ISR Italian Sociological Review
University of Verona, Italy
Department TeSIS, Section of Sociology
ISSN 2239-8589 | Editor in Chief Paola Di Nicola
Managing Editor Debora Viviani

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How to cite
Righetti N. (2014). The Sacred in Current Social Sciences Research. [Italian Sociological Review, 4 (1), 133-163]
Retrieved from http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v4i1.77

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v4i1.77]

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3. Article accepted for publication (*data*)
March 2014

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of existing scientific research and theoretical studies concerning the category of the sacred. The essay takes an interdisciplinary point of view and covers the literature published in the years between 2000 and 2013.This review is theoretically oriented by an approach to the sacred that conceives it as an immanent character of social life that is not constrained by the boundaries of religious institutions. In the first part of the paper, we present this perspective through both classic and recent theories. In the second and third section, we discuss the most recent sociological, anthropological, psychological, neuroscientific, and evolutionary research concerning the sacred, organizing the information into two classic key issues: the sacred as a social and a moral cohesive force, and the sacred in its relation to power. We close the paper by providing some hints for future research in this area.

Keywords: sacred, social research, review.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to offer an overview of the recent scientific literature about the sacred from a multidisciplinary perspective covering the years between 2000 and 2013.

To organize the literature on the subject, we first analyzed the most classical perspectives about the sacred in a preliminary study. We found that – although classic studies about the sacred in anthropology, sociology, and

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psychology date back to about one century ago, and the literature on the matter is countless – we could identify at least two main theoretical issues that are still relevant. The classic studies about the sacred, in fact –and mainly the sociological and anthropological ones started by the Durkheimian school (especially in relation to the moral value of the sacred) and those posed by Max Weber(regarding charismatic power) –trace two strands with which we can organize some of the latest research: the research strand about the moral and social cohesive function of the sacred, and the research strand about the relations between the sacred and power. These two general issues are analyzed in this paper in detail.

Our definition of the sacred goes beyond the realm of religion and the sociology of religion, expanding toward a more comprehensive perspective on society intended as a structure pervaded by sacrality. In the first section of the paper, we provide a theoretical account of the sacred from this perspective, considering both classic and some recent theoretical contributions from a multidisciplinary perspective.

Although we can only present some of the research strands about the sacred and only a few examples of the research on the subject within the limits of this paper, we are confident that this presentation could offer a useful overview of the current developments in research about the sacred in various scientific disciplines, which all contribute to the comprehension of the theme.

1. Defining the sacred. A theoretical framework in light of classical and recent contributions

1.1 A secular perspective on the sacred

The sacred is a classical but today almost neglected sociological category. Nevertheless, it could still be a useful category to interpret our culture and society because it identifies the core of social and cultural order, and some fundamental dynamics of their changes. Certainly, we have to conceive that contemporary societies are very complex, so they are clearly not understandable within only one interpretative category, as much as it goes to the core of many social processes. In fact, we know that social variables are countless, and their dynamic compositions need always to be considered in the context in which they appear. Due to this complexity, we consider the sacred as a fruitful category for sociological analysis.

The sacred can be defined in various ways. In the phenomenology of religions is the *mysterium tremendum* and *fascinans*, or numinous (Otto, 1936[1917]). From a Durkheimian perspective, indeed, it is an emotional-

based quality, with many important symbolical expressions, socially attributed to something that is set apart from the profane reality; the sacred is revered and feared, protected with interdictions, and in some way, it appears as exceptional, in contrast with ordinary things. Sacred things have absolute and non-utilitarian value, and they constitute the core of society because they are the absolute, inviolable principles to which the social order is anchored, providing it the necessary solidarity and cohesion (Durkheim, 2005[1912]).

We prefer the Durkheimian perspective because we find it more sociologically interesting, since it seems able to express sacred aspects of society beyond the boundaries of religion. In fact, this definition of the sacred does not necessarily include any reference to supernatural forces, which inevitably lead to the specific object of religion and the frequently debated problem of clarifying the boundaries between magic and religion (Goody, 1961; Malinowski, 1948; Mauss, 2001[1902]; Stark, 2001) and also between magic, religion, and spirituality (e.g.: Hill et al., 2000). The transcendent dimension of the sacred is indeed a very characteristic trait of Otto's definition, which identifies the sacred with a "wholly other" that is at the same time fascinating and terrifying, pointing to an almost mystical dimension of the sacred, devoting the most attention to extraordinary experiences rather than to a daily social reality in which the sacred is present in several ways.

Sacred things are not separate from ordinary or profane things; in fact, because they lie in another dimension with respect to the daily one and because they have a different value, they evoke awe and deference; they are socially recognized as inviolable and thus protected by severe interdictions, while the ordinary things are not protected by taboos. In other words, the sacred can be conceived as the quality of a specific socially shared attitude to some objects. With this attitude, we can discern an emotional aspect (the feeling of awe and deference experienced in the presence of sacred things), a cognitive aspect (the absolute, non-negotiable value and the inviolability of sacred things), and a behavioral aspect (the ritual adopted to approach sacred things). Moreover, there are other important cultural and social phenomena related to sacred things: for example, social interdictions (taboos) and mythological narration about sacred matters. By applying these categories, we can recognize a specifically religious sacred that is linked to some transcendent reality and supernatural powers but also can have a more worldly sacred, related to the inviolable things of social life: the things that "really matter" and command respect.

The necessity of clarifying the boundaries between religion and the sacred is argued also by Demerath, who proposes the following method to distinguish religion, conceived as an activity, and the sacred, conceived as a social function:

Religion is, after all, a category of activity, while the sacred is nothing if not a statement of a function. More important, this makes the relationship between the two empirically problematic. As already suggested, religious activities do not always have sacred consequences, or put more helpfully, the degree to which the consequences are sacred is a critical variable that must be explored (Demerath, 2000: 3-4).

Moreover, he proposes a typology of the sacred, which differentiates between the marginal or institutional nature of sacred experiences and between confirmatory or compensatory functions of these experiences[1] (Demerath, 2000: 5-7). Evans also argues the necessity to clarify the difference between sacred and religion and proposes a typology of the sacred, which differentiates between its social or personal value and between a natural or supernatural source of it[2] (Evans, 2003).

1.2 The sacred as the phenomenological result of sacralization process

Instead of using the "sacred" as a substantive, we propose that it should be more appropriate to use "sacred" as an adjective because the term "sacred" refers, empirically, to a phenomenological quality (linked to specific social functions and cultural expressions) socially attributed to something through some sacralization process, intending it as the process that transforms profane things into sacred things. In contrast, the substantive "sacred" could easily lead us to think of some ontological reality, but from our perspective, this appears as a substantivation, as the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy notes in a recent brief work about the sacred:

We say "the sacred" as if it were a thing, even a being. This substantivation is modern. It arises from ethnological and sociological considerations that

[1] The typology of Demerath identifies the sacred as "integrative" (marginal experience with confirmatory function), the sacred as "quest" (marginal experience with compensatory function), the sacred as "collectivity" (institutional experience with confirmatory function), and the sacred as "counter-culture" (institutional experience with compensatory function) (Demerath, 2000: 5-7).

[2] The typology of Evans identifies a "personal sacred" (natural source and individual holder of the sacred), a "civil sacred" (natural source and collective holder of the sacred), a "spiritual sacred" (supernatural source and individual holder of the sacred), and a "religious sacred" (supernatural source and collective holder of the sacred) (Evans, 2003: 40-43).

sought to construct the concept of what is never presented in person, but as the attribute of objects, actions, or speeches. A tree, a mask, an oath is sacred; but "the sacred" does not identify itself (Nancy, 2013[2008]: 157).

Thus, "the sacred" can be intended as a substantivated adjective resulting from reification[3] processes.

The reification of the sacred is due to the sociological and anthropological construction of sacred phenomena, according to Nancy, but also to the social need for meanings stability.

Therefore, we find the usage of "sacred" as an adjective to be more correct. Moreover, it leads to some conceptual advantages. For example, it immediately makes clear the difference between sacred things and religious things. As Demerath says, in fact: "Surely there are religious phenomena that have lost their power and are no longer sacred.

Just as surely there are sacred entities and symbols that have a compelling power without being religious" (Demerath, 2000: 3).

Considering the sacred as the outcome of social processes, furthermore, immediately draws attention to the dialectic between sacralization and desecration processes, which can occur in concomitance of social change. Because it also stresses the phenomenological and cultural side of the sacred in addition to problematizing relations between religion and its sacred function, this conceptualization of the sacred, as argued by Demerath, leads also to problematize the correspondence between sacred functions (e.g.: those identified by Demerath) and sacred phenomenology formation.

In fact, if it is true that many activities, and not only religious ones, can have sacred functions, then it would be interesting to know in which ways the realization of this sacred function leads to the production of a sacred form or not, with some degree of institutionalization, to the social objects involved in these activities.

[3] "(…) the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly suprahuman terms. Another way of saying this is that reification is the apprehension of human products of activity as if they were something else than human products - such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will. Reification implies that man is capable of forgetting his own authorship of the human world, and further, that the dialectic between man, the producer, and his products is lost to consciousness. The reified world is, by definition, a dehumanized world. It is experienced by man as a strange facticity, an opus alienum of his own productive activity" (Berger, Luckmann, 1991: 106).

1.3 The sacred as set apart and its transcendence

Sacred things are set apart, and separateness functions as a protective device: taboos enclose sacred things as a stronghold. Sacred things need to be protected for their social importance; in fact, they are an anchorage for social order, a relative and fragile structure that needs some stabilization to allow and protect social organization. These anchorages are sacralized and, thus, become inviolable. The sacred and chaos are a dialectic couple because the violation of order produces chaos; the chaos is a condition for creating a new order, as argued by many authors (Caillois, 2001[1939]; Douglas, 2003[1966]; Eliade, 1959). From this perspective, religion can be interpreted as a specific social institution, with its own specific proprieties and functions, which also projects the sacred beyond the boundaries of this world, connecting it with supernatural beings or forces and creating a symbolic system that represents and reinforces the power and the absolute authority of the sacred. In this way, religion emphasizes the separateness of the sacred to the highest degree.

However, although sacred things are not explicitly stated in a transcendent, religious frame, their symbols synthesize the world-view of a society, as Geertz and Luckmann argue about religious symbols (Geertz, 1957; Luckmann, 1967). The transcendence of the sacred can be viewed, from this perspective, simply as the inevitably metaphysical foundation of cultural principles founding a world-view, which are, in a broad sense, a matter of faith.

There are also other "secular" interpretations of the transcendence of the sacred. The Durkheimian one is related to the *homo duplex* theory. For Durkheim, society demands many sacrifices by individuals[4] and reciprocates consecrating them and giving meaning to their life; the sacred is the feeling for the moral authority of society, intended as a "being" that transcends individuals for its moral value. In this strand we find also Luckmann and, in some respects, Bourdieu, in connection with the concept of symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1998[1997]: 251-257).

Philosopher Nancy gives a "secular" account of the transcendence of the sacred. Nancy conceives the sacred as the most ordinary dimension of human life because it represents the transcendence that characterizes every aspect of life:

[4] "Society requires us to become its servants, forgetting our own interest, and compels us to endure all sorts of hardships, privations, and sacrifice without which social life would be impossible" (Durkheim, 2001: 154).

How then could there be no sacred, if nothing is more certain than this destination or this postulation of our being: passing, surpassing, bypassing what confines us and, by confining us, revealing to us the wish of passage, the step beyond? The step towards what is not there [...]. The sacred thing and being are withdrawn, situated at a distance, out of reach, because this distance forms their whole truth. [...] We (…) forget (…) how much the sacred is close and familiar to us: familiar to us is unfamiliarity, the strangeness of the newly born, of the unknown, the stranger, the beloved, the desired, the feared, the intruder. Nothing else is sacred, nothing else is "the sacred" (Nancy, 2013: 154-156).

So, for Nancy, the sacrifice, which holds the power to consecrate, is the act of giving attention to the other, in the wider sense:

An instant of reverence, of hospitality. I have to devote myself. "Devote to me a little time," says that which is not here, which is at a distance and yet nearby. I must sacrifice something: make sacred a thing, my gaze itself or my hearing, my gesture, my hand which lets go of its pencil in order to caress or be caressed. Or even in order to wash so that it be worthy of an encounter – even a simple handshake, perhaps. There is sacredness in the simplest exchanges, provided there is an exchange, a transformation, an alteration, something other than a transaction. We devote to each other some gestures, some manners, some attitudes (Idem: 155).

In the introduction of Nancy's work, moreover, its translator cites St. Paul's definition of the sacred: "the void in the phenomenal coming-forth of being"(Nancy, 2013: 153). To advance a free, social-constructionist interpretation of this aspect of the sacred, we could consider this void as the void on which society is arbitrary constructed, the void on which culture "stays afloat". This is a very general thesis; the symbolic constructions of humans, in fact, stay necessarily afloat on a non-symbolic space, that is, on a void, because the symbol is the sign of an absent thing. This human capacity opens to men the dimension of the future as a space of possibility, the space of creativity, but also the space of risk, danger, and uncertainty. This reflection leads us to the deeper ground of human society, and its next step could lead us to question predictability, expectation, and trust, but we cannot continue this analysis now. Instead, we can observe that the relation between the symbolic, absent, and the sacred leads to another "secular" perspective about transcendence, as in the analysis of Felice Cimatti (2008). Cimatti based his analysis on the symbolic-absence relation and on the concept of the "crisis of presence" developed by the anthropologist Ernesto De Martino, a concept

concerning the radical, existential insecurity of someone who has lost his cultural reference point (De Martino, 1977, 2012[1956]). The chaos-order couple, as we can see, returns also in these perspectives.

1.4 The ambivalence of the sacred

The sacred is ambivalent, and this ambivalence can give some useful conceptual instrument to interpret cultural and social change (Kurakin, 2013):

There are two modes of the sacred: pure and impure. The pure as achieved and as transgressed. These both belong to the sacred and not to the profane, a point that is often lost. The sacred, according to Durkheim (1995), manifests itself in powers and forces that are "benevolent, guardians of physical and moral order, as well as dispensers of life, health, and all the qualities that men value". The impure sacred consists of "evil and impure powers, bringers of disorder, causes of death and sickness, instigators of sacrilege. The only feelings men have for them is a fear that usually has a component of horror" (Kurakin, 2013: 4).

Alexander argues that evil is necessary to maintain the social definition of good; therefore, evil is socially constructed and implemented in various social performances:

(...) evil is deeply implicated in the symbolic formulation and institutional maintenance of the good. Because of this, the institutional and cultural vitality of evil must be continually sustained. The line dividing the sacred from profane must be drawn and redrawn time and time again; this demarcation must retain its vitality, or all is lost. Evil is not only symbolized cognitively but experienced in a vivid and emotional way (...). Through such phenomena as scandals, moral panics, public punishment, and wars, societies provide occasions to reexperience and recrystallize the enemies of the good. Wrenching experiences of horror, revulsion, and fear create opportunities for purification that keep what Plato called "the memory of justice" alive (Alexander, 2003: 115).

Kurakin argues that the ambivalent character of the sacred is sometimes neglected, confused with the sacred/profane dichotomy, or explicitly rejected in contemporary sociological works involved with the category of the sacred – as the cultural sociology of Alexander, one of the rare contemporary sociological approaches that uses these categories. But evil does not correspond to the profane; evil is, according to Kurakin, a specific form of the

sacred resulting from sacrilege[5]. In contrast, the profane is everything but the things that are sacred. This confusion is due, according to Kurakin, to many reasons, including the parsonsians' homeostatic interpretation of Durkheim. This omission reduces the explicatory power of the sacred because social change dynamics can be interpreted exactly by applying the sacred/desecration opposition. Moreover, this is also a methodological limit because profanation discloses the sacred better than worship rituals (Kurakin, 2013).

Psychologists Graham and Haidt recognize the relationship between the sacred and good and evil, arguing that "the elevation or 'sacralization' of a moral principle or symbol is a major cause of evil" (Graham, Haidt, 2011: 1). These authors developed a psychosocial approach to morals called Moral Foundation Theory[6]. This approach links moral psychology to some classical sociological accounts of morality (Haidt, Graham, 2009), giving an account of five (at least) foundations of morality. These psychological foundations are intended as the basis for the social construction of heterogeneous cultural narratives. Also from this perspective, the concept of the sacred delves further into the psychology of religion:

> As we have argued elsewhere (Graham & Haidt, 2010), the social psychology of religion should not focus on belief in gods; it should focus on the group-binding and society constituting effects of ritual practice and other religious behaviors. Whether one believes that God is a delusion, a reality, or an adaptation, it is hard to deny that human behavior now includes a rather strong tendency to invest objects, people, places, days, colors, words, and shapes with extraordinary importance that is in no way justified by practical or utilitarian considerations (Eliade, 1959). The psychology of sacredness may (or may not) have co-evolved with belief in gods, but it is now a very general aspect of human nature. We believe that sacredness is crucial for understanding morality, including fully secular moralities. (Graham, Haidt, 2011: 2)

[5] Kurakin makes the case that evil, or the impure sacred, is a transient product of the desecration process. The impure sacred, then, does not have a status of independent reality. Clearly, this is not the only way to conceptualize the distinction, and the relation, between the pure and impure sacred.

[6] "Haidt and Joseph (2004) drew on several existing accounts of moral variation (especially that of Shweder et al., 1997) to propose that there are five innate psychological 'foundations' upon which cultures construct widely divergent moral systems: Harm/care, Fairness/reciprocity, Ingroup/loyalty, Authority/respect, and Purity/sanctity" (Graham, Haidt, 2011: 4).

The definition of "sacredness"[7] provided by these scholars also clarifies the difference between "moral values" and "sacred values"; if there could be some degree of sacredness in every moral value – an issue for some authors to examine more in depth[8] – sacredness is, more precisely, the property of values not available to trade-off, and then sacredness does not completely overlap the moral sphere. These psychologists argue that evil results from profanation: "Evil is something more, something that threatens to hurt, oppress, betray, subvert, contaminate, or otherwise profane something that is held as sacred."For this reason, the sacred is set apart and protected: "and just as something is seen as worthy of ultimate protection, there is a vision of what it must be protected from: this is a vision of evil" (Idem: 6). Moreover, Graham and Haidt argue that "the sacred object prompting the vision of evil is not held by just one person (say, a favorite teddy bear), but a group, who explicitly or implicitly cohere in these twin visions of sacredness and evil" (Ibidem).

This last thesis reinforces the theoretical and methodological importance of evil in the study of the sacred. Moreover, it could be an interesting concept and empirical instrument to differentiate the "shared sacred" and the "individual sacred". In fact, many sacred qualities seem to be attributed to some private things. Therefore, the conceptual domain of the sacred needs to be differentiated in some sub-conceptual areas, like the personal and the social sacred, according to the clarifying typology of Evans (2003), so the existence of social representations of evil linked to these things can be a criterion able to discriminate between these two types of sacred.

A structural account of the ambivalence of the sacred is provided by Douglas. This anthropologist argues that dirty derives from a conflict with the cultural structure of classification (Douglas, 2003[1966]), which leads to a dangerous – but at the same time powerful and fascinating – realm of chaos, full of destructive, but also potentially creative, energies. The work of Douglas links to the work of anthropologist Van Gennep, who describes "liminality", the ambiguous and dangerous status, which characterizes individuals that stay

[7] "Sacredness refers to the human tendency to invest people, places, times, and ideas with importance far beyond the utility they possess. Tradeoffs or compromises involving what is sacralized are resisted or refused. In prototypical cases, these investments tie individuals to larger groups with shared identities and ennobling projects, so tradeoffs or compromises are felt to be acts of betrayal, even in non-prototypical cases in which no group is implicated" (Graham, Haidt, 2011: 3).

[8] E.g., the psychologists Ginges and Atran write: "it is not clear whether all moral convictions are sacred values. In our research, not all things considered virtues are classified by participants as sacred; moreover, there is no correlation between the importance of moral virtues and their likelihood of being sacred" (Ginges, Atran, 2014: 274).

temporarily outside the boundaries of social structure, and the rites of passage, which serve to control the danger related to this social condition (Van Gennep, 1960[1909]). Many dangers for society, hence, come from "the realm of the undefined" because it refers to unknown or indefinable things, unintelligible to the traditional cultural classifications. The chaos is just beyond the boundaries of social order, and this vague awareness seems to stay at the roots of some festivals as the carnival (Caillois, 2001). Similarly, this is the realm of "anti-structure" (Turner, 1969) that represents the social condition opposed to the structure of the society, the *axis mundi* (Eliade, 1959), or to the center of charismatic institutional authority, as for Shils, who writes, "the need for order and the fascination of disorder persist, and the charismatic propensity is a function of the need for order" (1965: 203).

The dialectic between the pure and the impure sacred can describe social change because it represents the dialectic between sacralization of social order, which improves its stability, and desecration of the same order, corresponding to the impure sacred that leads to chaos but also to the possible creation of a new order. These concepts, then, lead also to the relation between sacred and power, and to social conflicts to gain this power; power is present both in actions preserving social order and also in those actions that threaten social order because they prelude to a possible new order (Douglas, 2003). But to create a new order, it is necessary to desecrate the traditional one.

In the next two sections, we review the contemporary scientific literature related to moral-sacred relation and to sacred-power relation from a multidisciplinary perspective.

2. The sacred as a social cohesive force: moral commitment

The sacred, traditionally, constitutes the non-contractual core of social identity and social order, and it serves to maintain social order and social solidarity. The social solidarity function of the sacred is realized by socializing individuals with sacred values and beliefs, creating moral commitment amongst them; collective rituals reinforce this commitment. Many new research studies have developed these issues.

2.1 Sacred values

"Sacred values" are inviolable values, not available to trade-off. Sacred values do not appear a very treated object in contemporary sociological study, although values are a traditional field of study (Wuthnow, 2008) and the sacred is a foundational category of sociological thought. For example, there

are no records for the keywords "sacred values" in the *American Sociological Review* between 2000 and 2013, and there are no specifically sociological results in the social science section of *Jstor* and *Academic Search Premiere* databases[9].

More general surveys exist, like the World Value Survey[10], in which data are used to test the secularization hypothesis to show the relation between existential insecurity and religion in poor nations, and the widespread increase of spirituality – and the decreasing importance of institutional religions – in advanced industrial societies (Inglehart, Baker, 2000: 46-48; Norris, Inglehart, 2011). More generally, as it is well known, Inglehart argues the transition from material to post-material values (Inglehart, 2008). Although Inglehart does not refer to the concept of the sacred, we can hypothesize a relationship between the sacred and dominant values.

For example, the transition to post-material values is somewhat coherent with the individualization process identified by the most classic sociologist, starting with Durkheim, and linked by Luckmann to the core of the "invisible religion"(Luckmann, 1967). It is also interesting that "path dependence" is shown by values in relation to local traditional religions, which leave a cultural heritage of deep-rooted values (Inglehart, Baker, 2000: 49), as Cipriani also argues in his "diffuse religion" theory (1986). Although we stress that dominant values and sacred values do not overlap completely, we can nevertheless hypothesize that some deeper sacred values are somewhat reflected in some explicit dominant values. Thus, we should find some sacredness phenomenology concerning these dominant values. For example Inglehart writes that "self-expression values give high priority to environmental protection" (2008: 140); other research has shown the relation between willingness to make financial sacrifices to protect the environment and post-materialist values orientation (Gelissen, 2007). From our perspective, there is a widespread sacralization of nature in our society: for example, some natural areas are set apart (natural reserves), and there are quasi-religious movements, for example, Deep Ecology (Filoramo, 1994).

From a theoretical perspective, some works have returned to the Durkheimian reflection about the sacred to explore the problem of social solidarity also in relation to a contemporary, very differentiated society. For example, Rosati draws from the Durkheimian works (e.g.: 2002, 2003, 2008, 2009), interpreting the sacred as the core of the identity of a society because it represents its idealized values and because it is the "deep grammar" that generates all the successive institutions (Rosati, 2002, p. 27); moreover, he

[9] The research in the database was conducted using the terms "sacred values" in the title of papers.

[10] http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/

attempts to give a normative, in the sociological as well as the philosophical sense of the term, account of the sacred; he tries to link the sacred not only to the factual social order but also to *the right* social order (Idem, 18). However, with a few exceptions, sociology seems to be more focused on the study of institutional religions (for an international review of the field, see Cipriani, 2000, 2009) rather than on the sacred.

Despite the lack of interest in the sociological study of sacred values, the psychological discipline contains an emerging body of research about these special values. A research strand starts from the studies about "protected values" (Baron, Leshner, 2000; Baron, Spranca, 1997), which show the trade-off resistance of some values that seems to block any attempt to reason in rational terms of cost-benefits. Tetlok et al. developed a Sacred Value Protection Model (Tetlock, Kristel, Elson, Green, Lerner, 2000; Tetlock, 2003b), arguing that sacred values are treated differently from profane values (differences expressed in the moral-outrage hypotheses[11] and in the moral-cleansing hypotheses[12]) and observing that sometimes a compromise is necessary in a world of scarce resources. Thus, there are some psychological mechanisms that permit a reframing of the moral conflict into a more acceptable perspective (reality-constraints hypotheses[13]).

[11] "(…) the SVPM model posits that when people discover that members of their community have compromised sacred values, they experience an aversive arousal state – moral outrage – that has cognitive, affective and behavioral components [...] Traditional cognitive accounts trace the difficulty people have been making trade-offs between secular values such as money and convenience and sacred values, such as love and loyalty, to the incommensurability problem (...) The SVPM insists, however, that people find such trade-offs not only cognitively confusing but morally disturbing and traces this reaction to a deeper or constitutive form of incommensurability. Our commitments to other people require us to deny that certain things are comparable. Even to contemplate attaching a finite monetary value to one's friendships, children, or loyalty to one's country is to disqualify oneself from membership in the associated moral community. [...] Taboo trade-offs are, in this sense, morally corrosive" (Tetlock, 2003b: 321).

[12] "Resource constraints can bring people into disturbingly close psychological contact with temptations to compromise sacred values. The SVPM predicts that decision makers will feel tainted by merely contemplating scenarios that breach the psychological wall between secular and sacred and engage in symbolic acts of moral cleansing that reaffirm their solidarity with the moral community" (Tetlock, 2003b: 321).

[13] "The model posits that people are largely sincere in their protestations that certain values are sacred. But the model recognizes that people regularly run into decision problems in which the costs of upholding sacred values become prohibitive.[...] The model predicts that, without pressure to confront secular-sacred

These research studies challenge the idea of a pure rational and utilitarian nature of human beings; if traditional research on judgment and choice has posited people as "either intuitive economists aspiring to maximize utility or intuitive scientists trying to discern predictive regularities", research on sacred values "suggests a supplementary perspective that posits people to be intuitive theologians struggling to defend sacred values from secular encroachments" (Tetlock, 2003b: 323).

The moral rigidity implied by sacred values appears to be problematic in a globalized world because it has several effects on inter-religious and political dialogue, so the sacred values topic is very treated by psychological study and often applied to political sciences (for a review, see Ginges, Atran, 2014). Sacred values are treated differently from material, profane values (Jazzin, Sheikh, Obeid, Argo, Ginges, 2013). They imply emotional arousal in decisional processes (Hanselmann, Tanner, 2008), and the commitment to sacred values can result in hostility versus those groups that violate the sacred taboos, hindering dialogue and impeding compromise (Scott Atran, Axelrod, Davis, 2007; Sheikh, Ginges, Atran, 2013). Some negotiation practices that seem adequate in relation to utilitarian values, e.g. economical proposals[14], can lead to a "fire-back effect" when applied to the sacred values (Atran, Axelrod, 2008; Atran et al., 2009; Dehghani et al., 2010; Ginges, Atran, 2009; Tetlock et al., 2000; Tetlock, 2003a, 2003b). Nevertheless, some negotiation practices can prevent and overcome contraposition, e.g. making freely symbolic compromises over one's own sacred values (Ginges, Atran, Medin,Shikaki, 2007), and taboo boundaries can be overpassed, reframing the problematic moral compromise into more acceptable "routine trade-offs" or "tragic trade-offs" (Tetlock, 2003b).

2.2 Neural correlates of sacred values

There is an ongoing neuroscientific research strand about the neural correlates of sacred values related to their importance to the economic theory

contradictions, people will be motivated to look away and be easily distracted by rhetorical smokescreens. However, when gaze-aversion is not an option, people will welcome rhetorical redefinitions of situations that transform taboo trade-offs into more acceptable routine trade-offs (one secular value against another, the sort of mental operation one performs every time one strolls into a supermarket) or tragic trade-offs (one sacred value against another, such as honor versus life, the stuff of classical Greek tragedies)" (Tetlock, 2003b: 321).

[14] The method developed by P. E. Tetlock – that offers money to assess the sacredness of values (Tetlock et al., 2000; Tetlock, 2003a) – is also used in the Moral Foundations Sacredness Scale developed by Graham and Haidt (2011: 9-11, 18).

of values. We only take note of some examples of these studies without going into detail about this field. Some researchers argue the correlation between the sacred value areas and the ones concerned with social cognition (e.g.: Vilarroya, Hilferty, 2013), while others stress the different treatment of economic value and core-values (e.g.: Brosch, Coppin, Schwartz, Sander, 2012: 498) or sustaining the existence of dissociable neural systems for sacred and utilitarian values (e.g.: Berns et al., 2012: 758), and so on.

2.3 Sacred values, conflict, and violence

Religion and violence have a strong historical link. It is clear that religions are able to inspire violence and peace (e.g.: Appleby, 2000). Some classical anthropologists argue that sacrificial rites – that are violent for their destructive power – have sacralizing effects (Hubert, Mauss, 1981[1898]) as well as cohesive effects (Smith, 2002[1894]). Girard theorizes the foundative function of violence and sacrificial rites in order for community creation (2005[1972]). The neuroscientist Gallese finds some convergence between the theory of Girard and the role of the mirror neurons (Gallese, 2009).

Countless works have analyzed the relationship between violence and institutional religions (e.g. Bromley, Melton (eds.), 2002; Juergensmeyer, Kitts, Jerryson, 2013; Juergensmeyer, Kitts (eds.), 2011; Larsson, 2004; Murphy [ed.], 2011; Selengut, 2003; Turner [ed.], 2013). This field is also maturing in response to the political tension between Occident and Islamic states and fundamentalist movements. The tragic suicide attacks launched by Islamic terrorists leads clearly to the study the basis of auto-sacrificial behavior from various disciplinary perspectives (e.g. Bandura, 2004; Jones, 2008; Juergensmeyer et al., 2013; Sosis, Phillips, Alcorta, 2012; Stolz, 2011; Strenski, 2003).

Violence is also studied from a psychosocial perspective. In addition to the strand of psychosocial study of sacred values in relation to political negotiation and decision making, we have the Moral Foundation Theory, which theorizes the association between each one of the five foundations of moral, the relative sacralized objects, their evil enemies, and some forms of "idealistic violence" (Graham, Haidt, 2011: 16).

2.4 Ritual and the sacred

The conflictual power of the sacred leads us to rituals. The cohesive function of the sacred, in fact, emerges clearly during intergroup conflicts:

The more people participate in religious ritual the more likely they are to treat preferences as sacred values, and perception of threat to the in-group (e.g., in the context of intergroup conflicts) accentuates the positive relationship between participation in religious ritual and treating disputed values as sacred values" (Sheikh, Ginges, Atran, 2012).

Religious rituals, which always focus on some sacred things, promote the moral commitment to the community, re-creating the emotional charge that revitalizes the sacred, as in the collective effervescence described by Durkheim. This function is realized by religious ritual and by any forms of secular ritual, for example, dinner, academic and scholastic life, sport events, political events, and so on (Bellah, 2008: 200-204). In this Durkheimian strand, Collins developed a theory of "interaction ritual chains" centered on the cohesive effects of every form of social ritual, combining the micro-sociological theory of Goffman (1954) with the Durkheimian one (Collins, 2004).

2.5 Ritual and the sacred in evolutionary anthropology

Ritual is very studied in anthropology, also in the strand of evolutionary anthropology of religion (Sosis, Kiper, n.d.: 2-11). From this perspective, religion is seen as "an evolved mechanism for social cooperation" (Alcorta, Sosis, 2005), and religious ritual is interpreted as a device that promotes solidarity and confidence in the cooperative behavior of in-group members (Sosis, Alcorta, 2003). This theory attributes great theoretical importance to counterintuitive religious beliefs conceived as costly signals of group membership (Alcorta, Sosis, 2005: 325-329), or hard-to-fake signals of commitment (Irons, 2001). Although this strand concerns primary religion, interpreted as an adaptive complex, rather than the sacred in itself, it also considers the role of the sacred.

Mentioning the ritual theory expressed in *Religion and Ritual in the Making of Humanity* (Rappaport, 1999), "the most important book on ritual in recent years" according to Bellah (Bellah, 2008: 192), Alcorta and Sosis write:

Ritual does not merely identify that which is sacred; it creates the sacred. Holy water is not simply water that has been discovered to be holy (...). It is, rather, water that has been transformed through ritual [...].Although sacred and profane things are cognitively distinguished by adherents, the critical distinction between the sacred and the profane is the emotional charging associated with sacred things. This distinction in emotional valence is created through participation in religious ritual (Alcorta, Sosis, 2005: 332).

Therefore, collective rituals evoke strong collective emotions and associate these emotions with shared symbols, which therefore become sacred symbols, as in the Durkheimian interpretation of the Totem sacralization through the contagion of emotional energies. Moreover, because emotions activate biological processes and motivate behavior, sacred symbols become shared signals of commitment, which motivate the behavior of adherents.

2.6 Psychological account of sacralization

In the psychology of religion strand, we find an account of "sanctification". Pargament and Mahoney, for example, consider "how people 'make sacred'; that is, how they come to sanctify objects or perceive aspects of their lives as having divine character and significance" (Pargament, Mahoney, 2005: 180). These authors argue that sanctification occurs "when an individual either (a) perceives an object to be a direct manifestation of one's images, beliefs, or experiences of God; (b) attributes qualities to an object that are typically associated with the divine; or (c) does both" (Idem: 187). Sanctification differs from sacralization because it focuses on God and the Holy. Nevertheless, also in this perspective, the authors notice that the commitment to the "sacred," or to the holy things, has relevant psychological consequences:

(a) people invest a great deal of their time and energy in sacred matters; (b) people go to great lengths to preserve and protect whatever they perceive to be sacred; (c) sacred aspects of life are likely to elicit spiritual emotions of attraction (e.g., love, adoration, gratitude) and trepidation (e.g., awe, fear, humility); (d) the sacred represents a powerful personal and social resource that people can tap throughout their lives; and (e) the loss of the sacred can have devastating effects" (Idem: 180).

However, generally speaking, psychology is especially focused on the study of religion and, now, in research about spirituality. One exception is the just-cited account of the Moral Foundation Theory. Moreover, religion and spirituality often appear to be associated in many studies (e.g.: Hill et al., 2000; Paloutzia, Park (eds.), 2005; Pargament (ed.), 2013).

2.7 The sacred in cultural structure

Always considering social cohesion, but from a structural point of view about culture, the sacred is conceived by some classical scholars as a source

and bulwark of the symbolic order of society (Douglas, 2003; Van Gennep, 1960). The symbolic order of culture is related to the worldview of a society, which includes its moral order, and which is clearly related with its social order (Geertz, 1957; Luckmann, 1967). Shared beliefs create a sense of belonging to a group (Stroope, 2011), unifying the members in a community called "church," as Durkheim says, or placing them under a "sacred canopy" (Berger, 2011[1967]). This cultural strand is continued in contemporary sociology by "the strong program" in cultural sociology led by Alexander:

For most of its history, sociology, both as theory and method, has suffered from a numbness towards meaning. Culturally unmusical scholars have depicted human action as insipidly or brutally instrumental, as if it were constructed without reference to the internal environments of actions that are established by the moral structures of sacred-good and profane-evil (...) (Alexander, Smith, 2003: 15).

3. The sacred and power

3.1 Politics and political religion

The sacred and power are strongly related phenomena. Classic anthropologists discover, among the Polynesian-Melanesian tribes, the belief in an impersonal force called *mana* (Codrington, 1891; Mauss, 2001), but also the "personal forces," that is, the gods, are powerful and can interfere with the human's goals or promote them, and sometimes also mundane forces like politics appear to be sacred.

This is precisely the case of "political religions", which promise the redemption of humanity (Aron, 1946) and have a quasi-religious symbolic apparatus (Voegelin, 1986[1938]). Sacralization of political roles is an ancient cultural form, as shown by the case of the sacred king (Bertelli, 2003[1990]; Frazer, 1900), and it is well known that, throughout history, religion and politics have always had very close and complex relations (Filoramo, 2009; Mallett, Gentile, 2000; Turner, 2013).

Although we can discover traces of the sacred in politics throughout history worldwide, the Occidental totalitarian movements of the XX century are one of the specific foci of this strand of study. Among the many studies, we can cite those of Emilio Gentile (2005, 2006).

Also in the modern democracy. we can find some sacred aspects of politics (e.g. Augusteijn, Dassen, Janse (eds.), 2013). The contemporary re-emergence of political nationalism in many states around the world, in fact, renews the

question of the sacred aspects of politics (Sayegh, 2011), but we can also find some sacred aspects of politics, for example, in the studies about the sacred rhetoric of social movements (Rhys, 2002) and political discourses (Takala, Tanttu, Lämsä, Virtanen, 2013),which seems to valorise the speech, and to stimulate citizen engagement (Di Pietro, Wehling, 2011; Marietta, 2008, 2009).We could insert these studies in the strand of the analysis of religious category use in contemporary political discourses (Bellah, 1967).

Numerous studies about relations between politics and religion also exist, although they are more related with institutional religions than with the sacred. For example, one world survey analyzed government involvement with religion; this survey examined 175 governments around the globe between 1990 and 2002, and it showed a broad interrelation between these two spheres (Fox, 2008). The relations between religions and politics from various points of view appear to be widely studied by American literature, especially in relation to American territories (e.g.: Wald, Calhoun-Brown, 2007).

3.2 Charisma

Charisma is a religious concept that was developed in a sociological way by Weber (Abbruzzese, 2001; Weber, 2013). Charisma refers to the sacred as an active force in human affairs (Turner, 2001).Weber defines charisma as "a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities" (Weber, cit. in Abbruzzese, 2001: 1654). Extraordinary qualities of the leader and the innovative perspective he carries in social transition periods are fundamental features of the Weber account of charisma. The charismatic leader is "the man of God" around which a community of believers grows, expecting collective salvation (Abbruzzese, 2001).

Edward Shils underlines that the core social institutions have a sacred character, so the individual who occupies a status in a core institution is sacralized. Charisma is an "office charisma", and "the charismatic propensity is a function of the need of order" (Shils, 1965: 203).

Turner considers charisma to be related with danger. The charismatic leader is able to localize the danger (taboo) with his action, and facing the risks with brave actions and prowess, he demonstrates that the danger is a source of new possibilities, providing in this way the evidence of the reliability of his vision and promising its realization. Moreover, because risk is everywhere in our contemporary world, charisma is a very common feature of our culture, contrary to what Weber says (Turner, 2003).

Smith emphasizes the cultural side of charisma. There are some specific and autonomous cultural structures that underpin the moral bond of duty between leader and followers. These cultural structures are systems of meanings organized in a binary code that oppose the sacred and evil grammar and develop it along with narratives, which organize events in a salvation framework, marking out in this way the charismatic leader from simple deviance (Smith, 2000). Symbols of evil have a very important role since charismatic leaders can save people from "the evil". According to these perspectives, the sacred role of political leaders and the cultural basis of some political discourse we can also hear today may appear more clear.

3.3 Studies on leadership

The charisma studies open to the leadership issue, which is especially treated in management disciplines. Charismatic leaders create a quasi-religious bond with their followers, and they seem to have quasi-messianic characteristics; they have a missionary vision, create a symbiotic hierarchy, propose a manichean world-view, and have a magnetic personal presence (Eatwell, 2006). The separation between the leaders and the followers illustrates the characteristic separateness of the sacred things; we can identify the presence of a sacrificial dimension, and their power to silence the anxiety and the resistance of the followers is the same power of the sacred things (Grint, 2010). The self-sacrificial model of leadership has gained some popularity in leadership studies since the late 1990s (Spoelstra, 2013), so, generally speaking, sacrifice and charisma appear to be the fundamental concepts that mediate between religious and management studies.

Many studies have tried to determine the attributability condition of charisma. In fact, charismatic qualities exist only if they are socially recognized. According to Weber, this condition can be historical, as periods of crisis and transition, or it can be socially structured, as Shils says, or even cultural, according to Smith. Countless studies have focused on the social-psychological traits that could promote the attribution of charisma. Freud, by his own psychoanalytical perspective and in an interesting social-psychological study, considers leadership connected with a seductive narcissism, which stimulates a symbiotic process of identification in followers (Freud, 1920). The role of self-confidence for leadership effectiveness and the role of the collective identification in mediating interactive effects has also been empirically studied (Cremera, Knippenberg, 2004) as the leadership-narcissism relation (Arvisais, 2008; Foster, 2007; Humphreys, Zhao, Ingram, Gladstone, Basham, 2010; Oakes, 1997, 2010).

Also, if a charismatic leader is consecrated by a "special gift" that distinguishes him from his followers, he is also a representative member of the group (Platow, van Knippenberg, Haslam, van Knippenberg, Spears, 2006)and posseses certain relational qualities (Agle, Sonnenfeld, Campbell, Ward, 2008). Other studies have focused on the acoustic-prosodic characteristics of a charismatic speech (Signorello, D'Errico, Poggi, Demolin, 2012) or on the use of metaphors (Reese, Levin, Riggio, Mio, 2005), comparing various cultures to assess cultural influence on these phenomena (Biadsy, Hirschberg, Rosenberg, Dakka, 2007), and so on.

By an embodied cognition perspective, some studies have argued that the attribution of charismatic qualities is influenced by some physical traits, such as physical height in the case of male leaders (Hamstra, 2013). In fact, as the common language testifies ("to be high in the hierarchy"), power seems to correlate with a vertical location in space schemas (Pecher et al., 2012; Schubert, Giessner, 2007).

In our mass-media age, this topic has been extensively studied. It is clear that charisma is a form of symbolic power that can have many political, managerial, and economical application.

4. Conclusions

Referring both to classical and recent theories on the sacred, we have proposed a perspective on the sacred, which conceives it as a socially constructed "religious deference" culturally associated with some important ordering principles of society and to the things that symbolize them. Sacredness is thus considered a widespread quality of social life, and we hypothesized that there are different degrees of sacredness, starting from core ordering principles and moving up to the various social life elements associated with them.

We have argued that the sacred is a function of social order, and because sacralization protects the ordering criteria of society, the individual commitment to sacred things is an important condition of social solidarity. Sacred things trace the borders of society and differentiate between social inclusion and social exclusion. The constitutive ambivalence of the sacred can be referred to as the basic opposition between order and chaos, so the sacred opposition between good and evil can be found in some social phenomena related to the engagement in the social order and to social change. To preserve the interpretative and "dynamical" potential of the category of the sacred while at the same time avoiding the risk of a theoretical reification, we have also proposed to conceive it as the product of sacralization, that is, as a

product of social processes, a product that is conserved in this social reality by social activity.

We have also observed that although religion is a powerful device to stabilize the social order, we can also identify secular forms of the sacred that do not refer to any supernatural world, although we can always find connections with some metaphysical basis of the world-view that are, generally speaking, "matters of faith".

We have illustrated some studies about the sacred in relation to its moral force to offer a multidisciplinary overview on this subject. We have articulated the issue of the sacred in a section related to the moral commitment and community and in a section related to power.

Generally speaking, based on this bibliographical research, it seems that the sacred values and, more generally, the moral dimension of human behavior and society are considered an important object of study in political science (research about the role of sacred values in decisional processes), in moral psychology (from the perspective of the Moral Foundation Theory), and somewhat in evolutionary anthropology (especially in relation to ritual behaviour and religion) and also in neuroscience, especially in the neuroeconomics subfield (which includes research about the neural substratum of sacred values and the relationship between sacred and economic values). From a sociological perspective, the category of the sacred appears almost exclusively in the strand of cultural sociology started by Alexander, which is not surprising as it is a sociological perspective that stresses the cultural side of social life, and in some theoretical works that analyzes the classical Durkheimian concept of the sacred. In general, psychology seems more focused on spirituality rather than with the sacred, in the same way sociology seems more focused on institutional religions. Studies regarding the relations between the sacred and power confirm this trend because they appear especially linked to traditional and institutional religions in their relation to government and politics, a topic that is particularly prevalent in the American literature. Also, nationalism and the political religions seem to be extensively studied topics, especially from a historical perspective, in relation to the XX century totalitarian regimes, but there is also a very treated research strand, mainly psychological, that is focused on the discovery of the psychological traits that promote the attribution of charisma.

In conclusion, this field of study has many areas of potential development for sociological research, both theoretical and empirical. In fact, even today, the sacred is a deep moral force that motivates social behavior and sustains the social order, but it also represents the forces that can change the social world. Thus, we conclude this paper by offering suggestions for future research. For example, in the economic and social crisis of our time, we assist

with the re-emergence of nationalism, populism, and charismatic leaders, so the sacred can be a useful concept for a sociological analysis of political processes, focusing, for example, on the politicians' legitimation strategies, that, at the same time, have to lighten the network of the citizens' sacred values on which the power of these strategies is founded.

From another point of view, the analysis of secularization processes could be empowered to apply the sacralization/desecration dichotomy, instead of a more rigid religious/secular dichotomy. For example, we could try to analyze empirically some secularization processes as processes of "migration" of the sacred, instead of sacred annihilation processes, in a frame inspired by the "biography of things" of Kopytoff (1986). In other words, we could attempt to trace a "cultural biography of the sacred", trying to keep together, dialectically, the desecration of some reality and the consecration of certain others.

Another perspective could focus on social processes, related to the sacred, in small groups, empirically capturing the social dynamics that take part in the construction of a "sacred umbrella" in relation to the ongoing structuring of the roles and the relations. Many other perspectives on the sacred are possible because the sacred can be found in most unexpected places, if we look carefully, as well as follow the instructive tale of Demerath:

> (…) an old 'Mutt and Jeff' cartoon that portrayed Mutton on his hands and knees searching for a quarter in the dark of night under a corner street lamp. 'Is this where you lost the quarter?' asked Jeff. 'No', replied Mutt, 'I lost it in the middle of the block, but the light's better here'. (…) Too often we look for the sacred under a religious street lamp, when we should be searching amongst other experiences in the middle of the block (Demerath, 2000, p. 4).

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