Eliade, phenomenology, and the sacred

RANDALL STUDSTILL

Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley, CA 94709

Abstract: The purpose of this article is to clarify some of the areas considered most problematic in Mircea Eliade's approach to religion. One of its principal goals is to show that Eliade's method is primarily phenomenological rather than theological, as some interpreters of his work maintain. In presenting this phenomenological interpretation of Eliade four areas of his approach are addressed: (1) the extent to which it incorporates historical method; (2) the meaning of religion as *sui generis* and irreducible; (3) Eliade's use of the term 'sacred'; and (4) Eliade's hierarchalizing of religious phenomena. Eliade's departure from phenomenology to explain the causes of religious experience is also addressed.

Introduction

Mircea Eliade's approach to religion has been described as (among other things) essentialist, ahistorical, theological, etc. These types of criticisms have often been justified. But in many cases they have failed to do justice to Eliade's work, either by misunderstanding key concepts or by presenting his approach so superficially that its potential strengths go unacknowledged. Eliade may very well be 'essentialist' (for example), but there is a certain logic to his essentialism that gets lost in the knee-jerk tendency to caricature whatever offends current methodological sensibilities. My intention in this article is to review and clarify some of these misunderstood and/or inadequately presented areas of Eliade's method. Brian Rennie's *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion*[1] has already clarified a great deal, and much of what follows is indebted to his extensive research and insightful account of Eliade's views. Still, Rennie occasionally misses the mark. Certain points with respect to Eliade's methodology and interpretation of religion require additional analysis.

For the most part, my remarks are based on only two of Eliade's works: *Patterns in Comparative Religion*[2] and his essay 'Methodological remarks on the study of religious symbolism'.[3] My conclusions, then, are tentative. However, in both these works Eliade:

(1)   provides a general account of his methodological approach, and,

(2) raises the methodological issues that have proven most
     problematic in the eyes of Eliade's critics.

For these reasons these two works provide a sound basis for further reflection on
Eliade's methodology.

Eliade, history, and phenomenology

Eliade identifies himself as a 'historian of religions', a designation that
turns out to be misleading. Historical method, for Eliade, is only a first step, leading
to a phenomenological or philosophical approach to religion;[4] 'the history of
religions does not merely describe religious phenomena – it goes on to 'syste-
matize … and … reflect on [their] structure'.[5] Setting aside Eliade's own claims to
consider what he actually does, this second step turns out to be definitive of his
method as whole. Eliade's approach is guided and shaped by implicit presup-
positions and concerns that are essentially phenomenological. 'General struc-
tures', 'universal systems', 'the sacred', 'modes/modalities of the sacred'
are primarily used in a phenomenological sense to refer to structures of con-
sciousness, elements in such structures, or systems of structures that constitute
a religious mode of relating to one's world. The structure Eliade considers
fundamental – that which defines the religious as religious – is the intentional
relation between believer and the sacred, where 'sacred' is phenomenologically
understood as that category of objects construed in the mind of the believer as
both ultimately real and other with respect to the profane/material world.

The centrality of phenomenology over history in Eliade is reflected in his gen-
eral understanding of the religious phenomenon as 'hierophany'. For Eliade, the
hierophany is any 'manifestation of the sacred', and as such, has two elements:
the 'modality of the sacred' and the expression of that modality as a concrete
historical phenomena. 'Modality of the sacred' is a phenomenological expression,
referring at its most basic level to the structure of relation between the believer
and the sacred. The hierophany as 'historical incident', on the other hand, is the
historically particularized form of this underlying structure, 'reveal[ing] some
attitude man has had toward the sacred'.[6] At this level, the hierophany represents
a concrete, historically conditioned way in which the sacred was conceived and
therefore experienced. Approaching the religious phenomenon as hierophany,
then, involves focusing on 'the religious significance to the believer',[7] either in
terms of conscious experience, attitudes, and beliefs (which are historically par-
ticularized) or in terms of the phenomenological structures informing these atti-
tudes, i.e., the modalities of the sacred.

Since 'every hierophany we look at is also an historical fact', Eliade insists that
'understanding [the religious phenomena] will always come about in relation to
history'.[8] And since the religious phenomena as 'historical incident' expresses

'some attitude man has had toward the sacred',[9] historical analysis involves the description of such attitudes, including an account of their evolution. Eliade states that 'the history of religions is … largely the history of the devaluations and the revaluations which make up the process of the expression of the sacred'[10] – in other words, the history of what people have valued as sacred. Historical analysis is also concerned with a given phenomenon's context. Eliade claims that 'all expressions or conceptual formulation of … religious experience is imbedded in a historical context'.[11] But Eliade does not (in the sources I have examined) practise this level of analysis. 'I have not tried', he writes, 'to study religious phenomena in their historical framework, but merely as hierophanies.'[12] He goes on to claim that historical context is irrelevant to the extent that one's focus is on the content and structure of religious experience itself.[13]

Eliade's de-emphasis on history goes beyond the issue of context. Even though Eliade insists that hierophanies are both universal and historical and that understanding them requires historical analysis, it is specifically the manifestation of the hierophany that is historical. Meaning is found in the 'modalities of the sacred' revealed by the hierophany. Eliade's approach, then, naturally focuses on these 'modalities', downplaying historical considerations in favour of phenomenological analysis. As Eliade states, 'the religious historian … must first of all understand and explain the modality of the sacred that that hierophany discloses'.[14] Identifying the modalities of the sacred is 'more important' than 'trac[ing] the history of a hierophany'.[15]

Eliade's phenomenological method is reminiscent of Husserl's.[16] For Husserl, phenomenology involved the identification of essential structures of consciousness and the description of how 'objects' – and ultimately a 'world' – are intentionally constituted according to such structures. In terms of method, this required bracketing the 'natural attitude' (the tendency of ordinary awareness to experience objects as independently existing rather than as always 'intentionally given') and paying attention to the form and content of experience itself. Eliade's phenomenological approach has the same basic intent: to identify and describe structures of consciousness, in this case religious structures, in the mind of the believer. Though Eliade does not use the term, *verstehen* ('empathy') would seem to be his method of identifying such structures. But not 'empathy' in the sense used by Dilthey. Eliade does not attempt to recreate the believer's experience in his own consciousness. Rather, he analyses concrete religious phenomena based on the view that they encode the experience that created them, therefore making it possible to use the phenomena as a means of reconstructing the phenomenological structures underlying that experience. In this sense, *verstehen* is less problematic for Eliade than it is for other phenomenologists of religion who paradoxically attempt to practise the *epoche* while simultaneously seeking to recreate the believer's experience in their own consciousnesses. Still, Eliade is trying, if somewhat indirectly, to get inside the believer's head – a project that is highly

problematic, especially given Eliade's lack of reflexivity or concern with historical context.

To reiterate, the structures identified through phenomenological analysis are fundamentally distinct from religious attitudes or beliefs. Such attitudes or beliefs are the data that the historian of religion examines. However, they do not represent 'meaning' in Eliade's sense. For Eliade, attitudes, beliefs, or any concrete religious phenomenon (i.e., artifacts, myths, texts, rituals) reflect a particular way or ways of relating to the sacred, and beyond that, a religious way of being in the world. Any of these types of phenomena may disclose that 'structure of relation' or 'system' more or less transparently. In some cases, the attitude or belief and the structure that informs it may be practically identical. For example, relating to the sacred as 'the real' is almost indistinguishable from the conscious belief of the believer that the object of his worship is real in an ultimate sense (although, in the case of the believer, the real is usually construed as having a particular form). Generally speaking, however, a belief or religious artifact represents a way of relating to the sacred, a way that is not self-consciously represented in the phenomenon itself.

Religion as *sui generis*

Eliade's phenomenological approach starts out with a simple though often misunderstood presupposition: that religious phenomena are *sui generis*. This claim tends to be considered problematic, given that most scholars belong to disciplines that locate meaning at non-religious levels, i.e., at the level of culture, history, politics, economics, psychology, etc. From these perspectives, there are no religious phenomena – only historical, political, cultural, etc. phenomena. These modes of interpretation, however, have become so taken-for-granted that an obvious fact tends to be overlooked. The act of prayer may be used to illustrate. That people pray is indisputable. There may be many non-religious factors operative in constructing this activity, but this does not change the fact that the activity of prayer itself exists and is consistently identifiable as a distinct (i.e., *sui generis*) mode of experience.

For Eliade, the claim that prayer reflects a unique mode of experience does not imply that it also represents a state of consciousness fundamentally incommensurate from ordinary consciousness (although this may be the contention of other historians and/or phenomenologists of religion). *Sui generis* simply refers to the distinguishability of an essential structure informing a category of experiences – it applies to any such structure so identified.

The *sui generis* nature of prayer stands regardless of whether or not its object really exists. Even if the believer prays to an imaginary object there is still no doubt that the act itself exists and as such has an intentional structure and a noemic locus with certain qualities. Phenomenologically speaking, the object may be purely

intentional or properly intentional. Either way, the structures of religious experience are a distinct set of phenomena and can be investigated as such.[17]

Likewise, the *sui generis* nature of prayer is unaffected by whether or not its meaning can legitimately be reduced to the theoretical constructs of other disciplines. Eliade would not deny that religious phenomena in general are also historical, cultural, political and/or psychological phenomena. Indeed, he insists that 'there are no purely religious phenomena'.[18] The act of prayer may be nothing more than the manifestation of Oedipal drives. But there is still a level of experience (phenomenologically describable in terms of its intentional structure) that pertains to the act itself. And this level as such constitutes a unique domain of inquiry: religion as religious, as Eliade describes it.

From this perspective, reducing religious phenomena to non-religious factors means they have been lost as religious. This explains why Eliade considers religion to be 'irreducible'. For Eliade, such a reduction negates the possibility of un-covering the meaning of religious phenomena since it fails to address them in their religious dimensions. As he puts it, 'a religious phenomena will only be recognized as such [and therefore only understood as such] if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious'.[19] Logically the history of religions must keep its attention on the phenomena themselves – i.e., the religious phenomena as religious – in order to grasp the phenomenological structure informing those phenomena. In Eliade's approach, the meanings of religious phenomena as construed by history, anthropology, psychology, etc. become irrelevant. Only the history of religions addresses the meaning of the religious phenomena as such – the basis of its claim to be a distinct discipline.

The sacred

As a phenomenologist, Eliade is interested in discovering the structures of consciousness that constitute religious experience. The fundamental structure he identifies is the relation between the believer and 'the sacred'. The phenomenological nature of Eliade's approach would immediately suggest what he means by this term. As stated above, 'the sacred' is a cover-term for that category of 'objects' constituted in the mind of the believer as both 'ultimately real' and as distinct from the profane world.

Many scholars would dispute this interpretation, arguing that Eliade's 'sacred' refers to what he considers to be a really existing divine reality. Reading Eliade, it often sounds like this is the case. According to Eliade, 'every religious act and every cult object aims at a meta-empirical reality [i.e., the sacred]'.[20] Religious symbols (a medium of the sacred) 'reveal reality' or 'a profound structure of the World'.[21] Through them reality is grasped – a transcendent dimension that is generally 'inaccessible to human experience'. 'The religious symbols which point to the structures of life reveal a more profound, more mysterious life than that which is

known through everyday experience. They unveil the miraculous, inexplicable side of life, and at the same time the sacramental dimensions of human existence.'[22] Eliade also asserts that 'myth reveals … the actual structure of the divinity, which transcends all attributes and reconciles all contraries'.[23] Furthermore, this 'divine personality is not to be simply looked upon as a mere projection of human personality'.[24] 'Sacredness', Eliade states, 'is, above all, real.'[25] From these kinds of passages (which are by no means unusual) it is easy to see why Eliade has been considered a theologian discussing the nature of the divine. A closer reading, however, reveals that Eliade's description of the sacred as 'the real' is ambiguous. His statements do not indicate whether he means 'real' in an ontological sense or 'real' as posited by the believer. This same ambiguity applies to everything else Eliade says about the sacred and religion in general (at least in the works I have examined).

Resolving this ambiguity requires one to go beyond Eliade's specific remarks on the nature of the sacred to consider the actual locus of Eliade's discussion of religion. A theological approach to the sacred tends to posit, a priori, an ultimate reality or absolute existing independently of human involvement or experience. Eliade, on the other hand, consistently locates his area of concern in the mind of the believer. For Eliade, understanding the sacred involves 'arriv[ing] at the mental universe of archaic man',[26] and the hierophany Eliade describes as the 'manifestation of the sacred in the mental world of those who believed in it [my emphasis]'.[27] Eliade also 'proves' that different modalities of the sacred exist through reference to different experiences by observers of a single ritual.[28] The expression 'modes of the sacred' does not refer to the various forms of a divine reality. Rather, modes of the sacred reflect the different ways the sacred is constituted in the mind of the believer. That 'modality of the sacred' is an experiential term is also suggested indirectly through Eliade's discussion of the hierophany. The hierophany is both a representation of the modes of the sacred and an expression of 'religious significance' in the mind of 'the believer'.[29] In other words, Eliade equates 'modality of the sacred' with the believer's experience.

This emphasis on the mind is confirmed by Eliade's implicit understanding of religion. 'Man's response to the sacred' – generally considered to be Eliade's definition of religion – highlights the intentionality of religious experience as it includes both poles of experience. It represents a specifically phenomenological understanding of religion. Religion is an act of the believer, and so the study of religion is located within the believer. Eliade states that examining a religious phenomenon 'at first in itself, in [terms of] that which belongs to it alone [as religious] … is a matter … of … setting it in its true relation to the other things of the mind'.[30] Religion, then, is a 'thing of the mind'. This mind may relate itself to something it considers real and transcendent, but we are still 'in the mind', this relation to an 'other' being an issue of how the mind constitutes the objects of its experience. This does not mean that the sacred is not potentially real in the

ontological sense, but Eliade's focus on the mind would indicate that this is a question outside his concern. For Eliade, 'the sacred is an element in the structure of (human) consciousness',[31] a function of the believer's experience.

Furthermore, that Eliade's sacred is not an ontological entity is indicated by passages in which he steps outside his phenomenological approach and tries to explain the real basis for the arising of the experience of a given object as sacred (for example, attributing sacredness to a rock because of its quality of hardness). If Eliade was presenting the sacred theologically, the basis of the experience of the sacred would be nothing more than the reality of the sacred itself – in other words, the rock is experienced as sacred because it is sacred. But Eliade never takes this position. Rather, he explains that religious structures of consciousness are actually grounded in the circumstances of our predicament as human beings. Our existential predicament gives rise to 'archetypal intuitions' which become expressed in religious forms.[32] This bears directly on the meaning of Eliade's assertion that 'the divine personality is not … a mere projection'.[33] Far from implying that the sacred is therefore real, this statement expresses Eliade's view that 'the divinity' is an expression of how the believer comes to terms with her predicament as a human being. It is in this sense that Eliade considers a religious worldview existentially valuable.

This general assessment of Eliade's approach and, specifically, his view of the sacred, is confirmed by Rennie, who argues convincingly that Eliade's concern is mental states and structures of consciousness. He asserts that 'although Eliade has frequently been criticized for making a priori assumptions of the ontological autonomy of the sacred, it is rather the case that he is investigating an intentional object … without raising the question as to its proper or pure intentionality'.[34] The sacred is simply a cover term for 'that which is worshipped', and as such 'the question of the existence of the sacred does not occur'.[35]

Considering the larger context of Eliade's thought, then, he does not use the term 'sacred' in a theological sense. Eliade's concern with 'getting inside the head' of the believer would tend to indicate a phenomenological agenda: the meaning of a given phenomenon is in the particular structures of consciousness represented by that phenomenon. In this context, the sacred becomes a phenomenological term, subject to analysis and description as an intentional object; religion is a particular structure of consciousness relating the believer to this 'object'. When Eliade describes the sacred as 'the real' he is merely indicating how the object is constituted in the mind of the believer. The sacred is a 'fact' to be addressed by the history of religions, not in the sense that it has ontological validity (as Hans Penner erroneously assumes), but in the sense that believers do believe in something. Eliade maintains, like Rudolph Otto, that this sacred is 'the one unique and irreducible element in [religious phenomena]',[36] but this does not mean that he considers the sacred an ultimate entity. He means that in considering the phenomena as religious, the most basic structure that can be identified in

terms of defining what sets religious experience apart from nonreligious experience is this relation between believer and the sacred. As mentioned above, certain passages in Eliade do indicate a sense of the sacred that goes beyond mere phenomenological description – specifically, those passages that reflect Eliade's belief in the genuine existential value of a religious approach to life. This does not, however, change the fact that, generally speaking, Eliade's approach is phenomenologically oriented.

Eliade's emphasis on the 'pure' phenomenon

Another problematic area of Eliade's approach is his distinction between 'simple/pure' religious phenomena and 'complex' phenomena and his suggestion that the former evolve into the latter. In general, Eliade holds that religious phenomena tend to degenerate over time, both in their actual form (i.e., the form tends to become more complex and 'historicized' over time) and in terms of how they are understood by believers – symbols become interpreted 'on lower and lower planes' through time. Because of this, the structure(s) of consciousness operative in the origination of the phenomena may be only dimly reflected in the phenomena at hand to the scholar. We must then, according to Eliade, go back to the 'pure' forms of the phenomena. In order to understand religion one must study the 'simple' or 'pure' phenomena (i.e., those that are 'as close as possible to their origins') as opposed to the 'religious phenomena we see' which are 'complex' as the result of 'a long historical evolution'.[37]

This evolutionist perspective is closely related to Eliade's intent to 'get back to the mind of archaic man'. For Eliade, the meaning of a phenomenon is a function of the original experience through which that phenomenon originated. Since many of the symbols and myths Eliade examines are ancient in origin, it becomes necessary to go back to the mind of 'archaic man' to understand them. In general, this is done through extrapolation based on the given phenomenon. In other words, inferring from the design of a temple or the content of a myth how the originators of these artifacts related themselves to the sacred. Eliade also suggests that the original experience may be preserved within the religious practice of modern believers – but which believers? If a hypothetical outsider, observing the religious life of a European village, wants to understand 'the Christian religion as such' she should, according to Eliade, focus on the practices of the village priest and ignore those of the peasants because the priest 'has kept more completely, if not the original experience of Christianity, at least its basic elements and its mystical, theological and ritual values'.[38]

Again, it is questionable to what extent it is possible to 'get inside the head of the other', whether that 'other' is at hand or is somehow accessed through a text or an artifact. Religious phenomena may be clues to the phenomenological structure of religious experience, but there would still seem to be a high degree of

speculation involved in discussing the nature of the believer's experience, especially if that believer lived several thousand years ago and there is little attempt to reconstruct through sustained historical analysis the context of that experience. This speculative quality is never acknowledged by Eliade – he expounds on what 'primitives' experienced with absolute confidence.

For any cautious scholar, this kind of speculating appears reckless. For Eliade, however, it is based on what he considers to be the universality of the human condition (both in terms of human nature and our existential predicament) and his view that religious phenomena (in terms of their phenomenological structure) are inspired at this universal level. Human nature is not constituted by history alone. Structures or modes of the sacred – as modes of consciousness – arise out of a universal human nature and a universal human condition.[39] In fact, one of Eliade's goals is to 'lay bare the unity of the human condition'.[40] Since all human beings, regardless of cultural or temporal location, share a common level of experience, the ability to get inside the believer's head and phenomenologically describe her experience is taken for granted (this, if one accepts the premise, deproblematizes cross-cultural understanding in general).

Eliade's apparent identification of the experience of archaic man with religious consciousness *per se* is also problematic. Specifically, what is the basis for assuming that archaic man is more religious than the modern believer? Eliade's position here is based on what he sees as the fundamental distinction between sacred and profane consciousness. Again, sacred consciousness constitutes the real as other than the profane while profane consciousness (as represented by modern secular culture) constitutes the material, profane world itself as reality. Eliade, then, identifies the sacred mode of consciousness with the experience of archaic man, but not in an absolute sense – Eliade is clear that modes of the sacred are revealed in all religious phenomena, whether they are ancient or modern. Rather, he identifies them archetypically, as archaic man stands furthest from the mode of consciousness represented by modern, materialistic culture.

This distinction reflects the strong 'hierarchalizing' tendency of Eliade's approach. For Eliade, some religions are better than others. Specifically, religions are 'higher' if they are more universalizable, i.e., they have the capacity to existentially resonate with people at the level of their universal humanity. This implies, however, a normative presupposition, in a soteriological sense, since Eliade feels that this resonance has a positive and enriching effect on the human person. Whether this effect is ultimately spiritual or psychological is unclear, although certain statements by Eliade would seem to point in the spiritual direction. Eliade asserts, for example, that Yahweh, as opposed to Ba'al, 'manifested a more perfect holiness' and 'made possible a richer religious experience, a communion with God at once purer and more complete'.[41]

A normative, evolutionist approach may be defensible, but Eliade never defends it (much less make it explicit). Instead, the unsystematic nature of Eliade's

presentation confuses issues. On the one hand, it is clear that Eliade has evolutionist presuppositions. The hierophanies themselves devolve over time, while a religion like Judaism can evolve that is in some sense 'better' than the religions that preceded it. In this sense, Eliade's approach leads to the hierarchalizing of religions. Yet Eliade tries to distance himself from an 'evolutionist' approach to religion.[42] He also insists that in understanding the sacred there is no privileged data: the most sublime mystical experiences are on an equal footing with druidic human sacrifice.[43] Still, the experiences of mystics like Eckhart and Śankara represent for Eliade 'the greatest [religious] experiences'.[44]

These apparent contradictions are resolved by distinguishing the different modes of discourse Eliade employs. Eliade does consider some religions to be better than others and some religious experiences higher than others. These kinds of assertions go beyond a strictly phenomenological approach, but, as I have already indicated, Eliade is not consistently phenomenological and there is no reason that he should be (though he should identify the mode of discourse he is using, which he does not do). He makes these claims in a philosophical, existentialist mode. He would not seem to consider this hierarchalizing evolutionist because he does not maintain that religious consciousness evolves in a general, global sense. Particular forms may be more soteriologically effective, but this is not necessarily a result of development over time. His insistence that no religious data can be privileged with respect to understanding the modes of the sacred is, on the other hand, a phenomenological claim and reflects methodological concerns that are distinct from the philosophical/existential issues raised by the evolutionist elements of his approach.

Non-phenomenological aspects of Eliade's approach

In the discussion above I have touched upon some of the non-phenomenological elements in Eliade's methodology. Making sense of Eliade (especially in regards to clarifying some of the confusion around his understanding of the sacred and the relation between sacred and profane) requires that these elements be addressed more closely.

Phenomenology describes intentional structures of consciousness. From this perspective, understanding the causes of religious experience is outside a strictly phenomenological approach, and Eliade in fact implies that causal issues are not his concern.[45] It would seem, however, that he cannot resist the impulse to explain the phenomena (rather than simply describe them phenomenologically) in the sense that he speculates on the actual causes of religious experience, in particular, how objects in the profane world come to be experienced as sacred.

Eliade does not present his views on this subject systematically. Rather, in his free-associative, intuitive response to the phenomena he touches upon, often in passing, certain factors that reflect causal concerns. Based on these references in

the texts examined here, Eliade would seem to believe that the experience of the sacred arises through the conjunction of four basic factors: man's existential condition, the qualities of 'sacred' objects, man's openness toward his environment, and the mediation of experience through religious symbols.

For Eliade, there is a causal relation between basic elements of the human condition and religious forms of experience. Religious attitudes arise out of an awareness of our 'position … within the universe'.[46] Our predicament, defined by limitation and its concomitant suffering, leads to an 'irresistible human desire to transcend time and history'.[47] In this sense, the hierophany is not only an occasion for discerning ways a relation to the sacred has been constituted (the phenomenological structures that have been discussed), it also represents a window onto the existential factors that inspired those structures to evolve. As Eliade states, 'The greatest claim to merit of the history of religions is … its effort to decipher in a "fact", conditioned as it is by the historical moment and the cultural style of the epoch, the existential situation that made it possible.'[48]

To some extent, this 'effort' is inseparable from Eliade's phenomenological analysis as it has already been described, since one's 'existential situation' and the structures of relation between the believer and the sacred are reciprocally related – one's existential situation as experienced is generally a reflection of such structures. As a causative factor in the arising of religious experience, however, Eliade is referring to a level of our predicament as human beings that stands prior to human constructions. In relation to this level, such constructions are a response.

Again, whether or not this sacred reality exists is not a question Eliade addresses. However, it would seem he considers the religious mode of coming to terms with our condition and constructing a world to be positive. Referring specifically to the power of religious symbols, Eliade states that symbols 'abolish the limits of the "fragment" man is within society and the cosmos, and, by means of making clear his deepest identity and his social status, and making him one with the rhythms of nature – integrating him into a larger unity: society, the universe'.[49] A religious symbol is illuminative of our predicament 'and enables [man] to express it to himself coherently'.[50] In general, then, the experience of the sacred can not be reduced to historical/cultural factors. It represents an attempt to respond to and address universal problems intrinsic to the human predicament.

Obviously, most believers attribute sacredness to objects because of cultural/ religious conditioning. Mere attribution of sacredness at a conceptual level, then, is not a particularly interesting question, and it would not seem to be the question addressed by Eliade. For him, the 'causal question' refers to the actual experience of the sacred on two levels: primordially (what was the basis of the original apprehension of some object as sacred) and within a religious context.

These two areas present somewhat different sets of problems. At the primordial level, conditioning (at least, in a religious sense) is theoretically not a factor. In this

case, the experience of the sacred would seem to represent a chance openness to the qualities represented by an object, experienced as meaningful in reference to the believer's existential condition. Through a kind of 'peak experience'[51] occurring simply by chance, through 'grace', or perhaps through the ingestion of psychedelic plants, the archetypal archaic man opened himself to the experience of some object – a rock, for example. Juxtaposed to his human condition (his mortality, for example), the rock through its qualities (for example, its relative permanence) took on a deep existential meaningfulness – it became 'sacred'.

Within a religious tradition, however, the experience of the sacred obviously does have to do with conditioning. But does that conditioning construct an experience that is essentially a projection? Or does it prompt one to be more open to a given object, allowing one to perceive the 'sacredness' given within it (this would represent a qualitatively identical type of experience as that described in the primordial context above)? In Eliade there would seem to be some ambiguity around this question. On the one hand, he states that religious symbols are what make the perception of the profane as sacred possible.[52] This implies projection: the sacred is not given by the object but imposed on it as an interpretation. On the other hand, he indicates that the perception of the sacred is due to an 'openness' towards one's environment. 'To primitive man, every level of reality is so completely open to him that the emotion he felt at merely seeing anything as magnificent as the starry sky would haven been as strong as the most ''intimist'' personal experience felt by a modern.'[53] In addition, the sacred arises at least partially through the experience of the object's qualities. The perception of such qualities would not seem to be an interpretive act.

Rennie argues that Eliade's sacred arises through a reciprocal relation between the object's qualities and an interpretive act in the perception of the object.

> **While it is true that we do not simply 'project' the qualities of infinitude and transcendence onto the sky [for example], it is misleading to assume then that we are simply given these concepts by our experience of the sky. Rather our experience of the world is a reciprocal affair. Without some pre-existent conception of infinitude we could never recognize the infinitude manifested to us by the sky.**[54]

In general, Rennie sees the experience of the sacred as arising through 'powerful abstractions' and 'notional attitudes'[55] with the only necessary external basis of the experience being the existence of the object itself – the object's being.[56]

Is this Eliade's position? Eliade clearly explains the experience of the sacred in terms of an object's qualities, 'being' being one of those qualities. But does he include the interpretive element? Some passages may suggest this (as mentioned above), but Eliade's position is not clear. Rennie points out that Eliade describes the sacred as 'other' to the object. He then goes on to argue that this 'otherness' applies to the qualities themselves in the sense that they are conceptual abstractions imposed on the object.[57] This, however, would appear to construe what is

essentially phenomenological description on Eliade's part ('otherness' as a structure of the believer's experience) with an epistemological claim. In Eliade, the object's qualities point to a reality that is in some way 'other' than the profane world. The qualities given in the object lead the believer to a sense of otherness. The epistemological factors lying behind the experience (or construction) of the qualities themselves is an entirely different issue.

Rennie is correct when he points out that if all things can be potentially experienced as sacred, the experience of the sacred must depend on 'the perception of the event as such'.[58] But this does not necessarily imply that this perception is interpretive or constructive, as Rennie assumes.[59] It may be just the opposite. The experience of the object as profane may be the truly interpretive act, whereas the experience of sacredness may result from the cessation of all interpretation (as is suggested by certain Buddhist epistemologies which do not take for granted the profane point of view). From this alternative epistemological perspective, religious experience has nothing to do with being 'given concepts'. Rather, it involves the cessation of concepts. Eliade's own position on this issue, however, is ambiguous. It seems likely that he has different intuitions without bothering to resolve the contradictions they imply. If nothing else, his position is more complex than Rennie claims, given Eliade's emphasis on 'openness' in explaining the experience of the sacred.

The Buddhist-inspired epistemological framework mentioned above (i.e., that the objects of ordinary experience arise through interpretation while the experience of objects as sacred arises through the cessation of interpretation) may also help illuminate another problem in Eliade: the relation of sacred and profane. For Eliade, the sacred and the profane are radically opposed. The sacred is pure 'other', incommensurable with the impermanence, limitation, relativity, etc. of the profane world. Naturally, then, for a thing ('things' being by definition profane) to become sacred it must somehow presence 'something other than itself', i.e., the sacred.[60] The 'sacred value' of a rock, for example, 'is always due to that something or that somewhere, never to its own actual existence'.[61]

For Eliade, this would seem to represent a shift in experiential modes. According to Eliade, 'the sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a wholly different order from 'natural' realities'.[62] An object that manifests the sacred 'becomes something else' – it 'is transmuted into a supernatural reality'.[63] On the other hand, from the perspective of the outside observer (as well as from the perspective of the believer, according to Eliade), the believer is still worshipping an 'object': 'the sacred is always manifested through some thing'.[64] For Eliade this represents an essentially unresolvable paradox: the absolute somehow becoming 'limited and relative'.[65] This paradox Eliade refers to as the 'dialectic of the sacred' and he considers this dialectic to apply to every hierophany: 'this paradoxical coming-together of sacred and profane, being and non-being, absolute and relative, the eternal and the becoming, is what every hierophany … reveals'.[66] The Christian

understanding of the 'paradox of the incarnation' Eliade sees as an explicit for-
mulation of this dialectic.

The problem with Eliade's analysis is that he assumes (based on his own
experience and ontological/theological presuppositions) that an object's ap-
pearance as a profane entity does not change even when it is being experienced
as sacred.[67] For Eliade, a rock (for example) always remains, on some level, a rock.
He recognizes that it can become something more than a rock in the mind of the
believer who considers it sacred. But because he takes for granted the existence of
the rock itself he is lead inevitably to the conflict represented by the dialectic of the
sacred: the rock as a profane object vs. the rock as sacred.

This 'conflict', however, is based on the assumption that the believer maintains
(consciously or unconsciously) certain ontological presuppositions. For the dia-
lectic to hold true, the believer must experience the profane and sacred as each
having its own ontological referent whose essences conflict in the experience of
the hierophany. Eliade insists that the mere act of giving 'religious value to a
material thing' necessarily implies the paradox of the incarnation, regardless of
whether or not this paradox is consciously recognized.[68] The basis of this view
would seem to be Eliade's personal philosophical reflections on the religious
experience. Such reflection, however, has no necessary connection to the experi-
ence of the believer himself. Eliade admits, for example, that 'a devout Indian
villager worships an *arka* for no other reason than he thinks it embodies Visnu'.[69]
From a Christian theological perspective this may in fact imply the paradox of the
incarnation. But does this tell us anything about what that villager experienced?
It would seem not. For the dialectic to be applicable to the experience of a believer
it would have to be shown that the believer in question is inclined to philosophi-
cally reflect upon his experience according to certain specific ontological presup-
positions.

It is difficult for Eliade to recognize this because the existence of the object as
object is implicit in the way language tends to construct the problem and our own
perception. When Eliade refers to the act of giving 'religious value to a material
thing', built in to the phrase is the assumption that 'thingness' is still in view
within the experience of the believer relating to the sacred. But when 'religious
value' is actually being experienced is it necessarily being attributed to a 'thing'?
Perhaps it is. But there are no grounds for maintaining this position a priori,
especially as a universalizable description of religious experience. In general,
Eliade's discussion of the dialectic of the sacred is valid as a personal philosophical
exercise, but not as an description of the experience of all believers.

Again, a Buddhist epistemological model may help here, in that if offers a way
of making sense of Eliade's various and conflicting intuitions on this matter. From
this perspective, the rock, as a profane object, is an interpretation. The rock, as a
rock, does not have ontological status. (To some extent, Eliade seems to recognize
this when he indicates that within sacred experience the object remains profane

only from the profane point of view. But the ontology of 'common sense' seems to outweigh this passing intuition, as Eliade's overall presentation of the dialectic of the sacred demonstrates.) The 'rock' experienced as sacred (in which case, it is no longer a rock) is another mode of experience, generated by the cessation of interpretation. The 'otherness' of the sacred lies in the distinction between these two modes of experience; 'otherness' applies to a previous mode of experience. There is, then, no conflict in the experience of the believer, and the dialectic dissolves. The distinction between modes of experience, however, may be re-flexively interpreted by the believer ontologically leading to the dialectic as a conceptual construction. Ontologically, however, there is nothing 'other' than anything else. In the profane mode, reality is being perceived incorrectly. In the sacred mode, it is being perceived correctly.[70] From this perspective, experiencing a 'rock' as sacred is not 'other' (in the ontological sense) than that which was previously experienced as a mere rock. Experiencing the sacred represents the accessing of 'what is' in immediate experience.

This model retains the sense of the sacred's 'otherness' (though interpreted epistemologically), as well as resonating with Eliade's intuition that the experience of the sacred is to some extent the result of an openness to 'what is', in which case reality is immediately given. It can be further nuanced, in the sense that these two modes of experience reflect the extreme poles along a spectrum of possible experiences. On the profane end of the spectrum one's environment is interpreted as a world of distinct and concrete things experienced as separate from the subject. On the sacred end 'things' have dissolved into pure, felt meaning. In between these two extremes, moving from the profane pole towards the sacred, we can imagine a gradual dissipation of 'thingness' and growing sense of the existential meaningfulness in connection with the elements of one's world. Between the two poles there would be, to a greater or lesser extent, the retention of the appearance of the object, as Eliade points out. However, the existential meaningfulness of the object, i.e., its sacredness, would not be experienced as 'other than' the object.

Concluding remarks

Though Eliade approaches religious phenomena from a variety of perspectives (history, 'existential metaphysics', perhaps even theology), his method is essentially phenomenological, based on the view that religious artifacts encode the intentional structures constituting religious experience and religious ways of being in the world. Part of understanding those artifacts, then, is recovering that world through identifying the basic structures of relation between the person and the 'object' of worship. Because Eliade assumes a universal human condition, the immediate grasping of the other's experience becomes (based on that assumption) relatively unproblematic. As Robert Baird points out, Eliade's approach is valid to the extent that his presuppositions are accepted.[71]

Approaching religious phenomena as *sui generis* only makes sense because of the way Eliade construes meaning. For Eliade, understanding a religious phenomenon – discerning its 'meaning' – is synonymous with phenomenological description. Such description, however, does not explain anything (though it may help us understand what distinguishes religious states of consciousness). We may detail the structures of consciousness in a person's experience of the sacred, but this does not tell us why that person relates herself to the sacred. To explain phenomena they must be located within a larger frame of reference – they cannot just be studied 'as religious' (in Eliade's sense). For the most part Eliade's focus remains phenomenological, and to this extent his approach to the phenomena as *sui generis* is logically defensible. To the extent, however, that he tries to explain the phenomena he contradicts his own claim to study them 'as religious'.

My focus here has been on methodological/theoretical problems. Yet many of Eliade's critics focus on issues of application rather than the method itself. Some of Eliade's conclusions regarding the meaning of specific religious phenomena have been shown to be completely erroneous.[72] If a methodology can lead to such gross misunderstanding can it possibly be valid? My own sense is that it can, because the problem does not lie in the phenomenological method *per se*, but in Eliade's failure to adequately contextualize the phenomena historically and exercise a sufficient degree of caution and hermeneutical suspicion. That Eliade arrived at erroneous conclusions does not significantly problematize the theory behind his approach.

Eliade may be justifiably criticized for an overall lack of methodological coherence, but it is also the case that at least some of his inconsistencies are more apparent than real, a by-product of the confusion generated by his failure to identify the various modes of discourse he uses. Eliade's usage of the terms 'sacred' and 'history' are two cases in point. The sacred he describes as both evolving and unchanging, while with regards to 'history' he stresses the importance of historical analysis and also blames 'history' for the spiritual impoverishment of modern man. In both these examples, Eliade is using the same term in different contexts. At the historical level, 'the sacred' evolves; at the phenomenological level, the sacred is constituted in the mind of the believer as unchanging (according to Eliade). In the case of history, a historical perspective is essential on a methodological level, since the phenomena are historically conditioned. But on a phenomenological level, Eliade uses the term 'history' as synonym for the profane – it describes a mode of constituting the world in which reality is identified with the material and concrete things of ordinary experience. By identifying the different modes of discourse Eliade uses it is possible to resolve some apparent contradictions and find an underlying coherence in what may appear to have little or none.

This coherence is reflected in the phenomenological intent of his overall approach. Unfortunately, he takes his approach so much for granted that he rarely

makes it explicit, with the result that phenomenological statements often sound like theological ones (a confusion exacerbated by the fact that Eliade does not use the technical vocabulary normally associated with phenomenology). For Eliade, however, the very existence of the history of religions as a discipline (separate from theology) was justified by its non-normative stance. At the time he wrote, re-iterating the phenomenological sense of the terms he used would have seemed absurd. For readers today, however, who tend not to share his assumptions, his language is often ambiguous – or worse, its meaning becomes 'obvious' through the projection of our own taken-for-granted assumptions. Through a careful reading of his writings, however, it is possible to glimpse meaning beyond our own projections and enter into Eliade's vision. We can, in other words, get inside the head of the other, and in the process, get a sense of what Eliade's methodology is all about.

Notes

1. Brian Rennie *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion* (Albany NY: State University of New York Press, 1996).
2. Mircea Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (New York NY: Sheed & Ward, 1958).
3. Mircea Eliade 'Methodological remarks on the study of religious symbolism', in Mircea Eliade and Joseph M. Kitagawa (eds) *The History of Religions: Essays in Methodology* (Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press, 1959), 86–107.
4. *Ibid*., 88.
5. *Ibid*.
6. Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 2.
7. *Ibid*., 462.
8. *Ibid*., 2.
9. *Ibid*. See also 5.
10. *Ibid*., 25.
11. Eliade 'Methodological remarks', 89.
12. Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 461.
13. *Ibid*., 462.
14. *Ibid*., 5.
15. *Ibid*., 7–8.
16. Some scholars would disagree. For a positive assessment, see Sumner B. Twiss and Walter H. Conser (eds) *Experience of the Sacred: Readings in the Phenomenology of Religion* (Hanover RI: Brown University Press, 1992), 2, 9; and António Barbosa da Silva *The Phenomenology of Religion as a Philosophical Problem: An Analysis of the Theoretical Background of the Phenomenology of Religion, in General, and of M. Eliade's Phenomenological Approach, in Particular* (Lund: Gleerup, 1982), 15. For an opposing view see Hans Penner *Impasse and Resolution: A Critique of the Study of Religion* (New York NY: P. Lang, 1989), 42.
17. See Twiss and Conser *Experience of the Sacred*, 18–19.
18. Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, xiii.
19. *Ibid*.
20. Eliade 'Methodological remarks', 95.
21. *Ibid*., 98.
22. *Ibid*.
23. Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 419.
24. *Ibid*.
25. *Ibid*. 459. See also Rennie *Reconstructing Eliade*, 20, 196.

26. Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 10.

27. *Ibid.*

28. *Ibid.*, 7.

29. *Ibid.*, 461–462.

30. *Ibid.*, xiii.

31. Eliade, quoted in Rennie *Reconstructing Eliade*, 20. See also Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 445.

32. Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 433–434. See also 453.

33. *Ibid.*, 419.

34. Rennie *Reconstructing Eliade*, 18.

35. *Ibid.*, 217.

36. Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, xii.

37. *Ibid.*, 1.

38. *Ibid.*, 6.

39. See Rennie *Reconstructing Eliade*, 126–127.

40. Eliade, quoted in Rennie *Reconstructing Eliade*, 114.

41. Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 4.

42. *Ibid.*, xiv.

43. *Ibid.* 2. See also Rennie *Reconstructing Eliade*, 15.

44. Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 3.

45. *Ibid.*, 13.

46. *Ibid.*, 463.

47. Eliade 'Methodological remarks', 88.

48. *Ibid.*, 89.

49. Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 451.

50. *Ibid.*, 453. See also 433–434, 455.

51. Abraham Maslow *Religions, Values, and Peak-Experiences* (Columbus OH: Ohio State University Press, 1964), 19ff.

52. Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 452.

53. *Ibid.*, 456.

54. Rennie *Reconstructing Eliade*, 14.

55. *Ibid.*, 18.

56. *Ibid.*, 196, 203.

57. *Ibid.*, 18.

58. *Ibid.*, 15.

59. *Ibid.*, 13–15.

60. Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 13.

61. Eliade, quoted in Rennie *Reconstructing Eliade*, 18.

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*, 19. See also Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 13.

64. Eliade *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 26.

65. *Ibid.*, 30.

66. *Ibid.*, 29.

67. *Ibid.*, 30.

68. *Ibid.*, 28.

69. *Ibid.*

70. This parallels Ian Harris's interpretation of *paramarthasatya* and *samvrtisatya* in *Madhyamaka* Buddhism. See *The Continuity of Madhyamaka and Yogacara in Indian Mahayana Buddhism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1991).

71. Robert D. Baird *Category Formation and the History of Religions* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), 90–91.

72. See, for example, Jonathan Smith's critiques of Eliade in *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).