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**A Critical Comparison of Two Secondary Sources:
Defining the Sacred to Distinguish Significance
Word Count: 2266**

Introduction

This essay critically compares and contrasts two JSTOR papers: Matthew T. Evans, 'The Sacred: Differentiating, Clarifying and Extending Concepts', *Review of Religious Research*, Vol. 45 (Sep., 2003), and Adrian Ivakhiv, 'Toward a Geography of "Religion": Mapping the Distribution of an Unstable Signifier', *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (Mar., 2006) and, specifically, how they draw from the theories of Mircea Eliade and Émile Durkheim to address the theme of sacred space. Beginning with a synopsis of the two original theories, the paper includes a brief background of the authors and how their perspectives shape their approaches to the topic. It examines the articles' exploration of the use of the word "sacred" in modern parlance and how the evolving meanings refute or affirm Eliade and Durkheim.

Foundational Theories of Sacred Space

In his noted work "The Sacred and the Profane", philosopher and historian, Mircea Eliade explored two distinct notions of how humans experience the world, arguing that the sacred requires a type of transcendence that is not accessible in the mundane, or profound, world. He argued that humans have an innate longing for the divine. Drawing from his study of the religious and spiritual practices of traditional cultures, what Lévy-Bruhl might describe as 'primitive', Eliade derived his belief that they saw their practices as being critical to transcend the ordinary world. The pursuit of this transcendence, he believed, was almost a human necessity. Sacred space, therefore, could be distinguished from ordinary space by the existence of a hierophany, the manifestation of the sacred in some ordinary object, a stone, or a tree.¹ In Eliade's view, these hierophanies reveal deeper dimensions of existence and demonstrate how humanity has historically sought to make the divine accessible in daily life. He believes that humans possess a universal desire to connect with the divine and in this process of seeking it out the sacred, humans will have to transcend the ordinary. Sacred place is important for this transcendence and quest to find meaning.

To illustrate his points, Eliade draws from the practices of traditional cultures arguing that for many cultures, the sacred world is a realm apart, characterized by rituals, symbols, and spaces that help people connect with something greater than themselves. The sacred of which Eliade wrote, existed in its own distinct realm, and it was humans' existential need to seek it out. Taking his theory further, he proposed that the designation of the sacred site was in of itself a sacred process saying, 'men are not free to *choose* the sacred site, ... they only seek for it and find it by the help of mysterious signs.'²

By contrast and through his perspective as a founder of the academic discipline of sociology, Émile Durkheim's theory of sacred space was much more mundane. He based in his belief of religion as a social construct, something created by a communal ideal. He believed that individuals 'cannot sustain themselves except by coming together,' and it is in this creation of 'collective thought' that the concept of sacred is formed.³

¹ Mircea Eliade and Willard R. (Willard Ropes) Trask. *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* Harcourt Brace, 1959, p.11.

² Eliade, p. 28.

³ Emile Durkheim, and Karen E. (Karen Elise) Fields. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life : Pbk* Free Press, 1995, p. 447.

Like Eliade, Durkheim believed that the sacred was a 'world apart, by definition' and this notion of separateness that maintained the definition of sacredness. However, where Eliade implies a certainty of belief in a divine power, Durkheim says that 'sacredness possesses a certain transience'.⁴ This can be seen as a reinforcement of his sociological approach that if a collective - a community, a religion, can set the parameters then either those parameters change, or they can be projected onto something else. Eliade believes in boundaries, one could imply that Durkheim believes in the fluidity.

It is from these foundations that the journal authors, Evans and Ivakhiv bring forth their arguments to examine how a steady decrease in religious participation has led to variances in language in public discussion and designation of religion, sacred, and sacred space. More than an issue of semantics, these variances can serve as an indication that the theories of Eliade and Durkheim do not so much need to be abandoned as to be evolved.

Two approaches to expanding thought on sacred space

Described as a 'cultural theorist and an ecophilosopher'⁵, Ivakhiv's research has explored the societal, cultural, and even political considerations influencing the concept of sacred and sacred space in modern society. In his examined article, he begins by issuing a challenge to geographers to not rely on a conventional or implied definition of "religion" when addressing issues of what he terms 'religious geography' but rather he urges them to consider examining religion as a form of "distributing significance,".⁶ He employs this term to explain that sacred meanings and values are assigned to specific places through cultural practices and power relation.⁷ While aligning with Durkheim's theory of religion as a social construct, Ivakhiv also examines the suggests that "sacred" may be applied in ways that dilute any real significance. For this reason, he urges fellow researchers to apply 'a nuanced and geographically sensitive approach to religion',⁸ because context is key to understanding the influences that designate a space as set-apart. His analysis would seem to dismiss Eliade's notion that it is the sacred transcendence of a particular place that distinguishes it from others.

Reflective of his research on organized religion, Evans does imply a belief in a transcendent quality that is derived from a religious belief but that is not necessarily synonymous with how modern language is categorizing it. For this reason, he examines current usage of words such as religion and sacred and proposes the use of more precise definitions to distinguish the categories of what he sees as clearly defined dimensions: religious, transcendent, and "set apart."⁹ He argues that the clarity of terms help to maintain the force of their meanings. Here he mirrors an argument made by Stark that, 'having equated religion with the sacred, too many scholars have proceeded to discover the sacred (hence religion) virtually everywhere, thus depriving the term of analytical power'.¹⁰

This may be why Evans advocates for a differentiation of the "set apart" sacred from the more common associations of the term with religious or transcendent experiences. The uniqueness of the place or experience is, in fact, its power. While he, too, recognizes and considers it important to take into account other societal and cultural factors that give a place significance regardless of any mystical quality, Evan's aim is to reinforce a more traditional

⁴ Durkheim, p. 322.

⁵ "Adrian J. Ivakhiv – Professor of Environmental Thought and Culture," n.d. <https://site.uvm.edu/aivakhiv/>.

⁶ Adrian Ivakhiv, "Toward a Geography of "Religion": Mapping the Distribution of an Unstable Signifier." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 96, no. 1 (2006), <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3694151>, pp. 171.

⁷ Ivakhiv, pp. 169.

⁸ Ivakhiv, pp. 170.

⁹ Matthew T. Evans, "The Sacred: Differentiating, Clarifying and Extending Concepts." *Review of Religious Research* 45, no. 1 (2003), <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uwtsd.ac.uk/stable/3512498>, pp. 33

¹⁰ Rodney Stark, "Reconceptualizing Religion, Magic, and Science." *Review of Religious Research* 43, no. 2 (2001), <https://doi.org/10.2307/3512057>, pp. 120

form of religious experience. Perhaps, this puts him more in alignment with Eliade's belief of the transcendent qualities, thereby keeping the experience or place true to its characteristic as set-apart from more mundane, but spiritually-designated places.

A Comparison and Contrast of Evans and Ivakhiv

The designation of sacred is shaped by society and culture

Though the two authors may disagree on the notion of a divine and take different approaches to proving their arguments, both Evans and Ivakhiv similarly propose a belief that concept of the sacred is shaped strongly by society and culture. Each emphasize that what people consider sacred or religious is not an inherent quality, but it is a designation assigned by the collective practices, historical contexts, and cultural values of a community, society, religion, and even country. With a focus on the need for an agreed-upon set of terminologies, Evans offers, for instance, a definition of “set apart” sacred, a category where things become sacred because society or groups choose to ascribe this status to them, whether for symbolic, traditional, or practical reasons. This reflects, he believes, the cultural and social processes, independent from any formal religious designation, can establish certain places, objects, or practices to be sacred.

Likewise, Ivakhiv views "religion" not as a fixed belief system, but shaped entirely by the social and political factors even designating it as unstable and variable qualities¹¹, he believes are dependent on the social and political factors of the time. For these reasons, he does not consider any place to be inherently sacred in its existence, but instead a reflection of how people understand and experience them or more succinctly, "sacred" is merely a social construct. For him, the recognition of this point is important for how others talk about what is considered sacred space to more accurately reflect the sources of this designation.

For both Evans and Ivakhiv, sacredness is a fluid concept that adapts to and is determined by the context in which it exists. Additionally, they both recognize contexts and factors that are varied and products of historical, cultural, and societal factors. Whether those factors include a divine, or merely a collective understanding, they are the foundations for providing meaning to the notion of sacredness.

One can no longer assume collective agreement on terms
related to religious or spiritual belief

Evans and Ivakhiv would likely agree that the lack of a universal definition of “religion” that was assumed by Eliade and even to an extent, by Durkheim, is a significant factor for how something is designated as sacred today. Both authors emphasize the number of influences on religious thought and the increasingly more common use of "spiritual" in its place. A result, as Evans, illustrated is an inconsistent, fluid and contextual shift in the use of terminology even by far-reaching and influential voices such as the *New York Times*.¹²

Though Evans' sees a role for traditional religious designations, he does argue that it is critical that any discussion of the “sacred” in all the ways it may be used including religious, transcendent, or “set apart” acknowledge that sacredness can and does extend beyond traditional religious frameworks. This approach, however, can increase the influence of "other" factors beyond the traditional religious ones, thus increasing the subjectivity of the term.

Ivakhiv agrees here with Evans' identification of external factors in a sacred designation, though, he does consider religion itself to be what he deems an “unstable signifier,” meaning, that like public opinion, it is subject to change based on unrelated factors. The result, therefore, is that these designations are subject to shifts in cultural and political views and values and can lead to conflicting or overlapping, understandings of a place.

¹¹ Ivakhiv, pp. 171.

¹² Evans, pp. 33.

Without clear definitions, sacredness can end up as one of a number of other ideologies shaped by the secular world and devoid of deeper significance.

Divergence on the need for common understanding in language or
expanded understanding of other factors.

Although Ivakhiv is not explicit about the importance of terminology, it can be derived from his article that a focus of importance is to explore and be aware of the factors and influences determining the designation - as opposed to prioritizing defining the word itself. For him, the emphasis is understanding and acknowledging the fluidity of religion and the sacred as social constructs. A stable definition is less important than exploring the shifting cultural, historical, and political influences. One could even assume that he would consider that establishing rigid definitions may blunt the clarity needed to identify and distinguish the influencing sources. Furthermore, adhering to fixed definitions could overlook the cultural diversity and the shifting meanings that arise in different contexts.

There is no indication that Evans intended to homogenize definitions of the sacred, but his approach may be more of a reflection of his desire to recognize and differentiate the role that traditional religious belief or practices may play in sacred designations. It is possible to extrapolate from his arguments that Evans could consider that these designations should be regarded as distinct from those that reflect evolving cultural norms. His advocacy of specific categories could be considered a belief that having structured definitions can be useful if not necessary when dealing with an increasingly ambiguous subject.

Conclusion

In summary, both Eliade and Durkheim have offered important frameworks for understanding sacred space, though from divergent angles that, ultimately, can be considered complementary. The theorists shared beliefs that sacred space is not only a place of individual reverence but also a site where social cohesion and cultural continuity can exist.

With this foundation, Evans and Ivakhiv build on these works but offer new perspectives based on the evolution of religious thought in the modern era. Through the examination of the use of language related to sacred designations is no longer limited to a religious context. Both authors address the complex factors that shape our understanding of sacredness, showing that these are not fixed concepts, but like societies, must be contextually by exploring the myriads of influences that shape their understanding and self-definition.

While not explicit in their arguments, one can derive that the changing face and role of religion in the twenty-first century is central to the need to revisit, if not revise, Durkheim and Eliade's foundational theories. As dogmatic organized religion gives way to the expansiveness of "New Agism", the definition of sacred may become as varied as the array of practices that are sampled and embraced by its practitioners as Campion discusses.¹³

An important point that was not discussed in these articles is that a defining characteristic of this evolution of spiritual belief is a change from the collective to the individual. Consistently, in all the works examined, sacred space is considered as a group, community, institutional, or societal designation. However, modern times have personalized spirituality and to a degree even religion placing the focus on individualized experiences. It may then soon be the case that society will have to consider what obligation, if any, is there to recognize "the sacred" when it becomes, primarily, an individualized experience.

¹³ Nicholas Campion, *Astrology and Cosmology in the World's Religions*. New York [u.a.]: New York University Press, 2012, p. 191.

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