Accounts of Holiness.
A Socio-Religious *Tour d'horizon*

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to sketch a working definition of holiness, by offering a brief, comparative, and critical *tour d'horizon* of the notion, on the basis of five influential socio-religious accounts, namely those put forth by Emile Durkheim (*taboo*), Jonathan Söderblom (*mana* and *tabu*), Rudolf Otto (the *numinous*), Emmanuel Levinas (*ethical meaning*), and Mircea Eliade (*sacred* vs. *profane*). The paper ends with a theological wrap-up *in lieu* of conclusion.

Keywords: holiness, the sacred, sociology of religion, phenomenology, theology

Introduction

Defining *holiness* can be quite an elusive and intricate endeavour. In a famous Platonic dialogue, Socrates asks Euthyphro, an Athenian prophet who is ready to prosecute his own father for a misdeed, "Tell me then, what do you say holiness and what unholiness?" (Plato, 2005: 19). The zealous young prophet is convinced that holiness is doing what he is doing, prosecuting a wrongdoer, whether he/she be one's parent. Since Euthyphro's arguments are not persuasive, Socrates says: "At present try to *tell more clearly* what I asked you just now. For, my friend, you did not give me sufficient information before, when I asked *what holiness was…*" (Plato, 2005: 21, emphasis ours), insisting that Euthyphro "tell the essential aspect, by which all holy acts are holy" (Plato, 2005: 23). "Well then, what is dear to the gods is holy, and what is not dear to them is unholy" (Plato, 2005: 23), replies Euthyphro, giving birth to what has become known as the "Euthyphro dilemma": is something holy because God approves of it or does God approve of it because it is holy? Although during the dialogue it becomes clear that *holiness* is rather piety or morality[1], the exchange of ideas is useful to illustrate the

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[1] To speak of holiness, Plato uses the word ὅσιος (*hosios*). In the secular usage of the classical Greek language, this term can refer to 1) actions that are seen as "sacred", "legal" and "corresponding to the debt" (having as content what is right and good from the point of view of morality and religion), b) the quality of those who feel inner reverence before the gods or eternal laws and behave as such – "piety" or c) to things

difficulty – and age-long concern – to define holiness. Unfortunately, in their dialogue Socrates and Euthyphro reach a similar point with many researchers: "Euthyphro, it seems that when you were asked what holiness is, you were unwilling to plain its essence . . . So, if you please, do not hide it from me, but begin over again and tell me what holiness is…" (Plato, 2005: 41). But what or where is the "beginning"?

Indeed, one might ask if holiness is definable at all. Assuming that it is and that there is a "beginning", a point of departure from where one can begin – otherwise why bother with this paper? – how is holiness to be approached? What "lens" should one use in attempting to offer a working definition? Several approaches are possible, some of them concuring and competing: theology/religion, sociology, philosophy, phenomenology, ethics etc. This paper will focus on the socio-religious approach, which is quite rich in the diversity of the material it considers. Thus, our goal is to sketch a working definition of holiness, by means of a brief, comparative, and critical survey of five influential socio-religious accounts, namely those put forth by Émile Durkheim (holiness as *taboo*), Jonathan Söderblom (holiness as *mana* and *tabu*), Rudolf Otto (holiness as *numinousness*), Emmanuel Levinas (the *ethical dimension* of holiness), and Mircea Eliade (*sacred* vs. *profane*).

Émile Durkheim - holiness as a *taboo*

Émile Durkheim was a French philosopher and sociologist of Jewish origin and is considered the founder of the French school of sociology. Just like Schleiermacher (Schleiermacher, 1955: 19-82)[2], Durkheim supported the idea that holiness/the holy is central to the study of religion (Durkheim, 1995: 34)[3]. Moreover, he argued that there are varying levels of holiness (Durkheim, 1955: 5). For example, an amulet is sacred, but it does not inspire fear and is not a taboo, while other things can be both sacred and taboo. Such a vision of the sacred could motivate us to conceive a hierarchical scheme, which would include the phases of transition between the profane and the sacred.

For Durkheim, however, the relationship between the sacred and theprofane can not simply be arranged in a hierarchical order: "However,

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"sanctified", "pure", "absolved" (Kittel, 1964: 489-490). Interestingly, the *TDNT* states that the term ὅσιος is probably related to the root of the words ἔθος and ἦθος (Kittel, 1964: 489).

[2] The work originally appeared under the title *Über die Religion: Reden an die Gebildeten unter ihren Verächtern*, in three editions: the first in 1799, the second in 1806, and the third in 1831.

[3] Durkheim first published the book in 1912 in Paris, entitled *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie*.

if the criterion of a purely hierarchical distinction is at once too general and too imprecise, nothing but their heterogeneity is left to define the relation..." (Durkheim, 1995: 36). Speaking of heterogeneity, which he considers absolute (Durkheim, 1995: 36), Durkheim argues that "heterogeneity is such that it degenerates into real antagonism. The two worlds are conceived of not only as separate but also as hostile and jealous rivals" (Durkheim, 1995: 37).

Durkheim's entire view of primitive religious life is based on the idea that

> … whether simple or complex, all known religious beliefs display a common feature: They presuppose a classification of the real or ideal things that men conceive of into two classes - two opposite genera - that are widely designated by two distinct terms, which the words profane and sacred translate fairly well. The division of the world into two domains, one containing all that is sacred and the other all that is profane - such is the distinctive trait of religious thought. Beliefs, myths, dogmas, and legends are either representations or systems of representations that express the nature of sacred things, the virtues and powers attributed to them, their history, and their relationships with one another as well as with profane things (Durkheim, 1995: 34).

Due to this bipartite division, the *things that are set apart,* belonging to the sacred, require special attention, which makes the rituals rules of behavior that prescribe the way in which man must behave in the presence of the sacred. By defining the holy as that which is set apart (Durkheim, 1995: 44), the author deftly evades having to give it any substantive content, enabling a move beyond trite definitions.

Most interesting for this paper's purpose is to note that Durkheim's way of defining religion connects holiness/the holy to the idea of moral community:

> A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden - beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all thosewho adhere to them. The second element thus holds a place in my definition that is no less essential than the first: In showing that the idea of religion is inseparable from the idea of a Church, it conveys the notion that religion must be an eminently collective thing (Durkheim, 1995: 44).

It is clear, then, that in Durkheim's view *holiness/the holy* has unification as its main function and, as such, whether we speak of Australian Aboriginal culture or the worship of Israel before Jehovah, it is based on the same mechanism: the self-worship of society.

Jonathan Söderblom – holiness as *mana and tabu*[4]

Jonathan Söderblom, the Swedish Lutheran Archbishop of Uppsala, who coined the term "ecumenism" and was the first clergyman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize in 1930, published an ample and very informative article on "Holiness", in the famous *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics,* edited by James Hastings (Söderblom, 1914: 731-741). In the very beginning of his article, he makes a quite surprising statement, reminiscent of Émile Durkheim, who considered that the idea of deity is not necessary for religion and for the notion of holiness:

> Holiness is the great word in religion; it is even more essential than the notion of God. Real religion may exist without definite conception of divinity, but there is no real religion without the distinction between holy and profane… (Söderblom, 1914: 731).

Söderblom goes on to say that "the original idea of holiness seems to have been somewhat indeterminate", and that "the 'holy' is apart from ordinary life". Interestingly, he maintains that spiritual religion "strives to bring the whole of life under the sway of holiness" and points out that "the prophetic religion in Israel considered the whole people of Israel as holy by bringing the idea of 'the chosen people' into the connexion with the idea of holiness" (Söderblom, 1914: 731). Thus, "holiness is viewed as a mysterious power or entity connected with certain beings, things, events, or actions" (Söderblom, 1914: 731). This "mysterious power or entity", believes Söderblom, can be identified with the same thing which the Melanesians call anything that exceeds ordinary human capacity or course of nature: *mana* (Söderblom, 1914: 731).

Because it is so conceived, holiness becomes "the most valuable source of health, strength, food, success, influence", but it can simultaneously involve "a constant danger" (Söderblom, 1914: 732). According to Söderblom the rites birthed of this notion of holiness can

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[4] *Mana* is a word belonging originally to Oceanic languages but borrowed by European languages in which it acquired the meaning 'supernatural power'. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, "Mana, among Melanesian and Polynesian peoples, a supernatural force or power that may be ascribed to persons, spirits, or inanimate objects ... The term was first used in the 19th century in the West during debates concerning the origin of religion. It was first used to describe what apparently was interpreted to be an impersonal, amoral, supernatural power that manifested itself in extraordinary phenomena and abilities. Anything distinguished from the ordinary (e.g., an uncommonly shaped stone) is so because of the mana it possesses" (Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia, "Mana" in Encyclopedia Britannica, https://www.britannica.com/topic/mana-Polynesian-and-Melanesian-religion, accessed 26 March 2021). For a more detailed and extremely interesting study of *mana*, see Nicolas Meylan, *Mana: A History of a Western Category*, Leiden, Brill, 2017.

be categorised as having "either a positive or a negative character" (Söderblom, 1914: 732). "The positive rites" – which include "augmenting rites" (732), "revealing rites" (733), "initiatory rites" (733), and "the interdicts and observances imposed on holy persons" (733) – have their object the acquiring, concentrating, and utilising of holiness" (Söderblom, 1914: 733, emphasis ours). Furthermore – and somehow echoing Durkheim's understanding of holiness as *taboo* – Söderblom maintains that "the negative or prohibitory rites are designated in current language by the word *tabu*[12]" (Söderblom, 1914: 733, emphasis ours).

Hence, Söderblom defines holiness as *mana and tabu,* that is a mysterious power that people believe exists and is therefore not closely linked to a deity. From this point of view, Söderblom sees holiness differently from Robertson Smith, for whom holiness is closely linked to the deity and its presence, and Rudolf Otto (as we shall later see), for whom holiness and divinity are essentially synonymous.

Söderblom then develops some ideas which can be summarized as follows: 1) In the early stages of development, holiness and impurity are so closely linked that they can be confused to some extent, since both are taboos. At the opposite pole is what is *permitted*, that is the pure and the profane; 2) At a more advanced stage, due to the influence of language, morality or other cultural factors, the pure becomes that which is holy, while the profane becomes that which is unclean (Söderblom, 1914: 736); 3) In those religions (especially the Semitic ones) in which the idea of the idea of God is pronounced, the idea of holiness remains distinct and superior to the idea of purity; 4) In those religions in which the gods have an insignificant role or in which the god did not have an important role from the beginning, the concept of purity becomes prominent and assimilates it to that of holiness (Söderblom, 1914: 737). This last stage of the development of the concept takes place when holiness becomes a personal quality of both humankind and God, insofar as God makes humans saints and forces them, as such, to struggle to attain perfection. From the ethical perspective of religion, holy means "good" or "perfect"; however, "holy" never becomes just an ethical term, as it denotes a divine, supernatural power.

In a similar vein to Durkheim, Söderblom concludes his encyclopaedic article by underlining that "the time-honoured sociological theory recognizes the momentous importance of society to religion", but seems to arrive at a contradictory point to Durkheim's idea that religion is the self-worship of society. Söderblom concludes that "as

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[12] Söderblom explains that the word *tabu* comes from the Tonga dialect in the Friendship Islands, and is composed of *ta*, which means 'marked', and *pu*, which is an adverb with an intensive force, hence *tabu* means 'marked thoroughly'. In the author's opinion, *tabu* is closely connected with the idea of *mana*, their point of connection being the common idea of extraordinariness (see Söderblom, 1914: 733).

far as lower culture is concerned, the derivation of the holy institutions and beings from a mysterious apprehension of society seems to be artificial" (Söderblom, 1914: 741), and adds that "in the higher culture, holiness and mysticism most consciously put their ideals beyond society" Söderblom, 1914: 741).

Apparently, Söderblom's approach can be described as a scientific description of the evolution of religion, from the perspective of the component that he considers the most important, namely *holiness*. One can, however, spot, beyond the surface, a Christian apologetical interest. Thus, speaking of Durkheim's work, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, Söderblom rejects the idea that the "sacred" is only a way of objectifying and idealizing the community, as a mysterious power superior to the individual (Söderblom, 1914: 732). Later, when talking about the role that holiness played in the evolution of society towards civilization, Söderblom wonders if the time will ever come for humanity to dispense with holiness and let itself be guided only by rational principles. Following J. G. Frazer, Söderblom emphasises "what the system of holiness meant for the establishment and stability of gouvernement, for the security of private property against theft and destruction, for the sanctity of marriage, and, above all, for the respect for and protection of human life" (Söderblom, 1914: 735). He then firmly states that "civilisation and progress are inconceivable without the profoundly unreasoning sanction afforded by holiness" (Söderblom, 1914: 735).

Rudolf Otto – the holy as *numinous*

It is impossible not to think of Rudolf Otto when it comes to the notions of *holiness* and *the Sacred*. Endowed with great psychological finesse and benefiting from a double training, in both theology and the history of religions, Rudolf Otto was one of the greatest religious thinkers of the twentieth century. Although he wrote several monumental works[13], the book that consecrated him – and which enjoyed a resounding worldwide success – was *Das Heilige – Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen*, originally

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[13] Some of Rudolf Otto's most important works are *Die Anschauung vom heiligen Geist bei Luther (The Vision of the Holy Spirit in Luther)*, 1904; *Kantisch-Fries'sche Religionsphilosophie (Philosophy of Religion in Kant and Fries)*, 1909; *Dipika des Nivasa (Dipika of Nivasa)*, 1916; *Aufsatze, das Numinose betreffend* (Studies on the Numinos), 1923; *West-ostliche Mystik (Western and Eastern Mysticism)*, 1926; *Die Gnadenreligion Indiens und das Christentum (Religion of Grace in India and Christianity)*, 1930; *Reich Gottes und Menschensohn (The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man)*, 1934.

published in 1917 and translated into English in 1958 as *The Idea of the Holy*[14].

Otto's elaborate and complex analysis make the 200 pages of *The Idea of the Holy* quite difficult to summarise. The author begins by arguing that the common association of reason and morality with holiness has obscured the original substratum of the sacred and insists that the center of religious experience must not be mistakenly constructed as a vessel, neither to morality nor teleology (Otto, 1958: 5-8). Aspiring to safeguard holiness from the scientific impulse to naturalize all human experiences, including religion, Otto emphasizes the irrational, unassimilable nature of holiness (Otto, 1958: 8).

Although Rudolf Otto repeatedly reminds his readers that his view of holiness does not seek to diminish the significance of the rational dimension, according to him, the original, precognitive experience of holiness presupposes an *a priori* category; it stands both logically and chronologically before ethics. Once the secondary moral layer is removed from the original essence of holiness, as it appears in the Hebrew Scriptures, what remains, Otto would like us to believe, is an irreducible surplus that opposes cognitive assimilation.

Thus, according to Otto, the Holy/holiness consists of two elements: the *rational* and the *irrational*. The rational element is related to human understanding, can be understood through concepts and is especially associated with the ethical sphere (Otto, 1958: 1-5). This register can be found especially in Old Testament prophets, such as Amos (Amos 5: 23-24).

In his *Religion and Rational Theology,* Immanuel Kant has a chapter on "Lectures on the Philosophical Doctrine of Religion", in which he identifies the sacred with morality, defining *holiness* as

> … the absolute or unlimited moral perfection of the will. A holy being must not be affected with the least inclination contrary to morality. It must be impossible for it to will something which is contrary to moral law (Kant, 2001: 409)

According to Otto, however, this sacred rational dimension must be separated from the irrational one. The irrational can be perceived by the senses and intuitions, not through concepts. From a history of the phenomenology of religions perspective, these appear first in the religious life and are devoid of ethical content. Only later do they become filled with content ethical, a process which Otto called "schematization"[15].

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[14] In Romanian, the title of the book is *Sacrul*. See Rudolf Otto, *Sacrul*, Ioan Milea (trans.), București, Humanitas, 2005.

[15] Otto explains the relationship between holiness and morality with the help of the theory of *schematization*. As in the case of the psychological law of the association of

To speak of the irrational element of the sacred, Otto uses the term *numinous*. As he delves deeper into phenomenological analysis, Otto arrives at what he calls the *mysterium tremendum* and the *mysterium fascinans* of sacred experience (Otto, 1958: 12-23, 31-42). In other words, Otto is arguing that an authentic encounter with *the holy* simultaneously generates contradictory feelings of fear (*tremendum*) and fascination (*fascinans*). Purity and morality are no longer to be found in this antipodal experience. Otto warns his readers, however, that they must not be misled by the act of evaluation, which is expressed in the experience of the sacred. In the face of the majesty and greatness (*majestas*) of the sacred, the believer feels a strong sense of dependence. The prophet Isaiah's statement, "I am a man of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6: 5), is emblematic, according to Otto, of the self-deprecation that accompanies the experience of the sacred (Otto, 1958: 37). However, we would be wrong, Otto argues, to interpret such (de)valuations as occurrences of a moral judgment (Otto, 1958: 51). The feeling of self-depreciation associated with holy feelings can acquire a moral meaning only later.

Although he mentions Söderblom twice throughout his book, Otto's approach rejects the kind of evolutionary reason that characterizes Söderblom's work. First of all, Otto believes that attempts to rationally explain the Sacred cannot do justice to the most imporant aspect of holiness, namely its *irrationality*. It is precisely for this reason that Otto used the term *numinos* to describe the irrational part of the sacred, a part that remains after the rational accumulations acquired by it have been removed. Second, Otto does not accept that rational, evolutionary approaches can explain how different phenomena interrelate - from *mana*, *taboos*, spirits, and demons to monotheistic holiness. He is especially critical of phrases such as "gradual evolution", used in evolutionary approaches, but without demonstrating how ideas have evolved.

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ideas, in the sphere of the senses a sense gives birth to other corresponding senses. Then the occasional connections turn into permanent associations. The non-rational noun, schematized by rational and moral concepts, offers us the complex category of the sacred itself, strongly charged and perfect in the full sense of the word. In a older but timely PhD thesis presented to the University of Kent, Leon P. Schlamm has convincingly argued that "Otto's concepts of schematization of the numinous, the numinous and the rational a priori, and divination cannot be understood by phenomenologists and philosophers of religion except in the light of this claim, and that Otto intends that his concept of schematization (profoundly influenced by Fries's transcendental idealism) be identified with his law of association of analogous feelings which explains how the excitation of numinous experience is produced" (Schlamm, 1988: 2). For an in-depth perspective, see Leon Schlamm, *Rudolph Otto's theory of religious experience in The Idea of the Holy: A study in the phenomenology and philosophy of religion,* unpublished Ph.D thesis, Canterbury, University of Kent, 1988, https://ethos.bl.uk/OrderDetails.do?uin=uk.bl.ethos.235005, accessed on 26 March 2021.

If Söderblom's *tour de force* was implicitly theistic and Christian, Rudolf Otto's perspective on the same subject is undoubtedly an explicit Christian one, as this gradually emerges from the *The Idea of the Holy*. The last words of the book bear witness to this fact:

> We can look, beyond the prophet, to one in whom is found the Spirit in all its plenitude, and who at the same time in his person and in his performance is become most completely the object of divination, in whom Holiness is recognized apparent. Such a one is more than Prophet. He is the Son (Otto, 1958: 182).

Therefore, according to Otto, *holiness*, in its original state, has little or nothing to do with morality. It generates a whole spectrum of feelings, especially a "holy fea" and contains various elements such as an unapproachable or frightening "otherness", a state of absolute overwhelming and an energy that corresponds to the mystical idea that God is a "consuming fire" or a "consuming love".

In our opinion, there are at four issues to be critically addressed regarding Rudolf Otto's idea of holiness. First, if the distinctive feature of the Sacred is the mixture of fear and fascination, this formula can be applied to earthly things or places that have nothing in common with the idea of holiness. Mount Everest, for example. The frightening approach of Everest is exactly what fascinates and draws people to it.

The second problem is related to the fact that while Rudolf Otto categorically rejects the connection between the *numinous* and the ethical, he states that:

> The venerable religion of Moses marks the beginning of a process which from that point onward proceeds with ever increasing momentum, by which the numinous is throughout rational ized and moralized, i.e., charged with ethical import, until it becomes 'the holy' in the fullest sense of the word. The culmination of the process is found in the Prophets and in the Gospels. And it is in this that the special nobility of the religion revealed to us by the Bible is to be found, which, when the stage represented by the deutero-Isaiah is reached, justifies its claim to be a universal world-religion (Otto, 1958: 77).

If there is not – or cannot be – an inherent relationship between the *numinous* and the ethical, the "process" of which Otto speaks would not have been possible; otherwise, why would two concepts, from totally opposite spheres – according to Otto, the *sacred* and the ethical – follow the path of mutual union?

The third problem concerns the understanding of the relationship between the moral commandment within the context of the Holy and its non-rational elements. It can be best summed up by the. Following question: how could one *derive* the commandment to love one's neighbour from the character of the *numen* perceived as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*?

Finally but not surprisingly, Otto's view the separation between the rational and the irrational makes one wonder whether holiness, anthropologically speaking, can be achieved in two ways – on the one hand through feeling, emotions, and on the other, through reason or teachings?

Emmanuel Levinas – the *ethical dimension* of holiness

Even if we take into account Otto's statement that the moral dimension completes the experience of the sacred, the firmness with which he argues that the original – historical and conceptual – holiness was not related to ethics *is* a challenge to Levinas' thinking.

A French philosopher, born in a cultured Jewish environment, with philosophy studies in Strasbourg and Freiburg, Emmanuel Levinas is one of the chief promoters of phenomenology in France. His career has been divided between phenomenological and Jewish studies. The famous philosopher Jacques Derrida informs the reader that Levinas once said to him in a conversation: "You know, one often speaks of ethics to describe what I do, but what really interests me in the end is not ethics, not ethics alone, but the holy, the *holiness of the holy*" (Derrida, 1997: 4, emphasis ours)[16].

In order to better understand what Levinas means when he speaks of holiness, one must first distinguish between this and another category with which, Levinas argues, holiness is often confused. In fact, he frequently rebukes sociologists and philosophers of religion who fail to distinguish the idea of holiness (*la sainté*) from the category of the sacred (*le sacré*) (Levinas, 1994: 30-50)[17].

Levinas is so bold in upholding the distinction between sacredness and holiness, largely due to a significant current in philosophical and literary thought, which, according to Levinas' assessment, is guilty of hiding the dangers of a certain type of religious feelings. In this sense, it is important to remember the way in which the sacred was understood and explained by European researchers of the twentieth century and, especially, by those of the French school, whose leading exponents are Emile Durkheim, Georges Bataille, Roger Caillois, and Mircea Eliade. Levinas's controversy over holiness must be placed in connection with what the authors mentioned had to say on the subject.

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[16] For an excellent study on Levinas' perspective on ethics and holiness, see John Caruana, "Not Ethics, Not Ethics Alone, but the Holy: Levinas on Ethics and Holiness", in: *The Journal of Religious Ethics*, Vol. 34 (4), 2006, pp. 561-583.

[17] In Levinas's thought, *le sacré* critically refers to a primitive religious experience, which suppresses the capacity for rational discernment and facilitates the loss of self-consciousness, and *la sainté* is exactly the opposite. About the Sacred, Levinas speaks as the "temptation of temptation" that affects each self; the seduction of the sacred consists in its promise to provide direct access to the supernatural.

Levina' main objection is that most scholars have deepened the conceptual gap between sacredness and holiness. In regard to Durkheim, for example, Levinas sanctioned two of his important tendencies. First of all, while Durkheim considers the main function of holiness to be unification, Levinas sees holiness as an unstable and disturbing phenomenon. Second, Levinas vehemently rejects Durkheim's tendency to blur the differences between so-called "primitive" religions and classical monotheistic religions that originated in Judaism. Levinas reserves the notion of "sacre" only for a certain type of religious expression, one that Judaism denies.

One can also identify at least three irreconcilable differences between Levinas and Otto: 1) Otto's statement that holiness does not involve any moral connotation original; 2) Otto's characterization of the sacred as presupposing a direct encounter with the divine, and 3) while Otto claims that holiness consists in an irrational surplus of meaning beyond the ethical dimension of holiness, Levinas argues that that surplus is precisely the ethical nature of the sacred. First, Levinas – and with him, several Jewish thinkers – rejects Otto's assertion that the Jewish idea of holiness has no origin – at least in the Torah (Otto, 1958: 110) – no connection with ethics. In Levinas' view, Otto underestimates, if not completely ignores, the inseparable relationship that the Jewish Scriptures as a whole – not just the late prophetic texts, as Otto says – establish between God's holiness and ethics. As Levinas remarks, to say of God that he is the God of the poor or the God of justice presupposes a statement not of His attributes, but rather of His essence (Levinas, 1960: 116).

Levinas' view on holiness, as well as on other matters, places him in a certain current of Jewish thought, known as *ethical monotheism*[18]. This important current has its recent roots in the German-Jewish philosophy of the early twentieth century of Hermann Cohen[19]. It has, of course, much deeper roots in Hebrew Scripture and Talmudic sources. Levinas considers that the divine commandment concerning holiness (Leviticus 11: 44) has a two-fold purpose. First, the process of sanctification – often described in the Bible in terms of ritual demarcations between pure and

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[18] According to Dennis Prager, "Issues in Jewish Ethics: Ethical Monotheism", in: *Jewish Virtual Library*, https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/ethical-monotheism (accessed 27 March 2021), "*Ethical monotheism* means two things: 1) There is one God from whom emanates one morality for all humanity and 2) God's primary demand of people is that they act decently toward one another". One of the most helpful, in-depth works on this topic is Ehud Benor's, *Ethical Monotheism: A Philosophy of Judaism*, London, Routledge, 2018.

[19] Hermann Cohen is "more than any other single figure, responsible for founding the orthodox neo-Kantianism that dominated academic philosophy in Germany from the 1870s until the end of the First World War" (Scott Edgar, "Hermann Cohen", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, (Winter 2020 Online Edition), Edward Zalta (ed.), https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2020/entries/cohen/, accessed on 26 March 2021.

impure objects and deeds – promotes an appreciation of the chasm between the mortal self and God. In this way, holiness intensifies the feeling of self-awareness. Levinas considers that sanctification aims at imposing a strong sense of limits, thus facilitating the process of individuation, i.e., the unification of the unconscious and consciousness. Before the Holy One, man becomes more and more self-conscious, as a separate and distinct being (Levinas, 1976: 198-199). Second, Levinas believes that if holiness intensifies awareness of the distance between the self and the divine, it does so not only to encourage respect for the Ultimate Other, but especially because that distance throws us back into the realm of interpersonal relationships. According to Levinas, if God forbids His direct representations, He does so to thwart the universal fantasy that the absolute can be known, and to reorient our selves to its true vocation. In *Difficult Freedom: Essays on* Judaism, Levinas boldly declares that

> The God of monotheists Whose Revelation coincides with the very awakening of conscience, of the accounts kept against nature - an action that henceforth doubles our energy expenditure - does not give Himself over to human fantasies (Levinas, 1976: 102).

With the same confidence, he states in his book, *Nine Talmudic Readings*, that

> God – whatever his ultimate and, in some sense, naked meaning – appears to human consciousness (and especially in Jewish experience) "clothed" in values; and his clothing is not foreign to his nature or to his supra-nature (Levinas, 1994: 14-15).

In other words, Levinas believes that ethics is the basis of the divine command to be holy. As he says, "to know God is to know what must be done" (Levinas, 1976: 17). It is not to know some being or even to erect a regulative idea. The dignity and force of illeity thus share an important connection with what we might call our enacting God through responsibility to the other or through justice. Another word for this is "holiness".

Mircea Eliade – *the sacred vs. the profane*
One of the most famous personalities of Romanian culture, Mircea Eliade hardly needs an introduction. A philosopher and historian of religions, fiction writer and professor at the University of Chicago, USA, Eliade is the author of 30 scientific volumes, literary works and philosophical essays translated into 18 languages and about 1200 articles and reviews.
As Bryan Rennie once remarked,

> One of the most fundamental and, as we shall see, one of the most problematic of Eliade's categories for understanding and explicating the phenomena and the history of religion is that of the sacred. It is in terms of and. in relation to the sacred that almost all of his other categories are described. And it is in relation to the sacred that secondary scholars can most often be seen to be criticizing their own interpretations rather than the writings of Mircea Eliade (Rennie, 1996:17).

Sacrul și profanul [The Sacred and the Profane][20] is certainly the work in which Mircea Eliade develops most of his conception of the sacred and of the way it is perceived by people.

For Eliade, all descriptions or definitions given to the religious phenomenon reveal a fact of paramount importance: the experience of the sacred, religious life in general, is inconceivable without the opposition and unity between the sacred and the profane. Probably feeling the need to clarify how the sacred is spoken of, Eliade writes:

> Sacrul se manifestă întotdeauna ca o realitate de un ordin complet diferit de realitățile «naturale». Limbajul nu poate reda decât în chip naiv noțiunile de tremendum, majestas, mysterium fascinans, recurgând la termeni preluați din domeniul natural sau din viața spirituală profană a omului. Însă această terminologie analogică vine tocmai din incapacitatea omului de a exprima acel ganz andere: limbajul nu poate decât să sugereze ceea ce depășește experiența naturală a omului, cu ajutorul unor termeni preluați din aceasta experiență (Eliade, 2000: 12)[21].

Undoubtedly, Eliade adopts as a starting point Rudolf Otto's concept of the sacred, but unlike Otto, Eliade is not interested in the relationship between irrational and rational elements, but in the *sacred* as a whole. However, Eliade's statements about the language of the sacred leaves one in some confusion about the *Ganz andere*. What is this? Is it an autonomous entity, an intrinsic property of the sacred object or a property inherent in the perception of sacredness?

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[20] Mircea Eliade, *Sacrul și profanul* [The Sacred and the Profane], Brândușa Prelipceanu (trans.), 3rd edition, Bucharest, Humanitas, 2000. The work initially appeared in *Rowohlts Deutsche Enzyklopädie*, under the coordination of Ernesto Grassi, with the title "Das Heilige und das Profane", Rowohlt Taschenbuch Verlag, Reinbeck, 1957, and was published in French, *Le Sacré et le Profane*, in 1965 (the edition which the Romanian translation follows). Although for an exhaustive treatment of the category of the sacred in Eliade all his writings should be analyzed, this paper will focus on *Sacrul și profanul.*

[21] "The sacred always manifests itself as a reality of a completely different order from the 'natural' realities. Language can only naively reproduce the notions of tremendum, majestas, mysterium fascinans, using terms taken from the natural realm or from the profane human spiritual life. But this analogical terminology comes precisely from man's inability to express that *ganz andere*: language can only suggest what goes beyond man's natural experience, with the help of terms taken from this experience" (*our own translation*).

Because the first definition that could be given to the sacred is the *opposite of the profane*[22], Eliade claims that "omul îşi dă seama de existenţa sacrului pentru că acesta se manifestă, se înfăţişează ca un lucru cu totul diferit de profan" (Eliade, 2000: 12-13)[23]. For this reason, Eliade chooses to use the term *hierophany*[24] for the manifestation of the sacred (Eliade, 2000: 13).

What should one understand then, that a tree considered sacred ceases to be a tree? Eliade believes that although the sacred is always revealed through the profane, it does not suppress the profane in and through which it manifests itself:

> Manifestând sacrul, un obiect oarecare devine altceva, fără a înceta însă să fie el însuşi, deoarece continuă să facă parte din mediul său cosmic. O piatră sacră este tot o piatră; în aparenţă (sau mai bine zis din punct de vedere profan), nimic nu o deosebeşte de celelalte pietre. Pentru cei cărora o piatră li s-a arătat sacră, realitatea sa imediată se preschimbă însă în realitate supranaturală. Cu alte cuvinte, pentru cei care au o experienţă religioasă, întreaga Natură se poate înfăţişa ca sacralitate cosmică. Cosmosul, în totalitatea sa, poate deveni o hierofanie (Eliade, 2000: 14)[25].

What quality then has that what is perceived as sacred? Eliade argues that the sacred means *power* and, ultimately, *reality.* Eliade is quite clear and about this: the sacred is pre-eminently the real, at once power,

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[22] In the first fourteen pages of *Sacrul şi profanul*, Eliade progressively offers three definitions of the notion of the sacred: "the opposite of the profane", "power" and, finally, "reality" (see Eliade, 2000:1-14).

[23] "Man realizes the existence of the sacred because it manifests itself, it appears as something completely different from the profane" (*our own translation*).

[24] A *hierophany* is a manifestation of the sacred. The word is a compound of the Greek adjective *hieros* (Greek: ἱερός, 'sacred', 'holy'), and the verb *phainein* (φαίνειν, 'to reveal'', 'to bring to light'). For a better development of the concept, see Mircea Eliade, *Mituri, vise şi mistere* (*Myths, Dreams, and Mysteries*), Maria Ivănescu and Cezar Ivănescu (trans.), Bucureşti, Univers Enciclopedic, 1998, p. 133-135. Also, an excellent article on the role of hierophanies was written by Robert Hodgson Jr., "The Social Setting of Holiness in Intertestamental Judaism and Early Christianity," in: *Reaching Beyond: Studies in the History of Perfectionism*, Stanley Burgess (ed.), Peabody, Wipf and Stock, 1986, p. 65–91. See also Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, J.E. Turner. (trans.), with appendices incorporating the additions to the second German edition by Hans H. Penner, with a new foreword hy Ninian Smart, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2014, p. 23-36.

[25] "Manifesting the sacred, an object becomes something else, without ceasing to be itself, because it continues to be part of its cosmic environment. A sacred stone is also a stone; In appearance (or rather profanely), nothing distinguishes it from the other stones. For those to whom a stone has been shown to be sacred, its immediate reality is transformed into a supernatural reality. In other words, for those who have a religious experience, the whole of Nature can be presented as a cosmic sacredness. The cosmos, in its entirety, can become a hierophany" (*our own translation*).

efficacy, the source of life and fecundity. This is not to say that the sacred is necessarily something independent of this experience, rather

> … it is this experience of the sacred, that generates the idea of something which really exists and, in consequence the notion that there are absolute intangible values which confer a meaning upon human existence" (Rennie, 1996: 20).

One must, however, be careful and avoid assigning foreign meanings to the Eliadian notion of *reality*, that is, not to read Eliade believing that he is referring to what *we* mean by *reality*. Although many researchers have disregarded the definition quoted above or believed (wrongly) that it refers to a deity or a necessarily independent ontology, Rennie points out that Mircea Eliade has repeatedly stated that "the sacred it is an element of the structure of (human) consciousness" (Rennie, 1996: 21).

In other words, when he speaks of 'real' and 'reality', Eliade is not referring to an ontological sub-layer, which Aristotle calls *hyle* and Kant calls *noumenon*, but to the psycho-phenomenological act of *perceiving,* as a real consciousness of living religious experience. The 'real' is an intentional object, that is, an object of faith. Therefore, Eliade's conception of the sacred can be summarized in the following statement: the *sacred is the intentional object of human experience that is perceived as reality*[26].

For Eliade, "the utterly profane world", is the product of the modern man's spiritual behaviour, who has desacralised his world and assumed a profane existence (Eliade, 2000:14), while "the *sacred* and the *profane* are two ways of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by humankind throughout its history" (Eliade, 2000: 15).

On a critical note, although extremely impressive due to the complexity of the analysis of the Sacred, Eliade's *Sacrul și profanul* seems to lack a more detailed explanation of the relationship between holiness and ethics. He speaks in the same context both about the world as being continually sanctified by the sanctity of sanctuaries, and about the fact that the world is purified by that sanctity, implying that, in his opinion, the two concepts are synonymous, not complementary or antithetical.

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[26] Eliade's use of the term 'sacred' in this sense has led to all sorts of criticisms of his possible theological and metaphysical prejudices and assumptions. J. Z. Smith noted a certain similarity between the 'sacred – profane' pair in Eliade and Durkheim. He points out that Eliade may have replaced Rudolf Otto's language of the sacred with Durkheim's more neutral and positional 'sacred', while keeping the dynamics of Durkeim's dualism. See Jonathan Smith, *Map is not Territory: studies in the history of religions*, Leiden, Brill, 1978, p. 91.

In lieu of conclusion: a theological wrap-up

This paper aimed to offer a brief, comparative, and critical *tour d'horizon* of the notion of holiness from a socio-religious perspective. The five accounts of the Sacred considered were those which still make a strong contribution to the filed, namely those which have been employed forth by Emil Durkheim, Jonathan Söderblom, Rudolf Otto, Emmanuel Levinas, and Mircea Eliade.

Now, *in lieu* of a "definite" conclusion, we would like to offer a "theological wrap-up", mentioning a word or two about how Christian theology could relate to and critically use the five views explored in this paper. Thus, the complexity of the notion of holiness, on one hand, and its elusiveness, on the other, also reflect two important realities that derive from a common truth, namely that our life in the world is not an abstract one. On the contrary, we are individuals endowed with freedom and gifts, and we live in a certain age, with specific peculiarities in terms of culture, education, economy, and social conditions. Regardless of how it is conceived, the very fact that holiness involves a certain "setting aside" or separation highlights this complexity and puts one in front of some essential questions.

For example, does the state of holiness involve the rejection of the profane or, in order to use more biblical language, does one have to reject the world in order to choose God? At the same time, any biblically and theologically coherent view of holiness must take into account the *coincidentia oppositorum* inherent to the Christian faith, which, on one hand, affirms Creation and Incarnation, and, on the other, calls the believers to a state of separation from the world and of consecration to God. This 'tension' has not always been resolved in the history of Christian spirituality. The proof is the continuous Christian preoccupation for the *contemplative* life to the detriment of the *lived* life or vice versa. The motif of this theme has many antitheses: Martha *vs.* Mary, desert *vs.* fortress, flight from the world *vs.* serving the world, being in the world *vs.* being not the world, etc.

To conclude on a practical note, it must be said that there are two extremes which must be avoided. The first one is to put the sign of equality between holiness and the complete renunciation to our creatureliness. Historically, this temptation, which was rightly called 'angelism' by Jacques Maritain, has persisted in Christian spirituality, manifesting itself in the tendency to downplay humanity in favor of the elevation of the 'spiritual' nature. The second extreme is to emphasise the need to get so much involved in the affairs of the world that the transcendent reality of God (and, of course, of one having a relationship with God) is downplayed as illusory or escapist, in the name of the so-

called 'activism'. Any attempt to correctly understand and define holiness must recognize that there is a certain tension between that which is 'received' and that which is 'required', between holiness as a divine gift and holiness as a human virtue or ethical obligation. True holiness, rightly understood, must honor simultaneously both the transcendental axis (that of one's relationship to God), and the immanent reality of human condition, i.e., living horizontally, in the bosom of the world, both as an individual, and as a community.

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