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Student Name: Kevin S. Goodrich			
Student University Email: 2204677@student.UWTSD.ac.uk			
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Kevin Goodrich

Dr. Bernadette Brady

HPCA7014

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Comparing Views of Sacred Space: Mircea Eliade and Emile Durkheim

Much like Rudolf Otto originally did in 1917, here we are diving into the study of ‘religious experience’ as opposed to religious ideas themselves so as to consider how and why a space may be perceived to be sacred (Eliade 1957). We are examining and comparing the idea of ‘the sacred’ as seen in the influential works of Mircea Eliade and Emile Durkheim so as to build a comprehensive discourse about sacrality in space; ‘sacred space’. The literary focus will primarily be on comparing and contrasting Eliade’s 1957 monograph *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion* (translated by Willard R. Trask), as well as Durkheim’s 1912 study *Introduction to The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* as introduced by Karen E. Fields. In both works the concept of ‘the sacred’, while differing in the method of manifestation into space and place which is called ‘hierophany’, hinges on a concept called ‘the real’. These core concepts are introduced briefly and subsequently illustrated from the separate perspectives of the two minds by way of their literary works and finally brought back together for a clear comparison.

In order to set the grounds for an adequate comparison, we first need to break down the key concepts and terminology that Eliade and Durkheim utilize in their discourse. Beginning with ‘the real’ which is essentially, to both of our subjects, a sort of noumenal higher reality perceived as underlying, fundamental or intrinsic to the concept of reality as a whole (Eliade 1957; Fields 1992; Kant 2003). This supernatural reality is, by differing means, observed, experienced, worshiped and/or maintained as ‘the sacred’ (Eliade 1957; Fields 1992). The idea of ‘hierophany’ is central to this schema – it is the manifestation of the sacred, ‘the real’ made

tangible; capable of being experienced (Eliade 1957; Fields 1992). It is in this capacity that we reach outlooks on ‘sacred space’: No matter how this manifestation of ‘the real’ is thought to occur, it is regarded as taking place and thus evoking reaction or worship – these spaces ‘equally and actively shape human social, political and ritual action’ (Steel 2019). Thus, by whatever means, once the occurrence of hierophany is recognized, the space, and by extension the activities and behaviors that take place there, are transformed around this concept of sacrality. This line of thinking is not limited to any one conceptual ‘space’ but can extend via cosmological ideologies and social action to envelope all that we touch, developing a ‘sacred landscape’ (Steel 2019). We will come back to the differences in the way that Eliade and Durkheim imagine this manifestation to occur and thus be experienced in later paragraphs.

Prior to attempting to lay out Eliade’s thinking in *‘The Sacred and The Profane’* regarding sacred space, it is necessary to talk about his method of approaching his conclusions. Eliade ends his introduction of by explaining that he does not deem it particularly valuable in this discussion to regard religious experience in terms of history (‘differences in economy, culture and social organization’) because we can glean much more telling comparisons to the ‘modern human’ by discussing ‘existential situations’; as opposed to a ‘sacralized cosmos’ we now find ourselves in the procession of a comparably ‘profane’ or ‘desacralized’ cosmos (Eliade 1957). This is not the focus of this paper per se, but it can be important to recognize some criticisms of Eliade being that he is not particularly ‘historical’ in his approach to ancient peoples and aboriginal beliefs but merely posits them in terms of their ‘existential situation’ – the way a given hierophany (manifestation of the sacred) is experienced by a group of people in any given culture at any given time and is the modality of that which is worshipped; the unique perception

of this ‘ultimate reality’ (‘the real’) based on religious man’s existential situation at a given time and as a structure of consciousness itself (Eliade 1957; Studstill 2000).

For Eliade sacred space is a powerful and truly significant space that possesses revelatory existential orientation revealing the ‘nonreality of the vast surrounding expanse’. Profane space on the other hand is ‘without structure or consistency’, is homogeneous, neutral and reveals no qualitative differentiating breaks. Manifestation of the sacred into a space therefore reveals ‘the only real and real-ly existing space’(Eliade 1957), an ontological foundation, and this objectively should not to be speculated or treated with secular suspicion. Eliade is not concerned with whether or not this ‘ultimate reality’ truly exists or not because it wholly exists in the mind of the religious human (Studstill 2000). This ‘real’ reality is itself ‘the sacred’ constituted in the mind of the believer as an element or structure of consciousness represented by a phenomenon (Studstill 2000). Therefor this true, real or ultimate reality representing the ‘profound structure of the world’, is revealed to our senses in physical manifestation (hierophany) and can be considered a ‘primary religious experience that precedes all reflection on the world’; the numinous is thus experienced as phenomenon (Eliade 1957; Studstill 2000). To that effect ‘the sacred’, as posited by Eliade, is the one unique and irreducible element in religious phenomena which can be construed as hierophany (Studstill 2000).

Two more central concepts to Eliade’s view of what constitutes sacred spaces and religious phenomena are the previously mentioned ‘modes of the sacred’, which are the countless forms of the manifest sacred, and ‘eruption’, which is the way in which Eliade illustrates sacred manifestation from the divine ultimate reality to ‘transubstantiate mundane realities into hierophanies’ (Smith 2000; Studstill 2000). Eliade is not at all shy of taking a great many examples of religious phenomena and categorizing them into different modalities and thus

introducing concepts of morphology into the mix. These modalities would structure the formation of hierophany as an eruption of the divine reality into the profane, making it possible anywhere at any time so long as there is perceived space. The eruption of hierophany could be considered the explosive awe inspiring act of occurrence, a revelatory experience which may occur in a city center, a barren desert, a small figurine, a tree, mountain range or even ones very own body. The modes of the sacred continue to include mimetic ritual, symbolism, prayer and many other forms of worship and sacral representation that become part of the phenomena, extending the sacred experience and serving as a gateway to the numinous. These modes symbolically mirror the original experience of the relating hierophanies in ones existential situation and provide a continuous sacred relationship (Eliade 1957; Studstill 2000).

Now that Eliade's ideas about sacred space have more or less been outlined, it is time to turn our analysis to Field's introduction of Durkheim's '*The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*'. Similar to Eliade (though it needs to be said that Durkheim is in fact writing a few decades prior to Eliade), there is not a particular emphasis on the history of various groups, etc. Unlike Eliade, however, his approach is marked by a focus not on 'existential situation' but on 'unified systems' of representation, that is to say he is interested in a universal human condition that is shared between the humans of any period (Fields 1992). In his approach he scours through a variety of belief systems and ontologies from many different cultures for a certain relational human quality that delineates a uniquely human response to 'the sacred'. We might be able to say that his focus is not on sussing out the differences between the past and the present or the sacred and the profane, but instead on a universal underlying quality prevalent in the collective human experience (Fields 1992); this can be said to be one root for many of the differences

between Durkheim and Eliade while also containing many similar points (which are explored in later paragraphs).

Regarding the underlying nature of religion and collective ritual activity, Durkheim seems to view these ‘collective representations in action’ as making ‘collective representations real in individual minds’. That is to say that collective participation in religious activity, being an intrinsic quality of human experience, makes and maintains the sacred as an aspect of reality and representative of ‘the real’ (Fields 1992). This ‘real’ as just mentioned is also very much the basis for how Durkheim views the reality of religion – an ultimate reality that is expressed through universal human religious nature (Fields 1992). For Durkheim ‘the real’ is akin to a true underlying ultimate reality that human religious nature, as seen through the human experience at large, speaks to and is empowered by. In this regard Durkheim is presenting an substantial foci on the human and demarcating his line of thought as anthropocentric. Durkheim takes this very far, even situating religion as existing because ‘human beings exist (only) as social beings and in a humanly shaped world. Religion is “an eminently social thing”’, which does not deny religion but positions it as intrinsic to the human experience and very much real given how he views the presence of humanity in the cosmos. Therefor, to Durkheim, ‘all religions are true after their own fashion’ because they concern the very nature of human life which is irreducible and thus ‘grounded in the real’ (Fields 1992).

The fact that religion has survived to this day is also part of the foundation for Durkheim’s claims of irreducibility and grounding in ‘the real’. Essentially, to Durkheim, objects, animals and spaces are signified as sacred and maintained as such by human actors. As such, hierophanies are then instilled and accessed by humans via a sort of divine connection unique to mankind by way of the soul (Fields 1992). For Durkheim, using examples from

Descartes, Kant, Leibniz etc. the immortality of souls stands socially for the collective life of humanity as well as individually for the ‘social part of every human being’ which ultimately distinguishes us from animals (Fields 1992). In this introduction to Durkheim’s forms, Fields suggests that these ideas of ‘soul’ as a sort of divine substance representing something that is other than ourselves can also be suspected to be part of Durkheim’s foundational basis for regarding a uniquely human connection to ‘the real’. This connection is thus posited as central to our understanding of ‘the real’ in our collective experience of nature, claiming that ‘the idea of soul long was, and in part still is, the most universally held form of the idea of personality’ (Fields 1992).

For the sake of clarity, it’s now necessary to view the ideas of both Eliade and Durkheim together in regards to their various similarities and differences. Some aspects of their worldviews can indeed be viewed together – such as the psychological element in perceptions of ‘the real’ (and thus the sacred and by extension sacred spaces), the acceptance of religions as true in their own right and viewing the serious study of any religion as necessitating this acceptance. To both, religion cannot be rationally interpreted from a completely secular perceptive. As Durkheim eloquently describes ‘social facts’ it is indeed reasonable that ‘an irreligious interpretation of religion would be an interpretation which denied the phenomena it was trying to explain’ (Fields 1992).

More importantly for the intentions of this paper, while they both view ‘the real’ as pertaining to an element of the psyche the differences there-in are clear – Eliade thinks of this psychic element as a structure of consciousness represented by a phenomenon, which does not inherently direct us toward the anthropocentric like Durkheim’s idea of intrinsic human experience as there is no claim that consciousness is somehow unique to human nature (Eliade

1957; Fields 1992). For Durkheim ‘the real’ is an ultimate reality expressed uniquely through human experience and action as opposed to being the numinous experienced as a function of the mind; a real element of consciousness which erupts in nature instead of being instilled into it by human actors. This is key to the intention of this paper being to examine their ideas of ‘sacred space’ more specifically. For Durkheim sacrality is attributed to space by human agents who instill and maintain that quality. This is what he calls the ‘religious nature of man’ and is something we will naturally do. Eliade doesn’t exactly deny this maintenance aspect of hierophanies that Durkheim proposes, but the same cannot be said for the action of instilling this sacral quality. Eliade suggests that hierophanies permeate into nature of their own accord and it is the believers experience (where-in you experience what you believe) of that eruption (the many ‘modes of the sacred’), of that hierophany, which incites worship and mimetic acts for further evocation (Smith 2000).

In order to summarize their differences into a more digestible format (though at the risk of over-simplification), we might consider that Eliade mostly accounts for ‘god’ in that the truest form of reality is in the divine, the numinous, which we experience through hierophany in our immediate profane reality. On the contrary, Durkheim is accounting more for the human in which the divine reality, the true reality, is an intrinsic aspect of human nature which we instill into the profane world around us as hierophany. For both there is a perceived ‘otherness’ to the sacred, as well as a certain form of representation that is enacted in the world, but for Durkheim the sacred exists only through representation (Fields 1992) while for Eliade the sacred is a unique and irreducible element of consciousness which is then represented by a phenomenon (Studstill 2000) meaning that it sort of exists above the profane yet descends into a form of representation that can be experienced (Smith 2000). Both represent a different ontological

worldview and the differences between them seem to largely arise from this ontological difference. As Eliade is writing more contemporarily than Durkheim, his ideas may be branching away from the influences that Durkheim would have been drawing from, hence why his views might be accounting for other forms of consciousness that aren't necessarily grounded entirely in the 'rational' human mind and thus subject to it.

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