

# OBSERVE, DESCRIBE, COMPARE.

## A SMALL MEDITATION

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IN a brief presentation of the concept of territory in *History of religions*, Sam Gill defines the beginning of the academic study of religion as the abandonment of a theological perspective (where the emphasis is on the belief in a god) in favor of a taxonomic perspective, where the emphasis is on the construction of space and time, as charter of meaning.<sup>1</sup> Mircea Eliade would be the most influential representative of this type of thinking, where the «sacred» relegates «gods» to the second place. Space and time are considered, thenceforth, in the viewpoint of a Durkheimian distinction between sacred and profane. We know that in his *Treatise on the history of religions*, this book published in 1949, Mircea Eliade sought to identify, through a comparative and encyclopedic approach, how the relationships between man and the sacred are organized. He established what he calls, in the subtitle of this book, a «morphology of the sacred»: namely a classification of images, symbols and rituals through which mankind, everywhere and for ever, is trying to overcome the contingency, the disorder of the profane, in order to give a meaning, to achieve what he calls «real being». The sacred (the reality of being) is supposed to become apparent in some basic symbolic structures, designed by Eliade as archetypal and universal, and which he lists: heavenly symbolism, solar, lunar, aquatic symbolism, in a succession of epiphanies leading towards two fundamental religious experiences: the experience of a space ordered around a center (where an experience of communication with the archetype is made possible), and the experience of a cyclically organized time, a «liturgical» time making possible a periodical regeneration by the repetition of the cosmogony (a ritual return to the origins). Everywhere and always, and with a limited number of symbolic tools, humanity is trying to bring order to chaos and painful contingency.

Critical vis-à-vis the position of Eliade, Jonathan Smith has shown that the center concept is not a solid model that can explain the observed facts. Rather it is a dubious concept that needs to be rethought on the basis of specific comparative efforts. A territory, with its distribution in space more or less 'sacred', around a center, is simply the result of a construction of the world, a construction always questioned, always re-contextualized.<sup>2</sup> The reality (the real reality, in the sense of Eliade) is a symbolic construction, resulting from negotiation. In other words it does not fall from the sky.

A propos of a word come to us from very far away, and quickly adopted by the

<sup>1</sup> SAM GILL, *Territory*, in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Study*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998, p. 301.

<sup>2</sup> JONATHAN Z. SMITH, *In Search of Place*, in IDEM, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 17.

anthropology of religion, the mysterious mana analyzed by Marcel Mauss, Claude Lévi-Strauss speaks of concepts intended to «represent a value of undetermined significance, in themselves empty of meaning, and therefore able to receive any meaning». He said in a note that «the function of mana and this sort of concepts is to oppose no-meaning without communicating in themselves any particular meaning».<sup>1</sup> The sacred, in this view, would be just that which gives meaning to the profane. As Jonathan Z. Smith has seen, nothing is sacred in nature, and it is the same with the profane. The sacred and the profane are not substantial categories, but rather relational, depending on positions. The border between them is mobile. Nothing is sacred in itself, there are only things sacred in relation to others that are not, or less so. What is sacred for some is not necessarily sacred for others.

Confronted as we are, as a historian of religions, with the multiplicity of strategies and mythological ritual intended to «give meaning» to confer supernatural value on certain areas of reality, the only «entrance» that we reasonably have at our disposal, in order to apprehend such a fleeing object, an object so mobile, so culturally variable, is comparison. Our job is to observe these strategies in their diversity, to describe the behaviors and attitudes, in order to compare what is said or done here, with what is said or done there, in different periods: how does a ritual work, and how do the worshippers speak about their own rituals, with which vocabularies, which images?

From its most distant origins, history of religions appears as an exercise in comparison. The first evidence for this exercise, beginning with pre-academic reflection, is observable in antiquity, around the Mediterranean and in the Near East. It is in this region of the world, from the first millennium BC, in what may be termed a progressive expansion of consciousness, that a first exercise in comparison begins. The specific character of this region, both multi-ethnic and homogeneous, encouraged comparison: trade and incessant interaction made the old traditions of the ancient Near East (Egypt, Mesopotamia, Syria-Palestine, Phoenicia, Anatolia and the Iranian world) react to each others, even before the Greeks and Romans began to reinterpret this inheritance.

Hebrews reflected on Egypt, Iran, Babylon and Greece; Greece reacted to all its neighbors. In Mesopotamia, the Sumerian and Akkadian were in mutual dialogue, as came to be, in Rome, Italic, Etruscan and Greek traditions. The Hittite myths are recorded in both Anatolian and Mesopotamian versions. The Iranians (who addressed their oldest hymns, in the Avesta, to divine entities very close to those of Indian Vedas, in a language close to Sanskrit) built an empire ranging from India to the Mediterranean, preparing the way to Alexander and his successors, followed themselves by the Romans. Judaism, Christianity and Islam reacted in turn, each in its own way, in this great melting pot from which monotheistic ideas derived their substance and pugnacity. It is from these contacts and these preliminary clashes that were conceived the first prejudices and the first conceptual tools of this com-

<sup>1</sup> CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS, *Introduction à l'œuvre de Marcel Mauss*, in MARCEL MAUSS, *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris, PUF, 1950, pp. XLIV and L.

parative investigation which remains ours, concerning phenomena that we consider to be «religious».<sup>1</sup>

To build a comparative history of religions we are forced, as Europeans or Americans, or Europeanised scholars, to take in account this territory where our analytical instruments have been elaborated and have developed. We must be aware of how we built our evidence. The exercise of historiographically tracking the process of this construction (from classical antiquity and the ancient Middle East, through Late Antiquity, medieval and modern periods until today, here) is a vital task. But it is not enough. It also requires that we can recognize that other views are possible, sometimes very different from ours, issuing from other cultural areas. This could be somewhat confusing, for us. It is not enough to criticize the genesis and development of a colonialist viewpoint which has been finally ours in the history of religions in the West. It is not enough to practice archeology and internal criticism. We still need to prepare ourselves to meet and consider with interest elaborations different from ours, issued from alien cultures (the Far East, indigenous peoples of Australia or Amazon, etc. ...). We need to accept the idea of a truly comparative discipline, with a multifocal perspective, a discipline for which the concepts and research tools will remain objects to build, to negotiate between multiple and diverse viewpoints.

Here we will not need to go as far as Australia or China.

What has been, for us, the initial situation (the situation of classical antiquity) remains, from our viewpoint, exemplary, and useful. Indeed, the shimmering diversity of religious cultures included within Classical Antiquity, and the multiplicity of reactions in this «Greco-Roman Empire» (to adopt a term used by Paul Veyne) this diversity can prepare and encourage the historian or the anthropologist of religions to address this much broader phenomenon, that today we call globalization.

To observe the Greco-Roman origins of comparative procedures in history of religions, could be very useful as a preparation for the necessary expansion of our methodologies. Our exercise will be to take our inquiry back before and below the monotheistic revolution, in areas where we meet countless deities, which are addressed in innumerable rites.

Beginning with instruction given to Adam by God, all mankind is conceived by the early Christians as having a rudimentary religion, original and universal, involving a knowledge of God, illuminated by natural light. The soul is naturally Christian, said Tertullian. But this glimmering light has been buried in the darkness of ignorance. This is supposed to explain, with the help of the devil, the formation of polytheistic religions (the cults addressed to multiple gods). Noah, Abraham and Jacob, the revelation given to Moses and the prophets, Christ and the Evangelical mission represent, in this darkness, stages of a privileged history. From this providential chain of salvation, where light is transmitted so to speak without interrup-

<sup>1</sup> Cf. PH. BORGEAUD, *Aux origines de l'histoire des religions*, Paris, éditions du Seuil (collection «Bibliothèque du XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle»), 2004.

tion, the wisdom of nations, although victims of satanic mists, are not completely excluded. But they must be content to occupy a marginal position.

We know that each tribe has a tendency to think that the only real humans are those who constitute it. If we are willing to travel and to look elsewhere, even far away, at the different possible forms of such a marginalization, such a rejection of the alien, it may be useful as a first step, as propaedeutic, to observe what were European attitudes before the intervention of Christianity.

One could be surprised, perhaps, to discover that culture occupied, in the eyes of Cicero and his readers (before Christ), the place that will be devoted to Revelation by Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Any human, so far as he is civilized, i.e. separated from the wild animal (which is the most frequent situation, according to Cicero, but not always), has a natural knowledge of the gods. This means that in principle any (or almost any) religion is good for those who practice it, each in the manner of his tribe. Humanity, from this point of view, is a rather fairly shared thing. Even the barbarians may have wisdoms.

But this very tolerant attitude, generally widespread among intellectuals in Antiquity, knows its limits. A certain kind of distinction, of discrimination, leads them to look differently on ritual practices and mythical commentaries, if they are considered them foreign or indigenous. We meet here the edge of interpretation (*interpretatio*), a wall which blocks the possibility (in principle undisputed) of translating the gods of the other into ones own gods: this possibility, while it encourages a kind of open-mindedness, does not lead to a true assimilation. A suspicion of «superstition» inevitably occurs as soon as one looks outside, in the direction of a different community, or even in the direction of a neighbor doing something new.

Beneath theoretical tolerance we discover, in the basement of polytheism, a fundamental concern to maintain a gap between locals and aliens, also between public and private (between feelings of the group and those of the individual). The individual, compared with collective ritual practices, represents a potential threat. A double gap is thus maintained in religious cults between political and foreign cults and between collective piety and private piety, even though literature and philosophy, for their part, tend to assert the highly translatable, or even the oneness of all divine figures, wherever met.

From the point of view of polytheism, the practice of rituals, in their diversity, would be generally good for those who are respecting scrupulously the rules that define ancestral custom. Ancestral custom defines a specific way to communicate with the divine. But this is only true to a certain extent. Respect for one's neighbor may be modified by the invocation of a minimal code of «good ways to behave», a code defined by the observer, but claimed to be universal. Passing through Rome, Hercules puts an end to human sacrifices made by the predecessors of Romulus. Later on the Romans will condemn human sacrifices they meet among the Gauls. Alien customs are sometimes reported as shameful even by the old historian Herodotus, whose attitude in general is rather tolerant: he is shocked by the ritual prostitution of women in Babylon (I, 199) and does not appreciate that, in Egypt, in some circumstances, one could mate in a sanctuary (II, 64).

Custom also ensures that the «neighbor» does not get too close, that he does

not enter Athens or Rome to impose new rules. It is proper for the other to remain confined in his role of other, as barbarian, savage or wise.

But where is therefore, in such a system, the «truth»? Of course, even if the practice of my community is the only «real» practice, there nevertheless remain a multiplicity of explanations for any particular practice. Those multiple and often contradictory explanations arise, in Greece or Rome, as soon as one desires to find the reason or the cause of a rite. This indecision, this ongoing debate show the complexity of the relationship between believe and practice. Is it necessary to believe in order to practice? Certainly not. Custom (the *nomos*), to reproduce, must rely on itself. It is sovereign and powerful, as Pindar said: *Nomos Basileus, nomos is king, or tyrant, for those who subscribe to it.*

The display, the ostentation of a belief, in the ancient world, would have been close to confessing or admitting to be superstitious, which would be a form of exaggeration, extravagance or excess. It would detract from religion (*religio*) conceived as a way to cultivate, to normally treat the gods. While they are fond of praise, the gods, generally (...not always... cf. the Anatolian confession inscriptions..., the so-called aretologies...), do not want us to profess a belief in them. Of course, we are supposed to believe: however if that was not self-evident, if we should profess something like a credo, it would sound awkward, somewhat outside the suitable. This would mean departing from proper usage. There is no good piety beyond the border of the territory where religious action is founded sheerly on received opinions [the border which separates the religious action from the opinion]. To be on one's guard against theories, to admit ignorance regarding religious custom, this is to respect the incessant metamorphosis of countless gods, who refuse to be put in boxes. What we call «conviction» would be seen as crippling, or even mutilating, compared to practice. Strabo, a geographer historian and ethnographer contemporary of Augustus stated that «the secrecy with which the sacred rites are concealed induces reverence for the divine, since it imitates the nature of the divine, which is to avoid being perceived by our human senses».<sup>1</sup>

Myth, which speaks of rituals and gods, operates as a continuous commentary on practice, but it remains a comment attached to the mode of discussing and negotiating, anxious not to impose a dogma. The myth is happy and free speech, which does not give a definitive opinion, but on the contrary new interpretations, again and again, in a more or less harmonic relationship to other interpretations of the same theme. With myth, we are in the modulation of stories and counter-stories in continuous transformation, where there is no preferred version, no basic «text» on which to build. Such a text, such a theoretical model, exists only as the result of a secondary analysis, the result of the work of mythologists.

Monotheism reproaches polytheism with precisely this right, in the realm of Dionysus or Jupiter, to palaver, this right to stay in uncertainty and guesswork, and even contradiction. Jan Assmann, in a small book on the price of monotheism<sup>2</sup> is well aware of this contrasting difference in between myth and truth: he seeks to find the origin of this difference in what he calls «the [Mosaic] breakdown, or

<sup>1</sup> STRABO, *Geography* 10, 3, 9.

<sup>2</sup> Paris, Aubier, 2007.

rupture». But he postulates, unfortunately, that the advent of monotheism is to the advantage of reason. This rupture will have caused a kind of progress, it will have created the conditions that make it possible and desirable to separate fact from fiction. But does the ability to distinguish clearly and definitely between one's own (religious) truth and a number of errors really represent progress? And what should we think of this strange belief that in this area my truth begins where the error of the other stops?

Assmann's position is not very clear on this point: in his conclusion he somewhat admits that a negotiated truth is better than a truth imposed as a dogma. Let us come back to this old question, in order better to evaluate the importance of myth and palaver and to recognize the essential role of this plural, never final commentary.

Faced with the gods of others, the Fathers of the Church (and missionaries medieval and modern) behave in an amazing way. Their monotheism, while recognizing the existence of these «gods» of the aliens, denies their divine essence. For Christians, when the gods of Nations are not merely human beings divinized after their death (as an old theory, borrowed from the Hellenistic essayist Euhemerus, would have), they are demons (in the meaning of Satanic creatures). Eusebius, bishop of Caesarea in Palestine, founder of the Christian religious history around 300, speaks explicitly of «these demons, that they take to be gods», in his *Preparation* (v, 15, 1). Eusebius will argue that the demons (which the Greeks, for their part, take for gods) have taught themselves the gestures and the rules of their religion; they have taught how to make images, idols to be used as support for magical and «theurgic» practices, namely techniques specific to pagan rituals of the imperial era, intended to force the gods to communicate with the priest, through the mediation of the image.

Attached to the body and passions, these demons are naturally likely to disappear, to fade, and even to die. This is reflected by what happens to oracular shrines, as has long been noted at the time of Eusebius: they fell into disuse, one after another:

We can not reactivate the melodious voice of Pytho

(Delphi and its oracle)

This voice now erased by time has shut the lock of silence on the oracle.

This is how the pagan philosopher Porphyry (quoted by Eusebius) reported an oracle from the god Apollo, the Mantis, the Diviner par excellence, referring to the extinction of his own voice.

This type of speech pretends to have the right meaning of the speech of the other. This invites us to consider what happens when a culture begins to secrete and distill, to produce what will become its frontier, its shadow, or even the vertiginous abyss over which it seeks to balance.

In his famous remarks on the *Golden Bough* of Sir James Frazer, Ludwig Wittgenstein said, in essence, that Frazer was wrong to identify magic and religious concepts as errors. There can be no error, before a theory has been introduced.



The mere intention to explain a custom is doomed to failure because a religious symbol is not based on any opinion. «A religious symbol does not rest on any *opinion*. An error belongs only with opinion». Contrary to what Frazer pretends (says Wittgenstein), primitive man does not rely on opinions. «The characteristic feature of primitive man, I believe, is that he does not act from opinions he holds about things as Frazer thinks». The will to explain the opinions of the primitive inevitably reveals the views of the observer and not of the primitive, and that is precisely what happens to Frazer, «powerless to understand another life than English life of his time».

The task of the anthropologist and historian of religions is to be opposed to such a reductionism. It should simply consist in collecting correctly what is known, and in adding nothing. The satisfaction (according to Wittgenstein) does not result from explanation, but from this real observation, sufficient in itself.

In his preface to a useful little book by Philippe de Lara on *Wittgenstein the anthropologist*,<sup>1</sup> Vincent Descombes evokes what may be termed, following Wittgenstein, «the problem of Frazer». The problem of Frazer, according to Descombes, is brilliantly simple: Why do people continue to perform magic rituals in spite of the fact they should have realized since a long time that these practices have no efficacy at all? How to explain this persistence in error? The answers that were given to this question raised by Frazer range between two positions:

a) if the primitive does not realize that his magic is ineffective it is because he can not. This response is that of Frazer himself, in an evolutionary perspective assuming that magic and ignorance of real causes are characteristics of a primitive stage; it will be also be, with a slightly different coloration, the response of Levi-Brühl, who speaks of pre-logical mentality;

b) the other answer, certainly more interesting, was announced by Radcliffe-Brown, then by Malinowski and Evans-Pritchard: if the «primitive» does not realize the futility of magic, it is because he does not want to see it. He rather wants or he finds interest in «discharging emotional tension in a purely symbolic or expressive way» (in the words of Descombes). What to do, with the shimmering diversity of religious symbols, if one wishes to stay out of unnecessary exegesis? What would be the reasonable, if not the only right attitude? What, if not to stick to the observation of observable practices?

Philippe de Lara, in this regard, recalls a thought of Chesterton:

The man of science, not realizing that ceremonial is essentially a thing which is done without a reason, has to find a reason for every sort of ceremonial, and, as might be supposed, the reason is generally a very absurd one – absurd because it originates not in the simple mind of the barbarian, but in the sophisticated mind of the professor.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> PHILIPPE DE LARA, *Le rite et la raison. Wittgenstein anthropologue, avec une préface de Vincent Descombes*, Paris, Ellipses, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.pagebypagebooks.com/Gilbert\\_K\\_Chesterton/Heretics/Science\\_and\\_the\\_Savages\\_p1.html](http://www.pagebypagebooks.com/Gilbert_K_Chesterton/Heretics/Science_and_the_Savages_p1.html)

The program outlined here is to observe, to describe and to compare, in order to assess the specificity of such or such particular symbolic usage.

The only «reasons» deserving consideration are those given by the practitioner (the savages, as well as ourselves). When we have seen what people believe and think, and when we have realized who are these people who believe and think this, as Marcel Mauss said (quoted by Dumont himself quoted by Descombes), we have completed the analysis (sociological or anthropological) of our object. We only have still to translate, to make the information understandable. The translation becomes thus the final step in the process of analysis.

As Descombes wrote: «At the foundation of this anthropological point of view, there is the contrast between what we say when we're at home, and what we understand of what the other people say, precisely when they are home». There is therefore, as Dumont asserted, no explanation other than a radical comparison.

With this consideration, the historian of religions has to come back to the famous question of orthopraxy, as respect for traditional local custom, the custom of the ancestors. This respect the ancient Greeks and Romans saw as something universally shared, at work in all communities of practitioners in the humanized world: Greek, Roman, or barbaric ... This seems to lead to a potentially relativist position that could be illustrated by a set of ancient discourses: in Plutarch in particular, but already in Cicero, and even earlier in Herodotus. However, even though these old thinkers like to give importance to this universalist attitude, and to be acutely aware of the relativism which inhabits this universalist attitude, they postulate without hesitation the superiority of their own ancestral customs. Home remains a highlight in the foreground.

What appears to each of them, where he is situated, as the center and the measure of all things to be the best attitude, this would be *religio*. When others adopt the same attitude, they can consider it superstition (something displaced).

But nonetheless, in this regard, we discover in these distant ancestors a lucidity that yields nothing to Chesterton. Pliny the Elder, for example, is well aware that no normally intelligent individual would credit the effectiveness of magic rites, when asked in privacy. But the same individual, confronted by the same rites performed by the Roman state in the most official ceremonies, will unconditionally admit their efficacy.