A Comparison of Mircea Eliade’s and Jonathan Z. Smith’s Views on Dur-an-ki

Sacred space has become an important category in the study of religion since the mid-twentieth century, largely owing to the work of Mircea Eliade.¹ Eliade defines sacred space as a space set apart, most significantly by a hierophany, from ordinary, homogeneous spaces. The concept of sacred space encompasses natural elements that are usually associated with divine manifestations and thus religiously interpreted, such as mountains, trees, stones, or rivers. In addition, human constructions such as temples, where a deity or deities are believed to dwell and communicate with humans, are regarded sacred as well. Often found at the centre of the world, sacred space can function as an axis mundi linking together different cosmic levels. People orient themselves around this “centre of the world” in order to transcend their world of non-reality and communicate with the real par excellence.

Eliade’s theories of sacred space were highly influential, though controversial. Opposing his view of profane space as homogeneous, meaningless, and without orientation, Larry Shiner argues that people of modern societies, like the ancients, experience their world as a meaningful environment, not as something amorphous and chaotic as described by Eliade. The sacred/profane polarity cannot adequately explain the variegated dimensions of human spatiality. He therefore proposes “lived space” as the primary human environment at both extreme ends of which stand sacred and profane space.²

Joining Eliade’s critics as early as 1971 in his lecture “The Wobbling Pivot,” Jonathan Z. Smith questions the validity of Eliade’s theory of sacred space.³ He points out that chaos can best be understood as “a sacred power … perceived as being sacred in the wrong way” rather than as the equivalent of the neutral, meaningless profane. He also contends that Eliade’s discussion on the “Center” is one-sided and that this discussion does not consider the significance of the periphery. However, one of the best-known criticisms by Smith against Eliade revolves around Eliade’s interpretation of Dur-an-ki, or “bond between heaven and earth,” as a term demonstrating the concept of the temple in Mesopotamia as the “Center.” Essential to Eliade’s concept of sacred space is its centrality functioning as the cosmic center where the heavens, earth, and underworld intersect:

“Indeed, by the very fact of being placed at the center of the Cosmos, the temple or sacred city is always a meeting place for the three cosmic regions. Dur-an-ki, ‘bond between Heaven and Earth’, was the title of the sanctuaries of Nippur, Larsa and probably of Sippar too. Babylon had a great many names, among them ‘house of the foundation of heaven and earth’, ‘bond between heaven and earth’. But it was also in Babylon that the earth made connection with the underworld, for the town was built upon bab-apsi, ‘gate of Apsu’ – apsu signifying the waters of the chaos that preceded creation.”⁴

⁴ Eliade, Patterns (wie Anm. 1), S. 376-377. See also Idem, Sacred and the Profane (Fn. 1), S. 41.
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Criticizing Eliade’s concept of this “Center,” Smith states:

“The majority of relevant texts do not explicitly employ the kind of ‘Center’ language Eliade has collected, yet they are frequently more eloquent testimony to the underlying ideology. Furthermore, this focus on the explicit presence of the term ‘Center’ leads Eliade at times to employ questionable interpretations of his material (e.g., the term given to Babylonian sanctuaries, Dur-an-ki [Bond of Heaven and Earth], probably does not mean, as Eliade often implies, the place of intersection of the upper world with earth, but rather the scar, or navel, left behind when heaven and earth were forcibly separated in creation – it is the disjunctive rather than the conjunctive which is to the fore.”

In his book “To Take Place”, Smith once again affirms his conviction that “Dur-an-ki is a term that emphasizes disjunction rather than conjunction.”

Smith’s remark on Dur-an-ki is repeatedly quoted by Eliade’s critics as a convenient tool for discrediting Eliade’s arguments. For example, Frank Korom says:

“Smith further notes that Dur-an-ki, the celebrated passage that has been traditionally translated as the ‘link of heaven and earth,’ actually suggests the scar left from the separation of earth and sky. Hence, Dur-an-ki is permanently separated from, rather than connected to, the heavens.”

Bryan Rennie, citing Smith’s remark, even goes on to say that this is Smith’s “most incisive criticism” against Eliade. Therefore, the question of the meaning of Dur-an-ki merits careful examination.

Smith apparently depends on the eminent Assyriologist Thorkild Jacobsen when defining Dur-an-ki as “the scar, or navel, left behind when heaven and earth were forcibly separated in creation – it is the disjunctive rather than the conjunctive which is to the fore.” In my opinion, however, Smith may have misunderstood Jacobsen’s comments on Dur-an-ki:

“The place of this wound, and of the severed bond, was in Nippur, the sacred area Dur-an-ki, for Dur-an-ki means ‘the bond of Heaven and Earth.’ In Dur-an-ki was located Uzu-mú-a, which, after the wound had been closed, grew the first men.”

Here, Jacobsen is referring to an interesting Sumerian myth titled “The Song of

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5 Smith, Wobbling Pivot (Fn. 3), S. 144-145; Idem, Map Is Not Territory: Studies in the History of Religions (Fn. 3), S. 98-99.
6 Jonathan Z. Smith, To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual, Chicago 1992, S. 122 no. 3.
8 Korom, Of Navel and Mountains (Fn. 7), S. 121 no. 38.
9 Rennie, Reconstructing Eliade (Fn. 7), 189.
11 Jacobsen, Sumerian Mythology, S.137.