

Espen Dahl

In Between

The Holy Beyond Modern Dichotomies

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Translated by Brian McNeil

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Foreword

This book could not have been written without valuable help from others. I should like to thank Hege Gundersen, the editor responsible for the Norwegian edition of this book, who patiently followed the production of the manuscript throughout the whole writing process. Sigurd Hjelde and Otto Krogseth read through the manuscript and made valuable suggestions. Finally, I am grateful to the editors of *Research in Contemporary Religion* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) for suggestions about improvements. Most notably, adjustments are made in chapter 1, and a completely new concluding chapter is added.

1. The Return of the Holy and Late Modernity

An encounter with something that transcends one's possibilities of comprehension, where one is left speechless and full of wonder in the presence of a "something" for which words are lacking, a trembling impression that one is approaching the unapproachable – is such an experience of the holy still accessible to us today? Despite the innumerable declarations of the death of God and of the victory of secularization, it seems that this type of experience continues to form part of the register of our experiences. Several scholars have pointed out that in recent years, religious motifs have occurred with ever growing frequency in art, philosophy, and popular culture; others maintain that the age in which we live must be understood as "post-secular," since the decline of religion has been replaced by its return. For Christianity, as for other religions, traces of the holy are always important, if the abstract doctrinal systems are to be anchored in living experience. Experiences of the holy are included as raw material in religious symbols and are staged in various rituals. People continually relate to holy scriptures, holy words, holy things, holy persons ("saints"), the Holy Land, holy wars – and even to holy (or "sacred") cows.

Although the holy possesses an unmistakably religious value, it is not only found safely confined within the frameworks of institutionalized religion. Its expressions are also found outside such frameworks, today perhaps more than ever before. Many have encountered the holy in churches and have been filled by the holy atmosphere that is found in cathedrals. Some are moved solemnly in the presence of the mystery that takes place in the eucharist, while others experience the holy in great abstract paintings or in powerful music. Sometimes, one is suddenly struck with wonder at the most everyday things – a sudden feeling of strangeness vis-à-vis something with which one is profoundly familiar, perhaps a photograph from a half-forgotten past; a sudden shift in the weather which opens up the landscape anew; an encounter with another person which moves us strongly. These and similar experiences tell us that the holy has not yet abandoned us.

The holy can make itself known in a vague and indistinct manner, but it can also be given a clearly demarcated place within religious systems. It is therefore anything but easy to define the holy once and for all. Nevertheless, we tend to have a rough idea of what it entails – at any rate, before we are asked to offer a definition. Let me suggest, as a first pointer, that the holy prompts an experience of something *more and different* in our otherwise familiar environment. This experience bears within itself a more or less clear religious value and elicits particular types of response in human beings. The word

“response” here denotes specific ways of approaching the holy, such as the observation of particular rituals or the use of symbols and rituals.

The intention of this book is to shed light on central aspects of the holy. As a theoretical topic, this is no unplowed field; it belongs to an area, which has attracted many commentaries in the course of the last hundred years or so. Many of the classic theories about the holy come from the period between the close of the nineteenth century and the 1960's. After a slack period, this topic has begun to attract renewed attention. Many of the older theories are profoundly marked by the period in which they were formulated – a period which is no longer our own. This means that one must continually assess whether older theories continue to be relevant to our own understanding of the holy, after their date-stamping has expired. Nevertheless, it is my impression that people often rush rather too hastily past the classical texts, without allowing them to speak on their own terms. One aim of this book is enter into a dialogue with several of the classical twentieth-century theories. Such a dialogue has two partners: the theories in question must be allowed to speak, but we must also hear the objections and criticisms. The goal of the dialogue between various texts is always to increase the understanding of what the holy entails for us theoretically today.

This study of the holy is envisaged as a discussion of the most important aspects of the holy, employing a variety of approaches. Such an investigation, however, is not carried out from some “point of nowhere” where the phenomena can be known in a neutral and objective manner. The only approach that we human beings have to the phenomena is via a limited hermeneutical perspective. My perspective is marked by my religious (i.e. Christian) stance, and by my academic background in the philosophy of religion. It is perfectly clear that certain concepts and theoretical ways of grasping the phenomenon – what appears important or less important; which concepts are employed and which are excluded – will be colored by these two circumstances. And the fact that most of the theoreticians whom I shall study give priority to the Jewish-Christian tradition means that this tradition will dominate the account I give.

This, however, does not mean that the present book about the holy can be fully understood only by those who share my understanding of life or my background. On the contrary, I have endeavored to let a wide and inclusive horizon be reflected in the presentations: a limited perspective is not the same thing as a narrow horizon. It would be naïve to believe that everyone, irrespective of the culture and religion to which they belong, will nod appreciatively at everything I have written; but anyone who wants to describe a dimension of reality must attempt to present matters in a way that is representative of as many people as possible, while well aware that not everyone shares the same perspective. In this way, I invite the readers to a voyage of recognition and discovery – beyond this, there are no “proofs.” It is only by meeting one another halfway that the theoretical dialogue about the

holy can be pursued. Total agreement cannot be achieved in this area, but such agreement can have a regulative function, indicating the direction to be taken by the presentation. Accordingly, we must hold fast to two ideas at once, viz. the limitation of the starting point and the breadth and inclusiveness in the goal of this study, which is the open horizon for the understanding of the holy.

When I present and discuss theories from the science of religion, philosophy, theology, and psychology in the following chapters, a prominent position will be given to phenomenology. This is surely a fruitful point of departure for an investigation of the holy, not only because its branches are already found in academic disciplines such as philosophy, the science of religion, theology, and psychology, but also because the best way to do justice to the object of this book – the holy – is by means of a theoretical school of thought which seeks to let experience be the lodestar of its approach. Phenomenology attempts to preserve and describe the phenomenon as it shows itself to us. But the way in which it shows itself is formed by an interplay, which has its origin in two sources. First of all, the holy makes itself known to experience, as something foreign, something different and more, something that transcends my own self and my well known environment; secondly, however, it is also something whose appearance we ourselves help to form through a well known language, including cultural praxis. This praxis links that which is foreign to something with which we are familiar. It is the distinctive collaboration between the foreign and the familiar that gives the holy its specifically ambiguous and fleeting character.

Such an understanding of phenomenology is very broad. As far as our knowledge is concerned, the encounter with the holy begins in experience, but a linguistic element of interpretation must also be integrated. There is nothing new in the affirmation that phenomenology almost lives in a symbiotic fellowship with hermeneutics; but in our investigation of the holy, hermeneutics too must be understood very broadly. Following Paul Ricœur's model, I believe that the hermeneutical circular movement towards a deeper understanding has its starting point in phenomenology. This movement can include several stages, where various academic perspectives fill in aspects, which are not illuminated by phenomenology. The goal is not to get "behind" phenomenology, but to return to the phenomenon itself with an informed eye, where (to borrow Ricœur's concepts) we have moved from the first naïveté to the second naïveté.¹ Accordingly, I shall begin with (religious) phenomenology and deepen its understanding through investigations relating to the science of religion, theology, philosophy, and psychology. All these factors work "in the wings" when the holy manifests itself. These various perspectives are essential for another reason too: it is a fundamental supposition of this book that the holy is a complex phenomenon and that it must therefore be

1 Ricœur employs this model in several passages, e.g. in Ricœur: 2004 and Ricœur: 1967, 351 ff.

looked at from a variety of perspectives. The different aspects will emerge clearly only when we alternate between various academic approaches.

A short book like this cannot offer a comprehensive presentation of the central aspects of the holy on the basis of a broad spectrum of theoretical approaches, and this means that one must exclude certain things. Analyses of specific sacred scriptures, cultic feasts, and divinities in various religions from the perspective of the science of religion cannot find space in a book, which attempts to reflect on general problems. The secondary literature comments on questions linked to holy places, to playing and to liturgy; I do not discuss these here. Nor do I intend to offer a detailed discussion of sacred actions – rituals – although this matter is closely linked in many ways to my concern in this book. The research field of “ritual studies” is quite simply too vast to be presented in the space of a few pages.²

The Holy and Late Modernity

It may be true that we no longer live in the age of the great religious systems, or in a sacral universe where special times, places, and objects unfailingly manifest holiness; and presumably the time is also past when scholars thought that the holy was the very core of all the world religions. In many ways, the twentieth century has brought a very meager soil for the religions in our western world. Nevertheless, the holy keeps on coming back – perhaps no longer with the same self-assurance and vociferousness as in earlier ages, but often as small traces or signals from something “more” and “other.” Dietmar Kamper and Christoph Wulf, who have published an anthology on this subject, recall one of the well known prophecies uttered at the start of the twentieth century about the “past” character of the holy: “With regard to the holy, there is the thesis, adumbrated by Max Weber and subsequently repeated again and again with emphasis, that a disenchantment of the world has taken place through science, so that the holy has become a pre-modern matter.” Although this kind of prophecy has had enormous repercussions and has formed the perspective on the holy held by several generations of scholars, the time has now come to ask whether the prophecy still holds good. Kamper and Wulf

2 One further distinction must be drawn. In my earlier book *Phenomenology and the Holy* (Dahl: 2010), I attempt to prepare the ground for the holy on philosophical premises. By means of a detailed analysis of Husserl, I endeavor to show how one can get beyond certain problems that are a consequence of the classical way of understanding the holy, especially in Rudolf Otto. The present book is not primarily a religious-philosophical analysis, nor is it addressed to readers with a special interest in Husserl’s phenomenology. Rather, I wish to address a broader audience, elaborating a more comprehensive understanding of the holy in a dialogue with related academic disciplines, which also make a contribution to the understanding of the holy. The limitation of *Phenomenology and the Holy* is that it is content with a formal indication of the place for the holy; the present book is an attempt to develop a more substantial understanding of the holy.

continue with the following thesis: “The holy is not something that belongs to the past. Rather, it certainly belongs to the present, as something that is relocated, concealed, suppressed, and forgotten.” (Kamper/Wulf: 1997, 1. Eng. trans.: B.McN.).

Weber formulated his celebrated thesis as long ago as the beginning of the twentieth century. Today, one cannot simply act as if the thesis about the disenchantment of the world was unjustified, or as if it were not still justified in part. It is still the case that central societal institutions in the West lack a religious legitimation, and that the natural sciences, the human sciences, and even many theological disciplines get by perfectly well without “the hypothesis of God.” At the same time, however, Kamper and Wulf indicate that disenchantment is no longer – and perhaps has never been – a completely precise description. The holy still exists, but it turns up under different conditions, displaced, disguised, and perhaps in league with new phenomena. What has happened?

The short answer is that a cultural shift of climate has taken place. At least since the 1990’s, there has been talk of a “return of religion” in culture, in the visual arts, in literature, and in philosophy. Such a return can best be understood on the basis of changes which have occurred in our way of organizing our existence, a change from a modern to a late modern age. Let me sketch some aspects of this change. Weber’s thesis is in many ways typical of the entire modern self-understanding from the seventeenth-century Enlightenment onwards. At that period, the human person’s self-confidence intensified, above all thanks to trust in the human person’s hallmark, viz. reason. With the help of reason, tradition and religious authorities were seen in a new light. Reason found expression in Immanuel Kant’s vision of the self-legislating and mature subject, in the ideas of equality, liberty, and fraternity in the French Revolution, or in the confidence in science and technology – the confidence in progress itself. Since what Kant called “pure reason” was realized in society, a rationalization took place on the principle of a clear division of labor. The division of labor corresponded to a division of the societal sphere into various sectors. This so-called differentiation is an important characteristic of modernity; it entailed the detachment of various aspects of human existence from the religion, which had once included within itself our understanding of reality as a whole. Politics, science, and art – which had all been more or less closely linked to religion in earlier periods – were now established as self-sufficient sectors with their own internal logic. Ideally, all this looked like a huge cake, where each slice was neatly cut and inserted into a well rounded-off totality.

Religion, which in earlier times had been the overarching and integrating factor, was reduced to one sector among others, and a sector which was gradually pushed more and more to one side. This increasing displacement of religion from the public sphere is often called secularization. Although several theoreticians from Weber’s days until the 1960’s and 1970’s grieved over the

loss of an integrating religious dimension, there was no doubt that the development of society was going in one direction: religion would be obliged to yield ground to the exercise of the pure reason in society. What I will call a typically *modern dichotomy* developed between the religious and the secular, where it was believed that the religious was under pressure from the secular. It is indeed true that private religiosity and various religious groupings have existed in all historical periods, but these were regarded as marginal phenomena devoid of any influence on the overarching structures of public life. Such theories of secularization were predominant at least until the 1980's.

In the course of recent years, a new understanding has won acceptance. Let me mention some factors, which have made this necessary. Over a lengthy period, the conservative forces have made progress, both among Christians and among Muslims. Today, Christian charismatic religion is the form of religion, which is growing most strongly on a global basis, especially in Latin America. Through the media, such forms of religious expression have entered the public domain in a confrontational manner. The holy is no longer banished to private rooms as a purely personal concern. It has become much more visible in the society to which we relate on a day-to-day basis. Concepts such as "holy war" are not an echo from a remote and unreal past, but have forced their way into society through terrorist actions; there can be no doubt that the most spectacular of these up to now was the terrorist attack on the Twin Towers in New York on September 11, 2001. When a caricature published in a Danish newspaper in 2006, and later also in Norwegian periodicals and newspapers, portrayed Muhammad as a terrorist, this was a transgression of holy taboos connected to the prohibition of images, and these taboos were at any rate one of the components in the detonation, which unleashed holy wrath in many places in the world.

Similar examples can be found in recent popular culture. Dan Brown's novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003) is a detective story about how the truth about the Holy Grail has been suppressed for almost two thousand years. Conspiracy theories doubtless satisfy many readers' dislike of obligatory dogmatic systems and of a powerful institution like the Roman Catholic Church. Nevertheless, it remains remarkable that such an unambiguously sacral – indeed, Christian – theme should suddenly interest a surprisingly large portion of the book-reading world. Popular culture is not alone here: a broad stream of intellectuals also speak of "the return of religion." Trendsetting American, British, and French philosophers can now plume themselves on their religious orientation, while only one generation ago it was unthinkable, or at any rate unacceptable, to bring God into philosophy. I could have presented a different, and no doubt a longer, list of examples, but the point is only to show that the map, which was drawn up by the theoreticians of secularization is no longer a good match for the terrain. Once again, the question is: What has happened?

Some theoreticians speak of a resacralization, as a reaction to Weber's

disenchantment; others speak of the post-secular age, which has replaced the secular era. Peter Berger, who was one of the standard-bearers of the theory of secularization in the 1960's and 1970's, speaks today of desecralization in a global context. He avers straightforwardly that the theory of secularization was simply erroneous, and that we live in a world which is "as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more so than ever" (Berger: 1999, 2). Berger believes that scholars of religion earlier supposed that the European scholar and other like-minded persons were representative of the situation of religion. It is true that religion has come to play a smaller role in the life of a western, well-educated man than in the past; but Europe is not representative in the global religious context. Rather, Europe is the exception. The rest of the world, in Asia, Africa, and South America, has not gone through a correspondingly deep process of secularization. Accordingly, when we speak of the return of religion, this can give the wrong impression – as if religion has been away and is suddenly returning. Is it only the theoretical eye that has suddenly become aware of religion? It may indeed be the case that the "return of religion" reflects a more acute theoretical eye; but it also reflects new structures, which have made our own age more sensitive to the presence of the holy beyond the modern dichotomies.

Berger points out that the process of modernization, which has produced secularizing tendencies, has also produced the same amount of counter-secularizing tendencies. Such double movements – contra-secularization as a response to secularization – doubtless possess an explanatory value, not least in relation to the emergence of Christian and Muslim fundamentalism. But we can go even further and ask whether there has not been a shift in the very basic understanding of the modern period. The concept "post-modern" made its way into the general vocabulary at some point in the 1980's, and became firmly established in the following decade. By now, however, the "post-modern" has become so emptied of meaning that it no longer indicates a clearly demarcated content. There is also a certain scepticism about seeing our own age as contrasting so strongly with the preceding "modernity," as the concept "post-modern" invites us to do. As I see it, what we are experiencing at present is rather a late phase of modernity itself, where it is more appropriate to speak of late modernity.³

We may summarize this situation by saying that doubts have been sown in late modernity with regard to what we might call modernity's "cake model." Is there really a universal and unified order under which all human activity and experience can be classified? It may be that experiences of other cultures have come so close to us that it is not so easy to forget how foreign they are, and it may be that we have become much more sensitive to the abnormal, the alien, and the irregular within our own cultural order. Similarly, the idea that there

3 The principal work in post-modern theory remains Lyotard: 1984 (French original 1979). The most prominent critic of the post-modern is Habermas: 1981.

are clear and sharp borders between the sectors has become problematic, for when confidence in the universal order withers, this also entails a change in the understanding of the relationships between the sectors. The sectors glide into one another just as much as they glide apart; the clean-cut slices in the modern “cake model” intersect, and the interfaces have become more indistinct. With an allusion to the differentiation of modernity, one can speak of a certain de-differentiation, in which connections across the sectors assume a renewed importance.

Religion does not remain untouched by changes, which take place in culture and society. Science has not succeeded in expelling religion, and the public political sphere cannot close its eyes to the public role of religion. The American sociologist Samuel Huntington believes that future conflicts and wars will be waged between civilizations; and since religion is the most important characteristic of the civilizations, it is difficult to deny the political dimension of the holy (Huntington: 2005, 4). In a completely different manner, Jürgen Habermas has underlined the public significance of religion as a source of morality, identity, and fellowship, provided that citizens who are religious believers allow their insights to be translated into a language, which is universally accessible (Habermas: 2006, 10). In short, politics, science, and religion are once again woven into each other.

Irrespective of whether we speak of more indistinct borders in the order of the “cake model,” or of a shift to new models (“network” and “labyrinth” have been proposed), late modernity entails changed conditions for the holy. The modern dichotomies between the religious and the secular, the holy and the profane, appear less unambiguous. On the premises of modernity, the holy found it difficult to legitimate its domain, and suffered under continuous pressure from adjacent spheres. However, a weakening of modernity’s unified basic structure and its clearly differentiated sectors does not mean a return to the pre-modern sacral cosmos. The uncritical embrace of the holy power, the symbols, and the myths of the universe as the only true account and explanation of reality can be maintained only as an obstinate protest or as a hidebound fundamentalism. It appears that today, the holy dwells just as much in the interstices, the overlappings and points of intersection between the spheres which once were separate. Religion does not exist in a pure form, but is always to a greater or lesser extent woven into other cultural and social fields. One example is the way in which modern abstract painting, which has long since detached itself from ecclesiastical institutions and has no explicit references to religious symbols, nevertheless can hint at a holy presence. Another example is how something as prosaic as a scientific explanation of a biological process can kindle wonder, indeed almost a religious reverence for nature. It is not possible to define unambiguously how far this is an aesthetic experience, a scientific explanation, or a religious wonder – the holy is located in between all these.

The experience in this interstice may perhaps be more modest, taking the

form of hints and traces rather than of powerful manifestations. The holy has become weak. In a similar manner, the Italian philosopher Giovanni Vattimo has spoken of “weak thinking.” He claims that the history of western thought has undergone a considerable weakening. In the past, the reason laid claim to the strong and pure structures, but now it has become more reserved and modest. This applies likewise to people’s relationship to systems of religious doctrines. Vattimo says that he himself has a weak faith, a belief, which believes that it believes (Vattimo: 1999, 69). Often, the holy appears today in a way that allows a different approach which lies beyond the classic options of either dogmatic atheism or unwavering theism. Here, one can glimpse the connection between a weak holiness of this kind and the interstice: for it is precisely because the holy falls between the stools of clean-cut ideological or conceptual systems (so to speak) that it has also become more vulnerable, weaker. Alongside the interstice, the idea of weak holiness will be a leitmotif in this book.

Reality, however, is complex. On the one side, there are much more insistent experiences of the holy, as in strongly expressive, conservative, or indeed fundamentalist invocations of the holy. It has been pointed out that religious fundamentalism can be understood as an active resistance to the withering of the authority of religion which has been one consequence of secularization (Brekke: 2007, 18 ff). The late modern experience is open and flexible, but the price that must be paid is a lack of clarity and certainty. In this perspective, fundamentalism of various kinds (both Christian and Muslim, both political and religious) appears as a form of compensation for the loss of identity and certainty in the modern period (Krogseth: 1998, 204 f).

At the other extreme, we find the indeterminate neo-religious ideas of holiness. Perhaps it is possible to see neo-religious movements too as a compensation for a fragmented reality, as one way of attributing to the self a feeling of spiritual identity, despite everything. An open movement like New Age does not in any way attempt to absolutize dogmas and moral precepts. Rather, it attempts to develop a deeper contact with the authentic self – the holy self – and with the great totality to which the self belongs. In contradistinction to fundamentalism, several neo-religious movements have created a flexible notion of holiness where each one can make use of the freedom and openness to put together spiritual universes with elements drawn from various traditions and religions. In the center are the self which chooses and which realizes itself, and the experiences it has. This self is no longer willing to submit to divine authorities or institutional structures.⁴ Late modernity is thus a climate in which religious tendencies point in various directions at once. Some indicate a weakening, others a consolidation of the secure structures; some religious voices say yes to openness and plurality,

4 Cf. Heelas/Woodhead: 2005, 6 f, building on Taylor: 2002, 80; 100 f. The theme is further developed in Taylor’s most recent book (Taylor: 2007, ch. 13 – 14).

others seek to combat them. This complexity in itself points beyond the demand for clarity, which was made by the modern model.

The interstice. Preliminary Signposts

The holy becomes visible in very different contexts, e. g. in art, in the religious room, in everyday things. Is it possible to say something more general, something that embraces such varied manifestations? I have not offered any definition in the strict sense, but I have drawn attention to some decisive traits of the holy: It manifests something “other” and something “more.” It entails special human responses (symbols, rituals, precepts, etc.). I have also drawn attention to the religious value of the holy. This last point is both very central and very much a matter of dispute. For how are we to understand the relationship between the holy and the institutionalized religions?

One answer, which was predominant throughout most of the twentieth century, regarded the holy and religion as isomorphic realities. In other words, the tendency was to regard to holy as the common core of all religions, as the essence of the religions. Today, there are not many historians of religion who would be tempted to put forward such a claim without reservations. Greater weight is attached today than in the past to plurality and to the differences between the religions. The centrality of the holy varies in the different religions, and the meaning attached by the various cultures to this concept need not always be identical. Some scholars of religion, such as Richard Fenn, go to the other extreme and regard the holy and religion as mutually exclusive realities, at least in the contemporary situation. Fenn claims that the holy is an uncontrollable power which can no longer be held bound by institutionalized religion, and that this is why the holy seeps out into all the other spheres of society (Fenn: 2001, 9 f). The problem with Fenn’s position is that it does not take into account how the holy can still become visible within established religious frameworks. My starting point in this book will be an intermediate position: The holy is a religious phenomenon, which, especially in recent years, also becomes visible outside the traditional domain of religion. Although the holy continues to be primarily a religious phenomenon, it keeps on finding new forms of expression. The holy is “captured” in various ways in Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, and Buddhism, but it also finds expression outside these religions, in art, in important human encounters, and in memories.

If the holy is not the essence of religion, and if the holy itself does not possess any essence at all, is there then basically anything that unites the various experiences of the holy? Ludwig Wittgenstein endeavored to remind us that theoretical concepts too belong to the complicated network or “game” in everyday language. Instead of “essence,” Wittgenstein introduced the useful concept of *family resemblance*. A family can have characteristic facial features,

even if the son most strongly resembles his mother and the daughter most strongly resembles her father. In the same way, the unity of a concept can be sought in “a complicated network of similarities overlapping and criss-crossing” (Wittgenstein: 1967, §66). The same is true of the holy. The basis of all that we call “holy” is not some absolutely immutable core, but a set of criss-crossing similarities, which constitute a loose unity. This makes it more difficult to demarcate the holy once and for all; at the same time, however, the holy becomes more interesting, as a complex and mobile phenomenon. And it has been claimed that one of the enduring insights in Rudolf Otto’s epochal book *Das Heilige* (1917) is that the holy is a *complex* phenomenon (Colpe: 1997, 53). The holy is both puzzling and present, both attractive and repellent.

There are different branches of the family resemblance that make up the complexity of the holy. Let us begin with something that seems self-contradictory. On the one hand, wonder at the holy appears as something devoid of language. The holy presents itself as something foreign to the language which is available in our culture. On the other hand, it is clear that the understanding of the holy changes in the course of history and is therefore indebted to the cultural formation and the linguistic expression, which it receives. Is it possible to unite these two affirmations – the holy as both alien to, and nevertheless dependent on, culture and language? Perhaps it is precisely this inherent tension that can help us discover a very central characteristic of the holy, viz. that it is both *foreign* and *familiar*, or more precisely, that it is the *interstice* between foreign and familiar.

If it is possible to indicate the experiential content of the holy, this must be something more than the accustomed and familiar; at the same time, however, it cannot be completely detached from what it is possible to experience.⁵ Now, however, we must take a further step and ask: How does the holy become visible here? The space between, or the interstice, gives us at least a first pointer. The interstice challenges the typically modern dichotomies, where concepts are united by means of their mutual antithesis (holy/profane, religious/secular, pure/impure, etc.). More specifically, my suggestion is that the holy comes into play in the interstice that lies between three poles, namely the holy as different and other, the profane, and what I would call the sacral. The interstice is neither the one nor the other: it is neither completely familiar nor completely foreign. What place does such a concept find in research literature? Although such an understanding of the holy is not traditional, it clearly has precursors, not least in dialogue philosophy, which emphasizes the space between, that which cannot be reduced to either “I” or “thou,” since it demands both of these. In the “I–thou” relationship, there arises something qualitatively different and new, something more than the sum total of individual persons (Buber: 2002, 241). But although Buber articulates

5 This is the central argument of my *Phenomenology and the Holy* (Dahl: 2010).

important aspects of the interstice here, I believe that an investigation of the holy cannot be limited exclusively to the dialogical experience.

On the basis of completely different premises, Derrida's post-structuralist thinking has come close to the interstice in his use of concepts such as *différance*, trace, and aporias. The point of such concepts is to clear the path for structural interstices, which are not completely integrated into the systems of philosophical thought (Derrida: 1973). Derrida's approach does not exhaust the holy, because the method remains too formal and is not sufficiently sensitive to the phenomenological material. The interstice, as a decisive characteristic of the holy, is neither a self-contradiction nor an aporia, neither a conceptual leftover nor an element, which disturbs the logic: it is the concrete manner in which the holy occurs, usually right in the heart of our lived life. In this regard, Kristeva's reflections on feminine holiness have come closer, since they are open to the experiential dimension. Here, the interstice plays an important role (Clément/Kristeva: 2001, 27, 97). But although (as we shall see later) Kristeva has made important contributions to the understanding of the holy, the present book is not guided by the same gender-theoretical interests. In my context, the interstice is understood as a phenomenological description of how the holy becomes visible.

My starting point will be in Martin Heidegger's description of the open-mouthed wonder: "Bereft of all knowledge, wonder stands in a *between*, between that which is most ordinary, the existent, and its unordinariness, the fact that it 'is'." In this interstice of wonder, the human person is put into "the confused indecision of the ordinary and the unordinary" (Heidegger: 1984, 168 f. Eng. trans.: B.McN.). Doubtless, many people still have childhood memories of the wonder they felt at the first snowfall in winter, as it covered gardens and streets: everything is the same, and yet everything is changed. Or one may think of how the holy sacraments in church are based precisely on such a connection between the ordinary and the unordinary: for the believers, ordinary bread and wine, when put into a liturgical context, awaken the sense of Christ's presence.

More specifically, I wish to emphasize how the holy occurs in the force field between two other central poles, viz. the *profane* and the *sacral*. The holy entails something foreign. None of the classic theories with which we shall shortly become acquainted doubts that the appearing of the holy is linked to the appearing of something foreign, something mysterious and different. But this foreign element must also become visible within the field of human vision, for otherwise it does not concern us. This is why a link must also be established in some way or other between the holy and the life we lead from day to day. On the one hand, the holy is not transformed into something profane, into which it would be completely absorbed; but on the other hand, it cannot be completely separated from the everyday sphere. This kind of interweaving of the foreign and the familiar in the everyday sphere illustrates not only the "interstice" as a characteristic of the holy, but also weak holiness. The

everyday manifestations of the holy are not marked by an otherworldly revelation, but are weak manifestations of something “other” and “more” right in the midst of our everyday activities.

The holy is sometimes associated with that which is ethically good and estimable – a holy life, a holy calling – but one need not look long before one finds examples of another side to the phenomenon, which paint a much more somber picture. In what follows, the destructive aspect of the holy will be called the “sacral.” In customary usage, the “sacral” is synonymous with the holy, but for want of a better expression, I reserve this term for the dark side of the holy. Although it is possible, and sometimes necessary, to draw a distinction between the sacral and the holy, the sacral must not be separated or detached from it: the sacral is one pole, which forms part of a more comprehensive entity, viz. holiness.⁶ This dimension includes not only the sinister atmosphere, which can be linked to an overwhelming and foreign power, but also the potential of the sacral for violence. I have already mentioned the holy war; another example is the scapegoat, to which demonic qualities have been ascribed, thus legitimating violence. The persecution of the Jews is only the most obvious expression of this sacral logic, as René Girard has pointed out.

Traditionally, it has often been thought that the distinctions between the holy, the profane, and the sacred are kept in place by means of *taboos* and *purity regulations* which function (to put it simply) as control mechanisms which ensure both that the holy is not besmirched by the profane, and that the sacral is kept outside both the holy sphere and the profane sphere. I shall argue that the reality is not so unambiguous, since the holy itself appears to entail an “impure” exchange between holy and profane, holy and sacral, because it is precisely in this interplay that the mystery of the holy comes into force. One must be open to the possibility that the profane order can be perforated by the holy and the sacral, and that the holy can be besmirched by the profane and the sacral.

6 For a similar distinction between holy and sacral, see Levinas: 1990a, 141.

2. The Holy and Modern Dichotomies

The first and most fundamental question which this book as a whole will ask is: What is the holy? One obvious way to answer this question is to attempt to describe typical traits of experiences of the holy. For example, one can start with one's own self, paying attention to one's own experience, and then attempt to offer as exact as possible a description of this experience. If one wants to extend the investigation to cover more than one's own private experience, one must explore other people's experience of the holy. If one wishes to broaden one's insight even further, one can go to other cultures and see whether similar experiences of the holy are to be found there. If one identifies characteristic traits, which possess a general validity, one has broadened one's knowledge of the holy.

Simplifying somewhat, we can say that these and similar approaches were the path taken by the phenomenology of religion at the beginning of the twentieth century, a path that was to lead to some of the most important contributions to our understanding of the holy. The most prominent and influential representatives of the phenomenology of religion are perhaps the German historian of religion and theologian Rudolf Otto and the Rumanian-born historian of religion Mircea Eliade, whom we shall study in the present chapter. Although their theories must be regarded as classical contributions to the theoretical debate about the holy, it is important to grasp the limitations of these theories. In particular, I shall look at how they are dominated by the modern dichotomies that I mentioned in the previous chapter, especially by the dichotomy between the holy and the profane. One central question is how the separation between the holy and the everyday or profane is presented. This separation plays a decisive role for both Otto and Eliade, although they treat it in different ways. These two scholars occupy a relatively weak position in today's research. Nevertheless, I wish to underline what remains valid in their contributions, especially by showing how a philosophical phenomenology can come to their aid. But before we come to that point, it will be useful to form a picture of what is entailed by employing the phenomenology of religion as a methodology.

Phenomenology of Religion and its Background

The phenomenology of religion played a decisive role in the science of religion in our part of the world between the end of the nineteenth century and the 1970's. The "phenomenology of religion" is not, however, a univocal concept, partly because its leading spokesmen have developed their academic

discipline in various directions, and partly because that which goes by this name has its origin *de facto* in a variety of roots. The presupposition of the experience-based wing of the phenomenology of religion, which became predominant in the first half of the twentieth century, was the work of Edmund Husserl, the founding father of philosophical phenomenology. The other wing, with its structural orientation, seeks to *classify* the various aspects of religion, in order to develop structures and typologies; this tends not to have any link to philosophical phenomenology.¹ We shall see a confluence of the two wings – both the experienced-based wing and the structurally oriented wing – in some phenomenologists of religion, such as Eliade. But since both Otto and Eliade basically belong to the first wing of the phenomenology of religion, it is this wing that is the center of our attention here.

In order to grasp what is entailed by the phenomenological approach, we must first look at its background, at the fundamental models on which it builds, and not least at what it *turns its back on*. A fruitful starting point is offered here by Émile Durkheim's epoch-making study of the basic forms of religious life, published in 1912, both because this work so clearly articulates the distinction between the holy and the profane, a distinction which is later developed within the phenomenology of religion, and also because it launches a sociological explanatory model – which the phenomenologists of religion unambiguously oppose.

Durkheim sees religion as an explicitly societal phenomenon. He is indeed acquainted with mysticism and the religious individualism of Protestantism, but he claims that individualistic forms of faith like this are derived from a more basic collective origin. Religion must be understood as a unitary system within a religious collective, where actions and rituals take place, which correspond to mythical ideas (Durkheim: 2001, 46). The religious understandings of faith and praxis presuppose the existence of two fundamental spheres of reality which are separate, and which indeed have an antithetical relationship: the spheres of *the holy* and *the profane*. The relationship between the holy and the profane is not that of a fluid transition like that between the higher and the lower in a hierarchy. The relationship consists of *difference* or *heterogeneity*:

This heterogeneity suffices to characterize this classification of things and to distinguish it from any other for one particular reason: *it is absolute*. There is no other example in the history of human thought of two categories of things so profoundly differentiated or radically opposed to one another. The traditional opposition between good and evil is nothing in comparison; good and evil are opposite species of the same genus, namely morality, just as health and sickness are

1 For a comparable division, cf. Gilhus/Mikaelson: 2001, 49 ff. For a more fine-meshed division, cf. Allen: 1987, 273.

merely two different aspects of the same order of facts – life. By contrast, the sacred and the profane have always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as separate genera, as two worlds that have nothing in common (Durkheim: 2001, 38).

It would be impossible to formulate this point with greater clarity: the holy and the profane have nothing in common. The essential functions of rituals and taboos are to ensure that there is no admixture between the holy and the profane, and that they do not come into contact with each other in any other way.

Although the holy seems to be an autonomous phenomenon, Durkheim's intention is to show how the holy is in reality a masked expression of the fellowship itself. The holy is to be understood as a product of, or more precisely as a function of, societal mechanisms or functions which emerge in all fellowships. In order to unmask the actual societal mechanisms as simply as possible, he takes his starting point in the most easily understood form of religion, which was accessible in his own day, viz. Australian totemism. A totem is a material object, often an animal or a plant, which a delimited societal fellowship, a so-called clan, views as a symbol of its unity (Durkheim: 2001, 88). For Durkheim, such totems are the most exemplary instances of the holy. He is particularly interested in the fact that the totem is both adored as something transcendent – something that crosses a boundary, something “outside” – and understood as the very embodiment of the closed fellowship.

Durkheim's thesis is that the holiness of the totem is in reality a product of the fellowship, which it symbolizes. The individual understands himself in relation to a fellowship, which is *larger* and *more powerful* than he is. This is why the power is experienced as something transcendent in relation to each individual. In order for the individual to take part in the fellowship, it is necessary that one bridle one's own interests and natural needs and that one is thus willing to sacrifice something for the good of the fellowship. The moral authority of the fellowship is transferred to the totem in such a manner that the rituals and prescriptions, which are linked in one way or another to the totem demand obedience and respect. Although the clan members experience the commandments and prohibitions as issuing from the totem itself, Durkheim believes that on the deepest level, this involves a transference. The totem is nothing other than a crystallization point for the moral power of the fellowship. This power appears with a religious quality – as “holy” – which is transferred to the totem. The fields of existence which are not regulated by the fellowship, where the individual can decide freely for himself, thus become profane, while those fields which are regulated by the fellowship through commandments and prohibitions appear as holy (Durkheim: 2001, 155 – 160). According to Durkheim, if one takes one's starting point in the totem, it is possible to explain the universal structure of holy/profane by pointing to the underlying societal mechanisms.

Neither Otto nor Eliade made any fundamental alteration to Durkheim's understanding of the relationship between the holy and the profane, although this distinction is seldom expressed so unreservedly as in Durkheim. This means that they all confirm and develop the typically modern logic, where the dichotomies dominate their presentation. Durkheim agrees with the phenomenologists that religion is characterized by a particular feeling or experience, but it is here that they part company: for where Durkheim holds that the feeling can and should be traced back to the societal structures of which it is a product, the phenomenologists invest their entire analysis precisely *in* the feelings or experiences themselves, and refuse to go behind them. The phenomenologists' intention is not to block the investigation before it reaches its conclusion, nor do they wish to close their eyes to potentially uncomfortable explanations. They are quite simply in disagreement with Durkheim about what constitutes the ultimate "behind," the very basis, which the investigation seeks to uncover.

"To the Things Themselves!"

For the phenomenologists, it is the phenomenon that constitutes the basis, not only of the research carried out by the science of religion, but of all human knowledge. The phenomenon is neither a subjective experience nor a really existing object, but simply that which manifests itself, independently of whether or not it objectively exists. According to what Husserl calls "the Principle of all Principles," "every originary intuition" is "a legitimizing source of cognition" (Husserl: 1982, 44; Husserl: 1950, 55). Husserl holds that all knowledge has its origin in the present experience or original intuition. As a source of law, however, intuition sets limits for what the human person can know. All assertions, which do not correspond to some possible content of experience are empty speculations.

Husserl's slogan "To the things themselves!" was the lodestar of the phenomenological work. He noticed that philosophers had a tendency to take their starting point in philosophical principles, metaphysical or scientific dogmas, and then attempted to offer explanations of actual problems; sometimes, the preferred starting point was the principles of psychology, and sometimes – as in the case of Durkheim – they chose sociology. Husserl objects that this means overlooking the fact that all knowledge must have its starting point in "the things themselves," i.e. the phenomena; it also entails overlooking the special character that belongs to the religious phenomena. Instead of uncovering the special aspects which belong to the religious phenomena and giving a precise description of their essence, Durkheim always leaps behind the phenomena to an entity which is not itself of a religious nature – in Durkheim's case, the norms of the fellowship. Such an explanatory model, where one claims that one phenomenon is in reality

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Central to Espen Dahl's approach is the idea that the holy cannot be reduced to one stable essence, but is fundamentally composite and ambiguous. This means that the classical distinctions between the holy and the profane, the pure and the impure, the pious and the violent, cannot be drawn as sharply as scholars once did. Instead, the manifestation of the holy takes place in the interstice between those spheres. Such a position is not strong – it attests to the weakness of the holy. Through a critical dialogue with the most influential recent contributions, the author presents various theories and arguments from religious science, theology, philosophy, and psychology.

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