

Between Life and Death

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There are many ways of approaching religion. There are those who approach it in a state of extreme necessity, in the hope of finding in it salvation and shelter for a bewildered soul. Such an approach is perfectly legitimate. Indeed, one could even say that this is the test whereby religion is converted into something necessary for the survival of humanity.

Perhaps this preemptory and up till now irreplaceable necessity explains the persistence, or insistence, with which religion, like the phoenix, is born and reborn, including during those historical periods which would appear to presage its inevitable decline. There are circumstances in life when all one can do is entrust oneself to some figure in the religious pantheon, a God or special numen, or possibly a friendly genius or daimon — to some figure from the Otherworld who can come to our rescue.

The great critics of religion, those who have known best how to diagnose its harmful effects, are also those who have best understood it. I am talking here, of course, about the greatest, of those thinkers who have attempted the titanic task of challenging religion from the standpoint of their powerful ideas concerning the human condition. And it is true to say that anyone who approaches our predicament with fear and trembling, cannot avoid crossing paths with this complex phenomenon which has accompanied man since he was first able to recognize what he still is: an inhabitant of the world who does not limit himself to productive interchanges with his environment through the agency of instruments and tools, but who also displays a surprising capacity for expressing, through complex symbols, his particular way of interpreting his sur-

roundings, and of understanding himself by means of them.

There are, as I have said, many ways of approaching religion — cautiously, circum-spectly, with apprehension. And the most obvious and transparent is, of course, where it appears as something completely irreplaceable. It is important to emphasize this aspect of religion, given that it alone leads us to the heart of the enigma within which lies the secret of religion's extra-ordinary power of persuasion.

I believe that no one has been better able to express this enigma than one of the most acerbic critics of the religious phenomenon: Karl Marx. Before delighting us with his brilliant characterization of religion as the opium of the people, this great thinker in an early text offers an authentic and truly crucial formulation, which strikes to the very heart of the matter. He says that every true religion expresses and manifests «the tears and groans of the oppressed creature». Rarely has anyone stated with such accuracy what religion is, in its essential nature.

What is it that above all oppresses man? Wherein lie the roots of this sentiment of oppression? Are we really entitled to discard the Marxist focus on the «social and historical conditions of existence»?

Many signs of the times urge us to pose the question in these terms again. Now as never before we are witnessing a host of indications and proofs which demand that we revisit this classic German Jew who has been so reviled, so precipitately written off as useless old lumber by the ruling neo-liberal orthodoxy. Apocalyptic wars overwhelm us at the very heart of Europe — wars which we ingenuously believed were

the patrimony of the lost continent of Africa. Today as never before, in the style of a Grand Casino, the transnational financial engine holds sway on a planetary scale, dictating, with the coldness of its technologized transactions and to the vertiginous rhythm of a lightning velocity, the peaks and troughs of the socio-economic concert of nations transformed into a huddled circle of afflicted spectators winning or losing with every turn of the Grand Roulette Wheel. Today as never before, along with unstoppable demographic advances in the production and reproduction of an infinite number of potential recruits for a «reserve army» which will never accede to the labour market, tragic pockets of impoverished humanity are accumulating. The world today can with all justice validate the Marxist causality which characterizes Capital as the «summum et compendium» of all our misfortunes — our greatest oppressor.

But perhaps it is possible to go beyond this diagnosis; or to penetrate deeper, and with greater consciousness, into the heart of Horror, «the heart of darkness». What is it which in its most nuclear form reveals the very secret of human oppression? Does there exist in human experience a Power of such a kind that it succeeds in equalizing with the same blade what in terms of political, economic and social power is irritatingly unequal — in levelling the despot and the serf, the capitalist and the worker, the Roman emperor and the slave?

The Roman emperors knew something about this. Though appearing to represent divinity here on earth, as they circulated in triumphal processions they would listen to that very servant behind them holding the laurel crown recite the cruel reminder of their true (and miserable) condition: remember that you are a man, remember that you must die. A medieval spiritual text, which Heidegger recalls in «Being and Time», points out that man from the moment of birth is already ripe for death. Death is the Power that oppresses us from the moment we are born. It is the root and foundation of our impotence.

We feel and know ourselves oppressed, recognizing our impotence before a greater power; a power so great we will never be able to subject it to our precarious convenience. It could be that the Lord of the World in one of his cus-

tomary historical aspects (be it as absolute monarch, Roman emperor, Great Dictator, or grand director of a transnational global state) might appear to us to be the Lord of Life and Death. But it would be truer to say that he is always his agent, secretary or administrator, and that Death rules over him.

Perhaps it is death that makes us human. It is said that intelligence constitutes our inheritance (a capital, certainly, which is not distributed with fairness). One of the great enigmas of the human condition is to be found precisely in this characteristic capacity of man and woman for understanding themselves and their surroundings. A capacity uniquely challenged, every step of the way, by a constant propensity for self-contradiction on account of the errors, blindness's and clouding-over of this same exquisite faculty.

I do not seek the biological or evolutionary origin of this human treasure (which could also, of course, be a poisoned gift). I seek the philosophical «raison d'être» of this faculty. I have believed for some time now that Death can come to our assistance on this point. By which I mean I believe that the understanding of our mortal condition constitutes the paradigm, model or pattern of all possible understanding. I believe we are intelligent because we know ourselves to be mortal — that consciousness of our mortal condition provokes our leap into that condition of intelligence that determines and defines us as human beings. In other words, that we have emerged from vegetable numbness and animal semi-consciousness by virtue of the provocation which the consciousness of death constitutes.

Death is here to assist and provoke us, as in Schubert's beautiful «lied» «Death and the Maiden». He is here, his hand extended as when he stands before the Maiden, awakening us from our condition of pure animality and raising us to (or perhaps grounding us in?) the human condition. Nor is there any mathematics or exact science without this truly Platonic Idea of Precision and Proof — of Certainty — that Death brings with it.

Death, then, is the paradigm of every limit (to our capacity, virtue, power). It is limit itself in its heavy and terrible character of an invincible wall against which all our force, intelligence and ingenuity is always shattered. But it is

also the spur to our capacity for understanding our mortal finite condition by means of symbolical forms.

Our most distant and archaic ancestors already had an understanding of our mortal nature: it is known that they buried their dead. Cemeteries have been unearthed which astound us with their astonishing antiquity. «Homo Faber» already knew what to do with his dead: bury them; offer them the piety of a sepulchre. But only «homo symbolicus» (whom we are accustomed to calling «homo sapiens sapiens»), only this species, our contemporary from more (though not much more) than thirty thousand years ago on the Cantabrican littoral or in the Valley of the Dordogne, in Perigord — only this «Cro-Magnon Man» was able to offer an authentic human response to this challenge or invitation which was the discovery of his mortal condition. It was the response of an authentically symbolic expression with which he invaded the most hidden and sacred zones of his habitat.

At the Sources of Religious Experience

A short time ago I paid a visit to those regions neighbouring Perigord, in the Dordogne Valley, where we can discover the primal activity of our true ancestor, «homo symbolicus».

For the first time, we are aware of our own human condition, and of the mystery of a sensitive intelligence capable of shaping symbolical forms drawn from objects of natural perception, but surrounded by a halo of enigmatic signs, or hieroglyphs, which endow these familiar forms with the character of the sacred.

In the immense cathedral, which is the cavern at Peche-Merle, we are aware everywhere of signs that, like a secret alphabet, designate sexual differentiation: triangles which signify the vulva, a penis or feather designating the virile force. The grotto itself gives symbolic expression to the idea of the matrix, of the maternal or matricial womb, whence all life arises and bursts forth. Everything appears to be symbolically shaped in this maternal womb, like an embryo or foetus which can already glimpse the forms of life it will encounter in an outside

world governed by the exigencies of hunting and gathering.

To this concert of animals (especially horses and bison) weaving among themselves a mysterious language of superimpositions, is added the presence of the witness or officiating shaman, also decked with animal attributes, such as a goat's foot, horse's tail, antlered head or bird's beak. And near the animal is placed the supreme icon of fecundity: a sculpture, emerging from the very wall of the cave, of a female body, distinguished by its wide hips and large vulva and breasts; to the relative neglect of the head, which is merely a simple outline. Woman and the Great Animal seem to be the dominant symbols in this proto-historical sanctuary.

It is the walls of the inner sanctuary that awaken the greatest attention and sense of awe. One is fascinated to observe that the priest celebrating the mystery of the oldest of all the religions has left his own hand on the wall — or an ample scattering of such hands. Here and there one notices the amputation or occultation of a finger. Is this the first appearance of the sacrificial offering? Or are we dealing here with a linguistic sign, such as one finds in all mimetic or deaf-and-dumb languages? Although there is no agreement on these matters, it is generally accepted that with these symbolic forms, we are in the presence of a life-affirming response to the mystery of death. For death is mysterious insofar as it is the contra-revelation of the mystery of life.

To the power of death «homo symbolicus» can only oppose his inexhaustible capacity for the creation of significant symbols. In this lie the roots of his magic. Magic is the art of acquiring dominance over the sacred. Magic means power. The German word «macht», which is in such a special way part of the vocabulary of Nietzsche, proceeds from the same semantic field as the word «magic». So also «Mögen», which signifies power, or the Heideggerian «potentiality-to-be». From the same source comes the Sanskrit word «Maia». It is an Apollonian veil of Maya, or magic, that Shiva weaves in dancing his famous dance of fire, casting the spell of enchantment that creates what we call «the world». Magic is a creative power — whence the German expression «Machen», to make or cre-

ate — which conjures up what is nevertheless a veil of appearances.

Religion is, in relation to magic, its most complete refutation. Religion is born and arises from an advanced form of illuminated intelligence which is able to impose a limit on what Freud called «the omnipotence of ideas» — ideas which lead those who have fallen into the power of magical thinking to believe that the greater power of death will yield to them. Religion is born precisely from the awakened and lucid consciousness that this Greater Power, to which death is the supreme testimony, will not permit itself to be overcome by any expressive act on the part of humanity: there is no Symbol capable of confronting it or bringing it under its dominion.

Religion, instead of wishing to dominate the sacred, prostrates itself before the mystery in consternation. Religious man reveals, in his gestures of adoration, supplication, action of graces, of prayer and oration, the complete and radical acceptance of his extreme poverty and impotence before these superior powers. The special characteristic of religion, however, consists in keeping alive the expectation that, by means of this change of strategy towards the sacred, it should be possible, through the intercession of such figures as incarnate the Other-world, to achieve a preliminary victory over the powers of darkness, and especially over the most terrible of them all, Death.

Proto-historical religion, which finds its expression in the caves of Peche-Merle, Lascaux and Altamira, seems to offer a symbolic response to the disquiet the cycle of life-and-death-and-life evokes in the human being. It gives symbolic, indirect, analogical form and figure to the idea of a germinal matrix from which all life arises.

What seems to be revealed in this protean religion is the mystery of «live matter». Matter signifies mother and matrix. It is always the matricial, the maternal — that which must be ordered and organized so as to constitute a world, a «cosmos». It is deeply to be regretted that the concept of matter has become abstract and trivial through the fault of modern and contemporary «materialisms». It is necessary to recuperate an authentic «materialism» with a

new stamp, as vital as that of our prehistoric ancestors.

We must, therefore, go back to the Great Mother to encounter the genuine beginning of the life-adventure of «homo symbolicus». In the first aeon, which corresponds with the prehistoric sanctuary, whose wavelength extends to the mysteries of the megalithic culture, it is the mystery of life which seems to be revealed, with all its periodic cycles to accord with the rhythms of the moon; and which in mid-Neolithic times still finds ceremonial expression, in the divine procession of the figures of the pantheon: the Woman, in her rôle of fecund Female, and the Bull with his lunar horns. Woman and Animal still stand before the witness in their pre-eminence; and before them too the shaman, disguised with the attributes of an animal, prostrates himself with reverence and consternation. Not yet introduced is the inversion that makes of the animal the currency of sacrificial exchange (by means of destructive immolation) between the human witness and his mirror-image ideal, the god with the anthropomorphic characteristics.

It has been said, with considerable justification, that the «dramatis personae» of the religious drama are always the man, the animal and the god. In the first aeon animal and god preponderate, and the man prostrates himself in consternation before these eminences. Only the Woman (in her life-giving capacity of reproductive matrix and nurturing udder) seems to compete in status with the divinized eminence of the Great Animal that dominates the religious imagination of the protohistoric pantheon and sanctuary.

The Creation of the World

I believe I will not be mistaken if I affirm that what is always expected of religion is salvation — that it should perpetuate or re-compose and re-establish one. Or that it should produce the change that transforms a state of exhausted existential firmness (infirmity) into one of health recovered. And I am referring to an existential health — a mutation from misfortune to good fortune by means of the religious institutions of myth, ritual and ceremony.

When all the technical, practical and ethical recourses of this world have ceased to be reliable, then it seems that all that remains is the recourse to what borders on them, which is religion. Religion is the promise of a message of salvation from the boundary limits. Except that the resource it disposes of to fulfil this promise is of a very peculiar nature. It is symbolic. Which means that the way religion manages to distribute its gift of salvation is always «indirect and analogical».

But the peculiarity of religion is that it provokes from the worshipping participant an act of confidence in the existential (and therefore real) nature of what the symbolic weft constitutes. Which is to say, one has to give credit to what occurs there in such a way as to attribute to it the character of reality — or, which is the same thing, indubitable relevance to one's existence. This requisite attitude of credence is called in some religions (especially the religions of the Book), faith.

The principal religious narrative or myth in the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia — the cultures of the second aeon — is the Creation of the World. As nourishing source and guarantor of religious identity, this myth is memorialized and recreated in the cult, thereby assuring the perpetuation of a creative act that makes it possible that the world is as it is: a cosmos ordered by virtue of the creative act being renewed every day or every year or with the changes of the seasons.

The temple now is not the cavern or grotto under the mountain, but the mountain itself. This symbolizes perfectly the emergence of the «cosmos» from its subterranean cavernous depths towards the celestial heights. For the Egyptians, Creation is above all symbolized in an original or primal hillock emerging from the marsh waters. In Mesopotamia the mountain assumes the nature of a temple. The mountainside is bored so as to produce the graduations of a stairway — a model for the construction of the famous «ziggurat», prototype of the Tower of Babel. And in these cosmic religious myths, such as the «Poem of Gilgamesh», there is the attempt to dispel evil — an evil presented as disorganization and chaos, or desertification, or catastrophic inundation.

The religions are full of ideas that move us or stir our most radical needs for meaning. And one of the best-known ideas from the religions of the Book is that «God created the world out of nothing» («ex nihilo») we know, thanks to an excellent study by Gerhard Scholem, that this idea of creation «ex nihilo» emerged very late — in the Talmudic tradition at the beginning of the Christian Era. It was adopted by the Fathers of the Church and ended up transformed into one of the most characteristic dogmas of ecclesiastical Christianity. In the Book of Genesis, however, the Yahvist text (which is the oldest) speaks of the sterile earth that existed before the Creation. And the more recent Priestly text speaks of a Creation provoked by God's imperative word, before which the earth was «empty desert». In both narratives, there was something already there before the creative act.

«Nothingness» is a Greek concept foreign to Semitic tradition. It acquired a philosophical sense with the great poem of Parmenides. Plato distinguished between an absolute and innominable Nothingness and a relative Nothingness, which has certain relations of convenience with the concept of Being. Plato tells of a Creation by means of an intermediary divinity, the Demiurge, who attempts to construct a cosmic order patterned on ideal paradigms. To accomplish this task he is obliged to deal with a power who appears to offer resistance, whom Plato calls «chora» (usually translated as «space»). «Chora» is a relative «non-being» — in fact, a kind of «Wet-nurse of the Origins», a maternal power responsible for the survival of a principle of perpetual becoming ever opposed to the pure kingdom of ideal paradigms.

The concept of «chora» is a perhaps attractive antecedent to the Aristotelian concept of «hyle», that «matter» which however signifies «wood» in Greek. The stoics called this matter «silva», forest — the fierce and savage element not yet calmed and civilized by the «Creator of the Cosmos». The third aeon produces the symbolic revelation of the encounter, and subsequent meeting, of the witness with the sacred. It is exemplified in such theophanic scenes as that of the meeting of Moses and Yahweh on Mount Sinai.

The Meeting

If I am asked what religion is, what it consists of, what are its nature and essence, I have to say: it is an encounter, a meeting, and a covenant. It is an encounter that augurs a covenant. Religion should be defined as the engagement of man with the sacred. The specifically religious act consists of this meeting between a sacred presence emerging from its occultation, and man, who offers it his testimony.

We have in this act all the elements which we recognize as those which make it possible that there should be such a thing as «religion»: sacred presence, witness, testimony ratified in stories, poems or reports (usually called «myth»), visual implantation of this mythic weft in ceremonial ritual, the consummation of this ritual in a sacrificial act (the exchange of gifts from both extremities of the religious correlation i.e. sacred presence and human witness). All these elements together compose the symbolic weft of the religious event.

It is also possible that at the same meeting-place a separation occurs — the fateful event that is the divorce between man and the sacred. When what occurs is fortunate, an act of conjunction, then one can speak of a symbolic event. Symbol («sym»-«bolon») signifies the conjunction («sym») of two fragments of an original unity (a medal or coin), which serves to seal a pact between two parties, each of which is in possession of one of the halves. On the occasion of a renewed meeting, the fragments are thrown forth («ballein» signifies to throw) as an indication of a possible conjunction. The contrary of «symbol» is «dia-bolon». The «diabolical» indicates the separation of two parts.

The religious event, then, can give occasion for what could properly speaking be called a «symbolic» meeting, or for a «diabolic» encounter. This ambivalence of the sacred is not alien to the general ambivalence running through all the activities and expressions we associate with the word religion.

Philosophy, now and always, is an exercise in wonder forever renewed before the mystery of the beginning or origins. And the beginning is this scene of the meeting-place with the predictable encounter between human witness and

sacred presence. But there is always something which precedes the actual beginning (as logic precedes argument), and which demands a narrative movement that goes backwards. There is always a past in relation to every beginning.

The present, it has been said, is the meeting-place of human and divine. But the meeting cannot take place without the anterior conditions that make it possible. Which presupposes a cosmic «ordination» of this «temple» which is the world (or city). And this ordainment or creation of the world presupposes, in its turn, a «vital matter» or fundamental matrix, which this cosmos orders and organizes.

It behoves us to establish those «conditions of possibility», or «categories», which make it possible for such a meeting to occur. The first category is matter, or the matrix; the second is the ordered, created cosmos, converted into a cosmic temple or city temple; the third is precisely that which validates the religious act properly speaking: the meeting between man (or witness) and the sacred. But — category of what? And in relation to what?

I believe religion manifests itself as symbolic act or event. In which case, this third category displays in an ostensible form the fearless throwing forth — the «flinging» — of the two parts of the medal or coin, the «sym-bolon» that validates a pact or alliance, a covenant such as that established by Moses and Yahweh on Mount Sinai.

Religious Fragments

There are many attitudes one can assume towards the fact of religion. Before all else, there is what one usually means by the word «religion»: the attitude of the faithful believer who accepts the principles ruling a particular community of belief, or offers credence to its form and contents. But there is another possible attitude: that of one who approaches religion above all for the teachings it can offer him, without this approach signifying any profession of faith. And this is possible from a position of the most radical and naked agnosticism, as also from the religious position of one who nevertheless does not wish to accept the particular form of religion he finds in his «ethos».

Religion matters to me in the second sense; and I am interested in approaching it in the hope of finding there teachings which can be developed, without adulteration, into philosophical reflection.

In every great religion something existential is revealed, something relevant and necessary for the understanding of the vast mysteries surrounding human life. Religion sometimes hits on the symbolic code which, suitably elaborated by philosophical thinking, can act as the hermeneutic key to penetrating, however tentatively, those mysteries.

This revelation is symbolic. Which means it makes reference to Great Ideas, which stir us in the manner of enigmas concerning our essence and existence, but only (in accordance with the Kantian definition) indirectly and analogically. These are Ideas which, though not susceptible to scientific demonstration, impose themselves with an urgency which renders them indispensable to our survival; such as those relating to our mortal or immortal nature, to our liberty or lack of it, to the destiny, origin and predictable end of our world, to the mystery of the Principle of All Things (be it God or blind Fortune).

Confronted with the urgency of a rational intelligence that can only formulate these questions without succeeding in replying to them, religion manages to venture some responses, but only through symbolic expedients. And in this sense, the symbolism one finds in religion (as well as art) constitutes the necessary complement which reason (what I call «borderland reason») requires.

Every major religion is a fragment of Great Pan. «Great Pan is dead!» was the anguished cry in antiquity — which became for modern man, on the lips of Nietzsche, «God is dead!» But this death is not a recent event in the Modern Twilight, but the inaugural act itself of the human condition and its entrance into the symbolic dimension. The Great God has died, or the Grand All, and by virtue of this demise, the ever open possibility of restoring and cherishing some fragment of this shattered Truth has been established.

There is no «true religion». But the great historical and contemporary religions are all true religions. It is only that none of them can arro-

gate to itself the role of the religion that entirely realizes the very concept itself of religion, the essence of what it is that we wish to know. There is no «total» concept, only the partial and fragmentary; and in this characteristic diminishment every religion finds its true oblation, its «kenosis», the ascetic ordeal, which, saving it from its blindness and «hybris», reveals its true measure — its partial, but necessary and irreplaceable, truth.

My book *La edad del espíritu* («The Age of the Spirit») is a sort of Grand Narrative in which are assembled the different and successive symbolical revelations whereby the plural, multiple and diverse universe of the great historical religions (some of which still remain valid in our contemporary world) makes its appearance in the world. It is a philosophical account or narrative, pondered according to criteria that seemed to me rational (those proper to the «borderland reason» which I try to define in «Borderland Reason»).

In *La edad del espíritu* I tried to assign to each great (religious-symbolic) manifestation of the sacred, that partial, fragmentary but necessary truth it was responsible for giving birth to in the form of revelation. My idea is that this revelation, which in general constitutes what all religions attempt to display in the public domain (since, as the synoptic gospels say, it is not right that «one hides one's light under a bushel of grain»), is not something univocal flowing from this or that reputedly «true» religion, but rather, something multiply distributed in very diverse channels flowing back and forth from a Great River (or Grand Narrative) itself nourished by these partial revelations. My intention was to show, reflectively and philosophically, the outline of this story, or the milestones and principal stopping-places, which allow one to allow one to present it as a narrative journey.

In this way, I set about describing the emergence of these religions, from the oldest of them all, the probable protohistorical religion which took shape in the rock caves, until I reach the great religions of the first urban cultures (following the invention of writing) in the civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia; in order then to follow the diversification of revelation on four chosen fronts: the Vedic religion, with the reflec-

tions and dissidences it gave rise to (Buddhism appears here, in the form of necessary caesura); the Iranian religion reformed by Zarathustra; the Hebrew Biblical religion, which reaches its own caesura and crisis in the Prophetic Movement; and finally, the poetic religion of Greece, with its epic and its theogony, which finds its reflective beginnings in the primitive «Pre-Socratic» speculations — and its own moment of questioning in the Tragic Theatre.

The book then continues on to the great spiritual movements, syncretic by nature, of Late Antiquity (with special reference to the simultaneous birth of Early Christianity and Gnosticism), before penetrating afterwards into the Middle Ages, with the appearance of Islam and the establishment of the great communities of the Book — the Christian (Western and Eastern), the Moslem and the Jewish.

In the course of this narrative I show the different stages of symbolical revelation which, diversifying into multiple religious foundations, give expressive outlet to the sacred. But it is important to me to avoid letting one or other of them assume a preponderant rôle. If I do indeed

follow a route in the direction of my own religious and philosophical traditions, I make a strong effort not to privilege the perspective opened by religions nearest to our experience. In this sense, I do not attribute greater relevance, for example, to Christianity than to Islam (nor, when encompassing Antiquity, to Judaism or to Greek religion than to Oriental religions, those proceeding from India or the Persian world).

It was my intention to bring to completion an ecumenical outline that would allow all those approaching the religious fact in all its diversity to discover teachings springing from its own symbolical way of manifesting itself. Teachings that can be found throughout the whole constellation of religions analysed (which are not by any means the totality of those existing, the description of which would have been an impossible task; so that, finally, despite the considerable effort to which the book bears witness, it has large gaps, such as the religions of the Extreme Orient, the Pre-Columbian religions and, above all, the African religions.)

Translation: Jonathan Boulting

