

Introduction

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What is true of the natural and biological heritage is also the case with cultural diversity: efforts to conserve national languages, rites and traditions are swept along by the rising tide of globalization. But at the same time fashions come and go, buildings rise out of the ground, theories are constructed, new techniques result in hitherto unknown lifestyles. The cultural patchwork is like a shifting kaleidoscope. Of course this does not prevent losses from seeming to accelerate more rapidly than new creations, so that laws have become necessary to put a brake on these destructive developments.

It could be that religious pluralism provides the best antidote to the trend: when religion is not equated with the whole of society, each religion opens up its own space in plural societies, a space illuminated by a distant 'other world', with its internal laws, its private behaviour and its peculiar memory. Its existence is not at the mercy of humans like that of plants, animals and objects. The spontaneous effort of a religion is precisely the effort of those human beings that are part of it, and it exists only by being constantly repeated and adapted. Its way of being is precisely through imitation and distinction, through definition in and by relationship to oneself and others – other religions, other communities, other individuals. It reacts spontaneously to any influence, and even conformism is in fact an expression of its vitality.¹ Its continuation over time is enough to give an image of shimmering diversity. Only mass exodus and complete dilution of peoples, reification of the social in market economies, great massacres, genocides and mass propaganda, by entirely demoralizing individuals, may possibly, from outside, defeat this volatile resistance.

According to the anthropologist Hocart,² religion is a spontaneous element of social life, with the property of promoting life and survival.

However, factors tending to dissolution and anaemia are at work at the very heart of religions: we shall not touch here on the particular violence they make us fear, but on mass developments that have recently made their appearance. Does monotheism, which for so long maintained plurality within it, now threaten eventually to reduce

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religious diversity? More seriously still, are 'disenchantment with the world',³ the general rootlessness of populations, and the rise in agnosticism, atheism and scientism, sometimes brought about by deliberate and even brutal policies, destroying the sense of the religious at its very heart, which is symbolic representation?

The papers that follow suggest that neither monotheisms nor atheisms – which we are forced to speak of as plural – are necessarily opposed to religious diversity; indeed, we have hitherto witnessed them becoming part of and extending it. The danger lies elsewhere.

We should first remember that what is at issue in the question of cultural diversity, if we apply it to the religious dimension of that diversity, is nothing less than the existence of the social. This is an old idea we have borrowed from Emile Durkheim and Marcel Mauss.⁴ Nevertheless it is worth going back to.

The dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels saw culture as a result of the material conditions of production, which give rise to social structures and their ideological justification. Lévi-Strauss's structuralism brought material civilization and cultural objects together in the same symbolic network, a net thrown over nature and biological realities to bring them into a kind of articulated language, a system of signifying relationships. Within that system there would be no sense, according to this theory, in isolating the 'religious'. Techniques, classifications of natural realities, kinship bonds, ways of life, food preparation and eating, arts and rites would be closely correlated one with another.

Recently the development of cognitive science has introduced a radically different epistemology.⁵

Religious representations are seen as the spontaneous product of the human brain in certain conditions of experience, interaction and relaxation, from a certain stage in its development. Our brain is thought to be programmed in such a way that it would always be possible and easy for it to receive certain types of information rather than others, to lift off from the real to fashion its own artefacts – certain artefacts more easily than others – and in turn to be impressed by them. As children we do not meet the big bad wolf anywhere but we will happily believe those who claim to have seen him, we will occasionally think we have seen him ourselves, and we are genuinely afraid of him. If this kind of drama were in the long term to upset the individual or society too much, would we then only need to change programmes so that it would not harm the essential awareness of empirical realities? And would changing programmes simply mean making the symptom – in other words the overreaction to the artefact – go away? A disappearance that might eventually do away with any effectiveness of the artefact itself?

In this approach we can sense an old suspicion of symbolic representations breaking through that is always at work. Are they a disease of language, as Max Müller says, reasoning distorted by ignorance of causes, according to James G. Frazer, an illusion resulting from human neurosis in Sigmund Freud's view, or rather the stirring of consciousness (Giambattista Vico), a primitive state of mind (Lévy-Brühl), a sensitivity to mysteries (Gérard van der Leeuw, Rudolf Otto, Mircea Eliade . . .), which education in true knowledge can channel and make fruitful? Religion and magic, its sister that we have long presumed to be outdated, are both necessary evils, the site of the unfolding of the soul and a spur to knowledge. They do not involve

any area of human reality other than the faculty of thinking well or ill, in accordance or not with the true interests of each individual.

Armed with this suspicion and pragmatic intentions, the cognitive approach can aim to control or even transcend this biological and behavioural mechanism so that the efficacy of this drive may serve the good of each without harming the interests of all. Once religion has been stripped of its mystery it should no longer pose any problems other than those to which solutions could be found.

However, the pragmatic goodwill at work in the determined interventionism we see being adopted, in accordance with the logic of these theories, for instance in the field of psychiatry, deserves to be questioned. We would be wrong to think international laws are sufficient to protect religious traditions. What the law covers and declares inviolable appears in all its fragility: for the law may at any moment be repealed and the prohibition removed. Genuine sanctuaries are only sanctuaries because they defend themselves.⁶

As soon as cultural and religious diversity seems to be a mere congenital weakness or folklore or an extra dose of soul that has to be allowed for human comfort, it is soon ignored, even mistreated, by the laws of the market, and has survival value only to the extent that it provides profit for tour operators and dream merchants. Where it refuses to be marginalized it is strange to see that disproportionate methods and weapons are currently being aimed at it: just as in the past a whole judicial machinery investigated the mystery of witches,⁷ today in France the entire parliament passes laws affecting a few girls wearing head-scarves, and elsewhere starving and unarmed countries are suffering heavy bombing with the most sophisticated weapons in the so-called 'surgical' war.

The resistance that traditions offer to these steamrollers is especially remarkable since it is probably largely unaware of itself. The peripheral ethnic groups in the vast Russian, then soviet empire have undergone in turn campaigns of conversion to Orthodox Christianity and communist propaganda: they have sometimes changed language, but their rites and festivals have endured, with names that varied according to official ideology. Jean-Luc Lambert has carried out research in the far north of Russia and studied the stubborn passivity with which the Nenets have faced successive waves of indoctrination.

Mao's China in its turn tried, in the name of progress, to eradicate superstitions, by slapping the western categories 'religion' and 'superstition' on the country's realities, and allowing, for the sake of tolerance, only a few carefully listed religions to remain. On the whole people were not rebellious. But the presumed superstitions persisted more or less undercover and have recently started to re-emerge into the light of day under the label of folklore. Vincent Goossaert analyses in precise detail the inappropriateness of western categories to China's religious structures and the political mistakes that flowed from the contradictions entailed in using them.

If religious beliefs are problems we could solve, the least we might say is that propaganda for militant atheism was not capable of understanding the problems or imagining a solution to them.

According to André Malraux, the 21st century would be religious or it would not be at all. If this prophecy is accurate (and the space that religious questions have occupied in current affairs since the turn of the century points to that view), it is quite

simply that what is at stake for religions is not only the existence of the social but the survival of humanity. Does survival demand that we give up progress, reason, science, the Enlightenment?

If we look at the origins of monotheism and atheism we find that the vitality and plurality of religions were not harmed by either of them.

What is an atheist? Someone who does not believe in the gods (or God).

What is a monotheist? Someone who believes there is only one god and venerates him accordingly.

These off-the-cuff definitions clash with the varying accusations of atheism or monotheist statements of belief. They also shock the observing historian who is aware of the gulf between discourse and reality.

Over a period of about twenty centuries the West exported the concept of religion, which we now know – but constantly need to remind ourselves, as Vincent Goossaert does here – is in no way universal. Granted, this fact does not detract from the universality of certain phenomena, in particular the more or less stable representation of agents intervening in the course of human existence. But it does seem as though religion as such, in other words as a separate entity in the life of individuals and societies, began from the moment when certain human beings found it useful or necessary to convert others to their own way of representing and venerating supernatural powers, their own concept of salvation, or simply their own way of thinking the truth about nature.

Those people are nowadays considered throughout the world to have been the founders of religions or their disciples: Moses, Zarathustra, Buddha, Confucius, Jesus, Mani, Mahomet . . .

And those men are precisely what the ancient Greeks and Romans called philosophers.

Let us be clear: for the Ancients, philosophers were people who understand more than others do about the secrets of nature and the gods. In other words they were closer to the gods than others were. This is the case from the beginnings of philosophy, with Parmenides' 'goddess' or Socrates' 'demon'. For the Greeks of the Hellenistic period the Brahmin in India were philosophers and, as Philippe Borgeaud tells us in a recent book, the Jews were as well, whom their Greek neighbours saw as ascetics hidden away in Judea, a deserted corner of Syria, far from the main routes. They found Egyptian priests similar to their inspired poets and their mythical and mystical philosophers, Pythagoras, Orpheus, and finally Musaeus, who was sometimes thought, on account of a vaguely similar name, to be the same person as Moses.⁸

However, the accusation of atheism was the first criticism levelled at philosophers: at Socrates because he did not honour the gods exactly (or solely) in the same way as his fellow citizens; at the Judeans because their temple in Jerusalem contained no divine image.⁹ But atheism was not uniformly defined; for instance Plato distinguished between three forms of serious impiety: not believing in the existence of the gods; thinking the gods are indifferent to human affairs; and worst of all, thinking that, in return for 'a few small sacrifices or a little flattery', generous favours or absolution from all manner of crime can be obtained from the gods.¹⁰ The Epicurean sect, which taught both the existence of the gods and their inevitable indif-

ference to humans,¹¹ was thus atheistic in the eyes of many contemporaries, despite the honours accorded to its leaders even in the most sacred sanctuaries.¹² And superstition was thought by some to be the most odious form of atheism, but by others to be piety itself.¹³

Monotheism was a concept unknown to Greek antiquity. But the oneness of a god-world was firmly held by many philosophers long before the idea of one personal god for all – adapted to the Judean tradition in the cultural melting-pot of the city of Alexandria in Egypt, and accompanied by Christ's mediation – was spread by Pauline Christianity. In any case do we know exactly when the religion of Israel became explicitly monotheistic (and not simply henotheistic, for instance)? Arnaud Sérandour advances some powerful theories in this area that have this change appearing at a much later date than is generally thought when, even with a historian's knowledge, the biblical tradition is followed. This appearance does not seem to have preceded assimilation of Greek philosophy. But the Christians were seen as Jews or atheists by their pagan environment. And Paul the apostle seems to have considered philosophy as a rival more than an enemy, as I attempt to show in my paper below on 'Paul and the Athens Epicureans': when Paul approached the Athens Areopagus to explain the Christians' new faith, he tried to make his discourse fit in with the language of philosophy, and we may even think ourselves justified in detecting in that discourse Epicurean tones.

According to Matthew Kapstein, it was at roughly the same period that a theism appeared in India that postulated a supremely good personal god: Buddhism distanced itself from it and even refuted it energetically, and an entire philosophy developed around that debate. A certain representation of an impersonal cosmic divine makes Buddhism in particular similar to Hellenistic philosophy. We may add that we would be mistaken to underestimate the establishment of Greek culture on the borders of India, in Afghanistan, following Alexander's conquests.¹⁴

And so the systems that today we call religions were often philosophies to the Ancients, but for this very reason they deserved to be honoured in the sanctuaries. And the criterion for distinguishing philosophy in Greece lay not in the rational as opposed to the irrational but, on one hand, in a certain degree of moral asceticism and renunciation – in food, dress, sex – as opposed for example to the ordinary life of a married citizen who sacrificed, eating bread and meat from sacrifices and drinking wine diluted with water; and on the other hand, in the effort to observe and interpret applied to both nature and texts whose origin seemed, for one reason or another, to be in a non-human source, as in neo-Pythagorean thought, which was inspired by its founder's 'golden verses', and neo-Platonism, which set the Chaldean Oracles at the summit of its speculations, that were both mystical and rational. Both physics and textual hermeneutics were very soon able to come together, as in the extraordinary allegorical and physical commentary in an Orphic theogony found in the Derveni papyrus.¹⁵

The distinction, an extremely productive one, between religion and science, between belief and reason, is also a western one. But both come from the same source, that is, some people's certainty that they possessed the truth and their desire to impose it on others, by persuasion but also by coercion when they could. So the idea of a universal knowledge that had to do with objects or laws existing eternally

beyond the observer's consciousness and sight gave rise to the sciences and philosophy as well as religions.

Scientism is a striking example of this. In secular France, at the very time when Christian values were losing their credit in the early years of the 20th century, there immediately arose, as Giordana Charuty demonstrates, a new religion dedicated to the celebration of a liberating science and dramatized by Camille Flammarion in the form of a Sun festival celebrated at the top of the Eiffel Tower. Alongside this, certain revolutionary techniques were applied – in accordance with the new instructions on scientific objectivity – to an effort to objectify parapsychological phenomena, which people attempted to cause experimentally in order to subject them to the 'proof' of photographs. The social efficacy of the resulting beliefs is still observable today in meetings of 'psychic study societies', where the interaction between 'speakers', who are credited with knowledge, and enquirers, who are encouraged to reveal publicly part of their private self through the mediation of a 'medium' able to communicate with the other world, allows grieving enquirers, for example, to renew their bond with dead loved ones and once again take their place in the symbolic fabric of family and social relationships.

How is respect for spontaneous religiosity, in its many forms, necessary to society and human life? Here I will simply make a suggestion that links up with models contained in both Freud's and Mauss's theories. Without symbolic mediation, without the opportunity offered to us all to grasp it in a first-person utterance in order boldly to become part of the network of human relations, we are inevitably overwhelmed. Alterity exists only through symbolic mediation. That is true in the oedipal triangle and also in the triangle of the three Graces miming, as they dance, the threefold gesture of giving, receiving and giving back:¹⁶ in Marcel Mauss's analysis the gift together with the *hau*, the invisible spirit that binds it to its first owner, establishes both the bond and the necessary distance between giver and receiver, in a violent demand for mutual acknowledgement.¹⁷ Where Knowledge is concerned, both mystical and scientific, the ancient scholastic category of the fit between the intellect and the thing (*adaequatio intellectus ad rem*) expresses the danger in a science without mediation: a danger of a great conflagration resulting from research that is fascinated by its object to the extent of cleaving to it, plunging into it. The real is inaccessible by definition, for the real is death. And so, at each new temptation to disaster, we see mediation being reconstituted in the form of the Book, the Word, the medium, the cult of the Master, etc. In the *Timaeus* Plato showed the Demiurge ordering the world with first elements in the form of triangles.¹⁸ Without the third term, without the stubborn gap it introduces between the first two terms, any relationship is immediately cancelled out, and we see Empedocles casting himself into Etna's fire, Nietzsche sinking into madness, or hosts of martyrs rushing as they sing towards the ecstasy of death.

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Notes

1. What memory transmits intact has in fact been more worked and reworked than what is passed on distorted: individual distortion, therefore an increasing diversity, is a normal trend where beliefs are concerned. See Pascal Boyer (2001), *Et l'homme créa les dieux. Comment expliquer la religion*, Paris, Robert Laffont, p. 44.
2. See in particular A. M. Hocart (2004), *The Life-giving Myth and Other Essays*, London, Routledge; (1970), *Kings and Councillors*, London/Chicago, University of Chicago Press.
3. See M. Gauchet (1985), *Le Désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, Paris, Gallimard.
4. E. Durkheim (1911), *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, Paris; M. Mauss (1968), 'Essai sur le don' [1924], in *Sociologie et anthropologie*, Paris, PUF (with an Introduction by C. Lévi-Strauss).
5. See especially Boyer, quoted earlier, note 1. This approach seems at first sight very regressive since it dismisses the wealth of ethnographic observations and historical data as well as advances made in analysing them, and takes into consideration only the most ephemeral aspects of the religious phenomenon: beliefs, intellectual representations and emotions. It is true that, in doing so, it follows the 'hard' sciences in its methods and uses experimental manipulation.
6. Here we refer the reader to the many stories of the punishment of sacrilege. For an ancient view of the issue, see for example Plutarch, *On the delays of divine justice*.
7. See J. Michelet (1862), *La Sorcière*, Paris.
8. See at the end of this issue the review of Philippe Borgeaud's (2004) book, *Aux origines de l'histoire des religions*, Paris, Seuil.
9. See Plato, *Socrates' Apology*, and also Florus, I.40 (3, 5), 30.
10. Plato, *Laws* XII, 948 c 4–7, see *Republic* II, 365 d 7–8.
11. Without this indifference the gods could not live in peace and happiness! See D. Obbink (1989), 'The atheism of Epicurus', *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 30(2), pp. 187–223.
12. At Eleusis, for example.
13. See L. Bruit (2001), *Le Commerce des dieux. Eusebeia. Essai sur la piété en Grèce ancienne*, Paris, Éditions La Découverte.
14. French archaeology has recently made public, for example, an extract from Aristotle's exoteric work, which was found at Ai Khanoum in northern Afghanistan, or an epigrammatic poem in Kandahar, in an excellent Greek hand, which appears to be the work of an educated local summarizing the odyssey of his own life.
15. A remarkable document, discovered in 1962 and probably dating back to the 4th century BC: see for instance text, translation and commentaries by Fabienne Jourdan (2003), Paris, Les Belles Lettres.
16. Seneca, *De beneficiis*, I.3.
17. In French *reconnaissance* means both gratitude and recognition/acknowledgement (translator's note).
18. Plato, *Timaeus*, 53c–54d.