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A transdisciplinary approach of the need for sacred in the contemporary society

The summary of the PhD thesis

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Introduction

The itinerary of knowledge presented in this paper began with a first reading of the book “The Sacred and the Profane” of Mircea Eliade, which raised many questions about religious motivation of contemporary man. The intriguing image of the sacred hidden in the profane led to repeated outbreak of the question: “Is it possible that the areligious contemporary man, living in a secular society, still needs the sacred without realizing it?” Immediately, another fundamental question based on a psychological perspective, appeared: “Can psychology to capture this motivation?”.

The foray into the psychological literature has revealed both challenges and opportunities to address these questions. The sinuous course of the psychology of religion shows an interest of the founding fathers for the religious phenomenon and the wholeness of human being. The wish of psychology to impose itself as a science, however, led to the decrease this interest for several decades, between 1930 and 1960. But, starting with the seventh decade of last century, there is growing interest in psychology for religious and spiritual phenomenon manifested by an increased number of researches and publications in the field.

The increasing interest of psychologists for the phenomenon of religious and spirituality is an asset in trying to answer the questions listed above. Unfortunately, the researcher interested in studying the religious motivation will inevitably face a series of difficulties, such as a parallel evolution of the theory and of empirical studies without a real interconnection, an excessive disciplinary fragmentation and blast, respectively, the lack of connections between science and everyday life.

In this context, the saving solution comes from transdisciplinarity, which proposes a new methodology of knowledge, taking into account the existence of several levels of Reality of the Subject and of the Object and the complexity of the phenomena (in the sense of interconnectivity), based on the logic of included middle. The transdisciplinary model of Reality considers both: the existence of the sacred immanent in the world, whether or not this is acknowledged, and the importance of considering the relationship between the Subject and the Object in the scientific knowledge, which reintroduces the verticality of the Subject and especially the Subject – Object – Hidden Third dynamism, capturing the constant oscillation of the Subject, particularly of man, between: (1) the reality that seeks to know, (2) itself and (3) what that which is forever hidden, veiled.

The transdisciplinary knowledge does not reject the disciplinary knowledge – instead, it relies on it – but it is trying to go beyond the mentioned approaches in order to (as used in present research):

(1) Establish bridges between different disciplines studying the religious phenomenon and the need for the sacred;

(2) Establish bridges and to mediate dialogue between different forms of knowledge concerned with the sacred, the religious aspect, namely: scientific knowledge (disciplinary multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary), Traditional knowledge and art;

(3) Study the dynamics of the relationship between the knowledgeable Subject and Object of knowledge mediated by the third term, which is Hidden Third, a kind of guardian of the identity of the Object and of the Subject, enabling them the communication, even the “unity in diversity”, without allowing their fusion as it happened in different approaches of knowledge known by humanity until present.

In this context, in the current paper, we try to investigate the interest of modern man, religious or not, for the spiritual dimension. The search is conducted from a transdisciplinary perspective, needed to overcome the limits imposed by disciplinary research in order to arrive at that which is beyond any discipline, as Basarab Nicolescu says, the Subject.

Assuming a transdisciplinary position, we have to mention from the beginning that “the scientific objectivity” (the objectivity of classical science, characterized by detachment and an impersonal approach from the part of the researcher) is not an aim of this research. We rather try to attain a “*subjective objectivity*” and an “*objective subjectivity*”, having as guide and setback from deviation all the way, the permanent interrogation, the permanent checking of understanding, meaning the union of external and internal knowledge. In this context, we mention, of course, several aspects that influenced the choice of the thematic and the development of the entire research.

Therefore, it is important to mention from the beginning that the subject if this research is approached from the perspective of a researcher, psychologist, which in trying to understand the religious motivation, and to overcome the fragmentation and the limits imposed by disciplinarity, has found in transdisciplinarity the necessary resources to study “the need for the sacred of contemporary man”.

We preferred to use the expression “the need for the sacred” instead of “religious motivation”, first of all because the research is based on the lecture of Eliade’s book “The sacred and the profane”, as mentioned above, and on his idea that the sacred is a constitutive element of human consciousness. On the other hand, we used the term “sacred” as having a

broader reference as the “religious”, in accordance with the current tendency, acknowledged by the psychology of religion, to refer not only to the religious and religiosity, but to spirituality as well (as an individual, non-institutionalized search). The need for the sacred, for transcendence, encompasses both, overcoming them and having support in the transdisciplinary model of Reality.

The realization of this research did not lack difficulties and challenges. Therefore, we had to overcome the resistances related to a disciplinary approach, based on the principles of modern science, that aim to identify general laws based on experimentation and mathematical formalism. The challenge was a difficult one, an initiative journey to change mindsets and scientist tendencies, with convolution, ups and downs.

The experience we had in the early ears of childhood, in an environment where we can recognize the traditional (rural) society that Eliade speaks about, and where we could still encounter daily gestures with religious significance, was a significant influence, and it was decisive in choosing Mircea Eliade as a benchmark throughout the paper (along with admiration for the person and work of this remarkable historian of religions). The auestions this paper is based upon, also have their origin in this period, when “everything was good because was coming form God” and “the good old God” took care of everything. The experience we had in an Orthodox Christian context led to the choice of Orthodox Tradition for the search of common elements of transdisciplinarity and Christian Tradition, this being the context where the exterior knowledge meets the interior knowledge in searching for the sacred.

We established as *general objective*: the outline of a transdisciplinary perspective on the sacred and of the need for sacred of contemporary man, in comparison with other approaches to these issues.

Hence the *specific objectives* that need to be achieved in carrying out the research are:

1. The description and critical evaluation of previous approaches of the sacred and an analysis of these form a transdisciplinary perspective;
2. The analysis of religious and contemporary man (religious and areligious) from a transdisciplinary perspective;
3. The identification and analysis of the attempts of the psychology of religion to capture religious motivation, and to emphasize of the positive aspects, but also its limits from a transdisciplinary perspective;
4. The outline of a transdisciplinary perspective on the sacred;

5. The presentation of the reasons why the transdisciplinary approach, complementary to the disciplinary one, is the most adequate for the study of the sacred;
6. Supporting the idea of complementarity between disciplinary, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary approaches and transdisciplinarity for the study of the need of the sacred, based on empirical studies.

The entire paper is structured around the cross-ontological ternary Sacred - Profane – Hierophany, which is a contextualization of the transdisciplinary ternary Subject - Object - Hidden Third for the investigated problem. The red line that crosses the entire paper is the idea that the sacred and profane are two separate worlds, two conditions that the religious man assumes throughout his existence, as Eliade says, and the access of human to the sacred is possible only through hierophany, meaning through the manifestation of the sacred into the profane. The hierophany is both sacred and profane, and a gateway to the sacred.

Therefore, we could say that the study of the sacred is, after all, the study of hierophany. This is the reason why, we consider that the main ternaries crossing the thesis from the beginning to the end are:

Object – Subject – Hidden Third **Sacred – Profane - Hierophany**

Other ternaries found in the thesis, representing contextualization of the ternary Object – Subject – Hidden Third are:

- Objectivity – Subjectivity – Complexity
- Knowledge – Understanding – Being
- Materiality – Spirituality – Non-duality.

Chapter 1. The transdisciplinarity and the transdisciplinary methodology

Transdisciplinarity is born from the need to move to a new stage of knowledge in which Reality needs to be redefined and the unit of knowledge becomes an imperative. Anew Reality takes shape, one that is *multidimensional*, based on the existence of multiple levels of Reality of the Object, and *multiferential*, based on the existence of multiple levels of Reality

of the Subject. The structure of the Reality is a ternary one and assumes a dynamic relationship between the Subject, the Object and the Hidden Third.

The context of the emergency of transdisciplinarity and the challenges that led to the need for a new approach of knowledge include: the scientism, the limits of classic rationality faced with the results of quantum mechanics, the development of multivalent logics and the logic of included middle. The first definitions of transdisciplinarity capture the necessity of a new form of knowledge, different from the disciplinary, multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary knowledge. The relationship between disciplinary, multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary and transdisciplinarity is a complementary one. It seems that the natural evolution of knowledge requires leap represented by the transdisciplinary approach, which can be considered a necessity in order for the human knowledge to be put at the service of humanity and science to be made with consciousness.

A new principle of relativity arises, a principle that tells us that there is no privileged or fundamental level of Reality. Each level of Reality is what it is because all other levels are at the same time. The same idea can be extrapolated to the ternary relationship: Subject - Object - Hidden Third. Each element of this ternary is what it is because all others exist at the same time. Each is defined in relation with the other two, any exclusion leading to a distorted reality.

The need for the unity of knowledge and the new model of Reality, involving the dynamism Object – Subject – Hidden Third, make a necessity form the dialogue between science, art and Tradition. The understanding and the new definition of Reality from a transdisciplinary perspective cannot be achieved without the collaboration and the dialogue between these forms of knowledge, which complete each other.

Chapter 2. The sacred

The representation of the sacred in the scientific environment has evolved gradually from the simplification operated by sociological and ethnological theories in order to achieve the objectivity and the determinism, the more and more complex images. The reductionism of sociological approaches refers, on one hand, to the elimination of the Object and the exclusive focus on the Object, and on the other hand, to the elimination of the levels of Reality. Consequently, the levels of Reality are reduced to one, and spirituality is reduced to a social function.

Therefore, sociological approaches in the name of objectivity eliminate the Subject and the Hidden Third, reducing the whole Reality to the Object. The subject is reintroduced by the phenomenological approach, by example through the importance Rudolf Otto places on the personal experience, along with scientific (objective) knowledge, in the understanding of the religious phenomena. He considers that the religious phenomena can be studied only by someone who is from within, who had a religious experience.

The one introducing the third unifying the objectivity of scientific approaches and the subjectivity of phenomenology, is Mircea Eliade, who emphasizes the complexity of the religious phenomena. The ternary Objectivity – Subjectivity – Complexity characterizes the evolution of the study of the sacred. Eliade considers that its study cannot be reduced to only one discipline. The total human (man) involves a “total”, complex, study.

Eliade has also the merit of stressing the role of hierophanies in studying the sacred, which otherwise is an inaccessible reality. The hierophany may represent a spontaneous manifestation of the sacred in the profane, that we could call “a revelation”, or the hierophany may be invoked/ caused by religious man, by reading myths, rituals, repeated gestures of deities or heroes, respectively by symbols, in order to get in touch with the sacred. Sacred may never be known directly but only through hierophany, whatever its form, meaning through the manifestation of the sacred in something that is profane. The sacred, the profane and the hierophany, the third unifying them, constitutes one of the ternaries this thesis is based upon, and which crosses the thesis as the sacred crosses all religions, being their common element and a bridge.

Chapter 3. The religious man of the archaic and traditional societies

The religious man is presented from the perspective of Mircea Eliade – *homo religiosus* – for whom the sacred is an element of his consciousness. The religious man permanently seeks to be in touch with the sacred, and his search can be localized in space, time and through daily activities through which he seeks to imitate the gestures of deities. The access of religious man to the sacred is possible through hierophany, which, as mentioned before, is spontaneous or caused/ invoked.

Eliade’s religious man is a total human if he unifies both, the spiritual and the material dimension. We realize that in the case of *homo religiosus*, of *the total human*, described by Mircea Eliade, there is an overstatement of the spiritual dimension, similar to the overemphasize of material dimension in the case of modern, areligious, man. *Homo religiosus*

can be called a total human since he acknowledges both dimensions of his existence: the material and the spiritual ones; since he is “condemned” to a material existence, he tries to overcome it by assuming a material condition as well as a spiritual one. A new “total human” is expected, one that can oscillate in a dynamic equilibrium between spiritual and material dimension. This could be „*homo sui transcendentalis*” described by Basarab Nicolescu. But this page of humanity still remains to be written.

Chapter 4. The modern/ contemporary man faced with history and secularization

The modern man, contrary to the man of archaic societies, lost his ability to relate to the sacred in everything he does. His daily activities have no religious meaning, his house does not reflect a divine model, and his world becomes more and more secularized. According to the classic theory of secularization, in contemporary western society there is a decline of Christianity as a result of modernization - as the societies become more modern and complex they become also more rational, more individualistic and less religious.

It is found in modern society an increasing tendency to give attention mostly to the material aspect and too little attention to the spiritual dimension. The momentum taken by the material aspect in the life of modern man is highlighted by a stunning technological development, but it is accompanied, as noted by Basarab Nicolescu, by a great spiritual poverty, which manifests itself through fear, violence, hatred and dogmatism.

The areligious modern man, who loses his spiritual dimension, also loses his character of “total human” that Mircea Eliade speaks about. Without being oriented toward both dimensions, the areligious modern man is faced with the disequilibrium (that can take different forms, from the psychological disequilibrium to the physical one and disease) and with the split of his personality. The same danger faces the modern religious man also, that can be taken anytime by the materiality wave – the technological development can have extremely useful implications, but the danger of losing or ignoring the spiritual dimension is as great as the benefits.

The effects the secularization has on modern man can be disturbing at the individual level as well as at the social level. Viktor Frankl speaks about the existential vacuum of the modern man, which cannot find the meaning of his life. Losing his totality, the modern man cannot find his place in the world; he feels he lost something, but nothing can fill up this void. Carl Gustav Jung mentions the subdivision modern man’s consciousness and the danger of the split between the civilized consciousness and the primal instincts, leading to a high degree

of dissociation and mental confusion. Mircea Eliade, in an interview conducted by Paul Barbăneagră, states that a society totally non-religious could be in danger of self-destruction.

Chapter 5. The psychological approach of the religious phenomena

The presentation of the way the interest of psychologists for the religious phenomena evolved is an important aspect to understand the contributions and influences that the transdisciplinary approach can bring the future of the study and psychological methodology of this topic. The psychological study of religion was greatly influenced by the relationship between science and religion, to the extent that psychology has tried to impose itself as a scientific discipline with a rigorous methodology and a mathematical data analysis device like hard sciences.

The focus on mathematical formalism in order to identify “general laws” had as consequence the fact that many times the study of religious phenomena was centered on the common and general aspects, losing the singularity of the phenomena. And what could be more personal for the human being than the religious aspect of his life, respectively his spiritual dimension? Of course, capturing the general aspects has its importance, but especially in the study religion, extremely complex and personal (especially in the case of monotheistic religions where the personal relationship between man and God is very important) is also essential to capture the particular and singular aspects.

On the other hand, is found in psychology, as in all fields of science, a real disciplinary explosion, many new branches of psychology, and even of the psychology of religion, in particular, make their appearance. Knowledge is thus becoming more fragmented, often hindering the communication between professionals with different training, and also the possibility of obtaining a global picture of the phenomenon.

The need to overcome this moment was acknowledged by researchers in psychology of religion, Robert Emmons and Ray Paloutzian proposing a multilevel interdisciplinary paradigm in order to study the complexity of phenomena such as religious and spiritual ones. Unfortunately, there is not a comprehensive explanation of such a model yet, a model which would be extremely useful in unifying the knowledge of psychology of religion.

Also, the scientific perspective studies the sacred and religious phenomenon mostly as a social construction rather than as an immanent reality. We find that this approach from the anthropological studies on *mana* and totem to current neurobiological studies based on mental imagery which considers that God cannot exist as a concept or reality other than in our mind.

The study of religious motivation is quite dispersed and reduced. The strongest direction of study and research was given by Allport's theory on religious orientation. According to this theory, people may have an intrinsic religious orientation or extrinsic religious orientation. Another direction of study of religious motivation, which is developing rapidly in recent years, is the assessment of personal goals. It seems that these goals consistently related with the well being enter the following categories: privacy, generativity and spirituality.

Chapter 6. The sacred and the transdisciplinary model of Reality

The novelty brought by transdisciplinarity concerning the sacred is, on the one hand, the fact that the need to acknowledge the sacred arises among the scientists, and it pursues a rigorous methodology. On the other hand, transdisciplinarity tries to capture what across and beyond all forms of spiritual and religious experience and expression. The result of our enterprise to summarize here the transdisciplinary perspective on the sacred shows us that what has emerged so far in this respect may be surprised in the following model of the sacred:

- immanent and transcendent in the same time;
- rational, but non-rationalizable, in a single word, transparent;
- transparent and, though, absolute resistance in the conditions of harmony and communication between the Subject and the Object;
- constitutive to the Subject, and to the Object and mediator Third between them;
- permanently in dialogue with the Subject in search for meaning, and mediator of the dialog between the Subject and the Object;
- source of the self-consistency of outer and inner world.

The common elements of the transdisciplinary approach of the sacred and those of the Orthodox Christian Tradition include, first, the idea and apophatic and cataphatic knowledge of the sacred and God. The idea the "transparency of God" from the *Dogmatic* of father Dumitru Staniloae converges with the idea of transparency of the sacred in transdisciplinarity. The need for a constant effort in order to reach a sacred, respectively to the experience mysterious presence of God in the Orthodox Tradition, emphasizes the fact that to the sacred and to God arrives the one who is willing to make the effort and to make sacrifices, until becoming dead for the common world.

The fact that the symbolic thinking is specific for the religious and spiritual experience, where ordinary thinking (binary) stops and no longer has access, explains why and how art, through metaphor and symbol can be a gateway to the sacred.

Chapter 7. The necessity of a transdisciplinary approach in the study of the sacred

Seeking a more detailed description of the role the transdisciplinary approach has for the study of sacred, we tried, in fact, to emphasize the strengths that can be for the benefit of researches in the psychology of religion if we complementary combine the disciplinary methodology with the transdisciplinary one. Prior to estimate the impact of such a communion, er recapitulate these advantages:

- (1) postulating the existence of the sacred by considering the transparency areas;
- (2) the acknowledgement of the double nature and of the orientation of the Subject both, toward the Object and the Hidden Third;
- (3) the impossibility of an adequate relationship between the Subject and the Object without the mediator Third (because the meaning can only be found in the harmony of the Subject and of the Object due to the mediation of the Third);
- (4) transdisciplinarity as mediator between science and religion for the reinvestment of daily activities with a religious significance;
- (5) transdisciplinarity as mediator between science, Tradition and art as forms of knowledge in order to construct a more coherent model of Reality;
- (6) transdisciplinarity as mediator between *homo economicus* and *homo religiosus*;
- (7) the metaphor and the symbol – pathways to the sacred through the metamorphosis of the transparency in resistance under the “poetic regard” of the Subject;
- (8) the recovery of mystery and of the possibility of the miracle through the postulate of the zones of transparency and the gödelian nature of knowledge.

The complementary use of quantitative and qualitative methods in psychological research is a first step in integrating the transdisciplinary vision. The transdisciplinary model of reality provides the context for the development of the multilevel paradigm proposed by Emmons and Paloutzian. Using a transdisciplinary attitude will also facilitate the dialogue of psychology with other disciplines and forms of knowledge in studying the sacred.

Chapter 8. Empirical results in support of a transdisciplinary approach of the need for the sacred

The results of the two empirical studies conducted surprise, first of all, the fact that the spirituality belongs to an unseen world, and to arrive there we need to go beyond science (to the Tradition and art), and secondly we have highlighted the complexity of the search for meaning of human being. Finding the meaning is equivalent reconsidering the spiritual dimension, and retrieving the contact with the sacred. For some people this is achieved by establishing a relationship with God, for others it's done indirectly by finding the things that matter in life.

The results of the studies and the examples given, stress the need for a transdisciplinary approach of the topic treated in this thesis. But the complexity of the phenomenon makes it difficult to surprise it in only a few examples. Like the meaning of human being, this search can be a constant. It matters, however, the opening you have in addressing these things - openness to dialogue, but also to the unknown.

Chapter 9. General conclusions

The transdisciplinarity brings a new perspective on the world, the human being and the knowledge. This is complementary to the disciplinary knowledge and the most appropriate to the comprehensive study of the sacred. The study of the sacred is, in fact, the study of the hierophany, third between the sacred and the profane.

The search for the sacred by invoking or inducing the hierophany is the main characteristic of the religious man. Eliade calls him the "total man/ human being", which integrates both, the physical and the spiritual dimension. The modern man mainly oriented towards the material dimension loses his centrality and integrity tending toward the split of his personality.

But it appears that the interest in the sacred, the transcendent, persists, even if perhaps not in the same way and equally. But this interest is no longer included, most of the time, according to the directions of certain religions. It seems that many people prefer a personal search of the sacred. Whatever the form of search, the sacred is accessible only to the one that searches and is willing to make sacrifices. The search for the sacred is a prerequisite for its finding.

From a transdisciplinary point of view, the sacred is what crosses and is beyond all religions and forms of spiritual expression. The transdisciplinary perspective on the sacred should not be confused with a religion or a philosophy. The transdisciplinary model of the

sacred outlined in this thesis cannot be a substitute for any religion. It may, however, constitute the object of dialogue between any religion or spiritual movement.

The trasdisciplinary model of the sacred outlined in this thesis can be enhanced by further studies. The transdisciplinary attitude can provide context for the necessary dialogue in order to develop those future studies. In the development of future directions of study is also important to consider the impact that the transdisciplinary approach can have on research conducted in the psychology of religion.

The complementarity of disciplinary and transdisciplinary approach, where is a constant effort to integrate the knowledge gained through disciplinary research in a complex model of Reality, is an aim for reinvestment of scientific knowledge with an ontological status.

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