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The Necessity of Demonstrating Respect for the Sacred : an Attempt at Justification

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Konieczność okazywania szacunku dla świętości. Próba uzasadnienia

Abstract

The article attempts to define the sacred as a symbol which is cognizable by the senses and which connects a human being with the divine reality. The sacred has two dimensions which indicate its ontological otherness and its integrating and standard-setting function. Separation of the sacred sphere from the public sphere renders the sacred to be worthy of respect and, at the same time, not to be subjected to any interference by unauthorized individuals and institutions. Taking care of the sacrum emphasizes the sublimity of this reality and provides for the respect towards those sharing the faith in the sacred. Preserving and promoting the significance of the sacred in human life aims at protecting spiritual sensitivity to good and beauty that motivates a human being to take noble actions and inspires him to adopt the attitudes characterized by love and service. The faith and the sacred sphere should be defended, above all, by the testimony given in words and actions, aimed at showing and justifying the rationality of the given deeds and service expressing and promoting love.

W tekście podjęto próbę zdefiniowania sacrum jako możliwego do zmysłowego uchwycenia symbolu rzeczywistości świętej, łączącego człowieka z rzeczywistością boską. Sacrum posiada dwa wymiary wskazujące na jego ontologiczną inność oraz funkcję integrującą i normotwórczą. Wyodrębnienie sfery sacrum z powszedniej użyteczności sprawia, że staje się ona czymś, co winno być otoczone szacunkiem i zarazem niepoddawane ingerencjom ze strony nieuprawnionych do tego osób i instytucji. Przez otoczenie opieką rzeczywistości przynależącej do płaszczyzny sacrum, wskazuje się na wzniosłość tej rzeczywistości i domaga się szacunku dla osób, które ją przyjmują i dzielą. Zachowanie i rozszerzenie znaczenia sacrum w życiu ludzkim służy ocaleniu duchowej wrażliwości człowieka na dobro i piękno, które porusza go do szlachetnych działań i inspiruje do zajmowania postaw nacechowanych miłością i służbą. Obrona wiary i sfery sacrum winna dokonywać się nade wszystko na płaszczyźnie przekonywania przez słowo i świadectwo życia, dążące do wykazania i uzasadnienia racjonalności danych działań oraz praktyki służby prowadzącej do miłości.

Key words

respect, religion, Christianity, Islam, dialog
szacunek, religia, chrześcijaństwo, islam, dialog

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The Necessity of Demonstrating Respect for the Sacred. An Attempt at Justification

Introduction

The reality of the sacred is a gift to a human being because it gives him the chance of contact with God. Moreover, he has the opportunity to express his attitude in the form of worship, which is a response to God's revelation. Moreover, the sacred constitutes a challenge for a human being, because it determines the scope of obligations arising from worship. The plane of the sacred in a given religious group distinguishes this group from other religions and forms of worship. Therefore, it creates the identity of the group and calls to nurture and defend what is the most important to the community. A collection of what is holy is constitutive for a particular religious community. Therefore, it calls for a certain behavior, necessary for the developing, safeguarding and defending the sacred sphere.

1. An attempt to define the sacred

The reality referred to as the sacred belongs to the sphere of religion and culture, in which the values recognized and shared by the community are protected. The sacred is characterized by the substantial otherness of everything which is secular, or profane, which is marked by some mysterious and frightening power, with whom one can have contact (Otto 1968, 34-36; Zdybicka 1977, 241). The sacred points to the sacred reality and constitutes a symbol, which is cognizable by the senses and connects a human being with the divine reality. Thus, the sacred has two dimensions which demonstrate both its ontological otherness and its integrating and standard-setting function. Separation of the sacred sphere renders it to be worthy of respect and, at the same time, not to be subjected to any interference by unauthorized individuals and institutions (cf. Grodź 2002, 1058-1059).

The sacred sphere includes sacred things, places and forms of behavior, as well as views and beliefs that one considers to be the most important for him and to make his life meaningful (cf. Piwko 2012, c. 832). Acknowledgement of those particular things, places, or set of values to the plane of the sacred indicates

the willingness to save them and presents them as something that demands every effort to be protected.

The sacred has a value in itself. It represents a determined value on the religious and cultural plane, thus, it has impact on human society and obliges individuals to discover another dimension of their existence. A person feels respect for the sacred because he recognizes the existence of something bigger than himself and assigns the rank of non-infringement to the sacred. It determines the value of the man rather than man determining the value of the sacred (cf. Zdybicka 2000, 57). Further to the above, it is crucial to perceive the sacred through the prism of rationality, indicating the adequacy of the manifestation of the sacred to the dignity of a man.

The sacred leads a man into the transcendent reality. Exceeding his limits, he experiences the perspective of development. It has the dimension of time, or it even exceeds the time, allowing a person to enter the timeless reality that connects a human being with previous generations and opens him to immortality. Moreover, the sacred provides the perspective of moral development indicating the values, by which a man confirms the meaning of his existence and gains a sense of fulfillment of his own destiny. Through the respect for the sacred a man discovers his affiliation to other order of things, which raises him above other creatures.

In religious studies, it is emphasized that the sacred serves to underline the autonomy and irreducibility of religion towards other ontological categories (cf. Bronk 2009, 273). Starting from the etymology of the word religion, indicating a binding covenant of divine and human, the sacred can be positioned as a kind of a medium through which both sides communicate their presence and willingness to respect the accepted rules of their relationship. Therefore, the sacred demands respect because it is valuable due to the representation of divine reality and is also useful for a human as a tool to contact the divine.

The sacred leads to the relationship with God and allows for a participation in his wisdom, enabling a different view of the world. Furthermore, it obliges human being to certain behaviors defining the status of a man towards the deity. This can be expressed in the form of worship including the disposition of the spirit, body posture, prayers and sacrifices. The whole realm of ritual belonging to a religious relationship with God is protected as a reality that is not only affected by a human being, but also includes elements that are revealed, i.e. indicated, by God himself (cf. Ratzinger 2012, 28-29).

Therefore, sanctification of specific realities is performed on the discovery that something is indeed sublime, inspires to aim higher and has a value in itself; and not on the basis of social harmony and creation of an event. For this reason, the man is called to verify the recognition of the sacred in the process of purifying

the cultural transmission from mythological and non-historical elements; and to examine the phenomenon of a particular manifestation of the sacred from the historical, theological and aesthetic point of view.

2. Respect for values, religious symbols and beliefs

It is necessary to protect the realm of sacredness important for adherents of a particular religion due to the value of the sacred for the community. Taking care of reality belonging to the plane of the sacrum, the sublimity of this reality is being depicted. What is more, it demands respect for the people who receive and share it. Rejection, or even more humiliation and trampling the values that are experienced by the community, becomes an attack on the community because it undermines what is important for the adherents. However, it has to be stated that even the process of secularization of a particular religion consisting in abandoning the values and disregarding of rules by its followers is a lack of respect that significantly undermines its credibility in the eyes of others (Napiórkowski 2014, 12-13). Thus, respect for the sacred should be first emphasized among the adherents of the religion.

The man is free by nature and cannot be forced to fulfill the obligations arising from religion¹ (cf. Second Vatican Council, 1967). However, it does not mean that the religious community cannot determine the sanctions to mobilize or discipline to demonstrate zeal to the profession of faith. These sanctions may include a deprivation of privileges of the community, imposing penance or even exclusion from the group of believers. However, they cannot move to oppression in the form of imprisonment, corporal punishment or deprivation of life.

Therefore, respect for the sacred sphere is not an obligation arising from the defense against undermining it by outsiders. An even more important form of promoting respect for the sacred consists in the development of doctrine and worship in the way they actually enliven the lives of the adherents, thereby intensively and extensively expanding the scope of its influence. Only the spiritual and moral values internalized and lived as an essential element of daily existence are able to survive and revive a given religion, strengthening its followers in personal growth and accomplishing their life missions. Therefore, the respect for the value determines the survival of a particular religion. Any religion is going to exist as long as there are followers showing with their everyday choices that they deem a given religion to be an adequate and an optimal indication of the way to happiness.

1. "At the same time, however, there is a growing awareness of the sublime dignity of human persons, who stand above all things and whose rights and duties are universal and inviolable. They ought, therefore, to have ready access to all that is necessary for living a genuinely human life (...) the right to act according to the dictates of conscience and to safeguard their privacy, and rightful freedom, including freedom of religion." Second Vatican Council. 1967. "Pastoral constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et spes*." In *Sobór Watykański II. Konstytucje. Dekrety. Deklaracje*. [Second Vatican Council. Constitutions. Decrees. Declarations.], no. 26. Poznań: Pallottinum.

Ideal behaviors personified in the life of heroes of faith are characterized by their complete adherence to religious principles and internalization of a relationship to God, as an integrating factor for all efforts and intentions. “Religion directs our life towards God, while our relationship to God must penetrate it entirely, to the extent that religion becomes our life. Religion is closely linked with mankind and all its affairs, and at the same time it directs everything what is human towards God” (John Paul II 1997, 139).

It is not merely in theory that the man becomes certain a given religion is salutary, i.e., it brings salvation and indicates the way toward the personal development. The man, being a physical and spiritual creature, needs a system of signs and symbols pertaining to certain rituals which create a form of a living and existential relationship with God. The involvement of the mind, will and emotions requires not only doctrine in its dogmatic and moral dimension, but also it includes liturgy and diakonia, through which a communion with God and among people is established. The man enters into contact with God by his conduct in the form of worship, as well as by means of daily behavior expressed in choosing the good indicated and approved by religion.

Respect for the sacred is expressed as well in the care of the holy places. Another form of respect for the sacred is the consent of the state legislation on the use of certain forms of worship, including ritual slaughter. Sacrifices to God or the principles of eating particular food as a fulfillment of religious laws constitute the part of the sacred sphere of a particular religious group, which should be respected by other people. Fasts involving the temporary refrainment from meals, or from eating meat also belong to the above category (cf. Grodź 2000, 416).

Missionary activity is an essential requirement of respect for the sacred. It confirms the living faith of witnesses who are willing to propose to others the proclamation of the truth revealed. Acquisition of new coreligionists should take the form of a free decision of people who are convinced of the truth that is preached. It is not acceptable to use physical or moral and economic coercion that would limit the freedom of people to consciously choose a particular religious vocation.

3. Legitimate forms of defense of the sacred

The fundamental requirement towards the sacred is to respect it and ensure its rightful place within the community. Preserving and promoting the significance of the sacred in human life aims at protecting spiritual sensitivity to good and beauty that motivates a human being to take noble actions and inspires him to adopt the attitudes characterized by love and service.

The sacred should be defended when it becomes undermined and discredited as a value and if there are cases of media or physical attack against sacred things and

places. Mocking and belittling representatives of a particular religious community or their formal or informal persecution in the form of contempt, ostracism or discrimination against their positions within the society belong to a separate category. One of the worst forms of religious persecution consists in endangering health and life of the followers of a given religion. “Spreading the faith through violence is something unreasonable. Violence is incompatible with the nature of God and the nature of the soul.” (Benedict XVI 2006). Behaviors in the form of hatred due to a race, religion or political views are considered as violations of human rights and should be prosecuted by the relevant laws enforced by the designated authorities (cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church 1994, no. 2106).

There are different forms of defense of the sacred, which can be divided into individual and collective. Individual defensive behavior may be expressed in the promotion of positive values and in the demand for their rightful place in society. They can also take the negative form such as a fight against people and circles that discredit and destroy the sacred, as well as the prevention of future acts of vandalism. Socially, they may constitute organized activities in the form of enacting laws providing penalties for offending religious feelings, the destruction of places of worship and things considered sacred, or for violating physical integrity and the good name of representatives of the religion. Sometimes, a preventive defense may be organized by means of involving uniformed services to protect a place or a person.

The faith and the sacred sphere should be defended, above all, by the testimony given in words and actions, aimed at showing and justifying the rationality of the deeds and service expressing and promoting love. The theoretical and practical dimension of the sacred indicates its important role in the life of societies that are protected within the fundamental sense of their existence (cf. Eliade 1974, 124-125). Determining whether something or someone is sacred indicates a certain ideal reality that denotes the fulfillment of the aspirations of both the individuals and the community.

The truths which underlie the belief that the sacred sphere exists and which make it possible to state whether something is sacred or not, must be consistent and verifiable by means of logical reasoning based on strong evidence (cf. Bronk 2001, 622-623). The logical service of God, about which St. Paul writes in his Letter to the Romans (cf. Rom. 12:1), indicates that human behavior is in compliance with reason that seeks to know the reality of the created world and to uncover its logical structure. The reason open to truth should recognize the existence of the sphere of the spirit in the human world and should not exclude it from the range of human experience. Although it is not easy for a mind of a positivist to recognize the truth in theology, one cannot discredit it and consider it to be non-existent as long as he verifies his own methods used to assess the credibility of his claims.

As emphasized by the Pope Benedict XVI in his Regensburg address: “A reason which is deaf to the divine and which relegates religion into the realm of subcultures is incapable of entering into the dialogue of cultures.” (Benedict XVI 2006) Moreover, even the divinity that is not open to reason, is unable to properly apply the rules of religion to everyday life. There is an urgent need for a hermeneutic approach towards the principles of religion that would present them in the light of critical reason and prove them to be consistent with human nature and inscribed in centuries-old historical experience of a man. Religion is a reality that is present in the history of mankind since the dawn of its existence. Therefore, its understanding must be viewed in the context of centuries-old experience (cf. Francis 2013, no. 38).

Therefore, impeding any questions concerning the reality of the saints is unacceptable. This applies both to the dogmatic exclusion of the process of uncovering the truth step by step, as well as to neglecting the sphere of religion and treating it as unnecessary or harmful. Both extremes, the one that rejects the possibility of critical thinking and posing questions about the historical stages of revelation of a given religion, as well as the other one that treats questions about religion as wordplays, and defines religion as a subjectivist human invention, are unable to recognize the phenomenon of religion as it really is.

In the face of the fragility of his living and the need to answer the question about the meaning, the cause and the purpose of his own existence, a human being has two solutions; he may either accept that “the reality is rational and it is possible to show the sense of its rationality, or is absurd and a man has nothing left to do but define himself against this absurdity”(cf. Kłoczowski 1994, 146). The writings of Mohamed Talbi constitute an example of a courageous attitude towards seeking the truth. He is a professor at the University of Tunis, who suggests that “the sacred texts should be re-read according to the anthropological method, which will help to clearly understand their proper meaning. The human element in the process of their formation cannot be excluded” (Bajerowicz 2002, 216).

Critical assessment of own religion should be conducted at the theological level and requires specialized studies. However, it should also take into account the historical experience and sensibility of people, whose beliefs and sense of security should not be destroyed or reclaimed. Reforms of the religious communities take place slowly and require a long period of time. Moreover, there is a need for some courageous leaders who will initiate the process of assessing the changes and implement some positive elements modernizing both the doctrine and the practice. The change cannot question the fundamentals of the religion nor undermine its key dogmatic and moral constituents. It must begin with the change of heart, because only a heart that is sensitive to truth and to good will realize the calling for both accepting mercy and showing mercy towards an ever growing number of people.

Preventing the destruction of the sacred cannot be done by means of violence, or by hatred against innocent co-religionists of the ones who are guilty of profanation. Acts of vengeance, aimed at those living within the Muslim majority but having nothing to do with the acts of disrespect (which are perpetrated by those living in the seemingly Christian countries) are not only a tragic mistake, but, above all, great injustice and an act of blind hatred. Representatives of the Muslim communities addresses that issue in an open letter to Pope Benedict XVI, claiming: “any other similar acts of wanton individual violence — “in reaction to” your lecture at the University of Regensburg, are completely un-Islamic, and we totally condemn such acts.” (Muslim Religious Leaders, 2006)

An important expression of care for the sacred consists in a clear testimony of its positive impact upon promoting peace, justice and cooperation. Defending the sacred takes place by means of dialogue, avoiding dangerous misunderstandings and taking care “not to cause harmful misunderstandings, avoiding the risk of syncretism and of a facile and deceptive irenicism.”(John Paul II 1994, no. 53). From the positive point of view, it is done by “dialogue of actions”, which means a cooperation towards an integral development of all citizens. Moreover, an important theological dialogue should be also mentioned here, in which partners are trying to better understand each other's religious heritage and to appreciate spiritual values” (cf. John Paul II 1989, 164). This leads to striving towards “a better mutual understanding to be able to coexist peacefully and enrich one another. It is good to get to know one another and, by accepting differences, overcome prejudices in a spirit of mutual respect, work on reconciliation and serve the poorest” (John Paul II 1985, 123). Peace and reconciliation should be based on a proper respect for diversity.

Present reports on the activities of the Islamic state (considering itself to be the epitome of the sacred power in Islam) at the territories of Syria and Iraq are terrifying. Despite the condemnation of these actions by many Muslim communities, there are rampant acts of hatred; causing suffering of Muslims, Yezidis and Christians. Referring to the Koran and a desire to return to the behavior from the past centuries in the modern world seems not only unjustified but also harmful for humanity and the Islam in itself. “It is constantly repeated that the majority of Muslims want to live in peace with their neighbors, which is as real as irrelevant. Those believing in jihad constitute a minority but they can count on a considerable number of supporters, more numerous than would be sufficient to conduct a long-term terrorist campaign” (Wiegel 2009, 84).

Respect for the sacred requires an in-depth understanding thereof and its proper application within the context of the present times. The sacred, as a tool connecting people with the past, should also open the way towards the future in which every human being fulfills his mission interpreted by means of reason and heart.

The defense of the sacred cannot be reduced to its uncritical preservation, but rather should aim at finding ways of its constant revival and expression in everyday life, characterized by cooperation and dialogue with other people. The principle of non-violence and rejection of hatred cannot deprive a man of the right to a legitimate defense. However, it has to maintain a respect for the equal dignity of all people who enjoy freedom of conscience and right to freely profess their faith.

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