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Theory, the Uncanny and the Sacred

Abstract

This paper examines the related but different concepts of the uncanny and the sacred. Drawing on two cases – one fictional and one real – and using Žižek’s Symbolic-Real-Imaginary as an organising frame, the paper analyses how the uncanny and the sacred are connected. It then proceeds to examine the role of theorising in sacralising the uncanny and profaning the sacred. Finally, it briefly discusses how theory might be re-enchanted.

Keywords: uncanny, sacred, theory.

Introduction

This EGOS stream punctuates a recent wave of interest in the uncanny in organizational discourse. Orr (2014) has just published an article on ‘organizational ghosts’, Gabriel (2012) has written about ‘organizational miasma’, while last year *Organization Studies* published a special issue on the ‘dark side’ of organisation (O’Doherty et al. 2013) including a paper specifically on the uncanny by Beyes and Steyaert (2013). Of course, the supernatural is pervasive in popular culture and so it is no surprise that the uncanny is explored much more vigorously in literary studies, most especially by Royle (2003) and more recently by Masschelein (2011), both of whom position their work as an elaboration on Freud’s (1919/2003) seminal essay, *The Uncanny*. In turn, Freud is indebted to Jentsch (1906/1997), who provides a second foundational study of the phenomenon.

A ready link between organization and the uncanny is that the former, as a manifestation of rational structures and behaviour, works to contain if not eradicate the latter, which is seen as

nothing but a relic of a pre-modern world view that has yet to jettison superstition, religion, and all things metaphysical. Another approach is to see the uncanny as a natural part of the human condition – without need to leverage metaphysical explanations – and that organisation is but a device to tame or make sense of a bewildering world in which the uncanny is to be expected, albeit only occasionally. Organisation is nothing but a (never wholly successful) attempt to manage existential angst through practices that, firstly, distract us through immersion in the practice’s particularities, and, secondly, work to create a familiar, ordinary, mundane world from which the uncanny is necessarily decanted. And when that project inevitably stumbles we find some succour through appealing to the concept and word ‘uncanny’. In this paper, I follow a third route, one that retains the metaphysical language (which distinguishes it from the second approach), but does not embrace the pre-modern/modern distinction that frames the first approach. Specifically, the paper explores the relationship between the *uncanny* and the *sacred*, arguing that the uncanny – as in the unfamiliar and potentially dangerous – needs to be tamed, domesticated and made familiar, and that sacralisation is an important process through which this is achieved. In this sense, the uncanny and the sacred are necessarily closely connected and it is this connection – which is surprisingly overlooked in the call for papers – that is explored here. While the two terms are related, they are also different in important ways. The dictionary tells us that the uncanny refers to the ‘strange or mysterious, especially in an unsettling ways’, while its synonyms include words like preternatural, supernatural, unearthly, other-worldly, unreal, odd and weird. The word ‘sacred’ shares none of these synonyms, but, like the uncanny, is certainly linked with the unearthly in that its dictionary meaning is given as ‘connected with God or a god or dedicated to a religious purpose and so deserving veneration’.

The paper begins by reprising our understanding of the sacred, and maps out twelve attributes of the phenomenon, which provides a frame for contrasting with the uncanny. The next section uses two cases – one fictional, one real – to analyse how the uncanny and the sacred are connected, using Žižek’s Symbolic-Real-Imaginary as a conceptual frame. In developing these ideas, the paper examines the role of theorising in sacralising the uncanny and profaning the sacred. The paper concludes with a short discussion on how theory might perhaps be re-encharmed.

The sacred and the uncanny

We begin by summarising the attributes of the sacred, drawing on the quite extensive literature on the subject. For Durkheim, the sacred-profane dichotomy was foundational to all religions, which he famously defined as ‘a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them’ (Durkheim 1915/1995: 47). Moreover, he argued that

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* (Durkheim 1915/1995: 37, original emphasis).

The anthropologist Malinowski concurs: ‘In every primitive community, studied by trustworthy and competent observers, there have been found two clearly distinguishable domains, the Sacred and the Profane; in other words, the domain of Magic and Religion and that of Science’ (Malinowski 1948:17). However, subsequent scholars have taken issue with this essentialism and universalism, with Evans-Pritchard (1937/1976; 1940) arguing that ‘religion’, and distinctions between the natural and supernatural or between the sacred and profane were not features of tribes like the Azande or the Nuer. Goody (1961) also rejected Durkheim’s foundationalist view, arguing that many societies do not have words equivalent to sacred or profane and that the sacred-profane dichotomy, as well as distinctions between the natural and supernatural (and, by extension, the conceptual carapace framing the idea of the uncanny), are more a feature of European religious thought rather than a universal aspect of all religions.

Yet, it would be imprudent to jettison the concept of the sacred altogether, even if we don’t buy Durkheim’s notion that the sacred-profane distinction is an essential and basic feature of all religions. This makes much sense because the sacred and its associated constellation of terms has continued to provide an important framing device for thinking about individual and social phenomena (Eliade 1959/1961; Girard 1977/1995; Acquaviva 1979; Reason 1993; Taylor 2007; Kauffman 2008; Walsh 2011). It is perhaps no surprise that anthropologists and sociologists of religion continue to use the concept, but it is also very much present in management and organisation studies. For instance, the idea of the sacred runs through the ‘explosion in interest’ in workplace spirituality (Parameshwar 2005: 690), while for James March, the noted organisational theorist, the sacred is central to academic life: ‘Teaching is

not a job,' he maintains, 'it is a sacrament' (March 2003: 206). In marketing scholarship, the sacred features as a distinct strand following on from Belk, Wallendorf and Sherry's seminal paper on *The Sacred and the Profane in Consumer Behaviour* (Belk et al. 1989).

Interestingly, while that paper has achieved 'mythical status within our discipline' according to Brown and Schau (2008: 154), this is primarily because of its novel use of interpretative research methods to understand the symbolic meaning of consumption rather than its specific interest in the notion of the sacred, which is what concerns us most in this paper.

Nevertheless, Belk et al's study is helpful, not least because it maps out twelve properties of the sacred (Table 1, first two columns) based on their extensive reading of the literature.

Property	The Sacred	The Uncanny
Hierophany	Something sacred <i>shows</i> itself to us. Phenomenologically, <i>people do not create</i> sacred things.	The uncanny is that which ought to have remained hidden and secret but has become visible (see Freud 1919/2003).
Kratophany	The sacred elicits both strong approach and strong avoidance tendencies, creating an overwhelming power.	The uncanny shares this property, though it also creates a lack of orientation.
Mystery	The sacred has conferred upon it a dignity that raises it above the ordinary or 'empirical'. It cannot be understood cognitively, for the sacred commands love, devotion, fear, and related spiritual or emotional responses rather than rational thought.	The uncanny shares this sense of mystery, but does not command the same emotional responses; rather it brings an overwhelming feeling of uncertainty.
Objectification	The translation of elements of mundane existence into a transcendental frame of reference	The uncanny shares this property.
Opposition to the profane	The extraordinary sacred is partly defined by its opposition to the ordinary profane.	The uncanny is opposed to (or commingled with) the familiar rather than the profane.
Contamination	Both beneficent and evil sacred things have the power to contaminate through contact.	Not an attribute of the uncanny.
Sacrifice	Sacrifice establishes communication with the sacred.	Not an attribute of the uncanny.
Myth	Narratives document the status of the sacred and partly constitute that status.	The uncanny is an 'unconcept' (Masschelein 2011) and, as such, is pre-mythological.
Commitment	Individuals feel an emotional attachment to that which is considered sacred and this is important to their identity.	The uncanny upsets rather than constitutes identity.
Ritual	Rules of conduct prescribe how one should conduct oneself in the presence of sacred objects	Rules of conduct are absent because the uncanny is a 'crisis of the proper' (Royle 2003: 1).

Communitas	The social anti-structure that frees participants from their normal social roles and statuses and instead engages them in a transcending camaraderie of status equality.	Not an attribute of the uncanny.
Ecstasy and Flow	The sacred is capable of producing ecstatic experience, in which one stands outside one's self.	Not an attribute of the uncanny.

Table 1: Twelve Properties of the Sacred (adapted from Belk et al. 1989) contrasted with the uncanny.

Each of these twelve properties of the sacred may then be compared and contrasted with the uncanny, and this is done in the third column of Table 1. While each of the comparisons might be contested, they do highlight the overlaps and important points of departure between the two concepts. Or perhaps a better way to put it is between the concept of the sacred and the ‘unconcept’ that is the uncanny (Masschelein 2011).

In analysing the relationship between the sacred and the uncanny, we leverage Žižek’s (via Lacan) triad of the three domains of experience – the Symbolic, Real and Imaginary (Žižek 1989; 2006; Bailly 2009). The Symbolic is the domain of language and representation, as well as the network of rules and suppositions that constitute the symbolic order. The Real is not that which we normally understand as ‘reality’, but rather that which is always beyond representation, beyond the Symbolic, or, as Žižek puts it, it is ‘the impossible hard core which we cannot confront directly’ (Žižek 2006: 26). The Imaginary relates to the totalising effects of seeking to construct a coherent narrative in an attempt (which always fails) to bridge the gap between the Symbolic and the Real. It is the realm of identity linked to ideal images and destructive status games. Within this frame, the uncanny is best understood as part of the Real, while the sacred is primarily located in the Imaginary.

Freud, in his essay on the uncanny, notes that he ‘cannot think of any genuine fairy-story which has anything uncanny about it’ (Freud 1919/2003: 16). Why might this be so, given that fairy-tales are crammed with inanimate objects springing to life, re-animation of the dead, wish-fulfillments, secret powers, monsters, ghouls and goblins, all of which feature as part of the uncanny? Freud’s answer is that there is a difference between the uncanny that is actually experienced and the uncanny that we merely picture or read about. Thus, fairy-tales are framing devices that contain or tame the uncanny; the uncanny, through a fairy tale, is rendered familiar – normal even – part of a particular language game understood by both the story-teller and the audience. And so it is with the sacred, which works to domesticate the uncanny, while at the same time creating and maintaining a position for the supernatural and

cosmic. This paper's argument is that the uncanny, as part of the Real, is translated into the sacred through the practice of theorizing, drawing on mythological narratives that constitute the Imaginary while using the modes of representation and rules of language that form the Symbolic.

An Illustration

Steven Spielberg's movie, *War Horse* (2011), recounts a story about a boy who enlists to fight in the First World War after his beloved racehorse is sold to the cavalry. The movie includes at least two uncanny moments. First, when the young horse saves the farm by ploughing a rocky field that would be beyond the ability of most work horses. The event is witnessed by dozens of neighbours who watch in awe at the horse's preternatural ability. The second uncanny moment occurs on the battlefield where the boy, who has been blinded after being gassed in the trenches, hears about a wonder horse that has survived in no-man's-land. Believing it to be his own animal, he whistles for the horse as he did when he was a child. At that moment, the injured horse was about to be put down, but, uncannily, hears the whistle, is reunited with the boy, and his life is saved. This is but one fictional story with uncanny elements – it so happens to be the last movie I watched – and indeed the uncanny is routinely included as a plot device simply to make a story more interesting. However, when the uncanny is depicted in fiction, we know it is fiction, which is why fairy-tales, as Freud reminds us, are not uncanny. However, uncanny in the 'real' world, the truly uncanny, is a horse of quite a different colour.

For a real-life story of the uncanny, we turn to a phenomenon that occurred in Ireland during the summer of 1985. It began in County Cork in the small village of Ballinspittle where a roadside statue of the Virgin was reported to have moved spontaneously. (Inanimate objects apparently springing into life is a quintessential example of the uncanny.) Similar occurrences were reported at around 30 other locations around the country during that summer, often at grottos erected during the Marian Year of 1954. Thousands went to see what many believed were apparitions and it was reported that up to 100,000 visited the Ballinspittle site alone (Mulholland 2009). The media popularised the term 'moving statues' because the people who witnessed the phenomena often reported that a statue levitated, gestured, or moved in some way.

There's a long history of apparitions in the Catholic Church, and the 'moving statues' story is best understood within that context. The Catholic Church has recognised hundreds of official

Marian shrines across the world, including Lourdes (France) which receives five million pilgrims annually and Knock (Ireland) which receives one and a half million. The uncanny event that Lourdes celebrates is an apparition of the Virgin Mary in 1858, while Knock commemorates the appearance of the Virgin Mary, St Joseph and St John to fifteen individuals in 1879. The Catholic Church has a formal protocol, *Normae Congregationis*¹, for adjudicating on the veracity of apparitions, which is an important part of the process through which an uncanny event comes to be recast as something that is authentically sacred; it is, in effect, a formal process of sacralisation. The Knock apparitions were investigated by two Church Commissions of Inquiry in 1879 and 1936 and these deemed the witnesses' testimony as trustworthy and satisfactory. In 1979, Pope John Paul visited the shrine on the centenary of the apparition, giving Knock the indelible seal of Vatican approval and inspiring an even greater devotion to the shrine. Almost half a million pilgrims gathered at Knock on that day. However, other well-known sites have not yet received such official affirmation. For instance, in June 1981 four children reported seeing an apparition of the Virgin Mary in the village of Međugorje in what is now Bosnia and Herzegovina. Other uncanny phenomena were subsequently reported at the site, such as the sun spinning and dancing in the sky, or being surrounded by hearts or crosses. The events were investigated by a series of Church commissions with each declaring *non constat*: that is, they could not confirm the supernatural nature of the apparitions. In 1985 Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger – then prefect of the doctrinal congregation and the future Pope Benedict XVI – banned official, diocesan or parish-sponsored pilgrimages to the shrine. In 2008, the Vatican authorized 'severe cautionary and disciplinary measures' against the priest who served as spiritual director to the visionaries, sanctioning him 'for the diffusion of dubious doctrine, manipulation of consciences, suspicious mysticism, disobedience toward legitimately issued orders' as well as charges that he violated the Sixth Commandment.² Despite this, over one million pilgrims still visit Medjugorje every year (<http://www.medjugorje.hr/en/>).

In the summer of 1985, it is probable that some canny individuals saw the potential for Ballinspittle to emulate Knock, given that the village is only 30km from Cork International Airport and close to over a kilometre of sandy beach. However, this was not to be. The Catholic Church sat on the fence, recognizing that while interest in the phenomenon would

¹ Available at: <http://bit.ly/SqJER4> [accessed 9th June, 2014].

² Press Release by Catholic News Services, 5th September 2008, *Vatican disciplines ex-spiritual director to Medjugorje visionaries*; available at: <http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/0804522.htm> accessed 9th June 2014]

probably fade, it was unwilling to dismiss what might, in time, be considered an authentic apparition (Mulholland 2009). The media and wider public were more cynical, and, notwithstanding the large numbers travelling to the various sites where uncanny events had happened, the ‘moving statues’ phenomenon was routinely ridiculed in the press and in popular culture (Ryan and Kirakowski 1985). Thus, the summer of 1985 was a time when different images of the uncanny competed with one another. On the one hand, there were attempts to reimagine the uncanny happenings as part of the sacred, or in Žižek’s triad, to make sense of the Real (the uncanny) within a prior and evolving Imaginary, namely the mythological, theological and sacred traditions and narratives of the Catholic Church. Others reimaged the uncanny events using other narratives and traditions of the Imaginary. For example, two psychologists wrote a book claiming that the visions were optical illusions caused by staring at objects in the evening twilight (Ryan and Kirakowski 1985), while Mulholland (2009) leveraged a range of sociological, historical, theological, and psychological narratives to make sense of the ‘moving statues’, which he saw as a

modern manifestation of the kind of ‘magical-devotionalism’ that sections of the Irish Catholic population have long been prone to resort to during periods of personal or collective distress... They were products of an authoritarian, pessimistic, and guilt ridden religious ethos that stymied the emotional, religious, and cognitive development of many Irish children, undermined their capacity for self reflection and the possibility of developing a mature capacity for containing their inner fears and anxieties (p. 176).

But the most telling contribution was made by three Pentecostals who, on 31st October, attacked the statue with a hammer and axe claiming that the pilgrims were engaged in idolatry (the worship of images) or Mariolatry (Marian veneration) both of which are antithetical to Protestant religious beliefs. While the statue was subsequently repaired, the crowds never returned and the events of that summer were soon forgotten. The grotto in Ballinspittle never became a sacred place – at least no more than any of the thousands of other grottos in Ireland – it never competed in the international Marian market, and it never even made the list of Irish Marian shrines.³

The ‘moving statues’ story illustrates how theorizing can successfully or unsuccessfully transform the uncanny (the Real) into the sacred through drawing on narratives (theories) and practices that constitute the Imaginary. Theory, in this sense, operates on the uncanny and

³ See <http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/resources/shrines/ireland.html> [accessed 9th June 2014].

transforms it, making it familiar and (perhaps) sacred and somewhat understandable. Thus, the sacred is a potential, but not necessary, outcome of theorising the uncanny.

Yet, theorising the uncanny is problematic because it always and necessarily fail to truly represent the phenomenon, because the uncanny is axiomatically beyond representation (just as a joke is ‘lost’ in explanation). The uncanny is perhaps best understood as the part of life (and death) that cannot be symbolically appropriated or expressed, even through concepts such as the Real and *différance* that seek to speak to the impossibility of meaning. The first line of the *Tao te Ching* captures the sense of *mystery* that is an axiomatic attribute of the uncanny (and the sacred): “The Tao that can be spoken of is not the enduring and unchanging Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring and unchanging name”, echoing the last line in Wittgenstein’s *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*: ‘Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent’ (Wittgenstein 1922).

Attempts to theorise the uncanny has another problem in that the theorist is interested in and focused on *ideas*, such as the *idea* of the uncanny, which is quite different from any particular instance of the uncanny. This is precisely why Jentsch eschews any attempt to define the essence of the phenomenon:

Such a conceptual explanation would have very little value. The main reason for this is that the same impression does not necessarily exert an uncanny effect on everybody. Moreover, the same perception on the part of the same individual does not necessarily develop into the ‘uncanny’ every time, or at least not every time in the same way (Jentsch 1906/1997: 8).

Notwithstanding this epistemological difficulty, Jentsch proceeds to assert that this ‘does not mean to say that it would be impossible to give a working definition of the concept of the “uncanny,” since one can perhaps suppose that the impression which generates the feeling will be constituted along the same lines for a certain psycho-physiological group’ (p. 8). Indeed, theorizing can be seen as an integral part of containing and taming the uncanny in that it works to constitute, using Žižek’s triad again, part of the Imaginary and the Symbolic.

Theorising the Sacred

In this section we shift our focus from theorising the uncanny, to theorising the sacred. What happens when the sacred is theorised and how does this differ from theorising the uncanny? We begin with Belk et al’s paper which not only contains a helpful catalogue of the attributes of the sacred, but is also a useful case study of theorists studying the sacred. This gives an

opportunity to examine the relationship between the sacred and the *idea* of the sacred or, more generally, between theorising and sacralising.

A key point in Belk et al's paper is that 'Anything may become sacred' (p. 13), and that that anything may be something as apparently mundane or prosaic as a collection of Micky Mouse memorabilia (p. 30). They make it clear that an object in such a collection is semiotically enhanced through ownership/consumption, and is more 'special', to the collector than, say, an image of Mickey Mouse in a toy store. However, while one can accept that the owner's ritual care of the collection may be as important and meaningful to the owner as a weekly visit to Church is for many others, the salient question is, 'Is this a good thing?' Or, taking an Aristotelian angle, is this constitutive of the 'good life'? Does it matter that 'anything may become sacred'? If it does, how might individuals or a society decide on what constitutes the sacred?

This assertion that 'anything may become sacred' is consistent with a wider understanding – advanced by Saussurian semiotics, functionalist ethnography, the doctrine of cultural relativism, individual liberalism, and the sociology of knowledge – that all values are ultimately arbitrary. It matters not a whit whether it is an Amazonian tribal chief worshipping a stone, a Catholic nun blessing herself with holy water, or a collector of beer mats ritually dusting his collection; the river of sacredness runs through each phenomenon equally. Within this world-view, the social theorist is largely indifferent to sacred *content*, and confines herself to presenting an objective understanding of either causality or meaning-making (as in descriptions of the process of sacralization). However, this world-view seems to distil the ethical problems out of social theorizing, in line with Friedman's (2002: 12) assertion that, 'a major aim of the liberal is to leave the ethical problem for the individual to wrestle with'. Not only is this an inadequate if not obnoxious mode of being, but it flatly fails to resonate with the empirical world. We don't, in our own practices, take values to be arbitrary, and our institutions continue to operate as if there *is* external certainty and authority.

In addition to these ethical issues, attempts to theorise the sacred face similar epistemological problems to those encountered when theorising the uncanny, in so far as both the uncanny and the sacred are mysterious and hence beyond representation, beyond theorising.

However, theorising the sacred involves a further issue in that it can work to *undermine* the sacred. We see this if we imagine a theorist studying a nun blessing herself with what she believes to be holy water. While the water is sacred for the nun, this belief is not shared by

the theoriser who instead believes that the water's 'powers' are confined to the community of believers and that other communities will ascribe a similar power to other 'sacred' objects. Moreover, the theorist's interpretation of the holy water is that, while it is meaningful (or meaning-ful) for the nun, it is devoid of at least three properties of the sacred: *hierophany* (the sacred showing itself), *kratophany* (the sacred's overwhelming power) and *mystery*. In other words, the water is sacred for the nun, but not for the theorizer. Furthermore, if theorising is axiomatically about holding beliefs in ultimate *uncertainty*, then the theorist has to reject the concept of the truly sacred because this is axiomatically characterised by immediate *certainty*. A further twist is that in seeking to analyse, represent, and dissect the sacred, sociological theorising can be considered a form of *profanity* for two reasons. First, because the practice of theorising transgresses the strong avoidance tendencies that are axiomatic to the sacred. Second, because theorising, inspired as it is by a Platonic world-view, always devalues the particular – even when it is sacred – in favour of the general. This is the deep conundrum at the heart of the peculiarly Western idea that one can somehow step outside religious experience, objectify it and theorise the phenomenon. As the historian of religion, Jonathan Z. Smith, put it:

While there is a staggering amount of data, phenomena, of human experiences and expressions that might be characterized in one culture or another, by one criterion or another, as religious, there is no data for religion. Religion is solely the creation of the scholar's study. It is created for the scholar's analytic purposes by his imaginative acts of comparison and generalization. Religion has no existence apart from the academy. (Smith 1982: xi).

We can usefully extend Smith's critique of religion to the idea of the sacred, to distinctions between the secular and sacred realms, and to attempts at theorising the sacred. Timothy Fitzgerald (2000) makes a somewhat similar point arguing that when the category of religion (and by implication related terms like the sacred) is used in non-theological (contemporary) scholarship, then it has little if any analytical purchase and is likely to confuse rather than illuminate:

One finds in the published work of scholars working within religion departments the term 'religion' being used to refer to such diverse institutions as totems, the principle of hierarchy, Christmas cakes, witchcraft, unconditioned reality, the rights of man, the National Essence, Marxism and Freudianism, the tea ceremony, nature, ethics, and so on. But it seems obvious that these have very little in common in the abstract and that each can only be understood as institutions or ideologies that require interpretation in highly specific cultural contexts. In this case I argue that 'religion' dissolves or ought to dissolve without remainder into ideology or culture understood as institutionalized values and symbolic systems. (Fitzgerald 2000: 17)

Thus Fitzgerald, seeing no coherent concept of 'religion', considers that the term should be scrapped, at least within academia. He takes a similar view on the sacred, distinguishing between a theological and non-theological use of the word. In the former, objects, places and times are sacred because they are in some way related to God or the transcendent. But when

the word is used in a non-theological sense, then what is being said is that things are considered sacred by a community because they symbolise the community's values, or provide fundamental ways through which the community thinks about itself and the world. In this case, the researcher's legitimate role is 'to try to understand these collective values in the context of their actual institution in society' (p.19). However, much like the word 'religion', there seems no good reason why one should not scrap 'sacred' – given its theological resonances – and simply speak of the community's collective values. Within this paradigm, the sacred-profane distinction is understood as a *particular* distinction within a *particular* sign system of a *particular* community (this sign system will incorporate other distinctions such as young-old, male-female, dirty-clean, urban-rural, etc.). Nothing is *transcendentally* sacred or transcendentally profane (for to admit this is to allow in a metaphysics that is contrary to the Western paradigm of sociological inquiry).

Re-enchanting theory

This creates a conundrum as to the appropriate role for the social theorist interested in these matters. A number of options open up.

One possibility is to follow Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1962/1991) and Dubuisson (2003) and abandon the word 'religion' (and related words like the sacred and perhaps the uncanny), but only so as to foreground the personal, 'inner' experiential dimension of religion. Dubuisson calls this the "cosmographic formation", by which he means the universal human response to the collection of experiences we call Being, the Sacred or God. In essence, this is an inquiry into inner piety or 'faith', though Masuzawa (2000) argues that this is beyond the bounds of naturalistic analysis or explanation. And even though there is a genuine attempt to recognise and move away from loaded terms like 'religion', it seems likely that religious essentialism will still be smuggled in, albeit under cover of complex constructs like 'cosmographic formation'. 'Faith', or 'religion', or some variant of these concepts must be retained because it describes an empirical phenomenon that cannot be included in a wider concept. Religion, in this sense, is *sui generis*.

Fitzgerald, and McCutcheon agree that terms like 'sacred' and 'religion' are too loaded by half, but, unmoved by the *sui generis* argument, they instead propose a secular project that collapses the sociology of religion into sociology or anthropology. Similarly, Lease (1994: 472) asserts that 'there is no religion: rather such a history [of religion] can only trace how and why a culture or epoch allows certain experiences to count as "religion" while excluding

others'. One could detect an actor-network influence in this kind of project, in that the salient question is how things like the 'sacred', the 'uncanny', and 'religion' *come to be* in certain contexts and the way in which these categories are used by those that employ them (McCutcheon 1997). Here the focus is on the historical construction and mobilization of a particular classification system – as in sacred v secular – and the political and rhetorical strategies surrounding such classifications.

It seems to me than neither the *sui generis* (theocentric) nor the secular (anthropocentric) paradigms are altogether compelling. The problems with the former are well developed in the literature (Smith 1962/1991; Strenski 1973; McCutcheon 1997; Fitzgerald 2000; Dubuisson 2003; McCutcheon 2004) and need not be rehearsed. In contrast, the issues with the secular (anthropocentric) paradigm are less well articulated, though it is territory that the actor-network theorists have begun to explore. For instance, if we follow McCutcheon and focus on the researcher's role as one centred on mapping and describing how the sacred is mobilized as a classification device in particular contestations, then, while this is perhaps interesting, it seems quite limited. It also seems laden with Western understandings of objectivity and the primary requirement that the researcher keep her distance from the phenomenon under study. If the sacred provides a lens through which one can interpret Christmas gift-giving, tea ceremonies, stamp collecting and the like, then can it not provide a similar perspective on ritualistic killing, sadistic behaviour, suicide, child abuse, etc.? But more importantly, is the researcher to remain indifferent to these differences?

One way to unpick things is to think about how *uncertainty* is construed in the domains of the uncanny, the sacred and theorising. Following Jentsch (1906/1997), the uncanny is characterised by intellectual *uncertainty*, which happens, for example, when an 'inanimate' object appears to come to life. In contrast, the realm of the sacred is characterised by immediate *certainty*, in that the true believer does not doubt. One could argue that theorising should be about holding beliefs in *uncertainty*, and so it resonates more with the uncanny than with the sacred. Indeed theorizing might be thought of as a project of *disrupting the sacred*, or, more broadly, disrupting reified parts of the Imaginary that have become uncontested or taken-for-granted, as exemplified by Derrida's project of deconstruction (Derrida 1974/1976). Yet, this is difficult to achieve, not least because we academics have become proficient at, if not addicted to, shopping in the vast mall that is the Imaginary, where we appropriate and apply an idiosyncratic collection of theories, images and narratives. Žižek sees the Imaginary and ideology as broadly equivalent terms that describe the fantasy-

structure that supports our daily reality. 'The function of ideology', he asserts, 'is not to offer us a point of escape from our reality but to offer us the social reality itself as an escape from some traumatic, real kernel' (Žižek 1989: 45). Of course we cannot escape the myths we live by, but perhaps we can at least try to be more attuned to the uncanny, to be more skeptical of the Imaginary, and to learn again to be bewildered by this enchanting world in which we find ourselves.

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