

sacred

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the power, being, or realm understood by religious persons to be at the core of existence and to have a transformative effect on their lives and destinies. Other terms, such as holy, divine, transcendent, ultimate being (or reality), mystery, and perfection (or purity) have been used for this domain. "Sacred" is also an important technical term in the scholarly study and interpretation of religions.

The emergence of the concept of the sacred

It was during the first quarter of the 20th century that the concept of the sacred became dominant in the comparative study of religions. Nathan Söderblom, an eminent Swedish churchman and historian of religions, asserted in 1913 that the central notion of religion was "holiness" and that the distinction between sacred and profane was basic to all "real" religious life. In 1917 Rudolf Otto's *Heilige* (Eng. trans., *The Idea of the Holy*, 1923) appeared and exercised a great influence on the study of religion through its description of religious man's experience of the "numinous" (a mysterious, majestic presence inspiring dread and fascination), which Otto, a German theologian and historian of religions, claimed, could not be derived from anything other than an a priori sacred reality. Other scholars who used the notion of sacred as an important interpretive term during this period included the sociologist Émile Durkheim in France, and the psychologist-philosopher Max Scheler in Germany. For Durkheim, sacredness referred to those things in society that were forbidden or set apart; and since these sacred things were set apart by society, the sacred force, he concluded, was society itself. In contrast to this understanding of the nature of the sacred, Scheler argued that the sacred (or infinite) was not limited to the experience of a finite object. While Scheler did not agree with Otto's claim that the holy is experienced through a radically different kind of awareness, he did agree with Otto that the awareness of the sacred is not simply the result of conditioning social and psychological forces. Though he criticized Friedrich Schleiermacher, an early 19th-century Protestant theologian, for being too subjective in his definition of religion as "the consciousness of being absolutely dependent on God," Otto was indebted to him in working out the idea of the holy. Söderblom recorded his dependence on the scholarship of the history of religions (*Religionswissenschaft*), which had been a growing discipline in European universities for about half a century; Durkheim had access to two decades of scholarship on nonliterate peoples, some of which was an account of actual fieldwork. Scheler combined the interests of an empirical scientist with a philosophical effort that followed in the tradition of 19th-century attempts to relate human experiences to the concept of a reality (essence) that underlies

human thoughts and activities.

Since the first quarter of the 20th century many historians of religions have accepted the notion of the sacred and of sacred events, places, people, and acts as being central in religious life if not indeed the essential reality in religious life. For example, phenomenologists of religion such as Gerardus van der Leeuw and W. Brede Kristensen have considered the sacred (holy) as central and have organized the material in their systematic works around the (transcendent) object and (human) subject of sacred (cultic) activity, together with a consideration of the forms and symbols of the sacred. Such historians of religions as Friedrich Heiler and Gustav Mensching organized their material according to the nature of the sacred, its forms and structural types. Significant contributions to the analysis and elaboration of the sacred have been made by Roger Caillois, a sociologist, and by Mircea Eliade, an eminent historian of religions.

Basic characteristics of the sacred

Sacred–profane and other dichotomies

The term sacred has been used from a wide variety of perspectives and given varying descriptive and evaluative connotations by scholars seeking to interpret the materials provided by anthropology and the history of religions. In these different interpretations, however, common characteristics were recognized in the sacred, as it is understood by participant individuals and groups: it is separated from the common (profane) world; it expresses the ultimate total value and meaning of life; and it is the eternal reality, which is recognized to have been before it was known and to be known in a way different from that through which common things are known.

The term sacred comes from Latin *sacer* ("set off, restricted"). A person or thing was designated as sacred when it was unique or extraordinary. Closely related to *sacer* is *numen* ("mysterious power, god"). The term numinous is used at present as a description of the sacred to indicate its power, before which man trembles. Various terms from different traditions have been recognized as correlates of *sacer*: Greek *hagios*, Hebrew *qadosh*, Polynesian *tapu*, Arabic *haram*; correlates of *numen* include the Melanesian *mana*, the Sioux *wakanda*, the old German *haminja* (luck), and Sanskrit *Brahman*.

Besides the dichotomy of sacred–profane the sacred includes basic dichotomies of pure–impure and pollutant–"free." In ancient Rome the word *sacer* could mean that which would pollute someone or something that came into contact with it, as well as that which was restricted for divine use. Similarly, the Polynesian *tapu* ("tabu") designated something as not "free" for common use. It might be someone or something specially blessed because

it was full of power, or it might be something accursed, as a corpse. Whatever was tabu had special restrictions around it, for it was full of extraordinary energy that could destroy anyone unprotected with special power himself. In this case the sacred is whatever is uncommon and may include both generating and polluting forces. On the other hand there is the pure-impure dichotomy, in which the sacred is identified with the pure and the profane is identified with the impure. The pure state is that which produces health, vigour, luck, fortune, and long life. The impure state is that characterized by weakness, illness, misfortune, and death. To acquire purity means to enter the sacred realm, which could be done through purification rituals or through the fasting, continence, and meditation of ascetic life. When a person became pure he entered the realm of the divine and left the profane, impure, decaying world. Such a transition was often marked by a ritual act of rebirth.

Ambivalence in man's response to the sacred

Because the sacred contains notions both of a positive, creative power and a danger that requires stringent prohibitions, the common human reaction is both fear and fascination. Otto elaborated his understanding of the holy from this basic ambiguity. Only the sacred can fulfill man's deepest needs and hopes; thus, the reverence that man shows to the sacred is composed both of trust and terror. On the one hand, the sacred is the limit of human effort both in the sense of that which meets human frailty and that which prohibits human activity; on the other hand, it is the unlimited possibility that draws mankind beyond the limiting temporal-spatial structures that are constituents of human existence.

Not only is there an ambivalence in the individual's reaction to the numinous quality of the sacred but the restrictions, the tabus, can be expressive of the creative power of the sacred. Caillois has described at length the social mechanism of nonliterate societies, in which the group is divided into two complementary subgroups (moieties), and has interpreted the tabus and the necessary interrelationship of the moieties as expressions of sacredness. Whatever is sacred and restricted for one group is "free" for the other group. In a number of respects—e.g., in supplying certain goods, food, and wives—each group is dependent on the other for elemental needs. Here the sacred is seen to be manifested in the order of the social-physical universe, in which these tribal members live. To disrupt this order, this natural harmony, would be sacrilege, and the culprit would be severely punished. In this understanding of the sacred, a person is, by nature, one of a pair; he is never complete as a single unit. Reality is experienced as one of prescribed relationships, some of these being vertical, hierarchical relationships and others being horizontal, corresponding relationships.

Another significant ambiguity is that the sacred manifests itself in concrete forms that are also

profane. The transcendent mystery is recognized in a specific concrete symbol, act, idea, image, person, or community. The unconditioned reality is manifested in conditioned form. Eliade has elucidated this "dialectic of the sacred," in which the sacred may be seen in virtually any sort of form in religious history: a stone, an animal, or the sea. The ambiguity of the sacred taking on profane forms also means that even though every system of sacred thought and action differentiates between those things it regards as sacred or as profane, not all people find the sacred manifested in the same form; and what is profane for some is sacred for others. . . .

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Additional Reading

The socio-anthropological analyses written near the beginning of the 20th century that are still useful for their interpretations of the sacred in preliterate societies include Henri Hubert and Marcel Mauss, *Essai sur la nature et le fonction du sacrifice* (1899; Eng. trans., *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Function*, 1964); and Émile Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse, le système totémique en Australie* (1912; Eng. trans., *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, 1965). More recently, in the same vein, are E.O. James, *Sacrifice and Sacrament* (1962), a comparative analysis of sacred ritual from many different religious traditions; and Roger Caillois, *L'Homme et le sacré* (1939; Eng. trans., *Man and the Sacred*, 1960), a general reflective interpretation of various social expressions of the sacred. The following combine philosophical and theological concerns: Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige* (1917; Eng. trans., *The Idea of the Holy*, 1923), an appeal to an a priori preconceptual knowledge of the holy; Max F. Scheler, *Vom Ewigen im Menschen*, 2nd ed. (1923; Eng. trans., *On the Eternal in Man*, 1960), an intuitive philosopher's argument for the eternal reality of the sacred prior to man's awareness or social expression of it; Nathan Soderblom, "Holiness," *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 6:731-41 (1928, reprinted 1955), which stressed the quality of holiness in all religion four years prior to Otto's more famous statement, and his *Living God: Basal Forms of Personal Religion* (1933), a comparative study of religion organized according to various ways through which man encounters God; and Joachim Wach, *The Comparative Study of Religions*, ed. by J.M. Kitagawa (1958), a systematic analysis of the modes (thought, action, fellowship) used to express the religious experience. Two Dutch phenomenologists of religion who have made notable contributions to the interpretation of forms that express man's relation to the sacred are Gerardus van der Leeuw, whose *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933; Eng. trans., *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, 1963) organizes a wide spectrum of data into three foci: the object of religion, the subject of religion, and their reciprocal relation; and W. Brede Kristensen, who wrote *The Meaning of*

Religion (1960), a series of lectures given during the 1930s on the sacredness of man's cosmological, anthropological, and cultic awareness as expressed in the preliterate cultures and those of the ancient Mediterranean area. An extensive analysis of the forms and modes in which the sacred is recognized is found in the writings of Mircea Eliade, for whom the apprehension of the sacred is a unique kind of experience in which the creative power(s) of

life appear(s) in particular symbols, myths, and rites. Four of his works that deal with the nature and meaning of the sacred in different types of expression are: *Le Mythe de l'éternel retour* (1949; Eng. trans., *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, 1954, reissued 1989); *Myth and Reality* (1963); *Traité d'histoire des religions* (Eng. trans., *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 1958); and *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (1959).

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