

Eidetic Intuition and Religion

This essay will discuss the meaning of eidetic intuition in philosophical phenomenology and the phenomenological study of religion. It will also discuss Mircea Eliade's 'diagram', as illustrated in James L. Cox's *Expressing the Sacred*, as well as its contribution to the scholarly understanding of religious meaning.

The term 'eidetic intuition' (*wessenschau*) was primarily used in the philosophical study of phenomenology by Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). Husserl used the word 'eidetic' to explain that phenomenology is not a factual science; rather, phenomenology is a theory of the science of the essential structures of pure consciousness with its own distinctive method. This 'distinctive method' of phenomenology needs an eidetic intuition as a procedure to let the individual, subjective intuition move out to grasp the universal or the essence. This means that it is possible to have an intuitive insight into the essential natures of things which can be seen in a manner similar to the perceptual seeing of physical objects. This eidetic seen is 'seeing essence' or 'essential seeing', which can distinguish, examine and describe the 'fundamental forms of the activity of consciousness', such as perception, enumeration and anticipation.

Husserl's 'eidetic intuition' has been employed in the academic study of religion by the phenomenologists of religion. As in philosophical phenomenology, eidetic intuition in the phenomenological study of religion continues to presuppose *epoche* which 'involves restraint or suspension of judgement', to 'bracket' the bias of interpretive stances. This requires employing another methodological tool called 'empathy' by which the phenomenologists can enter the religious phenomena. Moreover, since eidetic intuition proclaims 'objective' knowledge, the phenomenologists of religion make use of its method to achieve 'objectivity' when they study the religious phenomena. In other words, the focus of the study of religion should be 'the religious apprehensions of the believers themselves'. Thus Ninian Smart asserts the 'study of religion must attempt to be objectively outlined in a warm way and to follow the logic of the structures it studies'. This means eidetic intuition not only directs the observer to see the universal qualities of the object (as in abstract philosophy), but it also shows the phenomenological observer the interaction between perception and the object under investigation.

In Mircea Eliade's case, as we shall see, eidetic intuition becomes the basis for comparative studies in which a 'pattern' or form is viewed within different religions. Examples would include studies of the symbolic meaning and use of water in many religions or sacred spaces as manifested in various religions.

Eliade's 'diagram' in James L. Cox's *Expressing the Sacred* explains the three fundamental elements of the religious phenomena. These elements are: the sacred, profane space and time and hierophanies.

In his *Patterns in Comparative Religion*, Mircea Eliade (1907-1986) says that religion has 'the one unique and irreducible element in it – the element of the sacred'. Eliade uses the term 'the sacred' as something synonymous to transcendence in the sense that his analysis of religion assumes the existence of the sacred as the object of worship of religious humanity. The sacred appears as the source of power, significance and value. As Walter H. Capps says, the sacred, according to Eliade, refers to 'a modality of consciousness' to be 'approached by an examination of patterns, and forms'.

Eliade highlights that religious people experience the ordinary world differently because they view it as a sacred place. The belief in the sacred foundations of life transforms the significance of natural objects and activities. Therefore, for the people who live according to a religious worldview, time and space have a symbolic, religious meaning.

What Eliade wants to say is there are parts of the space that are qualitatively different, for instance, as pointed out in God's command to Moses: 'Take off your shoes, for the place on which you stand is holy ground'. There is, then, something sacred and there is something profane, undefined and without consistency and surrounds the sacred. There are also hierophanies, or expressions of the sacred, which move in many directions and are applied to all religious experiences.

Eliade draws a contrast between 'sacred space', in which the sacred is obvious, and the space which lies outside it, which he calls 'profane space'. A space may become sacred through the display of the sacred, which Eliade calls hierophany, 'which expresses in some way modality of the sacred and some moment in its history'. Examples of sacred places where sacredness stemmed through a hierophany are Mount Sinai, a mountain where God appeared to Moses according to biblical stories, or Mount Fujiyama which Japanese Shintoists revere as sacred to the goddess Sengen-Sama. Such sacred spaces are significant and their recognition is of 'a primary religious experience'.

Eliade, however, does not intend to say the sacred and profane are set in dualistic opposition; rather, the sacred is an element in the structure of consciousness, not a stage in the history of consciousness. Therefore, the sacred space provides a nurturing ambience in which spirituality grows and flourishes, rather than a precondition for its emergence firstly.

The sacred space gives orientation to space. In so doing, it creates meaning within space. However, religious people seek their abode at the centre of the world. An example of this is the Kaaba in Mecca which believing Muslims regard as the centre of the world. There are also 'privileged' places of meaningfulness in profane experience such as one's birthplace.

The sacred space is a point at which two worlds meet. It could become the vertical axis of communication between heaven and earth, a spot where communication passes between two worlds, as on Jacob's ladder at Bethel. Such a point is distinguished from profane space by a hierophany.

According to Eliade, one of the things that religion does is to direct the believer in the cosmos. It does this by interrupting the normal flow of space with sacred places, such as shrines and temples, which mark points of reference for people's relationship to the sacred and their place in the world. For instance, some places, such as the Ganges in India, are regarded sacred from the beginning of time, or the act of their consecration replays the work of gods in creating a cosmos.

Religions set up special places, such as churches and mosques, to localise the sacred amid ordinary space. Sometimes there are places of natural beauty or striking power, such as mountains, caves and rivers. They may also be sites that commemorate great religious events of the past, for example, the birthplace of the Hindu god Krishna. Sometimes they are places where miraculous spiritual appearances are believed to have occurred, for example, the appearance of the Virgin Mary at the French town of Lourdes. Therefore, the sacred space is the indispensable locus in which religious, transformative experiences are activated. It is the source of creativity and renewal that potentiates order and harmony especially in facing chaos and destruction.

There are also sacred histories. Most religions are organised around certain past events and models, such as the stories of the Buddha and Jesus Christ. Each religion has its own account of the history of the world. Each religion speaks of the great time when ancestors, creators, founders, gods, sages, saviours or heroes fixed or revealed the essential elements of religion. These collective memories are preserved in oral traditions such as the Hindu *Mahabharata* or in scriptures and sacred writings such as the Bible and the Quran. For instance, in Judaism the great time was the Exodus and receiving the Law at Mount Sinai. For Muslims, the revelation of the Quran to the Prophet Muhammad is a defining event in Islam. The Islamic lunar calendar begins with Muhammad's migration to Medina.

Religions provide continual renewal by setting special times for their adherents to recollect and demonstrate that what they hold is sacred. These occasions may take place annually, monthly or daily. Christians, for instance, celebrate the Christmas once every year. Muslims are expected to observe a fast in the month of Ramadan everyday from sunrise to sunset. Therefore, every religion has regular major festivals and observances that celebrate and display its fundamental commitments as well as intensify and renew the spiritual memory of its followers.

On the knowledge of 'things-in-themselves', Eliade thinks the structure of religious consciousness is predicted in a form of the world which is present as a concrete form of matter. This means that when he speaks of natural matters, such as the sky, moon, water and stones, he is explaining the primary intuition of matter. In other words, Eliade approaches the issue of religious experiences in a manner the specific intuition of human consciousness is always correlated with a preceding form of the world. This is why it is important to consider the inner structure of the consciousness of religious people by examining the sacred symbols of human communities. This will show, for instance, how forms of nature draw out hierophanies or modes of consciousness and experience. Human communities often understand hierophanies, whether physical exhibitions or revelations of the sacred, in the forms of symbols, myths and rituals. Thus, any phenomenon is a potential hierophany and may give access to understanding the sacred space and time. Understanding this sacred space and time is a constitutive characteristic of the religious aspect of humanity. It is therefore important to see how the exhibitions of the sacred in rituals and myths invoke sacred space and time and how the phenomenologists of religion can free themselves from the existential unease of passing profane space and time.

Phenomenology aims at getting eidetic intuition to realise the essences of phenomena. Eidetic intuition is a procedure in the phenomenological method that moves beyond the particular instances of phenomena to the universal essences. It is an insight that works in and through the essential idea of being. Nevertheless, there are still two questions which phenomenology needs to answer: how can eidetic intuition avoid being subjective? How can the phenomenologists assess the accuracy of their interpretations?

Eliade addresses the issue of religion as a specific mode of being. He thinks the study of religion must not reduce its subject matter to something merely social or psychological, but must take seriously the idea that in the believer's world, the experience of the sacred defines a distinctive reality. Eliade's concern here is about the way human beings experience or understand the sacred in their life.

Eliade's comparative study of religion seeks to represent the common characteristics of all religions. All religions distinguish the realm of the sacred from the realm of the profane. The history of religion is formed by a great number of hierophanies or expressions of sacred reality. However, the question here is whether

identifying and comparing essential patterns make use of history. In other words, does the comparison of 'religious patterns' isolate religious practices from their socio-historical and cultural settings which give them particular meanings? Nonetheless, Eliade's 'diagram' is an important model since it affirms the greater experience in all religions and helps the students of religion understand the great dimensions of religious meaning.

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