

THE SACRED, NATURE, AND TECHNOLOGY

by Eduardo Rodrigues da Cruz

Abstract. Bronislaw Szerszynski's *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* prompts a short reflection on the meaning of "the sacred." Although it is part of the main thread of the book, the description of traditional and modern sacred does not seem to take into account recent scholarship in the field. In this essay I summarize a few issues in religious studies today regarding "the sacred" and what possible contribution they might have to Szerszynski's argument and, conversely, how his detailed analysis of the sacred may help this discipline to avoid "philistinism." The consequences of a universal human nature (from a Darwinian viewpoint) for the concept of the sacred are briefly discussed. In the end, a few suggestions are provided for the ongoing dialogue of science, technology, and religion.

Keywords: evolution; nature; religion; religious studies; sacred; Bronislaw Szerszynski.

If any concept has been under harsh scrutiny recently in religious studies, it is that of "the sacred," or "the holy." Indeed, although much used during the twentieth century, somehow replacing the more theological notion of God, it has begun to be criticized in a post-Eliadian era, basically with the three charges that it is crypto-theological, Eurocentric, and ill-defined.

A mainstream in religious studies has taken shape around societies such as International Association for the History of Religions and the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion and journals such as *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* and *Religion*. The new consensus has been decidedly suspicious of any religious agenda behind academic departments and dismisses anything resembling a *sui generis* character for religion. It is thoroughly naturalistic, antisubstantialist, and empirically oriented.

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A good example of this attitude can be found in the *Guide to the Study of Religion* (Braun and McCutcheon 2000). As its editor writes, the volume shares “aims of the family of human and social sciences in the modern university” (Braun 2000, 6). The antisubstantialist stance is unequivocal: “The editorial attitude in this volume . . . is . . . [to] regard ‘religion’ as essentially empty, of use only as a marking device” (p. 8). The model for a good scholar of religion, moreover, is the one who works with “entirely nonreligious concepts of religion” (p. 17).

This skeptical attitude holds especially true for the concept of “the sacred.” Be it in a more functional form (Emile Durkheim) or in a more substantial one (Rudolph Otto, Mircea Eliade), most scholars of religion are wary of its use and deny an explanatory role for it. Recent evaluations (for example, Anttonen 2000a, b) have stressed the place of the sacred more as an object of the inquiry (also “essentially empty”) than a tool for the inquirer.

This trend has been radicalized in evolutionary and cognitive studies of religion, which in a way reinforce the agenda of Feuerbach and Freud of dealing with “religion” and “the sacred” as the outcome of projections of a mind that was adapted for another purpose (see Boyer 2001). Moreover, from Daniel C. Dennett, a recent and authoritative popularizer, we get extreme criticisms of cryptoreligious attitudes in the academy:

A subtler, less forthright, but equally frustrating barrier to straightforward inquiry into the nature of religion has been erected and maintained by the scholarly friends of religion, many of whom are atheistic or agnostic connoisseurs, not champions of any creed. They do want to study religion, but only *their way*, not the way I am proposing, which by their lights is “scientific,” “reductionistic,” and, of course, philistine. (Dennett 2006, 259)

Dennett places religionists and social scientific scholars of religion in the same bag, insofar as they still presuppose the importance of religion in today’s world. Ironically, even Dennett admits entertaining “sacred values” (2006, 23–24). Indeed, fellow-minded philosophers and scientists do the same and protest the charge that they want to desacralize the world (see, for example, Rogers 2004).

However, contrary to the expectations of many, “the sacred” has been more popular than ever. Looking for the word in Amazon.com gives us 9,189 hits (as of June 2006), and 17,255 hits for “holy,” both as an adjective and a noun. Many scholars in fields related to religious studies do use “the sacred” without feeling any guilt (see Shorter 1996; Pargament, Magyar-Russell, and Murray-Swank 2005).

This brings us to two related questions: Whose sacred? Whose philistinism? Before trying to address these questions, however, I want to get more specific with the work of Bronislaw Szerszynski, an apparently distanced observer of this controversy.

ILL-DEFINED "SACRED"

Although "the sacred" is not anybody's property, it is certainly wise to resort to the best scholarship in the area before building one's argument. In his *Nature, Technology and the Sacred* (Szerszynski 2005a; see also 2005b) the author does not seem to follow this piece of advice. The concept is ill-defined: "I am using 'sacred' in a more general sense, to understand the ways in which a range of religious framing are involved in our ideas of and dealings with nature and technology. At the theoretical level, 'the sacred' in its different historical orderings plays the primary *interpretive and explanatory* role in the chapters that follow" (2005a, ix; emphasis added).

More than that, it is too Western, Eurocentric, and even WASP a concept: "I suggest that it [traditional account] obscures a deeper truth—that this disenchantment is itself a form of enchantment, a very particular sacralization of nature, and one that emerges within a specifically Western religious history" (2005a, xii). This also is visible in his extensive analysis of contemporary environmental concerns and how they relate to the sacred (p. 163, for example).

Finally, it tends to be cryptotheological, insofar as it assumes Otto's notion of the sacred without any distancing (pp. 60–61). In short, Szerszynski's use of the word has in it all that has been explored and criticized by scholars of religion. A good question that may be raised, therefore, is to what extent this half-naïve usage of "the sacred" jeopardizes Szerszynski's theses. This would require a more extensive analysis than I attempt here, but it is fair to say that they do not remain unscathed. The problem with ill-defined concepts and categories is that they do not pass Popperian tests. Any "ordering of the sacred" described by the author can be sustained with any number of sources, for alternative explanations could be easily ruled out with ad hoc hypotheses. The possible response is that, rather than an explanation, an interpretation is being offered: "I am using the idea of the transformations of the sacred not to *explain* the changes in our understanding of nature and technology, but to *understand* them better" (p. 26). But the latter floats in the air without the former, with causation being only implicit: "In the rest of the book I will be arguing that contemporary ideas and practices concerning nature and technology remain closely bound up with religious ways of thinking and action" (p. 7)—not very advisable for an argument that wishes to remain "social scientific" (p. x).

The concept of the sacred should be put into perspective. Szerszynski could profit more from discussions on secularization among theologians and theologically minded scholars. Those of us who are familiar with the literature notice the absence of references to Peter Berger (1999, for example) or the controversies around Karl Löwith's thesis of continuity and Hans Blumenberg's thesis of the autonomy of the modern age (for a discussion, see Pannenberg 1996).¹ This is all the more odd because

Szerszynski's thesis seems to be closer to Löwith (Szerszynski 2005a, 8, 146, 174), tempered with Max Weber and Marcel Gauchet. Regarding the latter, absent also is an assessment of the reception of Gauchet's book since its first publication in 1985 (see Ferry and Gauchet 2004). After all, Gauchet's theses spawned many responses and became yardsticks for discussion on secularization since then. Furthermore, still having in mind theologians and historians of Christianity, why does the book not dialogue with them in its extensive analysis of ecological concerns in Western history?²

REGAINING THE SACRED

Yet, as indicated above, "the sacred" is nobody's property. It may be an "unbounded category" (Saler [1993] 2000), but it is not a useless one. Szerszynski does a fine job in his well-documented book, and his dialectical view of the fate of modernity is persuasive. It has some bold assertions, such as "Taken as whole, then, the book could be read as saying that the confrontation between modern technology and its critics is a confrontation that is very much internal to Western sacral history, and one in which opposing positions turn out to be internally related in complex ways" (p. 174). Even if more interpretative than explanatory, and hardly falsifiable, they are convincingly argued for.

The ironies of the Western history of the sacred ("this very disenchantment [of nature] involves its *own* ordering of the sacred," p. 48) may carry, on the other hand, a few lessons for religious studies. Indeed, how could anyone, at the beginning of the second millennium, still assert that he or she has a God's-eye view of a group of overarching phenomena known as "religion?" Without necessarily falling into relativism, who may say, citing Dennett, that "their way" is more valuable or scientific than "my way"?

More specifically, if scholars of religion such as Donald Wiebe, Russell T. McCutcheon, and Daniel Dubuisson are right in pointing out the political agenda of advocates of "the sacred," why do they not present their own agenda for discussion? This group is very explicit in addressing their opponents' loyalties:

Although the essays in the "location" section do not give a detailed history of the "making of the discipline" . . . they do attempt to put up for critical thought some of the conditions, the general intellectual and cultural environment of Western modernity, that help us to understand both the rise and the particular orientation(s) of the academic study of religion. Turning the spotlight from the study of "religion" to the *scholars* who have done and are doing the studying, these essays demonstrate that the pursuit of "religion" neither was nor is a pure and isolated affair; instead, it is deeply embedded in wider conditions of motive and possibility: conceptual, social, institutional, political, even geopolitical forces, constraints and interests. (Braun 2000, 17)

Theirs is the agenda of the Enlightenment, of David Hume, Sigmund Freud, and Dennett. Certainly, it is a very valuable one. But, turning their argument on its head, my reading of Szerszynski's book inspires me to say it is not a "secular agenda," held by scholars who work with "entirely nonreligious concepts of religion" (p. 17). Rather, if we agree with Szerszynski's typology (although that is still in question) that there are basically five "orderings of the sacred" in Western history—primal, archaic, monotheistic, modern, and postmodern (Szerszynski 2005, 88–89)—religious studies today (Dennett being a radical exponent of it), to the extent that it represents a "modern ordering," would be no less religious than others.³

This does not mean that, in a postmodern fashion, any scientific approach to religion would have equal value. After many criticisms of "the sacred," we cannot come back to a pre-Eliadian era. Could we speak, though, of "orderings of the scientific"? That is certainly another matter, and much ink has been spilled on it.⁴ But, using a faint analogy from contemporary science studies, we may say that scholars are also entitled to use "the sacred" in a stronger sense. A case can be made in favor of "our guys," coming from people such as anthropologist Roy A. Rappaport (1999) or psychologist Kenneth Pargament (Pargament, Magyar-Russell, and Murray-Swank 2005). "Theirs" could be zoologist Richard Dawkins or psychologist Nicholas Humphrey. Is any one of these any more scientific than the other? It is doubtful.

As emphasis is put on an empirical view of the sacred, it has to appear in the plural, as plural as religious experiences. Again, this is a reaction against the Eliadian essentialist and universalistic sacred. But those recent evolutionary studies that push a naturalistic explanation to its extreme *do* use "the sacred" in the singular. In a way, *God* is back as a bona fide object of study (see Barrett 2004). Moreover, these studies closely follow research on the genetic bases of human behavior, which does present a picture of human nature to us. Contemporary religious studies, insofar as they are suspicious of a universal human nature (Dubuisson 2003, 171), have yet to be submitted to the "universal acid" of the Darwinian theory.

But this is a digression. I want to end with a note regarding nature and technology, which, after all, are the main subjects of Szerszynski's book. Both concepts are multilayered—closely woven into the tapestry of history, bound to the political, ideological, and spiritual interests of each era. However, as their description is always related to an "ordering of the sacred," all of the problems with the concept of the sacred are conveyed to the other two. The scientist and the philosopher of science will have a hard time with them, though the theologian will feel more at ease with their unfolding. Again, arguments against this usage may be turned on their heads: Szerszynski's systematic deconstruction of these concepts is a good counterpoint and challenge to the idea of nature as a single agent that still persists in the minds of many scientists.

CONCLUSION

“The sacred,” as a specification of “religion,” became at the beginning of the twenty-first century one of those concepts around which an academic battleground happens, while being happily used by preachers, writers, common folks, and even scholars from other departments. Both camps have their reasons. Besides epistemological concerns, scholars of religion have rightly pointed out the subjection of the sacred to the “mythical powers of origin” (Paul Tillich) throughout the twentieth century.⁵ On the other hand, a vast majority have found in the word the best way to express their idea of a very important aspect of reality, yesterday, today, and tomorrow, hardly thinking of it as a phantom in the mind, as it were.

One last point about the importance of Szerszynski’s discussion for the dialogue between religion and science. “Nature”—and to a lesser extent “technology” and “sacred”—is often used in the scholarship concerning this dialogue. The latter can profit much from his detailed analysis of the fate of nature in the modern world, in the hands of scientists and political leaders alike. It also can profit from the kind of social-scientific approach that Szerszynski represents in order to gain a good grasp of the modern world. On the other hand, one could expect from Szerszynski more acquaintance with this scholarship.⁶ For example, it is still embryonic in his view of nature as creation and of what *ex nihilo* means for the Christian tradition. He also could dialogue with more concrete renderings of “the sacred” (even though participants seldom have a touch for the nuances of the concept) in this scholarship, especially in late modernity.

Overall, the outcome is good for the science-religion dialogue and for religious studies, and Szerszynski’s work is a welcome contribution to the discussion of such overarching concepts as the sacred, nature, science, and technology.

NOTES

1. In his contribution to the issue of *Zygon* devoted to secularism and the technological society (December 2005), the author does relate to several other scholars dealing with the secularization thesis (Szerszynski 2005b). I do not attempt, however, to assess their contributions in this brief essay.

2. A good example of a Christian reflection on ecological matters is Santmire 2000. Many others could be cited.

3. In Dennett’s case, see Michael Ruse’s recent criticism (<http://www.stnews.org/Commentary-2692.htm>) of his *Breaking the Spell* (Dennett 2006) and the recent *Darwinism and Its Discontents* (Ruse 2006).

4. Scott Atran is representative of authors who deal symmetrically with “science” and “religion”—see Atran 1993.

5. Several contemporary writers have pointed out the many associations of romantic accounts of the sacred with conservative political thought, but Tillich was already doing this in the early 1930s—see Tillich [1933] 1977, for example.

6. This does happen, to be fair, in his work with Celia Deane-Drummond (Deane-Drummond, Szerszynski, and Grove-White 2003) and in his contribution to the issue of *Zygon* mentioned in Note 1.

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