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The Sacred, The Profane, and *The Spirit*

While we may like to think that they no longer exist in today's United States, cultural tensions are still overwhelmingly present. One example of such tension in the recent history of the United States is beautifully illustrated in Anne Fadiman's 1997 book, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures*.¹ Fadiman tells the true story of a young girl, Lia Lee, diagnosed with epilepsy, and the tensions between her parents' traditional beliefs and her Western-educated doctors' ideas about medical care. Though a variety of approaches may be helpful to use in interpreting this text, I found Mircea Eliade's theories in *The Sacred and the Profane* especially so.² Eliade writes about "two modes of being in the world" (one being "the sacred" and the other "the profane"), and advocates for the merits of maintaining religious practice and belief in a secular world.³ After introducing Eliade's work more completely, I will summarize the important ideas brought up by Fadiman. I will then argue that Eliade's theories provide a helpful framework through which to understand the case presented in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*.

Mircea Eliade was one of the most influential scholars of comparative religion in the twentieth century. Born in Romania in 1907 and educated there and in France, Italy, and India, Eliade grew to love the study of ancient religious practices—which he called archaic religion—and spent his life promoting the field of the history of religion, or comparative religion.⁴ One of his books, *The Sacred and the Profane*, illustrates his views on what it means to be religious. In this text, Eliade begins by describing a binary view of the sacred and the profane, or the religious

¹ Anne Fadiman, *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1997).

² Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion*, trans. Willard Trask (New York: Harcourt, Inc., 1959).

³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴ Daniel Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 229.

and the secular, drawing clear differences between “*homo religiosus*” (religious people) and non-religious people. By the end of the book, however, he blurs the bright line between these two, and he finishes by promoting a vastly inclusive understanding of what it means to be religious and what it means to be human. His work in revising the meanings of the words “sacred” and “religious” is critical to the modern study of religion and has had a strong influence on my understanding of how religion and humanity intersect.

Eliade begins *The Sacred and the Profane* by setting up the titular binary: he claims that these “are two modes of being in the world.”⁵ The sacred is something that causes one to stop and take notice, just as Moses stopped when he saw the burning bush. Eliade writes, “Man [*sic*] becomes aware of the sacred because it manifests itself, shows itself, as something wholly different from the profane,” making clear that he believes “sacred” and “profane” are mutually exclusive.^{6, 7} In other words, the profane is the homogeneity of normal, quotidian mundaneness while the sacred is that which causes “interruptions, breaks” in that homogeneity.⁸ This binary is paralleled in other binaries Eliade brings up, for example, religious and secular, real and unreal, and archaic and modern. Eliade equates archaic societies with religiosity and modern societies with secularity. He does not simply leave these binaries as they are, however; it seems that he favors one side of all of these dualities when he states, “the sacred is the ultimate cause of all real existence.”⁹

⁵ Eliade, 14.

⁶ One important flaw within Eliade’s work that should be addressed is his constant use of the generic masculine. When he writes about all of humanity using simply the word “man,” he perpetuates a masculine norm and discounts feminine views. Using the generic masculine was common for Eliade’s time, but it is critical to address this wherever we see it and work to dismantle the normalization of the masculine over the feminine. For my part, I will use [*sic*] in quotes of Eliade’s which use the generic masculine use in order to indicate my belief that its use should be discontinued.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 97.

The black and white nature of the dualities explained above can seem harsh and unreasonable; one might ask, for example, can the sacred and the profane not mix or coexist? And what does his claim about the sacred being the cause of all real existence mean for non-religious people? While these are legitimate concerns, Eliade's picture of what is sacred by the end of the book is so vast that it seems to negate the polarizing dualities expressed in the earlier part of *The Sacred and the Profane*. With an expanded perspective, the study of religion becomes a study of humanity rather than just a study of select systems of beliefs and practices. When Eliade writes "the sacred is the ultimate cause of all real existence," he does not mean that those who say they do not believe in the sacred have no cause for existence.¹⁰ Rather, he expands the definition of the sacred to include anything that causes a person to stop and take notice, anything that interrupts the rhythm of daily, mundane life, and reveals something completely out of the ordinary. This definition allows the study of religion to reach into nearly all aspects of modern life and study. Different spaces, times, and things hold different value to different people, but studying the patterns in which the sacred manifests itself through different eras, geographical locations and traditions can only serve to improve our understanding of one another and humanity in general.

By the end of his book, Eliade's understanding of *homo religiosus* has become much more inclusive. He points out that experiencing the sacred is a very human experience which has influenced most people in one way or another, even though it is more subconscious for some than for others. In particular, he posits that his ideas of sacred time and sacred space are ones that nearly all humans have the potential to relate to. What makes someone human is the ability to experience the sacred, and all humans are capable of this; therefore all humans can become *homo*

¹⁰ Ibid.

religiosus. For example, the sacred time of life-changing events such as births, deaths, and marriages create interruptions in the uniform fabric of everyday “profane” life, and therefore could be sacred even for people who would not call themselves religious. In addition, “a sacred place,” according to Eliade, “constitutes a break in the homogeneity of space”; space can be sacred (to some extent, at least) even for the non-religious at their birthplaces, for example, or at any threshold that signifies a move from the ordinary, profane world to a place of special significance.¹¹ Eliade ends *The Sacred and the Profane* asserting that even those who are nonreligious can become *homo religiosus* because they hold sacred potential. They retain subconscious memories and vestiges of the religions of their ancestors and have not lost what Eliade calls the essential quality of humanity—the ability to experience the sacred.¹²

For me, the vastness of Eliade’s understanding of what is sacred is striking. Adopting the understanding that everyone can hold something as sacred requires me to accept all religious beliefs as legitimate. I want this understanding of religion to inform my study of religion going forward. I also appreciate the fact that Eliade ends his book saying that religious people and non-religious people are essentially the same. We all share the ability to hold something as sacred, whether it is a space, a ritual, and celebration, or a simple object.

Trying to understand religion as a human experience is ongoing work, and Mircea Eliade was one of the most important scholars in developing the foundation of this work. His comparative study of religions, what he called “history of religions,” differentiated between the teaching of religion and the teaching about religion in higher education. While there are flaws in his work and elements to his ideas that could seem too dualistic or black and white to be useful,

¹¹ Ibid., 37; Ibid., 24–25.

¹² Ibid., 213.

Eliade's radical notions of the sacred and of the value of all world religions will continue to inspire students of religion to value many different ideas of the sacred.

The book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, written by Anne Fadiman in 1997, is the true story of a Hmong immigrant family and their experience with the American health care system. The Lee family moved to the United States in 1980 (with seven living children), and their daughter Lia was born in Merced, California in 1982. Shortly after her birth, Lia developed epilepsy, and she and her parents spent the next five years of her life struggling with their American doctors and health care providers trying to restore Lia to health. The difficulties they had with the American health care system were the result of a clash of very different cultures with very different values as well as significant cultural and language barriers.

Understanding these cultural differences requires some background on the Hmong culture. Fadiman explains how the Hmong have long been a nomadic, anti-authoritarian people. For many centuries, they lived in China, but their history there is littered with rebellions and oppressive policies forced on them by Chinese emperors. Early in the nineteenth century, the Hmong became “fed up with being persecuted [and the fact that] their soil was also getting depleted, there was a rash of epidemics, and taxes were rising.”¹³ Because of this, they left China and settled in the highlands of current Vietnam, Laos, and Thailand. Fadiman states the following:

The history of the Hmong yields several lessons that anyone who deals with them might do well to remember. Among the most obvious of these are that the Hmong do not like to take orders; that they do not like to lose; that they would rather flee, flight, or die than surrender; ... [and] that they are rarely persuaded that the customs of other cultures...are superior. Whether you find these traits infuriating or admirable depends largely on whether or not you are trying to make a Hmong do something he or she would prefer not to do. Those who have tried to defeat, deceive, govern, regulate, constrain, assimilate,

¹³ Fadiman, 16.

intimidate, or patronize the Hmong have, as a rule, disliked them intensely. On the other hand, many...have developed a great fondness for them.¹⁴

Later in the text, Fadiman summarizes the Hmong people's history of interaction with the American people. As opposed to the European immigrants of the early twentieth century, who "hoped to assimilate into mainstream American society," the Hmong had almost the exact opposite reason for immigrating to the United States: "The Hmong came to the United States for the same reason they had left China in the nineteenth century: because they were trying to *resist* assimilation."¹⁵ Fadiman quotes anthropologist Jacques Lemoine as saying, "They did not come to our countries only to save their lives, they rather came to save their selves, that is, their Hmong ethnicity."¹⁶ In the case of the Lee family, this sense of cultural pride was especially strongly manifested in their beliefs about health care.

Fadiman opens the third chapter of her book describing the scene of a Hmong-American immigrant visiting a refugee camp in Thailand and sharing her experience of American health care with thousands of Hmong refugees living at the camp. The questions asked by the Hmong refugees at the camp suggested that they had not heard very positive things about the American health care system. They asked, "Do American doctors eat the livers, kidneys, and brains of Hmong patients? When Hmong people die in the United States, is it true that they are cut into pieces and put in tin cans and sold as food?"¹⁷ While an uninformed reader might simply attribute such questions to ignorance, it is important to consider common Hmong beliefs about the body and the soul in order to understand their concerns about the American health care system. Fadiman writes,

¹⁴ Ibid., 17.

¹⁵ Ibid., 183.

¹⁶ Ibid., 183.

¹⁷ Ibid., 32.

some of the doctor's procedures actually seemed more likely to threaten their patients' health than to restore it. Most Hmong believe that the body contains a finite amount of blood that it is unable to replenish, so repeated blood sampling... may be fatal. When people are unconscious, their souls are at large, so anesthesia may lead to illness or death. If the body is cut or disfigured, or if it loses any of its parts, it will remain in a condition of perpetual imbalance, and the damaged person not only will become frequently ill but may be physically incomplete during the next incarnation.¹⁸

Clearly, Hmong ideas about the body and the soul are abundantly different from the standard Western conceptions of appropriate health care. Many might argue that the Lee family was at fault for what would happen to their daughter because of their inability to assimilate to normative Western ideas about medicine and health. I will argue, however, that looking at fault ignores the more important issue brought up in the book. Far more significant than determining who to blame is taking into account different ways of conceptualizing the sacred, the profane, and how we fit into this dialectic.

Fadiman's text is rich with the dualities between the sacred and the profane. There are many ways to conceptualize the sacred and the profane in *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*; Eliade's theories are one helpful framework through which we might attempt to understand this case study. Lia's American doctors might argue that their knowledge was paramount and must be respected above all else, but Eliade would probably argue that they were champions of the profane. Lia's family would argue that their views of the soul were sacred and that the doctors' attempts to heal Lia were in fact sources of profanity (or even sources of her illness). A helpful lens through which to interpret this cultural clash is a conversation between physician Bill Selvidge and psychotherapist Sukey Waller. The two were debating about whether a physician has a duty to treat a child in the way she finds most appropriate even if it goes against the parents' beliefs:

¹⁸ Ibid., 33.

“What if you have a family who rejects surgery because they believe an illness has a spiritual cause? What if they see a definite possibility of eternal damnation for their child if she dies from the surgery? Next to that, death might not seem so important. Which is more important, the life or the soul?”

“I make no apology,” said Bill. “The life comes first.”

“The soul,” said Sukey.¹⁹

In this interaction, we see Bill championing what Eliade might call “the profane”—denying agency to the sacred, and taking full agency upon humanity. Eliade writes,

From the point of view of profane existence, man [*sic*] feels no responsibility except to himself [*sic*] and to society. For him [*sic*], the universe does not properly constitute a cosmos—that is, a living and articulated unity.²⁰

Here, Eliade articulates clearly Bill’s worldview. While Sukey values the Lees’ beliefs about the universe and how it influences individuals’ life, death, and reincarnation, Bill denies any significance to this “sacred” view of things and only focuses on his own ability to provide medical care to a child. The “universe,” as Eliade envisions it, has no significance to Bill. Eliade suggests that denying agency to the sacred cosmos creates a life that “lacks...genuineness [and] depth”²¹—while this might be a little harsh, I think that his critique is heading in the right direction. Whether or not Bill believed the same things that the Lees did, lacking consideration for the things they saw as significant would not help his cause.

A second important passage of the book that can help to frame the conversation about the sacred and the profane is about a 1996 Supreme Court decision which decided that faith healing was not a legitimate medical treatment. In response to this case, Yale law professor Stephen L. Carter wrote,

By refusing to intervene in *McKown v. Lundman*, the Supreme Court has reinforced a societal message that has grown depressingly common: It is perfectly O.K. to believe in

¹⁹ Ibid., 277.

²⁰ Eliade, 93–94.

²¹ Ibid., 94.

the power of prayer, so long as one does not believe in it so sincerely that one actually expects it to work.²²

Here is another case of the duality that Eliade presents. Lia's doctors would probably say that it was perfectly O.K. for them to believe what they did, but to rely on these beliefs and faith healing techniques such as shamanism and animal sacrifice instead of trusting in science-backed Western medicine was unacceptable. Because the Lees believed in the power of faith healing, they were charged with child neglect, causing Child Protective Services to place Lia in foster care for a year.²³ As Carter writes, truly believing that faith healing works, as the Lees did, is unacceptable in modern American society. Again, Eliade can help us understand this situation. The difference between the Lees and their American doctors lies in the fact that the Lees assigned agency and power to what they saw as sacred, and their doctors simply did not. For *homo religiosus*, "the *sacred* is equivalent to a *power*, and, in the last analysis, to *reality*."²⁴ Because Lia's Western-educated doctors did not share this view of reality, they dismissed the Lees' trust in faith healing, just as the Supreme Court ruled against it in *McKown v. Lundman*.

To help us understand the Hmong conception of the sacred and the profane, we can look at the sacrifice scene that Fadiman describes in the last chapter of the book. During the first part of the ceremony, Fadiman notes how the "*txiv neeb* who was to perform today's ceremonies...wore blue flip-flops, black pants, and a white T-shirt decorated with dancing pandas," and sat "in front of a television set, watching a Winnie-the-Pooh cartoon."^{25, 26} Fadiman

²² Fadiman, 80.

²³ *Ibid.*, 79.

²⁴ Eliade, 12.

²⁵ A *txiv neeb* is a Hmong "shaman who [can] negotiate for his [*sic*] patients' health with the spirits who [live] in the realm of the unseen" (Fadiman, 4). Fadiman also writes that having epilepsy, or *qaug dab peg*, is considered "an illness of some distinction [among the Hmong, and] Hmong epileptics often become shamans [because] the seizures are thought to be evidence that they have the power to perceive things other people cannot see" (Fadiman, 21).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 281.

writes how “the maintenance of a sacred atmosphere [in the Lee’s living room] was an uphill battle”— there were cases of beer on either side of the altar, a “crude wooden table” that had been covered with newspaper, which sharply contrasted with the sacred tools to be used by the *txiv neeb* in the ceremony.²⁷ Fadiman notes the very interesting space, and especially how such a sacred ceremony could be held in such a seemingly profane space — how is the incongruity between the sacrality of the ceremony and the profanity of the space reconciled? Once the sacrifice of a small pig had taken place in the Lee’s living room, the pig was taken outside to be cleaned. Once Fadiman returned she noted how the previous incongruities between the sacred and the profane had been resolved:

By some unaccountable feat of sorcery [...] the bathos had been exorcised from Apartment A. Everyone could feel the difference. The Lee children, who talked and giggled as they walked from the parking lot, fell silent as soon as they crossed the threshold. The television was off. The candle on the altar had been lit. A joss stick was burning, filling the apartment with smoke trails that would guide the familiar spirits. The *txiv neeb* had put on a black silk jacket with indigo cuffs and a red sash. His feet were bare. He had shrugged all the American incongruities off his out aspect, and his inner aspect—the quality that had singled him out for spiritual election—now shone through, bright and hard.²⁸

This passage could fit into Eliade’s *The Sacred and the Profane* as an example of his conceptions of the dynamic between the sacred and the profane. Eliade’s view is that “the sacred...manifests itself as something wholly different from the profane,” and that “for those to whom [an object] reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality.”²⁹ For the Lees and their relatives who gather for the sacrifice ceremony, the ordinary living room which had previously been filled with profanity somehow became a manifestation of the sacred.

²⁷ Ibid., 280–282.

²⁸ Ibid., 283.

²⁹ Eliade, 11–12.

While the Eliadean framework gives us some insight, I think that Eliade's view of the sacred and the profane can be augmented in this scenario by Émile Durkheim's conception of religion: "a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden."³⁰ According to Durkheim, things are sacred when humans set them apart for religious use, and call them sacred. In this sacrifice scene, the *txiv neeb* put on a special outfit for the occasion, and a candle and a joss stick were burning in the previously profane living room. By using these items only for such a special ceremony (and by removing the things that had made the space profane earlier — turning off the television, the *txiv neeb* removing the "American incongruities" from his body), the Lees and their relatives were deeming them sacred. By complementing Eliade's view of the dichotomous sacred and profane with Durkheim's understanding of human agency in creating this distinction, our understanding of the sacrifice ceremony is enriched and fulfilled.

Eliade's vision of humanity as a unified body which holds in common the ability to experience the sacred reminds me of the children's book *Old Turtle*. Written by Douglas Wood, it is the story of how creatures and objects in the natural world come to see God in new ways and how they convince humans to do the same when they forget and begin destroying one another. Similar to Eliade, the author insists that whether we see God in the highest mountain peaks or the deepest depths of the sea as being gentle or powerful, or as being near or far, what we as humans hold in common is far more important than our different beliefs: we are all incredibly diverse, but we are "reminders of all that God is," we are "a message of love from God to the earth, and a prayer from the earth back to God."³¹ Wood is relating the Eliadean message that the essence of

³⁰ Émile Durkheim, "Elementary Forms of the Religious Life (Selections)," in Carl Olson, editor, *Theory and Method in the Study of Religion* (Toronto: Wadsworth, 2003), 222.

³¹ Douglas Wood, *Old Turtle* (Duluth: Pfeifer-Hamilton, 1992), 25, 27.

humanity is the ability to experience the sacred. Whether or not we can agree on what is or is not sacred, Eliade and Wood call us to recognize our shared ability to experience the sacred and to try to understand one another through this shared sense of being *homo religiosus*.

While the religious beliefs of the Lees' doctors are not discussed extensively (or at all) in Fadiman's work, one may argue that they practiced and believed in their Western medical training religiously. Essentially, *Old Turtle* tells the story of Lia Lee; the doctors and the Lees both shared a desire to heal Lia, but they disagreed on how to go about doing that. This common goal indicates that they both valued human life. I think it is not too much of a stretch to say that they both held human life as sacred, though they may not have used that word. Just as the people in *Old Turtle* needed to focus on their shared convictions in order to stop destroying the earth and one another, so the Lees' American doctors needed to focus on the shared goal of healing Lia instead of insisting that their strategy was right and ignoring the input of the Lees.

The cultural clashes portrayed in Fadiman's 1997 book *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down: A Hmong Child, Her American Doctors, and the Collision of Two Cultures* raise questions about what it means to believe in faith healing and what kinds of beliefs are considered legitimate in American society. Using Mircea Eliade's theories from his book *The Sacred and the Profane*, we can develop a deeper understanding of Fadiman's work. After summarizing my understanding of Eliade's conceptions of the sacred and the profane, I have illuminated several scenarios in Lia Lee's story with help from these ideas. While his ideas are not flawless, they provide an excellent framework through which to understand this complex case study.

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