

Semantics and the sacred

Steven Engler and Mark Q. Gardiner

Department of Humanities, Mount Royal University, Calgary, Alberta, Canada

ABSTRACT This article looks at four different scholarly perspectives on ‘sacred’ – the ineffable sacred, the experienced sacred, the polarized sacred and the contextualized sacred – in order to draw out their implicit presuppositions about meaning. The first two stances presuppose that meaning depends on what bits of language are *about* (referentialism), and the other two stances presuppose that meaning depends on relations *between* bits of language (holism). The article concludes three things: these prominent views of ‘sacred’ rest on usually implicit or unrecognized assumptions about the nature of meaning; some of those assumptions explain why certain theories are contentious and problematic; and others ground more promising and productive approaches.

KEYWORDS meaning; philosophy of religion; sacred; semantic holism; semantic theory; study of religion

CONTACT Steven Engler sengler@mtroyal.ca

The first step to understanding the meaning of the concept ‘sacred’ is to ask what ‘meaning’ means.¹ There are various options, even limiting ourselves to semantics, i.e., focusing on meaning as linguistic content and setting aside meaning as existential significance. Depending on what scholars of religion mean by ‘meaning,’ they will end up in very different places when investigating concepts like ‘sacred,’ ‘holy,’ ‘transcendence’ or ‘religion’ itself. The result will be divergent perspectives, talking past each other and often mutually incoherent. This seems a fair description of the status of the many divergent discussions of ‘sacred.’

This polyphony of views of ‘sacred’ motivates our approach in this article. We are not interested in defining ‘sacred’ or in whether that term is (or is not) valuable or meaningful. (Hence, the distinction between substantive and adjectival forms – ‘the sacred’ and ‘sacred’ – is of little importance in this article: we look at how others use ‘sacred’ in both of these.) We come at the problem from the other direction. We show that various uses of ‘sacred’ rest on unnoticed semantic assumptions, and we draw out some implications from this. Our approach is descriptive. We start by noting that confusion in discussions of ‘sacred’ reflects, at least in part,

¹ Readers do not need any philosophical background to follow this article. For introductory overviews of relevant philosophical ideas, written for scholars of religion, see Frankenberry and Penner 1999; Jensen 2004; 2014; Engler and Gardiner 2010; Schilbrack 2014; Gardiner and Engler 2016; Stausberg and Gardiner 2016. Thanks to Bill Paden, Michael Stausberg and Bryan Rennie for comments on previous drafts. Translations from French are by Engler.

participants' differing semantic commitments: Mircea Eliade and J. Z. Smith differ on 'sacred' in part because they look at meaning in different ways.

This article does not impose some semantic theory or other; it investigates presuppositions that are already there in the literature. We review an exemplary set of claims about 'sacred' in order to tease out their implicit views of meaning. We look at four different perspectives, which we call the ineffable sacred, the experienced sacred, the polarized sacred and the contextualized sacred. This list is not exhaustive, but these are the predominant perspectives in the literature. Not championing any particular view, we note that certain semantic presuppositions are already there, and we conclude three things: these prominent views of the sacred rest on usually implicit or unrecognized assumptions about the nature of meaning; some of those assumptions explain why certain theories are more contentious and problematic; and others assumptions explain why certain other theories are seen as more promising and productive.

In the end, this article offers some *prima facie* support for preferring certain approach to meaning over others; but this emerges from the analysis, not from our prior inclinations, allegiances or presuppositions. We do not presume, apply, test or promote some view of meaning. We show that published discussions of 'sacred' already arrive at the table with semantic presuppositions. And we highlight an important correlation: some views of the sacred are subject to prominent critiques, and these critiques reflect those views' presuppositions about meaning; other views of the sacred, more recent and recognized as more nuanced, reflect different views of meaning. Our argument is the following: if the study of religion has shown a tendency to prefer certain views of the sacred – e.g., Émile Durkheim and J. Z. Smith over Mircea Eliade and Joseph Epes Brown – this reflects, in part, an implicit preference for the formers' presuppositions about meaning.

Our goal is not to advance some salvific prospect, as if the study of religion would finally start blossoming if all its practitioners were familiar with semantic theory and able to agree on the best theory of meaning. To paraphrase Mao Tse-tung (1957), letting a hundred flowers blossom and a hundred schools of thought contend is the policy for promoting progress in the study of religion. But this is true precisely because some flowers prove more successful, produce more seeds, reproduce themselves more effectively; as that happens, we would be irresponsible gardeners not to ask what distinguishes these flowers from their less successful garden-mates. In sum, we do not champion a view of meaning. We demonstrate that scholars in the discipline have already spoken: the shifting tenor of discussions of the sacred indicates an implicit preference. This leads to a recommendation: scholars of religion should consider being more self-aware and explicit about the views of meaning that implicitly shape their work. This would enhance the existing strengths of business-as-usual research and writing in the discipline. Paying attention to the presuppositions of what we are already doing will help us to do it better.

The ineffable sacred

A first approach holds that the sacred cannot be spoken of – that it is ineffable in the literal sense.² Theologian Gordon Lynch describes this view (with which he disagrees) as follows: ‘the sacred as an ontological phenomenon that transcends signification’ (Lynch 2012a, 15). We do not need to commit ourselves to the ‘ontological’ part of Lynch’s characterization to see that if the sacred ‘transcends signification,’ then it cannot be spoken of. This places the concept in radical tension with language. Smaro Kamboureli, a scholar of literature, provides a useful statement of the general approach: ‘Speech or writing *about* the sacred. The *about* signifies interpretation, marks the gap between the sacred and the speaking or writing subject. It indicates that the sacred occurs outside language. To speak or write *about* the sacred would then mean to situate it within a foreign body, that of language’ (Kamboureli 1986, 52, original emphasis).

Kamboureli starts with a presumption about the transcendental nature of the sacred and concludes that therefore it cannot be talked *about*. In other words, there is supposedly something about the sacred that prevents it being accessible through language. To make sense of this, we would need to answer two questions: what precisely is the type of transcendence that the sacred supposedly has; and what is it about language that makes it unfit for the task of talking about the sacred? There are all kinds of transcendence. The temporal remoteness of ancient Rome puts it ‘beyond’ the possibility of our being able to experience it first-hand, and the intensity of the gravitational forces in a black hole puts it ‘beyond’ the possibility of any sentient being experiencing it. But there doesn’t seem to be any particular difficulty in thinking that the historian can successfully write about the past or that the astrophysicist can successfully write about black holes (granted that being able to write about something doesn’t mean that what one writes is necessarily correct). Isn’t this what we see in works of fiction like the films *Gladiator* [Ridley Scott, 2000] and *Interstellar* [Christopher Nolan, 2014])?

For Kamboureli, the sacred must be transcendental in some other way, but which? To shift the supposed ineffability from the very idea of the sacred to that of the transcendent seems inefficient and unnecessary, and would only raise the question of what sort of ineffability marks the transcendent. If we want to try to understand this alleged ineffability, it would be better to start by asking what it is about language that makes it unfit for talking about the sacred.

So, how is language being understood by ineffabilists? Their claim – that the sacred stands outside at least regular, ordinary language – is indistinguishable from similar statements found in theological works: e.g., ‘the sacred is ineffable – beyond all language’ (Borg 2011, 74). If language offers no purchase here – if reason is exercised only through language and there is *nothing* we can say of the sacred – then there is no place for rational explanation, interpretation, argumentation or study. On this view, faith is not a type of belief. It stands over and against belief, as a non-rational, non-discursive, way of knowing. As a result, discussion begins and ends with the claim that one has faith (or not). But to claim that one has faith *in something* necessarily uses language to characterize the object of faith. Seen as a scholarly analytic tool, then, faith cannot be entirely different from belief: they both have objects.

This leads the ineffabilist into a paradox: to say that the object of rational belief (requiring language) differs from the object of faith (beyond language) is to say that the sacred is the object only of the latter, never of the former. But this *is* to say something concrete about it.

² We take the literal sense as that set out in the *OED*: ‘That cannot be expressed or described in language; too great for words; transcending expression; unspeakable, unutterable, inexpressible.’ ‘Ineffable’ evokes an absolute impossibility of using language to speak of the sacred, not a relative difficulty or challenge in doing so. Other senses of ‘ineffable’ – e.g., that which should not be spoken or mentioned, or that which is difficult to pronounce – are not relevant here.

This paradox is clear in passages like the following: ‘From a phenomenological point of view ... the “sacred” is said to be, in a fundamental sense, ineffable. The ineffability or the ambiguity of the sacred is due to an unseen spiritual power that resides in it. Given that the sacred is ineffable and ambiguous, it lends a liminal identity to the place where it is revealed’ (Rehman 2012, 64, describing Sufi views).³ If we can (i) describe the sacred in terms of ‘an unseen spiritual power that resides in it’ or in terms of its ability to lend a certain sort of ‘identity to the place where it is revealed,’ and (ii) if we can actually communicate anything about the sacred as we do this, then the sacred is not ineffable. Having said something true about it – whatever our take on ‘truth’ – we have situated it in and through language.

The ineffabilists must distinguish ways that language talks *about*. They need to spell out just how it is that non-sacred things can be talked about in a myriad of ways, while the sacred has a much more limited relationship to language. Simply affirming that the sacred is ineffable or inexpressible gets us nowhere: we need a fuller account of how language works in the allegedly different cases of sacred and non-sacred. Lacking this – and it seems always to be lacking – we are forced to provisionally reject this view as unclear and undeveloped.

Philosophy of language comes into play here because philosophers study how language plays a role in knowledge and abstract conceptualization. In light of that work, if language fails to express truths about the sacred – i.e., if it cannot provide any avenue through which the sacred can be known – then that is due to language’s relation to knowledge in general. This foregrounds issues of language, and it makes us wary of attempts to allegedly sidestep language altogether. Smith makes an analogous claim with reference to understanding *mana*:

In the case of the argumentative use of the Oceanic *mana*, too much scholarly energy has been expended on getting ‘beneath’ the word to either some supernatural ‘reality,’ as in the lineage from Marett to Eliade, or some powerful social ‘reality,’ analogous to a physical force, as in Durkheim, as if such an endeavor guaranteed its being of interest. In the service of this project, *mana*, and the words claimed to be its equivalent, were stripped of their linguistic status and removed from the sentences in which they were embedded. (Smith 2004b, 134)

It is better to approach the issue by seeing how talk about *mana* is supposed to work rather than trying to figure out what *mana* itself is. This turns our attention to how language works as it *talks about* *mana*.

This turn to language applies to ‘sacred’ as well. To make this point clearer, it is worth reflecting on whether the ineffabilist thinks that *no* language is capable of talking about the sacred, or only human languages (granting hypothetical languages of aliens, angels, gods etc.). If it is simply impossible that any language of any sort could talk about the sacred, then there is some fact about language itself that is the culprit. This would be a problem or limitation with *all* languages, whether human or alien, natural or artificial, historical or invented. If, on the other hand, it is only human languages that cannot talk about the sacred – supposing, say, that God’s language is up to the task, i.e., a hypothetical perfect language – then the problem is something

³ Rehman equates ineffability and ambiguity in this passage, but this muddies the waters. The *impossibility* of speaking about X is different from the word ‘X’ having multiple senses or referents. The latter case presents a complex way of speaking about X, but it is still a way of speaking. If the sacred is just *hard* to talk about, it is not ineffable.

specific to our human languages. If that is the case, there are two ways of thinking about the matter. Some might see this as a contingent matter of fact that could be remedied with the development of a new and improved language, perhaps a special sort of religious or ‘sacred’ one, like those discussed in Robert Yelle’s *The Semiotics of Religion* (2012). On this view, there is some problem with *existing* human languages that gets in the way of their talking about the sacred, but the problem is potentially fixable: we could come up with a form of language that gets around the problem and, so, succeeds in talking about the sacred. On the other hand, there might be some deeper, less fixable, problem: perhaps our defective languages reflect our limited cognitive makeup. In this case, genuine contact with the sacred may require a change in one’s mode of consciousness, a cognitive re-boot. On this view, we could make sense of the claim that such altered personages might be able to communicate with each other in a language not understandable to the unenlightened. This would not be a strict ineffabilist view, putting the sacred beyond the reach of language. It would be a more nuanced view, that there are different types of language, at least one of which allows for talk of the sacred. The fact that language, of some sort, should be able to talk about the sacred is implicit in the fact that no scholar that we know of holds that a person who experiences the sacred is unable to communicate that fact to even themselves. When you see it, you know it, and more importantly you know that you know it: if you can tell yourself something about the sacred, then you are using language to talk of it. (To ask whether one experiences *the* sacred or, by contrast, some *thing* that is sacred is an irrelevant complication. Different writers will say different things, but with similar semantic assumptions.) This underlines that the sacred is accessible to language but that to speak of it is to speak of something less publicly accessible than is the case with most uses of human languages. As a result, something like the sacred-experience view of the sacred discussed in the following section offers a potentially more defensible position than naive ineffabilism.

The experienced sacred

Because ineffabilists explicitly put the sacred beyond language, we need to ask how they see the sacred in relation to religion. The typical move is to place religion in the category of the social – which necessarily demands that it can be understood and described collectively – while the sacred is placed in the category of the subjective. The sacred is apprehended directly, by a phenomenological feel, rather than indirectly by a discursive description. Religious knowledge can be described and disseminated, whereas knowledge of the sacred is immediate and experiential. To those not in the know – not having experienced it – it cannot be pointed to through language. Those who know – having experienced it – don’t need to point to it; it is within them. To take Wittgenstein out of context, knowledge of the sacred can only be shown, not said (Wittgenstein 1922, 4.1212).⁴ On this view, religions are social institutions founded on a core group of people who have, or at least claim to have, the requisite inner experience of the sacred. This reinforces the central paradox of ineffabilism: shared or public religion (which can be talked about) is predicated upon an inner or private experience (which cannot be talked about). However, even this *is* to say something concrete about the sacred, even if not by *pointing* to it.

This takes us to a middle ground position, that the sacred is primarily a matter of experience while remaining secondarily accessible to language; i.e., neither denying that the

⁴ Not so far out of context – Wittgenstein claimed that his ‘said-shown’ distinction pointed to mysticism: ‘There is indeed the inexpressible. This shows itself; it is the mystical’ (1922, 6.5222).

sacred is accessible to language nor holding that it is accessible in the same ways as all other things. This view is more interesting and less dismissible than a blank(et) affirmation that the sacred is ineffable.

These first two views – the ineffable and the experienced sacred – are sometimes found together. This overlap is present in Otto’s view of *das Heilige* (the holy). The following passage underlines the ineffability of experiences of the numinous:

the ‘mysterium’ is experienced ... as something that bestows upon man a beatitude beyond compare, but one whose real nature he can neither proclaim in speech nor conceive in thought, but may know only by a direct and living experience. ... It gives the Peace that passes understanding, and of which the tongue can only stammer brokenly. Only from afar, by metaphors and analogies, do we come to apprehend what it is in itself, and even so our notion is but inadequate and confused. (Otto 1936 [1917], 33–34)

Otto in this passage suggests both that it is impossible to speak or even think of the ‘real nature’ of the numinous and that one can apprehend it, albeit imperfectly, through language (‘metaphors and analogies’). These views cannot both be true. To stammer brokenly of the numinous is still to speak of it; to have a confused notion of it is still to think of it. It would not help to respond, hypothetically, that Otto is, in fact, speaking and therefore thinking of the numinous, just not fully or exhaustively, not communicating its ‘real nature.’ This counter-argument would fail to recognize the need to assure that the metaphorical talk about the sacred has anything to do with the ‘real nature’ of the sacred (shifting our focus back to the more generic concept). If the real nature of the sacred (or the numinous) cannot be spoken or thought of, how do we know that our metaphors have anything to do with it? The answer lies in an implicit appeal to experiences of the numinous or the sacred, and that is why we cite Otto here.

This second view, the experienced sacred, is distinct in holding two views of language’s relation to the sacred that stand in mutual tension: (i) the sacred can be spoken of and so is not ineffable; but (ii) that mode of speaking is held to be more complex, less direct, because the sacred is primarily something that the religious person experiences and only secondarily something that they talk about.

For Mircea Eliade, ‘normal, everyday experience is seen as illusory, unreal, profane. ... Yet that same experience, *when apprehended in a specific way*, when *interpreted* in a certain manner, becomes authentic, real, sacred: it becomes an hierophany’ (Rennie 1996, 10–11, original emphasis).⁵ Eliade was explicit that the sacred can be spoken of: he emphasized the need

⁵ We are not offering an exegesis of Eliade. He can be and is read in different ways, with variant readings resting on different semantic assumptions. Our possible reading of selected passages illustrates the experienced sacred, though other passages arguably exemplify the polarized view discussed below. To illustrate the ways that different views can be present in or attributed to a given complex thinker, here are two other ‘Eliadean’ views of the sacred (emphasizing metaphysics rather than semantics). (i) Eliade has a Kantian view, that the sacred is one of the categories of experience; the mind, as it were, is pre-structured by it as a precondition for being able to experience something as sacred: ‘Eliade sees the sacred as an element in the structure of consciousness’ (Colpe 2005, 7975). On this view, to understand ‘sacred’ is not to glimpse some objective or noumenal object, but rather to understand how this category figures into judgments of sacrality. (ii) Eliade has a Platonic view, that the ‘sacred’ is a pure Form, an objective essence that all and only sacred things participate in. The Eliadean ‘hierophany’ is just this relationship – a manifestation of The Sacred Itself in certain ordinary objects/events, each of which ‘has’ that property in defective ways: ‘Each historical religious expression is a limited and mutilated reflection of the archetype, and each is presumed to contribute one piece to the assembly of this meta-theology. Comparison of all expressions would make it possible to reconstitute ‘plenary forms’, the totality of which would portray a “morphology of the sacred”’

‘to explain ... documents which not only express authentic religious experience but also a general conception of man and of the world which is, in itself, truly *religious* and not magical’ (1961, 112–113, original emphasis). Yet he emphasized the priority of experience over language: he linked the sacred to ‘images ... that ... always express more than the subject who has experienced them could convey in words’ (Eliade 1961, 17).

This reading of Eliade’s view of the relation between the sacred and experience points to a certain view of meaning:

A sacred stone remains a stone; apparently (or, more precisely, from the profane point of view), nothing distinguishes it from all other stones. But for those to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred, its immediate reality is transmuted into a supernatural reality. In other words, for those who have a religious experience all nature is capable of revealing itself as cosmic sacrality. (1968 [1959], 12)

In at least some passages, Eliade makes two related assumptions about how language works, in particular what it means for some bit of language to be meaningful. First, he assumes that the meaning of some bit of language is to be identified by appealing to what it is *about*. Meaningfulness, on this model, rests on a relationship between something that is linguistic and something that is not. Second, he assumes here that language is, first and foremost, *about* our experiences, comparable to the Lockean idea that spoken and written words are external representations of our inner ideas (Locke 1975 [1689], Bk III Ch 1 Sec 2).⁶ Eliade draws a distinction between ‘ordinary’ experience, say of a stone by way of our sense organs, and a very different and special one that ‘goes beyond’ the first, sense-organ anchored, one. The ‘sacred’ experiences don’t necessarily negate the ordinary ones: one ‘to whom a stone reveals itself as sacred’ can continue to ordinary-experience the stone, but in addition special-experiences it as ‘transmuted into a supernatural reality.’

We can connect this move to the ineffability view as follows: ordinary language is limited to being about ordinary experience, and as such cannot meaningfully talk about the sacred, as that is experienced only in the special way (i.e., one in which the individual experiencer ‘always believes that there is an absolute reality, the sacred, which transcends this world but manifests itself in this world, thereby sanctifying it and making it real’ [Eliade 1960, 202]).

Jeffrey Kripal offers another example of the centrality of experience in the sacred:

By the sacred, I mean what the German theologian and historian of religions Rudolf Otto meant, that is, a particular structure of human consciousness that corresponds to a palpable presence, energy, or power encountered in the environment. Otto captured this sacred sixth sense, at once subject and object, in a famous Latin sound bite: the sacred is the *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, that is, the mystical (*mysterium*) as both fucking scary (*tremendum*) and utterly fascinating (*fascinans*). (Kripal 2010, 9)

(Borgeaud 1994, 417). On the Platonic view, in contrast to the Kantian model, the sacred is a real thing, and one that we can directly apprehend or have knowledge of, with the right kind of training.

⁶ This view is often called *semantic internalism* in the philosophy of language (see Stausberg and Gardiner 2016, 15). The main idea is that meaningfulness depends only on facts about language users.

Talk of ‘human consciousness’ puts Kripal into the experienced sacred camp, but he also introduces some complications that are clearer seen through a semantic lens. There are three different ways of thinking about the sacred here: (i) it can be identified with ‘a particular structure of consciousness,’ i.e., a type of experience; (ii) it can be identified with an objective and externally located ‘palpable presence, energy, or power encountered in the environment’; and (iii) it can be identified with the *relationship* between the inner experience and the outer reality – i.e., a ‘correspondence’ between (i) and (ii). Kripal describes (iii) in terms of a ‘sixth sense.’ With our other five senses, the *quality* of the sense-experiences (visible, auditory, tactile, gustatory, olfactory) is generally taken to be a faithful representation of what causes the experience or sensation (e.g., stop signs *really are* red, bag pipes *really are* piercing, fire *really is* hot, etc. – with Lockean complications generally ignored). This grounds Kripal’s claim that the sacred is ‘at once subject and object,’ given that the structural isomorphism between (i), the subjective part, and (ii), the objective part, constitutes (iii).⁷

Each of (i), (ii) and (iii) assume some form of referentialism. In (i), ‘sacred’ refers to the experience; its meaning is that referent. In (ii), it refers to the ‘energy;’ its meaning is that referent. In (iii), it refers to the reference relation itself, i.e., the way in which our sacred-experiences accurately represent sacred-reality, and the meaning of sacred is given by the form of that correspondence. In other words, Kripal holds that our sixth sense of the sacred yields a sacred experience when it gives us a sensation of the sacred *out there*, and this analogy presumes that ‘sacred’ means what it means through this referential relationship: the meaning of the word is rooted in a correspondence between our inner experience and the sacred reality that is sensed.

The priority of (iii) for Kripal renders co-dependent the senses of sacred in (i) and (ii). On the one hand, without sacred-reality, sacred-experiences would be illusory, because they would not be *caused* by the right sort of thing. (Their semantic contents would not be given by their structural isomorphism, or correspondence, to the right sort of thing and so would not have the right sort of meaning, at least as far as Otto seems to be concerned.) On the other hand, it is hard to imagine something being ‘scary’ and ‘fascinating’ unless there is someone who is scared and fascinated by it. In other words, sacred-reality can only be ‘mysterium tremendum et fascinans’ if it structurally corresponds to experiences which are scary and fascinating.

Kripal’s emphasis on (iii) as the primary sense of ‘sacred’ is clear from other passages:

we have theories about religion that attempt, and more or less succeed, to explain the encounter with the sacred, which lies almost entirely outside our rational grasp, in terms of something else, which is relatively within our rational grasp: society, psyche, body, politics, brain, and so on. The last forty years of theory have in many ways been very much about a quick retreat from any real encounter with the sacred as sacred. (Kripal 2010, 254)

This critique of recent theories of religion makes perfect sense if we accept Kripal’s identification of ‘sacred’ with the relation between sacred-experience and sacred-reality, i.e., his (iii). Sacred-reality (the ‘sacred as sacred’) is ‘beyond’ direct encounter: it ‘lies almost entirely outside our rational grasp’; the path to it is through the experience provided by our sixth, sacred sense. The reason for this emerges tautologically: there can be no unexperienced experience of sacred-

⁷ One obvious disanalogy is that there seems to be no sense-organ associated with this ‘sixth sense.’ It seems clear, though, that Kripal intends the sacred to be *sui generis* in some sense: the experience of (i) is not merely a concatenation of ordinary sense-based sensations. We will return to the problem of *sui genericity* later.

reality, just as objective reality is often said to lie ‘beyond’ language in that there can be no linguistically unmediated description of it: i.e., we have no access to reality *except through* language; all ‘access’ to the reality-relata is mediated through the language-relata. The key point here is that it is the structural isomorphism that makes it possible to have sacred-experience at all, even if descriptions of that experience will always fall short of the mark. For Kripal, we must always approach sacred-reality from the sacred-experience side: a ‘real encounter with the sacred as sacred’ is basic. This is why theories that frame the meaning of ‘sacred’ by talking of society, body or brain are unavoidable but necessarily fail to get to the ‘sacred as sacred’.⁸

The experientialist thesis rests on a number of semantic assumptions: (i) (at least) some language involving the sacred is meaningful; (ii) the meaning of some bit of language is what it is about⁹; (iii) language involving the sacred is about experience (or at least experience is *part* of what is about); (iv) that experience, unlike ‘ordinary’ ones that are tied to concrete contextual particularities, is ‘special’ in that it is taken to be of a universal supernatural reality. It is in that supernatural reality that the sacred finds its home, and while ordinary language can say *some* concrete things about it (such as what it is not), there are many other things of which it cannot speak. Uncovering these hidden semantic assumptions demystifies the ineffabilist paradox.

Kripal along with Eliade, on this reading at least, both assume that talk of the sacred is meaningful and that its meaning is given by what it is *about*. This position makes sense in light of two premises: a common-sense view of meaning, rooted in words’ referring to things; and the view that religious language talks of unusual things, sacred experiences. The experientialist view of ‘sacred’ make sense if (perhaps only if) you start with these two premises. If language refers to unusual things, and if meaning is about reference, then sacred-talk must be unusual, less direct, than normal talk of rocks. Given the view that sacred-talk cannot be about the same sort of thing that ordinary language is about, the experientialist is led to postulate a transcendental home for it. These assumptions, and the paths they lead to, explain some of the main criticisms that Eliade (on some readings) and Kripal have attracted.

William E. Paden, for example, points out that locating the central concept of religion in a realm which is not open to public and scientific investigation makes it ‘too theological and ontological to be appropriate for modern religious studies’: ‘an object that is transcendent, mysterious, wholly other, unknowable, [is] not ultimately an object for analysis’ (Paden 1991, 10). This type of critique has divided the study of religion into two camps: ‘On the surface, the division seems to have something to do with those who would imply some religious privilege for “the sacred” and those who would like to abandon the term and its overtones’ (Paden 1991, 10). In arguing about whether and how religious language is *about* experiences, both camps seem committed to a view that the ‘meaningfulness’ of language depends on what it is *about*. That is a

⁸ Kripal’s discussion of ‘experience’ and ‘sacred’ invites comparison with Bertrand Russell’s analysis of ‘sentences’ and ‘truth.’ The parallel to Russell is perhaps clearest when Kripal argues as follows: “UFO encounters ... are not what they seem to be. They symbolize. They translate across metaphysical orders. They reveal the sacred in the mode and code of the day” (2010, 214). Russell analyzed truth, a relationship between language and reality, by pushing past the particularities of, say, English to get to the logical structure of all languages; Kripal, reading Méheust, analyzes ‘sacred’ – seen as a relation between sacred-experience and sacred-reality – by pushing past the particularities of one cultural mode of representation to get to a universal or ‘logical’ structure.

⁹ This assumption is often labeled *representationalism* or *referentialism* in the philosophy of language. The main idea is that meaning is a function of what language is about or what words refer to, which presupposes a relatively direct relation between word and world. In the case of Eliade, it would be a red herring to quibble over (i) whether he holds that language refers to the sacred (substantive form) or to experiences that are sacred (adjectival form) or (ii) whether he is concerned with religious language or religious behaviour: all these views presuppose referentialism, insofar as our focus is on the meaning of ‘sacred.’

common sense view – just as the belief that the Earth is flat is rooted in common sense – but there are other ways of thinking about meaning that would dissolve this impasse, and various scholars in the study of religion have been working with these views.¹⁰

With an alternative approach to meaning, scholars of religion would not be forced to distinguish sharply between an outer, public world and an inner, private one; they would not have to argue over whether these are the meaning-conferring referents of radically different types of experience. The former ‘world’ is typically seen as transitory, changing, impermanent, and hence, by force of this postulated distinction, the latter can be seen as eternal, fixed, permanent. Once we let go of the semantic premise, that meaning is rooted in what words are *about*, we are no longer committed to this problematic dichotomy.

This view of the experienced sacred is able to leverage the referent of religious language free from normal views of how language works because it holds two assumptions that stand in tension: (1) meaning is rooted in reference or aboutness; and (2) religious language is *about* private experiences, though those experiences may be triggered by public things (e.g., by hierophanies, which are taken by the experiencer to involve a relation between ordinary things and the sacred). This forces a view that language, in referring to occult phenomena – i.e., religious experience – must work in a different way with the sacred. Most criticisms of the sacred-experience view disappear – allowing us to hold onto both the idea that language is always at least potentially public and the idea that people can say valid things about special or non-normal subjective experiences – if we let go of the first of these assumptions.¹¹

The polarized sacred

A third prevalent form of scholarly writing on the sacred is to characterize it as standing in opposition to something less mysterious, especially the profane. This brings it clearly within the view that ‘religion is constituted, or encompassed, by language. Language, in other words, is a necessary condition for the existence of religion: no language, no religion’ (Penner 1994, 989). Just how this is the case remains to be clarified.

Let’s begin, as so many do, with Durkheim. His radical separation between sacred and profane obscures at times the fundamental interrelation between them. ‘Sacred’ means what it means in opposition to ‘profane,’ through this mutual relation. When Durkheim insists that ‘the sacred and the profane are always and everywhere conceived by the human intellect as separate genera, as two worlds with nothing in common,’ he leaves out the one crucial thing that they do have in common, their mutual opposition: ‘nothing but their heterogeneity is left to define the relation between the sacred and the profane’ (1995 [1912], 36). As Roger Caillois notes, ‘regarding the sacred in general, the only thing that one can validly affirm is contained in the very definition of the term: that it is opposed to the profane’ (2015 [1939], 8). This most minimal – not to mention influential – definition of the sacred sees its meaning as constituted through a

¹⁰ Both camps presuppose representationalism or referentialism (see note 9). The prominence of an unsophisticated view of this sort is related to problematic appeals to the map/territory metaphor in the study of religion (Gardiner and Engler 2010). Non-representational semantic theories, especially holistic variants, offer a way past this and related impasses (on holism in the study of religion see Penner 1994; 1999; Godlove 1989, 2014; Davis 2007, 2012; Engler and Gardiner 2010; Frankenberry 2014; Gardiner and Engler 2016). There are important resonances between holistic semantic theories and other influential theoretical and methodological approaches in the study of religion: e.g., hermeneutics, poststructuralism, deconstruction and grounded theory (Penner 1986; Wheeler 1986; 1993; Malpas 1992; Peregrin 2001; McDowell 2002; Engler 2011c).

¹¹ This will be unpacked in the following two sections.

relation – albeit one of opposition and exclusion – to another concept, not as inherent in ‘sacred’ itself.

Different writers use different labels for the sacred’s conceptual other: sociologist N.J. Demerath III use ‘secular’ (Demerath 2000, 3), Gordon Lynch uses ‘mundane’ (2012b, 32–33), J.Z. Smith and Rebecca Norris use ‘ordinary’ (Smith 1987, 104; Norris 2012, 121), etc. For the most part, the choice of label is unimportant – except where it carries quite specific meaning beyond ‘non-sacred,’ such as Robert Segal’s use of ‘physical’ (2015, 264). What is important is the relationship between the sacred and its others, the set of words meaning ‘non-sacred.’ Here again Durkheim leads the way, arguing that they stand in an opposition that is stark, total, and absolute: ‘[One’s] notion of the sacred is always and everywhere separated from his notion of the profane by a sort of logical gulf between the two, the mind radically rejects any mingling or even contact between the things that correspond to these realms. Such promiscuous mingling or even contact dangerously contradicts the state of dissociation in which these ideas are found in human consciousness’ (Durkheim 1995 [1912], 37–38).

The literature illustrates a range of views on the opposition between sacred and profane. They are framed as polar opposites in a wide range of ways:

(1) In *logical* terms, nothing can be both sacred and profane at the same time and in the same place: ‘There is a ... pronounced opposition between sacred and profane things. They repel and contradict one another so forcefully that the mind refuses to think of them at the same time. They expel one another from consciousness’ (Durkheim 1995 [1912], 240). (Compare this to the law of non-contradiction: no sentence can be both true and false at the same time and in the same sense.) However, it is possible for the same thing to be sacred at one time/place but profane in another (see below).

(2) In *ontological* terms, they are so substantially different that any amount of contact fundamentally alters them. Profane things can become sacralized through contact with sacred things, while sacred things can become contaminated with profane ones. ‘All that touches the sacred becomes sacred itself, and whoever violates a taboo becomes taboo, even as the source remains undiluted by such transmission’ (Marshall 2010, 66; citing Caillois 2015 [1939]; Durkheim 1995 [1912]). Like matter and antimatter, or Harry Potter and Voldemort, neither can survive contact unchanged.

(3) In *spatio-temporal* terms, they find their natural homes in different places and are related to time in different ways. J.Z. Smith divides them on the basis of the distinction between the ‘now of the everyday life and the now of ritual place’ (1987, 105). For Smith, sacred spaces are just around the corner; the sacred is found in the temple, while the profane is found in the tavern, both just down the street, literally. In terms of time, whereas profane things are subject to the usual sort of generation, change, and decay, sacred things remain constant and unchanging. Topography is central for Smith: things are ‘sacred or profane sheerly by virtue of their location’ (1987, 104).

(4) In terms of *potency*, while perhaps nothing more than location is required to constitute certain objects, places or times as sacred, a great deal more happens as a result of that constitution. Whether something is ‘sacralized’ or ‘profaned’ has a huge impact on what it can do, what powers it is capable of. The potency of the sacred is the polar opposite of that of the profane. Smith gives this example: in profane locations, ‘blood is a major source for impurity’ and ‘water is the central agent by which impurity is transmitted,’ whereas in sacred places ‘blood removes impurity’ which is carried away by the ‘washing with water’ (1987, 119). He famously ties ritual to this sort of polarization, arguing that it is ‘concerned primarily with difference’ and

hence ‘is, necessarily, an affair of the relative’ (1987, 110). Ritual can transport blood from the profane world to that of the sacred, where water, likewise differently potent, can wash it away.

(5) In *emotional* terms, the sacred and its others have starkly opposed effects. A power things have in the sacred world, as opposed to the profane, is the power to inspire reverence. Historian Richard Trexler notes ‘There was no act more likely to elicit stupefaction, a groping incomprehension, from the [renaissance] Florentine than the violation of a sacred image’ (1972, 20). Just as reverence (through ‘commitment, either love or hate’) is the proper (natural) attitude to take towards the sacred, the proper one to take towards the polar opposite, the ‘profane,’ is also the polar opposite: indifference (Trexler 1972, 28n65). Sociologist of religion Douglas Marshall suggests that commitment to the sacred can take two forms, love and hate (which, contrary to first appearance, are *not* polar opposites but actually quite closely aligned attitudes) and refines it in terms of ‘hedonic ambivalence’ (2010, 65-66). The sacred and the taboo are thus kindred concepts.

(6) In *normative* terms, the sacred is fit and worthy and proper for human pursuit, while the profane is unfit, unworthy, and improper. Marshall defines the sacred as ‘a salient but directionally ambiguous moral property attributed by some observer(s) to some object(s) that is absolute in obliging those observer(s) to engage in or avoid certain behaviors toward it, and that evokes a mixture of attraction and repulsion, as well as a perception of contagiousness, in those who perceive it’ (Marshall 2010, 65–66, emphasis removed).

The first thing to note about the polarized approach is its affinity to the ineffabilist framework. The central paradox of that approach – the attempt to say something about a sacred that is impossible to talk about – is allegedly resolved by trying to say something about the sacred in a back-handed manner: by talking about what it is not, e.g., by pointing to the sacred by describing the profane. This is comparable to apophatic theology and the *via negativa*: for the polarizers, the sacred is best apprehended in relation to what it is not.

However, seeing ineffabilism as just a form of polarism would be a mistake for two reasons. First, Eliade, for example, does not see the sacred and the profane as polar opposites in the Durkheimian either/or sense, but rather as hierarchically related, with the sacred being prior to the profane: ‘in fact hierophanies could not abolish the profane world, for it is the very manifestation of the sacred that establishes the world, i.e., transforms a formless, unintelligible and terrifying chaos into a cosmos.... In short hierophany is ontophany – the experience of the sacred gives reality, shape, and meaning to the world’ (cited in Rennie 1996, 31).

Second, and more important for our purposes, different sets of semantic assumptions undergird the ineffable sacred and the polarized sacred. In the latter case, the assumption is not that the meaningfulness of a bit of language is to be found in what it is *about*, but rather in terms of a relationship to the meaningfulness of other bits of language. Talk of the sacred gets its meaning in terms of its relationship to the meaningfulness of talk of the profane. In the case of the polarized sacred, this relationship is a negative one: opposition, exclusion. The relative semantic familiarity of talk of the profane (or secular, or ordinary, or physical) thus provides a stable platform from which to ascend to the much more problematic talk surrounding the sacred. In the philosophy of language, this semantic position – where meaning is understood in terms of relations between concepts – is often called *semantic holism*.¹²

¹² Semantic holism is most often contrasted with semantic atomism. Atomists hold that basic semantic units, most usually individual words, have their meanings independently of the meaning of other semantic units, whereas semantic holism ‘locates meaning at a broader level, ranging from an indefinite network of linked units to an entire language... [It sees] meaning as inherently dynamic: where meaning is defined in terms of a broad network of

Polarism has several scholarly advantages over ineffabilism. We can hold onto both the public nature of language and the difference between experiencing something *as* sacred as opposed to experiencing it *as* profane – without postulating mysterious and scientifically inaccessible realms or embracing a linguistic paradox. Polarism is also able to say positive things about the sacred, as it needn't *define* the sacred simply as 'not profane.' The meaning-conferring holistic relationships can be multiple, complex, and widespread; we just listed six relatively distinct directions of scholarly analysis. Semantic holists often talk about meaning in terms of a 'web of significance.' Polarists implicitly treat the relationship between the nodes of the web clustering around the sacred in differential or oppositional terms, not in sayable vs. unsayable terms. This affords the polarist opportunities to explore ever larger portions of the web, leading to a nuanced and positive understanding of contextualized meanings of 'sacred.' Scholarly dialogue and progress is thus possible, whereas, from the perspective of ineffabilism, there is literally nothing left to say about the sacred.

Despite these advantages, polarism is not immune from critique. We note two related lines here. First, by focusing only on points of difference, it is unable to explain the mechanisms of sacralization or profanation. Those processes trade not only on differences but also on similarities. We would need to be able to characterize both sides of the sacred/non-sacred relation in substantive terms, in order to generate hypotheses about just how relations between the sacred and its others are dynamic processes within specific historical and cultural contexts. Second, polarism tends to a *sui generis* view of religion, something that has also plagued the ineffabilists. By portraying it only in terms of its otherness to determinate concepts, the polarizer makes 'sacred' a one-trick pony: non-location, non-location, non-location. This has two effects. It characterizes 'sacred' in a manner that is so unusual that it tends to be seen as unique. It leaves 'sacred' without the sorts of conceptual features that allow us to describe concepts in distinct historical, cultural and other contexts, which can give the impression that has a unitary, unvarying referent.

Problems arise above all when the oppositional, holistic meaning of the polarized sacred is read as referential. It is one thing to view 'sacred' in terms of its conceptual opposition to certain concepts, to see its meaning as part of that package deal. It is something else to insist that the shadow or mirror pole of this relational binary – 'sacred' as non-profane, non-secular, non-mundane, non-ordinary, etc. – corresponds to an objective referent. This starts with an unusual form of holistic semantic relation, meaning-via-opposition, and re-reads this in referential terms, as being *about* a specific thing. The unusual semantic characteristics of the *concept* 'sacred' are read off as unusual ontological characteristics of a *thing*, the sacred. Where polarizers default to a common-sense referential semantics in this way, 'sacred' transforms from holistic placeholder (the other of 'x') to a very unusual referent, one that stands beyond all concrete description. A relative semantic beyond is flipped over to reveal an absolute ontological beyond, *et voilà!*: *sui generis* transcendence by semantic sleight of hand.¹³

The contextualized sacred

relations between words, sentences, beliefs, etc., the inherent changeability of those relations implies that meaning necessarily has a certain open-ended quality' (Engler and Gardiner 2010, 285).

¹³ This is not a confusion between the polarizing and ineffabilist views; it shows what happens if they are combined. 'Sui generis' echoes various well-known debates. Our purpose is not to take sides in those debates but to show how they relate to the kinds of semantic assumptions that are our focus.

A fourth set of perspectives in the scholarly literature sees the meaning of ‘sacred’ as tied in different ways to specific contexts. Where polarizers read the meaning of ‘sacred’ in terms of a binary opposition to other concepts – especially ‘profane’ – contextualizers read it in terms of a more nuanced set of relations to a broader variety of other concepts. So, for example, if we accept that ‘Judeo-Christian meanings have become the prototype of the sacred’ (Anttonen 1996, 37), then we place ‘sacred’ in a specific historical, cultural and intellectual context, and we presuppose that understanding its meaning involves understanding its relationship to that context. Both polarized and contextualized views hold, in methodological terms, that the meaning of ‘sacred’ must be investigated by exploring the concept’s connections to other concepts in specific contexts. Hence, these views are not mutually exclusive. Both implicitly reject the idea that the meaning of ‘sacred’ is something embedded in the word itself. Both take a relational or holistic approach in presupposing that we can only come to an understanding of what a given usage of ‘sacred’ means by interpreting it through its semantic network, its relations to other words and concepts.

However, different semantic assumptions come into play with the contextualized sacred than with the polarized sacred. The latter is still committed to the idea that meaningfulness is a matter of what one is talking *about*.¹⁴ Of course, it does so in a very specific fashion, using a binary conceptual contrast that helps the scholar get to the referent of sacred-talk. In the contextualist approach, however, the meaningfulness of talk of the sacred is understood primarily in terms of how that talk is plugged into a much broader, much more contextually sensitive, network of discourse. In philosophical terms, it does not assume the primacy of a referential semantics.

On the contextualized view – seen in non-referential and holistic terms – talk of the sacred can be seen by the scholar as fully meaningful in a way that does not commit her to postulating mysterious realms (as per the ineffabilists) or even to attributing beliefs about such a realm to religious adherents (as per Eliade). This does not preclude the possibility that the best interpretation of a particular religious group’s discourse might involve such attributions. But, in the same vein, it allows for the possibility of interpreting different religious groups as having very different ontological commitments: e.g., understanding the sacred as not having a *sui generis* referent.¹⁵ For some the sacred might name a place, for others a process, for still others an experience. But – and this is key for the contextualized sacred – in some communities of religious discourse it may not name anything at all, but rather mark a position in a complex system of discourse which has many interrelated functions, including description, prescription, exhortation, socialization, prayer etc. On this view, we can conclude that a given religious community sees the sacred as naming something only *after* the scholar has a much richer

¹⁴ The referential/non-referential distinction is different from the atomist/holist one. Our point in the previous section was that the polarized sacred *points* to the sacred (hence the assumption of referentialism) via exploiting the *meaning* of relations with the profane (hence the assumption of holism). That is, the polarizer still wants us to get to the thing itself.

¹⁵ One of our readers asked, ‘If the referent is the attribution (not some independent ontology) can that referent still be *sui generis* despite the very different “commitments” (does that mean beliefs?) of different groups?’ We are not suggesting that referents can shift from one sort of thing to another sort of thing. Rather, we point out the potential value of understanding concepts in non-referential terms: independent from asserting, for example, that their meaning-conferring referents are belief-attributions. Meaning can be independent of the issue of reference. This is not to deny that words can refer to all sort of things (as we acknowledge in the text, right after this note); it is just to highlight that we can make sense of religious language while bracketing the issue of whether there are real things ‘out there’ to which the words refer. A non-referential approach to meaning lurks among the semantic assumptions that we find in our selection of discussions of ‘sacred.’

understanding of that concept's placement in the holistic web. Holistic meaning allows for the possibility that meaningful expressions are *about* things, i.e., that they *name* things, but it does not presuppose this, nor does it limit language to this view: whether, and to what, a given word refers in a given case is an empirical finding, not a semantic presupposition.

Various descriptions embody the idea that understanding 'sacred' involves interpreting it in a relational network. Marshall, for example, describes it as follows:

The sacred is a salient but directionally ambiguous moral property attributed by some observer(s) to some object(s) that is absolute in obliging those observer(s) to engage in or avoid certain behaviors toward it, and that evokes a mixture of attraction and repulsion, as well as a perception of contagiousness, in those who perceive it. Accordingly, 'sacralization' is: a process by which an object is invested with the property of sacredness. (2010, 65–66, original emphasis; compare Taves 2009)

Expressed in this way, we cannot understand the sacred without looking at its relations to certain behaviors, perceptions and objects. That is, the meaning of 'sacred' is determined only through its relation to its context; its meaning is not some property inherent in the concept itself.

To give another example, Gordon Lynch presents 'sacred' as follows:

The sacred is defined by what people collectively experience as absolute, non-contingent realities that exert unquestionable moral claims over the meaning and conduct of their lives. Particular forms of the sacred emerge through the passage of history, and involve the weaving together of symbols, systems of thought, powerful moral sentiments and a sense of collective identity. These sacred forms retain their vitality in social life through repeated actions, laden with sacred meaning, that reinforce their reality for their adherents. A particular understanding of the sacred simultaneously constructs a vision of the specific form of evil that threatens to profane and destroy it. When the sacred is breached or polluted in some way, its adherents experience this as a painful wound, which demands some form of restitution or repair. Although not the only force that binds groups together, the sacred generates both the reality and the impression of moral community – a sense of the boundaries of humane society – and is a potent source of meaning that legitimizes ways of treating people that would not be acceptable in mundane, social interaction. (2012b, 32–33)

Here, the meaning of the sacred reflects its relations to certain 'moral claims,' 'repeated actions' and 'ways of treating people.' Because the sacred involves 'the weaving together of symbols, systems of thought, powerful moral sentiments and a sense of collective identity,' we would need to understand its relation to this network of other things in order to understand it. If a given sense of 'sacred simultaneously constructs a vision of the specific form of evil,' then the meaning of that sacred and that evil are inter-related. In sum, investigating the meaning of the sacred, so conceived, would not involve teasing out some cryptic essence that can be expressed in a dictionary-style definition¹⁶; it would involve interpreting this range of related things in specific contexts.

¹⁶ Dictionary-style definitions assume atomism; holism thinks of definition in very different ways. See Stausberg and Gardiner (2016).

This focus on context during interpretation should come as no surprise. The study of religion, like related disciplines in the human/social sciences, studies putatively religious phenomena in historical, cultural and other contexts. This has led to a wide variety of work that reads the meaning of key concepts in terms of context-specific ‘associations’: e.g., ‘the usages made of [“religion”] ... and of associated terms such as “sacred” and “supernatural” are complex, nuanced, and historically variable. Such terms are heavily laden with associations in Western cultural traditions...’ (Saler 1993, 74). The finding that senses of ‘sacred’ vary across these contexts implicitly undermines an ‘atomistic’ view that meaning is something internal to words or concepts themselves. It turns our attention to the methodological challenge of interpreting ‘sacred’ in relation to its differing contexts.

These descriptions, however, represent a fairly limited form of contextualization. In a manner not dissimilar to the ‘internalism’ of the experienced sacred, Lynch and Saler emphasize the semantic interrelation of the sacred to inner mental states – attractions and repulsions, perceptions of contagiousness, moral sentiments, collective identity, or a sense of boundary. The meaning of the sacred – even if it varies from context of usage to context of usage – appears to remain firmly tied to the beliefs, desires and intentions of either individuals or communities.

More thorough-going forms of the contextualized sacred break this assumption of internalism, including external and fully publically observable circumstances in the list of things that contribute to meaningfulness. ‘Meanings,’ philosopher Hilary Putnam declared, inaugurating the rebirth of semantic externalism, ‘just ain’t in the head’ (Putnam, 1975, 227). On this view, the sacred gets its meaning not only in ‘narrow’ contexts – e.g., how a religious community uses it and thinks about it – but in a much broader one that includes a good many elements that take us well beyond the border of ‘religion,’ however we define this. This view is clear in recent discussions of ‘the secular sacred.’ When Kim Knott suggests that ‘sacred’ functions as ‘a category-boundary to set things with non-negotiable value apart from things whose value is based on continuous transactions,’ this pins the meaning of ‘sacred’ to relationships between specific sets of non-negotiable and negotiable things (2013, 145). This more robust view suggests the need to understand ‘sacred,’ or any putatively religious concept, in contexts in which ‘religious phenomena already look to be holistically related to a good many other things – culture, economy, class, ethnicity, gender, politics, etc. In other words, it is difficult, if not impossible, to identify some behaviour as exclusively ‘religious,’ and this certainly suggests that the religious gets its content in a holistically sensitive fashion’ (Gardiner and Engler 2015, 15).

A link between the sacred and society often underlies this extension beyond religion, and the contrast with a sacred-experience view underlines the need to understand ‘sacred’ in relation to a broad set of other factors: ‘Sacred order is a broader concept than religion. It is not a uniquely religious category.... It is a structuring force, in a primordial sense, in every system on which some community’s or individual’s life depends. ... In only focusing on ... the revelatory nature of objects, phenomenologists of religion have typically ignored ... the sacrality of the system itself’ (Paden 2000, 221, 208). Reading ‘sacred’ as working in relation to a set of social boundaries or a social system presupposes that its meaning is a function of that shifting context of relations. Consider the following claim: ‘it is important to conceptualize the sacred as a category-boundary which becomes actual only in social situations, when the inviolability of such categories as person, gender, marriage, nation, or justice, liberty, purity, propriety, are threatened and are in danger of losing their legitimating authority as moral foundations of society and social life’ (Anttonen 2000, 276–277). Even if we interpret this in narrowly functionalist terms – that ‘sacred’ does similar work in all these cases – we would need to look at specific social

boundaries in specific moral and social contexts in order to understand a given usage of ‘sacred.’ The meaning of ‘sacred’ here depends on those contextualized relations, not on some free-floating essence internal to the concept itself.

Polarized and contextualized views of ‘sacred’ can converge. Recall that Durkheim both frames ‘sacred’ in terms of a polarized and mutually exclusive binary opposition with ‘profane’ and in terms of its relation to society, especially a parallel opposition between collectivity and individual – and this link becomes clearer when we recognize Durkheim’s emphasis on the contrast between communal and individual property in Roman law (Smith 2004a, 104–107). Michel Despland points to the polarized sacred in that senses of the sacred and related terms not only vary historically but depend upon their relations to particular conceptions of non-sacred: ‘*sacré* becomes prevalent in the 19th century as learned language necessitated by secularisation. It all happens as if this arose from a post-revolutionary need to distinguish what is civil and what is religious. The distinction sacred/profane was ready at-hand. The terminology of sanctity was not polarizing enough and thus not adequate to the new realities of national life’ (1991, 44). We do not presume that ‘*sacré*’ in nineteenth-century French writings on religion means the same thing as ‘sacred’ in early twenty-first-century English works. Their various possible points of potential divergence underline our point: we have to investigate such concepts in specific contexts.

This closely resembles Timothy Fitzgerald’s argument that ‘the secular’ is ‘defined by its essential exclusion of religion’: ‘it is precisely through the exclusion and separation of . . . modern categories such as the state, politics, and economics . . . that generic religion had appeared as a distinct and autonomous reality’ (2007, 174, 4). Despland holds that the meaning of ‘*sacré*’ in nineteenth-century France can only be understood in relation, i.e., opposition, to certain conceptions of civil society; Fitzgerald holds that the meaning of ‘religion’ can only be understood in relation to certain conceptions of ‘the secular.’ Like Despland, Fitzgerald presupposes a holistic, not atomistic, sense of meaning (Engler 2011a, 430; see Fitzgerald 2011; Engler 2011b).

Cognitive science approaches, not just to religion, tend to be holistic, understanding concepts in terms of an interrelated set of external inputs, perceptible outputs and internal states – and also insofar as they adopt an evolutionary perspective, where our understanding of current adaptations is understood in relation to specific evolutionary contexts (Gardiner and Engler 2015). Veikko Anttonen’s work illustrates one way in which cognitive views of the sacred are holistic:

In any cultural context, where the idea of the sacred can be detected as a term in vernacular or as a metaphorical expression of religious experience, it is causally dependent on principles of categorization and especially on the culture-specific rules as to how important category transformations are allowed to take place and how they are symbolically expressed in rituals. . . . The sacred as a scholarly concept in the study of religion should be reassessed in accordance with the latest finding concerning the role of categories in human language and cognition. . . . [With respect to ‘sacred’] there are two most fundamental conceptual structures which the cultural and religious discourse on the sacred is linked to: these are the notions of ‘human body’ and ‘territory’. (1996, 38, 40)

For Anttonen, the meaning of ‘sacred’ is rooted in its relation to ‘principles of categorization and . . . culture-specific rules,’ i.e., in relation to other things, not independently or atomistically.

The sacred is contextualized most often through its relation to objects, spaces and times: ‘the sacred belongs, as a stable or ephemeral property, to certain things (the instruments of worship), to certain beings (the king, the priest), to certain spaces (the temple, the church, the high place), to certain times (Sunday, Easter, Christmas, etc.)’ (Caillois 2015 [1939], 11; see 45, 105, 121; see also Segal 2015, 260). The contingency of this relation is underlined by J. Z. Smith:

Within the temple, the ordinary ... becomes significant, becomes ‘sacred’ simply by being there. A ritual object or action becomes sacred by having attention focused on it in a highly marked way. From such a point of view, there is nothing that is inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive categories, but rather situational ones. Sacrality is, above all, a category of emplacement. ... This understanding ... is present in the defense of the status of the Song of Songs.... The issue, here, is not the content of this collection of erotic ditties, but their place. When chanted in the Temple (or its surrogate), they are, perforce, sacred; when chanted in a tavern, they are not. ... A sacred text is one that is used in a sacred place.... (1987, 104)

Scholars of religion tend to emphasize ‘the classificatory nature of the distinction, sacred/profane’ (Smith 2004a, 102). This sees the meaning of ‘sacred’ as something to be read in relation to the things that are categorized in a given case.

Contextualized approaches to the sacred, like the others, are not immune from critique. First, a holistic view of meaning, emphasizing the context of each usage of a term, doesn’t seem to allow ‘sacred’ to have a fully determinate meaning. It will shift from use to use, community to community, scholar to scholar, etc. This could be seen as a problem by those committed to certain views of the comparative nature of the study of religion. Scholars of religion should not discount the possibility that different occurrences of ‘sacred,’ might be not simply vague but outright equivocal. That said, the contextualized view is arguably consistent with the range of meanings we find such complex terms to have in general, not to mention the fact that the distinct discourse of the study of religion is, in part, what constitutes it as a discipline.

Second, the contextualist who narrowly limits the meaning-conferring contexts to ‘internal’ elements – e.g., concepts, beliefs or intentions – will have a tendency to read the sacred as merely a social construct, dislodged from the natural world. This sort of approach is most strongly associated with Russell McCutcheon (1997), though his position is nuanced. This view holds that concepts, most notably ‘religion’ but by extension ‘sacred,’ are wholly ‘manufactured’ from other concepts that are themselves wholly ‘manufactured.’ This view has been as controversial and divisive as cognitive approaches have been. Ironically, the two views both share an implicit relational or holistic view of meaning, but they are radically opposed, with a radical, even relativist, constructionism at one end of a spectrum of possible views and, at the other end, some cognitive approaches’ attempt to reduce religious phenomena to neurological functioning. In fact, a more nuanced understanding of meaning would allow for a productive rapprochement: a constructionism that pays more attention to external contexts of meaning and a cognitive approach that paid more attention to cultural and embodied contexts would complement each other.

As a final note on the contextualized sacred, consider the variety of meanings of ‘sacred’ that we have looked at in this article, not to mention the many others not touched on. Let’s bracket, for the sake of argument, any commitment to the idea that ‘sacred’ has some

determinate, correct or best meaning and simply note that it means different things in the works of different scholars. If ‘sacred’ means all these things, then the meaning of a given use necessarily depends on the other concepts to which it is linked in the work of a given scholar or groups of scholars.

There are different levels of contextualization here, not sharply distinct but blurring into each other. For example, we can’t understand ‘sacred’ as used in René Girard’s *Violence and the Sacred* (1977) without understanding ‘violence,’ the meaning of which, in turn, takes shape in relation to other concepts, like ‘sacrifice,’ ‘redemption,’ ‘purification,’ and ‘mimesis,’ not to mention less scholarly abstract and more observable things like physical harm, pain and death. The way we actually come to understand a particular author’s use of ‘sacred’ – as we read or study her or his work – is through a process of open-ended interpretation, of reading uses of the word through their relations to others. But this is a prototypical example of how holistic semantic theories suggest that we arrive at meanings, through ongoing processes of contextualized interpretation that are firmly anchored in a shared world.

Zooming out to a broader context, doesn’t the importance that scholars place on ‘influences’ suggest that the meaning of Girard’s ‘sacred’ becomes clearer when we recognize his indebtedness to Durkheim, Freud and Bataille, and so read his uses of the concept in relation to, in the context of, their works? These practices – close textual work and the reading of related thinkers – are business as usual for scholars of religion, and they are also precisely what a holistic view of meaning predicts that we would do. We interpret a word through its relation to the web of concepts to which it happens to be related in its particular context: a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter, a book, an oeuvre; using tools like marginal notations, indices and concordances to see how the meaning of the word is fleshed out further when we read it in appropriately related contexts.¹⁷

There is no preset boundary to this interpretive work. We come to a fuller sense of the meaning of ‘sacred’ – or any concept – as we explore more and more connections, beyond this usage to others, beyond this book to others, beyond our author’s works to those of other writers. We consider national differences between approaches to our target concepts: e.g., ‘In most French 20th century work on religion, the social and the sacred are wedded to each other; and the political is never far’ (Despland 1991, 45). We argue over which passages are more revealing, which links to other words are more central, which contexts are more appropriate, etc. (We favour those that explain not only what adherents believe and desire, but also how they act, in particular how they act in the day-to-day world which diverse cultures share, often in colliding ways.) Is it possible that the prominence of the contextualized sacred in the literature reflects not a particular approach to a particular term, but a general feature of how we arrive at the meanings of words, whether as speakers and listeners in our homes, or as readers and scholars in the academy?

Conclusion

This discussion of the semantics of ‘sacred’ illustrates one way that philosophy can be valuable to the study of religion. This article does not apply philosophy as a lens for interpreting the

¹⁷ On a related note, a relational, holistic reading of the meaning of ‘Otto,’ ‘Girard,’ or ‘Eliade’ would acknowledge that there is no such thing as the one true reading of these scholars’ work. Some readings are more defensible – e.g., based on close, consistent interpretation of a more complete corpus and a fuller set of influences, in more languages, etc. – but the process of interpretation is open-ended.

sacred. It draws on selected philosophical ideas in order to clarify assumptions already present in published work on the concept. All scholarly work presupposes some view of meaning or another: this is unavoidable. Bringing these presuppositions into the light allows us to compare theoretical perspectives more effectively.

In doing so, this article serves as something like an empirical test of semantic theories, investigating the presuppositions about meaning that are implicit in four prominent views of the sacred in the study of religion. Of course, these four views are not radically distinct from each other. They overlap at points and can be combined to some extent. Our claim is that where they are similar they have similar underlying semantic assumptions, and where they are different they have different ones. In this light, we found two things.

First, the stances we call the ineffable sacred and the experienced sacred presuppose a certain view of meaning – that meaning depends on what bits of language are *about*. That view lies behind much of what critics find wrong with many thinkers. Moving to a non-referential view of meaning could potentially offer a way past that impasse, opening up more productive avenues of discussion. In sum, major *weaknesses* of these two views are related to their implicit view of meaning. A referential approach to meaning is implicit in these often criticized scholarly discussions of ‘sacred.’

Second, the stances we called the polarized sacred and the contextualized sacred presuppose a different view of meaning – that meaning depends on relations *between* bits of language. That view lies behind many of the more influential views of the sacred, and it resonates strongly with the drive to look at religious phenomena in their historical, cultural and other contexts, a drive that is arguably a core characteristic of the discipline. In sum, major *strengths* of these two views are related to their implicit view of meaning. A relational, holistic approach to meaning is implicit in these ‘best-practice’ scholarly discussions of ‘sacred.’

All these approaches have strengths and weaknesses, but, in our view, the third and fourth views come out ahead, with their more relational, holistic approach to meaning. The first two views – the ineffable sacred and the experienced sacred – seem to get something right: the sacred is not a normal object of ordinary experience, like tables and chairs. But aspects of these views are more problematic. Their commitment to a referential view of meaning leads them to commit to non-naturalism, to postulate an academically unapproachable subject matter, and to propose a difficult-to-defend split between different ways that language works (a normal way and a sacred way). The third and fourth views – the polarized sacred and the contextualized sacred – resonate with recent developments in the discipline, treating meaning as contextually dependent, whether through opposition (e.g., sacred vs. profane) or through more a more diffuse network of relations. But certain aspects of these views are more problematic. The polarizer has a tendency to read the binary opposition between the sacred and its others in *sui generis* terms, that is, to read the sacred as unique in its opposition to its semantic others. The contextualist has a tendency to slide into a radical constructionism; and a holistic view of meaning emphasizes particular contexts to the point where, some might argue, it undermines comparison.

The three different semantic distinctions that we found implicit in the literature could contribute here in different ways. (i) A non-referential, as opposed to referential, view of meaning would give scholars of religion greater latitude to interpret religious language and actions, without getting hung up on questions of whether or not such terms as ‘sacred’ or ‘deity’ have objective referents. (ii) An externalist, as opposed to internalist, view of meaning would place greater emphasis on empirical, public data for the study of religion, side-stepping many unproductive theoretical debates, e.g., those over religious experience and radical

constructionism. (iii) A holistic, as opposed to atomistic, view of meaning would resonate with what scholars of religion actually do – interpreting religious phenomena and language about religion in context – and it could move forward debates on a number of issues in the discipline (see Engler and Gardiner 2010; 2012; 2013; Gardiner and Engler 2012; 2015).

It should not concern scholars of religion that these are not the most common-sense views of meaning. Much ink has been spilled trying to stretch common-sense views of meaning to cover the unusual objects of religious language. This attempt to have it both ways – to recognize that religion speaks of unusual things while insisting that we must speak of them in the usual ways – lies behind certain intractable debates in the field. If scholars of religion insist on common-sense views of meaning – i.e., assuming that truth and meaning are a function of a one-to-one fit between words and empirical objects in the world, while at the same time recognizing that religious language refers to objects that are not as easy to point to as rocks and tables – then they place themselves in a bind. They end up positing that language must work in strange ways to talk of the sacred, which leads to views that religious language is really about occult internal experiences, and/or that the sacred and religion are *sui generis*.

The more nuanced conceptions of meaning that we point to here are becoming more prominent in the study of religion (see n. 1 and n. 10 above). However, this article does not presume or impose these non-common-sense views of meaning: it finds them implicit in the strengths and weaknesses of published discussions of the sacred. There is no need to rush off and study philosophy of language in order to apply it to the study of religion. However, given that presuppositions about the nature of meaning are unavoidable, it might make sense to pay more attention to these sorts of issues. If the sticking points in some views of the sacred can be traced to their reliance on certain semantic assumptions, then perhaps these should be avoided. If the strengths of other views reflect different semantic assumptions, then perhaps these should be emphasized more.

Notes on contributors

Steven Engler is Professor of Religious Studies and Mark Q. Gardiner Professor of Philosophy at Mount Royal University, Calgary. Their joint work includes articles in *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion*, *Journal of Ritual Studies*, *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion*, *Religion*, *Religious Studies* and various book chapters.

References

Anttonen, Veikko. 1996. 'Rethinking the Sacred: The Notions of "Human Body" and "Territory" in Conceptualizing Religion.' In *The Sacred and Its Scholars: Comparative Methodologies for the Study of Primary Religious Data*, edited by Thomas A. Idinopulos, & Edward A. Yonan, 36–64. Leiden: Brill.

Anttonen, Veikko. 2000. 'Sacred.' In *Guide to the Study of Religion*, ed. Braun, Willi & McCutcheon, Russell T. London and New York: Cassell, 271–282.

Borg, Marcus. 2011. *Speaking Christian: Why Christian Words Have Lost Their Meaning and Power – And How They Can Be Restored*. New York: HarperOne.

- Borgeaud, Philippe. 1994. 'Le Couple Sacré/Profane: Genèse et fortune d'un concept « opératoire » en histoire des religions.' *Revue de l'histoire des religions* 211(4): 387–418.
- Caillois, Roger. 2015 [1939]. *L'homme et le sacré*, 3rd ed. Paris: Gallimard.
- Colpe, Carsten. 2005 [1987]. 'The Sacred and the Profane.' In *Encyclopedia of Religion*, 2nd ed., edited by Lindsay Jones, vol. 12: 7964–7978. Detroit: MacMillan Reference.
- Davis, G. Scott 2007. 'Donald Davidson, Anomalous Monism and the Study of Religion.' *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 19(3–4): 200–231.
- Davis, G. Scott. 2012. *Believing and Acting: The Pragmatic Turn in Comparative Religion and Ethics*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Demerath, III, N.J. 2000. 'The Varieties of Sacred Experience: Finding the Sacred in a Secular Grove.' *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 39(1): 1-11.
- Despland, Michel. 1991. 'The Sacred: The French Evidence.' *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 3(1): 41–46.
- Durkheim, Émile. 1995 [1912]. *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: Free Press.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1960. *Myth, Dreams and Mysteries: The Encounter between Contemporary Faiths and Archaic Realities*. London: Harvill Press.
- Eliade, Mircea 1961 [1952]. *Images and Symbols: Studies in Religious Symbolism*, translated by Philip Mairet. New York: Sheed and Ward.
- Eliade, Mircea. 1968 [1959]. *The Sacred and the Profane*, translated by Willard R. Trask. New York: Harvest Books.
- Engler, Steven. 2011a. "“Religion,” “the Secular” and the Critical Study of Religion.' *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 40(4): 419–442. doi: 10.1177/0008429811420406.
- Engler, Steven. 2011b. 'Response to Timothy Fitzgerald.' *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 40(4): 456–460. doi: 10.1177/0008429811420407.
- Engler, Steven. 2011c. 'Grounded Theory.' In *The Routledge Handbook of Research Methods in the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, 256–274. London and New York: Routledge.
- Engler, Steven and Mark Q. Gardiner. 2010. 'Ten Implications of Semantic Holism for Theories of Religion.' *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 22(4): 283–292. doi: 10.1163/157006810X531067.
- Engler, Steven and Mark Q. Gardiner. 2012. Re-mapping Bateson's Frame. *Journal of Ritual Studies* 26(2): 7–20.

- Engler, Steven and Mark Q. Gardiner. 2013. “‘God(s)’ as a Comparative Category’. *DIN - Tidsskrift for religion og kultur* 2(1): 120–132.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy. 2007. *Discourse on Civility and Barbarity: A Critical History of Religion and Related Categories*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fitzgerald, Timothy. 2011. ‘A Response to Steven Engler, “‘Religion,’ ‘the Secular’ and the Critical Study of Religion”’. *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 40(4): 443–455. DOI 10.1177/0008429811425446.
- Frankenberry, Nancy K. 2014. ‘The Study of Religion after Davidson and Rorty.’ *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 35(3): 195–210. doi: 10.5406/amerjtheophil.35.3.0195.
- Frankenberry, Nancy K. and Hans H. Penner, eds. 1999. *Language, Truth, and Religious Belief: Studies in Twentieth-Century Theory and Method in Religion*. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Gardiner, Mark Q. and Steven Engler. 2010. ‘Charting the Map Metaphor in Theories of Religion.’ *Religion* 40(1): 1–13. doi: 10.1016/j.religion.2009.08.010.
- Gardiner, Mark Q. and Steven Engler. 2012. ‘Semantic Holism and the Insider-Outsider Problem.’ *Religious Studies* 48(2): 239–255. doi: 10.1017/S0034412511000205.
- Gardiner, Mark Q. and Steven Engler. 2015. ‘The Philosophy and Semantics of the Cognitive Science of Religion.’ *Journal for the Cognitive Science of Religion* 3(1): 7–35. doi: 10.1558/jcsr.v3i1.21033.
- Gardiner, Mark Q. and Steven Engler. 2016. ‘Semantics.’ In *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, 195–207. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Godlove, Terry F. 1989. *Religion, Interpretation, and Diversity of Belief: The Framework Model from Kant to Durkheim to Davidson*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Godlove, Terry F. 2014. *Kant and the Meaning of Religion*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Girard, René. 1977. *Violence and the Sacred*, translated by Patrick Gregory. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding. 2004. ‘Meaning and Religion: On Semantics in the Study of Religion.’ In *New Approaches to the Study of Religion. Volume 1: Regional, Critical and Historical Approaches*, edited by Peter Antes, Armin W. Geertz and Randi R. Warne, 219–252. Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter.
- Jensen, Jeppe Sinding 2014. *What Is Religion?* London and New York: Routledge.

- Kamboureli, Smaro. 1986. 'St. Teresa's Jouissance: Toward a Rhetoric of Reading.' In *Silence, the Word and the Sacred*, edited by E.D. Blodgett, Harold Coward, 51–65. Calgary: Calgary Institute for the Humanities.
- Knott, Kim 2013. 'The Secular Sacred: In-between or Both/and?' In *Social Identities Between the Sacred and the Secular*, edited by Abby Day, Giselle Vincett, and Christopher R. Cotter, 145–160. Surrey: Ashgate.
- Kripal, Jeffrey J. 2010. *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal and the Sacred*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Locke, John. 1975 [1689]. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Lynch, Gordon. 2012a. *The Sacred in the Modern World: A Cultural Sociological Approach*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Lynch, Gordon. 2012b. *On the Sacred*. London: Acumen.
- Malpas, Jeff E. 1992. *Donald Davidson and the Mirror of Meaning: Holism, Truth, Interpretation*. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Mao Tse-tung. 1957. 'On the Correct Handling of Contradictions among the People.' https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/mao/selected-works/volume-5/mswv5_58.htm.
- Marshall, Douglas A. 2010. 'Temptation, Tradition, and Taboo: A Theory of Sacralization.' *Sociological Theory* 28(1): 64–90. DOI 10.1111/j.1467-9558.2009.01366.x.
- McCutcheon, Russell T. 1997. *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse of Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- McDowell, John. 2002. 'Gadamer and Davidson on Understanding and Relativism.' In *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, edited by Jens Kertscher, Hans-Georg Gadamer, J. E. Malpas and Ulrich von Arnswald, 173–194. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Norris, Rebecca Sachs. 2012. 'Religion, Neuroscience and Emotion: Some Implications of Consumerism and Entertainment Culture.' In *Religion and the Body: Modern Science and the Construction of Religious Meaning*, edited by David Cave and Rebecca Sachs Norris, 105–128. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Otto, Rudolph. 1936 [1917]. *The Idea of the Holy*. Translated by John W. Harvey. London: Oxford University Press.
- Paden, William E. 1991. 'Before "the Sacred" Became Theological: Rereading the Durkheimian Legacy.' *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 3/1: 10–23.
- Paden, William E. 2000. 'Sacred Order.' *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* 12(1–4): 207–225.

- Penner, Hans H. 1986. 'Structure and Religion.' *History of Religions* 25(3): 236–254.
- Penner, Hans H. 1994. 'Holistic Analysis: Conjectures and Refutations.' *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 62(4): 977–996.
- Penner, Hans H. 1999. 'Why Does Semantics Matter?' In *Language, Truth, and Religious Belief: Studies in Twentieth-Century Theory and Method in Religion*, edited by Nancy K. Frankenberry and Hans H. Penner, 473–506. Atlanta: Scholars Press.
- Peregrin, Jaroslav. 2001. *Meaning and Structure: Structuralism of (Post)Analytic Philosophers*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Putnam, Hilary. 1975. 'The Meaning of "Meaning".' In *Mind, Language and Reality: Philosophical Papers Volume 2*, 215–271. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Rehman, Uzma. 2012. 'Spiritual Power and "Threshold" Identities: The Mazārs of Sayyid Pīr Waris Shāh Abdul Latīf Bhitāi.' In *South Asian Sufis: Devotion, Deviation, and Destiny*, edited by Clinton Bennett and Charles M. Ramsey, 61–81. London and New York: Continuum.
- Rennie, Bryan S. 1996. *Reconstructing Eliade: Making Sense of Religion*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Salzer, Benson. 1993. *Conceptualizing Religion: Imminent Anthropologists, Transcendent Natives, and Unbounded Categories*. Leiden: E.J. Brill.
- Schilbrack, Kevin. 2014. *Philosophy and the Study of Religions: A Manifesto*. Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Segal, Robert A. 2015. 'Sacred (the); Sacred and Profane.' In *Vocabulary for the Study of Religion*, edited by Kocku von Stuckrad and Robert A. Segal, vol. 3: 258–264. Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 1987. *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 2004a. 'The Topography of the Sacred.' In *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, 101–116. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Smith, Jonathan Z. 2004b [2002]. 'Manna, Mana Everywhere and /_/_/_.' In *Relating Religion: Essays in the Study of Religion*, 117–144. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Stausberg, Michael and Mark Q. Gardiner. 2016. 'Definition.' In *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, edited by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler, 9–32. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Taves, Ann. 2009. *Religious Experience Reconsidered: A Building Block Approach to the Study of Religion and Other Special Things*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Trexler, Richard C. 1972. 'Florentine Religious Experience: The Sacred Image.' *Studies in the Renaissance* 19: 7–41.

Wheeler, Samuel C. 1986. 'Indeterminacy of French Interpretation: Derrida and Davidson.' In *Truth and Interpretation: Perspectives on the Philosophy of Donald Davidson*, edited by Ernest LePore, 477–494. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Wheeler, Samuel C. 1993. 'Truth-Conditions, Rhetoric, and Logical Form: Davidson and Deconstruction.' In *Literary Theory after Davidson*, edited by Reed Way Dasenbrock, 144–159. University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1922. *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co.

Yelle, Robert A. 2012. *Semiotics of Religion: Signs of the Sacred in History*. London and New York: Continuum.