What is Sacred? Sacredness as Specialness

One day I was walking through the Australian bush with an elder of the Warlpiri people when he suddenly yelled for me to stop. Mid-step, I realized that I was about to put my foot on a small pile of stones, only a few inches tall, which was for him and the Warlpiri a “sacred site,” a place where spiritual meaning or energy from the jukurrpa or “Dreaming” was located. Without his warning, I would have stepped on and perhaps trampled the sacred.

I was left to ponder what was “sacred” about this spot or about this little stack of pebbles. There was nothing obviously important or imposing about it. Presumably the Warlpiri would have told a story about an event that transpired there in the creation-time and/or about power that dwelt there today—although they would not have used the term “sacred,” as no such word exists in the Warlpiri language. But why this place was sacred, or why we use the word “sacred” to describe religious experiences, still eluded me.

As we have seen in Chapter One of *Introducing Anthropology of Religion*, “sacred” is a basic concept in the Western analysis of religion. Durkheim opined that “sacred” was central to the very definition of religion (along with its contrast, “profane”), and hardly a discussion of religion occurs without invoking the concept of “sacred.” Still, it is utterly unclear what makes one thing “sacred” and not another. There is no quality of sacredness that can be perceived, like, say, a quality of roundness or redness. The experience of “sacred” appears to be an instance of what Leslie White called “symboling,” that is, adding an unseen—and non-existent, apart from human action—layer of meaning or significance to a thing. He offered the example of holy water as a product of symboling: there is no perceptible or measurable difference between holy water and regular (profane?) water, yet to those who believe in holy water—and who believe that this particular water is holy—it is different.

The capacity, indeed the imperative, to engage in symboling is what makes culture possible in White’s analysis—in fact, it is what culture is—and it is also what makes religion and “sacred” possible. Ann Taves, a professor of religious studies, has delved deeper into the notion of “sacred,” drawing from psychology, neuroscience, and anthropology, as well as her own field, to account for the concept of “sacred” and therefore of related concepts like “experience of the sacred” and “religious experience” itself. Contrary to most of the treatments of religious experience from William James, to Rudolf Otto, to
Mircea Eliade, to many a modern-day scholar, mystic, or run of the mill believer, she begins by noting that what constitutes a “religious” or “sacred” experience is not at all obvious. Taves takes the clever approach of refocusing the question “on experiences deemed religious...rather than ‘religious experience.’ This shift in terminology signals my interest in exploring the processes whereby experiences come to be understood as religious at multiple levels, from the intrapersonal to intergroup” (2009: xiii). That is, the question of “religious experience” or “experience of the sacred” is a question of who judges the experience, what criteria they use to make the judgment, and what practices they perform to arrive at the judgment.

Taves proposes that “sacredness” is one type of specialness and that “specialness” is a case of the general process of ascription, by which people put things in categories. Specialness, she argues, is a basic assessment for humans: some things are special while others are (not so much profane as) mundane and ordinary. First, she identifies the marks of specialness across contexts and cultures; for instance, things that are “set apart” are often beyond price or commodification, are unsuitable for mixing with other things, and are not comparable to other things (often there is only one of them or they only occurred once). Of course, these traits are not perfect either: some objects, like a cross or an altar, actually are bought and sold and are hardly one of a kind. And while there might be only one Jesus, there are many saints. (There is only one “true cross,” but there are many many replicas, which are merely copies of the original, but somewhat holy themselves to many believers.)

There is also more than one kind of specialness. Taves mentions ideal things as special, as well as anomalous things, some of which are perceived as products or instances of “agency” and some not. Here she comes closest to the contemporary evolutionary psychology of Stewart Guthrie, Pascal Boyer, and Scott Atran, who all emphasize the category-violating nature of “religious” entities as well as their human-like agency. And as she notes perhaps better than those anthropologists, it is a big step from “ideal/anomalous experiences of agency” to specific religious beings or deities (45).

Next, she examines “experience” more closely, returning to the angle of “experiences deemed religious.” This takes her on an interesting if somewhat arcane discussion about consciousness and “types” and “levels” of consciousness, if only to establish that “experience” is more complex than we usually grant and that “any experience we can describe is an experience of something. We cannot talk about ‘pure experience’ without making it an experience of something (even if the something is
‘nothing’)’ (62). She then launches into an analysis of particular categories of (“altered” or “special”) experience which are also of interest to anthropologists, such as dreams, trance/possession, and meditation. She suggests actual research directions to investigate such phenomena, based on three fundamental premises: “1. Suspending beliefs or theories about experience [i.e., being wary not to apply Western ethno-psychology or to “speak Christian”], 2. Gaining intimacy with the domain of investigation, and 3. Offering descriptions and using intersubjective validations” (73).

These considerations lead her to engage the question of explanation, that is, “when and why people explain events, including experiences, that seem special to them, whether their own or others’, in religious or religion-like terms” (89). For this purpose, she advocates attribution theory, which she defines as a set of models “to explain the commonsense causal explanations that people offer for why things happen as they do” (181). In a word, we are talking about a kind of ethnomethodology of religion, a kind of folk theorizing about religion, if you will. Of course, as she clearly understands and illustrates, there are two kinds of explanations—the “everyday explanations” of the folk (what she calls descriptive analysis), in which people try to make sense of their own and each others’ experiences, and “meta-explanations” including scientific and scholarly explanations of those experiences. Here she also adds that explanation (in the sense of “what was that experience I/you just had?”) occurs at and under the influence of four different levels: intrapersonal, interpersonal, intragroup, and intergroup. She explicitly excludes a cultural level, “since culture—if understood as (behavioral) representations of thoughts, feelings, and sensations—is present in some form at all four levels” (111).

Finally, she considers the problem of comparison, arguing that comparison between different “religious experiences” is not only possible but critical but also that comparisons “are powerful research tools, but in order to make effective use of them we need to have a clear sense of the kinds of comparisons we can set up and the different sorts of questions each kind of comparison allows us to examine” (121). Her most important message for us here is that any comparison involves a choice (usually by the scholar performing the comparison) of which things to compare and why, based on some stipulation (or unspoken assumption) about what those things have in common. The most relevant assumption for present purposes is that those things are “religious” or “sacred,” which is attended by all the difficulties and relativities already discussed. To paraphrase her position, we scholars select and assemble sets of things for comparison and thus for explanation, but it is our subjects (the people having experiences and
possessing beliefs, performing rituals, etc.) who decide (through their ethnomethodological and culturally-informed practices) which things are “religious,” “sacred,” or “beliefs,” etc.

References