

The Sacred and the Profane: The eternal quest for the sacred in the profane

Overview

Mircea Eliade, in "The Sacred and the Profane," challenges the belief that the modern world is entirely secular and devoid of the sacred. He argues that even in an era of declining religious faith, there remains an unconscious longing for the sacred within individuals. As such, the world we live in, despite the industrialisation and secularization in the modern century, is not entirely profane.

Key concepts: the sacred, the hierophant and homo religious

Eliade's thesis rests on three key concepts: the Sacred, the hierophant, and homo religious. **The Sacred** refers to elements that evoke awe and wonder, contrasting with the mundane aspects of daily life known as the profane. **The hierophany** encompasses both the manifestation of the divine and human awareness of the divine, exemplified by encounters such as Moses encountering a burning bush. **Homo religious** represents individuals who actively seek transcendence, freedom, and the creation of meaning. These individuals are inherently religious, distinct from those who merely adhere to personal beliefs, existential needs, and societal obligations. By understanding these three concepts, we can grasp Eliade's proposition of the dichotomy between the sacred and the profane. The sacred seeks and discovers sacred spaces to find meaning in existence, while the profane lacks such a desire.

The innate longing for the sacred

Eliade contends that in our modern, industrialized era, the longing for the sacred persists in our thoughts, even as the influence of organized religion declines. These remnants of longing can be observed in the continued presence of rituals and festivals within contemporary society. Notably, holidays such as Christmas and Easter, with their religious origins, continue to be celebrated and carry a sense of sacredness. Moreover, the pursuit of art and literature suggests a deeper need for meaning that surpasses individual existence. The popularity of spiritual tourism further exemplifies the human desire to seek broader significance beyond daily surroundings, akin to ancient religious pilgrimages. The rise of New Age spirituality, yoga, and meditation also illustrates humanity's quest for spiritual enlightenment. These examples demonstrate an inherent longing for the sacred within the human mind. Consequently, the world is not solely a profane place, and the concept of sacredness will always hold a place in human consciousness, even in an era where religious faith is less overt than in ancient times.

Religion for the non-religious?

Eliade's book brings to mind the work of contemporary writer Alain de Botton and his book "A Non-Believer's Guide to the Uses of Religion." In my view, de Botton's book can be seen as an extension of Eliade's thesis, as he advocates for the incorporation of religious rituals without the need for a religious framework or belief. In his book, de Botton suggests that non-religious individuals have much to gain from religious rituals. He proposes that by extracting some of the worthwhile features of religious rituals, we can create our own personal and communal rituals to cultivate a life imbued with values and a sense of purpose. Still, it begs the question of the purpose and significance of engaging in rituals without submitting to an organized religious framework in the first place. Without the essence of religion, how are these rituals sustain in our quotidian living and guide us to experience the sacred in its fullest?

The submission to divine sovereignty

As Eliade highlighted major differences between the religious and the non-religious person in their pursuit of the sacred, religious individuals believe in the existence of an absolute reality transcending human experience. Life itself is sacred and one should strive to imitate divine behavior. In contrast, nonreligious individuals reject transcendence and accept the relativity of reality. They may question the meaning of existence, and human beings as only subjects. There is an emphasis on human knowledge and agency. It is therefore difficult for them to experience the transcendence experience of spiritual rebirth that marks the essence of the sacred.

Job and the miserable comforters

The biblical story of Job came to my mind when I was reading Elisade's thesis. Job's story remains as urgently relevant in today's world as we wrestle with the vicissitudes of life and seek higher purpose and meanings. During Job's great misery, his friends, dubbed as the "miserable comforters", came and purport to comfort Job. Their human understanding proves to be insufficient in capturing the complexity of human experiences and the mysterious ways in which God works in the world.

The eternal quest for meaning

In our present world, we are faced with the marketing and wholesale of pseudo-religions generated from humans' innate demand for the sacred, generating cults of followers. Are these offerings genuine sources of comfort and guidance in an era of secularization, or do they serve as mere "miserable comforters" for those who do not adhere to religious belief systems? Should we be content with a shallow semblance of the sacred, or should we embrace and submit to established religious systems to transcend the profanity of existence? Would the pursuit of pseudo-religion be a better than nothing alternative, or a misguided tragedy? Moreover, will such innate desire for meaning seeking be manipulated into other social-political ends?

Where is wisdom we have lost in knowledge?

English poet T.S. Eliot foresaw humanity's everlasting battle for knowledge and wisdom in the information age when he asked, "*Where is the knowledge we have lost in information? Where is the wisdom we have lost in knowledge?*" This enduring longing for wisdom, which gives birth to the quest for the sacred, persists even in an increasingly secular and profane world. In our current reality, whether the pursuit of knowledge amidst the overwhelming sea of information can both blind us and aid us on this quest for sacredness remains a pressing question of concern.

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