Anthropology of religion: Sighting the dynamics of sacredness

Antropología de la religión: avistamiento a la dinámica de la sacralidad
Antropologia da religião: um vislumbre da dinâmica da sacralidade

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Abstract

Introduction: The sciences of religion have been involved in the understandings of transcendence and its derived relations. Objective: The present study recognizes the theoretical considerations held by the anthropology of religion on the dynamics of sacredness. **Methodology:** The study employed hermeneutics applying deductive technique. **Result:** The study identified the anthropological character of religion, its structure, and the notion of the sacred and the profane. **Conclusion:** The conceptions allow to assume that it is necessary to assume the manifestations of religiosity and spirituality in the understandings of the current social and cultural systems.

Keywords: Anthropology of religion; Creeds; Sacred; Profane; Sacredness.

Resumen

Introducción: Las ciencias de la religión se han implicado en las comprensiones de la trascendencia y de sus relaciones derivadas. **Objetivo:** Este estudio reconoce las consideraciones teóricas que ostenta la antropología de la religión sobre la dinámica de la sacralidad. **Metodología:** Se empleó la hermenéutica aplicando técnica deductiva. **Resultados:** Se identificó el carácter antropológico de la religión, su estructura y la noción de lo sagrado y lo profano. **Conclusiones:** Las concepciones permiten asumir que es preciso asumir las manifestaciones de la religiosidad y espiritualidad en los entendimientos de los actuales sistemas sociales y culturales.

Palabras clave: Antropología de la religión; Credos; Sagrado; Profano; Sacralidad.

Resumo

Introdução: As ciências da religião têm sido envolvidas em entendimentos da transcendência e suas relações derivadas. **Objetivo:** Este estudo reconhece as considerações teóricas mantidas pela antropologia da religião sobre a dinâmica da sacralidade. **Metodologia:** A hermenêutica foi empregada por meio de uma técnica dedutiva. **Resultados:** Foram identificados o caráter antropológico da religião, sua estrutura e a noção de sagrado e profano. **Conclusões:** As concepções permitem supor que é necessário assumir as manifestações da religiosidade e da espiritualidade nas compreensões dos sistemas sociais e culturais atuais.

Palavras-chave: Antropologia da religião; Credos; Sagrado; Profano; Sacralidade.

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Introduction

The objective treatment of the events of religiosity determines the identification of the structure of religion and allows to understand patterns in its dynamics and operativity. The intentional relationship can be assumed from science with rational mediation and theological assignment. These relationships suggest appreciations of religion as a political strategy, as an irrational derivative and as an experience of reverence and hope.

Another circumstance of objective location is decided by the anthropology of religion. Anthropological studies aim at the functioning of religion in the possibility *"man:environment:creeds"* and note the connotations of the sacred and the profane in the deontological group structures and in the order of interaction.

It is necessary to suggest the importance of the anthropology of religion in the current accommodations of polarization: in secularization, fundamentalism, fanaticism and religious extremism.

Theoretical framework

Religion according to science

Religion as a belief in supernatural elements

The category of the supernatural is admitted as a notion of the uncontrollable by the scientific method (Dein, 2016), so that the contents not explained through the laws of nature or the phenomena that exceed the epistemological limits of science are considered supernatural. Science refers to religion the non-logical and non-demonstrable matters, and decides a differential region of gnoseological procedure.

Religion is perceived as beliefs in the supernatural, affirmations in deities, forces, spirits or souls of the dead (Hossain, 2021; Perez and Rohde, 2022; Plante et al., 2023; Van Elk, 2022; Wilt et al., 2023). Ellis (2023) explains how religion has traditionally captivated through the supernatural factor by exhorting faith and trust in favors and promises coming from metaphysical entities or forces. Davidsen (2014) defines religion as "beliefs, practices, experiences, and discourses that assume the existence of supernatural agents, worlds, or processes."

Religion as institutional creeds

Émile Durkheim perceived religion as a conglomerate of beliefs from a social and institutional perspective. Religion is a manifestation of society and of the morality that arises from it (Maioli, 2011), "it is a solidary system of beliefs and practices relating to sacred entities, that is to say, separate, forbidden; beliefs and practices that unite in the same moral community, called church, all those who adhere to it" (Durkheim, 1982, p. 98). Durkheim idealized religion as a hierarchical collectivity that has systematized its creeds.

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Religion from the point of view of reason

Religion as a means of manipulation

Ludwig Feuerbach, intellectual father of "anthropological atheism", affirmed that God is nothing more than a creation of man and that even the secret of theology is anthropology; therefore, man is God for man according to his famous legacy *"Homo homini Deus" (*Piñón Gaytan, 2014).

Karl Marx stated that religion was the *"Opium of the volkes"* (the opium of the people), as it was nothing more than an instrument used by the social classes with the sole purpose of exercising control over the masses and alleviating their pains with utopias (Eberhardt, 2019). Marx stated that religion does not make man, it is man that makes religion, where man is the world of man, the state and society (Bielo, 2015).

From the same perspective in which Marx assumes capitalism (workers are submissive and ignorant in the system), he refers to religion. This is a veil that blinds men, it is an alteration of consciousness that leads man to ignore and neglect the needs of his social environment (Blankenship, 2008).

This position has been questioned because not all religions have an institutional or organizational model. Thomas Luckmann points out that to appreciate religion merely as an institution is to limit religion to one of its multiple forms (Luckmann et al., 2022).

Religion as an executioner

Sigmund Freud warned that "religion is a mirage" (Freud, 2016), a state of neurosis with significant mental affectations (Hernández Sáenz, 2014). He described religion as a provoking executioner of intellectual atrophy (Kenny, 2015), which needed to be intervened with psychoanalysis (Bielo, 2015). He established that the reason why religion has dominated is in man's need to get rid of his fears and apprehensions, the most determined of them: death (Parsons, 2021).

Max Weber intends to study religion from its repercussions and impact on society (Del Castillo, 2001). In order to be understood, religion requires the significance it has on the practitioner and its implication in group customs (Weber, 2012).

Theological perception of religion

Religion as an experience

Peter Berger has argued that "religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established" (Hjelm, 2024).

This epistemological condition does not interpret religion through the rationality of beliefs, but through religious experiences. Rudolf Otto, drawing from Lutheran thought, suggests that a believer did not see God as "the god of the philosophers, the god of an Erasmus; an idea, an abstract notion, a simple moral allegory. It is a terrible power, manifested in divine 'wrath'" (Eliade, 1981, p. 6).

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Otto, although he included the irrational element, did not pretend to exclude the rational one (Risoto de Mesa, 2014); human experience of these religious phenomena is necessary to understand them (Guacaneme, 2010).

The incursion of the numen

The term *numinous* comes from the Latin numen meaning "deity", "being with divinity"; it implies sacred, divine and supernatural experience. The numen is constituted by three dimensions: *mysterium, tremen- dum and fascinans.*

Mysterium: Something ineffable, enigmatic and inexplicable: content.

Tremendum: Man's fear of the occult, the unknown and the supernatural: subject experience.

Fascinans: The fascinating and attractive character (Merkur, 2006): object experience.

Consequently, it is established that, from the numinous, the sensations of fear emerge before the sacred: on the one hand, the *mysterium tremendum,* fear produced by the power of an unknown being; and on the other, the *mysterium fascinans,* which generates a pleasant fullness in the being (Jiménez Orellano, 2013). The numinous is structured by two types of experiences: a terrifying and irrational experience before the sacred, *mysterium tremen- dum,* which produces a sense of fear; and contrary to this, an attractive and reverent experience before the divine as is the *mysterium fascinans* (Risoto de Mesa, 2014).

The mysterium tremendum

In the experience of the *mysterium tremendum,* the occult is very significant, for, as Elias Canetti stated: "There is nothing that man fears more than being touched by the unknown" (Lambert, 1963). The enigmatic and mysterious characteristics of the unknown are so powerful that they make it unshakable and unassailable.

Religion has been the instrument historically used by mankind to avoid being overtaken by that feeling of intimidation generated by the power of the unknown, of the *mysterium tremendum.* Man can only subdue the fear of this experience by being in the company of others, and it is here where the beings described in religious beliefs have a great influence to overcome the fear of the occult (Lleó, 2012).

The mysterium fascinans

In spite of the terror that the numinousness of the mysterium tremendum can cause, it is convenient to recognize the fascination and enchantment that it generates: mysterium fascinans. In Christianity, God is assumed with respect or reverence and, on many occasions, with fear. At the same time, it produces hope, protection and companionship. For the professing Christian, aspects of God such as his unconditional love, his forgiveness that is available at all times, his protection and companionship lead to a sense of comfort and well-being. Added to the grace of salvation and the hope of healing, elements of the numonosity of Christianity, are of interest even to unbelievers (Lleó, 2012).

Methodology

The study determined a qualitative research approach (Silverman, 2021). The methodology

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was hermeneutic in nature (Forster and Gjesdal, 2019), as it aimed at the understanding of an epistemological event (anthropology of religion) from the texts generated. The deductive technique (Panke, 2018) was developed in appropriation and discussion.

Results

Anthropological character of religion

Anthropological enunciation of religion

Religion has been present in different civilizations (Rodríguez Fernández et al., 2022), involving systems of codes, signs, symbols, rituals and beliefs that link man with the sacred (Swenson, 2010). The systems are manifested in culture through customs of worship and experiences of transcendence. The anthropology of religion focuses on the study of religious phenomena manifested in culture, to identify their origin, progression and dynamics, linking meaning and belief systems (Edara, 2017). William James, a celebrated 20th century psychologist, analyzed religion through anthropology and concluded that religion is related to man's feelings, acts and experiences towards what he considers divine (Levi and Kocher, 2013). In agreement, the Canadian anthropologist Anthony Wallace affirmed that religion is a sum of rituals and beliefs established for a specific purpose or prevention in man (Wallace, 2013).

Religion has always had an anthropological character in its structure (Wallace, 2013), although the anthropology of religion emerged as a science approximately in the middle of the 19th century.

Anthropological structure of religion

While it is true that there is no universal consensus regarding the meaning of the term *religion*, it is possible to observe a structure that is maintained in all religions. Religion is localized with its beliefs in particular cultural environments and does not realize the stubborn universalism that crosses epochs, borders and groups (Dinham et al., 2017). Man, environment (spacetime) and creeds are indispensable aspects for the existence and functioning of religion (Figure 1).

Figure 1.
Bibliographic systematization of the documents reviewed

Source: *Own elaboration.*

Anthropological conception of the sacred and the profane.

The sacred

The expression *sacred* derives from the Latin sacer meaning "set apart or restricted" (Pera, 2012); however, multiculturalism and different ideological positions make it risky to generalize the meaning of the term *sacred*. What for some is sacred for others may not be, for this reason it can only be stated with certainty that the sacred is the antonym of the profane. The sacred implies hope of succor, success and prosperity; at times, it represents punishment and calamity. The sacred is an objectification of respect constituted by fear and security (Caillois, 2023). Man's reaction to what he considers sacred determines a reverent attitude, acts of adoration and a link with superio- res realities. Morga (2017) calls a "power of presence" a phenomenon that can occur in both art and religion.

Paden (2017) posits some universal behaviors of mankind around the sacred: a) the act of setting a thing aside especially, attaching importance and veneration to it as a product of sacralizing or determining something as sacred; b) the establishment of identity, position, reputation and popularity within society; c) the creation and establishment of codes to avoid desecration or breach of what has been established as sacred; and d) the grasping and engagement of man around what has been stipulated as sacred.

Religion is not the only field dedicated to sacred matters; however, it can be admitted that religion is characterized by a full focus on the sacred (Pargament et al., 2017). Henri Hubert states that the sacred is the sequence of religion: myths, beliefs, doctrines, religious codes, rituals, ceremonies, priestly service, idols, monuments, temples and shrines. In short, for Hubert "religion is the administration of the sacred" (Caillois, 2023).

The profane

Knowledge of the characteristics of "the sacred" will facilitate the understanding of "the profane", since the profane is the opposite expression of man towards "the sacred", a breach, a violation or offense to what was previously venerated as sacred, or, sometimes, a manifestation of resistance or flight to this type of elements (Sabar, 2017).

Marett (1914) resorted to mysticism to understand "the sacred" and "the profane". Primitive man intuited a supernatural power, an intuition that constitutes the realizations of transcendence. With the presence or absence of this sensation, one can distinguish "the sacred" from the "profane". An experience constituted by the qualities of the mysterium tremendum and mysterium fascinans expounded by Otto. However, this author does not mention or explain why certain elements provoke this sensation in man and why others do not.

The notion of the *profane* varies according to the cultural environment in which man manifests his beliefs. An unusual case of the profane can be observed in the Tana Toraja ethnic group. This group located in northern Indonesia considers it normal and exalted to live with embalmed corpses. While for most Westerners death is feared, they mourn their dead and consider ritual contact with the dead as profane, the Toraja make provisions for the dead, celebrate and replace with the obituary the

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importance of the birth. This community believes that the dead live their lives in a better way (Tsin-tjilonis, 2007). While for the Toraja it is a sacred duty to remove the dead from the grave, in some Western nations this action is criminalized and in others it is classified as a non-excusable offense (Rodriguez Fernandez et al., 2022). Toraja funeral rituals are seen by Western religions as manifestations of profanation; for the Torajas, the way in which people from outside their culture perform their funerals is a manifest sacrilege.

Discussion

Areas of sacredness

In the four major world religions, the following pattern has been observed in the areas of sacredness (Table 1):

Table 1.

Areas of sacredness

Religion	Areas of sacredness			
	Locus Location	*Tempus* Weather	*Instrumentum* Thing	*Animatus* Living being
Christianity	Church, parish, cathedral (Polanco, 2003).	Holy Week (Ferro, 2011)	Chalice (Kumler, 2015)	Clergyman (Rincón-Pérez, 2015)
Islam	Mosque, sanctuary of the Kafiaba (Abumalham, 2004)	Ramadan (Arias, 2018).	El Tasbih (Moallem, 2014)	Imam (Martin, 2004)
Hinduism	Dhamas (abodes of deities) and tirthas (places of worship) (Ramchandani, 2016).	Rama-navami, the nine nights of Nava-ratri (Ramchandani, 2016).	Lingam (Mahdihassan, 1990)	Animals (especially cows) (Cordero del Castillo, 2008).
Judaism	Levitical shrine, Temple of Jerusalem, synagogue (Bickerman, 1965).	Sabbath (McKay, 2021)	El yad (Azulay Tapiero, 2019)	Priest (Cordero del Castillo, 2008)

Source: *Own elaboration.*

Polarization generates division, confrontation and sociocultural violence (García Gaspar, 2021).

The polarization omits the sophist principle: no bird can fly with only one wing, either the left wing or the right wing.
right, but needs both wings to fly (Gamboa and Jaramillo Jassir, 2022). The polarized masses become dogmatic, apologists, radical and intransigent.

Esteban et al. (2012) found a significant increase in ethnic and religious polarization compared to the measure previously reported by Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2005). This phenomenon has been ad-

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verted even in developed nations such as Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. The studies with clude that in these countries religious polarization has been expanding since the mid-1980s (Wilkins-Laflamme, 2014).

Some forms in which religious polarization manifests itself are secularization, religious extremism, fundamentalism and religious fanaticism, ideologies and behaviors that represent current interest for the anthropology of religion (Masferrer, 2019).

Fundamentalism

This ideological current is characterized by its *radical* interpretation of *religious codes and sacred texts*. The texts are assumed to be literal and infallible; therefore, the veneration and strict observation of the written contents constitute the vision of reality that its supporters understand as pure and ideal (Antoun, 2008). The anthropological challenge posed by this position refers to the fact that beliefs, religious codes and sacred texts come from ancient times and specific cultures, with environments different from the present; thus, literal interpretation ends up imposing customs, thoughts and codes alien to the time and cultural context of the present. This circumstance leads to an anachronistic appropriation of moral contents and group habituations, reduces the understanding of the subject and inhibits normative accommodation in relationships. The estimation of the regulated and written tradition on the valuation of the individual is its manifest consequence (Díaz, 2021).

Religious extremism

Exaggerated positions are established and promoted, *far from a constituted consensus*. This departure from consensus or convention sets up poles and antagonisms. Conflicts are not caused by objective cultural differences, but by the way in which beliefs are conceived (Esteban et al., 2012). Unlike fundamentalism, which is distinguished by the literal application of established religious codes and consensuses, religious extremism exceeds and exaggerates these standards, producing a distancing from the point of consensus, so that norms end up being indirectly broken (Van Prooijen and Kuijper, 2020).

Religious extremism has usually been associated with terrorism (Schipper, 2003), with violent action by groups for politico-religious causes, which urge participation in a "holy war" in support of their beliefs (Webber et al., 2018). However, it is convenient to specify that a religious extremist does not always implement violence; terrorist actions are not what distinguishes religious extremism.

Religious fanaticism

It reflects an obsession with rigorous adherence to religious doctrines and beliefs. Religious fanatics are distinguished by the intransigent imposition of their religious convictions, and even tend to impose their positions with aggressiveness and intimidation. Religious fanaticism has been categorized by some authors as obsessive-compulsive behavior (Priego, 2018). The religious fanatic is radical, tends to be crude and resorts to violence to defend and impose beliefs; he can kill or die for his beliefs (Steffen, 2007).

The attitude of the religious fanatic ends up materializing in acts of exclusion and violence against those who desecrate or oppose their beliefs, religious codes and standards. Religious fanaticism is not a phenomenon specific to Muslims, but can occur in all religions. Religious fanaticism does not depend on creeds, but on the obsessive and radical way in which religious people assimilate, promote and impose their beliefs (Hemminger, 2021).

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Secularization

Secularization is the antithesis of fundamentalism, extremism and religious fanaticism. Secularization is determined by anti-radical paradigms and promotes religious emancipation. Secularism underestimates the religious foundations, skimps on the intervention of religious institutions in human behavior, locates religiosity in the axiological periphery and suggests the abandonment of religious practices (Moncada Cerón, 2012). Some authors do not conceive secularization as a religious distancing, but as a religious updating, resulting from modernity (Masferrer Kan, 2019).

Secularization is related as an anthropological problem because it represents a religious enculturation with respect to contemporaneity and because it implies an alteration in the orders and customs on which religions are based.

Conclusions

The recognition of the dynamics of sacredness by the anthropology of religion requires the gnoseological referral to theology, to objective rationality and to science. Theology can propose, for the recognition of transcendence, the notions *of fact-experience and numen-divine*. Objective rationality suggests that religious realization should be understood critically, while science supposes the verification of the distinctions between materiality and over-materiality in the collectivities of religious experience.

The contribution made by the anthropology of religion in dealing with the religious phenomenon refers to culture and tradition, determining the religious fact from the sacred and the profane, characterizing its structure and noting its manifestations: fundamentalism, extremism, religious fanaticism and secularization.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare the non-existence of possible conflicts of interest that may arise in relation to the article submitted for publication and that may involve third parties.

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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