Everything is a Cemetery: On the History Behind the “Ahistorical”

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As I write this, the 150th anniversary of the Battle of Gettysburg has just passed. Gettysburg is remembered as one of the most pivotal moments in the United States’ Civil War in part for the decisive way that momentum shifted in favor of the Union forces, but also because the largest number of lives were lost there than in any other battle in the conflict. Today, the battle is often remembered in conjunction with Lincoln’s famous Gettysburg Address, which occurred some four months after the clash that shares the same name. In that speech, Lincoln invoked the founding of the nation itself (“Four score and seven years ago...”) as the start of an enterprise dedicated to the preservation of justice, equality, and freedom, one which the sacrifices of the Gettysburg dead continued to make possible, he noted, for they “gave their lives that a nation might live”.

I was recently listening to a local radio talk show that was interviewing the author of a new book on the battle. The author described Gettysburg (now a national military park and major tourist draw) as “hallowed ground” because, he claimed, it is infused with a sacred aura due to the sheer number of people killed on the site. When the phone lines were opened up to the audience, many of the show’s callers remarked on Gettysburg’s “haunting” nature. One caller in particular (a self-described stoic) claimed that he found himself sobbing uncontrollably when he entered the park, a response he understood as an instinctual reaction to the sadness and the death that tangibly permeated that physical space. He was careful to note that he had never felt anything like that before in any other location, an evaluation with which many others on the show concurred.

These descriptions of Gettysburg show the critical role that an enormously popular narrative can play in normalizing the description of, and even sensations surrounding, a particular event or place. On the simplest analytical level, those who contributed to this conversation were asserting that the physical site of the battle holds distinction because so many died there – it literally reeks, some might say, with the emotions of death. To those who employ this sort of description, death (and particularly, mass death) is portrayed as a force that exposes things called “sacredness” and “hallowedness,” states which, under this reading, comprise a wholly “other,” ineffable experience.

It seems, however, that if Gettysburg had been left an unmarked, grassy field, uncontextualized as a vital part of a nation’s (and by extension, its citizen’s) history, then it would likely conjure no emotions at all. Realistically speaking, those of us who live in a locale that has ever
supported a population of any size are constantly walking, jogging, working, and simply living directly on the geographical sites where others – perhaps many, many others – have long ago died. In this sense, everything is a cemetery. It is a common problem in certain regions of Greece, for instance, that when one wants to erect a new building, one will frequently unearth all sorts of artifacts and even human remains, the ruins of that country’s many ancient population centers. The government then decides whether such artifacts are of any historical importance (that is, whether they play a role in the nation’s dominant cultural narrative), which then determines whether the building project may proceed.

This process of selective importance is instructive, for what this shows to the analytical scholar is that it is not particularly useful to describe “the sacred” as a substance that emanates universally from certain sources, but is, rather, a label that gets strategically deployed to distinguish certain phenomena from others. We can likely all agree that those who long ago died underneath our backyards or the local shopping mall (to name a couple of mundane examples) were not any less alive than those who participated in Gettysburg. Rather, those more mundane places remain largely irrelevant precisely because those who died there are not a part of our social consciousness, and thus are not a part of our cultural or personal narratives. Moreover, their absence within these narratives means that they do not even register as a piece of data in our minds, the relative “sacredness” of which we might evaluate.

If “sacredness,” then, is a term that does not so much describe an eternal, ahistorical essence as much as it labels the way that we presently appropriate importance to certain things, how and in what context we construct such labels (and the emotions that often accompany them) is worth considering. To be clear, taking up this question is not an implicit statement that those who visited Gettysburg were not feeling real emotions, nor that they were not sincerely moved by whatever it was that they experienced there. Rather, it is to suggest, in the vein of Durkheim, that the emotional experiences that help create our perceptions of reality are not inward impulses that reveal deep-seated truths as much as they are learned responses that operate like teaching tools, reinforcing the values that cultures embrace – and thus pass on – to their members.

Consider the multiple other labels that we are trained, in a sense, to feel. Our culture’s obsession with thinness is not something that we’re born with; one must be taught that body fat is disgusting before a close examination in the mirror conjures feelings of repulsion and worthlessness. So also some learn to be afraid of public speaking or harmless spiders, neither of which pose any sort of inherent physical harm. Similarly, one might think of the irony that so much of what is called “comfort food,” if consumed in certain quantities over time, can kill. Although the sensations that we experience in these moments are “real” in the sense that they are measurable phenomena, this does not make them any less constructed.
It seems, then, that Gettysburg produces the emotions that it does because the story of the Civil War is a well-rehearsed, critical part of the American narrative that has been fundamental not only to politics past and present, but to everything from the nation’s religious history and racial demographics to its real estate patterns and culinary preferences. In this way, Americans have been trained to see Gettysburg as a place overwhelmed with emotion only because it is the backdrop in a story of a courageous president, freed slaves, liberties preserved, and the coming of age of a young and righteous nation. There are other ways, of course, to think about Gettysburg and the Civil War. The white supremacist confederate movements that still exist today likely contextualize events differently, as might those who trouble Lincoln’s memorialization as the “Great Emancipator,” instead highlighting the many examples of the President’s overt racism. Had either one of these perspectives been mainstreamed as the central version of events we hear today, perhaps our recollections, attitudes, and even feelings about Gettysburg might be different. The fact that one version of the story has been widely popularized at the expense of other recollections of the same physical events, however, displays the very selective qualities of memory, history, and the emotional training that often follows from them.

Insomuch as one of our most basic acts as humans is the social dance of being taught and thereby adopting certain descriptions over others, then, the power of certain accounts of reality operate as pre-existing frames of reference that work not to simply describe a reality in neutral existence before us, but to craft the seemingly inevitable version of events (or the limited choices therein) that our culture’s labels permit. With this in mind, perhaps a robust scholarly analysis depends on exercising a considerable amount of caution when encountering any descriptions of reality that presume self-evidence, universality, or any other claim of inexplicability that the aforementioned terms like “sacred” or “hallowed” invoke. Scholars may find this a rather obvious lesson when it comes to the categorization performed by cultures that strike us as illogical, inconsequential, or otherwise uncanny. It is much harder to keep this in mind, however, when the labels being employed are so widely popular and of such great cultural importance (to us, at least) that they’re rendered virtually obvious.

This is the very sort of issue that the following essay considers regarding the highly influential work of Mircea Eliade. As McCutcheon argues, Eliade’s popularization of the concept of “the sacred” has created what he perceives to be a series of the discipline’s most serious methodological contradictions. In addition to how one can analytically speak about a thing that is often described as beyond proof, Eliadian models also introduce concepts that push the critical scholar to consider how one should generally regard the logic used by insiders, the role and degree to which social and historical forces help create powerful and popular social concepts, and even how scholars’ own socio-political locations contribute to their creation, interpretation, and analysis of categories like “the sacred.”
This is an important lesson to keep in mind when thinking about historically prominent events such as Gettysburg, for sometimes the scholars responsible for the dominant narratives about those events with which we live become the very data worth studying. In Eliade’s case, McCutcheon shows how the concept of an enduring, positive, universal force that remained above the political fray would have been a concept with great appeal to someone living in a time and place marred by political instability. Similarly, those who want to seriously consider why Gettysburg is described as a “sacred” site might look to the contexts of those scholars who deploy the term today rather than back to any special quality of Gettysburg itself. Only so long as Gettysburg remains a critical backdrop to the way that concepts like patriotism, liberties, sacrifice, and duty – to name just a popular few – are currently contextualized does its “sacred” label likely stand. In other words, the fact that a certain emotion stems from a certain concept that was inspired by certain social arrangements makes the resulting labels (“sacred,” “hallowed,” etc.) adjectives that are the product of the co-mingling of historical, temporal events, not descriptions of ahistorical, *sui generis* phenomena.

What this means, by extension, is that the way that we talk – and even the way we feel – about the past is always a matter of understanding the political negotiations of the present. We miss the ability to understand why such labels are both manufactured and applied to specific historical moments if we presume that they stand outside of history even as they describe it. To take the concept of “the sacred” as an indefinable, ineffable, ahistorical reality – a term thrown around and often used in the service of describing otherwise powerful emotions or things “beyond description” – ultimately arrests the scholarly conversation. For if the defining quality of the sacred is this fundamental ineffability, then scholars are disqualified from its study; as themselves products of culture, time, and place, scholars are left with no extra-cultural techniques of studying an extra-cultural thing. If, however, we can begin to think about “the sacred” as an identificatory strategy instead of an essence that defies analysis, then the conversation can begin, and with it the question of how a grassy field in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania has become, for some, a central character in a nation’s self-representation.

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