power or might), things that cause the best and most plentiful source of meaning, gradually declined with the progress of the Enlightenment. Dreyfus and Kelly remark that the discovery of sense through feelings of fascination by a superior power is not completely lost. They claim that through the reading and study of the western classics, for example, one can discover crucial moments which pulsate with almost divine, sacred and powerful presence. The work of art embodies the truth of its world, as they put it.⁹ Dreyfus and Kelly propose that artworks shine, thus illuminating the way of life, and that all other things are illuminated by their brightness. The authors point to classical works, like Homer's *Odyssey*, Melville's *Moby Dick*, as well as Foster Wallace's works *Infinite Jest* and *The Pale King*, showing that the light of the sacred has faded in the contemporary civilization. Still, people need the feelings of the sublime; the fascination of an alien, powerful reality; being moved by something extraordinary; being rendered speechless by beauty, goodness, honor, pride; the sense of shared exaltation, and similar sentiments of enchantment.

Both the traditional understanding of the experience of the sacred and the contemporary feelings of (almost) sacredness are about the manifestation of ambivalent, strong feelings of awe, of fascination and trembling, of instinctive reactions, of being attracted to, and desiring to be assimilated by (and assimilate) the incredible otherworldly numinous power.

Play and the sacred

The ritual nature of games is another way of the persistence of sacred. While Huizinga's seminal work on ludology, *Homo ludens*, remains unchallenged, not much has been done to develop the study of the links between the possible role of play in the origins and the history of ritual practices. On the one hand, there is an evident difference between play and ritual: they seem to be disparate phenomena, one unburdened, flexible and free (although not free of rules), the other exhibiting formality and rigidity.¹⁰ On the other

of mythologizing and the creation of the mythological novel as a separate quasi-genre, E. Мелетинский, op. cit., 365.

⁹ H. Dreyfus, S. D. Kelly, op. cit., 102.

¹⁰ See G. M. Burghardt, "The Origins, Evolution and Interconnections of Play and Ritual: Setting the Stage", C. Renfrew, I. Morley, M. Boyd (Eds.), *Ritual, Play and Belief, in Evolution*

hand, the hierarchization and rules of games (often based on repetition and un/expected outcomes or consequences), and the fact that they open a space-time “bubble” within reality in order to happen, make them quite similar, and obviously closely linked to rituals. Rituals can, therefore, be considered “as if” and in essence pretend play.¹¹

The fact that man is capable of playing with different options, perspectives and scenarios, the very fact of play, makes man connected to the sacred: ludology supposes that one plays with sacred dedication. In its cultic-ritual manifestation, religion has some characteristics of play. Huizinga treats myth, ritual, art, law, language etc. as play. According to him, it is precisely in myth and ritual that the great powers of the civilized life have their origin. Custom law, commerce, gifting, crafts and arts, poetry, science, wisdom, they are all rooted in the foundational play of the primordial sacred actions. The cult is play in the fullest sense, it is a dromenon, which means it is an action, but also acted out. In the form and function of play, the position of man in the world finds its first, highest, most sacred expression.¹² Gradually in play the meaning of the consecrated acts enters, and the cult is formed.

Guardini points out that liturgy shares many of the characteristic of play. For example, it could be said that it lacks purpose, but not meaning (the purpose of liturgy is God, not man). Both child’s play and artistic creation are similar to liturgy. With maximum care, liturgy gives the serious rules

and Early Human Societies, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2018, 23; G. M. Burghardt, *The Genesis of Animal Play: Testing the Limits*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 2005.

¹¹ See A. B. Seligman, R. P. Weller, M. J. Puett, B. Simon, *Ritual and its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2008; and of course, V. Turner, who underlines the role of play in ritualization (*From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, PAJ Publications, New York, 1982).

Dissanayake purports that what is commonly recognized as ritual in humans has its origins in the constituent elements of play and ritualized behaviors, as observed in many non-human mammals. These elements also represent the antecedents and components of art in a wider sense. Furthermore, they are also key ingredients of rituals, and play a role in the efficacy of rituals founded in arts, especially through the inspiration of belief and the instillation of doctrine in the participants. She analyses the participatory aspects of ritual, and the components that ritual and play behaviors contribute to human ritual practices (see E. Dissanayake, “From Play and Ritualisation to Ritual and its Arts: Sources of Upper Pleistocene Ritual Practices in Lower Middle Pleistocene Ritualised and Play Behaviours in Ancestral Hominins”, C. Renfrew, I. Morley, M. Boyd, op. cit., 87-98).

¹² J. Huizinga, *Homo ludens - Proeve eener bepaling van het spel-element der cultuur*, Athenaeum Boekhandel Canon, digital library, Amsterdam University Press, Amsterdam, 2008, 43-45.

of sacred play which the believers play in front of God himself.¹³ The forms, the rules of play, are an object of deep investigation, instead of mere needs which the play meets.¹⁴

According to Caillois, while at first it seems unlikely that the dedicated believer and the one who plays, or the cult and the gameplay, are similar, it becomes clear: the sacred and the ludic can be identified. In the cult, a closed space is separated from the world, and for a certain time, regulated actions, acts that represent of actualize a mysterious reality are performed. The participant is transported outside of the ordinary existence.¹⁵

Caillois includes himself in the pioneers of the identification of the sacred and play, but claims that he differs from Huizinga in one key point (it is, in fact, two points). He does not believe that the forms of play and the cult, by making sure to separate themselves from the regular order of existence, assume an equal position towards it, nor does he believe that they have an equal content.¹⁶ Play for Caillois is pure form, an activity which contains its purpose, with rules that are followed simply because they are rules. This does not apply to the sacred, which is pure content, indivisible power, ambivalent, ungraspable.

According to Fink, by being cultic at the beginning, play was installed right at the centre of attention of the archaic man.¹⁷ Within the cult, ordinary things are elevated to sublime, powerful positions. Man constantly lives in the world, but due to his priorities, has not real relation with the world. This connection is established on the level beyond the profane, as contradictory as it sounds, through the ludic nature of the cult.¹⁸

Some of the things that shine and illuminate other things in the contemporary, largely disenchanting world, can be found in the joy of sharing a fulfilling intellectual experience; or in the beauty of meeting kindred spirits; in the awe of inexplicable achievements and emotions; in the numinous experience of being a part of something greater. For all those who look for it, the sacred is here.

¹³ R. Guardini, "Liturgia come gioco", *Lo spirito della liturgia - I Santi segni*, Morcelliana, Roma, 1980.

¹⁴ R. Caillois, *Les jeux et les hommes*, Gallimard, Paris, 2008, 206.

¹⁵ R. Caillois, *L'homme et le sacré*, Gallimard, Paris, 2008, 208.

¹⁶ Caillois never explicitly formulates this, but, following his theory, it is plausible to extract such a summary.

¹⁷ E. Fink, *Le jeu comme symbole du monde*, trad. H. Hildenbrad et A. Lindenberg, Editions Minuit, 1966, Paris, 170.

¹⁸ E. Fink, op. cit., 138-139.

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