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THE CONCEPT OF “SACRED” IN A MULTIDISCIPLINARY PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

After Romania’s political and social changes from the 90s, non-theological university students have asked for the introduction of courses with a religious topic, such as: history of religion, philosophy of religion, psychology of religion, sociology of religion. Beyond an individual’s faith and religion, some knowledge about the religious phenomenon and how the sacred is manifested in cults and churches in our country seem necessary. Social life everywhere is impregnated with the religious dimension. Authentic or secular, “homo religiosus” is a reality that must be taken into account and to which any sociological approach relates.

Concern on knowing religion and the religious phenomena has existed for a long time, manifested as description, apology or disproof regarding certain beliefs, cults and heresies. As the great current religious systems were constituted, theologies and churches have restricted access to the study and interpretation of sacred texts and religious events by the pre-existence of “grace”, of “confirming” that status. Protestantism and “free” thinking encouraged non-theological concerns on religion and the sacred. Several research trends and explanatory concerns related to the religious phenomenon were gradually established.

The sacred is the transcendental essence of the religious phenomenon. Religions include very heterogeneous beliefs and manifestations. But they have something in common and specific by which the religious phenomenon is distinguished from all others. The sacred is something outside and above individuals. It is therefore an individual's encounter a reality that transcends. Bastide concluded: “*if I were to give a definition of the sacred, it would cross my subjectivity, my own experience of the sacred and not a general definition*” (Desroche&Bastide, 1974, p 34). More than in any other previous eras, the twentieth century is a century of interference in all forms of manifestation of the human spirit. The contemporaneous gnoseological structures seem to promote a different way to see the world, at a rather integrative than unitary level, to eliminate the sterile clichés and to impose a hermeneutics of confluences. In such an environment, we can no longer speak about a reductionist perspective of preeminence, but about a possibly honest attitude, liberated from the thick layer of preconceived ideas, of prejudices. Today, the academic world no longer approaches subjects such as *creation-evolution* from radically opposed positions, dialectically structured yet foreign to everything that means the real spirit of dialectics. It approaches them from the perspective of open, free

dialogue, based on common and practical criteria.

The integrative meaning of our era is a change of perspectives and a balance of priorities. The 21st century man can no longer agree with a unilateral and constrictive approach but wants to benefit from progress made by science and, generally, human mentality have made. This type of approach of the sacred is justified as it allows both theologians and non-theological „intellectuals” to be closer to this precious concept. On the one hand there is the rigid believer, sometimes ignorant, who lives anachronically centuries in the past, and on the other, there is the intellectual, the researcher based on a search for the proven and provable truth. In this way, the offer of interdisciplinary studies seems the fairest modality to approach the „sacred”.

Albert Einstein, who is difficult to be labeled as religious, claimed that „science without religion is not convincing; science is Jacob's ladder, it ends at God's feet” (Rochat, 2008, p.28).

The entire approach should start from the idea that God is the basis of scientific and economic development of humanity. By creating man after his face and resemblance, God gave his creature the capacity to rule the world. Moreover, in His Sacerdotal prayer, Jesus prayed to the Heavenly Father for His apprentices, asking not to escape from the world but to guard them from evil (Ioan 17: 15). In other words, man cannot ignore science. Nevertheless, it is essential that science is approached wisely. Vice versa, id sacred is revealed through a richness of representations, it would be completely abusive to attempt to know it by one „means” only.

When the primitive man started to establish connections with the environment, he became aware of its existence. The fragility of its existence in comparison with the preeminence of these rapports with nature has imposed its central position in the universe. As a result, *Homo religiosus* precedes *Homo sapiens* in building our relationship with the sacred.

The science to relate forces is the basis of an immaterial universe, yet crucial for our affects, and for the acts that characterize us. Thus, human existence abounds in symbols, and man, even the most realist, lives from images. Therefore, man becomes the meeting point of two worlds.

Etymologically, as Eliade has underlined, sacred is opposed to profane. If sacred designates something totally separate (it imposes the idea of delimitation, surrounding, and as a result, sanctification), profane is what is left out of the reserved perimeter (*pro fanum*). Thus, we are confronted with two essential and distinctive domains: one governed by transcendence, conceived as dangerous, restrictive and significant – sacred- and the other, totally permissive, where man can think and act as he pleases.

Deep down, every human being there is a necessity, more or less latent, to be reported to the sacred and religion (*Homo religiosus*). This explains why modern occidental man recognizes effortlessly, even in remote areas and times, events that are reported to sacred. Thus, we may consider that sacred lives inside our collective unconsciousness. In the profound nature of man, there is this aspiration for the Absolute, which he can only foreknow most of the times. From this perspective, „to know” the Other presupposes to know the Self at first, and then to know the report between the self and the World. Finally, it means to know the report between the self and what is beyond the knowable world – the transcendent.

The sociological and anthropological approach of the issue is welcome, especially if we report to one of the pioneer of sociology, Émile Durkheim. The French intellectual could not ignore such a topic. Because the present civilization tends towards a unified society, it seems necessary to know and research its fundamental structure, as Durkheim has mentioned. Among them, the dialogue between science and religion can play a decisive role in perceiving, creating

and joining a common social structure which should also be natural and not artificial.

The field of religion is not “the sacred” but “translating the sacred” or, as expressed by Durkheim: “religion is the management of the sacred”. Religion is a management system to warrant the sacred in the community; recovering the sacred; the sacred can be communicated; adjustment through the sacred ((Desroche&Bastide, 1974, pp. 35-36). According to sociological theories, the sacred is the heart of any religion, and religion is a social phenomenon “in origin, content and purpose” (Desroche&Bastide, 1974, p. 13). The purely social function of religion is recovered also by René Girard, who emphasizes the role of reducing social violence brought forth by the ritualistic sacrifice (Ries, 2000, p 21).

On the same note, Wach defined religion as “experiencing the sacred” (Wach, 1955, p 9). The religious phenomenon, as a subject of sociology is a social, objective manifestation of this experience. More recently, it is sometimes believed that a definition to religion would not be appropriate, not only because the definition remains approximate and inappropriate, “*but especially because such a metaphysics would likely distort the scientific meaning of any research in this area*” (Meslin, 1993, p.8). Experiencing the sacred may be understood only by what man says about the experience, or manifests through ritual, symbol and behavior. Sociology perceives a lived sacredness, existing in time and space. “*Therefore, in this sense, there is no religion susceptible to scientific analysis, except for in the many religious experiences of humanity*” (Meslin, 1993, p 9). All these manifestations still have a constant, “*an irreducible core*”, which “*constitutes the major component of the religious man*”.

Noting the distinction between things as represented by us and as they are, Kant made a distinction more than two centuries ago between the aprioristic forms and the empirical ones, using terms like “phenomenon” and “numenon”. **God, freedom and immortality** are for Kant

attributes of pure reason (Kant, 1969, p 46). If the thing itself (the noumenon) can be known only through “*intellectual intuition*”, the sacred, the divine cannot be known empirically since it is transcendental in nature. God said, “*You cannot see My face, for man shall not see Me and live*” (Exodus 33:20). Phenomena are but empirically ascertainable facts. Man can know the divine seen phenomenologically; the manner in which the sacred manifests in the secular world becomes eventful.

Systematic and empirical study of the experience of the sacred and of the life that the faithful live in communion with God was intensified towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Not only because of the rigor of the communist regime, but in terms of mutations that society has suffered in the last two centuries, intellectualism considered religion as a consequence of ignorance. Modern man, intellectualized, scientifically and technically endowed, considered religion unnecessary and its maintenance a nonsense. In Europe, the French Revolution also encouraged haughtily the false autonomy of man, who became “the measure of all things”. Exacerbated humanism has removed the divine, but anthropolatry – man’s proud self-divinization – would fail in the devastating and dehumanizing nihilism of 20th century European history. Against this background, communism only deepened the **opposition between science and religion**. But the persistence of religiosity, regardless of the education level of the individual and society illustrates that between science and religion relationships are more complex, and that religion is objective and has an own life following a specific existence.

Even if human biological endowment is not religious, man exceeds its biological nature by building worlds, as claimed Luckmann. Religion, as the objective existence of man, is not only social, but also anthropological, forged throughout history and evolution of the human species. The objectivity of some of these events is obvious, while of others is more irrelevant. J. Wach

said that “*A religious doctrine, prayer or ritual are less «objective» than a law or an industrial product*”. Even if religion is considered a human projection, Peter Berger considered that projects also have an independent status to the man – the designer. Dilthey showed that there are objective culture systems, such as law, art, science, including religion, as there are objective ways of social organization: states, nations, churches. According to Dilthey, religion would be one of the systems of the objective spirit.

Psychology of religion and sociology of religion have asserted themselves only in the early twentieth century, complementing previous concerns of history of religion, hermeneutics, comparative analysis of myths, religious anthropology and so on. The tortuous journey of psychology of religion shows an interest in psychology’s founding fathers with the religious phenomena and the integrality of a human person. Psychology’s desire to assert itself as a science, however, led to a decrease of this interest for several decades, from 1930 to 1960. But from the seventh decade of the last century, in psychology there is an increasing interest for the religious and spiritual phenomenon manifested by the increasing numbers of researchers and publications in the field. Disciplines as psychology of religion and sociology of religion are interrelated or are rather in a part-whole relationship, given that the first one aims to analyze an individual’s religious behavior, while the second studies the role of religion in society, the life of religious communities and how the sacred manifests in communities. Psychology of religion had an important role not only in explaining the religious phenomenon’s specifics but also in understanding the sacred. Religious deeds cannot be isolated to the individual; they are social and live together with other human activities. One of the features of religion is that it occurs in human groups, in societies that convey religious beliefs and practices to individuals, these observing and relating to them.

Ethnological and sociological theories are the first which have attempted the empirical scientific study of the religious phenomenon. They seek to explain the sacred through social behavior, without reference to a transcendent reality. On the same direction, one of the pioneers in the field, Émile Durkheim, aimed to study the religious phenomenon “with the objective rigor of scientific disciplines” (Ries, 2000, p 12). Therefore, objective study for these researchers would imply distancing and neutrality towards the subject studied. Studies in this field start from reductionism, simplification: to understand the religious phenomenon, both Durkheim and other ethnologists, anthropologists and sociologists seek to study the most primitive religion to more religious phenomena. According to Durkheim, society is not the sum of individuals, but community represents a cohesion, certain relationships, principles, criteria and values of the community, and, in this context, **moral power belongs to society**. Thus, that society is sacralized in religion and imposes its values.

The religious phenomenon is objective, it exists socially before the individual, it is laid on the latter, it manifests through individuals, but based on the sacred experience of the community. Man finds these models, criteria, norms, traditions in society and refers to them by everything he does: he observes some, alters or opposes others. “*Similarly – Durkheim wrote – the believer found his religious life beliefs and practices ready-made at birth; if they existed before him, it means that they existed outside of him it*” (Durkheim, 1974, p 58).

Researching the religious phenomena we keep in mind, regardless of our opinion and belief, that for the believer God exists objectively, is something real, and our attempt to explain or justify anything else is beyond scientific interest. J.M. Guyau said that “*Man becomes truly religious (...) when it overlaps human society in which he lives another stronger and higher society, a universal and cosmic society*” (Guyau, 1921, p 16). A believer relates to God as something real,

finds out solutions to his problems, an explanatory system, arguments, criteria, rules, etc.

Mircea Eliade pleaded for understanding the religious phenomenon “*in its own reference plane*”, “*in what it has irreducible and original*”. Interpretation of religious facts must be made “*according to angle proper to them*” (Marino, 1980, p 99), for the understanding of the religious phenomenon and faith involves entering into its original structures and removing “logic” of the faithful and this spiritual lifestyle. Fidelity to the objective character of the religious phenomenon involves a high degree of adhesion and personal integration of the sociologist in religious life and communities of believers.

Therefore, we also consider that, for the sociological and ethnological approach, society is the root of any religious behavior. In these approaches of the sacred, studying the religious phenomena is reduced to the Object. According to Durkheim, the common layer of all religions can be identified only by objective study. The subject is excluded because, being subjective, it is, in fact, the reason for religious variety, which eludes the objective image of the religious phenomenon’s reality (Durkheim, 1995, p 382).

The religious phenomena cannot be studied only objectively or subjectively; objectivity and subjectivity are two contradictory concepts leading to the discovery of a third term that best characterizes this phenomenon: complexity. Given this complexity of the religious phenomenon, which involves an interrelation between all its aspects, any reductionism becomes unable to capture anything more than disparate elements that put together do not lead to the restoration of the whole and are not of real value.

Approaching such an issue cannot be done purely scientifically. On the same note, Rudolf Otto accuses historians of religions and sociologists of lacking feeling in their approaches. At the beginning of the chapter in which he tried to explain “the feeling of being

a creature”, he even suggests to nonbelievers and to those who have never experienced strong religious emotion the futility of reading further, because “it is hard to talk about religion” (Otto, 2005, p 14) to a man who did not have any religious experience. For Eliade, studying the sacred is a study of the religious man (*homo religiosus*) because it tends to live permanently in contact with the sacred.

A transdisciplinary approach to the need of the sacred in contemporary society in a higher closeness to the sacred. By making archetypal behaviors, using symbols or narrating myths about civilizing gods or heroes, the religious man seeks to be within the sacred (Eliade, 2007).

Since religious man is a total man, the study of the sacred should be achieved “totally”, i.e. without disciplinarily truncating it. Studying the sacred cannot be reduced to the history of religions, nor to psychology, sociology or any disciplinary approach. What Eliade accuses, and Georges Dumézil in the preface of the great scientist’s work (Eliade, 2008, p. 7) predecessors in the field of history of religion is reductionism. Obviously, the religious phenomena can be approached from different angles, but what Mircea Eliade considers important is studying what is irreducible, which is not easy, given the complexity. He has an interest precisely in this “labyrinthine complexity of the phenomena that resist any formula and any definition” (Eliade, 2008, p. 17), a linear approach being considered an “improper simplification.”

The mission of a religion historian is multiple: historical, phenomenological and hermeneutical. He must seek to integrate information obtained from different approach methods to the religious phenomena to reveal the sacred dialectics, “structures in which the sacred forms” (Eliade, 2008, p. 17), the relationship between man and the sacred, sacred handling, the relations between different forms of hierophany. Phenomenology of the sacred seeks how the sacred allows description because it manifests, by a hierophany, in space and time. The hierophany structure is always the same –

the sacred always manifests itself through something different from it (Ries, 2000). The sacred, opposed to the profane, “a reality completely different from “natural” realities” (Eliade, 2007, p. 12) is accessible to man as it manifests in the world, and this manifestation expresses an eternal paradox: something that is “quite different” manifests itself in something profane, which is part of our world.

Sacredness representation in the academia has evolved gradually from the simplification operated by sociological and ethnological theories serving objectivism and determinism to more complex images. Sociological approaches’ reductionism refers, on the one hand, to the removal of the Subject and the focus on the Object, and, on the other hand, to the removal of Reality levels. Consequently, Reality levels are reduced to a single one, and spirituality is reduced to a social function.

Eliade believed that study cannot be reduced to any discipline: “[...] *a religious phenomenon will not reveal itself except for when it is considered in its own way, that is studied on a religious scale. Wanting to delimit the phenomenon through physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art, etc. [...] means to betray it; it means to let its uniqueness and irreducible character, namely its sacred character, escape*” (Eliade, 2008, p. 15) because the total man involves a “total” and complex study.

What Eliade argues, and Georges Dumézil agrees in the preface of Eliade’s works (Eliade, 2008, p. 7) is that his predecessors in the history of religions are to blame for reductionism. Obviously, religious phenomena can be approached from many different angles, but what Mircea Eliade considers important is to study what is irreducible. It is not an easy task, taking into account its complexity. A linear approach can be considered „abusive simplification”. What is interesting is that „this complexity and labyrinth of phenomena go against any formula and definition” (Eliade, 2008, p. 17).

CONCLUSIONS

Sacred, characterized by multi-valence: psychological, gnoseological, axiological, defines the ineffable nature of Ultimate Reality. Even if it is essentially defined as nonrational, it does not exclude the rational. The two modalities to live – religiously and scientifically – are based on the same principle: trust in the existence of a truth that transcends. The ways to get there are different: revelation for religion, confirmation of hypothesis and theories for science. The two ways to gather a meaning, either religious or scientific, are not exclusive, but they converge and become complementary sometimes, on their sinuous way to approach the sacred.

Taking into consideration that homo religious is that complex being, „multifaceted”, the study of the sacred should be done „totally”, that is, with no disciplinary limits. Approaching this issue cannot be reduced to the history of religions, to psychology, to sociology or to any disciplinary approach.

Moreover, we consider that, if God makes His presence felt in infinity of ways, a limited and unilateral approach of the concept would be totally unjust. The sacred is in anything that surrounds us, tangible or intangible, perceptible or imperceptible, not being restricted in simple human patterns. Only by that « summum » offered by the sciences of present life, can we achieve a synthesis of our own representations and explanations of the sacred.

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