Sacralisation – the role of individual actors in legitimising religion

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Abstract: The article makes a contribution to the study of religion by developing the analytical concept of sacralisation as the process whereby individual religious actors and groups construct religious tradition by attributing value to single ideas and practices. The concept of sacralisation helps us understand how religious actors engage with their religious tradition and participate in constructing it by legitimising its single elements. The sacred is thus understood as constructed by religious actors as that which is of value for them and distinctive of their specific tradition. This concept has been developed from a three-year long ethnographic research in a Christian evangelical church and is illustrated through an analysis of the research data.

Keywords: sacred; religion; tradition; individuals; ethnography; religious change

The role of individuals in shaping religion

The contemporary Anglo-American paradigm of individual autonomy is often seen as opposed to tradition and religious authorities, and a threat to them. Individuals are no longer able to connect to religious tradition, intended as a ‘chain of memory’ (Hervieu-Léger 2000) that gives meaning and binds the individual to the community. This understanding of tradition as a grand narrative being eroded by modern individual autonomy obfuscates how religious actors refer to tradition in constructing their religious identity and shape tradition itself. This article argues that individual religious actors legitimise ideas and practices they value by engaging with a shared tradition and as part of a community. Based on ethnographic data in a Christian evangelical church, the article shows that it is individuals’ embeddedness in their religious community and their engagement with tradition that makes possible for them to shape and legitimise tradition. Consequently, adherence to religious norms and practices is not merely an autonomous
choice of the individual, but an expression of identity and commitment (Montemaggi 2013).

Religious actors’ identity rests on their commitment to tradition. This does not imply an unquestioning adherence; rather individuals shape their religious identity in groups and in relation to what they understand to be their tradition. Therefore, it is important to analyse how individuals subscribe to religious ideas and practices and thus contribute in legitimising them. This article proposes the concept of sacralisation to further the understanding of the construction and legitimisation of religious tradition. Sacralisation is the process whereby individual religious actors bestow value to ideas and practices and recognise them as legitimate part of tradition. The sacred derives from this process and is that which religious actors consider of value and distinctive of their religious tradition. The sacred, therefore, is always constructed in reference to a specific religious culture, which includes narratives belonging to a specific denomination as well as more general narratives.

The article argues that individuals and groups construct religious tradition by interpreting it and granting legitimacy to its norms and practices from below. Religious tradition is thus constantly being reinterpreted and constructed not only by religious authorities, but also by individuals and groups. Religious actors, as demonstrated by the analysis of ethnographic data, vary in what they consider sacred and that they are more likely to construct successfully the sacred by employing narratives of their shared tradition. The sacred is, therefore, not an essential property of a religious object, idea or practice; rather it is derived from religious actors’ reference to tradition. For instance, giving to the poor is sacralised by religious actors through reference to traditional texts and practices. The process of sacralisation legitimises practices and ideas with reference to tradition and making them part of tradition. The process is inherently circular for tradition is always being reinterpreted in relation to changed social circumstances.

The proposed concept of sacralisation accounts specifically for the contribution of individual actors in legitimising tradition, rather than presenting a model of social relationships in the religious realm. The focus is on the active part played by individual religious actors in interpreting and legitimising tradition, rather than textual exegesis (Bielo 2008a, 2008b). It is envisaged that the concept will illuminate how successful religious transformation happens, how actors construct continuity with the past, what makes some changes more durable than others and how some innovation fails. The next section presents a review of current uses of the term sacralisation that are relevant to the discussion. The article then outlines the definition of sacralisation as an analytical tool to better comprehend the role of individual actors in constructing and legitimising religious tradition. This is illustrated by data gathered from interviews and participant observation during a three-year ethnographic project.

**The term ‘sacralisation’**

The term sacralisation is employed across disciplines to identify different phenomena. In psychology of religion, sacralisation is the recognition of something as sacred, while, in ‘fandom’ studies, it identifies community formation around shared beliefs and interests, which is considered akin to religious belonging. The following consideration of the use of
the term sacralisation seeks to point to some common traits on which to build a framework for the understanding of the role of individual religious actors in valuing and legitimising religious tradition. In particular, I wish to adopt the term sacralisation to identify the attribution of value that shapes a shared identity by codifying common values, customs, beliefs, myths and rituals. Codification is a feature of the notion of the sacralisation of politics put forward by historian Emilio Gentile, who devotes several studies to his notion of politics as religion (2001, 2004). He develops the concept of sacralisation on the basis of his work on totalitarian political movements (Gentile 1990, 2000). Sacralisation thus refers to politics acquiring a ‘religious dimension’ (2000, 22). Religion, for Gentile, is a system of beliefs and myths that define values and ethics. The sacralisation of politics takes place ‘when politics is conceived, lived and represented through myths, rituals and symbols that demand faith in the sacralised secular entity, dedication among the community of believers’ (2000, 21). In this framework, sacralisation identifies the process whereby political beliefs and movements assume the characteristics of religion by making political ideas, symbols and myths, such as the nation, sacred.

The sacred is, for Gentile, that which is of ultimate value, what gives meaning and purpose to life. Accordingly, the sacralisation of the nation, as in the case of Italian Fascism, is the recognition of the nation as being of ultimate value. Gentile understands the sacred in universalist and essentialist terms, rather than seeing it as constructed. This is problematic because it leaves little room for an appreciation of changes, or at least development, of values depending on the social context. Further, his notion of sacralisation rests on religion being understood as a coherent system of beliefs, myths, rituals and symbols, which fails to account for the internal diversity of all religious traditions (Ammerman 2010), and for the continuity and change of religions (Robbins 2003, 2007). Further, Gentile’s focus is on how the Fascist movement, as a whole, was able to sacralise a particular view of the nation, which leaves unexplored the role of ordinary Italians in accepting Fascist beliefs, myths and rituals and the extent of the penetration of Fascist ideology. In contrast, the notion of sacralisation I put forward emphasises how individuals engage with tradition in constructing the sacred in their everyday lives.

In sociology, sacralisation is mentioned in relation to the phenomenon of Star Trek fandom. Jindra (1994) argues that Star Trek ‘fandom’ can be considered a religious phenomenon due to the sacralisation of shared elements of culture, the formation of distinctive communities, the development of a canon and the presence of official authorities. Sacralisation here entails ‘deep-seated American beliefs about the nature of humankind, the world and its future, and encourages the practices that parallel religious processes of codifying, forming a community and developing institutions to guide its practices’ (1994, 50). Jindra’s sacralisation (2005) is based on shared beliefs and belonging to an identified community through a process of codification. Here, religion is understood as a set of codified practices and beliefs which form a community whose institutions reinforce religious codification. Like Gentile, Jindra points to the presence of a ‘canon’ identifying what is officially part of the ‘Star Trek universe’. Star Trek thus becomes a ‘body of knowledge that is continually being added to and revised’ (1994, 46).
Jindra’s sociological outlook makes him more attuned to how Star Trek fans receive, interpret and contribute to the Star Trek universe. The identity of fans rests on belief and belonging; yet Jindra’s research does not consider how single practices or ideas become part of the canon and thus gain legitimacy, whether some fans have more influence than others, and what criteria are employed to accept or reject innovation. Another interpretation on the formation of the sacred outside of traditional religion comes from Rothenbuhler (2005). Reflecting on the cult of the individual in modern society, he proposes seeing celebrity culture as part of the religion of the individual. Following Durkheim, Rothenbuhler argues that in this ‘new, modern religion, the individual is sacred’ (2005, 92). The celebrity phenomenon is thus a form of worship sustained by the media and consumer culture. Accordingly, ‘the media system of consumer culture and celebrity has grown as a church of the cult of the individual’ (2005, 92). Within this framework, religion is diffused and thus without organisational structures and authorities, although Rothenbuhler stresses the pre-eminent role of the media in promoting the cult of the individual. Rothenbuhler suggests convincingly that individuality is sacralised by the media, but this sacralisation has no individual agents and no shared cultural reference points aside from a general American consumer culture. The focus is here on the macro cultural phenomena, rather than on how individual fans relate to celebrities and what that means to their daily lives.

In sociology of religion, Mol’s (1976) classical study of religious identity proposed an understanding of religion as the sacralisation of individual and collective identity. Accordingly, individuals and groups have a need for identity, understood as ‘a stable niche in a predictable environment’ (1976, 55) to counter the process of differentiation of modernity. Mol’s sacralisation rests on the projection of a feeling of awe on to one’s identity, which has the effect of consolidating it. Mol’s notion of sacralisation emphasises the attribution of sacred value to identity. His functionalist approach presumes religion to be beneficial to individuals, groups and society by providing cohesion. However, this view neglects the diversity of religious expressions, especially disruptive or violent religion (Smith 1996). It also rests on a universalist and essentialist idea of the sacred, like Gentile’s, which inspires awe and is an essential core of human experience. In contrast with the focus on the macro-level and collective identity of the above historical and sociological studies, the notion of sacralisation in psychology of religion is concerned almost exclusively with the individual.

Psychologists conceive of religion as an all-encompassing meaning system (Paloutzian 2005; Park 2005; Silberman 2005), which orients the religious person. Religion provides a framework according to which one organises values. Emmons and Crumpler (1999) distinguish between ‘sacralization’ as ‘a process of imbuing external objects with sacred qualities’, and ‘sacctification’ as ‘an inner process of transformation’ (1999, 18). Sacrtification corresponds to ‘a process by which personas are made pure or holy. Sacrtification thus refers to moral purity or moral goodness (literally, “saint-like”)’ (1999, 18–9). This notion of sanctification, however, reflects the Protestant idea of sanctification by the Holy Spirit, according to which the Holy Spirit begins a process of perfecting the believer once the believer has accepted God in their life. There are fundamental problems with this conception. In the first instance, it applies the lens of a particular religious
tradition whilst making a universal claim on individual experience. In the second instance, it conflates the sensation of being cleansed with moral purity disregarding the processes of construction of purity and any relationship between morality and group boundaries (Douglas [1966]1989). Consequently, in the third instance, it assumes that there is such a state or quality of moral purity, disregarding the complexity and contested nature of ethics. In contrast, sacralisation, for Pargament (1997), entails attributing sacred value to daily actions. Within this framework, religion ‘has to do with building, changing, and holding on to the things people care about in ways that are tied to the sacred’ (1997, 32). In line with Gentile’s notion of sacralisation, Pargament’s notion identifies the process of ascribing sacred value to everyday activities, such as teaching or giving food to the homeless. In turn, these become ‘ministering’, when performed as service to God, and are understood differently from the same activities performed as a secular task (1997, 211).

This notion of sacralisation, understood as attribution of value to practices, objects and ideas, is helpful in understanding the impact of values on decisionmaking. For instance, bargaining based on economic incentives during conflict resolution negotiations, or affecting symbolical state policies, such as the Iranian nuclear programme, has been shown to backfire when it disregards sacred meaning (Fiske and Tetlock 1997; Dehghan et al. 2009). This example helps us see the sacred and sacralisation beyond religious forms. This notion, however, does not explain the process of attribution of value and how actors do not necessarily attribute ultimate value to all or most of their actions and ideas. Anticipating the discussion, it is important to recognise that actors often understand norms and practices as carrying different degrees of sacredness and consider some specific practices and norms of particular value to them, whilst recognising that they might be of no consequence to others. For instance, as shown by the data presented in this article, some religious actors integrate environmental concerns in their religious living, while others do not.

**Sacralisation as legitimisation of tradition**

The overview of the above studies suggests some common themes, which can be developed fruitfully to highlight a process of attribution of value and consequent codification, or ‘canonisation’, of what constitutes the sacred. Specifically, I propose a concept of sacralisation as a process whereby religious actors attribute value to ideas and practices canonising them, i.e. making them legitimate part of tradition. I thus reject the notion of the sacred as pure and ethical, proposed by Emmons and Crumpler (1999) and temper Gentile’s and Pargament’s definition of the sacred as that which is recognised as of ultimate value, by emphasising that the value attributed to the sacred is constructed through the religious actors’ interpretation of tradition in the light of everyday experience. Sacralisation is therefore the attribution of value by individual religious actors to ideas and practices by reference to tradition. In other words, what actors consider valuable and relevant to their lives is inscribed within the framework of tradition and thus legitimised.

Sacralisation has the effect of drawing and redrawing the boundaries of tradition. Long-standing practices, such as male-only elders, might come to be rejected as no longer valuable and/or relevant. However, any change requires to be inserted within tradition and thus legitimised. For instance, environmental concerns, as shown in the next
section, valued by some members of the group, are ‘made traditional’ by appealing to
toncepts and narratives that are recognised by the group as tradition, such as ‘stewardship’.
Sacralisation stresses the role of individuals and groups in ‘canonising’ practices. This
may happen alongside or, even, in conflict with formal canonising processes of
religious authorities, such as formal concilia or theologians’ interpretations. The present
case study being an evangelical church that is independent of outside authorities means
that individual and group interpretation is essential to the legitimisation of practices. This
is likely to be less significant in more structured and centralised churches, such as the
Anglican Church and Catholic Church.

Tradition, here, is not a ‘grand narrative’ identifying a timeless order, but a cultural
framework of reference. For the purposes of explaining the legitimisation of practices in
the case study, I employ the term in a wide sense. Accordingly, tradition is a body of
symbols, rituals, laws, customs, beliefs and narratives associated with a religion. It is not
a static paradigm to which individuals and groups subscribe; rather individuals and
groups engage actively with it through interpretation. The narratives and practices
making up tradition are always changing, for tradition is always being reinterpreted. It is
a symbolic construction based on the interpretation of the ideas, beliefs, symbols and
rituals that a community understands as its past. There is no essential and static core to
tradition. On the contrary, with Handler and Linnekin, I argue that ‘tradition is not a
bounded entity made up of bounded constituent parts, but a process of interpretation,
attributing meaning in the present though making reference to the past’ (Handler and
Linnekin 1984, 287). What is traditional is the outcome of an interpretation. As Handler
and Linnekin point out, ‘traditional is not an objective property of phenomena but an
assigned meaning’ (Handler and Linnekin, 1984, 286).

Sacralisation, as mentioned, is a key process in constructing and altering the boundaries
of tradition. It includes and excludes practices. The emerging boundaries point to what is
acceptable and what is not, what pertains to a specific religion and what is extraneous to
it. The sacred is thus what results from the attribution of value. In this framework, there is
no static sacred as there is no static tradition, but an ongoing process of making tradition.
Some individuals and groups will carry more influence and authority than others; yet all
have a role in constituting what they understand to be their religion, but can do so
successfully only through engagement with shared narratives and within the context of a
community. The concept of sacralisation allows us to appreciate that religious tradition is
not passed on from generation to generation, nor is it simply the result of the
interpretation and practices by religious authorities; rather individuals are active
participants in its construction and legitimisation.

Sacralisation requires a broad definition of religion, which is more than belief or
belonging to a community; rather it rests on the approach of ‘lived religion’ (Hall 1997;
Orsi 2002), which emphasises the actions and interpretations of religious actors in
shaping religion. Religion results from socially embedded individuals engaging with a
body of knowledge, ideas, rituals and practices, with which they identify and through
which they construct their religious identity. Religion is part of society where social
norms, customs and roles are integrated or resisted. Religious actors thus reflect their
social embeddedness in their interpretations of tradition. This is not to say that the social is exhaustive of religion. Indeed, sacralisation allows us to see how religious actors identify and engage with their tradition and, above all, how their interpretation of tradition influences how they act in their daily lives, as shown in the next section.

**Bethlehem church – a case study**

The proposed concept of sacralisation emerged from a three-year long ethnographic research in a Christian evangelical church in the UK, here named Bethlehem. The aim of the study was to explore individual religiosity and how individuals participate in churches. Bethlehem is an independent Protestant evangelical church with a high level of lay involvement. This allowed an inquiry into the roles and perspectives of church members. The focus of the project was on the local narratives and meanings through which actors construct their religious identity. The case study approach was therefore chosen to enable an understanding of a real-life phenomenon in depth and within its context (Yin 2009, 18). The data collection privileged speech uttered in small groups and individual interviews in order to capture the narratives through which social identity is constructed.

The methods employed were recorded and unstructured interviews, ethnographic interviews and participant observation of bible study groups, social events, Sunday services and other church activities, which were noted down and written up in field notes. The data collection included informal conversations to allow feedback from the informants. The data were fully transcribed and analysed thematically through NVivo software to avoid imposing limited viewpoints and to identify discrepant data. The data, presented in the next section, come from the transcripts of individual interviews and the field notes collected during the observation of Bible study evenings. The names of participants have been changed. The extracts used were selected to illustrate sacralisation at the individual and group level.

**Instances of sacralisation**

Bethlehem was set up around 30 years ago in an area of rapid housing development that lacked a community ‘hub’, as Nicholas, one of the founding members and former elder of the church, explained. The original vision for the church was to combine worship with activities open to the local community. Church members and leadership, faithful to that vision, value greatly the church openness to the local community providing groups for local people around their needs, such as parent and toddler groups, youth groups and an elderly group. These activities are understood as ‘serving’ or ‘ministering’. The following analysis of serving is based on the definition used by members of the community in their individual interviews. It illustrates the process of sacralisation as well as the distinction between the morally ‘good’ and the sacred, which reflects what is valuable and distinctive within a specific framework, in this instance: a Protestant evangelical Christian church in the UK.

Serving plays a key role in the identity of the church. Bethlehem’s Protestant theology emphasises the role of individuals in serving by grounding it in the tenet of the priesthood of all believers, according to which believers do not need the intercession of an ordained priest in their relationship with God and are called individually to minister. Thus, each
member has a duty to serve God in their daily lives and in the collective life of the church. This calls for a high level of lay involvement in the running of the church. Involvement in the church is thus ‘sacralised’ by reference to the tenet of the priesthood of all believers, often referred to by saying that ‘every person is a minister’. The activities that are considered serving by research participants are acts that meet the emotional, physical or psychological needs of others. Serving is therefore understood to be ethical; yet not all ethical acts constitute serving. What constitutes serving is constructed through the use of shared narratives, which are part of Christian tradition.

At Bethlehem, participants often talk about the distinctiveness of being a Christian and the role of the church by drawing a contrast between Christian ‘caring’ and the world ‘outside’, which is seen as competitive and harsh. Lucy, who is employed by the church to assist disabled and chronically ill people among the members of the church and of the local community, drew the contrast saying:

The world teaches us that we have to fight for ourselves. You fight or you get trampled on. And living as a Christian is, is very much at odds sometimes with the world, but then at other times I think it’s, it’s what humanity is seeking, people want to be cared for and want to be nurtured and protected.

Christian ‘caring’ is what humanity seeks; yet it is at odds with the ‘world’ outside. This narrative of being at odds with the world is a staple of evangelical tradition and is often expressed as ‘being in the world, but not of the world’. Serving has a dual aspect of being an activity that is valuable in itself (‘what humanity is seeking’), and characteristic of Christian identity. Activities are sacralised as serving by stressing the conflict with outside culture and by reference to Christian narratives, such as that of ‘feeding the hungry’. The quote below from Godwin, another member of staff, also draws from the narrative of contrast with the world outside.

What’s the difference between serving and caring? I think [...] I’m the centre manager here and under a normal business model [...] I would have people under me who would do the rolling their sleeves up [...], but that’s not the model that we hold up to here. [...] If I walk into the kitchen and the kitchen staff are busy, I roll my sleeves up and work the dishwasher. [...] I think it’s about putting yourself in somebody else’s shoes [...] Serving is about making everybody else’s burden lighter, making their work easier [...] that’s what Christianity is all about.

Godwin states that serving is ‘making everybody else’s burden lighter’. He explains serving by contrasting the way in which he and the other members of staff work in the church’s café as opposed to the ‘normal business model’, which is seen as more hierarchical. Under the ‘normal business model’, members of staff perform their duties according to their roles in the organisation. In contrast, Godwin serves by ‘rolling up his sleeves’, but also by waving the cost of food to those who appear to be needy. In his interview, he says:

Personally I believe that [...] when we’re doing what God wants us to do, then the business operates well. So we made decision for some people, in the last financial year, for some people we would give meals away.
Serving, here, is altruistic and in stark contrast with profit-making business. The church café operates largely as any other cafés; yet the work in the kitchen is serving, for it embodies the idea of caring for one another that participants consider distinctive of Christianity. The rationale of caring is paramount and alters the operations of the café by opting out from the normal charging of customers making it serving. This instance of sacralisation draws a contrast with the outside and inserts work in a business, such as that of the church café, within tradition.

The following quote from Lucy identifies serving as a mental attitude; however, it is not a mental framework of doing things in accordance with one’s conscience or will, but of being accountable to God.

The whole serving thing to me is [...] a kind of an attitude really: what you do, you do to please God. And sometimes the things you do to please God are not necessarily the things you would have wanted to do or chosen to do, but you know that it’s the right thing. [...] Whereas sometimes giving is [...] we do for our own gratification. Perhaps we need that in a certain way, to be built up, but I think the service is really about where I stand before God and where he’s kind of pushing me and nudging me to do.

Lucy contrasts serving with ‘giving’. Accordingly, serving is doing things to please God, to act as a Christian. The activity that constitutes serving might be the same as that of giving; yet by inscribing the activity within the theological framework of serving, it assumes sacred value. Lucy identifies the motivation for ‘giving’ in one’s own gratification. Personal gratification is acceptable and it is not judged unethical. The real distinction with serving is, instead, the element of struggle, which reflects religious actors’ recognition of God’s sovereignty over their life and choices. Giving is seen as wholly dependent on one’s will, while serving is a call from God. The element of struggle reinforces the idea that serving is the expression of one’s accountability to God; rather than the expression of an altruistic personality.

The motif of struggle is, of course, present across faiths. In this context, the struggle identifies the personal relationship the believer has with God. Serving, at Bethlehem, is an expression of personal faith, which is sometimes contrasted with Catholic ‘good works’ to merit heaven, as understood by participants. This can be drawn from Celia, a member of the church, who stated during a Bible study: ‘As a Christian I have absolutely no doubt about my salvation, but it doesn’t mean there is no challenge daily in how we act’. The implication is that some religious people might do good to be saved, which is contrary to the Protestant doctrine of sola fide, salvation by faith in Christ alone. The activities people carry out at Bethlehem might be common to other religious and non-religious groups; however, the sacredness of serving derives from being firmly inscribed within the framework of Protestant tradition. This is evident in Celia’s comment below referring to the parent and toddler ‘ministry’.

How is it a ministry? [...] I love the little ones [toddlers], I do, don’t get me wrong, I love them very much and, but it’s not my sole reason in doing it, [...] but my heart is for the families in the community, [...] my heart is that they
Francesca E.S. Montemaggi

might come to know God, they might come to know of the saviour that loves them, [...] they might experience God’s love for them, as well as meeting them on a human level.

Celia runs the group of parents and toddlers, which in most respects is like many of its secular equivalent groups. There are no explicit references to God or Christianity with the exception of Christmas songs and a special event for Easter. Celia’s running of the group of parents and toddlers is serving because it is within the framework of Christian tradition and therefore different from similar secular activities. It is a ministry because the purpose of the activity is to provide a place for parents to experience God’s love. Giving, in contrast, is limited to the ‘human level’, whilst serving goes beyond that by connecting people to God. The group is of value to the families; yet what makes it sacred is the fact that such an activity enables volunteers to be a vehicle of God’s love.

The local understanding of Christian identity which emerges from these definitions of serving is not limited to doing good, but having that awareness of living one’s everyday life ‘with God in mind’. For it to be serving, an action needs to be carried out with religious intention, i.e. with an awareness of its spiritual significance. It is not merely for the benefit of the recipient; rather its rationale is in serving God. This is evident in Lucy’s quote, where she stresses serving as an attitude. The person has God in mind rather than personal gratification. Although the rationale of one’s own gratification is present in giving only ‘sometimes’, it needs to be avoided in serving. Serving by definition is only in service to God. Thus, the instances of serving presented above are ethical, but ethical activities are not necessarily serving. It is the narratives of serving God that which sacralises activities like the running of the parent and toddler group. Sacredness is not a quality of the act itself.

The sacred is therefore not limited to what is considered ‘good’ within a given culture and society. Indeed, the data presented in the next extract show that some participants see environmental ethics as ‘good’ and yet outside of what they consider to be sacred. The process of sacralisation has therefore the effect of drawing and redrawing boundaries. It defines what is inside and what is outside of religious tradition, although not in any permanent way. It does not follow that what falls outside of one’s interpretation of tradition is necessarily judged as unethical. Indeed, ideas and practices that are outside a specific religious tradition can be seen as morally valuable; they are simply not part of the specific identity of the group. Further, some ideas and practices, as shown in the next extract on environmental concerns, might be sacralised by some individuals but not by the group as a whole. The discussion below is taken from the field notes and is therefore not verbatim. Participants here comment on a video from a Christian DVD series entitled ‘Living Distinctively’. This particular video featured an environmentalist Christian woman named Ruth, who is shown as an example of living distinctively as a Christian.

Tertius: the stress is on buying local, but this has a huge impact on the third world which relies on us buying non-locally.
Camden: (reading from the DVD booklet) How does our attitude to the environment reflect theology?  
Rosamond: I’ve never thought about it. It’s stressful enough when you’re going shopping to look at where it comes from.

Nicholas: I’m not convinced by her (Ruth) view of theology.

Will: it would have been helpful if they had quoted scripture. (Winifred reads some verses from Bible)

Camden: it’s about stewardship. We can’t be wasteful, we can’t be careless. It’s ultimately about being ethical to our fellow-man.

Arthur: for our society is as cheap as you can.

Harriet: … and people can’t afford it as it is now.

Nicholas: food prices are going to go up with the economy of India and China growing. We might not be able to care about the environment if feeding the family becomes difficult. I think the bigger issue is resource management … energy …

Harriet: it’s got to be an individual’s decision. As a society we cannot possibly do it, because there’s such a difference between those who can afford it and those who can’t.

Arthur: there is huge inequality in the world. I wonder what he (God) thinks about that.

Celia: what she’s (Ruth) saying is that that it comes from our heart, to reflect how we understand God.

Harriet: I agree with you. Different things touch you. I prefer giving to the poor than spending hours checking where things come from.

Camden: what are the more important commitments? (Winifred reads from the booklet a statement on the environment being part of being a Christian) […] If Jesus were around today, would he go around the supermarket looking at where things come from? I’m not convinced that the answer is yes.

Winifred: (Camden’s wife) Yes, he (Jesus) would.

Tertius: This is all very well but we’re making a mess of everything else. What about people who have nothing in Africa?
As former elder, Nicholas’ opinion carries influence on the group, especially in matters of theology. In the extract above, he questions the theological framework of the environmentalist in the video. Although the video was accompanied by a booklet which contained biblical verses, it lacked explicit mention of theological terms or Bible’s passages, as pointed out by Will. Will’s mention of the need to ground practices in scripture shows that for a lifestyle to be sacralised, it cannot simply be recognised as valuable; rather it needs to be inserted within tradition. Winifred, who is very supportive of recognising ecofriendly lifestyles as part of Christian tradition, reads from the Bible to provide that grounding. Camden, in turn, employs the theological term ‘stewardship’ to add support to the argument of seeing eco-friendly lifestyles as Christian practices.

The participants refer to theological language and to the Bible in search of religious grounding of environmental ethics. They all agree with the ethics just not with its sacredness within Christian tradition. Although there are attempts at inserting environmental concerns among Christian practices, the group is not persuaded. Even Camden shows that he is not fully convinced. He asks what Jesus would do, to which his wife Winifred answers promptly that Jesus would care about the environment. Being in favour of environmental ethics, she reads from the Bible twice to steer the others to make the connection between the shared religious framework and human care for the environment. She attempts to sacralise environmental ethics, although seemingly with no success. Later conversations with participants suggested a much wider support for seeing good environmental practices as part of Christian life, nevertheless the discussion that evening showed that the group agreed that respect for the environment was important and ethical, and that everybody should adopt a more sustainable lifestyle without however endorsing environmental practices as part of Christian life. The eco-friendly lifestyle was thus not sacralised.

I suggest that there are three main reasons for the failed sacralisation. In the first instance, the discussion showed participants were not certain of what constituted sustainability. The group lacked clear guidelines and criteria upon which to judge the best policy. Arthur highlighted how ‘for our society everything needs to be as cheap as you can’, arguing environmental concerns clash with consumerism with no apparent solution. The price of an environmentally friendly lifestyle seemed to confine issues of sustainability to the personal choice of a few, rather than the many. In the second instance, the discussion lacked a robust theological grounding of environmentalism. Although the environment is becoming increasingly part of evangelical concerns (Smith and Johnson 2010; Pally 2011), at Bethlehem, the group did not have access to environmental theologies and sufficient time to reflect on them.

Serving is primarily conceived as giving to other human beings. The ‘poor’ are seen much more as a priority, especially if in poorer countries, as the comments by Harriet and Tertius show. Thus, ideas, norms and practices relating to environmental concerns have so far failed to be sacralised among the majority of Bethlehem members and are therefore not part of the local canon. The focus on the environment, whilst not wholly absent, is not central in Bethlehem’s Christian repertoire. The lack of the theological underpinning and sufficient guidelines on which to insert norms and practices within the sacred realm
Francesca E.S. Montemaggi

prevented the group from sacralising environmental concerns and practices. In this particular example, the divergence in interpretation did not cause a rift in the group. This is partly because environmental concerns can be accommodated in the lives of individuals without impacting on the rest of the group or on the organisation of the church. This is in stark contrast with other issues, such as the recognition of women as ‘elders’ of the church, which a significant section of Bethlehem membership would like to see happen.

Some in the church have sacralised women as elders. Based on their interpretation of the bible, as they have reported to me, they have come to the opinion that women should be eligible to be elders; yet this has not been accepted formally and is in contrast with the stance of the current pastor. One of my research participants, Dorothea, explained that for her and her husband, Will, as well as others in the church, the recognition of women as elders in the church follows an engagement with scripture, which is interpreted in the light of their everyday experience. Dorothea told me that she was part of a group that voiced strong objections to the current situation at Bethlehem, but that the matter has not been dealt with in a wider forum. During a conversation, she said that in a society where her daughter can aspire to become a doctor, scientist or lawyer, she does not want her daughter to see inequality at church. This sends the wrong message that women cannot lead the church because of their gender. The contrast with the outside is here to challenge church practices. Unlike the first instance of sacralisation, where serving is pitted against a harsh and competitive environment, here the value of equality of outside society, albeit a very imperfect one, calls into questions the practices of the church. As things stand, women are not allowed to be elders at Bethlehem. The current divergence in interpretation of tradition is likely to make the sacralisation of women as elders difficult. How Bethlehem handles this issue will determine its next chapter and shape its future identity.

The instances of sacralisation explored here are not meant to provide a representative sample in order to identify social determinants of theological preferences. However, these examples show that the application of the concept of sacralisation to a number of groups and religious organisations would make possible to assess how groups vary in the internal legitimising processes of specific ideas and practices according to geographical, social and cultural background, demographical characteristics, religious denomination and theological tradition, among others. The structure and composition of the group is likely to impact on what is sacralised and how. In addition, sacralisation happens within the religious group’s hierarchies and structures. Group leaders, who may have either formal or informal authority, are influential in shaping the local narratives, interpreting texts authoritatively and legitimising customs. Consequently, they have more sway in granting legitimacy to practices and beliefs, but also in allowing, promoting, or prohibiting change.

Winifred’s persistence at legitimising environmental concerns provides a strong example of individual sacralisation despite the absence of communal agreement and a connection to the relevant theological literature. This example reveals that what and how one sacralises depends on one’s interpretation of tradition as much as on one’s adoption of
wider social values. Winifred shows that environmental ethics in wider society have impressed on her urgent concerns, whilst Nicholas is more concerned with the lack of theological grounding and thus does not see eco-friendly practices as distinctive of Christian life although he recognises their social importance. The acceptance of wider social values is also present in the recognition by some of the appropriateness of women elders. Sacralisation is thus the result of the dynamic relationship between the religious actors’ personal background, their community and the relevant theological and cultural traditions.

From the analysis of the extracts emerges the distinction between ethical practices, such as ‘giving’ and environmentally friendly practices, and Christian practices. The distinction between ‘giving’ and ‘serving’ shows that the sacred is not to be conflated with ethics. The lack of sacralisation of the eco-friendly lifestyle holds a lesson for the possibility of recognising women as elders. It shows that for environmental practices to become part of the ‘canon’, and be legitimised as Christian practices, they need to be related explicitly to tradition. The important difference is that, whilst the former can be accommodated as part of an individual lifestyle, the latter goes right at the heart of the church organisation and identity. Sacralisation is thus performed by individuals, but it is in the context of a group and in reference to tradition.

The issue of women’s equality in the church has so far not been debated explicitly and in an open forum. It is therefore difficult to assess the arguments and interpretations of tradition put forward by either side. For Dorothea and Will, this is an ethical issue and one that has prompted them to engage with the Bible by contextualising their interpretation to today’s world. The church model of St Paul’s is deemed no longer valid and requires a reinterpretation of tradition in the light of contemporary experience and ethical values. However, whether women will be legitimised as elders at Bethlehem in the near future will largely depend on the possibility of open discussion and the successful sacralisation of women’s equality in the church. This shows that sacralisation establishes the boundaries of tradition and, within that, the identity and cohesion of the church.

Conclusions
The article proposed the concept of sacralisation to identify the legitimisation of religious ideas and practices at the individual and group level. Contrary to a view of religious tradition as static and handed down from religious authorities, sacralisation emphasises the role of individual religious actors in engaging with their tradition by interpreting and, at times, innovating its beliefs and practices. They participate in the making of their religious tradition by following or subverting the prescription of religious authorities. Individuals thus contribute to the making of a ‘canon’ of texts, beliefs, symbols, rituals and practices. This concept helps us focus on the meaning-making from below, rather than accepting the interpretation of religious tradition as the one given by official authorities. It also sheds light on how individuals relate to a shared religious tradition within community.

The concept rests on an understanding of tradition not as a static and coherent body of knowledge, but an ever changing frame of reference. Sacralisation does not happen in a
social vacuum, but within the web of social relationships the person inhabits inside the group and society. This implies that religious actors have different social roles, which may be supported by formal or informal structures within a group, church or larger institutions. Individual religious actors are not simply choosing ideas and practices that resonate with them; rather they engage actively with tradition and participate in shaping it by attributing value to its single elements. They do so through the interpretation and use of shared narratives. By inserting specific ideas, customs, symbols and rituals within the framework of narratives that are considered distinctive of their tradition, religious actors draw and redraw the boundaries of tradition.

The concept of sacralisation thus helps us understand the role of individual religious actors in constituting the sacred, identifying with their religious tradition, and legitimising it. It allows a more fluid understanding of change within religious organisations. By recognising the importance of individuals and their differential level of influence, we can appreciate how religious groups can shift in belief and customs, including in ethical stances, through the changes in interpretation and attribution of value to ideas and practices. Further application of the concept of sacralisation will help identify patterns of religious transformation by focusing on how individuals and groups inside a tradition legitimise its elements.

References


Francesca E.S. Montemaggi


