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Wienberg, Jes

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LUND UNIVERSITY

PO Box 117
221 00 Lund
+46 46-222 00 00

Tidens landskap

En vänbok till Anders Andrén

Redaktion

Cecilia Ljung

Anna Andreasson Sjögren

Ingrid Berg

Elin Engström

Ann-Mari Hållans Stenholm

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Sacred and profane – an encounter between two worlds?

Jes Wienberg

All known religious beliefs, whether simple or complex, present one common characteristic: they presuppose a classification of all things, real and ideal, of which men think, into two classes or opposed groups, generally designated by two distinct terms which are translated well enough by the words *profane* and *sacred* (*profane*, *sacré*). This division of the world into two domains, the one containing all that is sacred, the other all that is profane, is the distinctive trait of religious thought. (Durkheim 1915, 37)

In the 1910s Émile Durkheim claimed that the division into the sacred and the profane is fundamental to religion. The same division was also fundamental when Mircea Eliade analysed religion in the 1950s. In *The Sacred and the Profane* he wrote that ‘*sacred* and *profane* are two modes of being in the world, two existential situations assumed by man in the course of his history’ (Eliade 1961, 14). Durkheim and Eliade might be criticized for their generalizing approach to religion. However, the division gives rise to some questions: is the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane a modern invention? Why is the sacred separated from the profane? Does the dichotomy represent a reality or an intention? What is the relationship between the sacred and the profane? And finally, are the concepts relevant in a study of medieval architecture?

Entangled concepts

The critique is not new; it is easy to reject the claim of a universal dichotomy defining religion made by Durkheim. First, the dichotomy is not universal. For example, rituals of Old Norse religion were conducted in the farm hall or spread out in the landscape, demonstrating how the sacred and the profane were entangled in agency and space (cf. Andrén 2002; Sundqvist 2007b). Second, even in Christianity the sacred and the profane were not an either/or but a spatial continuum. As illustrated by Anders Andrén, ecclesiastical law ranged from the relics in the medieval church altar to the church road along a scale of falling fines, if somebody had committed a crime. The other way around, seen from the domestic perspective, the scale of falling fines extends from the bed to the distant grazing lands (Andrén 1999). To these scales must be added the sound of the church bells creating an all-inclusive sacred soundscape (Magnusson Staaf 1996). Even though Eliade’s view is also controversial, his description of ‘two modes

of being in the world’ is more convincing than the edgy classification by Durkheim. The dichotomy of the sacred and the profane represents a choice of perspective on the world, two perspectives on the same reality. However, I lack a discussion of the motives and the agency behind the creation of division. Why deal with two worldviews, one magic or enchanted, and one non-magic or disenchanting? Why define a sacred sphere at all? What is the purpose?

Defining the clergy

The division between the sacred and the profane is a precondition for establishing a group of religious specialists distanced from other groups in society. The role and status of the specialists is legitimated by their exclusive access to the sacred domain. The gradual development of the three (and later four) orders, from the ninth century onwards, as described by Georges Duby (1981), was all about creating a role for the clergy as a link between the sacred and the profane world. The medieval orders were an ecclesiastical ideology which provided status, privileges and meaning to the clergy. Thus, the division into a sacred and a profane world is an issue connecting social structure with ideology.

The clergy with its bishops, canons, priests, monks and nuns were separated from other groups by special education and visible signs in clothing, hairstyle, and paraphernalia. The vows of obedience, poverty and chastity, delivered when a monk or a nun was to enter a religious order, were a rite of passage, marking distance from the profane world. The Lutheran Reformation in the early sixteenth century created a new relationship between the sacred and the profane. Monks and nuns disappeared as religious specialists. Poverty and chastity were no longer ideals. Common people gained direct access to the sacred text, the Bible, which was translated into national languages. And the king became head of the Church. However, the social boundaries of the clergy were also transgressed during the Middle Ages. Poverty was an ideal, but not necessarily a reality. For a long time, the clergy could be married or live with concubines; celibacy was difficult to enforce in the Scandinavian countries (cf. Gallén 1957).

Encounter on three levels

The study of the sacred and the profane in medieval architecture will now be systematized on three levels, with inspiration from *Between Artifacts and Texts* by Andrén

(1998b). The encounter between artefacts and texts in correspondence, association or contrast – a methodological ‘ladder’ of increasing severity – may also be relevant for the sacred and the profane. However, the order of the last two steps will switch places here.

On the first step of correspondence we identify and classify actions, time and space as either sacred or profane, using the concepts as if they were self-evident and neutral entities. We look for borders delimiting the churchyard or the cathedral precinct. We look for sacred or profane spaces in the church. We look for rood screens separating the clergy from the laity. And we try to identify exclusive portals for different categories of the clergy, for instance special portals for the bishop, priest or monks, allowing direct access to the chancel, or portals for the nuns to a western gallery (e.g. Gilchrist 1994, 150–169; Kristensen 2013, 147–150). Architecture is interpreted as an arena for negotiating social order (Parker Pearson and Richards 1994). Again, the Reformation meant a change in the relationship between the sacred and the profane, as rood screens and galleries were demolished, at least in Scandinavia, and portals blocked or changed in use.

On the second step of contrast we look for differences and discrepancies for problematising. We get puzzled when the expected sacred is located in a profane context and vice versa. We are astonished by all the ‘profane’ activities going on in the churches, for instance storing weapons, or beer belonging to the vicar in the church tower of Skaarup on Funen (Uldall 1931–1932). We wonder why we find traces of craftsmanship using furnaces inside the cloister of the Cistercian abbey of Øm in Jutland, although the closed cloister could be re-dated as being later than the activities (Olsen 1979). We are puzzled when finding a number of ‘exotic’ stones or so-called ‘sepulchral-stones’ distributed in the ordinary settlement of the town Sigtuna (Tesch 2007b); the explanation might be that the ‘exotic stones’ were brought back as magic souvenirs from pilgrimage (Karlsson 2015, 95–101). We get puzzled finding burials outside the churchyards in the town of Lund; they seem to represent executed criminals (Carelli 1995). And we get curious about finding playing cards and other items, when moving the choir stalls in the cathedral of Lund; the canons or choir boys seem to have been really bored sitting there (Carelli 2012, 394–397). Most of these puzzling discrepancies or paradoxes arise as a consequence of our own acceptance of a rigid categorization of the world into either the sacred or the profane, and are solved by a reclassification.

On the third step of association, looking for new ways of knowledge integrating the sacred and the profane, I will only present one contested example, the so-called fortified, defensive churches or multifunctional churches. Since the seventeenth century attention has been drawn to a group of deviating medieval churches in Scandinavia, mainly on the Baltic Sea. The churches are characterized by having vaulted upper spaces over the chancel, nave or in the tower. The upper spaces have often been called profane, intended for refuge, habitation, storage

and protection, for example at Østerlars on Bornholm. However, I have claimed that the point was to relocate secular activities from the surrounding settlement into the churches and churchyards, so that they became protected by the sacredness of the church. Profane activities were embedded in the sacred zone. We might call this an architecture of fusion, where the sacred and the profane have merged (Wienberg 2004).

Trends and towers

Turning to trends in church archaeology, there is a healthy pendulum movement between the sacred and the profane. Reflecting general trends in society, and also as a sociological expression, different generations of researchers have in polemical contrast focused on either sacred or profane perspectives (Wienberg 2006; Nilsson 2011). Driven for too long, each perspective gets exhausted, non-creative, and starts repeating itself. However, in the long run contrasting perspectives hopefully leave a balanced, more complete or integrated picture.

An obvious example of conflicting research trends has been, and still is, the interpretation of Romanesque church towers with their upper galleries: On the one hand, we insistently find the sacred perspective on the towers, as being expressions of the heavenly Jerusalem, of faith and piety, a place for burials, altars, ceremonies of memory and bell-ringing (e.g. Nyborg 1985; Karlsson 2015, 265). On the other hand, a hard-core profane perspective on the towers as ‘westworks’ being an expression of a feudal society, of secular power, social distinction and wealth (e.g. Redelius 1972; Andrén 1985, 90, 138; Wienberg 1986, 54; Anglert 1989; Nilsson 2003).

What is lacking here is an understanding of how status and power in medieval society necessarily had to be dressed in religious terms to be legitimate. Thus the Romanesque tower represented an architectural fusion of the sacred and the profane, of Christian faith and social display (Wienberg 1993, 156, 2012, 30–33). And the same merging perspective might be applied to other aspects of church buildings and furnishings.

Between two worlds

Now my concluding answers to the questions at the beginning: the dichotomy has received attention in a modern discussion on religion, but the distinction between the sacred and the profane goes back at least to the Middle Ages. The separation of the sacred and the profane was necessary for defining and legitimizing the clergy as a social group. As such the dichotomy represents an ecclesiastical ideology. But the dichotomy was more of an intention and a continuum than a clearly defined reality. The borders between the two worlds were incessantly transgressed. Finally, as an ecclesiastical ideology we do not need to uncritically accept the alleged division of the world into two domains.

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