Text 9: Phenomenology of the Sacred

Summary

This text offers a religious-studies and philosophical exploration of the nature of the phenomenon, the relationship between consciousness and the brain, the concept of subtle matter (hylic pluralism), and the contemporary cultural confrontation between Western civil religion and Islam.

1. The Phenomenon and the Phenomenological Method (9.1)

The phenomenologist of religion Gerardus van der Leeuw describes a phenomenon as that which presents itself directly in an encounter between a subject and an object, whereby what is given is admitted into consciousness as it is.

Edmund Husserl developed this method through *Einklammerung* (bracketing additional assumptions) and eidetic reduction (reducing a phenomenon to its general essence or *eidos*).

In contrast to the sociological approach of Émile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss, who explain the sacred in terms of its social function, Nathan Söderblom argues that phenomenology must focus directly on the experience of sacred 'power'.

Within this approach, the esoteric and the occult partly overlap with the sacred as an irreducible mystery.

2. Consciousness without Brain Activity (9.2)

The text illustrates the limits of biological materialism through medically documented near-death experiences (NDEs).

Cardiologist Michael Sabom investigated the case of Pam Reynolds, who was placed under deep hypothermia during brain surgery.

Although her brain was completely drained of blood, her brainstem was inactive, and the EEG showed a flat line, auditory and visual verification indicated that she possessed a clear, alert awareness during this period.

This poses a phenomenological question for medical science: how can consciousness function without any measurable biological brain activity?

3. Hylic Pluralism and Subtle Matter (9.3)

J. J. Poortman maps the history of hylic pluralism: the age-old belief that reality does not consist of a single type of matter, but of a plurality of kinds of substance, including rarefied or subtle matter (*ochèma*, or the vehicle of the soul).

Poortman criticizes 'monistic materialism', which recognizes only gross matter, and defends a form of 'dualistic materialism' found in Democritus, the Stoics and Neoplatonists such as Proclus.

Within esoteric traditions, an etheric body, an astral body and an immaterial soul are distinguished alongside the biological body.

This corresponds to the animistic plurality of souls in Haitian Vodou (Wade Davis), where, among other things, the *gros bon ange* (cosmic energy) and the *ti bon ange* (the individual soul) are distinguished.

4. Currents, History and Ethics in Islam (9.4)

The text outlines the foundations of Islam (its emergence around Muhammad, the Hijra in 622, the Qur'an as the uncreated Word, sharia, the Sunna and the ummah).

Ismailism emerged within Shia Islam. From the mountain fortress of Alamut, Hassan-i Sabbah established a network of *fedayeen* (volunteer commandos) belonging to this movement.

Vladimir Bartol's novel *Alamut* depicts how these fighters were driven to carry out suicide attacks through religious initiation and the promise of paradise.

Historian Farhad Daftary, however, qualifies this account by showing that stories about coercive drug use (hashish) and atheism were largely constructed by hostile Sunnis and Crusaders.

The text also illustrates the cultural diversity in women's legal status across the Islamic world, ranging from traditional sharia to extensive secularization in countries such as Turkey, Tunisia and Indonesia.