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HOMO RELIGIOSUS: REASONS FOR A RECONSIDERATION

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Abstract: Discussions on Mircea Eliade's contributions to the study of religion are often focus on his controversial notion of the sacred, mainly deployed in his work *The sacred and the Profane* (1959). However, it is often disregarded that Eliade understands the sacred as closely related with another key notion: the *homo religiosus*. Because this notion has been overlooked and understudied, the purpose of this writing is to reconsider the value of the 'homo religiosus' and advocate for its legitimacy through a two-step argumentation. Firstly, departing from Eliade's understanding of the *homo religiosus*, its meaning and implications will be briefly exposed. Secondly, a justification of the validity of this expression will be attempted through a subject-object approach and the application of the philosophical principle of *operari sequitur esse*. While the former means that the *homo religiosus* (subject) is always understood as operating in relation with something else (object), the latter allows to account for the implications of this expression through its effects, as this principle states that every being operates according to its ontological constitution. This paper proposes six ways in which the validity of the *homo religiosus* can be justified through this reasoning: while three of them are alternative approaches from different disciplines, the other three are paradoxically based on the anti-religious argumentations of Nietzsche, Marx and Freud.

Key words: Mircea Eliade – Homo Religiosus – Religion – The Sacred – *operari sequitur esse*

1. Approaching the notion of ‘homo religiosus’

Discussions on Mircea Eliade’s contributions to the study of religion are often focus on his controversial notion of the sacred. This concept is presented by Eliade in *The sacred and the Profane* (1959) as an emerging “something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world” (11). Though interesting, Eliade has been harshly accused of essentializing religion through this ontological understanding of *the sacred* and its relationship with *the profane*. However, these critiques often disregard the fact that Eliade understands the sacred closely related with another key notion: the *homo religiosus*. In fact, in Eliade’s bidimensional cosmology, when *the sacred* breaks through *the profane* world (1959, 30), it always triggers a religious response on human beings (1959, 151) because they are considered ‘*homo religiosus*’, which means naturally capable of religious understanding and behaviour.

While Eliade’s ontological conceptualization of the sacred is indeed controversial and most of its critiques might be well-grounded, the implications of the *homo religiosus* can still be relevant. Therefore, this essay attempts to go beyond Eliade’s contribution and advocate for the legitimacy of this expression, ‘*homo religiosus*’, through a two-step argumentation. Firstly, departing from Eliade’s understanding of the *homo religiosus* (1959), its meaning and implications will be briefly exposed. Secondly, a justification of the validity of this expression will be attempted through a subject-object approach and the application of the philosophical principle of “*operari sequitur esse*”. While the former means that the *homo religiosus* (subject) is always understood as operating in relation with something else (object), the latter allows to account for the implications of this expression through its effects, as this principle states that every being operates according to its ontological constitution. Different examples of how this combination may advocate for the *homo religiosus* will be proposed.

What the expression ‘*homo religiosus*’ mainly suggest is that human beings are religious by nature. This implies the recognition of a natural capacity to understand and engage with realities considered sacred, regardless of whether the sacred is understood as an independent reality (Eliade 1959, 11 and 27) or as a human construction (Lynch 2011, 20). Moreover, because this capacity is natural, even though it can be differently nurtured (Alvis 2019, 14), it cannot be suppressed (Cervigni 2007, 16; Eliade 1959, 23). Interestingly, this capacity also “operates with a latent religious drive or activity” (Alvis 2019, 11) that cannot be universalized (Asad 1993, 29; McKay & Whitehouse 2015, 455), because the encounter with a sacred reality from which these religious expressions emerge are always subjective and situated in a particular historical

circumstance (Eliade 1959, 17 and 202; Rennie 2007, 84). Therefore, the *homo religiosus* “does not belong only to a traditional cultural framework” (Frunză 2019, 158) and does not claim for a unique religious behaviour, a necessary belonging to an institutionalized religion or the recognition of an objective and ontologically unique sacred thing. On the contrary, the *homo religiosus* implies the assumption of a natural capacity to recognize and engage with a reality considered sacred (i.e. places, time, objects, rituals; cf. Eliade 1959) through acts of sacralization and distinctive behaviours broadly conceived as spiritual or religious (Mcpherson 2015, 336-7; Watson 2008, 54).

It should be noted that the assessment and acceptance of the *homo religiosus* may differ among traditions and scholars. In the Catholic tradition, for example, this notion is unproblematically recognized, not only by particular thinkers (e.g. Giussani 2014, 45) but also by Popes’ declarations (Benedict XVI 2011; 2012; Francis 2013, §2; John Paul II 1998, §81) and other official documents of the Catholic Church (1992, §28; 2004, §7). However, other scholars (e.g. Dubuisson 2003, 173; McCutcheon 2003, 206; Segal 1983, 99; Smith 2004, 7; mostly referred in: Apple 2013), straightforwardly criticize and reject the implications of the *homo religiosus*. Therefore, because it is not ubiquitously accepted, an attempt to account for this notion will be proposed by adopting a subject-object approach that applies the philosophical principle of “*operari sequitur esse*”, which basically states that the ontological constitution of an agent determines the kind of actions that can be executed by that agent (Jałochowski-Palicka 2014, 130 and 152).

2. The relationship between the *homo religiosus* and the sacred

It has already been stated that the *homo religiosus* claims for a natural capacity on human beings to recognize a sacred reality and potentially engage with it adopting a religious behaviour (Chrétien 2000, 147). Therefore, there is a subject-object relationship between humans understood as religious beings and realities perceived as sacred (Alvis 2019, 5; Zdybicka 2016, 290). In this relationship, the *homo religiosus* is more clearly conceived in connection with the sacred rather than with *religion* for two reasons. First, because *religion* is an overwhelmingly more problematic concept (Capps 1995, 1; Mutuvi 2018, 29; Fitzgerald 2000, 9), often associated with institutionalized belongings and practices (Mcpherson 2015, 336). Secondly, because *sacred* is a broader concept than *religion*. Indeed, while “there is no religion, however unified it may be, that does not acknowledge a plurality of sacred things” (Durkheim 1995, 21), the sacred is not always presented as part of a certain *religion*.

A certain reality can be considered sacred when it is conceived as highly valuable (Lynch 2011, 24), absolute, ultimate and normative (Alvis

2019, 1-2; Mcpherson 2015, 337; Roberts 2014, 229). In other words, the sacred represents “the real *par excellence* and at once power, efficacy, the source of life and fecundity” (Eliade 1959, 28. Quoted by: Frunză 2019, 158), regardless of whether the particular reality considered sacred actually possess these features or not. Therefore, there is no need to neither adopt an ontological and transcendent understanding of the sacred (Cottingham 2014, 61-2) nor to circumscribe it to a certain institutionalized religion in order to justify the validity of this relationship. In fact, the human capacity to identify something as sacred and religiously engage with it, claimed by the *homo religiosus*, operates regardless of whether the sacred is considered objectively independent or humanly constructed.

Therefore, despite of implying each other, it is crucial to highlight that the validity of the *homo religiosus* does not rely on the nature of the sacred or the origin of its sacredness. Because “the whole of life is capable of being sanctified” (Eliade 1959, 167), even if there is no objective sacredness to religiously engage with, the *homo religiosus* can still attribute the status of sacred to any reality and establish a religious relationship with it. Consequently, what the *homo religiosus* implies is that every human being has this natural capacity to engage with the sacred, regardless of whether the sacredness of that reality is considered inbuilt or humanly attributed through acts of sacralization. In any case, just as Durkheim stated, it is always possible “to point out a certain number of readily visible outward features that allow us to recognize religious phenomena wherever they are encountered” (1995, 21).

Moreover, because it does not rely on how the sacred is conceived and how the *homo religiosus* engages with that reality, this relationship can be differently understood. In the Christian tradition, for example, the sacred is identified with God and the *homo religiosus* responds to Him through acts of faith (Balthasar 1982, 136), prayers (Chrétien 2015, 78) or any other expression considered religious (Jung & Jaffé 1995, 306). Differently, Mcpherson (2015) prefers to understand this relationship in ethical terms, where the sacred “makes normative demands upon us for certain ways of feeling and acting in relationship to it” (338). Moreover, Roberts (2014) highlights the fact that humans can also behave religiously towards mundane realities previously sacralised, such as a soccer league or online gaming (229).

Similarly, while Frunză (2019) states that postmodern human beings have sacralised the whole digital world (164), Lynch (2011) recognizes that “Gender, human rights, the care of children, nature, and the neo-liberal marketplace all have sacralised significance in modern social life” (5). Lastly, Everett and his colleagues (2018) went even further in this issue and suggested that humans had(can?) never been(be?) really secular because “the secular is itself a manifestation of formal religiosity” (1122). All these examples do not suggest that sports or videogames might be considered religions; instead, they point out that, through this capacity, humans can

sacralise any mundane reality and perceived it as sacred as any sacred reality pertaining to a certain institutionalized religion.

Interestingly, despite of not relying on the nature of the sacred, the validity of the *homo religiosus* is granted by the existence of sacred realities, because sacredness can only be identified or constructed by a religious capacity. In other words, because the human religious capacity operates identifying and engaging with the sacred, the recognition of the existence of sacred realities is an argument in favour of the validity of the *homo religiosus*. As it has already been said, the sacred can be conceived as an objective reality or humanly constructed.

On the one hand, if the sacred is considered an ontologically independent reality that “manifest itself” (Eliade 1959, 30), the implications of the *homo religiosus* can be justified, for example, by Eliade’s argumentation: the world is so “impregnated with sacredness” (1959, 116) and man are so naturally religious that “even the most desacralized existence still preserves traces of a religious valorization of the world” (23) and nobody “however irreligious, is entirely insensible to the charm of nature” (151). On the other hand, if the sacred is considered a human construction (Lynch 2011, 15), the *homo religiosus* will first have to sacralise a certain reality before assuming a religious behaviour towards it.

Interestingly, even though acts of sacralisation are not always conscious and voluntary, as many times realities are unwillingly sacralised, these acts can still be identified through their effects. Addictions are an illustrative example of this phenomenon. In fact, the word ‘addict’ comes from the Latin verb *addico*, which means “consecrate” (Morwood 2005, ‘addico’), that is “to officially make something holy and able to be used for religious ceremonies” (Cambridge online dictionary, ‘consecrate’). Therefore, such etymology clearly states that addictions, which many times are involuntary, trigger the same normative behaviour previously attributed to the engagement with the sacred (Manoussakis 2019, 51). Accordingly, in these cases the natural religious capacity might be justified with the application of the metaphysical maxim of *operari sequitur esse*, which will allow to recognize the *homo religiosus* through its acts of sacralization and religious behaviours.

3. *Operari sequitur esse*: a philosophical approach to the *homo religiosus*

Stating that “being precedes acting and becoming” (Jałoch-Palicka 2014, 152), what this philosophical principle mainly explains is that the actions of a certain agent must be proportional to the ontological constitution of that agent: “*Qualis modus essendi, talis modus operandi*” (Bretzke 2013, 255). Therefore, this principle allows to state that constitutive features of a certain being can be discovered through its

actions and their effects. A plant, for example, can execute actions of nutrition and growth, but it cannot move from one place to another. A stone, on the contrary, is unable to execute any of these actions. Therefore, if an unknown being manifest actions of nourishment, it could be a plant, but not a stone. Moreover, if the same being can also self-relocate, it is neither a stone nor a plant but something else.

The appliance of this principle on human's behaviours and actions allows to discover different human capacities. For example, the identification of different languages, artistic expressions, social organizations and manufactures among human beings, allow to recognize humans (*homo*) as speakers (*loquens*), artists (*aestheticus/poeticus*), social beings (*sociologicus*) and makers (*faber*). Because these capacities are not circumscribed to a certain culture or historical context, they are considered inbuilt on human nature, which means that every human being has the capacity to potentially engage in some way with language, art, society and manufactures. Moreover, these capacities do not need to be ubiquitously and homogeneously developed in order to be recognized as natural, because they are differently exploited. Even though judging and measuring how these capacities are differently developed is a complex issue that exceeds the purposes of this essay, it can still be affirmed that every human can understand and engage with art or tools without necessarily being Shakespeare or Da Vinci. Therefore, every human being is naturally *homo loquens* (Goucha et al. 2017, 213), *homo poeticus* (Juri 2015, 218), *homo sociologicus* (Subrt 2017, 242-253) and *homo faber* (Ferraro & Reid 2013, 128).

Following the same argumentation, humans can also be considered naturally *homo religiosus*. One way of advocating for this expression is through its similarity with the human's natural capacities previously presented. In fact, just as the *Homo Loquens* can produce different languages, the *Homo poeticus* can produce different forms of art and the *Homo faber* can built different tools, the *homo religiosus* can sacralise different things and assume a religious behaviour towards them. Moreover, as they are all natural, these capacities are interconnected. Mcpherson (2015), for instance, presents the *Homo Loquens* as a condition for engaging with the sacred, (341-2), which is the main activity of the *homo religiosus*. Similarly, exploiting Heidegger's intuition that "the poet names the holy" (1949, 391), Juri (2015) straightforwardly states that the *homo religiosus* and the *homo poeticus* converge in the human experience of amazement (218-221). Lastly, Roberts (2014) suggests that the activities and point of view of the *homo religiosus* might enrich how the *homo economicus* operates. Even though all these interconnections and similarities are not probative, they are still indirect recognitions of a religious capacity on human beings. However, at least three arguments based on the recognition of religious acts and behaviours can be suggested as more direct justifications of the *homo religiosus*.

4. Three argumentations in favour of the *homo religiosus*

Firstly, Holmes' (1996) intends to justify the *homo religiosus* through a neuroscientific study of the brain's activity. This investigation recognizes that, even though the brain operates in every being as a meaning maker, "the categories of meaning depend upon brain structure" (446). Accordingly, the way humans perceive and understand reality reveals the constitution of their brain: *operari sequitur esse*. Therefore, because human beings can identify something as "ultimately significant" (444), their brain must be "equipped with more access to meaning than mere social pride and prejudice" (453). Holmes (1996) describes this capacity for conceiving an absolute reality (the sacred) as a "religious understanding" (452) that is not present in other animals (445) and can only be executed by humans after becoming "the religious human being that we are today" (451). Even though this statement is not ubiquitously accepted among scholars (e.g. Goodall 2005), because a "functioning cortex (and subcortical structures) is necessary for an intelligent, conscious, religious activity" (449), the recognition of this religious understanding supposes that human beings are naturally capable of behaving religiously due to their brain structure.

Secondly, a different justification might be provided by the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR). In fact, the CSR recognizes a hypersensitive agency detection device (HADD) on human beings, which is an inbuilt capacity that tends to assume the intervention on certain experiences of unknown agents, which could be potentially supernatural (Barret 2007, 773; McKay & Whitehouse 2015, 455). Whether they exist or not, these kinds of supernatural agents belong to a transcendent or *sacred* reality (Maij et al. 2019, 24). Therefore, with the recognition of an inbuilt capacity to postulate the intervention of these beings and behave accordingly towards them (McKay & Whitehouse 2015, 458-65) the CSR is indirectly accounting for the *homo religiosus*. It should be reminded at this point that the validity of the natural religious capacity does not rely on whether the sacred or a supernatural agent exists or not, because in both cases humans can naturally understand the implications of their existence and adopt a religious behaviour towards it. Consequently, the identification of the HADD might also work as another way of accounting for this religious capacity (Maij et al. 2019, 23).

Thirdly, another justification of the *homo religiosus* can be underpinned by Carl Jung's theory of the collective unconscious and the archetypes, which are defined as "a collective *a priori* beneath the personal psyche" (Jung & Jaffé 1995, 199). In other words, an archetype represents a pre-conscious common background for every personal psyche (Jung 1970, §13). Witzel (2012) explains that the recognition of an archetype, often used to explain cross-cultural myths (23), allows to account for the

existence of universal ideas, behaviours or features inbuilt on every human being (12). Interestingly, Jung does not only identify 'God' as an archetypal figure (Jung 1969, §5 and §149), but also states that there are objective religious values, "founded on a consensus omnium" and "universally recognized [as] ideals or feeling-toned collective ideas" (Jung 1970, §54). Therefore, grounded on the existence of these universal religious values, the personal psyche "spontaneously produces images with a religious content, that it is 'by nature religious'" (Jung & Jaffé 1995, 10). Consequently, even though the scope and validity of this theory is debatable (Witzel 2012, 13), Jung's recognition of collective "religious ideas" and "the attitude resulting from them" (Jung 1970, §33) works as another possible justification of the *homo religiosus*, because it presupposes the existence of a natural religious capacity to understand those ideas and adopt a subsequent suitable (religious) behaviour.

5. The paradox of anti-religious argumentations

Differently though more interestingly, justifications of the *homo religiosus* might also be paradoxically found in modern critiques of religion, which often (probably unwillingly albeit unavoidably) end up presupposing a natural religious capacity on human beings. For instance, Risoto de Mesa (2014) points out that, even though modern positivism implies a rejection of the sacred (45), it still operates religiously, which is perceived in how humans sacralise and adopt a religious behaviour towards its scientific concepts (40). Moreover, Watson (2008) shows how spirituality is also recognized by the atheistic worldviews of B. Russell and J. P. Sartre, which still operate as "systems of belief" (51) and "offer much that is spiritually and morally uplifting" (53). Similarly, other major intellectuals of modernity such as Nietzsche, Marx and Freud are "often perceived as offering ideas to replace or dissolve religious ways of thinking" (Erickson 2007, 7). However, there is no need to detailly engage with these authors to suggest that they are unable to completely reject the implications of the *homo religiosus*, as they "offered secular narratives of redemption that bear strong similarities to Christian narratives" (Everett et al. 2018, 1136; Taylor 2008, 182).

Firstly, Nietzsche's stand for "a new spiritual sensibility" is usually overshadowed by the undeniable fact that he is "highly critical of a certain religiosity" (Roberts 1998, 5). Indeed, it is often overlooked that Nietzsche's rejection to a certain conception of religion does not necessarily imply a negation of a religious sense on humans. In fact, Nietzsche recognizes the natural human capacity to sacralise different realities in the same paragraph in which he sentences the death of God: "God is dead (...) How shall we comfort ourselves? (...) What sacred games shall we have to invent?" (Nietzsche 1974, §125). According to the

philosophical principle previously applied (*operari sequitur esse*), new “sacred games” could only be created and subsequently understood by religious beings. Therefore, in Nietzsche’s radical nihilism humans still preserve a religious capacity and can be considered *homo religiosus*.

Secondly, the case of Marx is even more paradoxical. In fact, despite of representing a vigorous attempt to demolish religion, Marxism still remains quite religious, as it “reflects eschatological views in its belief in an absolute end to history” (Mutuvi 2018, 33) and is “imbued by a whole Judeo-Christian messianic ideology” (Cervigni 2007, 12). Moreover, when Marx states that “man makes religion” (1843, §3) he is presupposing, as any other constructivist approach, a human capacity to understand and behave religiously towards a previously created religion or any other sacralised reality. Moreover, albeit in pejorative terms, Marx explicitly recognizes the existence of a religious capacity on humans: “Religious estrangement as such occurs only in the realm of *consciousness*, of man’s inner life” (1844, §10). Therefore, in atheistic Marxism there is also place for an understanding of human beings as religious or, at least, as capable of behaving religiously towards a certain reality or ideology.

Thirdly, Freud understands religion as “the universal obsessional neurosis of mankind” (Kovel 1990, 70). Regardless of being “unable to restrain his disdain for religion” (Kenny 2014, 74), Freud states that “the great majority of mortals” behave religiously (Freud 1930, 74), which means: *as if* religion is true (Freud 1927, 29–34). Again, according to what it has been said above, independently of the nature and purpose of religion and the connotation attributed to a religious life, the identification of this capacity to behave religiously is enough justification of the *homo religiosus*. Therefore, a natural religious capacity on human beings can also be recognized in Freud’s antireligious psychoanalysis. Lastly, it is interesting to note that Carl Jung, who also belongs to the psychoanalytic tradition, has identified in Freud’s thought “the eruption of unconscious religious factors” (Jung & Jaffé 1995, 187).

Further similar argumentations could be proposed in addition to all the presented examples if the relationship between the sacred and the *homo religiosus* is recognized as grounded on other human activities. For instance, Giussani (2014, 45) and John Paul II (1998, §81) understand the natural capacity to ask ultimate questions as a universal feature of the *homo religiosus*. Moreover, Durkheim seems to identify a close connection between the sacred, morality and religious life, as he attempted to “give a rational understanding of the sacred based on an emerging morality which could thus be strengthen and made more effective” (Pickering 2009, 23). Interestingly, these two ways of identifying the human religious sense are jointly addressed by Zdybicka (2016, 288 and 293). Differently, other authors base this relationship on certain human feelings and sensations, such as a “feeling of dependence” (Otto 1958, 9), a distinctive “awe and fear” (Kreeft 1989, 97), or the experience of “authentic joy” (Lewis 1955,

72), through which “we can be prompted along toward transcendence by means of it” (Puckett & Linville 2013, 18). According to Puckett and Linville (2013), these understandings assume the recognition of an inbuilt desire for transcendence on human beings, which recalls the antique Augustinian intuition: “You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in You” (Augustine *Conf.* 1. 1).

6. Conclusion

Everything considered, it should be noted that none of the arguments exposed in this essay represents an irrefutable demonstration of the *homo religiosus*. In fact, because attempting “to overcome or make explicit how religion is implicit (...) would amount to attempting to unveil that which by necessity must to some degree remain hidden and inconspicuous” (Alvis 2019, 2), the validity of the *homo religiosus* cannot be strictly demonstrated. However, even though these arguments are limited and can be further discussed, they might still contribute to the identification of the expression ‘*homo religiosus*’ as valid and valuable for religious studies.

In conclusion, through this essay it has been suggested that the expression ‘*homo religiosus*’ mainly implies the recognition a natural capacity on human beings to identify a certain reality as sacred and subsequently adopt a religious behaviour towards it. Such human capacity is always in relation with a reality considered *sacred*, which can be conceived as objective independent or as humanly constructed through acts of sacralisation. The claimed capacity operates almost in the same way in both cases, with the only difference that, from a constructivist point of view, instead of recognizing the sacred, humans must previously sacralise a certain reality before religiously engaging with it. Therefore, because it operates independently of how the sacred is conceived, the natural capacity claimed by the *homo religiosus* does not rely on an ontological understanding of sacred realities or the assumption of a particular religious worldview. Similarly, because there is not a unique way of recognizing and religiously engaging with the sacred, this capacity transcends every cultural and historical context and can be nurtured and expressed through incredibly different and mutually enriching ways. In summary, this essay represents an attempt to show how, implicitly or explicitly, this capacity is recognized by different disciplines, approaches and understandings of human beings and their relationship with religion or *the sacred*, even by those considered antireligious.

Nonetheless, the identification of this common assumption does not account for all the implications of the *homo religiosus* and other problematic issues related with the study of religion. For instance, how this capacity is nurtured, how it can be considered more or less developed in each subject, or what exactly means to adopt a religious behaviour, are

all crucial questions triggered by the assumption of the *homo religiosus* that had not been addressed in this investigation. More importantly, the understanding of the *homo religiosus* as a capacity may controversially conceive the absence or non-identification of religious behaviours as a disability, which is a problematic conclusion that demands further explanations. Therefore, even though the purpose of this essay was circumscribed to providing arguments for the recognition of this natural religious capacity, its implications claim for further investigations.

More positively, the recognition of this capacity allows a reciprocal enrichment between different approaches to religion, which might be a useful contribution to religious studies. In fact, even though the Catholic tradition, the CSR, Jung, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche or any other thinker reflecting on this topic may have different appreciations and understandings of the origin, purpose and utility of religion, their argumentations always provide complementary insights to the *homo religiosus*, which is always somehow assumed. Therefore, the complexities of the study of religion can be more consistently addressed if it is recognized that there is a commonly presupposed natural capacity on human beings to differently engage with a sacred reality through religious acts and behaviours, on which all these apparently irreconcilable contributions might converge and complement each other.

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