

## The Fall of the Gods, or Modernity without Illusions

Eduardo Grüner\*

*“Deep down, what deprives man of all possibility of speaking about God is that, in human thought, God is necessarily the image of man, whereas man is weary and hungry for sleep and peace”*

Georges Bataille

### 1

It is said –or rather, it has quite often been said- that modernity is an unstoppable process of “disillusionment with the world” from which there is no turning back. At that point, the religious (better said, God, as if the religious could be *reduced* to this image) *has no place* \*. The phrase, so frequently uttered by judges in movies, should at least deserve an article by Marc Augé: is religion also one of his trivial *non-places*? One of the first signs of incipient “modernity”, as suggested by Hegel himself, was the introduction of Judeo-Christian monoteism into ancient European paganism as the principle of subjective individuation. It goes without saying that, in this context, the term “introduction” is not a random choice, for in fact the so-called “West” *receives* monoteism as if it were “from outside”. On the subject of monoteism: since I am far from being an expert in the matter, I do not know whether much thought has been devoted to the fact that the West as such has not given rise to *any* of the great religions of the world. All of them –Judaism, Christianity, Islamism, and even Buddhism, “the atheist religion” can be included here- come from what we call the “East”. After all, this may not be a minor detail, specially when one wants to discuss the bond between religion and the *social sciences*, which indeed have been “invented” in the West.

Whatever the case may be, with regard to this field, modernity believed it had surpassed itself –let us say, it had achieved its own *Aufhebung*, to keep up Hegel’s terminology- by casting away the very monoteism that had been one of its first distinctive features insofar as it stood for a process of *abstraction* that unified the much more *carnal* dispersion of the endless “primitive” or ancient gods. The passage from the Many to the One is accompanied by *distance* from a divinity that is much less willing to meddle in men’s daily disputes. To clear this point further, let it be understood that “casting away” is meant as the fact that, at least in appearance, social life (as well as economic, political, and cultural life) ceases to *revolve* around religion. It is common knowledge that religion has nothing to do with politics, economy, art, and culture. Undoubtedly, the weight and *purpose* of institutional cults and their policies concerning decisions made in *other* spheres (something that any trained newspaper reader can confirm, irrespective of the equally indubitable “last instance decisions”) have not succeeded in naturalizing a more than common sense: religious *faith*, we were saying, belongs in the *private*, intimate realm of individual conscience. Moreover, this would be the strictly “modern”, “enlightened” and “progressist” stance which, among other things, lies at the base of irrefutable proposals like the one that urges that State and Church be separated.

In other senses, the persistence of religiousness, whether popular or *élite*, is exceedingly obvious. In truth, religion dies hard. There are many who wonder at the growing power of new sects and cults, while others stand aghast at the part played by the passions involved in religious

---

\* Professor of Political Theory at the School of Social Sciences, University of Buenos Aires. Former Deputy Dean of the School of Social Sciences (UBA).

\* Here starts a play on words based on the Spanish phrase “no ha lugar”, which is equivalent to the word “overruled” uttered by a Judge in a trial conducted in English, but that also means “there’s no room”.

[TN]

struggles during present conflicts, or are horrified by the new fundamentalist trends *on both sides* of what is now called “the clash of civilizations”, an objectionable name if any. Although in the last few years the “return” of the religious to the political arena has aroused particular interest, the phenomenon is not that recent: in the early 50s, pioneers like Vittorio Lanternari, following into the footsteps of previous studies by Antonio Gramsci and Ernesto de Martino, had examined the crucial role of the religious in the forms of resistance adopted by subaltern culture, more specifically in the processes of anti-colonial struggle<sup>1</sup>. Of course, this was not restricted to the classic “Third World” regions; Ireland is another case in point. It is hardly necessary to mention the extraordinary phenomenon embodied in Latin America’s *theology of liberation* in the 60s. All of this soon aroused historians’ interest in going back to the Middle Ages in order to find, for example, the prophetic and messianic drive of certain “heresies” whose meanings were utopian and even “revolutionary”<sup>2</sup> or, conversely, the role of religious “fanaticism” in the first great Western movement of “colonial” expansion that preceded the conquest of America –I am speaking about the Crusades<sup>3</sup>. Closer to our own times, many scholars were surprised to see how seventy years of consistent atheist education had clearly failed to do away with religiousness in the popular classes round the zone of influence of the ex URSS: Poland is a particularly striking case, but it is certainly not the only one.

It can be inferred from these few examples, picked among many others, that the religious not only persists, but that it is endowed with a remarkable ideological and political plasticity. There also appears the hint of a suspicion that perhaps the discovery made by the anthropologists as from the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century regarding the *foundational* role played by the religious in the very shaping of “archaic” societies was not valid *exclusively* for them. Exception made of cases of extreme *reductionism* –of which there are still quite a few- we are no longer content regarding religion as *pure* “ideology” (in the bad sense of the word) or as *pure* manipulation of propaganda at the service of the dominant classes. In Marcel Gauchet’s words<sup>4</sup>, we are not even content to make classic schema of historic materialism more complex by *integrating* the religious “superstructure” into the economic-technological “infrastructure”, as Maurice Godelier pointedly did, also in the 60s. Like those anthropologists and historians of religion, we have come to think that the religious is not merely yet another dimension of the social, but the very *condition* of its possibility.

Nevertheless, “optimism” on the face of the irresistible road leading to a “laicized” world seems to be as persistent as religiousness itself. Gauchet emphatically declares that “what we have been witnessing *in Europe* (my italics) for the last two centuries is in keeping with the due way out of religion; that is to say, a thorough transformation in the relations between the social actors and the fact that they are in society. The point is not that there will not be furtive returns of the religious, but there are criteria to identify them properly, circumscribe them, and distinguish them clearly from the central social movement where they in no way stand for the true feelings of the whole population. There is no constituent need at the base of religion, so that the collective would not exist if it were not for it. Religion is a secondary formation; its old functions can be socially performed and replaced by something completely different”. That is to say that in the old structural-functionalist jargon (more recently updated by Habermas or by Luhmann’s “systemics”), religion would be a mere “subsystem” among others, regardless of how *showy* and attractive Vatican power or fundamentalist violence can be for the value the media set on catastrophic events..

Yes, but... *but*: the situation seems to be rather more complicated. It is not enough to speak of a change of “function” or a “topological” redistribution of the religious with respect to the social to account for the extent (or lack of it) of its constitutive role in modernity’s *political unconscious*, as Jameson would label it. Finally, political scientists tell us that modernity, in the

---

<sup>1</sup> Vittorio Lanternari. *Movimientos religiosos de libertad y salvación de los pueblos oprimidos*. Editorial Seix Barral, Barcelona, 1962.

<sup>2</sup> Of course, the canonical text on this problem is Norman Cohn’s *En pos del Milenio. Revolucionarios, milenaristas y anarquistas místicos de la Edad Media*. Barral Editores, Barcelona, 1972.

<sup>3</sup> Steven Runciman. *Historia de las cruzadas*. Editorial Alianza, 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Marcel Gauchet. *La democracia contra sí misma*. Editorial Homo Sapiens, Rosario, 2004.

purest juridical and political sense of the word, began with the French Revolution. But was it not the French Revolution that consecrated a “Religion of Reason”, with its own cultural and devoted patterns, not to speak of its own regime of Terror, whose *logic* was not unlike the iniquities of the Inquisition? This remark should not be read as a naive rejection of Jacobinism, but merely as a further call of attention directed at the complexities involved, *symptomatically* anticipating Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s reflections about the dialectic transformation undergone by “instrumental” rationality in the new Myth of modern Reason. The following sections will not provide answers to these questions –it would be an impossible task. At the most, I will succeed in bringing up a few instances of a hazy yet persistent *perplexity*.

## 2

Dostoevsky –or one of his characters; it makes no difference to our immediate purposes- complemented Nietzsche’s most famous dictum “God is dead” by adding “and we have killed Him.” The added words are far from being innocent: the point is, precisely, detecting *guilt* or, at the very least, responsibility. This is more than –and not the same as- Heidegger does when he regrets the passive *retreat* of the gods in order to make room for “the image of the world” resulting from the metaphysics of technology. Years before, Marx had uttered his equally famous *dictum* about “the opium of the peoples”. Of course this was not the *only* thing he said on the matter. Still, if it were, it is inconceivable to think that someone like Marx would choose the first words that came to his mind: where such a strong pain-killer is needed, it is because the pain is *real*. This is so, let us say, from an absolutely negative standpoint; one cannot make light work of *active* mystic and messianic redemptory perspectives of Marxists such as Ernst Bloch or Walter Benjamin, no doubt heterodox but extraordinarily important. Something similar must have happened with Freud and his “future of an illusion”. Anybody who has read at least two pages by him knows that the nature of illusions –*ideals*- makes them less essential to sustain man’s subjectivity. Sartre may have lost sight of the issue when, during one of his last interviews, he answered, regarding his “atheism”: “I am not in fact an atheist; but I deal with man’s predicament, not with God.” His ingenious answer implies that atheism is a *theological* rather than an “anthropological” problem. But the thing is that God, precisely –and the absence of God, naturally- falls within the scope of *man’s* problems, whether believers or atheists; it is certainly not a problem to God himself.

At all events, these examples of diehard agnostics show that, in their view, the issue is a *problem* that cannot be easily shaken off. Nor can it be disposed of through the *magnificent irony* displayed by Borges, who finds this to be the most interesting (and the most ancient) instance of science fiction. In all the cases mentioned –just as in the many others we could cite- we are dealing with critical thinkers of modernity (in the twofold sense that they criticize modernity while still being a part of it). That is to say that, contrarily to those who praised religion in superlatively optimistic ways –i.e. those who lived between the Enlightenment in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to the ones who witnessed positivism in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century- these thinkers sense that religion is *something else* than a scarecrow invented by priests and reactionaries to handle ignorant peasants; something else than an anachronistic superstition amply “defeated” by science. The obvious dilemma lies in defining the “something else”, the symbolic “added value”, the *supplement* that, in the “imaginary”, seems to enjoy an obstinate, effective *lifespan expansion*, to use a thought-provoking notion of Aby Warburg that points to something much more powerful and disturbing than the idea of “survival” or the *cultural lag*\* of evolutionist anthropologists. Since we have invoked Freud’s ominous shadow, we could also talk of the insistent *return of the repressed*. If God -or the gods, or religion/s- stands as a problem before these thinkers, most of whom lived in the positivist, optimistic, and “progressist” 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it is mainly because they endow the very issue with the full value of a *symptom*.

---

\* In English in the original. [TN]

A “symptom” of what? First and foremost, perhaps of the fact that the dominant *imago* of the century –that of having left behind traditional mythologies for the sake of a technological and scientific Reason that was potentially able to do away with the “pain” of existing, thus making redundant the need for some kind of ‘opium’- was nothing but a colossal *foreclosure* (to persist in using psychoanalytic jargon) of the shattering and fractures that survived from previous eras or were *produced* by modernity itself, call them what you will: class struggle, will of power, or splitting of the subject.

There is no denying that the above enumeration is not at all naive. These are, to echo Foucault’s words, the three “founders of discourse” that can be immediately identified with the three great fields of problems respectively posed by Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud. Though in entirely different ways, these thinkers were the most consequent in resisting *deproblematization* of modernity, in accepting the homogeneous and “conciliatory” image that hegemonic thought intended to build as a *superstructure* even in intellectual and scientific circles (and please excuse my simplification of the matter). The said superstructure aimed at the new ways of the “administration of things” discussed by Auguste Comte; in truth, one should not forget that *the 19<sup>th</sup> Century* “invented” social science, and that its invention is *constitutive* of the modern dream that wishes for the “secularization” of culture. It cannot be a mere coincidence that, in their zeal to cause trouble to the hegemonic imaginary –and no doubt to the social sciences as well- the *three* authors mentioned resort to the same *propitiatory metaphor*; namely, *tragedy*, to coin their respective theories of history, of Western moral values, and of the unconscious.

It is not just any metaphor: on the one hand, tragedy –*the* tragic- is the register of the real where, by definition, *there is no* “going beyond”, since tragedy is ignorant of *Aufhebung*. Within tragedy, conflict is structural and there is no place for “reconciliation”. On the other hand (although we are actually speaking about the same, only viewed from a different angle) the original meaning of tragedy, as could have been understood by an Athenian living in the 5<sup>th</sup> C. B.C., and *returning* later on in the works of Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud, is *much more* than a literary genre. It is the “symbolic representation” par excellence of the conflictive yet inextricable *knot* of the esthetic and cultural, *the* political and *the* religious.

To some extent, it could be said that, in the register mentioned, the whole history of Western culture consists of a dauntless effort to *un-tie* the foundational knot until the moment of Max Weber’s “fragmentation of spheres” arrives as the central characteristic of modern *instrumental rationality*. It is not necessary to expound on Weber’s *nodal thesis* at this point: conviviality between a (Protestant) religious ethics and the spirit of the times (capitalism). To some –certainly to Nietzsche, but also to Heidegger and Adorno, in very different ways, indeed- *that* had started much earlier, at the very rise of Western thought, under the shape of “Socratism”. They would doubtlessly agree that it was necessary to wait for that “spirit” to consolidate as the *dominant* aspect of modernity for the issue to become unquestionably visible. In the very early years of modernity, Jansenist Pascal shows some *blurred clarity* (let me resort to oxymoron) about the subject: while his faith prevents him from speaking of God as dead, he does speak of a *deus absconditus* whose hiding away has installed “the terrifying silence of infinite spaces”, and this might well be the other side of the “solidity” dissolved in air and afterwards celebrated in the Communist Manifesto. The attempt at *un-tying* the knot had already set its course; that is why Lucien Goldmann, referring to Racine’s efforts and invoking Pascal himself, can speak of the *impossibility* of tragedy in modernity.<sup>5</sup> Progress –whether scientific, technological, or economic, in the new tenets of the field- does not need gods. When Napoleon asked Lavoisier about the place of God in the latter’s theory of physics, the scientist answered frankly: “Sire, God is an unnecessary hypothesis.”

Well, then; Marx, Nietzsche and Freud are bearers of bad news. That magnificent, epic, in many ways defensible, or at least inevitable, has ended up in utter *failure*. It could not have been otherwise. The determination to artfully *deny* the knot produced inside and for the community by the *ekklesia* (the “assembly” of the community as such), the movement that has the better right to call itself a *generator* of what we now call “the social bond” could not but *fail*,

---

<sup>5</sup> Lucien Goldmann. *El hombre y lo absoluto*. Editorial Península, Barcelona, 1973.

it was bound to be as *unsuccessful* as the positivist/evolutionist illusion that history can be simply *left behind*. Of course, modernity –lets us hasten to translate: capitalism- *had to* undertake that historical task, among other reasons because what Marx named *intra-economic coercion* required the construction of a new *legitimization logic* to exercise its power, and this logic had to be based on an “individual liberty” that is incompatible with the *public* character (i.e. *political*, in a wide yet strict sense) of the political, the religious, and the esthetic. Thus, the other side of this movement consisted in the differentiation and *privatization* of “spheres” that traditionally belonged in the tight original “knot”. The esthetic was confined among the walls of a museum (or an art dealer’s store), the religious was confined to the churches (or to the schools, until these completed their secularization), and the political to the Government House (or to political parties’ meeting places, or to the places voters attended to cast their vote on election days). In every case, it was reduced to a *conscience* issue through a massive operation that *psychologized* the old components of the foundational “knot”. This operation pushed them away from the public space –i.e. from the teeming arena of the *demos*– to lock them up in the *solitude* of esthetic contemplation provided by the confessional and the “dark room” (and here one cannot help playing on the expressions “to vote” and “to make vows”).

It is sometimes forgotten that, even in the religious field, and even before Christianity, the vindication that solitude offers believers when the time comes to confront their sinful conscience has been a rather belated idea. It was only in the 13<sup>th</sup> Century (the same century which “invented” the intermediate stage of Purgatory, for before then we only had Heaven and, more often than not, Hell to receive us) that the sacrament of *confession* –that used to be voluntary- became compulsory for *every* believer, a fact which definitely accoladed the *psychologization* we mentioned before. If you will, we may say that it definitely accoladed what someone called the passage from the culture of *shame* –a public, that is, *political* feeling that existed in Homer’s time as well as in classical tragedy- to the culture of *guilt* –an intimate, that is, *private* feeling as a manner of “subejctivizing” dominance.

In no way does this suggest that the greatest and most “revolutionary” among the struggling bourgeoisie (take a look at the *princeps* examples offered by Machiavelli or Hobbes, to name just the very conspicuous ones) did not preserve a decisive role to be played by religion in the construction of the modern State. But their only reason to engineer that *beautiful lie* –in Machiavelli’s own words- was that for strictly political and “esthetic” motives it would come in handy for the *integration* or *consolation* of the masses. After all, for many centuries, some of the most beautiful productions of literature, the plastic arts, and architecture would have been unthinkable unless they had been prompted by religious feelings. This manipulation, one that might be called “reactionary” today, but secured after the French Revolution by the much more frontal and lucid *reaction* of conservatives such as Burke, Bonald, De Maestre, and Donoso, should not prevent us from at least suspecting that there must have been *a moment of truth* when the constitutive nature of the religious was called upon to make up the “social bond”. Finally, the *three* thinkers that our academic milieu has canonized as “the founding fathers” of the social sciences (Marx, Durkheim, and Weber) placed religion at the centre of their own theories. This is clearly seen from *Las Formas Elementales de la Vida Religiosa* and *Etica Protestante*;<sup>\*</sup> but were it not for some inertial ideological reflexes, it should not be less clear in the case of Marx, not so much because of the anecdotal reference to “opium” but because of the much more significant description, in Chapter One of *Capital*, of capitalism as the “religion of merchandise”, based on *fetishist* logic –quite evidently, a blatantly religious notion. There are exceedingly few studies of the extremely complex scope of this seemingly curious metaphor from Marx’s pen –in fact, only one text gives due importance to the line that goes from the “discovery” that money has a *religious* nature (with God as a “general equivalent”) to the notion that capitalism amounts to religion *disguised* as secularism. The “discovery” was made by none other than St. Augustine, and we owe the notion to Marx, Weber, and Simmel on the side. We are of course referring to León Rozitchner’s *La Cosa y la Cruz*.

---

<sup>\*</sup> Published in English under the titles of “Elementary Forms of the Religious Life” and “Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism” respectively. [TN]

Obviously, the issue is not related only to the “Holy Trinity” of the social sciences, the one composed by Marx / Durkheim / Weber (we should not forget about other remarkable historical sociological thoughts about the religious, like those produced by Ernst Troeltsch, Joachim Wach, Arnold Toynbee, and Peter Berger, unfortunately not frequently visited in our curricula) or, if you prefer Foucault’s approach, the one including Marx / Nietzsche / Freud. Another outstanding anthropological and social tradition takes the religious as the *matrix* of the social structure: in it, society as such takes on a “sacred” status based on the basal religious phenomena that involve the idea of sacrifice, “gift”, and reciprocity. (More about these later.) This tradition came into existence in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, when positivism was in full swing. It was started by Durkheim, but enthusiastically embraced by Mass and Hubert and, enriched by a number of later nuances and sophisticated additions, it ended up in Georges Dumézil and Claude Lévi-Strauss great “structuralist” renewal. Just for the sake of naming it, we need to remember the great philological tradition from Max Müller to H. Gunkel and H. Gressmann, and the great tradition of the first “laboratory” religious ethnology by Frazer, Tylor, Morgan, and Lang, and the great *phenomenological* tradition of the history of religions by Van der Leeuw, Rudolf Otto, Father Wilhelm Schmidt (the creator of the famous hypothesis supporting that *primitive monotheism* “degenerated” into politeism), Raffaele Petazzoni, Adolf Jensen and Mircea Eliade. We must also bear in mind the great tradition of the so-called *mythic-and-ritual school*, to which we will soon return out of its particular interest for the purpose of this paper. Starting from Jane Harrison’s colossal studies on the “dark aspects” of ancient Greek mythology, it is taken up by A. M. Hocart and reaches our times through such profound historians and anthropologists as Jean-Pierre Vernant, Marcel Detienne and Victor Turner.

Such interest, such passion for the religious, in a wide yet strict sense that includes “mythology” –a sense that amid *secular modernity* has produced works ranking among the best of the social sciences and the humanities of the past century- *must* be (going back to what we have already said) a *symptom* rather than a mere coincidence. When from a hazy perspective of “the history of ideas” one remembers that the interest in question *originated* next to the giant *crisis* of rationalism, positivism, and “progressism” that occurred between the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century and the early 20<sup>th</sup> C., it is not easy to avoid suspicions of “irrationalism” and even of “proto-fascism” against some or many of these trends of thought. Moreover, during the 20s and 30s, the problematic ideological affiliations of some of the most important authors mentioned above – Dumézil, Eliade, Jensen- do not aid clearer thinking. However, we should make an intellectual effort, without necessarily reaching a “balanced” assessment, for we do not intend to cross swords with anybody for the sake of the exact *happy medium*. We could take the aforesaid “affiliations” as symptomatic elements; as constituents of a “tragic” conflict, so to speak, *within* Western reason. From *different* affiliations, much less “suspicious”, this was what the members of the School of Frankfurt, particularly Adorno, attempted to do, denouncing the ways in which omnipotent instrumental rationality (the *will of dominance* that, under capitalism, always became *synonymous* with *Reason*) had transformed “enlightened” and anti-mythic drive in the *worse* of myths, for its “conciliatory” pretensions prevented realizing their persistence, *distorted* by the very denial of the mythic-and-religious social background.

Finally, there is one more tradition, one that we shall have to call “the accursed tradition”, in spite of having respectably originated in the concurrence between the French sociological school (Durkheim/Mauss, to be brief) and the mythic-and-ritual school from Jane Harrison on. This tradition lays emphasis on the *violent* foundations of the religious, or of the “sacred”, to give it a more general name, and allows for an uncomfortable grouping of names that include members of the most heretical College de Sociologie (Roger Caillois, Georges Bataille, Michel Leiris, Pierre Klossowski, Maurice Blanchot, specially the first three), René

Girard, Walter Burkert and, on the side, the already cited Jean-Pierre Vernant, Marcel Detienne and Ernesto de Martino. Their *accursedness* is due only to the fact that they were courageous enough to make *explicit* a number of disquieting connotations that the research carried out by those two schools had handled in a more reserved fashion. On the one hand, it is common knowledge that the matrix *gift/reciprocity*, which constitutes a central hypothesis in sociological thought, includes the institution of (not only animal) *sacrifice* as a crucial element in the matrix, for it gives rise to some sort of *communion* and “covenant” with the gods. In the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Jane Harrison had already revolutionized the ethnohistory of religions in two ways. First, she had posited that *ritual* –i.e. the ideological and esthetical rationalization of man’s concrete, effective conduct- rather than myth enclosed what is *true* about the religious<sup>6</sup> and, second, she had detected, in religious rites practiced in ancient Greece, a *double standard* that confronted “Olympic” rituals involving worship of/calling on kindly gods with “ctonic” rituals to reject/drive away Evil as represented by the same gods. In later times, anthropologists called these rituals “*apotropaic*”; their steps included brutal sacrifices, and it can be said that Nietzsche’s opposition between Apollo and Dionysus has exercised a clear influence on the pair “Olympic/ctonic”.<sup>7</sup>

In Caillouis, but specially in Bataille –without forgetting Vittorio Lanternari’s classic, *La Grande Festa*<sup>8</sup>– religious ritual, boundless eroticism, and sacrificial violence compose a new matrix from where the community is founded. According to Bataille, sacrificial ritual is the *religious ceremony* par excellence<sup>9</sup>. Its “religious quality” is *prior* to any other religious form organized as theology and/or institution, and it concerns the *sacred* in the widest sense of the word: that of a “void” of meaning (the *yawn* of the real that the word *Chaos* meant to the ancient Greeks) on which the foundational act occurs. The sacred sacrifice takes upon itself the profound “knowledge” about the social of which “archaic” societies boast when they refuse to acknowledge the existence of *natural* death. They know that the social is constituted by potential violence, and drive this violence towards the propitiatory victim through a sort of primitive common “catharsis”. Bataille proves that, contrary to what a more or less automated or spontaneous common sense might imagine (that is, an evolutionist *ideology*), history tells that sacrificial practices were *first* performed on animals and only were transferred to human victims after a civilizing process had taken place. This is no “totemism”, but an initial, metaphorical construction through which a sacred “transgression” operates a “regulated” closeness to the primitive Chaos of *animal* sexuality and violence devoid of norms (the bisons of Altamira or of Lascaux, but also the *persona* or the *hypokrates*, those Greek animal masks used during Dionysian rites would here stand for the first “esthetic” representation of unrestrained *animal divinity*, of pure “jouissance”). In the logic of the *celebration* of a sacrificial ritual, the tension between closeness to animal original excess (the “subhuman”) and the register of prohibitions and taboos regulating the ritual and endowing it with the characteristics of a divine mystery put in play a true *dialectic* of sacred sacrifice. On the one hand, the human world, shaped in the denial of nature, denies itself; and through an operation of “denial of the denial” ascends towards divinity. But this *transcendence* keeps the *immanent* imprint of the initial concurrence between violence, eroticism, and the sacred. In Callois’s words: “Like incest in the Dionysian

<sup>6</sup> Also an *existential* “truth”. Again we come across Blaise Pascal, who very cunningly, as Louis Althusser remembers regarding ideology) recommended not to try to *persuade* an agnostic with more or less logical arguments, but with deeds (I quote off the top of my head: “Just ask him to go into the nearest church, kneel before the altar, and start to pray: then he will believe.”)

<sup>7</sup> Jane Harrison. *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. Meridian Books, New York, 1955.

<sup>8</sup> Vittorio Lanternari. *La Grande Festa. Vita rituale e sistema di produzione nelle società tradizionali*. Edizioni Dedalo, Bari, 2004. In an extraordinary demonstration of Girardi’s hypothesis about the possibility of existence of a *materialist* theory of the sacred, Lanternari, from a perspective that included Marx, De Martino, and Gramsci, studied the *structural* place—but not at all the “superstructural” in the vulgar Marxist sense of religious rituals in “pre-modern” Oceanian societies already studied by Malinowski, for the development of the corresponding *mode of production*, whether of hunting-and-gathering societies or more “advanced” agricultural societies.

<sup>9</sup> Georges Bataille. *El erotismo*. Editorial Sur, Buenos Aires, 1967.

celebration, murder in war brings religious echoes. It derives from human sacrifice and has no useful purpose [...] It is the moment for looting with impunity, for desecrating that highly venerated object, man's mortal remains: who would resign such revenge, such desecration? Whatever we deem sacred will eventually demand it. At the same time as it sends shivers up your spine, it yearns for shame and attracts spit..."<sup>10</sup>

No doubt it is a first "projective" movement towards the outside (similar to what Marx attributed to Hegel when he said that Hegel projects the State born from the conflict among men towards a divine realm), but it still keeps the obscure consciousness of foundational violence. It is also the possibility of thinking *the* political in relation to *the* sacred, outside all theological "rationalization"; of producing a *materialist and political* theory of the sacred, where the sacred is a *riddle* on which the *ecclesia*, the "community of equals" is to be founded in its de-mimed relation (here the articulation with the *gift/reciprocity* matrix is suggestive.<sup>11</sup>)

This line will reach its apex with René Girard and his *scapegoat* (sacrificial victim) theory as the *sacred* space par excellence. The sacrificial ritual founds the Law (the religious Law first) insofar as it stands for a "regulation" of the violence originally exerted among equals (this thesis is redolent of Hobbes, no doubt) so as to redirect it against the "propitiatory victim". We could say that the first "pact" among the brothers is not only a primitive form of religion but also of the "State", a fully "democratic" State, understood as one where there is full participation of the community in the foundational act: at that moment there is no *separation* between State and Society; like in the *Negara* analyzed by Geertz, the religious ritual does not "represent" the State, nor does the State "symbolize" Society. The three of them *are*, at one and the same time, one and the same *action*<sup>12</sup>. At the bottom of the action there is an *imaginary* – something that has not yet developed into the Law, but that stands for its condition of emergence. This operates on a place that still lacks symbolic representation, and so the establishment of *the* Law as such becomes essential (or the new establishment of the Law in later ritual repetitions which, as we have already seen, keep all the foundational violence in their subordination to the Myth, to the purely symbolic.) We shall name all this *the* political, understood as the original engine that produced the community of men in its original proximity to *the* religious.

Finally, Walter Burkert also relates the origin of the social-and-religious to the sacrificial ritual, where he finds the symbolic expression of atonement for the violence that man the hunter exercises on nature. It is not a strictly metaphysical issue: "reciprocity" between man and nature constitutes the basis of the most primitive "mode of production" one could think of. As a primitive form of religion, the sacrificial ritual represents, at the same time, the *return* of goods "stolen" from nature through hunting and fishing, and *communication* among men in the sacrificial feast. Primary "organic solidarity" is then grounded on an original violent crime.

The sensible reader will have noticed that *all* the cases considered are more or less conscious variations of Freud's famous hypothesis, developed in his writing of 1912 and entitled *Totem and Taboo*, about the *simultaneous* origin of religion, the Law, and "political power" stemming from the murder of a tyrannical "Primal Father" and "retroactive obedience" moved by a feeling of guilt. In actual fact, this *generates* the three instances (religion, "social" law, political order) as an indivisible whole. In Freud's well-known words: "culture is the product of a shared crime." To the purpose of this paper, there is no point in trying to establish the historical/anthropological "truth"(impossible to prove, by the way) of Freud's hypothesis. What really matters is that the "variations" are underlaid by a *hermeneutic horizon*; namely, an "interpretation" whose ideology does not *fall far* from the *violent* background nesting in the

---

<sup>10</sup> Roger Caillois. *El hombre y lo sagrado*. Fondo de Cultura Editorial, Mexico, 1958.

<sup>11</sup> In *El enigma del don*, Maurice Godelier explores how, in institutions known as *potlatch* or *kula*, the *obligation* to interchange is ruled precisely by the *prohibition* to exchange certain mysterious objects that only initiates know; sacred objects that endow the society with its identity. To a certain extent, the exchanged objects are *substitutions* that protect the enigma of what, being sacred, gives a society its absolute *difference* from others; its "raison d'être".

<sup>12</sup> Clifford Geertz. *Negara. El Estado-teatro balinés en el siglo XIX*. Editorial Paidós, Buenos Aires, 1996.



*logic* foundations of the “knot” that originated the religious, the political, and the cultural. Neither does it fall far from the fact that the religious, like the *sacred* –i.e., that *radical otherness*, that *void* of meaning into which men build up meanings- is not the realm of pure Goodness, but that of a constant *negative dialectics* between Good and Evil, regardless of how different societies choose to define both terms. Furthermore, contrary to what Marcel Gauchet thinks when he sees, in the first forms of “State”, an incipient laicization process through which politics supposedly begins to replace religion, from what has been said we can clearly see the *solidarity* between politics and religion, between State and Church; this solidarity is not only circumstantially historical, as happens so frequently and easily, but also constitutive and generative.

#### 4

It is not then so simple to establish a clear-cut differentiation between a “traditional” society, ruled by any of the multiple religious forms that be, and a secular, “modern” society, fully liberated from religion. This is a unilateral, schematically evolutionist notion into which the “dominant” social sciences (a product, as we have said, of the same illusions entertained by modern laicism) have sometimes hastily rushed headlong. Unfortunately, there have also been Marxist developments that did not succeed in escaping this illusion. Owing to a rare paradox, such developments tend to think *too well* of the religious. What I mean is that they tend to conceive of it as an ideological space that is both *harmonic* and *homogeneous* instead of analyzing its shattering and conflicts as well as the complex ways in which religions, those particular *modes of production of the symbolic*, permit –thanks to another apparent paradox and provided that one can hold the “accursed” perspective we discussed- to interrogate critically and *call into question* the evidence presented by such evolutionist, linear, and teleological *common sense*.<sup>13</sup>

For example, Ernesto de Martino –the great Italian ethnologist who was a disciple of Gramsci’s and Heidegger’s simultaneously–, has shown, with amazing subtlety, the (far too often) “enlightened” error of believing that the practice of religious rituals are plainly “out of history”. De Martino views the issue as a much more subtle logic by means of which it is deeply engrained *in* history, but *as if* it were not so<sup>14</sup>. The ritual’s ultimate meaning does not consist in a mere “repetition” of a mythical event that occurred in *illo tempore* (going back to Mircea Eliade), but the periodical *new foundation* of the social community, under the constant threat of being dissolved by what de Martino calls *the crisis of presence*. The mere fact that “archaic” societies (or the “social archaism” that persists in any “modern” religious practice) need to *found anew* their own social existence with the obsessive periodicity of the ritual points to a much sharper –at any rate, much more intense- social consciousness than our Western, modern, “progressist” consciousness. They *know* that their society –I am extrapolating Adorno’s famous phrase about art- has not been guaranteed even the right to exist, since the “crisis of presence” appears in it from time to time. Apocalypse is not at the end of a road whose length is unknown; apocalypse is a constant threat, which is the reason why history has to *recommence* every now and then. It is true that it always does so in the same way, returning to the primal, “metahistorical” moment; still, the very idea of *a return to History* from outside, in every ritual, is more profoundly “historical” than the deceitful comfort of those who think they are *forever* installed in the irreversible course of events; in the “progress” of time.

On issuing massive *denial* of the “knot” that originated the religious, the political, and the cultural such as we have seen it esthetically depicted in the tragedy, the omnipotence of modernity –and of the corresponding hegemonic versions produced by the social sciences- has

---

<sup>13</sup> There is no need to point out here that *renunciation* by many Marxists (or progressist thinkers in general) has only succeeded to deliver the thorny yet enthralling problem of the *teleological-and-political* (to use Carl Schmitt’s canonical expression) into the hands of “rightist thought”, which may be interesting despite our ideological rejection of it.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, his *magnum opus* (unfinished and posthumous): *La Fine del Mondo*, published in Milan in 2000.

rendered us helpless to recognize and interpret *the return of the repressed* (let alone exercise political action on it) that the denial itself has contributed to bring about. This involves “postmodern” varieties of religion, ranging from extreme “fundamentalism” (it goes without saying that the epithet is not addressed at the partial, poorly representative Islamic extremism *only*) to the silliness of the widespread, *new age* forms of self-help, with the reactionary populism of electronic pastoralism or whatever else between both ends. All this to avoid the pathetic predicament of having to mention the many ways in which the 20<sup>th</sup> Century became an enormous, barbaric ritual of collective sacrifice, a “useless” one at that. To cite Caillois once again, it has been *actually* possible “to loot with impunity and desecrate that highly venerated object, man’s mortal remains”, without even having a “true” religion that might justify the act as necessary. Now –let us say it once more- it is about “postmodernity” forced to kill its own illusions. Were the great “authoritarian” narratives of modernity over? Here they are again, as the “return of the repressed” with its most perverse trimmings. As always, and without the possibility of reckoning *all* of the related consequences, this amounts to an oversized challenge to what goes by the name of “critical thought”, and an even bigger challenge to a worldwide intervention on *the* political, *stricto sensu*; namely, on the re-creation of a true *ekklesia* in its classic Greek meaning: an egalitarian, democratic *assembly* of humans where legitimacy and consensus for the sake of a better world –including, if you will, the reconstruction of true religious *faith*- may be ruled by a different *logic* of production regarding social issues.

Our arrogant “modernity” has ensnared us in our own traps. As Bataille would say in the epigraph to this paper, we are weary and hungry for sleep and peace. Perhaps too weary to notice our own “crisis of presence” before it is too late.

#### **Bibliography:**

- Georges Bataille. *El erotismo*. Editorial Sur, Buenos Aires, 1967.  
Roger Caillois. *El hombre y lo sagrado*. Fondo de Cultura Editorial, Mexico, 1958.  
Norman Cohn: *En pos del Milenio. Revolucionarios, milenaristas y anarquistas místicos de la Edad Media*. Barral Editores, Barcelona, 1972.  
Marcel Gauchet. *La democracia contra sí misma*. Editorial Homo Sapiens, Rosario, 2004.  
Clifford Geertz. *Negara. El Estado-teatro balinés en el siglo XIX*. Editorial Paidós, Buenos Aires, 1996.  
Lucien Goldmann. *El hombre y lo absoluto*. Editorial Península, Barcelona, 1973.  
Jane Harrison. *Prolegomena to the Study of Greek Religion*. Meridian Books, New York, 1955.  
Vittorio Lanternari. *Movimientos religiosos de libertad y salvación de los pueblos oprimidos*. Editorial Seix Barral, Barcelona, 1962.  
Vittorio Lanternari. *La Grande Festa. Vita rituale e sistema di produzione nelle società tradizionali*. Edizioni Dedalo, Bari, 2004.  
Steven Runciman. *Historia de las cruzadas*. Editorial Alianza, 1978.

#### **Abstract:**

In this paper, the author explores the survival of religion in the world after the modern historical process known as “disillusionment with the world”. In that context, the paper poses questions about the present relations between religion and the social sciences, bearing in mind religion’s ideological plasticity. An interest in various sociological traditions that have dealt with religious issues reveals that a purely rational approach to the problem is bound to frustrate hermeneutic power. Perhaps what is being called into question is man’s “presence” in the world.

Published in **Sociedad**. Social Science Journal, School of Social Sciences, University of Buenos Aires, #24. Buenos Aires Argentina.

Translated by Marta Ines Merajver  
Translation from Sociedad (Buenos Aires) no.24, año 2005