

Reflections on Shils, Sacred and Civil Ties, and Universities

Louis H. Swartz

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This review essay, concerning three collections of Shils' essays published in 1997, focuses on Shils' assertion of the importance of charisma or the sacred in the ties that bind a secular society together and enable it to function as it does, asks why Shils did not accept Polanyi's views about intellectuals, and refers to aspects of the sacred attributed to universities and to our academic traditions.

I

Knowing of my interest in the relationship between Polanyi and Shils (e.g., Swartz 1998), Phil Mullins suggested that I write this short piece pertaining to three fairly recently published collections of Edward Shils' essays (Shils 1997a, 1997b, 1997c). Readers of *TAD* may be assumed to be aware of Turner's obituary of Shils, and of the posthumous publication of Shils' talk at Kent State concerning Polanyi on intellectuals (Shils 1995-96; Turner 1995-96). Both are worth rereading. One of my intentions in this essay is to pique and provoke further interest in Shils' writing. A second is to flag some questions about limitations of the influence of Polanyi on Shils, that bear further study. A third is to point to evidences of a contribution by Shils to sociological thought which I believe will be his most lastingly fruitful one, namely, his development of the idea of the power and importance of experiences and perceptions of the sacred in holding secular societies together and making them work as they do.

II

Not only does a current literature search show that Shils is still abundantly cited with respect to an amazing array of topics; he figures again in a current novel by Bellow (Staples 2000), and controversy continues concerning CIA funding of the Congress for Cultural Freedom in which both Shils and Polanyi played a part (Coleman 1989, 1999; Saunders 1999). Turner (1999) has recently published a thoughtful piece on certain aspects of Shils' contributions to social and political theory.

In addition to the Shils' essays contained in these volumes, I enthusiastically commend to your attention the informative, reflective introduction to "The Virtue of Civility" (Shils 1997c) on the antinomies of liberalism, and on consensus and collective consciousness, by Professor Grosby, and on "Edward Shils and the American University" (Shils 1997b) by Professor Altbach, as well as the shorter introduction to "The Calling of Education" (Shils 1997a), again by Professor Grosby. I have not undertaken to cover the same ground that they have most ably chosen to deal with. I have elected, for the most part, to emphasize still further components of Shils' thought. I should mention also that a valuable chronologically organized bibliography of Shils' published work is included at the end of the volume edited by Altbach (Shils 1997b).

III

Let me first comment on an obstacle to a wider appreciation of some of Shils' most basic sociological contributions. He preferred use of the essay style. Much in Shils' essays could not be documented by him, in the ordinary sense, because it depended so heavily on his own discernment, his own acute perceptions synthesized on the basis of his own judgment. Perhaps in part because he did not want to draw attention to his lack of citation of scholarly or scientific authority for many of the points he was making, he used very few footnotes. He was quite reluctant to cite his contemporaries, perhaps for fear of alienating some of his various intellectual friends for whom other friends were rivals. He even was stingy about citing his own work in the many cases where such citations, and cross references, would have proved very helpful to all readers but that small fraction thoroughly familiar with his extensive scholarly output. This paucity of self-citation and other citation has made adequate understanding and appreciation of his work more difficult, and has probably greatly inhibited a wider dissemination of his ideas, although he does have a loyal following with respect to particular facets of his production.

IV

Freud and Weber were among the prominent intellectuals of the early 20th century who believed that the sacred was disappearing from the world. Freud apparently thought that, aided by science and psychoanalysis, the gradual disappearance of such illusions would be a good thing (Freud 1927/1975). Weber thought that it was inevitable, that the process of rationalization – the inexorable spread of bureaucratic technical rationality to every sphere of life – would result in the *Entzauberung der Welt* – the disenchantment or desacralization of the world (e.g., Shils 1997c, pp. 245-264). Linking his analysis in part to Weber's concept of charisma, but greatly extending and elaborating that concept – to include, inter alia, the dispersion of charisma and variations in its intensity, and hence also to link these ideas with his own conceptions of center and periphery – Shils quietly and persistently asserted that without experiences of and attributions of the sacred, social life as we know it would be impossible. He included as a foundational element in his analysis Otto's (1917/1958) concept of the *mysterium tremendum* – universal human experiences of awesomeness in varying degrees.

Weber asserted that the world would become completely *entzaubert*. But it has not. The world cannot be in such a condition and still be a world of relatively stable complex societies. Charisma, experiences and attributions of the sacred, are not only disruptive and disjunctive forces, as Weber described them; in proper form, location and degree they are also essential for continuity and stability. Charisma inheres in all social ties, such as the primordial (e.g., ties of blood and to territory) and the civil (e.g., membership in a territorial society). It flows from the exercise of both traditional authority and rational-legal authority. As a matter of fact, the bare exercise of power itself evokes experiences and attributions of awesomeness.

Finally in this incomplete account, high social valuations of one type of activity rather than another, for example, giving high esteem in a post-colonial country to being a civil servant rather than to being an entrepreneur, a person whose career is economizing, involves attributing a kind of awesomeness to the one activity which the other lacks. One is closer to the transcendent than the other; an American example, until recently, would be being a university professor as opposed to someone engaged in business, mere buying and selling. All of this, too briefly recounted here, relates to the human need for meaning, which is, among other things, not only a need for order but, in varying degrees, a need to be in right relation with what are eventually

perceived to be the fundamentals of some larger picture.

V

The above analysis gives us an additional tool for interpreting other portions of Shils' work beyond that specifically treated in "Max Weber and the World Since 1920," a 1987 essay (Shils 1997c, pp. 225-267). (For a fuller account see Shils 1975, especially his "Introduction" plus the reprinted "Primordial, Personal, Sacred, and Civil Ties" [1957], "Charisma, Order and Status" [1965], and "Charisma" [1968].)

Especially rich is the 1958 essay "Ideology and Civility" (Shils, 1997c, pp. 25-62). Civility, a concern and sense of responsibility for the well being of the whole of society, is another of Shils' complex concepts that resists brief explication. Illustratively, however, Shils (1997c, p. 107) refers to "a spontaneous moral tendency in man, a need to be in contact with the ultimately true and right, a sensitivity to the sacred...." He says "[Tradition] establishes contact between the recipient and the sacred values of his life in society. Man has a need for being in right relations with the sacred" (id.).

The attachment to the sacred cannot be evaded in any society. All societies regard as *sacred* certain standards of judgment, certain rules of conduct and thought, and certain arrangements of action. ...At its highest level of intensity, the belief in the sacredness of an institution or a system of institutions is inimical to liberty because it is hostile, in substance and in form, to innovation, which is an inevitable consequence of a system of liberty. (Shils 1997c, p. 108. Emphasis in original.)

Hence, "A major task of liberal policy is to respect the sacred while keeping it at low ebb. This is one of the chief functions of the transmission of sacred beliefs through a loose tradition" (id., p. 109).

VI

But, with his assertions concerning the importance of the sacred in all human societies, including contemporary secular ones, Shils has exposed himself, and those who would follow his profound analysis, to several sorts of objections. (1) The least meritorious, but real nonetheless, has to do with the possible adverse reactions and concerns of secularist intellectuals who might fear that Shils' ideas signal giving respect to the non-rational or even the anti-rational factors in social life, thus undermining some hard-fought gains achieved by the Enlightenment. (2) The second is that this mode of analysis and commentary involves and requires great sensitivity and great good judgment. Routine talents will make a mess of it and swamp the literature with their assertions which will vary all over the lot. The method seems to require keen discernment and substantial wisdom, both being in short supply, both not easily nor reliably identified. (3) The third is that it "explains" that which Shils (and others much more broadly) oppose. It has a positivistic quality, a *relativistic* quality. All too easily it lends further strength to the view that all interpretations of the nature and the locus of charisma are equally worthy of our support.

VII

Indeed, this latter point seems to me to link up with some of the points made by Polanyi in his analysis of modern nihilism, also called moral inversion. Natural science has been interpreted as saying that values

don't exist: there is no grounding of values to be found in the natural order, the natural reality of the cosmos. This point gets explicitly affirmed by the nihilists. Shils' analysis does not address this directly, but the seeming relativism as to the profound and sacred values in Shils' analysis does not explicitly oppose this view, and by implication seems to support it. But, Polanyi says, humans have an irrepressible urge toward valuing, reinforced and given specific content and direction by Western culture, including Christianity and the millennialism described and analyzed by Norman Cohn. Hence valuing, in particular in the form of a perfectionism, are given powerful expression, but their normative content is somehow obscured and denied. These perfectionistic valuing are often expressed as "science," especially in the form of Marxism or the many modern derivatives whose Marxist inspiration is not recognized, or is conveniently forgotten.

It would be fundamentally helpful, Polanyi asserts, for people – especially intellectuals – to recognize that science is grounded in values and that it depends upon the responsibility and the fiduciary faithfulness of scientists. There is no disembodied knowledge which exists, has been discovered, preserved and maintained "out there" somehow, apart from our embodied perceptiveness and responsibility.

Central to this most prestigious of social institutions, modern science, is the embodied, committed responsible person carrying on within a Republic of Science of somewhat similar persons, supported and nurtured in a variety of ways by larger societies. For this Republic of Science to function, or to function best, we need free societies.

Why is it that a more widely shared awareness of these truths among "elites" and among the general populace would not be an inherently good thing – because closer to the truth than prevalent views typified, for example, by the dominant portion of what Karl Popper has to say about objective knowledge? Might not a fuller awareness of this basic truth about the fundamental importance of responsibility in questing after transcendent ideals such as Truth, Justice, Beauty and Tolerance (as elaborated by Polanyi in connection with his views about a free society) have the potential for a profound effect in interrupting some of the contemporary trends – including the bohemianism of intellectuals – that Shils repeatedly deplors? Why would Shils (e.g., 1995-96) never take seriously these ideas, which constitute a fundamental challenge to his own eventual stance of resignation and to the resignation of his hero Max Weber?

VIII

Bearing in mind the great importance of attributions of the sacred helps us to be aware of some of the most powerful themes in Shils' writings about higher education. The title of Shils 1979 Eighth Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities, "Render unto Caesar... : Government, Society, and the Universities in Their Reciprocal Rights and Duties" – a lecture containing a plea against intrusive U.S. Government regulation of universities, including mandates for affirmative action in faculty hiring – represented for Shils much more than a useful rhetorical device that happened to be grounded in Matthew 22. Shils was asserting the transcendent character of higher education.

The effort to achieve understanding of the order or pattern of existence constitutes a sphere which is as close as many of us can come to the sphere of the divine. The relationship between the sphere of science and learning and the sphere in which Caesar acts is my theme (Shils 1997a, pp. 177-178).

“The Academic Ethic,” technically speaking an international committee product (Shils 1997a, pp. 3-128), should in my view be seen as an advocacy document against those who would attribute no sacralty, or indeed no reality, to universities’ disciplined and disinterested search for knowledge, or who would see this as having less sacralty than various useful services, including political services, that universities might perform.

IX

Although I have resolved to limit the scope of this essay, rather than attempt an overview of the three 1997 collections of Shils’ essays, I cannot resist registering one loyal dissent on an important position taken by Shils concerning higher education. I will not be able to pursue this in detail here. Perhaps my dissent will provoke some readers to further explore this matter in Shils’ writings.

I greatly admire Shils’ work but at the same time am in substantial disagreement with some important portions of it. To take a central example, seen in major portions of two of the three collections under review, I believe Shils’ (1997a, 1997b) assertions that the research university as contemplated by Humboldt ought to be seen as an adequate synthesis of our great traditions of the cultivation, preservation and advancement of higher learning in Western societies, the “gold standard” for present manifestations of these traditions (as one of the editors has put it, see Altbach, in Shils 1997b, p. x) is profoundly flawed. The implicit argument might be said to be that to effectively oppose the destructive ideologies of the second half of the 20th century as these relate to universities and to intellectual life more generally, one has to promote what comes close to a simplistic monolithic counter-ideology, compressing into one ideal (the pursuit of truth) and into one form (the research university) the sacredness of the richly varied and somewhat contradictory higher education traditions of the West. I wonder!

Nevertheless, one of Shils enduring scholarly gifts to higher education consists in his addition, in important ways, to the relatively modest body of existing evidence that a first-class academic talent can find this subject area worthy of sustained attention and commitment. He helped to show that it is possible that contributions to this literature, by a citizen of what should be regarded as the international higher education community, can be of high intellectual quality. His work concerning universities, such as is collected in these volumes, especially Shils 1997a and 1997b, also helps establish a detailed groundwork for further thought and reflection in this area. The charisma attributed by academics themselves to a career devoted to scholarship and commentary concerning higher education usually has been low, as has been the charisma attributed to activities of academic citizenship pertinent to university-wide governance and self-assessment. Eventually perhaps, this part of Shils’ legacy may help in turning these things around.

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