

Introduction to the Special Issue on Ernst Cassirer's Philosophy of Religion

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Ernst Cassirer has often been classified as a Neo-Kantian, and there can be no doubt that Kant's philosophy was indeed a crucial topic of his writings and an important point of orientation for him in all areas of his own philosophical work.¹ In focussing on Cassirer's philosophy of religion we might therefore not expect more from it than a mere reconstruction or slight revision of Immanuel Kant's own philosophy of religion — a contribution that has been aptly called by Richard Schäffler an attempt to save religion, but with a fatal result («Rettungsversuch mit tödlichem Ausgang»)² The main question that immediately arises then is whether Cassirer really went beyond Kant in his philosophy of religion, particularly with regard to the objections that have been raised against Kant in the more than two hundred years since the publication of his book *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der bloßen Vernunft*. The textual basis for an answer to this question mainly has to be the second volume of Cassirer's *Philosophy of*

Symbolic Forms, particularly the last chapter.³ In this work Cassirer reconstructs what he calls the dialectics of mythical consciousness, i.e. the process in which religion itself develops out of a critique of mythical consciousness. The most important aspect of Cassirer's argument is that the author does not present a rationalist critique of myth in which myth appears as mere delusion or distortion,⁴ but describes an internal learning process that leads to an overcoming of myth, not to its destruction. What is absolutely crucial for this process is the growing insight into the difference between the sign and its meaning. For Cassirer mythical consciousness is defined by a confusion of sign and meaning, the sacralization of names, images, and numbers, whereas religion — a term he reserves for the «higher» form — is based on a clear distinction between them.⁵ After this epochal rupture, signs can be only articulations of meaning, whereas the sacred meaning itself is located in an altogether different dimension. Articulation will always remain

¹ The symposium took place in Jonsered (near Göteborg) May 20, 2005. It was organized by the Swedish Ernst Cassirer Society and made possible by the Volkswagen Foundation in Germany in the framework of the Ernst Cassirer professorship held by myself in the academic year 2004/05.

² Richard Schaeffler, «Immanuel Kant. Kritik und Neubegründung der Religion», in: Thomas Brose (ed.), *Religionsphilosophie. Europäische Denker zwischen philosophischer Theologie und Religionskritik*. Würzburg 1998, pp. 159–176, here p. 159.

³ Ernst Cassirer, *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, vol. 2 (1925), Darmstadt 1958, pp. 281–311.

⁴ Michael Moxter, «Formzerstörung und Formaufbau: Zur Unterscheidung von Mythos und Religion bei Ernst Cassirer», in: Matthias Jung/Michael Moxter/Thomas M. Schmidt (eds.), *Religionsphilosophie. Historische Positionen und systematische Reflexionen*. Würzburg 2000, pp. 165–182.

⁵ John E. Smith, «Some Comments on Cassirer's Interpretation of Religion», in: *Revue internationale de philosophie* 28 (1978), no. 110, pp. 475–491.

an insufficient and all-too-human attempt at expressing the meaning of this different, i.e. «transcendent» dimension.

This is, in my view, the crucial point in Cassirer's work about religion. But the elaboration of this point in his work is not without ambiguities. These ambiguities, on the one hand, and the relationship between Cassirer's thinking and other pertinent intellectual developments led to the structuration of the symposium that is (partly) documented here.

The first question has to be what exactly the place of religion in Cassirer's slightly evolutionist schematization was. For him it is not only religion that transcends myth, but also art and science. But it is not clear what the relationship between these products of differentiation is. Did he assume that religion overcomes mythical consciousness, but then will be overcome itself by art, science, and philosophy? If so, he would have remained a proponent of the secularization thesis like so many other intellectuals of his time. If not, why did he not write a volume on religion in his multi-volume *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*? Would it have been possible for him to treat «religion» as a unitary «symbolic form» in the same sense as he treated the others? What would an analysis of religion along the lines of Cassirer's other analyses look like? It is the German Catholic theologian Michael Bongardt who has studied these questions most intensely,⁶ and it is very helpful therefore that he has been willing to contribute to this special issue on Ernst Cassirer and the philosophy of religion.

The second question refers to the relationship between Cassirer's thinking and a historical sociology of religious evolution; this question has to be posed both with regard to classical and to contemporary work in the social sciences. As one can see in his footnotes, Cassirer clearly had studied the most important relevant writings by classical sociologists like Max Weber and Émile Durkheim, but also by scholars like Ernst Troeltsch and Rudolf Otto, and, of course, by the classics of religious studies. All his empirical

statements are taken from these works, including the emphasis on the distinction between sacred and profane, the primacy of cult (over myth), or the role of the «mana». In the introduction to the second volume of his work, Cassirer writes that in the field of religion he could not find in any of these authors a guiding thread similar to the one he had found in Wilhelm von Humboldt in the field of language.⁷ It might be worthwhile to do some research on the question as to whether this statement can be defended or whether Cassirer exaggerates the originality of his own contribution here. It seems to me that Cassirer's work depends much more on Émile Durkheim's work than he is willing to admit.

Whereas this question is mostly of historical interest, Cassirer's ideas on the dialectics of mythical consciousness show an intriguing similarity with one of the most promising areas of research in contemporary historical sociology, namely the studies on an axial age, axial civilizations etc. It is obvious that Cassirer's emphasis on the emergence of a distinction between sign and meaning is not only a contribution to a semiotic typology, but directly related to what at least some authors see as the most important aspect of the axial breakthrough, namely the discovery (or, if one prefers, the invention) of transcendence. In Cassirer's thinking, this breakthrough is presented as an almost logical result of the inherent dialectics of mythical consciousness. Although he sees the important role of ancient Judaism in this regard — which he learned to stress even more in his writings after emigration,⁸ in view of the murderous antisemitism of the Nazis — he is certainly not sociological enough to pay attention to the social, economic, and political preconditions of this breakthrough. In the symposium one of the main contributors to this social-scientific debate, Björn Wittrock, discussed the questions to which extent these preconditions determine such a religious development, what we know today about

⁷ Cassirer, p. XII.

⁸ Ernst Cassirer, «Judaism and the Modern Political Myths», in: *Contemporary Jewish Record* 7 (1944), pp. 115–126.

⁶ Michael Bongardt, *Die Fraglichkeit der Offenbarung. Ernst Cassirers Philosophie als Orientierung im Dialog der Religionen*. Regensburg 2000.

the dynamics of the «axial age» and whether we can speak about one such axial age at all.⁹

The third question refers to the precise relationship between Cassirer's philosophy of religion and the contributions of other related philosophical traditions like pragmatism and hermeneutics. American pragmatism has produced extremely important work on religion — the best known, of course, being William James's classical work on *The Varieties of Religious Experience*. The pragmatists are responsible for a semiotic turn in philosophy in general, although James's book on religion was not deeply influenced by this semiotic turn. An important area of study, therefore, is whether Cassirer's own version of a semiotic turn that is so crucial for his «dialectics of mythical consciousness» can stand the challenge of pragmatist semiotics in the wake of Charles Sanders Peirce's work. Some of the most important critical studies about these questions have been published by the German philosopher Matthias Jung,¹⁰ and his contribution to the symposium is also published here.

With regard to the hermeneutical tradition, we have a highly appreciative, but also critical review of Cassirer's work on the symbolic form of mythical thought by none other than Martin Heidegger.¹¹ He blamed Cassirer for concentrating on mythical *thought* instead of a mythical form of life; for Heidegger this was a deplorable remnant of Neo-Kantianism in Cassirer's work. Although it is true that Cassirer did not devote

enough attention to the connection between «life» and «thought» here and treated «life» more as the expression of «thought» than the other way round, it would be a similar mistake to ignore the fact that in the times of mythical consciousness not everything was mythical. Pragmatism has always emphasized the role of action here, the coexistence of «know how» and «know that», of sensorimotor practical knowledge and mythical discursive knowledge.¹² It was John Krois, one of the leading experts on Cassirer in the world, who raised the question during the symposium as to whether this point — as valid as it may be — is still true for Cassirer's writings after 1933 or whether we should not consider Cassirer as being on the way to a fully developed pragmatist philosophy in general, but also in particular with regard to religion.



⁹ This contribution is not published here, but see on Wittrock's thinking and the whole debate: Johann Arnason/ Shmuel N. Eisenstadt/Björn Wittrock (eds.), *Axial Civilizations and World History*. Leiden 2005.

¹⁰ With regard to Cassirer, see, for example: Matthias Jung, «Der Ausdruckscharakter des Religiösen. Zur Pragmatik der symbolischen Formen bei Ernst Cassirer», in: Hermann Deuser/Michael Moxter (eds.), *Rationalität der Religion und Kritik der Kultur: Hermann Cohen und Ernst Cassirer*. Würzburg 2002, pp. 119–124.

¹¹ Martin Heidegger's review of Cassirer's book was originally published in the *Deutsche Literaturzeitung* in 1928. It is now available in: M.H., *Kant und das Problem der Metaphysik*. Frankfurt am Main 1998, pp. 255–270.

¹² See Hans Joas, «Durkheim and Pragmatism: The Psychology of Consciousness and the Social Constitution of Categories», in: H.J., *Pragmatism and Social Theory*. Chicago 1993, pp. 55–78.