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Religious Meaning in Philosophy

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Abstract

Postmodernism has seen the advent and development of phenomenological methods for the study of religion. Scholar of religion Mircea Eliade contributes uniquely to the phenomenological method by emphasizing the universality of religion across heterogeneous human societies and historical circumstances. Eliade also comments upon the negative effects that a decline in religious belief has had in the postmodern era. A growing number of atheists and agnostics corresponds to a rise in positivism and scientism. A survey of the origins of ancient Greek philosophy indicates that philosophical thought is motivated from an impulse to understand the world which might be called "religious". Philosophers from varying religious traditions have historically felt called upon to answer questions about the divine. However, the connection between philosophy and religion goes deeper than that. The experience of philosophical meditation and the unique nature of philosophical method demand a world-defining view which according to Eliadian methodology could be examined phenomenologically. Philosophy is unique, emerging as the first academic discipline. As a result of its uniqueness, philosophical method rarely comes under scrutiny from other fields. Applying a phenomenological lens to the history of philosophical thought reveals ways in which the postmodern world has adapted to a change in religious life.

1. Introduction

Homo religiosus and *homo symbolicus* are two ways in which postmodern phenomenologists of religion have undertaken to narrow the field of religious studies.[1] *Homo religiosus* and *homo symbolicus* define the religious phenomenon as a fundamental part of the human experience. These terms present themselves in Eliadian phenomenology as anthropological concepts tied to the evolution of *homo sapiens*. Eliade answers three questions: what defines religious phenomena, what constitutes personhood, and what makes humans distinct from other animals, through his appeal to *homo religiosus* and *homo symbolicus*. Their fundamental and cross-cultural applicability justifies Eliade's incorporation of diverse phenomena under the category of religion.

Homo religiosus and *homo symbolicus* translate from Latin to English as "religious man" and "symbolic man."[2] With these fundamental categories, Eliade contends that an experience of the cosmos as meaningful is innate to human beings. This meaningful experience of the cosmos then presents itself through manifold human social products. Not least among these, for Eliade, are the social products which arise surrounding sacred reality.

The category of the sacred is a fundamental postulate in Eliadian phenomenology. It is the idea that across civilizations, human beings have uniformly oriented their social reality around a single, identifiable source of meaning. Religion is a category of behavior which responds to intrusions of sacred reality into profane existence. Eliade assumes that the sacred has an ontological foundation, that it is universally recognized among the constituents of every human society, and that the recognition of the sacred results in a particular set of human social behaviors.

That behavior, and the artifacts and liturgy created from it constitute the set of empirically observable facts that can be studied as "religion." To use Eliadian language, the sacred must be contacted "dialectically" through religious

ritual. He writes: "the world (that is, our world) is a place in which the sacred has already manifested itself, in which, consequently, the break-through from plane to plane has become possible and repeatable."[3] Religion serves as a category of social devices which establish stability and meaning for human existence. Religion is oriented around intrusions of the sacred into profane existence which Eliade refers to as "hierophanies." The construct of religion as a deeply meaningful category establishes the importance of the sacred in contrast to its dualistic opposite: profane existence.

Eliade describes the profane as being "the fluid, larval, modality of chaos."[4] In an example of how religion expresses itself through a human reaction to the dichotomy of sacred and profane existence, Eliade remarks that "the sacred reveals absolute reality and at the same time makes orientation possible; hence it *founds the world* in the sense that it fixes the limits and establishes the order of the world."[5] According to Eliade's complex metaphysical and existential characterization of religion, human beings are aware of a fundamental and unalienable "religious conception of the world."[6] This understanding of oneself as a being enthralled in the dialectic opposition between sacred and profane existence manifests itself through the attempt to make order out of the perception of chaos and suffering in everyday life. That order is established through making and nurturing meaningful contact with sacred reality.

Some of these assumptions are rife with intellectual opposition. Eliade claims that the innate impulse toward religious expression, and a universal acceptance of sacred ontology can be located in all cultures and throughout all times. This claim is specious because of its sweeping universality. The claim that any single feature of social behavior, or system of belief can universally span the human experience is difficult to defend. Furthermore, the arcane nature of postulating and interpreting fundamental human phenomena places categories such as *homo religiosus* and *homo symbolicus* beyond empirical verifiability. There is no way for Eliade to prove that *homo religiosus* and *homo symbolicus* are necessary features of human existence. This is because it is impossible to prove that religious behaviors and symbols arise from a common experience of sacred reality. Furthermore, it is impossible to reliably establish that any concept is universally recognized cross-culturally in light of the subjectivity that cross-cultural analysis implies.

Eliade's postulates make the phenomenological method of religious studies subject to the same concerns over its applicability and coherence as psychoanalysis or astrology.[7] It has also become apparent in contemporary fieldwork that many West African societies do not have a philosophical use for a concept remotely like "the sacred" in their own cosmological systems.[8] This evidence, coming from within the field of phenomenology of religion itself works against Eliade's claim that the sacred is a universal ontological constant, and that religion is fundamentally characterized by contact with the sacred. If the sacred is not universally recognized cross-culturally, then religion as a product of human interaction with the sacred may likewise be less universally applicable than Eliade is inclined to assume. That means that the construct of *homo religiosus* and *homo symbolicus* do not reliably capture any single feature of human existence. Eliade's attempt to define religion as an empirically accessible feature of all human cultures is not easily defensible from intellectual criticism.

Even so, it is possible to identify philosophical constructs across human societies which carry superlative significance. Furthermore, it is plausible that a certain set of axiomatic beliefs are necessarily adopted by all people for the purpose of maintaining their own lives. Which particular beliefs are necessary for sustaining human life are very broad and are not necessarily consistent between individuals. However, a category of metaphysical, epistemological, and existential presuppositions are required to sustain consciousness. If someone had no beliefs whatsoever, then that person would not be able to understand herself or the world in any meaningful sense. This person would have no conscious or logical framework with which to process her perceptions and actions. In the words of psychologist William James, existence for uch a person would be a "blooming, buzzing confusion"[9] and would be unsustainable. While Eliade's postulates for the phenomenological method of religious studies are in need of careful modification, he is correct to claim that at leas some concepts are necessary for sustaining human existence. Eliade's mistake in making the claim that a singular and specific ontology, the sacred, is universally experienced and that it universally inspires awe and reverence.

Eliade claims that concepts like *homo religiosus, homo symbolicus,* and the sacred are more universal than is plausible given the level of specificity with which he describes them. Even so, Eliade's attempt to find a universal structure to human meaning-making in the form of religion is valuable. Studying the kinds of beliefs to which ancient and postmodern societies ascribe superlative value can be a meaningful and important exercise. It is not necessary to claim that certain concepts, for instance religion or the sacred are truly universal in order to make sense of the fact that they are specific manifestations of ideas with great power and importance. Furthermore, it is possible to study religious ideas as ideas of supreme importance without also supposing that they must share a common characteristic besides their fundamental importance. Beliefs of fundamental importance may orient an individual to a meaningful existence without the kinds of ontological presuppositions Eliade uses to categorize them.

Eliade purports to unveil new and important information about the very nature of reality by studying how it is perceived and qualified across societies and throughout time. Especially important is his claim to have discovered

facts about sacred reality through the deployment of phenomenological method. Phenomenologist of religion Rudolf Otto elaborates on the importance of the information Eliade seeks to uncover. Otto does so by describing his own understanding of religious experience. Otto believes, alongside Eliade, that the sacred is a category of supreme ontological significance. He thus writes that the presence of the sacred encourages a "hushed, trembling, and speechless humility." [10] In another section of his famous *Idea of the Holy,* Otto alternatively describes the sacred as a "mystery inexpressible."[11] Otto's report sheds light on the significance of the sacred in a way that demonstrates why the phenomenology of religion can be a powerful tool for interpreting human self-understanding. Whether the category of the sacred is universally applicable to religious experience or not, it is clearly very meaningful to many people. Not only understanding the sacred, but other things of like significance can be an important endeavor in any effort to understand the human experience at face-value.

Eliade's own elaboration of phenomenological method and its importance for the study of religion demonstrates no shortage of flaws related to its supposed universality. Even so, a slight modification of the applicability and goal of religious studies addresses some of these concerns effectively. *Religious studies, as a means through which beliefs of superlative importance may be uncovered and interpreted allows the level of generality Eliade requires for his comparative analysis of religions.* Furthermore, this level of generality captures the more specific elaborations of Otto's experience within the encompassing category of religious studies.

2. Argument

The invention and propagation of postmodernism has brought an epistemic shift in human self-understanding. The development of positivistic philosophical systems has resulted in new fundamentals of human self-understanding. These include the belief in a demythologized world, and the corresponding widespread adoption of atheistic and existential philosophies. With the rise in epistemology over metaphysics has come a divisionary tendency in thought.[12] This tendency is traceable to the origins of the philosophical project whereby ancient Greeks attempted to make the world epistemically accessible by simplifying natural phenomena into conceptual units.[13] The postmodern ethos is unique in that it includes a demystifying perspective in addition to the historically documented reductionistic drive of philosophical method. The postmodern tendency towards demythologizing human existence is unique and unprecedented period in the history of philosophical thought.

Philosophy can be interpreted phenomenologically using the history of philosophy as the data for interpretation and comparison. With the development of positivistic postmodernism has come a comparatively new and unprecedented move toward secularism. Nonetheless, postmodern epistemology is often rife with leaping metaphysical assumptions. Philosopher Henri Frankfort offers a clear example of the metaphysical underpinnings of postmodern thought as he contrasts it with ancient Greek philosophy. He writes that ancient Greeks "naturally recognized the relationship of cause and effect, but [did not] recognize our view of an impersonal, mechanical, and lawlike functioning of causality."[14] This demonstrates that the view of the cosmos as mechanical is not immediately obvious from direct empirical observation. Otherwise, the interpretation of causes and other natural phenomena would not have changed so much over time and would not differ so considerably across cultures.

Ancient Greek philosophers interpolated an anthropomorphic representation of natural causes in the form of deities. In this way, they described causality in terms of its relationship to a property of things which is beyond observable explanation. Frankfort contrasts this stance, which he calls an "I-thou" relationship to the natural world, with the postmodern "I-it" relationship. The difference between the two is that ancient Greek philosophers adopted the postulate that "when there is change, there is a cause; and a cause…is a will."[15] Alternatively, postmodern philosophers have "eliminated the last vestige of mythical concreteness and imagery." [16] Rather than manifesting itself as knowledge of deities, postmodern thought focuses upon epistemological and existential ways of explaining the world. The postmodern drive to philosophize is therefore qualitatively different from the ancient Greek perspective in that postmodernism separates the empirical mechanics of causality from its non-empirical metaphysical antecedents.

Frankfort's comparison of ancient Greek and postmodern causal metaphysics demonstrates that postmodern philosophers make as many unverifiable assumptions as ancient Greeks. It is no less clear, according to Frankfort, that a cause is correctly interpreted as a living will, than it is that the same cause is necessitated by a set of external physical concepts. Postmodern philosophy relies on a complex metaphysical position according to which the relationship between cause and effect is reducible to their mere statistical conjunction.[17] While postmodernism represents a comparatively new and unprecedented move toward secular analysis, its axiomatic premises are nonetheless unverifiable. Postmodern philosophy attempts to demythologize existence. One way in which it can be understood to do so is through shifting the language of metaphysics.

Philosopher Bhagavan Das analyzes the language of positivist philosophy to advance the point that subtle methodological choices and assumptions bely metaphysical dogma. He criticizes postmodern science, claiming that it truncates our understanding of reality by failing to recognize that important things exist "beyond the reach of our senses."[18] Even so, he writes that "very meta-physical 'abstract concepts…' indispensably constitute the various roots of the various…most positivist sciences."[19] The metaphysical underpinnings of postmodern philosophy cannot be ignored. Das continues stating that there is an "inseparable connection between the physical and the meta-physical."[20] Das' point is demonstrably true at least insofar as positivists must presuppose that something integral to physical phenomena lends itself to being understood empirically. This is one axiomatic epistemological and metaphysical claim at the heart of positivist philosophy which is neither falsifiable nor empirically verifiable.

Like Frankfort, Das provides an analysis of positivist language against historical, religious antecedents. He writes that the epistemic structure of positivism is sometimes less formal and less verifiable than it is often thought to be. Das writes that "science has its ritual, its etiquette, its sacrosanct formalities, its oracular pomposity, and superior stand-offishness, its popish infallibility, its expertcraft, its jingoism and fanaticism, as much as religion."[21] If Das is correct in making this claim, then there is something implicit within scientific method which goes beyond its empirical foundation. He continues, stating that positivism finds its "controversial animus [in the] religionless and Godless."[22] Das' critique is valuable for illuminating ways in which even positivist philosophy retains an essential unity with religious forms of thinking. Namely, he points out that both are belief structures with their own internally motivated methodological dispositions and impositions on behavior. In his claim that positivism finds its animus in the rejection of religion, Das does not establish a distinction between the two. Rather, an atheistic form of philosophy is, for Das, a pronouncement of belief with the same strength as any existential religious claim. At its core, positivist philosophy remains as grounded in unsubstantiated assumptions as any other philosophical or religious system.

Philosopher of science Thomas Kuhn writes about scientific paradigms for explaining natural phenomena. He suggests that as a preponderance of data accrues which cannot be explained from available scientific theories, new theories have to be constructed. He states that the "laws of scientific theory… are only law sketches in that their symbolic formalizations depend upon the problem to which they are applied."[23] He continues in another section "different languages impose different structures on the world."[24] Finally, Kuhn writes that "in matching terms with their referents, one may legitimately make use of anything one knows or believes about those referents."[25] Kuhn's analyses of scientific method supports the claim that the structure of scientific method is often a chaotic process of assimilating like phenomena into cognitive categories to which they may not reliably fit. Furthermore, the descriptions scientists come up with for how theories ought to come together do not always align, and do not always include the same phenomena. This suggests that principles in science are not as reliable as they are often portrayed to be. Components of scientific method, for instance, theory choice, cannot themselves be understood as empirically motivated aspects of the scientific process, but are rather a product of the ideations of individual scientists. These ideations cannot be supported or refuted on the basis of evidence, nor do they coherently conjoin to create overall meaningful explanations of the natural world. Nonetheless, scientific conclusions are given authority on the basis of their supposed ultimate relevance in comprehensively addressing natural phenomena. It is because of a qualitative shift in the style of postmodern philosophy that empirical method has become the most consistently accepted form of knowledge making. Even so, positivistic philosophy and the sciences are imperfect empirical systems because of their reliance on unsubstantiated metaphysical propositions.

Understanding the history of philosophical thought involves understanding how the course of ideas has taken place in terms of a changing human disposition towards what it means to understand the cosmos. A comparison of ancient Greek and postmodern philosophies indicates a shift in philosophical thought processes involving the adoption of different axiomatic beliefs. Eliade writes that while the "profane man"[26] of the postmodern world stabilizes his understanding through science and reductionism, it is nonetheless the case that more ancient "images are still used in our own day to describe the dangers that threaten…civilization."[27] In the process of describing the carryovers in postmodern thought from the distant past, Eliade mentions that "paradigmatic images live on in the language and clichés of non-religious man. Something of the religious conception still lives on in the behavior of profane man, although he is not always conscious of his immemorial heritage."[28] Even as parlance in philosophy and the sciences has transitioned to understanding the world in mechanistic and reductionistic terms, it is nonetheless still the case that a vaguely religious perspective abides in postmodern consciousness.

One clear carryover from ancient to postmodern thought is highlighted through an Eliadian phenomenological approach to the structural need that philosophical and scientific thought fulfill. One of the most significant Eliadian postulates is the ontological existence of sacred reality. Experience of the sacred is particularly important for Eliade, and for the religious person, because the sacred is a medium of stability. Eliade describes epistemic orientation in the ancient world as occurring "at the point of communication between…cosmic regions."[29] He insinuates that these nexus points are integral for providing the human connection to sacred power necessary for gaining abstruse knowledge.

Similarly, in postmodern thought, the knowledge of scientific or mathematical postulates allows one to condense knowledge in a way that allows for an existence made comfortable by the fact that it is predictable. In Frankfort's words, the ancient and postmodern tenancy to locate meaning and stability in knowledge shows that both systems of thought "share essentials."[30] Postmodern and ancient Greek philosophy are similar in that both attempt to salvage a sense of stability by seeking knowledge about the fundamental nature of the cosmos.

Working within philosophical frames of reference involves the adoption of a structured worldview which is both valuable and adaptable according to the unique frame of reference of the individual philosopher. Over time, this worldview has shifted from axiomatic beliefs about a fundamentally anthropomorphic cosmos to one that is mechanical, logical, and epistemologically accessible. This qualitative change in the way that knowledge is envisioned nonetheless occurs despite the fact that no fundamental change in the cosmos itself is understood to have taken place. Analyzing the evolution of philosophical postulates phenomenologically involves questioning how philosophical method is developed as well as its relevance to human self-understanding.

The Eliadian concepts of *homo religiosus*, *homo symbolicus*, and the sacred-profane dichotomy hold up with modifications in contemporary times. Even as the world gravitates towards a distinctively secular pattern of thought, the distinction between secular and religious ways of thinking remains notoriously difficult to qualify. The postmodern constructs of empirical science, cultural atheism, and existential philosophy involve conscious and experientially motivated decisions at the methodological level. Eliadian phenomenology provides a methodologically useful lens through which the constructs of secular philosophy may be analyzed in terms of their implicit relationship to highly significant ways of thinking.

3. Literature Review

Historian of philosophy Francis Cornford supports the claim that religious patterns of thought and the philosophical enterprise are best understood as "two successive products of the same consciousness."[31] He continues: "there is a real continuity between the earliest rational speculation and the religious representation that lay behind it…philosophy inherited from religion certain great conceptions—for instance, the ideas of 'God,' 'Soul,' 'Destiny,' 'Law,'—which continue to circumscribe the movements of rational thought and to determine [its] main directions."[32] Cornford's analysis of the relationship between philosophy and religion indicates that the two disciplines, today considered distinct, arise from the same set of early concepts and carry a similar burden of importance for historical peoples.

This understanding of the religious and philosophical enterprises as fundamentally interwoven is expressed in the popular sentiments of other historians of religion. In his piece entitled "The Relation of Philosophy and Religion," philosopher George F. Thomas makes a similar point. He writes that while religion and philosophy may be understood to address different subject matter, they are similar in that both "provide a principle of interpretation and integration for all specialized knowledge.[33] Elaborating on this point, Thomas writes: "though philosophy stresses theory, and religion practice, both at their best seek to bring theory and practice together in a permanent and fruitful marriage."[34] This argument establishes that religion and philosophy are similar in that they offer interpretive means through which knowledge can be meaningfully assimilated into people's lived reality.

Thomas suggests that both religion and philosophy differ in ways that have become increasingly discursive. However, he establishes that both are fundamentally related. Philosophy and religion are human processes involved in the formation of a core outlook on the meaning of the world and one's choices within it. While religion and philosophy are often ascribed context dependent-meanings, at their fundamental level both are necessary representations of human thought which are likewise inextricably interconnected.

Additional analysis clarifies Thomas's conceptualization of the fundamental unity underlying the human impulse towards religion and philosophy. He writes that the "primary assurances of religion are the ultimate questions of philosophy."[35] In another passage he writes that "the lack of interest in philosophy in our time is the weakening of the religious impulse."[36] Thus, Thomas suggests, religion and philosophy rely upon one another to create an ultimately meaningful and unified perspective on what aspects of the world require critical inquiry, and what results such inquiry is likely to produce. Thomas presupposes that the assurances of religion predate the questions of philosophy; however, the sentiment is just as well understood in reverse order. Thomas argues that the impulse toward religious or philosophical thought cannot be undertaken in isolation. Whichever perspective one adopts on the primacy of philosophy or religion is reflected in the same person's ensuing beliefs regarding the other subject.

Religious assurances are therefore a particular application of philosophical method, and philosophical method a particular tool of or departure from religious order. Thomas does not follow Cornford in relating philosophy and

religion chronologically through a development of related concepts. He does, however suggest that both disciplines stem from a similar inclination to conceptualize the world as a place of meaning and importance.

From a related perspective, historian of philosophy Kenneth Hamilton states that philosophy enables a sense of existential contentment. Hamilton states that philosophy enables "man [to] live and feel at home" in a world of uncertainties.[37] In this way, Hamilton describes and contextualizes the relationship between religion and philosophy by describing his own experience in doing philosophy. Philosophy, for Hamilton provides the kind of stability that Eliade describes in terms of the orientation people derive from contact with sacred reality. In some cases, philosophical concepts are as integral for the establishment of a meaningful life as are religious concepts strictly speaking. According to Hamilton, both afford the sense of wellbeing and significance necessary to qualify human life in terms of its greater meaning.

Hamilton's perspective suggests that the relationship between philosophy and religion is not only similar cognitively in the sense that both are concerned with concepts of superlative meaning for human existence. Rather, Hamilton suggests that there is an experiential component to philosophy which helps to establish its meaning and importance. Historians of philosophy, Francis Cornford, George Thomas, and Kenneth Hamilton analyze the origins of philosophical and religious thought with the intention of relating the two disciplines. They do so by establishing the importance of philosophy alongside religion as a field of knowledge which seeks to unify the phenomenal world in an overall sense of meaning.

Historian of religion and phenomenologist Charles Long elaborates a different though related perspective on the connection between philosophy and religion. He describes them as divergent patterns which arise from the same necessity in human thought. Long's analysis considers how philosophical and religious ways of thinking have coalesced surrounding our understanding of the "human sciences," especially methodology in the academic study of religion.[38] He writes that "systematic inquiry" in the academic study of religion "presupposed the locus of an ordered and centered intelligence in human consciousness."[39] Long continues, claiming that this assumption has resulted in a general "problem of reductionism in the human sciences."[40] Long postulates that the "primary data of religion" is demarcated and analyzed erroneously through the misapplication of religious studies method. He responds directly to Eliade in his critique of the concept of the sacred as the chief unifying principle underlying the religious phenomena. Long suggests that the field of academic religious studies is loaded with amorphous ontological and epistemological postulates. These postulates are then interpreted in such a way as to justify unwanted scholarly intrusions on cultural phenomena.

Religious studies method is flawed, according to Long, because it is motivated from a desire to study people's and cultures for reasons that are often etic and destructive. The universality of the religious experience which Eliade postulates presupposed and justified assembling knowledge about religion in cultures where categories such as religion and the sacred are not recognized. This means, for Long, that scholars invented the categories of religion and the sacred in order to justify studying other cultures for purposes which extend beyond a desire to understand religious expression at face value. Philosophically speaking, the ontological foundations of the phenomenological method are constructed carefully to justify the widest possible intrusion of scholarly curiosity into cultures where such intrusion cannot be of direct benefit. In this way, philosophy is implicit in the development of an academically inclined perspective toward religion.

The phenomenological method propounded by Eliade is characterized by value-laden assumptions about the nature of religious meaning. These assumptions often justify erroneous intrusions of intellectual curiosity into inappropriate cultural contexts. For Long, this intrusion has resulted in a substantial history of intellectual mischaracterization of people's and cultures subject to attention from the field of religious studies.

Historiographer of religion David Cave provides insight on the appropriation and dissemination of Eliadian concepts such as *homo religiosus*. Cave's commentary is useful in distinguishing the effect of contemporary method on the knowledge derived from academic religious studies. Through Cave's interpretation of the history of phenomenological terms, it is possible to discern that at least some innate connection between philosophy and religion is necessary at the theoretical level. He writes that "*homo religiosus* is not confined to religion proper but transcends all structural and doctrinal distinctions associated with religion."[41] While Cave's preliminary analysis verifies the concept's applicability to philosophy, this definition is too broad to be conceptually useful.

Alternatively, Cave contextualizes *homo religiosus* as a "structural capacity" in human thought which resists "this-worldly and secular" movements in favor of understanding the world in religious terms.[42] This introduces a new condition to the concept of *homo religiosus*. Not only is the category integral to human thought, and intrinsically meaningful—forming a subspecies to ethical behavior—it is also structurally incompatible with a secularizing strain in postmodern thought. Cave's post-Elidian discourse on the concept of *homo religiosus* establishes it as a particularly broad interpretive category concerned with delineating human behaviors that are rich with symbolic meaning.

Scholars of religion Robert Meagher and Christiane Barth discuss the context-specific nature of categorical language in religious studies. They establish respectively that the concept of *homo religiosus* is methodologically useful in describing some overarching patterns in the academic analysis of religious, as well as philosophical concepts. Meagher writes that the "bywords of Eliade's comparative system are indeed well-known" and used meaningfully across disciplines to describe a fundamental human relationship to the object of knowledge.[43] He conducts a literary review of ways in which Eliadian terms such as the sacred and profane as well as *homo religiosus* have been deployed and modified categorically.

Meagher concludes that Eliadian categories often "function in accord with the characteristically postmodern understanding of…value and fact."[44] That is, Meagher suggests that a qualitative philological shift has taken place between the ways in which religious concepts have been understood and described, and the ways in which postmodern epistemological concepts are likewise delineated. This suggests that terms native to religious self-understanding have become relevant to philosophical self-understanding through a gradual shift in linguistic structures. Barth as well suggests that the terms Eliade uses to describe religious concepts have "trans-historical meaning for mankind."[45] According to this assessment, it is possible to conceptualize aspects of scientific and philosophical language as being related to concepts of supreme importance in the structure of human thought through time. Not only are philosophy and religion related historically and in contemporary disputes over religious studies method. They bear an intrinsic similarity in terms of the meaning of words associated with the fundamental principles of each.

Philosopher Etienne Gilson calls for a "philosophical history of philosophy."[46] He defines this as a discipline which attempts to explain human structures of "meaning in regard to the nature of philosophical knowledge itself."[47] According to Gilson's reading of history, what is most important is arranging facts in a way that "makes philosophical sense."[48] Much like Barth and Meagher, Gilson focuses particular attention on the use of language in conveying an ultimate "unity of philosophical experience."[49] If philosophical systems are unified by a similar experience of conceptual analysis, then what does this say for the relationship of philosophy to other academic disciplines including religious studies, or religion itself?

Gilson indulges in a philological method of comparison. In particular, he compares the different ways in which similar philosophical questions have been posed through time. He argues that different philosophical questions gain relevance as metaphysical and epistemological presuppositions also change. Unlike Eliade, Barth, and Meaghan, Gilson does not necessarily suggest that a fundamental unit of meaning is accessible in the ancient or postmodern conceptions of core philosophical questions. He is also non-committal on the popular stance that the religious impulse suffers diminution in the contemporary world. Gilson does however suggest that a similar concern for ultimate meaning and unity in the human experience is discernable in roughly analogous, though gradually desacralized concepts.

Gilson does not directly support the Eliadian belief that a conceptual shift from a focus on sacred reality to a focus on profane reality has caused an ensuing crisis in human consciousness. However, his linguistic account of the changes in philosophical discourse suggests that a conceptual shift has occurred in the way that philosophers understand the questions they are asking. This qualitative shift has in turn been focused on an understanding of philosophical concepts in terms which are less existentially significant for human structures of meaning. While key philosophical questions may persist in the consciousness of many people, Gilson suggests that they have a less significant or central role than they did in ancient times.

4. Analysis:

The relationship between religion and philosophy is a contested historical fact. Much of the connection between these disciplines is established from interpreting the significance of each phenomenologically. Phenomenological analysis such as that provided above suggests that conceptual similarities abound between certain terms and ultimate questions within philosophy and religion. Philosophy and religion share an innate similarity in that they are both motivated from a fundamental urge to understand the human condition. This fundamental urge to understand is likewise discernable as the core motivating principle underlying the development of philosophical and religious ways of structuring meaning and reality. The ultimate significance for both philosophy and religion is their proposed unity across time and civilizations in the concept of *homo religiosus*. It is from the universal need to create meaning that philosophy and religion derive their trans-historical importance and complexity in terms of the experience of being human.

Though I support the prospect that fundamental structures of meaning and thought processes coalesce in a human necessity to make meaning, objections like those raised by Long plausibly refute the historicity of *homo religiosus*. Long's elaboration on the value-laden relationship between the historical implementation of method in the human

sciences, and overlaying structures in philosophical and religious orientation suggest that presuppositions factor heavily into the conclusions scholars come to when compiling phenomenological data. It is therefore important not to overstate the strength of the interpreted relationship between structures of superlative meaning in philosophy and religion.

Phenomenological constructs, such as the ontological significance of the sacred, and the essentialized humanistic expression of religious significance through *homo religiosus* are meaningful, though fraught. It is possible to salvage the intellectual utility of such categories by reinterpreting their meaning philosophically. It is not necessary to identify the fundamental features of superlatively significant themes in cultural expression in order to understand what aspects of a particular culture are worthy of religious studies interest.

Even if the category of *homo religiosus* is not cross-culturally universal, it can still serve an important function in describing a fundamental orienting aspect that is locatable in some religious expressions and in the work of some philosophers. Otto's elaboration of the feeling inspired from contact with the sacred, for instance, is best understood as genuine phenomenological data. Similarly, Hamilton's reference to philosophy as a structure allowing for meaning making in the context of fundamental orientation is likewise a verifiable account of a person experiencing the vexing power of confronting their core presuppositions. Both cases bear aesthetic resemblances in the sense that they qualify as experiences of ultimate meaning. Otto and Hamilton understand the world in relation to a certain set of concepts. Those concepts present themselves as portions of an overall religious or philosophical orientation while they in fact make up the means of primary expression according to which both individuals understand themselves. The concept of *homo religiosus* exceeds its theoretically responsible boundaries for use. Nevertheless, it does have a referent in the orienting aspect everyone must go through in selecting a unique identity.

5. Conclusion

One of the paradigmatic complexities facing phenomenological method in the postmodern era is that its interpretive approach and broad comparative disposition require many unsubstantiated metaphysical and epistemological premises. Phenomenological methodology ought to be criticized insofar as its unique set of presuppositions can be used to justify scholarly intrusion and misrepresentation of other peoples and cultures. Yet, phenomenological methodology ought also to be appraised for the unique conclusions it is able to support. Empirical methodology alone is inadequate to comprehensively establish the similarities in meaning-making which liken concepts of superlative significance for human orientation.

Philosophy and religion are related in the sense that both represent methodologically divergent, though experientially similar forms of meaning-making. In the absence of some integral system of beliefs, human life is meaningless and unsustainable. For many, the unique nature of religious institutions prevail in offering something of supreme existential significance. This tendency to make meaning through the establishment of a fundamental orientation between *homo religiosus* and the transcendent sacred is well documented, though imperfectly understood. Even less understood is the relationship between non-religious, or intellectual belief systems, and the sense of meaning that they also provide for human life. If the religious phenomena is defined by a relationship to sacred reality, then the concept of fundamental orientation extends beyond concepts like religion and the sacred. Within the presuppositions of postmodern positivism and other atheistic philosophies is a system for the establishment and interpretation of meaning.

6. Endnotes

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