

Sacralisation

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1. Introduction

Sacralisation is a process of distinction and elevation comparable to [heroization](#), based on the attribution of the extraordinary quality of *sacrality* to a person. 'Sacral' can be defined as that which is assigned to the divine or to powers not available to man himself and thus excluded as 'sacred' from the material-physical reality and connected with something extra-worldly.[1] The processes of sacralisation include, for example, divinisation and relating to the divine, through which figures such as martyrs and saints are constituted. It is thus a form of exaltation, honour and distinction that marks the exemplary and generates [admiration or adoration](#), without the term 'hero' being used.[2]

The relations between sacralisation and heroization are close, but ambiguous: It is true that religiously founded exceptional figures such as saints, prophets or [martyrs](#) can hardly be explained without some recourse to notions of the heroic. Conversely, however, this does not mean that every hero *eo ipso* must also be a figure with a sacral connotation; every sacredly distinguished king also a hero.[3] Rather, the nature and intensity of the relationship must be determined in each individual case, but also according to epoch, culture and religion. However, as the relations have a significance that transcends epochal boundaries, they provide a useful analytical heuristic for a variety of heroic phenomena.

2. Historical overview

Many ideas dating back to Greek antiquity remain of lasting importance for European conceptions of heroism. The dual character of heroes as epic-heroic and religious is fundamental to this thinking: they were often recipients of cult and thus part of the sacred sphere. But already the [Homeric epics](#) refer to the figures of a mythical past as great *heroes*. Both categories were often separate, were terminological and conceptual in nature, but could also be superimposed, especially in processes of heroization. Accordingly, some transitions from heroism to divinity, from the heroic to the sacred, are fluid.[\[4\]](#) Heroization and apotheosis/divinisation have many common features.[\[5\]](#) Late antiquity seems to have shaped, at least in Europe, a tradition in which concepts of the sacred were strongly connected with those of the heroic – albeit with unmistakable, substantial discontinuities and transformations, particularly with regard to the status and role of [violence](#) and sacrifice, as well as to the notion of the divine in post-antiquity, which was for the most part no longer defined polytheistically.[\[6\]](#) It is not only the discussion about martyrs[\[7\]](#) as heroes that is gaining new currency today, even beyond the boundaries of the Christian-influenced cultural and social space.[\[8\]](#) Due to the Christian legacy of a multitude of cultural phenomena, especially in Europe, this tradition has been continued since the Middle Ages via the figures of saints and martyrs, but also via those of [kings and rulers](#), who can be awarded heroic status as well as sacrality.[\[9\]](#) It is precisely in this context that the symbolic languages of the heroic, of the sacred and of power have many things in common, as is evident in the quality of ‘radiance’ attributed to extraordinary figures. Until modern times these symbolic languages have therefore been used in rather ambiguous and interchangeable ways to elevate figures of present and past.[\[10\]](#) Moreover, without heroization, the sacralisation of the nation and the nationalisation of the religious in the 19th and 20th centuries seem inconceivable.[\[11\]](#)

3. Relations between the heroic and the sacred

3.1. Similarities of the concepts

The heroic and the sacred exhibit striking similarities as phenomena, symbolisations and discourses of the extraordinary.[\[12\]](#) This is evidenced by the theoretical approach to the phenomenon of the sacred chosen by the DFG Research Unit 1533 “Sakralität und Sakralisierung in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit” (Sacredness and Sacralization in the Medieval and Early Modern Period) at the University of Erlangen between 2011 and 2017.[\[13\]](#) The Erlangen Research Unit refrained from an *a priori* definition of the sacred in order to concentrate on processes of sacralisation and thus focus on their dynamics. It understood sacralisations to be processes of boundary work, in which, as in the case of heroizations and [heroisms](#), media and forms of communication, languages and expression, but also the blurring of their semantics and definitions become relevant.[\[14\]](#) Furthermore, the [affective power](#) of the heroic, which evokes astonishment and fascination, closeness and distance, also appears to be fundamentally related to the sacred – at least in Rudolf Otto’s characterisation of its effect between *tremendum* and *fascinans* – even if this does not define the sacred either comprehensively or analytically with sufficient precision.[\[15\]](#)

3.2. Dependence on context

From a diachronic perspective, it becomes clear that the establishment of monotheistic religions since late antiquity often brought about a separation of their heroes from those of antiquity. Sacral qualities which ancient heroes in polytheism as well as heroes of the Hindu tradition possessed had to be defined in a different way in monotheistic religions, since the ancient fluid transition between the human and the divine was no longer conceivable.[\[16\]](#)

However, it is also clear that [martyrs](#), Christian saints, Jewish and Hindu heroes, and figures heroized in Islam, just like the heroes of ancient Greece, are 'open' figures whose meaning is subject to diachronic transformations.[\[17\]](#) They too become easier to explain if the processes of attribution that constitute these figures are examined as forms of heroization. This makes it easier to compare attributions of extraordinariness that lie outside the realm of religion and cannot be considered solely in the context of religious discourse. However, the question of sacralisations as special or intensified forms of heroization also brings additional facets to the discourse on the heroic. Heroes are predominantly sacralised in certain historical contexts, especially when religiously based symbolic discourse promises a high degree of acceptance or legitimacy. This might have to do with which forms of attribution of extraordinariness were more effective, more convincing, and more connectable for social and political discourses in certain contexts and epochs.

3.3. Intensified heroizations

A question worth exploring is how the use of symbolic languages of the sacred can intensify heroizations. Case studies on the 17th century, but more specifically observations on historical changes since the late 18th century suggest that sacralisation offers a way to conceptualise divine will, providence and predestination, sacrifice, repentance and redemption, and transfer these to heroic figures.[\[18\]](#) This aspect, which in the long 19th century manifested primarily in the auto-sacralisation of nations at war, can hardly be overestimated in its potential to create meaning. Religious codes offered an almost inexhaustible reservoir of interpretations, motifs and topoi to communicate heroizations suggestively or 'powerfully'. This function became particularly clear where, as in France since the Revolution, a political salvation framework of revolution, republic and nation replaced the sacralisation of the monarch whilst partly adopting older religious forms of representation.[\[19\]](#) In the embodiment of Napoleon, the semantic potential unlocked by the intersection of the heroization of war, nation and religion became particularly clear and at the same time contradictory. It conveyed the image of an almost permanent history of upheaval, which produced ever new promises of salvation, but whose relative duration was becoming increasingly short.[\[20\]](#)

3.4. Resonant communication

At the level of politics of history and memory, the appropriation of heroizations and sacralisations gave rise to distinct communities of experience, fate and sacrifice. This collective self-interpretation transcended the distinction between victors and losers, since it was precisely the defeated or martyr who could function as the moral champion, and the renunciation of violence could become a model of (un)heroic superiority.[\[21\]](#) The appropriation of defeats and upheavals, stories of loss and sacrifice could also give rise to suggestive attributions of meaning, which political movements could refer to. In this way, it could be argued that heroizations with religious connotations create unique spaces in which collective experiences and expectations can resonate. At the same time, such spaces are characterised by a particular concentration of communicative contacts and ideas, images and interpretations conveyed by [media](#). In this sense, the connection between sacralisation and heroization should be understood as a communicative event that stimulates the discursive bundling of self-interpretations through reference points, projections and memories. But this never resulted in any stabilising unambiguity. The overlapping of heroizations and sacralisations led to idiosyncratic dynamics of interpretation and competition, and thus to polysemies which often escaped control.

3.5. Exercise of power

A further question that arises is whether the use of the sacred can enhance the latent potential of

power inherent in the heroic and thus increase the dominance and oppression exercised over the individual. Even more so than heroization, sacralisation might be regarded as an instrument for establishing and exercising power. However, one must not equate claim and reality here, because the coupling of sacralisation and heroization has repeatedly led to ambiguous patterns of justifying and criticising power.[22]

3.6. Ambivalences

Sacredly connoted manifestations of the heroic always contain aspects of the antithetical, even of resistance. They thus tend to reinforce the ambivalence that is always present in the field of heroism. Biblical as well as extra-biblical prophets and martyrs demand allegiance. However, because of the absoluteness of their claim, they also provoke rejection and resistance. Paradoxical as it may appear at first sight, it is precisely through the analysis of religious stylisations of heroic figures that, in contrast to an affirmative view of the hero, aspects of relativising distance, criticism and questioning are revealed.

4. References

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- 2 Heinzer, Felix / Leonhard, Jörn / von den Hoff, Ralf (Eds.): "Einleitung: Relationen zwischen Sakralisierungen und Heroisierungen". In: Heinzer, Felix / Leonhard, Jörn / von den Hoff, Ralf (Eds.): *Sakralität und Heldentum*. Würzburg 2017: Ergon, 9-18, 10.
- 3 Admittedly, there are very striking examples of such a superimposition, such as the stylisation of the Saint Olaf, King of Norway (c. 995–1030): Iversen, Gunilla: "Transforming a Viking into a Saint, The Divine Office of St. Olav". In: Fassler, Margot E. / Balzer, Rebecca A. (Eds.): *The Divine Office in the Latin Middle Ages. Methodology and Source Studies, Regional Developments, Hagiography Written in Honor of Professor Ruth Steiner*. Oxford 2000: Oxford University Press, 401-429; Jiřousková, Lenka: *Der heilige Wikingerkönig Olav Haraldsson und sein hagiographisches Dossier. Text und Kontext der 'Passio Olavi'*. Leiden et al. 2014: Brill.
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