

THE NOTION OF THE SACRED

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‘Chaque chose sacrée doit être à sa place’,
notait avec profondeur un penseur indigène¹

1. The Varieties of the ‘Sacred’

Since Nathan Söderblom, in his trail-blazing entry in Hastings’ *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, announced that ‘holiness’ is the great word in religion,² the term and its synonyms have informed more and more detailed and sometimes confusing debates in the study of religion. On the one hand ‘sacredness’ is seen as an essential characteristic of religion, on the other it is also used to refer to spaces³ and experiences that are not ‘really’ religious, but are located in the forecourt of the ultimate religious (and the ultimate religious – to make it even more confusing – can in some traditions be referred to as ‘the Holy of Holies’).⁴ The adjective ‘sacred’ or ‘holy’ (in this article I take these terms as near equivalents)⁵ is used to refer to persons, festivals or spaces that have an

¹ C. LÉVI-STRAUSS: *La pensée sauvage* (Paris 1962) 17, referring to A.C. FLETCHER ‘The Hako: A Pawnee Ceremony’, in *22nd Annual Report. Bureau of American Ethnology (1900-1901)*, part 2 (Washington DC 1904) 34: ‘All sacred things must have their place’ (explanation by the priest of the tribe). Cf. the review of Fletcher in M. MAUSS: *Oeuvres I. Les fonctions sociales du sacré* (Paris 1968) 44-45.

² N. SÖDERBLOM: ‘Holiness, General and Primitive’, in J. HASTINGS (ed.): *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, vol. 6 (Edinburgh 1913) 731-741, here 731.

³ In his comments on an earlier version of this article Justin Beaumont noted that the notions of space and place need more reflection. In this article I use them in a rather loose sense as almost interchangeable terms; for a theoretical elaboration see D. MASSEY: *For Space* (London 2005).

⁴ For a typology of the uses of the ‘sacred’, see M.T. EVANS: ‘The Sacred: Differentiating, Clarifying and Extending Concepts’, in *Review of Religious Research* 45 (2003) 32-47.

⁵ This is not to deny that there are etymological and semantical differences between these terms and the ways they are used, ‘holy’ probably being more of an ‘insider’s’ notion, whereas ‘sacred’ is the word preferred by ‘outsiders’.

‘outstanding’ character. But what does this characterization mean? Somewhat hesitantly Söderblom wrote that the psychological origin of the concept ‘seems to have been the mental reaction against what is startling, astonishing, new, terrifying’.⁶ In this sense, the sacred seems to refer to an overwhelming power that is experienced by man, the bipolar *mysterium tremendum et fascinans* discussed by Rudolf Otto in his *The Idea of the Holy*.⁷ In this entry, written a couple of years before Otto’s bestseller appeared in 1917, Söderblom stated: ‘Holiness is viewed as a mysterious power or entity connected with certain beings, things, events, or actions’.⁸ The ‘holy’ or ‘sacred’ is somehow materialized and ‘attached’ to innerworldly objects and events, which are conceived as separate from ‘ordinary’ objects and events: ‘(T)here is no real religion without a distinction between holy and profane’.⁹ In this way, ‘holy’ or ‘sacred’ is part of a dichotomy that structures a great deal of modern thought about religion. Söderblom also referred critically to Emile Durkheim’s ‘time-honoured sociological theory’: ‘But the essential connexion between ‘the sacred’ and society does not imply that the notion of the ‘sacred’ is merely a kind of objectifying and idealizing of the community as a power mysteriously superior to the individual’.¹⁰

Söderblom’s contribution to Hasting’s *Encyclopaedia* of 1913 already shows the immense complexity surrounding the terms ‘holy’ or ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’. It would be somewhat of an exaggeration to claim that some hundred years of scholarly debate have solved this complexity. In this paper I will go back to some ‘classical’ views of ‘sacred’ and ‘sacrality’ and pay special attention to the issue of ‘sacred space’, which was a much-studied subject from Emile Durkheim to Victor Turner and Mircea Eliade, but seems rather undertheorized in more recent literature.¹¹

⁶ SÖDERBLOM: ‘Holiness’ (1913) 732.

⁷ R. OTTO: *Das Heilige. Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (1917; 23. bis 25. Auflage, München s.a. [1936?]); *The Idea of the Holy. An Inquiry into the Non-Rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational* (1923), trans. J.W. HARVEY based on the 9th edition (New York 1958).

⁸ SÖDERBLOM: ‘Holiness’ (1913) 731.

⁹ SÖDERBLOM: ‘Holiness’ (1913) 731.

¹⁰ SÖDERBLOM: ‘Holiness’ (1913) 732; cf. 741.

¹¹ For a recent overview see K. KNOTT: *The Location of Religion. A Spatial Analysis* (London 2005).

David Chidester and Edward T. Linenthal discern two main lines of definition of the 'sacred' in the history of the study of religion: 'one substantial, one situational'. Familiar substantial definitions – Otto's 'holy', Van der Leeuw's 'power' or Mircea Eliade's 'real' – 'might be regarded as attempts to replicate an insider's evocation of certain experiential qualities that can be associated with the sacred' (the sacred meaning mysterious power, the uncanny or the awesome). Situational approaches, on the contrary, claim 'that nothing is inherently sacred' and regard the term as a 'sign of difference that can be assigned to virtually anything by human labor or consecration'.¹² According to Chidester and Linenthal, the difference between the two views is most evident in the analysis of sacred space: 'Mircea Eliade held that the sacred irrupted, manifested, or appeared in certain places, causing them to become powerful centers of meaningful worlds. On the contrary, Jonathan Z. Smith has shown how place is sacralized as the result of the cultural labor or ritual, in specific historical situations, involving the hard work of attention, memory, design, construction, and control of place'.¹³ I will take this typological dichotomy as a starting point, and first deal with the views of two 'situationalists' (William Robertson Smith and Emile Durkheim), followed by a discussion of two 'substantialists' (Rudolf Otto and Gerardus van der Leeuw). I propose to analyze some key texts in order to explore the full range and theoretical implications of these uses and views of the sacred. One of the results will be that the distinction between the 'situationalists' and the 'substantialists' is not as clear-cut as is sometimes suggested. On the basis of this analysis I will, finally, outline my view of how this solid and at the same time impalpable notion of '(the) sacred' is best used in our present-day predicament.

2. Signs of Difference

The situational approach is usually traced back to Emile Durkheim and his colleagues, Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert, but it is evident that they owe much to *William Robertson Smith* (1846-1889). Durkheim

¹² D. CHIDESTER & E.T. LINENTHAL: 'Introduction', in IDEM (eds.): *American Sacred Space* (Bloomington 1995) 1-42, here 5-6.

¹³ CHIDESTER & LINENTHAL: 'Introduction' (1995) 6.



Figure 1. William Robertson Smith

pointed several times to the special importance of Smith's work,¹⁴ and Mauss and Hubert stated that they profited from everything Smith wrote on the sacred, *tabu*, and the distinction between pure and impure.¹⁵ Let

¹⁴ In a letter of 1907 Durkheim observes that until 1895 he had no 'clear sense of the role played by religion in social life' and that becoming aware of this role was 'a revelation' for him, due to 'the studies of religious history that I had just undertaken, and particularly to the reading of the works of Robertson Smith and his school'; quoted in R.A. JONES: 'La Genèse du Système. The Origins of Durkheim's Sociology of Religion', in W.M. CALDER III (ed.): *The Cambridge Ritualists Reconsidered* (Atlanta 1989) 97-121, here 97f.

¹⁵ Quoted in F.-A. ISAMBERT: *Le sens du sacré. Fête et religion populaire* (Paris 1982) 222. H. HUBERT & M. MAUSS: 'Préface', in IDEM: *Mélanges d'histoire des religions* (Paris

us have a closer look at the work of this Scottish Biblical scholar and Arabist. In his most famous book, *The Religion of the Semites*, based on the Burnett Lectures he gave in the late eighties of the nineteenth century at his old *Alma Mater*, the University of Aberdeen, Robertson Smith examined the fundamental institutions of the Hebrew religion and reconstructed its attitude toward holy places, sanctuaries and the system of sacrifice.¹⁶ In my discussion I will highlight the key elements in Smith's conceptualization of holiness or sacredness ('holy' and cognates being the terms he clearly preferred).

In the history of (ancient) religion the connection between the ideas of locality, the deity and worship (sacrifice) cannot be denied, according to Robertson Smith. 'There is a fixed place on the earth's surface, marked by a sacred tree or a sacred stone, where the god is wont to be found, and offerings deposited there have reached their address'.¹⁷ He emphasizes the role played by the the gods who 'haunted certain spots, which in consequence of this were holy places and fit places of worship'.¹⁸ In his next lecture he reverses the perspective and speaks about 'holy places in their relation to man'. The fundamental principle here is 'that the sanctuary is holy, and must not be treated like a common place'. This distinction between what is holy and what is common, Smith states, is one of the most important things in ancient religion, but 'very difficult to grasp precisely, because its interpretation varied from age to age with the general progress of religious thought'.¹⁹ Nowadays, Smith explains, we conceive of holiness in ethical terms (a conception which goes back to the Hebrew prophets), but in ancient Semitic religion 'it is quite certain that it has nothing to do with morality and purity of life. Holy persons were such, not in virtue of their character but in virtue of their race, function, or mere material consecration'.²⁰

1929²) i-xlii, here xvii; published earlier in the *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 29,58 (1908?) 163-203; reprinted as 'Introduction à l'analyse de quelques phénomènes religieux', in M. MAUSS: *Oeuvres* I, 3-40, here 5 (cf. 41-65).

¹⁶ For a good discussion of Robertson Smith's work and career, see G.W. STOCKING jr.: *After Tylor. British Social Anthropology 1888-1951* (London 1996) 63-83. I have restricted the references to secondary literature to a minimum.

¹⁷ W. ROBERTSON SMITH: *The Religion of the Semites. The Fundamental Institutions* (1889; repr. New York 1956) 114-115.

¹⁸ ROBERTSON SMITH: *The Religion of the Semites* (1889 etc.) 115.

¹⁹ ROBERTSON SMITH: *The Religion of the Semites* (1889 etc.) 140.

²⁰ ROBERTSON SMITH: *The Religion of the Semites* (1889 etc.) 140f.

Robertson Smith takes great trouble to define this key concept, but – as he himself admits – more or less fails to do so, as the following important statement shows: ‘Indeed the holiness of the gods is an expression to which it is hardly possible to attach a definite sense apart from the holiness of their physical surroundings; it shows itself in the sanctity attached to the persons places things and times²¹ through which the gods and men come into contact with one another’.²² Although at first sight ‘holiness’ to Smith seems to be (primarily) an attribute of the gods, closer inspection reveals that he actually connects it to ‘their physical surroundings’. The notion comes to the fore wherever gods and men come into contact with each other and ‘these relations are concentrated at particular points of the earth’s surface’.²³ This spatial, or should we say mathematical, metaphor points to the intimate connection between ‘holy/sacred’ and ‘space’.

The next question raised by Robertson Smith is whether the holiness of sanctuaries can be explained in terms of property rights. His conclusion is ‘that the difference between holy things and common things does not originally turn on ownership, as if common things belonged to men and holy things to the gods’.²⁴ The sanctuaries were not in any sense private property (of the gods), but served public purposes and could in ancient cities function as public parks and halls. The treasures kept in them ‘were a kind of state treasure’ and were available for public use in time of need.²⁵ Thus, the use of holy places and things is not restricted to the gods; under certain restrictions men are free to use them as well. ‘From this point of view it would appear that common things are such as men have licence to use freely at their own good pleasure without fear of supernatural penalties, while holy things may be used only in prescribed ways and under definite restrictions, on pain of the anger of the gods’.²⁶ The rules of conduct towards the holy have two aspects. On the one hand, the rules that regulate social intercourse within the community (kinship) also apply to the gods, as they belong to this community. On the other hand, ‘the god has natural relations to

²¹ The commas one would expect are missing in Smith’s text.

²² ROBERTSON SMITH: *The Religion of the Semites* (1889 etc.) 141.

²³ ROBERTSON SMITH: *The Religion of the Semites* (1889 etc.) 142.

²⁴ ROBERTSON SMITH: *The Religion of the Semites* (1889 etc.) 147.

²⁵ ROBERTSON SMITH: *The Religion of the Semites* (1889 etc.) 147.

²⁶ ROBERTSON SMITH: *The Religion of the Semites* (1889 etc.) 150.

certain physical things, and these must be respected also'. Borrowing 'a metaphor from electricity', Robertson Smith explains this as follows: a divine place or thing is regarded 'as charged with divine energy and ready at any moment to discharge itself to the destruction of the man who presumes to approach it unduly'.²⁷

The holy character of a place or thing is here conceptualized by Robertson Smith in terms of a (devastating) power that occupies a particular place or thing. In this context he does not speak about possible beneficial effects of this power. The emphasis is not so much on the divine energy itself as on the way people should behave with regard to the holy (place). The 'rules of holiness' form 'a system of restrictions on man's arbitrary use of natural things'.²⁸ It is convenient, he argues, to have a 'distinct name for this primitive institution, to mark it off from the later development of the idea of holy in advanced religions, and for this purpose the Polynesian term *taboo* has been selected'.²⁹ Two types of taboos have to be distinguished: the taboos that exactly correspond to the rules of holiness, protecting the holy places, and the rules of uncleanness, in which the fear of hostile powers is the dominant motive.³⁰ Taboo stands for rules of human conduct (or perhaps better: restrictions) regarding sacred things and places. In Smith's teleological view of religious history it is extremely important to discriminate between the two types of taboo, as the rules of uncleanness are tokens of 'magical superstition', which should be clearly distinguished from the proper rules of holiness ('founded on respect for the prerogative of a friendly god') that 'contain within them germinant principles of social progress and moral order'.³¹ The distinction between these two types of taboo, however, does not help us much further in clarifying what exactly 'holy' means in Robertson Smith's view. His analysis is rather formal. The character of holy or sacred places is explained by the taboos surrounding them, and these seem to be a kind of warning signs, saying 'this is a

²⁷ ROBERTSON SMITH: *The Religion of the Semites* (1889 etc.) 151.

²⁸ ROBERTSON SMITH: *The Religion of the Semites* (1889 etc.) 152.

²⁹ ROBERTSON SMITH: *The Religion of the Semites* (1889 etc.) 152 (with reference to J.G. FRAZER: 'Taboo' in the famous ninth edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, vol. 23 (Edinburgh 1888⁹) 15-18, which was supervised by Robertson Smith).

³⁰ ROBERTSON SMITH: *The Religion of the Semites* (1889 etc.) 152-154.

³¹ ROBERTSON SMITH: *The Religion of the Semites* (1889 etc.) 154. On the same page Smith explains this issue in more detail: 'To restrain one's individual licence (...) his worshippers' (154-155).



Figure 2. Emile Durkheim

high-powered place, do not enter (unless you know how to behave)'. The rest of the book deals mainly with rituals, first of all sacrifices, which enable contact with the sacred.

This focus on ritual (the social) and demarcation (by taboos) may well have been a source of inspiration for *Emile Durkheim* (1858-1917). However, before we turn to his work, I should indicate the scope and limitations of my paper in this respect. My aim is not a discussion of Durkheim's concept of the sacred in all its (historical) ramifications. Scholars distinguish various phases in the development of his thought (on the sacred), and an integral discussion should, of course, include the work of

his close collaborators Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert.³² Instead, I will give a chronological presentation of four texts by Durkheimians, in order to shed light on the breadth and depth of their discussion of the ‘sacred’ (and the ‘profane’). Most attention is devoted to two crucial texts by Durkheim; in order to put these into perspective I will address two shorter passages from the work of Mauss and Hubert as well.

(1) I will start with an early text by Durkheim, posthumously published in 1950 under the title *Leçons de sociologie. Physique des moeurs et du droit*.³³ The publication is based on a series of lectures given by Durkheim between 1890 and 1900 at the university of Bordeaux and repeated at the Sorbonne, first in 1904 and later in 1912. Mauss testifies that the final draft was made between November 1898 and June 1900.³⁴ In his analysis of Durkheim’s book, especially chapters 12-14, Jonathan Z. Smith states: ‘These *Lectures* constitute Durkheim’s earliest persistent use of the distinction sacred/profane, which is here presented as a set of spatial categories in the context of a sustained meditation on property rights’.³⁵

Durkheim here claims that to consecrate is a way of appropriating, and stresses the ‘striking analogies between the idea of the sacred and that of the thing appropriated’.³⁶ Both sacred and appropriated things are distinct from common property. The right of property is ‘better defined negatively than in terms of positive content, by the exclusion it involves rather than the prerogatives it confers’. Whether or not the owner actually uses it is of minor importance. Essentially, the right of

³² Some titles that were particularly helpful to me: ISAMBERT: *Le sens du sacré* (1982) 215-245; S. LUKES: *Emile Durkheim. His Life and Work: A Historical and Critical Study* (1973, repr. London 1988) esp. 24-28; W.S.F. PICKERING: *Durkheim’s Sociology of Religion. Themes and Theories* (London etc. 1984) esp. 115-162; J.N. BREMMER: ‘Religion’, ‘Ritual’ and the Opposition ‘Sacred vs. Profane’. Notes towards a Terminological ‘Genealogy’, in F. GRAF (ed.): *Ansichten griechischer Rituale. Fs. Walter Burkert* (Stuttgart / Leipzig 1998) 9-32 (who lists a great amount of additional secondary literature).

³³ DURKHEIM: *Leçons de sociologie. Physique des moeurs et du droit* (Paris 1950). The subtitle may be translated as ‘the nature of morals [in the sense of the German *Sittlichkeit*] and law’. The English version is entitled: *Professional Ethics and Civic Morals* (London / New York 1992).

³⁴ DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) ix-x.

³⁵ J.Z. SMITH: ‘The Topography of Sacred Space’, in J.Z. SMITH: *Relating Religion. Essays in the Study of Religion* (Chicago / London 2004) 101-116, 103.

³⁶ DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 149; *Leçons* (1950) 177.

property consists ‘in the right to withdraw a thing from common usage’.³⁷ This is very similar to the domain of the sacred:

Whenever we have a religious ritual (*religions*), the world over, the feature that distinguishes the sacred entities is that they are withdrawn from general circulation; they are separate and set apart. The common people (*le vulgaire*) cannot enjoy them. They cannot even touch them. Those who have a kinship, as it were, with sacred things of this kind, can alone have access to them – that is, those who are sacred as they are: the priests, the great (*les grands*), and the magistrates, especially where the latter have a sacred character (*nature religieuse*).³⁸

Although Durkheim does not refer to the work of Robertson Smith in this context,³⁹ he treats the subject in a similar vein and sees a close connection between the sacred and the institution of the taboo. Taboo is defined by Durkheim as the setting apart of something consecrated, ‘as something belonging to the sphere of the divine’, which implies that sacred things cannot be appropriated by common people.⁴⁰

Further, Durkheim argues that – notwithstanding the almost absolute contradistinction between the two domains he suggested earlier – the ‘sacred character (...) is in its essence contagious and communicates itself to any object it comes in contact with’.⁴¹ It is a ‘potency’ (*principe*), he says, in the sacred entity that renders it sacred and is seen in the popular imagination ‘as ever ready to spread into all the *milieux* open to it’.⁴² The ritual interdictions that separate the sacred from the profane (here for the first time in the text the distinction is no longer between ‘sacred’ and ‘common’, but between ‘sacred’ and ‘profane’) are a way of ‘insulating this potency’.⁴³ ‘(W)e might say that, as a rule, the sacred draws to itself the profane with which it is in contact’.⁴⁴ A ritual can be

³⁷ DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 142; *Leçons* (1950) 169.

³⁸ DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 143; *Leçons* (1950) 169f. In some cases I have put the original French words between brackets in the English text.

³⁹ Cf., however, DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 180; *Leçons* (1950) 211.

⁴⁰ DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 143; *Leçons* (1950) 170.

⁴¹ DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 147; *Leçons* (1950) 174.

⁴² DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 147; cf. DURKHEIM: *Leçons* (1950) 175: ‘L’imagination populaire se représente en quelque sorte le principe qui est dans l’être religieux et qui fait son état religieux comme toujours prêt à se répandre dans tous les milieux qui lui sont ouverts’.

⁴³ DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 147.

⁴⁴ DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 148; *Leçons* (1950) 175. According to Durkheim there is no satisfactory explanation for this ‘strange phenomenon’.

used to counter this tendency; for instance, Durkheim interprets the ritual of the sacrifice of the first crops in terms of preventing the sacred element residing in it to pass over into the profane. ‘The line of demarcation of the two worlds has been respected, and this is the supreme sacred obligation’.⁴⁵ This line of thought leads to fascinating reflections, such as that the ‘sacredness’ of property does not come from the owner, but initially resides in the thing itself:

The things were sacred in themselves; they were inhabited by potencies (*principes*), rather [more or less, ALM] obscurely represented, and these were supposed to be their true owners, making things untouchable to the profane. The profane [things, ALM] were therefore not able to intrude on (*empiéter sur*) the divine sphere, unless they gave the gods their due and expiated their sacrilege by sacrifices.⁴⁶

It is important to note here that Durkheim does not define the sacred solely by saying that it is set apart, but also by ascribing some (special) quality to it: the sacred is inhabited by a principle or – as the English translation has it – a ‘potency’.

Durkheim concludes that the right of property has a sacred origin. But how has this ‘social institution been able to persist, if it rests on fallacies alone?’⁴⁷ Durkheim next moves to a discussion of religions. Although they throw little light on the world itself, it would be wrong to consider them mere ‘phantasies that have no basis in reality. (...) (T)hey do interpret in a symbolic form, social needs and collective interests’.⁴⁸ Through a religion the structure of a society can be analyzed. Behind this symbolic universe there are real societal forces, and ultimately it is society that is worshipped by the believers.⁴⁹ In an interesting comparison – inspired by Kant – Durkheim draws a parallel between individual perception and collective, religious symbolization (Durkheim uses the word ‘representation’ here). In both cases there is a distortion (*altération*) of the things represented, caused by the ‘categories’ by which the human subject represents the world. Sound and colour have no more positive existence in our world than the gods, demons and spirits.

⁴⁵ DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 155; *Leçons* (1950) 184.

⁴⁶ DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 159; *Leçons* (1950) 188. The additions in square brackets are my corrections of the translation on the basis of the French original.

⁴⁷ DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 160; *Leçons* (1950) 189.

⁴⁸ DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 160; *Leçons* (1950) 189.

⁴⁹ DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 161; *Leçons* (1950) 190.

The individual, in picturing by means of sensation the relations he has with the world about him, puts into these images something that is not there, some qualities that come from his own mind. The society does the same thing in picturing by means of religion the *milieu* that constitutes it.⁵⁰

The ‘reduction’ (in the neutral sense of the word) of religion to the *milieu* that constitutes it is the last step in Durkheim’s argument that may interest us in the context of a discussion of his view of sacred versus profane, and of religion. This step in the reasoning can easily be distinguished from his prior use of the profane-sacred dichotomy. In these lectures the dichotomy seems to be not just a formal distinction, between (sacred) things set apart and common (profane) things not set apart, but – perhaps under the influence of the work of Robertson Smith – the concept of the sacred is defined by potencies that are supposed to be there as well.

(2) The second text of the Durkheimians I want to examine is Henri Hubert’s 1904 introduction to the French translation of Pierre Daniël Chantepie de la Saussaye’s manual of the history of religion.⁵¹ The introduction is to a large extent an exposition of Hubert’s own views, and contains a sketchy but illuminative passage about the sacred. For Hubert, the idea of the sacred is the idea from which religion springs (*l’idée mère de la religion*), and he identifies religion with the ‘administration of the sacred’.⁵² What does this idea imply? First, the sacred is

⁵⁰ DURKHEIM: *Professional Ethics* (1992) 161; *Leçons* (1950) 190: ‘Par cela seul que la représentation suppose un sujet qui se représente, – (ici un sujet individuel et là, collectif) – la nature de ce sujet est un facteur de la représentation et dénature les choses représentées. L’individu, en pensant par la sensation les rapports qu’il soutient avec le monde qui l’entoure, y met ce qui ne s’y trouve pas, des qualités qui viennent de lui. La société fait de même en pensant, par la religion, le milieu qui la constitue’; cf. DURKHEIM: ‘De la définition des phénomènes religieux’, in *Année Sociologique* 2 (1897-1898) 1-28, reprinted in DURKHEIM: *Journal Sociologique* (Paris 1969) 140-165 162f; DURKHEIM: *Textes II: religion, morale, anomie* (Paris s.a.) 9 (from a letter Durkheim wrote to Gaston Richard on May 11th, 1899).

⁵¹ P.D. CHANTEPIE DE LA SAUSSAYE: *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte*, 2 vols. (Freiburg i.B. 1887-1889; Leipzig / Tübingen 1897²); *Manuel d’histoire des religions*, ed. H. HUBERT & I. LÉVY (Paris 1904), which is the translation of the second edition, ‘Introduction à la traduction française’, v-xlvi (by Hubert). On Chantepie de la Saussaye, see A.L. MOLENDIJK: *The Emergence of the Science of Religion in the Netherlands* (Leiden etc. 2005) 106-122.

⁵² HUBERT: ‘Introduction’ (1904) xlvi: ‘La religion est l’administration du sacré’.

characterized as the separate, the forbidden; sacred things are protected by ritual prohibitions; they are tabooed (*tabouées*). As a kind of corollary this means that there is a barrier between things sacred and things profane, which may advance or recede, but never disappears. Trespassing may have terrible consequences. The sacred may only be approached by people who are qualified to do so. After the general description of the sacred summarized here, Hubert makes the following observation: implied in the idea of the sacred, he claims, is the idea of a *milieu* that one enters and leaves. Without any transition Hubert then states that the sacred is also the idea of a quality that implies an effective power (*force effective*). This characterization is in line with Durkheim's speaking about the principle that inhabits the sacred, but is less formal and provides – one is inclined to say – more 'content', although neither Durkheim nor Hubert specifies exactly what the term 'power' means. In order to enter and to leave sacred space (or time), efficacious acts are performed in the form of rituals.⁵³ The sacred is defined by Hubert primarily in terms of inderdictions and taboos, more specifically, a space (*milieu*) which can – notwithstanding its forbidden character – be entered by religious specialists, taking certain precautions, which often include the performance of prescribed rituals.

Like Durkheim, Hubert suggests taking the sacred as a genuine category (in the Aristotelian sense of the word, Hubert adds, but his subsequent remarks, not always crystal clear, suggest that he actually presupposes the Kantian 'turn to the subject'). In religious representations the sacred allegedly performs the same function as the categories of time, space and causation in the representations by individuals. As with Durkheim, the sacred and religion are somehow the expressions of society and societal thought. In Hubert's view, religion (at least in its original stages) 'embraces the whole of social life and is itself wholly social'.⁵⁴ In a somewhat cryptic formulation: 'The sacred has precisely by its rela-

⁵³ HUBERT: 'Introduction' (1904) xlvi: 'C'est l'idée d'une sorte de milieu où l'on entre en d'ou l'on sort, dans les rites d'entrée et de sortie du sacrifice, par exemple. C'est aussi celle d'une qualité d'où résulte une force effective. Derrière les barrières du sacré s'abrite le monde des mythes, des esprits, des pouvoirs et des toutes-puissances métaphysiques, objets de croyance. C'est également dans le sacré, temps sacré, espace sacré, que s'accomplissent les actes efficaces que sont les rites'.

⁵⁴ HUBERT: 'Introduction' (1904) xlvi: 'A l'origine, elle embrasse toute la vie sociale et elle est elle-même toute sociale'.

tion to the individual the same objectivity as the social phenomenon of which it is the involuntary actor'.⁵⁵

(3) The third text I would like to discuss briefly also points to the social dimension of the sacred. In their introduction to the collection of essays on the history of religions they published in 1909, Hubert and Mauss write that the ultimate aim of their research was the study of the notion of the sacred.⁵⁶ In their discussion of 'sacrifice' they conclude that sacrifice is invested by a certain quality, the quality of being sacred, which they define as follows: 'The sacrifice is a means for the profane to communicate with the sacred by (the intermediate) way of a victim'.⁵⁷ This is a short and somewhat enigmatic characterization, as this formulation does not speak of human agents who are involved (in this type of communication), while at same time the sacrifice is seen as a thoroughly social phenomenon. The sacred is characterized as the separate and the forbidden, and the authors stress that it is evident that a social prohibition is not simply the result of the accumulated scruples of individuals. Sacred things are social things, according to Hubert and Mauss; they even go a step further and state that anything that qualifies society (for the group and its members) is considered to be sacred.⁵⁸ This seems to be a rather bold claim and is not completely transparent, as the authors do not explain what they mean by 'qualify' in this particular context. Is the fact that something is typical of a certain group or society by itself enough to qualify it as 'sacred'? That seems unlikely. It must be essential, I would say, to the society involved and somehow, even if it is surrounded by fear or awe, have a positive ring. The term 'qualify', therefore, has itself to be 'qualified' to make Hubert's and Mauss' remark really understandable.

⁵⁵ HUBERT: 'Introduction' (1904) xlviii: 'Le sacré a précisément par rapport à l'individu la même objectivité que le phénomène social dont il est l'acteur involontaire'.

⁵⁶ H. HUBERT & M. MAUSS: 'Préface' (1909; Paris 1929²) i-xlii, xvii; repr. MAUSS: 'Introduction', cf. 41-65.

⁵⁷ HUBERT & MAUSS: 'Préface' (1909 etc.) xvi: 'Le sacrifice est un moyen pour le profane de communiquer avec le sacré par l'intermédiaire d'une victime' (the whole sentence is italicized in the original).

⁵⁸ HUBERT & MAUSS: 'Préface' (1909 etc.) xvi: 'A notre avis est conçu comme sacré tout ce qui, pour le groupe et ses membres, qualifie la société'; cf. DURKHEIM: 'Le problème religieux et la dualité de la nature humaine' (1913), in *Textes* II, 23-59, esp. 40, who explicitly denies the thesis that social things are necessarily religious.

Interestingly enough, in this introduction Hubert and Mauss more or less correct their earlier understanding of the sacred in terms of separation and (im)purity, an understanding they now deem insufficient. 'Behind' these notions closer inspection reveals respect, love, repulsion and fear, all strong sentiments, 'which translate themselves into gestures and thoughts'.⁵⁹ The notion of the sacred, they write, thus seems more complex, rich, general and practical than they first thought. The sacred is the *idée-force* around which the rituals and myths can establish themselves, and thus forms the central phenomenon amid all the religious phenomena. The authors see it as their task to understand it and 'to verify that what we have said about the identity of the sacred and the social'.⁶⁰

(4) The last and fourth text I will discuss is Durkheim's classic *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (1912).⁶¹ With respect to the 'sacred' his first important statement, meanwhile become famous, is that all religious beliefs have a common feature: 'They presuppose a classification of the real or ideal things that men conceive of (*se représentent*) into two classes – two opposite genera – that are widely designated by two distinct terms, which the words *profane* and *sacred* translate fairly well'.⁶² The emphasis is clearly on the way the world is represented by human subjects. How exactly is religion connected to the sacred? Durkheim's answer is complex, but clear: beliefs, myths, dogmas and legends are (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'.⁶³ In one sentence Durkheim 'reduces' (not to be taken in a pejorative sense) religious beliefs (the cognitive or theoretical aspect of religion) to 'things' with a special character, which not only are related to one another, but also to the profane. On

⁵⁹ HUBERT & MAUSS: 'Préface' (1909 etc.) xvii; cf. I. STRENSKI: *Durkheim and the Jews of France* (Chicago / London 1997) 76f.

⁶⁰ HUBERT & MAUSS: 'Préface' (1909 etc.) xvii.

⁶¹ DURKHEIM: *Les formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse. Le système totémique en Australie* (1912, repr. Paris 1985); first translated into English by J.W. Swain in 1915. I am using/have used the new translation by K.E. FIELDS: *DURKHEIM: The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York etc. 1995). The subtitle has been left out by the translator.

⁶² DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 34; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 50.

⁶³ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 34; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 50.

the one hand, there is supposed to be a 'logical void' or 'abyss' (as it was once called by Durkheim)⁶⁴ between the 'two worlds', but on the other hand, they also relate to each other.

Next, Durkheim explains that not only gods and spirits, but also rocks, trees, houses, etcetera can have a sacred character: *en un mot une chose quelconque peut être sacrée* (anything can be sacred).⁶⁵ How, then, are sacred things distinguished from profane things? It is not enough to say that they have a different status in the hierarchy of things. Man depends on the divine, but the reverse is also true: 'The gods also need man; without offerings and sacrifices, they would die'.⁶⁶ That leaves us, according to Durkheim, with only one option: the relation between the sacred and the profane must be defined by their heterogeneity, which is absolute. There is – he claims – no other example of two categories of things as profoundly different from or as radically opposed to each other.⁶⁷ Yet, this does not mean that a thing cannot pass from one of these worlds to the other. Initiation rites are an example, the change of status accomplished by such rituals is radical. It is not conceived as a mere development, but as a 'transformation *totius substantiae*'.⁶⁸

This bipartite division of all things 'into two genera that include all that exists but radically exclude one another' is the main criterium for religion.⁶⁹ The sacred should not be in contact with the profane. Almost by way of definition Durkheim states: 'Sacred things are things protected and isolated by prohibitions; profane things are those things to which the prohibitions are applied and that must keep at a distance from what is sacred'.⁷⁰ Along these lines the two basic types of religious phenomena are described. Religious *beliefs* are those representations that

⁶⁴ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 37, 58; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 55, 87.

⁶⁵ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 35; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 51.

⁶⁶ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 36; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 53.

⁶⁷ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 36; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 53.

⁶⁸ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 37; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 54.

⁶⁹ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 38; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 56.

⁷⁰ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 38; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 56.

express the nature of the sacred, and the relations sacred things have with other sacred things and with profane things, whereas *rites* are ‘rules of conduct that prescribe how man must conduct himself with sacred things’.⁷¹

However, this characterization is not yet complete, Durkheim argues in *Les formes élémentaires*, because it does not take into account the important difference between magic and religion. The difference ultimately lies in the fact that religion is essentially a social phenomenon, whereas magic is not. A society with shared beliefs and rituals is called a Church (capitalized by Durkheim). Thus, Durkheim arrives at the following definition:

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 those who adhere to them.⁷²

To avoid any possible misunderstanding he adds that the second element in the definition is no less important than the first: ‘in showing that the idea of religion is inseparable from the idea of a Church, it conveys [anticipates, *fait pressentir*, ALM] the notion that religion must be an eminently collective thing’.⁷³ In spite or perhaps even because of this assurance, one gets the impression that the collective character of religion here does not have the same (crucial) weight as in other texts by Durkheim. Although the collective and social elements in religion, and the fact that god and society may be the same, are stressed at various places in the book,⁷⁴ the claim that religion is ultimately about society is not substantiated and argued as tightly as one would expect. Durkheim adds a footnote to indicate that the definition given here is

⁷¹ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 38; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 56.

⁷² DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 44; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 65. In the original the whole sentence is italicized.

⁷³ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 44; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 65. The correction of Fields’ translation is suggested by W.J. HANEGRAAFF in his insightful contribution: ‘Defining Religion in Spite of History’, in J.G. PLATVOET & A.L. MOLENDIJK (eds.): *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion. Contexts, Concepts and Contests* (Leiden etc. 1999) 337-378, here 344.

⁷⁴ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 268f; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 294-301.

(slightly) different from the one he proposed earlier in the *Année sociologique*. There he defined religious beliefs 'exclusively by their obligatory character; but that obligation evidently arises (...) from the fact that those beliefs belong to a group that imposes them on its members'.⁷⁵

In an exposition of the principal ideas of *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* before the French Society of Philosophy, Durkheim summarizes his line of thought using the notion of 'force' (power) to capture both the *sui generis* character of religion and the collective forces that express themselves in it. One has often seen in religion some sort of speculation, a system of ideas, he states, but this is not the most important element. Above all, religious life presupposes forces *sui generis*, which elevate individuals above themselves and bring them into another world than that of their profane existence. From where do these extraordinary forces come? The only forces that are superior to those of the individual are those which are the result of an arrangement of individual forces, their synthesis in and by society, that is, collective forces.⁷⁶ In the subsequent discussion Durkheim states that the gods are no more than personified, collective ideals.⁷⁷ In another text he refers to the chapters of *Les formes élémentaires* in which he discusses the origin of the notion

⁷⁵ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 44; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 65f. The text referred to is probably: DURKHEIM: 'De la définition des phénomènes religieux', in *Année Sociologique* 2 (1897-1898) 1-28, reprinted in DURKHEIM: *Journal Sociologique* (1969) 140-165, here 159f; translated as 'Concerning the Definition of Religious Phenomena', in W.S.F. PICKERING (ed.): *Durkheim on Religion. A Selection of Readings with Bibliographies* (London / Boston 1975) 75-99, here 93: 'phenomena held to be religious consist in obligatory beliefs, connected with clearly defined practices which are related to given objects of those beliefs' (in the original this sentence is italicized).

⁷⁶ DURKHEIM: 'Le problème religieux et la dualité de la nature humaine' (1913) (extrait du *Bulletin de la Société française de philosophie* 13, 63-100, exposé suivi d'un débat), in DURKHEIM: *Textes* II, 23-59, 23f: 'Avant tout, la vie religieuse suppose la mise en oeuvre de forces *sui generis*, qui élèvent l'individu au-dessus de lui-même, qui le transportent dans un autre milieu que celui où s'écoule son existence profane et qui le font vivre d'une vie très différente, plus haute et plus intense. (...) Or les seules forces morales supérieures à celles de l'individu humain que l'on rencontre dans le monde observable sont celles qui résultent du groupement des forces individuelles, de leur synthèse dans en par la société: ce sont les forces collectives'.

⁷⁷ DURKHEIM: *Textes* II, 30; cf. p. 40f and *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 299-300, for a discussion of a 'communion of consciousnesses', which elevates the individual to a higher sphere.

of the totemic principle or *mana*, as an attempt ‘to show that sacred things are simply collective ideals that have themselves fixed on material objects’.⁷⁸

We may conclude that the sacred-profane distinction in the work of Emile Durkheim is not just a formal distinction between things that are common and things that are set apart more or less arbitrarily. The claim that the sacred character of a thing is not implicated in its intrinsic properties but added to it does not imply that there is no real difference between the profane and the sacred thing.⁷⁹ The sacred thing is the seat of a power (*puissance*) that acts on the profane, whereas the profane thing only has the power and possibility (*pouvoir*) to provoke the discharge of the energy from the sacred thing.⁸⁰ This force is so strong because it is ultimately a collective force that represents (the overwhelming power of) society. If the social prohibitions and inhibitions surrounding the sacred are violated the penalty can be extremely severe. Contrary to common opinion Durkheim did not define the sacred ‘just’ by its opposition to the profane, but also by the ‘power’ invested in (or ascribed to) it, and the accompanying prohibitions and regulations on how to approach and to deal with sacred beings and places. This is not a purely structuralist way of defining the sacred, as I will further explain in the conclusion to this paper.

⁷⁸ DURKHEIM: ‘Le dualisme de la nature humaine et ses conditions sociales’, in *Scientia* 14 (1914) 206-221; trans. as ‘The Dualism of Human Nature and Its Social Conditions’, in K.H. WOLFF (ed.): *Emile Durkheim, 1858-1917. A Collection of Essays, with Translations and a Bibliography* (Columbus 1960) 325-340, here 335.

⁷⁹ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 230; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 327f.

⁸⁰ DURKHEIM: ‘[Définition du sacré en du profane]’ (1917), in *Textes* II, 64; this rich and succinct text was written in the course of the preparation of, and included in, André Lalande’s *Vocabulaire philosophique*; cf. ISAMBERT: *Le sens du sacré* (1982) 238 (my discussion of Durkheim owes very much to Isambert’s study). Cf. LALANDE: *Vocabulaire technique et critique de la philosophie, revu par MM. les membres et correspondants de la société française de philosophie et publié avec leurs corrections et observations* (Paris 1947⁵) 917: ‘le sacré est le siège d’une puissance, d’une énergie qui agit sur le profane, comme agissent un corps électrisé, un ressort tendu, tandis que le profane n’a que le pouvoir de provoquer la décharge de cette énergie’.



Figure 3. Rudolf Otto

3. Substances and experiences

The most famous title in the history of the discussion of the sacred is without doubt Otto's *Das Heilige*. The book has found a broad audience, inside as well as outside academia, and has been continually available in print in various languages up to the present day. *Rudolf Otto* (1869-1937) did not reject 'reductionist' explanations out of hand, although he was fairly critical in this respect, but he was looking for an approach that would do as much justice to religious phenomena as

possible.⁸¹ There is much debate about what kind of venture the book represents: theology, religious education, science of religion, or a mixture of these. Otto's call at the beginning of the third chapter, for those who had no religious feelings themselves to put the book down, has led to severe criticism.⁸² It was perhaps not meant as a provocation, but the effect was the same. To those scholars who defend an empirical, 'scientific' approach to religion he is a *bête noire*.⁸³ A study of the reception of the work of Rudolf Otto and his concept of *das Heilige* would throw light on the development of and relationship between theology and religious studies in the Western world in the twentieth century. My aim here, however, is to put the methodological and ontological presuppositions and implications of Otto's use of this conceptuality into perspective.

The complex subtitle of the book immediately indicates that Otto was first and foremost interested in the irrational (on another occasion Otto also spoke of 'non-rational or suprarational')⁸⁴ aspects of religion and the divine. However important rational predicates such as omnipotence, benevolence or rationality may be, they do not exhaust the idea of the deity (*Gottheit*). According to Otto they apply to something irrational (*gelten von einem Irrationalen*).⁸⁵ The term and category of the sacred (*Heilige*) is used to indicate and identify the particularity of the religious, especially insofar as it cannot be understood conceptually.⁸⁶ Otto is well aware of the fact that in actual usage the term has a strong ethical dimension, but he stresses that this is not the original meaning. He explains that he looked for a term that refers exclusively to the specific element of religion (without its ethical and rational aspects). For this he coins the now famous term '(the) numinous' (from *numen*, divine [power]). The numinous denotes a category completely *sui generis*

⁸¹ OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.).

⁸² OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.).

⁸³ Cf. K. RUDOLPH: *Historical Fundamentals and the Study of Religions* (New York 1985) 35-36.

⁸⁴ Both the translator and Otto himself (in his foreword to the English edition) speak of the non-rational and suprarational (instead of irrational): *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) xvii-xviii, xxi, and Harvey adapted the translation in this sense. But in the German text and revisions Otto retained 'irrational'.

⁸⁵ OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.) 1-2; *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) 1-2 (emphasis in the original).

⁸⁶ OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.) 5; *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) 5.

and, therefore, cannot be defined in any standard procedure. This explains why Otto presents many examples, which he hopes will lead the readers to that point of their awareness (*Gemüt*) where the numinous will present itself to them and they will become conscious of it. The undefinable X cannot be learned, but can only be aroused, like ‘everything that comes ‘of the Spirit’’.⁸⁷ This shows that Otto’s remark that those who completely lack such sensibility and do not have any experience of the numinous had better stop reading his book follows from the way he defined the numinous.

After this explanation of the irrational part of the sacred, Otto goes on to give a detailed account of various ‘moments of the numinous’, which I will treat briefly. He begins with a critical discussion of Friedrich Schleiermacher’s foundational ‘feeling of absolute dependence’ (*schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*). Otto prefers to speak of the ‘feeling of being created’ (*Kreaturgefühl*), which expresses itself in (and/or is related to)⁸⁸ various emotions such as trust, gratitude, and humility (*Demut*). In a somewhat complex formulation the feeling of being created is considered to be ‘a shadow’ of the feeling of *Scheu* (awe, respect, fear), which – and this is quintessential here – is related to an object outside the self. This object – Otto argues – can be no other than the numinous object. The feeling is a feeling of ‘an objectively given numinous’.⁸⁹ He claims that this feeling actually precedes the feeling of being created,⁹⁰ although his whole analysis starts with the *Kreaturgefühl*. For the sake of consistency Otto has to emphasize that he does not give a rational explanation: he stresses that his elucidation of the *Kreaturgefühl* in terms of the confrontation of human nothingness (*Nichtigkeit*) with the absolute, over-powerful does not say anything about the intended over-powerful object, which is *unsagbar*.⁹¹

⁸⁷ OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.) 7: ‘unser X ist nicht im strengen Sinne lehrbar sondern nur anregbar, erweckbar – wie alles, was ‘aus dem Geiste’ kommt’; *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) 7.

⁸⁸ It is difficult to integrate Otto’s varying formulations into one succinct summary.

⁸⁹ OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.) 11; *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) 11, footnote: ‘the feeling of a ‘numinous’ object objectively given’.

⁹⁰ OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.) 12 (later addition); cf. *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) 11; cf. the title of the third chapter: ‘Das Kreaturgefühl als Reflex des numinosen Objekt-Gefühls im Selbstgefühl’; first edition: ‘Das *Kreaturgefühl* als Reflexäußerung des Numinosen im Selbstgefühl’ (in the Table of Contents; in the text: ‘als erste Reflexwirkung’).

⁹¹ OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.) 10; *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) 10.

Looking for the primary object-related *Gefühlsbestimmtheit*, Otto arrives at the feeling of the *mysterium tremendum*, the awesome mystery.⁹² Again, the term ‘mystery’ is no conceptual characterization: it signifies what is hidden and not understood. The positive that is intended can only be experienced in feelings, which he tries to elucidate – by letting them resonate.⁹³ I will not follow this procedure by giving extensive quotes, but limit myself to a few remarks. Among other things, Otto discusses the following ‘moments of the numinous’: the *tremendum* (awe-inspiring), the over-powerful (*majestas*), the energetical, the mysterious (the ‘wholly Other’) and the *fascinans* (attraction). In later editions he added a chapter ‘what is called irrational?’, in which he explains in more detail why this concept is crucial to his purpose. As stated earlier, Otto does not deny that the idea of the deity can be defined to some degree, but around this area of conceptual clarity lies a mysterious-dark sphere, which cannot be understood by reason and which is, therefore, called the irrational. It is not a question of time before we will be able to do so – it is impossible in principle.⁹⁴ Finally, the feeling of the sacred is explained in a neo-Kantian way: it springs from the *Seelengrund*, which no doubt is stimulated and activated by material circumstances and sensual experiences, but cannot be reduced to these. Practically, this boils down to the idea of a religious apriori, a religious capacity, on the same (or even deeper) level as the theoretical and practical apriori.⁹⁵

In spite of the role of the imagination in the production of the religious, Rudolf Otto is convinced of the reality of the sacred. From the analysis of the structure of the feeling of the numinous he tries to conclude to the ultimate reality of that what is experienced (felt).⁹⁶

⁹² OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.) 13; *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) 12.

⁹³ OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.) 14; *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) 13.

⁹⁴ OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.) 76 (taken from chapter 10, ‘was heißt irrational?’, which was added in later editions): ‘Auch bei stärkster Spannung der Aufmerksamkeit gelingt es hier nicht, das Was and Wie des beseligenden Gegenstandes aus dem Dunkel des Gefühls in den Bereich des begreifenden Verstehens zu bringen. Er bleibt im unauflösblichen Dunkel des rein gefühlsmäßigen unbegrifflichen Erfahrens, und nur durch die Notenschrift der deutenden Ideogramme ist er – nicht deutbar aber – andeutbar’. Cf. OTTO: *Das Gefühl des Überweltlichen (sensus numinis)* (München 1932) 327f, where ‘feeling’ (*Gefühl*) is described as a form of knowledge.

⁹⁵ OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.) 137-142, esp. 138; *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) 136-142.

⁹⁶ Cf. G. PFLEIDERER: *Theologie als Wirklichkeitswissenschaft. Studien zum Religionsbegriff bei Georg Wobbermin, Rudolf Otto, Heinrich Scholz und Max Scheler* (Tübingen 1992) 126.

Self-reflection leads to reflection about the subject concerned, and then we are no longer doing *Seelenkunde*, but *Gotteskunde*, that is, theology.⁹⁷ This approach is open to various kinds of criticism, but what matters in this context is that it differs profoundly from the approaches of Robertson Smith and Durkheim. The sacred or holy ultimately has a transcendental status in a realm beyond the profane world. This difference is not so much addressed as touched upon in the following passage about what is characteristically called ‘manifestations of the sacred/holy’ (*Erscheinungen des Heiligen*) rather than ‘sacred phenomena’.⁹⁸ Here Otto distinguishes between the inner notion and the outer object of religion in the following way:

Religion is convinced not only that the holy and sacred reality is attested by the inward voice of conscience and the religious consciousness, the ‘still, small voice’ of the Spirit in the heart, by feeling, presentiment, and longing, but also that it may be directly encountered in particular occurrences and events, self-revealed in persons and displayed in actions, in a word, that beside the inner revelation from the Spirit there is an outward revelation of the divine nature.⁹⁹

In religious language the outward manifestations are called ‘signs’, according to Otto, but not all these are “signs’ in the true sense, but opportunities, circumstances, prompting the religious feeling to awake of itself (*aus sich selbst*); and the factor promoting this result was found to lie in an element common to them all, but merely analogous with ‘the holy’.¹⁰⁰ Thus, some so-called ‘signs’ are not genuine recognitions of the holy in its own authentic nature, so that it comes as no surprise that at a higher level of religious development ‘such false recognitions of the holy are (...) rejected’.¹⁰¹ Apparently, Otto is ultimately interested in ‘the holy’ as such, which surely manifests itself in the inner consciousness and – in a somewhat defective way – also in things, persons, and events, but these ‘sacred things’ are at best secondary to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, around which religion revolves.

⁹⁷ OTTO: *Aufsätze das Numinose betreffend* (Stuttgart / Gotha 1923) vi-vii.

⁹⁸ OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.) 172; *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) 143.

⁹⁹ OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.) 172; *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) 143.

¹⁰⁰ OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.) 172; *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) 143.

¹⁰¹ OTTO: *Das Heilige* (1917 etc.) 172; *The Idea of the Holy* (1923) 144.



Figure 4. Gerardus van der Leeuw

In the work of the phenomenologist *Gerardus van der Leeuw* (1890-1950), 'sacred' (*heilig*) is an extremely important term. Although Van der Leeuw admired Rudolf Otto and called *Das Heilige* a 'wonderful' book, his usage differs from Otto's.¹⁰² This is already indicated by the fact that Van der Leeuw prefers the adjective 'sacred' and speaks of sacred stones, trees, animals, men, communities, times, and spaces. In the following I will not address all these particular topics, but concentrate on the question how the sacred is conceptualized in his monumental book about the phenomenology of religion. The book starts with a discussion of the key concept of power (*mana*), which – as Van der Leeuw summarizes – is empirically experienced in things and persons and causes these to be influential and effective.¹⁰³ The original object of religion was just (factual) power.¹⁰⁴ In a characteristic formulation, God is called

¹⁰² G. VAN DER LEEUW: *Einführung in die Phänomenologie der Religion* (München 1925) 131; cf. W. HOFSTEE: *Goden en mensen. De godsdienstwetenschap van Gerardus van der Leeuw* (Kampen 1997) 61.

¹⁰³ G. VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (Tübingen 1933) 8; English translation: *Religion in Essence and Manifestation. A Study in Phenomenology* (London 1938) 28.

¹⁰⁴ VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) 4: 'Wir müssen uns daran gewöhnen, für die primitive und sogar für einen großen Teil der antiken Religiosität das

‘a late comer in [the history of] religion’.¹⁰⁵ The confrontation with this extraordinary power can lead to amazement, awe, and even fear. According to Van der Leeuw, things and persons endowed with this potency have ‘an essential nature of their own which we call ‘sacred’’.¹⁰⁶ Although this formulation may not be completely transparent, it points to the fact that the presence of this power in things and persons gives them a special character: they are of a different type (*andersartig*). Van der Leeuw further notices that this notion of power is actually theorized in religion (for instance, in the pagan and christian concept of *pneuma*).

Theoretically important is his discussion of the relationship between power, awe and taboo.¹⁰⁷ The relationship between power and taboo seems to be structurally parallel to that between power and ‘sacred’. ‘Objects, persons, times, places or actions charged with Power are called *tabu*’ or *tapu* (the verb *tapui* meaning ‘to make holy’).¹⁰⁸ Taboo indicates what is exceptional, and is a kind of warning: ‘danger, high voltage’. One should maintain the proper distance to these highly charged things or persons. *Tabu* implies (much more strongly than ‘sacred’) a code of behaviour, which is negatively described by Van der Leeuw in terms of keeping distance. ‘*Tabu* (...) is the avoidance of deed and word, springing from awe in the presence of Power’.¹⁰⁹ The violation of the taboo does not imply punishment, but automatic reaction, ‘exactly as the electric current shocks anyone who carelessly touches the wire’.¹¹⁰ The power awakens awe (*Scheu*), which may manifest itself as both fear and attraction. The reaction to the power that manifests itself is ambivalent; an ambivalence that Otto gave an ontological status by referring

Übernatürliche in der Gottesvorstellung durch die einfache Notion des Andern, Anderartigen, Außergewöhnlichen zu ersetzen, die schlechthinnige Abhängigkeit, die uns geläufig ist, durch ein allgemeines Distanzgefühl’; *Religion* (1938) 23f (‘ersetzen’ should be translated by ‘replace’, not ‘interpret’).

¹⁰⁵ VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) 29; *Religion* (1938) 48.

¹⁰⁶ VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) 9; *Religion* (1938) 28.

¹⁰⁷ VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) 23-32; *Religion* (1938) 43-51.

¹⁰⁸ VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) 24; *Religion* (1938) 43; for the explanation of the word *tapui* Van der Leeuw refers to N. SÖDERBLOM: *Das Werden des Gottesglaubens* (1916) 40; 2nd ed. (Leipzig 1925) 31f.

¹⁰⁹ VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) 25: ‘*Tabu* ist Meidung der Tat und des Worts aus Scheu vor der Macht’; *Religion* (1938) 45.

¹¹⁰ VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) 27; *Religion* (1938) 46.

to the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. In the context of his phenomenological work Van der Leeuw refrains from doing so.¹¹¹

This does not mean, however, that he does not touch upon the object of religious observance and behaviour at all. In a discussion of the *distance* between the powerful and the relatively powerless (i.e., between the sacred and the profane), he characterizes the sacred as what is placed within boundaries (*das Abgegrenzte*), what is exceptional and set apart (*das Ausgenommene*).¹¹² Changing the perspective (taking the sacred instead of power as ‘acting subject’, so to speak), Van der Leeuw says that the power of the sacred creates a place of its own for it.¹¹³ This, once again, points to the fact that the (extraordinary) power has to ‘take place’ somewhere. Whoever is confronted with this power – and here follows the almost hesitant turn from the subjective to the ontological level – ‘realizes that he is in the presence of some quality with which in his previous experience he was never familiar, and which cannot be evoked from something else but which, *sui generis* and *sui juris*, can be designated only by religious terms such as ‘sacred’ and ‘numinous’. All these terms have a common factor in that they indicate a firm conviction, but at the same time no definite conception, of the completely different, the absolutely distinct’.¹¹⁴

Although a definite conception is missing, it is evident that Van der Leeuw considers this power to materialize in things and persons which were deemed ‘sacred’ just because they were charged with this power. In this view, it hardly makes sense to speak about the ‘sacred’ dimension of power as such, as ‘sacred’ is the privileged term to refer to the many things, persons, acts, etcetera, in which power is invested. This matter would certainly deserve more detailed study, but what is immediately relevant here is Van der Leeuw’s treatment of the topic of sacred space (*heiliger Raum*).¹¹⁵ With reference to the work of Henri Bergson and Ernst Cassirer, he states that parts of space, like parts of time, ‘have their

¹¹¹ VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) 29; *Religion* (1938) 48.

¹¹² VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) 28; *Religion* (1938) 47.

¹¹³ VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) 28: ‘Seine Mächtigkeit [des ‘Heiligen’] schafft ihm eine Stelle für sich’; *Religion* (1938) 47.

¹¹⁴ VAN DER LEEUW: *Religion* (1938) 47-48. This translation of the last sentence certainly is an interpretation. See the original text in *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) 29: ‘Alle diese Termini haben gemeinsam, daß sie eine Ahnung andeuten des gänzlich Andern, schlechthin Verschiedenen’.

¹¹⁵ VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) §57; *Religion* (1938).

own and independent value',¹¹⁶ are set apart and inhabited by power. Van der Leeuw suggests defining sacred space as

that locality that becomes a position (*Stätte*) by the effects of power repeating themselves there, or being repeated by man. It is the place of worship (...)¹¹⁷

To paraphrase: a sacred place is an empowered place – empowered either by the special effects of 'power' or by rituals performed by man. This is not exactly an operational definition, but it is evident to Van der Leeuw that the sacred must have a form: 'it must be 'localizable' (*es muß 'statthaft' werden*), spatially, temporally, visibly or audibly. Or still more simple: the sacred must 'take place'.¹¹⁸ For Van der Leeuw the sacred implies some sort of materialization, whereas for Otto it ultimately denotes the transcendental as such.

4. The Administration of the Sacred

If the above discussion has clarified anything, it is that the administration of the sacred is a hazardous undertaking. The 'sacred' is hard to get (at), and there is no consensus among scholars of religion as how to approach it theoretically. One can even doubt whether they speak about the same subject named '(the) sacred'. Let me make a few concluding remarks. In view of the current sophisticated debates about the various types of the sacred (the 'personal sacred', the 'spiritual sacred', the 'civil sacred', the 'religious sacred'),¹¹⁹ it is striking that the four major theorists discussed above all use the term 'sacred' to refer to religion(s) or religious phenomena. It is even claimed that the sacred is the common denominator of any and every religion. To a large degree, at least, the 'sacred' stands for the attempt to theorize religion beyond the level of theisms or polytheisms. Emile Durkheim, Gerardus van der Leeuw,

¹¹⁶ VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) 369; *Religion* (1938) 393 (translation corrected).

¹¹⁷ VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) 369: '(H)eiliger Raum ist ein Ort, der zur Stätte wird, indem sich an ihm die Wirkung der Macht wiederholt oder vom Menschen wiederholt wird. Er ist die Stelle des Kults'; *Religion* (1938) 393.

¹¹⁸ VAN DER LEEUW: *Phänomenologie der Religion* (1933) 425: es muß 'stattfinden'; *Religion* (1938) 447.

¹¹⁹ EVANS: 'The Sacred' (2003).

Rudolf Otto, and – to some extent – also William Robertson Smith employed the term ‘sacred’ to include ‘pre-theistic’ (if this term is permitted) or – more accurate – ‘non-theistic’ religious phenomena in their research.¹²⁰ This vocabulary enabled them to highlight the distinctive character of religion (apart from its theoretical or ethical elements) in a way they deemed to be superior to definitions that explicitly refer to the divine or supernatural. The exclusion of the gods and the theorized supernatural may make the concept of the sacred also attractive to present-day scholars who are interested in ‘post-theistic’ religious phenomena.

The treatment of the ‘sacred’, as was to be expected, varies from scholar to scholar, but there are also insights and observations that they all have in common. To a great extent, Robertson Smith set the agenda. He stressed how difficult it was to define the sacred, opposed the holy and the common (profane), pointed to the spatial (and material) dimension of the sacred, established the connection between the deities (sacred), locality and ritual, and highlighted the social dimension of the sacred and the ‘rules of holiness’ (how to behave in relation to the sacred), which were explained in terms of taboo. The close relation between the holy/sacred and taboo for a long time remained a key element in the history of religious studies and cultural anthropology. The points mentioned by Robertson Smith were also important to Durkheim. In an attempt to specify what the sacred represented, Durkheim postulated an absolute heterogeneity between the sacred and the profane: there is no other example of things as radically opposed to each other. A transition from the one category to the other involves a complete transformation: the profane and the sacred tree may have the same appearance, but differ in substance. As in the Catholic Eucharist, a kind of transubstantiation seems to take place, in which the consecrated bread and wine are supposed to actually change into the body and blood of Christ. Although Durkheim is well-known for this binary opposition, we should not overlook the fact that in his view the sacred was also something invested with a power *sui generis*, to be explained in terms of the collective forces behind it.

¹²⁰ It is true that Robertson Smith spoke about the gods and their holiness (and therefore he is not a very good example of theorizing religion beyond the gods), but he also connected holiness to places charged with energy and thus made a move in defining and locating religion in a new energetical way. But, again, it must be admitted that Smith saw this energy as ‘divine energy’.

This takes me back to the two main lines (the substantial and the situational) of defining the sacred in the history of the study of religion which I introduced at the beginning of this paper, and along which the discussion of the various positions proceeded. *Grosso modo*, these two lines can indeed be discerned, although it is not that easy to specify where they actually differ. The difference is not adequately and fully addressed by distinguishing between 'situational/linguistic' and 'substantial' approaches, or between sacredness as a value placed *on* objects and a power that shines *through* objects (because of their extraordinary qualities).¹²¹ Even for Durkheim it was not enough to claim that the distinction between profane and sacred is just a linguistic marker 'to set things apart' in a certain context: somehow these sacred places are invested with powers which deter people from intruding. Thus, the sacred (place) is not only defined by being set apart, but also by an extraordinary quality. One could say that Durkheim, to some extent, substantialized the sacred by attributing 'power' to it. The main difference, of course, is that Van der Leeuw and certainly Otto related the power of the sacred to the numinous or the sphere of the gods, whereas Durkheim related it to society and collective ideals. The first view implies an interest in religious experience or even the numinous itself, whereas the situational view focusses on human activity (ritual) and how place is sacralized. To a large degree, this is the opposition between the 'insider' and the 'outsider' perspectives (*Teilnehmer- und Beobachterperspektive*), between the poetics of the religious and the politics of demarcation. These differences can be related to the diverse approaches seen in phenomenology of religion on the one hand, and in anthropology of religion on the other.

In an influential essay Jonathan Z. Smith remarks that there is no inherent difference between a sacred vessel and an ordinary one, and concludes that sacred and profane are transitive categories: 'they serve as maps and labels, not substances; they are distinctions of office, indices of difference'.¹²² According to Smith, the sacred and the profane cannot be distinguished by natural, but only by social characteristics. Anything can be sacred, and this leads Smith to the conclusion that the

¹²¹ W.E. PADEN: 'Before 'the Sacred' became Theological: Rereading the Durkheimian Legacy', in *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 3,1 (1991) 10-23, 16.

¹²² J.Z. SMITH: *To Take Place. Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago / London 1987) 105.

distinction between profane and sacred is just a linguistic one: it is a social marker 'to set things apart'. To a certain extent this is correct, but according to the authors discussed above setting apart as such is not enough to make something sacred. In both the situational and substantivist view the special nature of the sacred is explained by the extraordinary power attached to it. The inclination to compare the extraordinary power residing in the sacred with 'electricity', which was felt even by the Durkheimians, must spring from the wish to show that the sacred, indeed, is real. But what does ascribing power to the sacred exactly mean? First, one has to understand that 'being empowered' is not a quality (in the technical sense of the word) which can be discerned by the senses (as is the case with qualities such as being red or heavy). Further, one could claim that the attribution of power to something amounts to saying that it is really there. And in cases of transgression the sacred shows its 'being there' by its – destructive – power. This is the backdrop against which the characterization of the sacred as a signifier without signification is to be understood. Perhaps one could say that consecrating is *ipso facto* empowering, creating something real. Thus, calling something sacred is a performative act which makes things real: it endows them with the really exceptional 'quality' 'real', which is not in the strict, logical meaning of the word a quality of things.¹²³ The French word *idée-force* in its original sense (literally it means 'idea-power'), by which Hubert and Mauss characterized the sacred,¹²⁴ seems particularly apt to catch this doubleness.

One of the most important points of criticism regarding Durkheim is that he did not clearly distinguish between the sacred-profane opposition as (1) classes of things or realms, and as (2) relationships to things.¹²⁵ It can hardly be denied that Durkheim suggested that the whole world is divided into two classes that radically exclude each

¹²³ Just as in the case of other performative speech acts, consecrating can fail. A set of conditions has to be fulfilled to make the act successful. In John Searle's typology this act would be classified as a 'declaration', where successful performance guarantees the correspondence between the propositional content and the world, as in 'I open this meeting' or 'you are fired'; cf. SEARLE: *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language* (London / New York 1969); SEARLE: *Expression and Meaning. Studies in the Theory of Speech Acts* (London etc. 1979) 16f.

¹²⁴ HUBERT & MAUSS: 'Préface' (1909 etc.) xvii.

¹²⁵ LUKES: *Emile Durkheim* (1973 etc) 27, and PADEN: 'Before 'the Sacred' became Theological' (1991) 17, whose formulation I use here.

other, and that, therefore, sacred and profane are 'fixed properties of objects', so to speak.¹²⁶ But on the other hand it is evident that a being can 'pass from one of these world to the other'.¹²⁷ Durkheim spoke of the contagiousness of the sacred. 'By a sort of contradiction, the sacred world is as though inclined by its very nature to spread into the same profane world that it otherwise excludes. While repelling the profane world, the sacred world tends at the same time to flow into the profane world whenever that latter world comes near it'.¹²⁸ Such observations show that although Durkheim had an inclination to speak of the sacred and the profane as opposite realms, he also was aware of the fact that what is sacred and what is profane is ultimately relative to varying situations. Authors such as Jonathan Z. Smith, David Chidester and Edward Linenthal have rightly stressed that nothing is inherently sacred, and that 'sacred' is best regarded as 'a sign of difference that can be attached to virtually anything through the human labor of consecration'.¹²⁹

This movement between the sacred and the profane is often captured by Arnold van Gennep's famous notion of the 'pivoting of the sacred', which indicates that the same thing is sacred on one occasion and profane on another (or even sacred in some respect and profane in another). Van Gennep gives the example of a man who when at home within his own clan lives in the sphere of the profane, whereas as soon as he makes a journey he may enter the sphere of the sacred. The representation of 'the pivoting of the notion of the sacred' (*le pivotement de la notion de sacré*) and the corresponding rites (of passage) are characterized by the fact that they are alternatives. The sacred is no absolute value, but a value that indicates specific situations (*indique des situations respectives*).¹³⁰ In his classic *Les Rites de Passage* Van Gennep gives various examples of transitions between the two spheres by moving to other locations and also by ritual performances. The fact that 'sacred' is a relational notion also explains the fact that in certain situations various levels or grades of

¹²⁶ PADEN: 'Before 'the Sacred' became Theological' (1991) 17.

¹²⁷ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 36; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 54.

¹²⁸ DURKHEIM: *The Elementary Forms* (1995) 322; *Les formes élémentaires* (1912 etc.) 454.

¹²⁹ CHIDESTER & LINENTHAL: 'Introduction' (1995) 6.

¹³⁰ A. VAN GENNEP: *Les rites de passage* (Paris 1909) 16; *The Rites of Passage* (Chicago 1960) 12.

sacredness are possible. With regard to this last point, the sharp dichotomy between sacred (connected with the strong notion of taboo) and profane, developed in studying 'primitive' and ancient religions, is not really convincing. The dichotomization of this distinction may have been stimulated by a search for particularly 'strong' examples of religion, which would reveal the essence of religion. However, with the ongoing process of the diffusion of religions into the generally religious, the sacred has lost its strong contours as well.¹³¹ As with beauty, what is sacred lies – at least to some extent¹³² – in the eye of the beholder. As (religious) authority diminishes, who determines what is 'sacred' or – for that matter – 'religious'? Of course, one can point to paradigmatic examples, but how to decide the less obvious cases? American scholars argue that – at least with respect to the United States – the dichotomy has lost much of its value.¹³³

Although the gulf between the situational and substantial view of the sacred may be not that deep as is sometimes suggested, I side with the 'situationalists'. Why? Because in spite of what was said above about the attribution of the sacred as making something 'real', it is not (primarily) a substance that can be found 'out there', but is at closer inspection found first of all to be a notion applied to certain things or persons, etcetera. It is no coincidence that the sacred is so often put between quotation marks, and that scholars talking about the sacred speak about the very *notion* of the sacred. It is a language rather than an object game: representation (to use the Durkheimians' favourite word), not

¹³¹ D. HERVIEU-LÉGER: 'Religion as Memory. Reference to Tradition and the Constitution of a Heritage of Belief in Modern Societies', in J.G. PLATVOET & A.L. MOLENDIJK (eds.): *The Pragmatics of Defining Religion. Concepts, Contexts and Contests* (Leiden 1999) 73-92, 75f: 'Will it be necessary to concentrate one's efforts on those 'indisputably' religious phenomena, at the risk of being blinded by their very obviousness, given that it is society itself which thus pre-defines them? Or, rather, will it be necessary to widen one's perspective in order to bring to light modernity's (invisible) religious logic, at the risk of the dissolution of the religious object as such, at the risk as well of giving to the researcher an exorbitant privilege in the selection of the significant facts?'

¹³² Most authors discussed in this paper connect the sacred to the collective forces of society. If this is still true, 'the sacred', having a more or less strong social dimension, is less individualized than (the experience of) beauty.

¹³³ C. MCDANNELL: *Material Christianity. Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven / London 1995); R.L. MOORE: *Selling God. American Religion in the Marketplace of Culture* (New York etc. 1994).

presence (of the divine).¹³⁴ I do not want to exaggerate, but to a large extent ‘sacred’ is a linguistic or classificatory device. Something is *called* sacred, and thereby (if the act succeeds) *becomes* sacred. This, again, implies that the sacred can be contested. Did the consecration succeed? Is this really a sacred site, and for whom? These questions have to be addressed. No doubt, research will show that some elements (such as candles, inscriptions and flowers) are frequently associated with ‘the sacred’ and used to sacralize, but these are not in themselves things which make a spot, a person or a deed sacred. Something becomes sacred by the elusive act of making it sacred (in one way or the other). Thus, from a theoretical point of view, the performance is the essential and most interesting aspect of the sacred. The space that is contested, the meaning that is attached, and the ritual that is performed, these are foci that really do matter when studying the sacred.

In my view ‘sacred’ is more an adjective than a substantive. In religion the word is first and foremost predicated – I would guess – of things: religion materialized. Sacred persons, festivals and spaces have a special character which at first sight is probably best described as non-profane. They are distinguished from ‘ordinary’ persons, festivals and spaces by being ‘set apart’, by being named ‘sacred’. These tautological and negative characterizations are mostly supplemented by statements that the sacred has (or is inhabited by) special – or even absolute – power(s). But although this bestows upon these persons, festivals and spaces a density and (awe-inspiring) reality for the believers, saying that something is particularly powerful does not present us with much content about the thing it is said of. That is why the ‘situationalists’ claim that the ‘sacred’ is best interpreted as a structural marker or even an empty signifier. According to Jonathan Z. Smith, it is ritual and place that, above all, direct attention:

The temple serves as a focusing lens, establishing the possibility of significance by directing attention, by requiring the perception of difference. Within the temple, the ordinary (which to an outside eye or ear remains wholly ordinary) becomes significant, becomes ‘sacred’, simply by being there.¹³⁵

¹³⁴ VAN GENNEP: *Les rites de passage* 16f: ‘Celui qui passe, au cours de sa vie, par ces alternatives, se trouve, à un moment donné, par le jeu même des conceptions et des classements, pivoter sur lui-même et regarder le sacré *au lieu de profane*, ou inversement’ (italicized in the original).

¹³⁵ J.Z. SMITH: *To Take Place* (1987) 104.

The difficulty for much recent research on 'invisible' religion or diffused forms of religiosity, of course, is that the 'places' are not so obviously sacred, and much controversy can arise about whether or not a certain locus is sacred, or to what degree.¹³⁶

There seems to be a growing uncertainty about the boundaries of the sacred and how to administer the sacred. Even with obvious sacred places such as churches or the Vietnam Veterans Memorial (Washington DC), it is deemed necessary to mark their special character by prohibitory signs (the modern taboo) like 'no smoking, no food or drink, no bikes, no running'. Apparently, it can no longer be taken for granted that visitors know how to behave in sacred space. Its traditional characteristics are no longer sufficient and, therefore, negative markers are placed at the entrances. If even these 'obvious' cases are no longer 'obvious', how difficult it must be to 'mark', recognize and respect the new sacred sites and events of late modernity, such as the (temporal) memorials for victims of violence at the site where the crime or accident took place, or rooms of silence (meditation spaces) in hospitals. As it is no longer obvious, even for the experts, whether this (space) is sacred or not, 'holy grounds' are contested in at least two ways. First, there will be discussion or even strife about establishing new sacred spaces (for instance, the municipality should in some way or another acknowledge or at least accept a road monument), and, second, on a more basic level, the 'sacred' character of such spaces will be contested, because the definition of the sacred cannot be settled. Is every memorial 'sacred' per se? Because of the lack of consensus about the (definition of the) sacred, the 'sacred' will remain an area of discussion and disagreement. The only thing we know for sure is that in order to be sacred the sacred has to be demarcated, set apart in a special way, usually by some form of ritualization. But we do not know how this has to be done in order to count as 'sacred'. I guess that the diffusion of (religious) authority (which had the power to define) is one of the main reasons why the administration of the sacred has increasingly become a topic of debate among both practitioners and scholars.

¹³⁶ T. ASAD: *Genealogies of Religion. Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore / London 1993) 126f.

