

MIRCEA ELIADE'S PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION

The Reality and Relevance Today

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Abstract: Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) speaks of religion as the 'experience of the sacred'; the sacral character is the unique feature and the distinct nature of religion. This element of sacred can be located in any person, at any place or in any situation, because all have experienced and manifested the sense of the sacred through signs, symbols or rituals at some time in history. The popular religiosity which is the living religion of the people exhibits the characteristics of religion as presented by Mircea Eliade. A detailed and critical analysis of the Eliade's concept of the sacred is studied in the context of field studies of popular religious practices of Catholics in Kalghatgi, Dharward, Karnataka, and shrines near Chennai, India. This study, while testing the applicability of Eliade's theory to popular religious practices, will also make a critical analysis of the study of religion as presented by Eliade in light of the reality of religion as lived in Kalghatgi.

Keywords: Eliade, Nature, Philosophy of Religion, Pilgrimage, Popular Religiosity, Profane, Sacred, Shrine, Space, Time

1. Introduction

Mircea Eliade is a phenomenologist, philosopher, and historian of religion, widely known for his editorial work on the *Encyclopedia of Religion*. His works can be classified as history of religions, phenomenology of religion, theology, or an instance of

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the wider and more encompassing *religionswissenschaft*.¹ His experience of travelling across the globe during which he met people of different cultures, religious faiths and social backgrounds helped him to bring to light an important element in religion, namely, the dimension of the sacred. Mircea Eliade was influenced by the writings of Emile Durkheim and Rudolf Otto.

Attributing religion to mere manifestation of the sacred as presented by Eliade is not without its share of criticism. His perception of religion is to be tested in a day-to-day living of the religion. Religion continues to play an important role in the lives of people and its role is far more visible now than ever before as is witnessed in the growing number of devotees visiting the shrines and other religious and pilgrim centres attracting devotees in larger numbers than ever before. Eliade's claim that each being has experienced and has manifested the sacred is something, which is to be questioned and challenged, in the postmodern society.

Though Eliade may not have envisaged the phenomenon of popular religiosity and the application of his principles to this emerging religious phenomenon in our world today, one can clearly grasp how Eliade's theory sees its application in popular religious practices. From the field studies of popular religious practices undertaken in Kalghatgi Taluk in Karnataka, Annai Vailankanni Shrine and Mazhai Malai Madha Shrine, near Chennai, Tamil Nadu, an analysis is made on Eliade's philosophy of religion. Field studies are conducted to test the meaning, importance, and significance of Mircea Eliade's study of religion. It would help one to go beyond the structures of religious organization and define what is it to be a religious believer today without strictly adhering to any religious sect or group. It would help one to go beyond the traditional, hierarchical, and organized structures of religion to see the

¹Babu Joseph, "Mircea Eliade's Phenomenological Description of "the Sacred" in *Romancing the Sacred? Towards an Indian Christian Philosophy of Religion*, George Karuvelil, ed., Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2007, 97-98.

presence of the sacred everywhere. Here God is not the important part of religion but a sense, a feeling, or an attribute of sacredness is what really matters. According to Eliade, that which is sacred today may not be considered sacred tomorrow. If that claim is accepted, then we need to ask what is the permanent factor in religion. If religion is something that evolves with time, then how about the organized religions in the world, which claim to have fixed truth or dogmas? Can religion ever be institutionalized? Can there be any founder of religion at all? These are some of the questions that seek answers as one gets into the study of religion as presented by Eliade.

In order to find answers to these questions it is important that a detailed study of religion in the writings of Mircea Eliade is made. This essay is an attempt in that direction.

2. Religion: An Experience of the Sacred

Eliade defines religion as a phenomenon that deals with the experience of the sacred. In his words,

It is unfortunate that we do not have at our disposal a more precise word than ‘religion’ to denote the experience of the sacred. This term carries with it a long, although, culturally rather limited, history... Religion may still be a relevant term provided we keep in mind that it does not necessarily imply belief in God, gods, or ghosts, but refers to the experience of the sacred and, consequently, is related to the idea of being, meaning, and truth.²

Thus, the study of religion for Eliade would be the study of the sacred in its various manifestations in the society today because religion is basically an experience and expression of the sacred. In celebrations and commemorations in the religious sphere, one can see a sense of the sacred. The sacred, he describes, as that which is the opposite of the profane,³ though the sense of the

²Mircea Eliade, *The Quest: History and Meaning in Religion*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984, i.

³Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, New York: Harvest Book, 1959, 10.

sacred is not restricted to religious sphere alone. It pervades the whole life.⁴

Abraham Ayrookuzhiel investigated on *The Sacred in Popular Hinduism* and proposed two ways of studying the sense of the sacred. One is to study their beliefs, myths, rites, and festivals in the context of their sacred scriptures and traditions. The other is to study the religion of a people in the context of their religious consciousness today.⁵ This essay would look into the phenomenon of the sacred as presented by Mircea Eliade in the context of religious experience and expressions based on the field work.

For Eliade, sacred is something real; yet, he clearly states that the sacred is a structure of human consciousness. The sacred is identified as the source of significance, meaning, power, and being and, accordingly, its manifestations are referred to as *hierophanies*, *kratophanies*, or *ontophanies* (appearances of the holy, of power, or of being).

Eliade, while speaking on the sacred, states that one becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself as something wholly different. He calls this *act of manifesting* as *hierophany* (from the Greek *hieros*, meaning sacred, and *phanein*, meaning to appear.) Reflecting on this term, Eliade states: "it is a fitting term, because it does not imply anything further; it expresses no more than is implicit in its etymological content, i.e., that something sacred shows itself to us."⁶ That hierophany is always a historical event, occurring in some definite situation, does not lessen its universal quality. Some hierophanies have a purely local purpose; others have, or attain a worldwide significance. Sacred shows itself by its peculiar mode, shape, size, etc. *Kratophany* is where one experiences the power of the sacred. For example, one can witness this sense of power when one is possessed by God. One would see instances where one is able to

⁴Lawrence Fernandes, "The Sacred in Popular Religiosity," *Asian Journal for Priests and Religious* 52, 3 (May 2007), 14.

⁵Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, *The Sacred in Popular Hinduism*, Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1983, 1.

⁶Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 11.

walk on the fire or able to speak in a different language when empowered by God. *Ontophany* is that which gives the identity to the being. It makes what one is.

To perceive the sacred, one needs to have a background of religious experience. A person brought up in a non-religious environment may not be able to perceive the manifestation even when it reveals itself. In the *hierophanies*, i.e., manifestation of the sacred expressed in symbols, myths are grasped as structures, and constitute a pre-reflective language that requires special hermeneutics.

In the process of manifesting the sacred, the being manifests something beyond its natural self. It becomes ‘something other’ even though there would be no changes in its physical properties. According to Eliade, “what is venerated is not stone as a stone or a tree as a tree; they are worshipped precisely because they are hierophanies, because they show something that is no longer stone or tree but the sacred.”⁷

In the practice of popular religiosity, this aspect is very visible. The offerings made at the church, the flower which is used to adorn the chariot/vehicle during the religious procession, and the coconut received at the shrine, etc., are no longer merely material products; they are sacred objects as they are in contact with the sacred. Any touch or proximity with the sacred causes a being to attain sacredness. So, the whole aspect of holy water, holy oil, amulets, and relics do manifest the sacred, thanks to its association with the sacred being. The parish priest of Tumarikoppa⁸ informed the researcher that the offerings made at the altar during the feasts which later are auctioned for a higher price because people perceive the offered things as sacred.⁹

⁷Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, New York: World Publishing Company, 1963, 2.

⁸Tumarikoppa is a village in Kalghatgi Taulk, where majority of Catholics of Kalghatgi reside.

⁹Fr. Xavier Figredo, the parish priest of Tumarikoppa church, informed the researcher that on the feast of Epiphany, he invited the people to offer gifts, which he said would be auctioned and the returns

One of the important assertions of Eliade is that the realm of sacred is not limited to any particular group. It can be manifested anywhere and everywhere. All beings in the society are capable of manifesting the sacred; and, in fact, all beings, sometime or the other did manifest the sacred. In his words,

The realm of sacred is not limited to a particular area or a group. One must get used to the idea of recognizing hierophanies absolutely everywhere... Indeed, we cannot be sure that there is anything, that has not at sometime in human history been somewhere transformed into a hierophany ... somewhere at a given time, each human society chose for itself a certain number of things, plants, animals, gestures and so on and turned them into hierophanies: and as this has been going on for tens of thousands of years of religious life, it seems improbable that there remains anything that has not at sometime been so transfigured.¹⁰

One aspect that Eliade seems to have missed is that people adopt, adapt, and appropriate what is sacred in the other into one's own culture. For example, Catholics who used to eat beef earlier in Kalghatgi do not eat beef in the village anymore, as a mark of respect to the majority Lingayats, who do not eat beef as cow is sacred to them. Thus, we see that what is sacred to one becomes sacred to the other by association with the other and not necessarily by sharing the religious experience of the other.

According to Eliade, it is difficult to perceive the exact reason why a particular society at a particular time gives the sacral character to particular beings while ignoring the other. If one studies the phenomenon of popular religiosity, one comes to realise that the socio-cultural context plays an important role in assigning the sense of the sacred to particular being - living or nonliving. Therefore, in Kalghatgi, which is an agrarian society

would be used for the needs of the church and the poor. The response was overwhelming. People treated the items auctioned as sacred and preserved them at home with reverence. If the articles were food items, then they consumed them with a sense of reverence.

¹⁰Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 12.

the patron of farmers, Vanachinnappa (also known as St. Paul the hermit) is venerated. Vanachinnappa may not be of much importance in Chennai where Annai Vailankanni (Our Lady of Vailankanni) is important.

Farming being an important occupation of the people in Kalghatgi, the Catholics would have their field and the seed that would be sown in the field blessed. They would take recourse to the sacred through prayer for rains, safety of the grains from pests and insects, and pray for good harvest. When harvest is over they would express their thanks with a religious festival. Socio-economic cultural situations play a role in the birth of the sacred.

By associating the self with the sacred, one experiences a sense of power. Hence, there is a great rush to carry the processional chariot/vehicle during festivals. To kiss the statue carried during the procession is also seen as an occasion and opportunity to participate in the sacred. The religious person places all trust in God (the sacred). This trust is expressed through pilgrimage, reading of sacred book, listening to religious teacher, etc. By doing this, the devotees find themselves being lifted up to a different realm, and from it, they draw a lot of inner strength. The assurance of the sacred, by wearing amulet, for example, gives believers new energy and new drive to carry on with their lives. Being in close touch with the sacred, they feel a power which is beyond human imagination. Though the present day psychological studies can explain many of these attributes without any reference to the sacred, one cannot deny the fact that new power surges in religious persons when they are in contact with the sacred.

3. Taboos and the Ambivalence of the Sacred

The ambivalence of the sacred is not only in the psychological order, but also in the order of values; the sacred is at once “sacred” and “deified.” It is dangerous to come near any deified or consecrated object in a profane state. It is more than a sense of reverence or awe. One is conscious of his/her self. So, one would get rid of the profane state through a ritual, for approaching the

profane is dangerous and would bring in bad results. So, there is a taboo in relation to the sacred.

In Tumarikoppa, the statue of Blessed Mother placed at the church corridor exhibits these features. People are very conscious of the presence of this divine being and the researcher found out that people of all faiths, while coming to this place, pay reverence to the Blessed Mother; they remind themselves that, in the presence of the statue, no lie is told nor any misbehaviour tolerated. If committed, they feel that they would be punished by the Blessed Mother. Thus, we see that while there is a great reverence towards this image of the Blessed Mother there is also a sense of reverential fear attached to it.

Manifestation of the sacred is not only in the pleasant and beautiful realities but also in the unaccustomed and the extraordinary which generally provoke fear and withdrawal. These, to some extent, can reveal the sacred. Actions, things, and persons tabooed have shown the workings by which kratophanies of the unusual, the disastrous, the mysterious, and so on, are set apart from the world of ordinary experience. This setting apart sometimes has positive effects; it does not merely isolate, it elevates. Thus, ugliness and deformities, while making out those who possess them, at the same time make them sacred. Eliade, in this context, speaks of *mana* which can be termed as spiritual power or spiritual energy which makes the person to do great things in life.¹¹

With regard to participating in the sacred, one can perceive two modes of being in the world. For one who does not believe in sacred, i.e., for a non-sacral being, all would be profane; a religious being, on the other hand, is able to perceive the sacred everywhere. The *sacred* and the *profane* modes of being depend upon different positions that human beings have adopted in the cosmos: hence, they are of concern to anyone seeking to discover the possible dimensions of human existence.

Eliade moves on to describe the manifestations of sacred in different realities: in time, space, nature, life, etc. In popular

¹¹Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 19.

religious practices, one sees an attempt made by the devotee to live in the sacred realm. The very purpose of pilgrimage is *darshan*, i.e., to view the presence of God and be blessed.

4. Sacred Time

It is the religious person, who makes a distinction between sacred time and profane time. For them, time is neither homogeneous nor continuous. There is a sacred time – time of festivities and celebrations – and also there is profane time, which is ordinary or mundane time. Between these two kinds of time, there is, of course, the solution of continuity; but by means of rites, a religious person can pass without danger from ordinary temporal duration to the sacred time.¹² Sense of sacred time can be seen very clearly in the lifecycle rituals of the people. Be birth, puberty, marriage, or death, people perform many religious rituals to purify and sanctify the time and the person. For the non-religious people, there is no distinction; there is only one time, i.e., the historical present.

Sacred time might also mean a mythical time, attained by means of a ritual, or by mere repetition of some action with a mythical archetype. It might also indicate the rhythms of the cosmos (like hierophanies of the moon). Thus, an instant or a fragment time might at any moment become hierophanic.

Sacral character of a time is seen as it re-actualises the mythical past. There is a great desire in human beings to be connected to the religious history (at times it could be a myth or a legend). Thus, a sense of sacred time is evolved wherein through rites, rituals, and remembrance the sacred past is remembered and brought alive through enactment, narration, etc.

In Kalghatgi, Catholics distinguish the sacred time and the profane time. For example, the season of Lent is treated as a very sacred time by the Catholics of Kalghatgi. As a result, they abstain from meat, alcohol, and smoking and participate in many devotions, spend more time in prayer, and undertake

¹²Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 68.

pilgrimage, charitable works, etc. They also have special devotion to the Holy Spirit on Mondays, Vanachinnappa and St Antony on Tuesdays, and Infant Jesus on Thursdays. Apart from the church rituals, at home, people conduct elaborate rituals to empower themselves. Thus, they do differentiate sacred time and non-sacred time as elucidated by Eliade.

5. Sacred Space

As in time, so also in space: for a religious person, space is not homogeneous; some parts are qualitatively different from others. The sacred space is caused by *hierophany* in contrast to the profane space of daily activities: An irruption of the sacred results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and makes it qualitatively different.¹³ The sacred space is also an opening to the holy or divine, a place where communication with the sacred power is made possible.¹⁴ At times, a mere sign would suffice to indicate the sacredness of a place. For example, Eliade refers to the story of Jacob's ladder in the Bible.¹⁵ Such a place serves as an *axis mundi*, the centre of the world. Even in the case of a non-religious person, space is not always homogenous; there will be some places which are of more significance and value than others, e.g., birth place, place of intimacy.

According to Eliade, when no sign manifests itself, it is *provoked*. For example, a sort of *evocation* is performed with the help of animals; it is they who *show* what place is fit to receive the sanctuary or the village. This amounts to an evocation of sacred forms or figures for the immediate purpose of *orientation* in the homogeneity of space.¹⁶ This aspect of the sacred space and place as elucidated by Eliade is seen clearly in the life of the people of Kalghatgi. They would, therefore, perform rituals to bless the agricultural land, bless their home to keep the evil

¹³Eliade, *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, 26.

¹⁴James C. Livingston, *Anatomy of the Sacred: An Introduction to Religion*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989, 56.

¹⁵Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 26.

¹⁶Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*, 27.

away for the land and, thus, to make the place blessed through the help of a ritual. Religious practices to appease and plead are seen very commonly. Devotion to Our Lady of Tumarikoppa became popular as her intercession brought rain to the ravaged land of Tumarikoppa. The devotion of Malai Mazhai Madha at the shrine in Acharapakkam near Chennai speaks of similar experience.¹⁷

Consecration of a place is another way of making it sacred. The spot where the statue of Our Lady was found (as in Vailankanni) or where the statue of St. Antony was found (in Dornally, Mysore in Karnataka) is deemed holy and the very mud from that place too is seen as sacred.

6. Sacred Nature

It is not only place and time but the whole nature too reveals the sacredness. The element of sacredness is able to pervade all realities both animate and inanimate. Eliade states: “For a religious person, nature is never merely ‘natural’, it is always filled with religious value. This is easy to understand, for the cosmos is a divine creation, coming from the hands of the gods.”¹⁸ The world is not only filled with objects which, through consecration or through rites, receive the ‘sacred’ status, but also is a place where the divine is manifested, filling the entire universe with the sacred. So, one can see or experience a sense of sacred in and around nature not only in the celestial world but also in the seas filled with water and also in different creations of God. Sacrality of the nature is based on the belief that God who created the world filled it with their presence. In the words of Eliade, “It is not simply a sacrality communicated by the gods, as is the case, for example, with a place or an object consecrated by divine presence. The gods did more; they manifested different modalities of the sacred in the very structure of the world and of the cosmic phenomenon.”¹⁹

¹⁷<<http://malaimadha.org.in>> accessed on 13 May 2015.

¹⁸Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 116.

¹⁹Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 116.

As we look at the popular religious practices of the people of Kalghatgi we realize that those who involve in agriculture are very close to nature and their religious ceremonies and rituals bring to the fore their sense of sacredness towards nature. Before sowing the seed, for example, they do conduct special prayers that the field be blessed. Water being an important commodity for agriculture they pray to God for rain and see rain as a gift of God.

7. Human Existence and Sanctified Life

When the whole nature is charged with the sacred, the human body cannot be an exception. Probably in very distant past all human organs, physiological experiences, and acts may have had a religious meaning. "For all human behaviour was established by gods or cultural heroes in *illo tempore*; they instituted the various kinds of work and the various ways of obtaining food, of making love, of expressing thought and feeling, and so on, but even acts apparently of no importance."²⁰

A human being may receive the sacral character due to a revelation from some divine beings or due to some supernatural being empowering the human being with its powers. For example, a person when consecrated in a Roman Catholic Church through the rite of ordination becomes a sacred person which gives him a new status in the society. In Kalghatgi, all the families of those children who have joined priesthood or religious life receive greater respect in the society.

Rites of passage play a considerable role in the life of a religious person. At every important stage of life, rites are performed to initiate a person into a new stage of life. It could be birth, marriage, or death. A person is gently initiated to the new stage of life through rites, which speak of transition from one stage to the other. The sacred rituals make this transition holy and blessed. For a child, starting from the initiation ceremony till the death, special prayers are offered through the rites of passage.

²⁰Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, 168.

In Kalghatgi, at the time of marriage, blessing of the jewels, planting the first pole of marriage pandal, fasting by women who would conduct special rituals for the wedding, like grinding turmeric and preparing some food items, though may look ordinary, have very close affinity to the sacred. Through rituals, prayers, and fasting they invoke the sacred giving a sacral touch to their daily life events.

There are also sacred people. Be it priest, shaman, *poojary* and at times even an elder of the family or community would take the place of a sacred person. During some Hindu religious festivals, there are occasions where a person will be possessed by the divine and all the utterings of that person at that time are treated with reverence.

9. Sacred Chariot (*Ter*)

One of the very popular Catholic religious activities is preparation and participation in religious processions. Great feasts of deities would conclude with processions. There are many beliefs associated with the *ter*, the chariot or the vehicle, used in the procession to carry the statues. These beliefs very much correspond to the theory of the sacred as illustrated by Eliade. This is observed in the following features.²¹

- a. Participating in *ter* procession is a beautiful way to express love and devotion towards the sacred deity and joining the *ter* procession, therefore, is a meritorious act.
- b. Preparing flowers for *ter* is blessed by God. He is believed to be pleased with the sacrifice the devotee makes in preparing, arranging, and beautifying the *ter*. So, even the very preparation of the *ter* is seen as a sacred act.
- c. Flowers used on the *ter* are believed to have miraculous powers. So, eating it or keeping it at home would bring in blessings and would fulfil the heart’s desire.
- d. Carrying the *ter* in procession is a meritorious act which will bring in blessings.

²¹These findings are from the field research visit made in May 2013.

- e. *Ter* being decorated and illumined can be affected by evil eye. Therefore, one needs to take precautions and use measures to ward off evil eye all through the route of the *ter* by throwing chilly, salt, or grains on it. That would work in both ways: a sense of honouring the saint and, at the same time, a measure to overcome the evil eye.
- f. Pouring water on the way to the shrine is a sign of cleaning the road to welcome the saint or the Blessed Mother. The same idea is expressed when one spreads clothes on the road to the sacred person to pass by. This shows the saint or the Blessed Virgin is holy and, therefore, one needs to keep the place and the road as clean as possible.

Since these images reveal the sacred power, all those who approach it also participate in the sacred power. Hence, a proper disposition and behaviour is expected from the devotees. Therefore, the shrines that contain these images place some guidelines and restrictions regarding the members who can be admitted to the shrine, the type of rituals that can be conducted at the shrine, etc. Each shrine has details regarding the type of rites and rituals to be performed. For example, a shrine of Kali in Kolkata would permit animal sacrifice while a shrine of Vailankanni in Tamilnadu would not permit animal sacrifice. Through these rites and rituals people participate in the sacred power and remain associated with the sacred.

Thus, Mircea Eliade while defining religion as manifestation of the sacred has brought in features of the sacred which are prevalent in the religious practices of ordinary people. Their religion is not restricted to holy sanctuaries or temples but is situated in ordinary life, day-to-day activities, and everything that is associated with human life, thus, making the whole universe and the activities of religious people marked with a sense of the sacred.

10. Conclusion

Mircea Eliade, by stating religion as manifestation of the sacred, has opened a new dimension in the whole understanding of religion. The importance of religion is not invested in a deity, a

scripture, places, or persons but on its ability to reveal the sacral character. This diminishes the power structures of organised religions, which give much importance to rites, rituals, deity, sacred book, and sacred persons. There is no much evolution of sacredness in the organised religion whereas, for Eliade, sacredness is an evolving concept. For him, that which is sacred today may not be sacred tomorrow and that which is non-sacral can become sacred if it reveals sacred character. This would also question the organisational structure of the religions, which do not easily admit change. These presentations of Eliade on religion and sacred seem most applicable in the arena of popular religious practices. This research, through the fieldwork in Kalghagti, has revealed the applicability of Eliade’s theory in the lives of the people today as expressed in popular religious practices.