

# NOTES AND DISCUSSION

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## ON THE TRANSITION

## FROM THE SACRED TO THE PROFANE

We live in a universe infinitely more complex than that which is evoked by the word *reality*. Only the desire for pragmatic knowledge allows us to believe that things are simply that which they are: the bearers of material qualities by which we distinguish or manipulate them. We give them names, which designate their *genre*, and make use of them according to our fancy. They are tools or means which refer us to other things to which they have a relation. When knowledge is elevated to a science, in doing away with appearances we discover their structure, and new types of relations, expressed in the language of figures and numbers, beyond which there is only the possibility of other structures and other numbers. The object is explained either by the finiteness of human needs or by the network of scientific relations. It is what it is, nothing more.

Translated by T. Jaeger.

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Now usefulness or cold scientific curiosity are not the only aspects of this object which have meaning for us. Sometimes it speaks to us in its uniqueness; it is more than itself, it evokes other universes. Here it is an aesthetic object, related to a whole world of brilliant lights, or else it refers to our past and becomes a relic. It can be a carrier of the sacred. Then it touches us and awakes differing affective attitudes in us. In contrast to the positivists shallowness, we will say that our universe has depth, that that which is apparent refers to a background, to other worlds which are glimpsed through a veil, offered but not given. A presence is manifest here, values haunt our universe.

The sacred is one of these haunting values focused in an object. It is only in a second, derived sense that a society or an authority can declare a being sacred without necessarily referring to an affective experience. There is a purely social sacredness. There can be also a shade of the sacred attached to other values: memory, art, morality. But in itself the sacred provokes a specific attitude which Rudolf Otto, in his classic work,<sup>1</sup> defines by a fundamental ambivalence: the sacred object presents itself as at the same time terrifying and fascinating. When our senses perceive only an indifferent object, identical to many others, the sacred has the unique characteristic of containing a mysterious and fantastic power, beneficent and redoubtable, whose true nature often becomes apparent only in the misfortunes brought about by sacrilege. The sacred is the point of contact with the obscure background, with the mysterious, with unpredictable powers which one dare not approach without precautions. A taboo forbids it. One can approach the sacred only by respecting particular forms, purifications, rites. To make the attempt is a sin, a soiling, but not, generally, a moral fault. The violation of the prohibition unleashes misfortune and introduces anarchy into the order of the world. Although Oedipus committed incest without knowing it, disorder was introduced into the innocent city of Thebes. The sacrilegious act calls for harsh expiation in order to calm the maleficent powers which were imprudently unchained. Sociologists have spoken of a "mystic" mentality, where technical, social, moral and aesthetic activities are involved in a certain way in this mysterious world,

<sup>1</sup> *Le Sacré*, trad. fr. Paris, 1929, p. 57.

where no action has full significance in itself, and where propitiatory rites are always necessary: where all of life has reference to the sacred.

By this tie with the order of the world, the sacred achieves an ontological significance which distinguishes it from other values. Nothing is neutral in nature, nothing has sufficient reality in itself. The real is the supernatural, the ensemble of hidden powers to be respected, seduced, awakened, calmed, or utilized. Through the object, we are in communication with the sources of order and of disorder. These interventions of the occult give rise to a terror before the unforeseeable, before ruptures provoked by its intrusions into known nature, but also the certitude of efficacious protection when everything has been accomplished as is proper. According to the particular case, the sacred may be beneficent or maleficent, asylum or death. It appears in the distance separating the will from its effect, success from failure; in short, in that twilight zone which we call change, where our superstitions still insist that the characteristic incident, the crow rising from the left, the spilt salt, governs conduct more authentically than skill or prudence.

Thus the sacred, recognized and codified by tradition, takes up a function in society. It organizes the time and place of groups, protects the threshold, the door, the walls, marks the time of festivals and ceremonies where a people's unity is forged; it presides over institutions. But if it organizes, it also limits; it determines an exterior and an interior, a before and an afterwards. Perhaps it is at the threshold that one should place the distinction between the sacred and the profane, at the transition from the *fanum* to the *pro-fanum*, from the sanctuary where the sacred is as it were condensed, to the public place which has quite other characteristics. The localization in place (the temple) and in time (the ceremony) introduces a dualism: two ways of being are in opposition, two universes obeying two laws. If there are sacred places and days, circumstances, men, objects, words or languages, the profane, in its negative aspect, is that which escapes this regimentation. In its positive aspect, in the realm of the profane, change becomes possible, choice is allowed. Here liberty and responsibility blossom. Here reverential fear ceases and curiosity begins. The rational can be established. The analysis of causes and effects, of means and ends, permits a new order on the human ladder, an order that is

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understood and desired. The realms of the profane call on technique, not on ritual.

Abandoned in a profane world where values, like things, have become detached from the sacred, where everything can be explored and exploited, man, rid of protection and threats, must take over his own identity, carry out his own exploits according to his own powers, build a universe which is his own. We live today in a civilization which wants to be profane, but is not without some concern when it reflects on its own uprootedness. It is not, certainly, that the sacred has totally disappeared from our world. Traditionally, religions organize and interpret, channel and limit the sacred: there are still sanctuaries, cults, sacraments and even miracles. On a completely different level, we see clearly that the most ancient superstitions are still alive, and sometime insert themselves into the mythology of our daily newspapers. We even see new forms of the sacred appearing, or the resurgence of ancient forms: the prestige of pure blood has resuscitated a religion, the flame is lit on tombstones, countries have their sacred places and venerated emblems. Nonetheless, in spite of everything that shows us that the need for contact with mysterious powers is reborn all the time and everywhere, a long evolution, begun at the height of the Middle Ages and manifest especially since the Renaissance, tends continually to increase the spread of the profane, to de-sacralize values, to establish all our activities within the embrace of a single completely human world, without reference to the immanence of the supernatural.

The outstanding instrument of the intellectual revolution of the West has been science. It presupposes profanation, and is that which renders profane. It has become the frame of reference of truth, the point where the world is manifest as supremely real. Now, that which constitutes science is controllable experience. Control implies an object manipulated without precautions, if necessary transformed, divided, submitted to all possible conditions. Control has no reference to anything that is not *natural*. We will not be astonished, then, that the fight of scientific rationalism has been directed above all at the miracle, at this trickery which is the inopportune intervention of the Sacred in the order of things, and secondly against the finality which presupposes an intimate power of organization. The world can only be that of inertia, of a passivity

entirely determined by laws which constitute a completely closed system, without a crack. Of course, the human being enters into the natural order as well, and makes himself an object of the sciences (and the sacred too, as representation or conductor, cannot be an exception). In short, man's possibility of exercising his power has as its only limit the resistance of a nature which one can command only by obeying it, that is by understanding it. And if philosophy demands a first being to bring about the existence and intelligibility of nature, it can only intervene as a beginning and not as a force intervening in the course of things.

The profane world, then, is totally bound to the exercise of our liberty—liberty felt and wanted before knowledge has even shown us all its possibilities. One can see it for instance in the first attempts of man to construct a social order which would finally be rational. It was necessary, by means of sacrilege, to attack the sacred symbols of the *ancien régime*, and to invoke magically the sacred words of liberty and equality to make the new order take shape. The sacred of the institution is simply transformed into the sacred of principles. But one must go as far as the profanation of the principles themselves in order to understand that words are not sufficient to transform structures and give a positive content. The passions of men can only be defeated by the analysis which makes them understandable and places them in a context.

The world will be completely understood by science if it can be totally remade. The sacred will be torn away bit by bit from all its refuges, and from nature itself to which it has retreated. Nature is not untouchable, geography does not describe a world which is given, once and for all. Our earth is an ensemble of materials, of hidden sources of energy; we will sound its depths, turn its rivers from their courses, cultivate its deserts. There remains the fact that nature still has its angers, its imperfect cycles, in short its disorder and its chance. It is still attached to destiny. The technical world no longer has any right to these disorders which simply manifest our own insufficiency. The fortuitousness of catastrophes, of sickness and death, even the fortuitousness of our premature decisions: everything will finally enter into our equations and let itself be handled by machine.

We do not move towards such a perfect universe without hesitations. Explanation leaves us dissatisfied in the realm of justifi-

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cation. If the sacred has hardly any real ontological significance for us, it still exists in a psychological form, as an objectivating projection of anxiety, as an interpretation of the world through ancestral "archetypes" of our unconscious. As Duméry says, it will be "the projection onto a thing of the aspiration and intention of the subject." Establishing the exteriority of the sacred is our means of re-attaining an interiority which is being lost. Man "finds, through the exterior world, that which defines him as subjectivity, he expresses his most profound imaginative flight, his need for the absolute."<sup>2</sup> But how, then, can one escape from the feeling that the sacred, projected thus, is finally only a mystification?

A remark is necessary: this exigency of a completely profane world is a characteristic of our civilization, and spreads with it to peoples whose religious traditions are more deeply rooted than those of the West. What relation is there between this exigency and the theological reflection of the West? If the word *divine* can designate the nebulosity of the mysterious power implied in the sacred (at the risk of distinguishing degrees within the supernatural, such as the demoniac for example), it is not yet apparent how God can be involved in this affair. Rudolf Otto declares that sacred means relationship to the absolute. It is, however, a capital fact of our history that, from its first stutterings, theological reflection has engaged itself in distinguishing between the divine and the sacred. Werner Jaeger has shown how the pre-Socratics already searched for the theological purification which disengaged its object from the religious sacralization of the Greeks. It is a fact that Plato was far from being a stranger to the religion of mysteries, as it is that the role of the demoniac in his thought was important. But for him philosophy is an ascension towards a being which one attains by a hierarchic series of stages. The sacred of the social world can be symbolic, but he pursues another initiation, that which, by the progress of the intelligence, gives access to a world other than that of appearances, a world of forms truer than the images that reflect it. It is no longer a matter of powers hidden in things, but of a sort of profaned supernatural, even if one must recognize in the eternity and immutability

<sup>2</sup> Henry Duméry: *Philosophie de la religion*, Paris, 1957, v. II, p. 114.

of these forms some relation with the divine. The philosopher who has contemplated these summits must become a theologian, that is, must seek the best terms for speaking of God. In opposition to the popular and poetic mythology, he must recognize that Zeus has a royal soul, and therefore refer to the analogy of that which represents to mankind the noblest and greatest qualities: justice and organizing intelligence. This is certainly not the only way in which Plato evokes the supreme Being. His transcendence is indicated by the image of light, in the *Republic*, light which at the same time gives life and permits vision, irradiation which spreads and reflects into our deepest shadows. But transcendence is not the only note, since the soul of the world, made of the purest substance, presides over all nature, and introduces into the world something of the divine. Thus a theology is sketched, by image, which justifies the spiritual effort of man to order his life according to what he understands of divine order, according to intelligence and not according to the impulse of emotion, of sacred terror.

But Judaeo-Christian theology arrives at a much more radical thesis, since for it the nebulousness of the divine, the natural immanence, disappears before an absolute which is God. Scripture contains the story of a tribal God, confounded in the crowd of gods of nations and places, who reveals himself gradually as the unique God, personal and creative. In his uniqueness he is the God of all men, the all-powerful Lord of the entire world, whose wisdom ordained the world's form as it ordains the course of human history. In his role as the creator his radical difference from the creature is implied. If the world, well governed, carries the mark of God and, if the heavens sing his glory, we are nonetheless faced with a non-sacred world which contains nothing of the divine. The world obeys sovereign decrees, and thus can be known and used by us; but it is without initiative and without soul, and this negation is one of the most certain constants in Christian philosophy. And it is certainly a world, in the most positive sense of the word, which is the premise of the traditional cosmological proofs. Finally, the personal character of God means that the divine is not nebulous, that it is an *I* opposed to a *you*, that it is neither deaf nor dumb but that its Word is the means of communication with the intelligent creature. Thus an absolute transcendence distinguishes God from the sacred. He is

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neither localized nor immanent in things. He carries the ontological reality of the supernatural as of nature.

Two remarks are necessary here. The first is of a linguistic nature: French has two words of the same root, *sacré* and *saint*,<sup>3</sup> which other languages confuse. The distinction is important, however, because if the sacred is essentially that which is set apart, the holy implies also the interiorization which gives it a personal and spiritual quality. If one says interchangeably of a place that it is sacred or that it is holy, its sacredness relates to its consecration; its holiness refers to its spiritual state, not to its function, to the power which it has to manipulate sacred objects. One could easily show a process of de-sacralization throughout the Old Testament, from the struggle against the mysteries of the trees, rivers and mountains of Palestine to the disappearance in successive historical episodes of all the material supports of the divine: the Tablets of the Law, the Ark of the Covenant and finally the Temple and its sacrifice themselves. "Judaism is a religion without images, and even without altars beyond that of the Temple; it desired to preserve monotheistic belief from all idolatry."<sup>4</sup> To the extent indeed that the sacred retains the affective powers of man, man turns from his vocation and creates an idol. The true cult is in spirit and in truth.

Will it be objected that Christianity introduced a new sacralization in the theophany of the Incarnation? This is the thesis of Duméry: "The faith in the Incarnate Word concentrates in the sole person of Christ the source of sacralization.... It collects in a single main foyer all the sacrality which until then was sparse and diffused."<sup>5</sup> If this formula is not deprived of all historical thought, one may ask if the meaning of the doctrine is really in this condensation and redistribution of the sacred, if the ambiguity of the Incarnation cannot just as well signify a profanation of the God who enters into human misery even unto

<sup>3</sup> *Sanctus* comes from *sancire*, to prescribe by law, and *sacratu*s from *sacrare*, to make sacred. Both verbs come from *sacer*, sacred.

<sup>4</sup> Henry Duméry, *op. cit.*, p. 117.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.



death, as a sacralization of the world. The Gospel, which abolishes the last elements of that which was sacred to the Jews: sacrifices, purification, the sabbath; does it not play the role of a profaner? In any case, the accent is not on the diffusion of the sacred from a unique center, as an effusion of the divine in things or as a power, but on the sanctification of the human person, in his relations with the person of God, with revelation that can be heard as a word. Sanctification is the action of carrying grace into the heart of the profane, where a new life is developed by obedience.

It remains certain that Christianity has played an ambiguous role in Western history. It has not remained on a purely spiritual level, but has become the religion, in the traditional sense of the word, of a defined society. This means, in conformity with the schema of Duméry, that it has agreed to assume social sacredness; that, in the first part of its history, it has been a conscious attempt to gather together as much as possible of the world's sacredness. The Middle Ages organized a venerated calendar of sacred places and objects, introduced the sacred into domestic, professional and political institutions. It is this work which gave mediaeval society a structure we call Christian. But the rupture of this harmony has contributed to making Christianity a conservative power, which has sharpened certain conflicts, particularly those from which modern science stems. Thus the cosmic sacralization, translating the transcendence into images, made blasphemous the Galilean idea that the earth is already in the heavens, like any other body. One could make similar observations about the quarrel of evolution or of the development of historical techniques. The Age of Enlightenment drew the lesson that Christianity is the symbol of obscurity; and this break, which became more profound when the social plan and the powerful transformations of the industrial world brought with them the revision of a quantity of moral principals thought to be sacred, characterizes the modern world.

This being the case, one may ask whether Christianity has not been disloyal to its own essence, and whether it does not contain in embryo the idea that the world is profane since it is totally different from its creator. To which could be added the idea that the sovereignty of God over the totality of beings excludes the existence of two separate domains, subject to different orders.

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Everything is confided to the responsibility of man, at the risk that he may conflict with God; the meaning of sin and grace is of a totally different order than the dualism of the sacred and the profane. In this perspective, the Reformation would appear as an attempt at the de-sacralization of objects, of men and of institution—even ecclesiastical ones—as is clear in the interpretation of the “sacraments.” Not, moreover, without the human need for the sacred having taken the offensive again in the course of history.

To resume, it seems to us that Christianity has been one of the important sources of Western profanation, as much in ridding man of naturalistic and sociological idolatries as in freeing the intelligence and the creative capabilities of man, who has the right to master nature according to his power. This cannot be said without posing certain questions. Is a man who no longer has to reckon with the sacred, and lives in a universe henceforth profane, still capable of conserving or rediscovering a hierarchy of values? Is he not tempted to conceive of his liberty as indifferent? In short, to consider himself as the god of this world? In the perspective of the death of God Nietzsche recognized the necessity for assuming the heritage and its risks. Our period of exaggeration and experiment cannot help but make us uneasy. The progressive idealism of the last century risks being checked by our incertitudes about right and morality, by the resurrection of political tyranny applied to a technocracy, by the contempt of physical man which is shown by so many of our enterprises, by the acceptance of cruelty, as soon as society becomes an absolute end and the individual becomes the means. New de-mystifications of the socially sacred become necessary when the meaning of existence is lost in reference to the transcendent, if we wish to conserve the respect of man, and even of things, and not revert to barbarism.