CREATION OF THE SACRED

TRACKS OF BIOLOGY

IN EARLY RELIGIONS

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Preface

"Natural Theology, in the widest sense" was proposed for investigation by the will of Lord Gifford in 1886.[1] More than a hundred years later no one will claim that we have come to any firm conclusions in this task. Instead, we find ourselves entangled in widening problems. Does religion come naturally to human beings? In what sense can religion, let alone theology, be seen as "natural?" What is the meaning of nature in general, and in this context?

The concept of nature has long been the domain of the natural sciences, which have made gigantic progress since the time of Lord Gifford. Yet nature itself is disintegrating in the process. As science is revealing the details of molecular biology and unraveling the genetic code, the processes going on in living organisms become accessible to knowledge and manipulation far beyond that delicate harmony established in the evolution of life which had been called Nature by admiring philosophers and poets. At present, no Nature remains to hold hopes for providing the framework for stability, order, and morality; it has been dispelled as a concept and is physically vanishing from our sight under the heap of man-made construction and refuse.

Religion, though, fails to disappear. While all around us generations are growing up factually without religion, the religious

forces remain unexpectedly tenacious and impetuous, nay dangerous and sometimes disastrous. We are puzzled by the drawing power of new cults and sects, we are horrified by the passions of

religious strife in many contemporary conflicts, we are apprehensive of the growing tide of fundamentalism in different encampments. More than seventy years of well-organized atheistic education and propaganda did not succeed in abolishing religion in the Soviet empire, and its re-emergence is resuscitating age-old battles. It is no less agonizing to observe the failure of religion to deal with such urgent problems of the day as environment protection and population control. Religion still enjoys high moral credit and yet appears thoroughly problematic, a challenge to reason in its theory and practice as it has always been—all the more reason, then, for anthropology to take account of this phenomenon. We must at least try to make sense of the irrational in the hope of gaining some illumination, some insight from the fringes of experience, whether superhuman or subhuman.

It is the process of modernization and the growing achievements of science that make us realize more than before how much we are ourselves part of nature. Even if nature has ceased to exist as an immutable essence or matrix and rather appears as an irreversible process of self-organization in transient patterns emerging from chaos, we cannot escape from being involved in this, formed as we are by the age-old evolution of life. In this sense, biological "nature" is working in each of our acts and thoughts, just as the changes of nature and the threats to nature are affecting our own existence. The study of nature and human self-knowledge should no longer be separated, even if Socrates long ago insisted it was right to do so. And if religion constitutes an integral part of the human world embedded in nature, understanding religion should be part of the same theoretical effort, in a framework of natural (biological) anthropology.

The inquiry concerning "natural theology in the widest sense," including its historical dimension, thus turns into this question: what has been the *raison d'être* for religion in the evolution of

human life and culture hitherto? Is there a natural foundation of religion, based on the great and general process of life which has brought forth humanity and still holds sway over it, beyond chance and manipulation, personal idiosyncrasies and social conditioning?

As both nature and theology are assuming a nostalgic ring, there is a new incentive to look farther back in history, to conduct an investigation starting with the earliest forms of religion attested.[2] The most ancient documents bearing on our tradition come from Near Eastern and Mediterranean civilizations: Mesopotamia, Egypt, Asia Minor, Israel, and Greece. The approach based on the earliest written evidence has the advantage of a distanced view, largely exempt from the tensions and anxieties encircling living religions. The ancient gods—with the single exception of Jahweh—are no longer powerful nor represented in living belief; they do not demand cult and no longer spread awe. What is more, pre-Buddhistic, pre-Christian, pre-Islamic religions lack certain forms of systematic reflection, organization, and defense mechanisms which have contributed to the overwhelming success of the so-called world religions. The older models, being more variegated, experimental, and changeable, may still give clues to the original growth or construction of religion through their apparent "primitivity."[3] Contemporary religions have grown out of these, in an evolutionary and sometimes revolutionary process; identical elements still abound. In what sense this can be called natural remains to be seen.

An attempt to tie historical and philological research to biological anthropology requires that one explore fields set far apart, each crowded with innumerable publications, amidst more and more refined and specialized if often conflicting methods, results, and controversies. It is far beyond an individual's abilities to master all the relevant discussions. Yet precisely because historians have become aware of how much of their work, beyond the mere retrieval and accumulation of data, is bound by the special pat-

terns, principles, and fashions of their own civilization, they must look beyond the narrow historical perspectives of the past and take into regard the widening scientific horizons of our own

world. General anthropology will in the end have to merge with biology.

Historical studies presuppose some optimism as to the existence of facts and the possibility of correct accounts. This may sound naive vis-à-vis modern or post-modern tendencies to dissolve every object of study into interpretations, to be analyzed in turn to detect their tacit preconceptions and tendentious distortions.[4] Those who cling to a hard core of reality may still claim company with science, which in its most abstract constructs remains tied to empirical data. Biology is exploring the "reality" of living organisms with growing success, from self-replicating molecules to human consciousness. Even in the humanities, interpretations are not just constructs but hypotheses about reality which does not cease to make itself felt. If, for example, the language and symbolism of sacrifice in a specific cultural context prompt a variety of interpretations, real bones remain at the site to prove that real killing took place there. Religion is life-and-death realistic—which keeps it close to nature.

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Culture in a Landscape

SITUATING RELIGION

Beyond Culture

"Neither history nor anthropology knows of societies from which religion has been totally absent."[1] The observation that practically all tribes, states, and cities have some form of religion has been made repeatedly, ever since Herodotus. Ancient philosophers made this "consensus of nations" proof for the existence of the gods.[2] The question is not whether ethnographers may still find a few exceptions to that consensus; it is the universality of the consensus that has to be explained. To be sure, differences in belief and practice are dramatic; indeed, religion can be a most serious obstacle for communication between different groups, producing "pseudo-species" which exclude and may try to exterminate each other; but even this divisive tendency is a common feature.

The ubiquity of religion is matched by its persistence through the millennia. It evidently has survived most drastic social and economic changes: the neolithic revolution, the urban revolution, and even the industrial revolution. If religion ever was invented, it has managed to infiltrate practically all varieties of human cultures; in the course of history, however, religion has never been demonstrably reinvented but has always been there, carried on from generation to generation since time immemorial. As for the founders of new religions, such as Zarathustra, Jesus, or Mo-

hammed, their creative achievement consisted in transforming, reversing, or rearranging existing patterns and elements, which continue to carry an undeniable family resemblance to older
2 forms.

The civilizations that will come into closer view in this book, mainly the Mesopotamian, Jewish, Greek, and Roman, are contiguous and were in contact for a long time. While they developed under comparable climatic, economic, and social conditions, they also present glaring contrasts and revolutionary changes, from monarchy to democracy, from temple economy to monetary systems, from illiteracy to writing. Yet there are impressive similarities in their understanding and practice of religion, their myths and their rituals, temples and offerings. Diverse cultures have proved hospitable to many of the same elements of religion.

Culture has been defined as a "realized signifying system," a social system characterized by standard forms of communication.[3] Anthropologists see not just one system of this kind but an apparently boundless variety of them, although this variety seems to merge into a yet undefined conglomerate today. Hence the principle held by the leading schools of contemporary social sciences: each culture must be studied in its diversity and relative autonomy. In consequence, the very concept of human nature has come under attack. In what has been termed "new dualism," nature is excluded from cultural studies.[4] Humans are defined by culture far beyond their natural makeup: "there is no human nature apart from culture." Likewise, "humanity is as various in its essence as it is in its expression."[5]

This exclusively cultural approach would make any investigation into the natural elements or foundations of a phenomenon such as religion worse than heresy from the start. It is now common to integrate religion into culture, to view it in relation to specific groups and epochs. Religion is thus posed in contrast to nature and cannot be treated as a general phenomenon deriving from human nature.

Some of the most important and influential anthropological

studies of civilizations and religions in our century exemplify this view, exploring the Nuer or the Azande, the Andaman islanders or the Argonauts of the Western Pacific.[6] "Religion as a Cultural System" is the title of a famous paper by Clifford Geertz.[7] In the wake of Émile Durkheim religion has been seen, first of all, as a social phenomenon; Durkheim replaced the concept of religious ideas by that of "collective representations."[8] More recent decades have brought into ever sharper focus the forms and functions of communication within social groups.[9] This line has been followed in the successful development of semiology, structuralism, and poststructuralism.

Important studies along these lines have been carried out in the field of Greek religion, especially by the Paris school of Jean-Pierre Vernant.[10] In these works, Greek religion emerges in the context of the Greek city state, the *polis* as it has evolved beginning in the 8th century B.C. The details of myth and ritual, and especially of sacrifice, are seen as objective agents in their respective contexts marking distinctions and correlations, normality and deviation, within the structure of a particular ancient society. The impulse provided by this approach has been effective far beyond the specialized circles of classical philology.

Yet if cultures remain enclosed each in its own signifying system, what about the interactions of cultures, influences, and traditions that link the present to the past? What about our own chances of transcultural understanding of other civilizations whether past or present? And how do we account for the ubiquity and persistence of a phenomenon such as religion?

An alternative thesis may provide a basis for dealing with such questions. It proposes that there are phenomena common to all human civilizations, *universalia* of anthropology; they may be but need not be called characteristics of human nature. Religion belongs with them. Cultures interact; there are exchanges and conflicts, breaks but also continuities even within historical change. Above all there are basic similarities in all forms of human culture, inasmuch as everywhere people eat, drink, and defecate, work and sleep, enjoy sex and procreate, get sick and die.

There is no denying either the general or the biological character of these processes. Cultural anthropologists will claim they are trivial; it is only the cultural elaborations and differences that make these phenomena at all interesting. But they are there.

What is startling is the ubiquity of certain less trivial phenomena, which are culturally determined in every case and yet not generated nor explicable in isolation. They always appear integrated into specific cultures and take various shapes accordingly, but their unmistakable similarity makes them a general class transcending single cultural systems. They must be presumed to fulfill basic functions for human social life in all its forms, even if it is easy to imagine alternatives. These universals include such disparate phenomena as the nuclear family with a marked role of the father and the special father-son relationship; the use of technology, especially of fire; interactions that include economic exchange but also warfare; and above all language, art, and religion.[11] The last two mentioned may come as a surprise: what are in fact the functions of art and religion? They seem to be much less necessary for human life than the other items mentioned, yet they have been with us for all the time *homo sapiens sapiens* has been in existence.

The worldwide similarity of religious phenomena is easy to point out: they include formalized ritual behavior appropriate for veneration; the practice of offerings, sacrifices, vows and prayers with reference to superior beings; and songs, tales, teachings, and explanations about these beings and the worship they demand. Normally, religion is emphatically accepted. If voices of skepticism arise, it is deemed wise to silence them. "The fool says in his heart: there is no god"[12]—but most are not so foolish as to speak out. Even rhetoricians know that "one has to worship the divine: nobody opposes this exhortation unless he has gone mad."[13]

Nevertheless it is notoriously difficult to define religion in a general, transcultural way. Most attempts work at the level of

ideas or symbols. Jan van Baal, for example, defines religion as "all explicit and implicit notions and ideas, accepted as true, which relate to a reality which cannot be verified empirically."[14] This comes close to the older concept of religion as belief in the supernatural, while disregarding the practice of religion which is not necessarily based on so-called true belief. More circumspect is the definition of religion by Clifford Geertz: "(1) a system of symbols which act to (2) establish powerful, persuasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."[15] (Note the characteristic paradox that the symbolic should seem "uniquely realistic.") The realistic, that is, practical, aspects of religion may still be underestimated in Geertz's formula: it is not the symbols alone that create this seeming reality; it is the ongoing activity of living people interacting with each other through symbols, exchanging signs and reacting to them while working on their own "reality," which constitutes religion.

Numerous other proposed definitions and pertinent methodological reflections have been offered on the subject of religion.[16] Here, as Benson Saler has recommended, it will suffice to assemble some elements that characterize religion in almost every instance.[17] This attempt to grasp the distinctive features of religion remains at the level of observable behavior; the claims of factual truth or real existence of the gods are not of primary concern in the study of past religions.

The first principal characteristic of religion is negative: that is, religion deals with the nonobvious, the unseen, that "which cannot be verified empirically." Protagoras the sophist spoke of the *adelótes*, the "unclearness" or "nonevidence" of the gods.[18] Religion is manifest in actions and attitudes that do not fulfill immediate practical functions. What is intended and dealt with cannot be seen, or touched, or worked upon in the usual fashion of everyday life. This is why strangers are usually puzzled by religious practice. Conversely, we are tempted to suppose that any-

thing puzzling and not immediately apparent may be religious—a problem often met in prehistoric archaeology; drastic misunderstandings may of course occur. It is difficult to "get" what is
6 meant in religious behavior, but some common basis for empathy, interpretation, and translation evidently does exist. The criterion of *adelótes* is insufficient, yet it remains basic.

It is true that this unclearness is often emphatically denied by the insiders. "The knowability of god is clear among men," St. Paul wrote in Romans, "for god has made it clear for them. For the invisible (characteristics) of him are seen by the mind in his works, from the creation of the world. . . ." In both these arguments, from the mind and from the world *(kosmos),* Paul was following Greek popular philosophy.[19] The very emphasis, circumstantial argument, and special pleading of his claims acknowledge the difficulties of access. Even St. Paul's most optimistic formulation retains the "invisible." *Adelótes* can neither be abolished nor denied; it can be given a positive twist, however, by proclaiming it a secret.

To get beyond the barrier of unclearness, special forms of experience—meditation, vision, and ecstasy—are commonly invoked; thus the paranormal range of feelings is called upon to establish direct encounter with the supernatural. Yet the remarkable fact is not the existence of ecstasy and other forms of altered consciousness; it is their acceptance and interpretation by the majority of normal people. The ecstatic phenomena are integrated into religion and confirm existing belief, and these manifestations are themselves shaped by cultural training and practice insofar as they become communicable and accessible to others. In fact, they are judged and selected by an existing religion's own categories: "test the spirits."[20]

The second principal characteristic of religion stands in antithesis to the ineffable: religion manifests itself through interaction and communication. It is thus a relevant factor in the systems of civilization. Even the lonely ascetic communicates, as he becomes the object of admiration, propaganda, and pilgrimage. In fact, religious communication always focuses in two di-

rections, toward the unseen and toward the contemporary social situation. Through attitudes, acts, and language certain non-obvious entities or partners with special characteristics and interests are introduced, recognized, and tended.[21] Distinct from humans and still analogous in many respects, they are deemed superior specifically because of their invisibility, the supernatural as such. People give them various names, class them as spirits, demons, gods, or equate them with long-dead ancestors.[22] Religion thus becomes a "culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated superhuman beings."[23] Communication with these entities interferes with normal relations within society and thus often turns out to be a special form of indirect communication, using the supernatural to strengthen the effect of intended conventional communication. In this sense one might even say the divine is a social tool to manipulate communication.[24] At any rate, it is the practice of interaction, together with its consequences, that makes religion "uniquely realistic."

Implicit in the first two is the third characteristic of religion: its claim for priority and seriousness, for which Paul Tillich used the term "ultimate concern." Religion is thus set apart from other forms of symbolic communication, from play and from art. Although in play as in ritual there is an element that transcends reality, an "as if" structure which creates unseen partners with whom to interact, these playmates can be dismissed at will. In religion there is a postulate of priority and necessity, of certainty that given thoughts and actions are essential and unavoidable. All other plans, projects, predilections, or desires are downgraded, foregone, or at least postponed. Spartans stopped warfare to celebrate their festivals even at crucial moments; Jews decided to die rather than defend themselves on the Sabbath.[25] Even the Roman senate, relentlessly repressing the infamous *Bacchanalia* in Italy, respected the "necessity" some people felt to carry on their ritual according to tradition.[26] Religion is serious; hence it is vulnerable to laughter and derision.[27] But the unseen, in the form of personal partners, calls for submission and veneration, and the ego has to take second rank. As supernatural