

Religion comme jeu: la situation au XXIème siècle.

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If we categorise human social activity into three spheres, the sacred, profane and play, twenty-first century Western religion falls neatly into the realm of play. Which is to say that religion, for the majority of contemporary Western people, is a vital part of culture, but is not serious. In this paper, I utilise the thought of two French sociologists, Roger Caillois and Jacques Ellul, to argue this point.

A caveat before beginning, by categorising religion as play, I in no way make a value judgment on any religion nor on society now. I am neither saying any religion is true or false, only observing the social role it plays today.

Sources

It is assumed that the reader is familiar with Jacques Ellul and so little introduction is here necessary.

Roger Caillois (1913-1978)¹ was an interesting and diverse thinker of the 20th century. From his involvement with the early Surrealist movement and his writings on similarities of human society and those of praying mantises, to his late writing on rocks, he is easy to overlook for his diverse and sometimes peculiar topics. In the midst of his rather eclectic corpus, he wrote two sociological books that have proven successful enough to merit very recent reprints. These works, which this paper uses heavily, are *L'homme et la sacré* or *Man and the Sacred*, originally published in 1939 and 1958's *Les jeux et les hommes*, or *Man, Play and Games*. In addition, of course, Caillois founded the journal *Diogenes*.

The Sacred and Religion

In *Man and the Sacred*, Caillois speaks about the religious conception of the universe as one that implies a distinction between the sacred and the profane. I will add one point here before getting into this worldview, that religion is always a difficult term to define. Rather than subsuming the sacred to religion, I would propose, following Jacques Ellul, that religion is only one possible rendition of the sacred,² The dichotomous worldview of the sacred is

visible in places that appear to be entirely secularised. Religious phenomena can be absent even when the sacred is present. I will thus proceed to look at the sacred and the profane, then to add the realm of play afterward.

The sacred³ is primarily a collective force of valuation, a property, that can be applied to any object, person, place, time or concept. This sacred force is considered the source of success. It inhabits and gives life to all that a social group values. But this sacred force is also deadly serious. It is the "condition of life and gateway to death" as Caillois so well puts it.⁴ To violate the sacred is worthy of death or exile. Because of this, taboos must be established that separate the realm of the sacred from the profane. In this way the sacred power is institutionalised and socialised. It must eventually take institutional form if society is to be run successfully and if one's environment is to operate harmoniously. Thus, the sacred which initially may be a psychological experience,⁵ becomes a realm of social activity.

The sacred provides orientation to space and time. It establishes a dichotomous world wherein certain places and certain times are distinct from all others. A temple, a grove, the new year are all examples. But the sacred also provides social orientation by the establishment of sacred personages, e.g. priests, shamans, or military dictators. These people represent the greatest incarnation of the sacred power and are thus imitated. But, in all things, they remain separate. Their distance is maintained through taboos. Thus, the social realm of the sacred is separated from the profane by means of specific differentiations. These differentiations occur in clothing, a sacred location for their work, rules of conduct, activities undertaken and a separate, heightened language. Through its dichotomies and differentiations the sacred creates the structures of the universe for a social group. Indeed, it might be argued that the sacred is the social hermeneutic of reality, that by which an individual is able to understand experienced reality.⁶

The social and environmental orientation provided by the sacred is necessarily foundational, or *a priori*. As such, the sacred is unconscious and non-rational,⁷ in the sense that it cannot be subjected to reasoned arguments--to do so would be to deny its *a priori* nature. Therefore, its derived truths and implicit values are understood to be self-evident, or intuitive, as they comprise the very structure of the universe.

The profane social realm, on the other hand, is where normal life happens. It may be called the 'mundane' as has recently been argued.⁸

Play

The sacred/profane dichotomy is a strict dichotomy. Play is a third realm that has no reference to the formation of social rules. Play does not form society, it is itself formed by society in reference to its life in the sacred and profane realms. Play is, just like the sacred, a realm for separate language, different dress, specific and strict rules, located in an enclosed and specific space, etc. Johan Huizinga, in his seminal work, *Homo Ludens*, first published in English 1944, thus equated play and the sacred due to these similarities. Caillois, however, thinks this is a mistake, for it neglects the fact that play is never serious, whereas the sacred is always serious. Play does not assume the risk of death, whereas the sacred is assumed to be the realm where life and death are managed carefully. As Caillois says,

Through the sacred, the source of omnipotence, the worshiper is fulfilled. Confronted by the sacred, he is defenseless and completely at its mercy. In play, the opposite is the case. All is human, invented by man the creator. For this reason, play rests, relaxes, distracts, and causes the dangers, cares, and travails of life to be forgotten. The sacred, on the contrary, is the domain of internal tension, from which it is precisely profane existence that relaxes, rests, and distracts.⁹

Thus, while it seems clear that both the sacred and play are purely human creations, to those under a sacral system, which nearly everyone is, the sacred and play are worlds apart.

What is important to note, however, is that play and the sacred have similar phenomena. It is thus possible, as with Huizinga, to confuse the two. It is this confusion I wish to identify in the early 21st century with respect to religion, at least in the West. In order to do so, I will follow on Caillois' six features that define play. Play is:

1. *Free*: in which playing is not obligatory; if it were, it would at once lose its attractive and joyous quality as diversion;

2. *Separate*: circumscribed within the limits of space and time, defined and fixed in advance;
3. *Uncertain*: the course of which cannot be determined, nor the result attained beforehand, and some latitude for innovation being left to the player's initiative;
4. *Unproductive*: creating neither goods, nor wealth, nor new elements of any kind; and, except for the exchange of property among the players, ending in a situation identical to that prevailing at the beginning of the game;
5. *Governed by rules*: under conventions that suspend ordinary laws, and for the moment establish new legislation, which alone counts;
6. *Make-believe*: accompanied by a special awareness of a second reality or of a free unreality, as against real life,¹⁰

Play is seen to be similar to the sacred in only two points, that of separation and governance by rules. Thus, the four points of contrast, freedom, uncertainty, un-productivity, and self-aware unreality, demonstrate that play is radically distinct from the sacred, though often resembling it phenomenologically.

Separation of Religion and The Sacred

Contemporary religion falls squarely within the realm of play, not the sacred, though it may refer to the sacred. While the terms 'sacred' and 'religion' are often used synonymously, to do so is historically misleading. The nineteenth and twentieth century's relentless attack on religion effected a separation between religion and the sacred. It has been well recognised that many of the political regimes of the last century that were thoroughly atheistic, such as Stalinism or Maoism, included numerous sacred manifestations and claims.¹¹ Ellul, writing in the early '70's, notes how many of the twentieth century movements embodied a search to rediscover the sacred without religion. He says,

Rational man has not been able to adhere to his rationality. [...] The more man penetrates into himself the more he is led to question the systematic certitudes

so painfully acquired during the nineteenth century. [...] We have seen reasonable man caught up in waves of mystic insanity and acting like a barbarian. We have witnessed the exasperated search for universal communions, from surrealism to jazz to eroticism. The fact is that man cannot live without participation in the sacred, and we are seeing his protest.¹²

What many have called postmodernity, then, is largely bound up in this attempt to rediscover the sacred heart of human society. But, as Ellul says,

Man cannot retrace his steps. [...] Man is forced to create something to serve as the sacred. [...] It cannot be said that man is no longer religious just because Christianity is no longer the religion of the masses. To the contrary, he is just as religious as medieval man. [...] However, we must realize that the sacred is no longer located in the same place as before.¹³

If the sacred has been reinvigorated in the past fifty years, it has not done so in religion. While religion is on the rise, it no longer pertains to the sacred in the contemporary West. This is clear because the sacred is oriented precisely to the milieu or greatest necessary condition of a social group. When nature was that primary milieu, it was nature that was sacred and empowered with deities throughout. When society was sacred, it was kings and Durkheimian gods of the social group that were empowered. Today, however, the primary environment or milieu of the modern West, and increasingly the whole world, is technology or *la technique*¹⁴ in all spheres of activity.¹⁵ Nature and society are mediated through technology. Politics, as demonstrated by recent events with Wikileaks and the place of internet social media in the rebellions in Egypt and Libya, is increasingly at the mercy of technology. In this situation, reference to traditional gods, be they pagan gods of the harvest, or monotheistic deities, is largely irrelevant.

The sacred must be perceived to be effective and omnipotent to be the sacred. It must provide orientation to the experience of life, a 'topography' as Ellul calls it.¹⁶ Religion is not now regarded this way. But, technique is. It has necessary internal rules that influence the very features of humanity. Humanity is modified by technique.¹⁷ Technique is the primary cause of what gives life and brings death. If climate change is the world's greatest threat, it

falls squarely on the shoulders of technique and technology, both as the problem and the perceived solution. Technique is at once the saviour and agent of destruction. It is the sacred. Any reference to a god that has nothing to say to this reality is entirely irrelevant.

Religion as Play

Because of this, it seems that religion is in the process of becoming, or is already, play, or recreational activity. Following Caillois' six attributes of play, it is seen that religion today pairs rather well with them.

1. Religion is free. That is, there is no obligation to join a religion and, for the most part, one is free to leave at any time. This is in contrast to a time when the community's religion was a mark of communal membership, and thus obligatory.
2. Religion is separate. That is, engaging in a religious ceremony of some type involves separation of time, place, language, dress, etc. This is perhaps the most obvious aspect and the one that causes the confusion that religion is still equal to the sacred.
3. Religion is uncertain. While this is not as clear in the case of a highly liturgical religious setting, it is the so-called charismatic movements where religious growth is more evident. In these gatherings there is a high focus on emotion, there are open spaces for 'prophecy' and other free speech acts that are not known prior to the ceremony. Even amongst more traditional churches parishioners frequently anticipate and discuss the sermon afterwards. It is evaluated as a speech act, its rhetoric, delivery, content, etc., much as the performance of an athlete is analysed following a game. Instead of religion offering stability in the midst of a chaotic world, religion offers an escape from the world. It does not order reality as does the sacred, it entertains it away. Many believers speak of a church worship service in recreational terms: they feel refreshed, recharged, filled, fed, it is a celebration, etc. This is not to speak of theologians keen on connecting religion and social activism, or those who speak of having a Christian worldview, these specialists are exceptional.
4. Religion is unproductive. By unproductive I think Caillois means materially unproductive. Religion is expected to do nothing. It offers sagacious words which are also offered by

popular culture icons, rather than material or capital production. No good or service that can be capitalised upon is created. Granted there are those who use religion to gain money, but these people are 'cheats'. The play aspect of religion is lost if it is utilised for capital gain. Religious institutions do raise money, but charity is no longer the *raison d'être* for religion, as giving of money is now expected of large corporations. Religion has lost its monopoly on social services both to the state and to corporations, which is another clear indication that it no longer orders the world and serves as the foundation of society.

5. Religion is governed by rules. This is an obvious point.

6. Religion is make-believe. Perhaps the most controversial point is that the religious worshippers are aware that they are engaged in a farce. The very word that has come into common usage, 'Fundamentalism' demonstrates this point well, however. Those who truly believe that their religious beliefs are objectively true for themselves and for everyone else seek to impose those beliefs on others, whether peaceably or violently. But fundamentalists are simply those who deny that their religion is make-believe and who try to live as if it were the sacral order.

That religion is make-believe is therefore seen by the sociological fact that most religious believers act with little distinction from unbelievers. That is, their moral conduct is not based in their religious beliefs, but in the general sacred to which everyone in their society holds fast. Those who deny that their religion is make-believe and yet do not seek to order their entire world around their religion are in denial.¹⁸ This is not a particularly pernicious form of denial, but likened to the football fan who takes the sport with far too much seriousness. The Christian who steps into a church once a week and is filled with passion for an hour only to resume normal life as before is acting in precisely the same manner as the football fan.

That religion is not serious is explicit in a 2005 UK House of Lords case which claims that religion is part of the individual's personality, rather than a group identity:

Religious and other beliefs or convictions are part of the humanity of every individual. They are an integral part of his personality and individuality. In a civilised society individuals respect each other's beliefs. This enables them to

live in harmony.¹⁹

Religion is thus a preference, just as a certain form of recreation is part of one's personality. Social cohesion is here blatantly denied to religion, but is accorded to 'civilised society' wherein individuals respect each other's religious beliefs. That is to say, religion is play. It is make-believe, fantasy, a hobby. The sacred is unacknowledged, it is non-rational and unconscious. It lies buried beneath the implicit and unquestionable values of 'civilised society', which is now international, transcultural and thus only possible via a now international sacral order. An entire world (in many senses) lies hidden beneath 'civilised society' that could be explored, but it is here vital to note how religion no longer exists as equivalent to 'civilised society' but as a personal peculiarity or preference.

Even if religion belongs to the realm of play and personal preference, this does not mean that it is without social value. Caillois explains that:

[P]lay is not at all a meaningless residue of a routine adult occupation, although it eventually perpetuates a counterfeit of adult activity after the latter has become obsolete. Above all, play is a parallel, independent activity, opposed to the acts and decisions of ordinary life by special characteristics appropriate to play.²⁰

Play retains a social function, though it may be a parody of sacred activity. Religion will not disappear if its traditional social function is lost. But religion will become increasingly technical and, as play, correspond to the needs of recreation and escape from the technical.

Conclusion

It seems, then, that religious and nonreligious people live in denial about the role of religion in our contemporary world. Religion is still accorded far more respect than its current social function merits. The contemporary West, since the 1980's has been highly self-congratulatory that it has solved the former divisions of human societies. We now live in a great unified diversity of religious views. It is true, but only true insofar as religion is not serious, that is, it is true insofar as religion is play. Religious diversity is little different than

the peaceful coexistence of rugby, cricket and football.

If religion has a social function today it falls squarely within the category of play. This means that religion is not a serious activity, but one of recreation and renewal. This does not make it worthless, or even in danger of extinction. If this is true, the common talk of toleration, of victory in diversity is at the same time to quietly admit that religion is no longer socially vital, or that through which the social group has coherence. Tolerance only comes by devaluation. We have not overcome religious intolerance, but have devalued what was formerly *vitally* important and therefore are actually highly patronising in our tolerance of traditional religion. Karl Barth well expresses this tolerance,

That the so-called "tolerance" of this kind is unattainable is revealed by the fact that the object, religion and religions, and therefore man, are not taken seriously, but are at bottom patronised. Tolerance in the sense of moderation, or superior knowledge, or scepticism is actually the worst form of intolerance.²¹

Victory for one governing sacral order comes only by the defeat of another. Only, the grand 'we' are not the victors of a conscious battle against intolerance, but the unacknowledged subjects of a new and more powerful victor, la technique.

1. A good and recent English anthology with some biographical detail is Caillois, *The Edge of Surrealism: A Roger Caillois Reader*.
2. Ellul, *Les Nouveaux Possedes*. Ellul, *New Demons*, 48.
3. This section is a summary of Caillois' account of the sacred which is largely taken up by Ellul.
4. Title of Chapter V in Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*. Caillois, *L'homme Et La Sacré*.
5. So argue e.g. Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*. Eliade, *Sacred and Profane*.
6. This is a self-confessed nominalist position to take on the matter. If truth is always linguistic, and language is always social, truth is always social. A society gets its categories of truth by the orientation function that the sacred provides. Thus, the sacred is the fount of truth for a social group. It is the hermeneutic, indeed, the language of reality. Sacral structures are an implicit framework of language, cf. Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, 158.
7. This is the thesis of Rudolf Otto's influential work, *The Holy*, Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*.
8. Lynch, *The Sacred in the Modern World : A Cultural Sociological Approach*.
9. Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, 158. Caillois, *L'homme Et La Sacré*, 212.
10. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 9-10. Caillois, *Les Jeux Et Les Hommes Le Masque Et Le Vertige*, 42-43.
11. cf. Ellul, *New Demons*, 166-202.
12. Ibid., 64-65.
13. Ibid., 65.
14. There is quite a difficult English/French translational issue in regard to Ellul's work. His *magnum opus*, *La technique/The Technological Society* Ellul, *La Technique; Ou, L'enjeu Du Siecle./Ellul, The Technological Society*. is concerned with an elaboration of *la technique*. In English this has been translated as 'technology' which is misleading insofar as it has come to refer only to applied science, rather than the etymological meaning of a study of technique. Because it is somewhat out of the scope of this paper to bring in all of Ellul's thought on this matter, I will hereafter use 'technology', but the reader must understand that this does not refer only to applied science, but to an entire technical way of viewing the world.
15. Ellul presents these three environments most fully in Ellul, *What I Believe*. Ellul,

Ce Que Je Crois..

16. Ellul, *New Demons*, 51-52.

17. cf. Ellul, *The Technological Society*, chapter 5. Ellul, *La Technique; Ou, L'enjeu Du Siecle*.

18. The European Court's Human Rights Act of 1998 makes this denial clear. Point 2 of Article 9 of the 1998 Act states, "Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society [...] for the protection of public [...] morals [...]." That religious beliefs are subject to public morals by law could not be a more clear statement of the fact that religion is not in the least the order of the universe, but is submitted to the public morals of democratic society.

19. Bingham, "R V. Education."

20. Caillois, *Man, Play, and Games*, 63.

21. Barth, *CD*, I.2 p299.

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