

**The Western  
Construction  
of Religion**

*Myths, Knowledge,  
and Ideology*

**Daniel Dubuisson**

Translated by  
William Sayers

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That when it was written—captive to its Western ethnocentrism—it was without interrogating the very notion of religion, which everyone took as self-evident.

That in rewriting it today, and thanks to the distance created by the time that has passed, we have a right to hope to throw some new light on its presuppositions and its methods and thus perhaps contribute to gaining recognition for the idea that the history (or the history of the history) of a discipline can be conceived of as the critical moment in its redefinition.<sup>13</sup>

Yet this redefinition, if it is simultaneously oriented toward the object and toward the gaze leveled at this object, is capable of proposing, even if only exceptionally, not new ways of thinking (this would be too ambitious) but at least new dispositions of ideas and objects, capable of disabusing us of those that have (mis-)shaped our minds.

On the condition that the critical gaze and historicist point of view are constantly and, if possible, dialectically counterbalanced by the categorical imperative of an anthropological perspective (itself sustained by a comparative methodology as bold as it is vigilant), it seems to me now possible to address the idea of religion, this time as the history of religions has conceived of it and, dare I say, defined it.

### 3 | An Uncertain Anthropological Calling

#### A Nebula of Definitions

To begin with, I invite the reader to review some more or less ancient definitions that follow below, to retrace their various filiations, and thus to discover unexpected family resemblances.<sup>1</sup> It will immediately be seen that none of these definitions challenges the very idea of religion, even when the definition is prompted by incredulity. Many of the “scientific” definitions do not truly distinguish themselves from the others: philosophy, theology, and the history of religions spontaneously return to the same general arguments located at the heart of the same topical complexes. Finally, the majority of these definitions have as implicit model the Christian conception, but reduced in some fashion to its “ideal type,” to its stripped down quintessence (which, I must emphasize, makes this spiritualized and minimalist version even less open to universalization, even if, at the same time, it seems to us Westerners more relevant and closer to our most familiar common intuition).

This ideal definition advances a psychological and profoundly individualistic vision. It reduces religion to an interior sentiment that is inevitably born of the experience of transcendence, whether the latter be called God, the sacred, the beyond, power, mystery, or the like. This conception, which would be rediscovered in the twentieth century in the wake of the phenomenological movement, owes a great deal, as does the latter, to theological theses of Lutheran inspiration: Johann Herder, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Benjamin Constant, Auguste Sabatier, Cornelius Tiele, Rudolf Otto, and many others less well known have contributed, since the end of the eighteenth century, to the success of this eidetic pseudo-reduction. I write “pseudo-reduction” with no qualms, for it completely disregards (as if this disregard were *sui generis* to it) the diversity of cultures, the uniqueness of other human beings, and, with the same carelessness, the formi-

dable work of history. Its *eidōs* is scarcely more than a rhetorical artifice. In this domain, the transcendental error consisted—and today still consists—of seeing as a universal notion what is after all only the purified version of one of our old native categories.

But can we, for all that, dispense with asking ourselves: how can such numerous definitions, arising from such different eras and temporal horizons, inspired by opposing opinions and at times promoting contending theses—how can they despite everything be brought so easily into agreement, apparently without it even being necessary to raise this point, to admit that something called religion, for better or worse, exists in most, if not all, human cultures? This amounts to admitting the idea of a humanity—and human beings—who are fundamentally religious. Otherwise, the deep disagreements, clearly expressed, could have gradually led to a challenge to the received idea of religion, where, conversely, its general recognition ought to have opened a door to the discovery of some undeniable universal trait or characteristic. These seem to be the two extreme options involved in the choice with which this strange situation confronts us. But what, curiously, do we observe? That disagreement finds expression, admittedly, but without ever quitting a kind of preestablished framework in which this notion seems obvious, irrefutable, as if the word and the thing “went without saying.” No doubts, no reservations are expressed with regard to them.

But, at the same time, as we have seen, this tacit agreement hardly goes beyond a schematic definition of religion, about which the least that one can say is that it is content to express, with no little naïveté and conviction, the narcissistic ambitions of an ecumenical Christianity—to such an extent and so thoroughly that we cannot very well see what other civilizations would have been or would be capable of recognizing themselves in it. It is true that Western thought has never been very concerned with this aspect of things, the paradoxes that it could contain, never having asked other cultures what they thought of the concepts that it imposed on them. In a fashion that we might qualify as compulsive, this symbolic violence was always followed or accompanied by very real violence. It cannot be too strongly stated that since the end of the fifteenth century, the West has associated its imperialist perspectives and conquests more and more explicitly with its own conceptions of mankind with a view—if the neologism may be permitted—to “anthropologizing” these conceptions, to making them an absolute and universal point of reference. This process culminated

in the second half of the nineteenth century, the period in which the history of religions was born.

This fundamental agreement, the fact that all European thinkers, or nearly all, judged the idea of an eminently religious human being to be just as obvious as the idea of religion, is a fact of primary importance. It proves that religion is inherent in Western culture, that it is situated in its very foundations, there where the deepest structures of thought are elaborated. As always, we must initially call attention to the cultural weight of the Christian religion in any reflection concerning religion (its definition, nature, or attributes). No discussion, no intellectual controversy on the subject ever proceeds other than within its own limits, with the aid of arguments and ideas that were fashioned by it or in its interest. This soothing procedure, although it avoids the most striking contradictions, is surely condemned to add nothing new to its own presuppositions. For (as a variant on Gödel's theorem) one cannot speak analytically of a form of knowledge with the vocabulary of that knowledge, a fortiori when it has borrowed its nomenclature and a good share of its essential conceptions from the sphere of the object that is supposedly under study! Discursive circularity (speaking of things in the language of these same things) is guaranteed.

In addition, who cannot see that disagreements on the nature or role of religion are in reality engaging in another debate, one more metaphysical than scientific. Behind it, it is in fact (to be brief) a question of the existence of God, since, for many Western minds, denying the idea of religion is tantamount to denying the existence of the divinity. (In the Christian conception, is not religion the eternal, unchanging bond that unites the creature with his creator? In this perspective, human beings, religion, and the divinity form a unique, indivisible ensemble—they mutually imply each other.) The presence of this theological equation has continuously sidetracked all debate. A regrettable confusion constantly arises between religious ideas and ideas about religion. We could not talk about the one set of ideas without these opinions reverberating noisily among the others.

Nothing authorizes us to claim that this equivocation has dissipated today. The modern history of religions has too often remained captive to these same metaphysical controversies, in which it could only become mired down. And although it has stimulated a certain number of opinions and an even greater number of discussions, it has not generated many

original analyses or fertile reflections. Most have remained prisoners of its religious past.

And in these four things, opinions of ghosts, ignorance of second causes, devotion towards what men fear, and taking of things casual for prognostiques, consisteth the natural seed of religion, which by reason of the different fancies, judgments, and passions of several men, hath grown up into ceremonies so different, that those which are used by one man, are for the most part ridiculous to another. (Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651)

We may conclude, therefore, that in all nations . . . the first ideas of religion arose not from a contemplation of the works of nature, but from a concern with regard to the events of life, and from the incessant hopes and fears, which actuate the human mind. (David Hume, *Dialogues on Natural Religion*, 1757)

In a general way . . . we designate as religious the relationship of man with the sacred, which is expressed, as subjective religion, in veneration and adoration and which is incarnated, as objective religion, in confession, in speech, in acts . . . and in law. (*Dictionary of Theology* [1960s])<sup>2</sup>

But when religion—consciousness of God—is designated as the self-consciousness of man, this is not to be understood as affirming that the religious man is directly aware of this identity; for, on the contrary, ignorance of it is fundamental to the particular nature of religion. To preclude this misconception, it is better to say, religion is man's earliest and also indirect form of self-knowledge. Hence, religion everywhere precedes philosophy, as in the history of the race, so also in that of the individual. (Ludwig Feuerbach, *Das Wesen des Christentums*, 1841)

The wretchedness of religion is at once an expression of and a protest against real wretchedness. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is a demand for their true happiness. The call to abandon illusions about their condition is the call to abandon a condition which requires illusions. (Karl Marx, *Zur Kritik der hegelschen Rechtsphilosophie: Einleitung*, 1844)

Religion is (considered subjectively) the recognition of all our duties as divine commands. (Immanuel Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft*, 1793)

The essence of religion consists in the feeling of an absolute dependence. (Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Christliche Glaubenslehre*, 1821)

Religious feeling is born of man's perceived need to enter into communication with invisible forces. (Benjamin Constant, *De la religion*, 1830)

Religion, therefore, as I now ask you arbitrarily to take it, shall mean for us the feelings, acts, and experience of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine. Since the relation may be either moral, physical, or ritual, it is evident that out of religion in the sense in which we take it, theologies, philosophies, and ecclesiastical organizations may secondarily grow. In these lectures, however, as I have already said, the immediate personal experience will amply fill our time, and we shall hardly consider theology or ecclesiasticism at all. (William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1906)

Religion is intimate prayer and deliverance. It is so inherent in man that he would be unable to tear it from his heart without condemning himself to be separated from himself and to kill that which constitutes his very humanity. (Auguste Sabatier, *Outlines of a Philosophy of Religion*, 1897)

[Religion] is a commerce, a conscious and willed relation into which the soul in distress enters with the mysterious power on which it feels that it and its destiny depend. (Auguste Sabatier, *ibid.*, 1897)

[Religion is] the manner in which man realizes his relationship with superhuman, mysterious powers on which he believes himself dependent. (Eugène Goblet d'Alviella, *Introduction à l'histoire générale des religions*, 1887)

Summing up in the broadest possible way the characteristics of the religious life, as we have found them, it includes the following beliefs:

1. That the visible world is part of a more spiritual universe from which it draws its chief significance;
2. That union or harmonious relations with that higher universe is our true end;
3. That prayer or inner communion with the spirit thereof—be that spirit 'God' or 'law'—is a process wherein work is really done, and spiritual energy flows in and produces effects, psychological or material, within the phenomenal world.

Religion includes also the following psychological characteristics:

4. A new zest which adds itself like a gift to life, and takes the form either of lyrical enchantment or of appeal to earnestness and heroism.
5. An assurance of safety and a temper of peace, and, in relation to others, a preponderance of loving affections. (William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1906)

[Religion] consists of two parts: the first an easily definable, if not precisely specific feeling; and the second [of] certain specific arts, customs, beliefs, and conceptions associated with this feeling. The belief most inextricably connected with the specific feeling is a belief in spirits outside of man, conceived of as more powerful than man and as controlling all those elements in life upon which he lays most stress. (Paul Radin, *La Religion primitive*, 1941)

In short, religion can be looked upon as an extension of the people's social relationship beyond the confines of purely human society. And for completeness' sake, we would perhaps add the rider that this extension must be one in which the human beings involved see themselves in dependent positions vis-à-vis their non-human alters—a qualification necessary to exclude pets from the pantheon of gods. (Robert Horton)

I shall define "religion" as an institution consisting of culturally patterned interaction with culturally postulated super-human beings. (M. E. Spiro, *Anthropological Approach to the Study of Religion*, 1966)

Religion signifies the totality of relations that exist between man and the invisible world. (Benjamin Constant, *De la religion*, 1830)

Set of doctrines and practices that constitute the relationship of man with divine power. (Émile Littré, *Dictionnaire de la langue française*, 1872)

Specific set of beliefs, moral rules, and cultural practices through which man establishes his relations with the divinity. (*Grand Larousse de la langue française*, 1977)<sup>3</sup>

Religions diametrically opposed in their overt dogmas, are yet perfectly at one in the tacit conviction that the existence of the world with all it contains and all which surrounds it, is a mystery ever pressing for interpretation. (Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*, 1862)

Religion is the determination of human life by the sentiment of a link uniting the human spirit with the mysterious spirit whose domination over the world and over himself he recognizes and with which he is pleased to feel himself united. (Albert Réville, *Prolégomènes de l'histoire des religions*, 1881)

A set of scruples hindering the free exercise of our faculties. (Salomon Reinach, *Orpheus: Histoire générale des religions*, 1909)

In its objective aspect, active religion consists, then, of attitudes, practices, rites, ceremonies, institutions; in its subjective aspect, it consists of desires, emotions, and ideas, instigating and accompanying these objective manifestations.

The reason for the existence of religion is not the objective truth of its conceptions, but its biological value. This value is to be estimated by its success in procuring not only the results expected by the worshipper, but also others, some of which are of great significance. (James H. Leuba, *A Psychological Study of Religion, Its Origin, Function, and Future*, 1912)

Religion consists of three elements: (1) the natural recognition of a Power or Powers beyond our control; (2) the feeling of dependence upon this Power or Powers; (3) entering into relations with this Power or Powers. Uniting these elements into a single proposition, religion may be defined as the natural belief in a Power or Powers beyond our control, and upon whom we feel ourselves dependent; which belief and feeling of dependence prompt (1) to organisation, (2) to specific acts, and (3) to the regulation of conduct, with a view to establishing favourable relations between ourselves and the Power or Powers in question. (Morris Jastrow, *The Study of Religion*, 1901)

We shall say then that there is religion everywhere and only where there is, implicit perhaps but certainly present and displaying its natural effects of seriousness, submission, fear, the transcendent nature of the Being who is the object of prayer, rite and sacrifice. Religion is then defined by the group of beliefs, feelings, rules and rites, individual or collective, directed toward (or imposed by) a Power that man currently holds as sovereign, on which he as a result depends, with which he can enter (or better, has entered) into personal relations. More briefly put, religion is the conversation of man, individual and social, with his God. (Léonce de Grandmaison, *Christus: La Religion chrétienne*, 1916)

On one hand, religious facts make religion manifest, one and indivisible, and the goal of history would be to reveal, in the phases through which it must pass, its permanence and identity. On the other, religious facts are the whole of religion; they can maintain a relative independence and can be studied for their specifics; this is the case in the present history. We obviously prefer this second method. (Henri Hubert, "Introduction" to *Manuel d'histoire des religions* [French translation of *Lehrbuch der Religionsgeschichte*] by P. D. Chantepie de la Saussaye, 1904)

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them. (Émile Durkheim, *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*, 1912)

By religion I do not mean religious practices or specific beliefs, which so obviously vary from one social state to another. But true religion is surely

incapable of being born of any social connection; for there is in it a fundamental negation of all exterior givens and thereby a breaking away from the group as well as from nature. The religious soul seeks itself and finds itself beyond the social group, far from it and often against it. (Jules Lachelier, in *Oeuvres*, vol. 2, 1913)

Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today even as in former times deeply stir the hearts of men. (Vatican II, "Nostra Aetate," 1965)

We have determined the sphere of the phenomenon "religion": we have included . . . beliefs, actions, institutions, behavior, etc. that, despite their extreme variety, appear as the products of a particular type of creative effort by various human societies, by virtue of which these societies strive to acquire control over that which, in their concrete experience of reality, seems to escape all other means of control. (Angelo Brelich, "Prolégomènes à une histoire des religions," in *Encyclopédie de la Pléiade*, vol. 1: *Histoire des religions*, 1970)

One fact can be established immediately: there is no common Indo-European term for "religion." (Émile Benveniste, *Le Vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, 1969)

Religion (from Latin *religare* "tie") is the bond that ties man to the sacred and that prevents him from feeling lost in the midst of a world that he will never totally dominate. It is then to be hoped that the crisis of agnosticism through which Western civilization is currently passing will soon lead to an authentic religious revival that will deliver us from our solitude. (Jean Delumeau, in *Le Fait religieux*, 1993)

Religion is a mental faculty or disposition, which, independent of, nay in spite of, sense and reason, enables man to apprehend the Infinite under different names, and under varying disguises. Without that faculty, no religion, not even the lowest worship of idols and fetishes, would be possible; and if we will but listen attentively, we can hear in all religions a groaning of the spirit, a struggle to conceive the inconceivable, to utter the unutterable, a longing after the Infinite, a love of God. (Max Müller, *Introduction to the Science of Religion*, 1873)

[According to religion] all things are manifestations of a power that transcends our knowledge. (Herbert Spencer, *First Principles*, 1862)

The fundamental dogmas of religion are two in number: (1) the existence of God, a living, perfect, all-powerful God; (2) the relationship, equally living and concrete, of this God with man. (Émile Boutroux, *Science et religion*, 1908)

This metaphysics, which we might call popular metaphysics, is religion. However, religion consists of something more than the metaphysical ideas of the masses; it contains the capability of discerning the means and directions for arousing in a strong and lasting form the religious sentiment with this metaphysics for its foundation,—that is to say, religious cultus; and secondly, religion contains the deductions drawn from this metaphysics for the practical conduct of men; in other words, religious ethics. (Eduard von Hartmann, *The Religion of the Future*, 1900)

It is the realm where all enigmatic problems of the world are solved; where all contradictions of deep musing thoughts are unveiled and all pangs of feeling soothed. . . . The whole manifold of human relations, activities, joys, everything that man values and esteems, wherein he seeks his happiness, his glory and his pride—all find their final middle point in religion in the thought, consciousness, and feeling of God. (G. W. F. Hegel, *Philosophy of Religion*, 1840)

The result is that religion, as an integral part of human nature, is true in its essence, and that above the specific forms of the cult, necessarily marred by the same defects as the times and countries to which it belongs, there is Religion, the clear sign in man of a superior destiny. (Ernest Renan, *Études d'histoire des religions*, 1857)

Religions are groups of religious phenomena; Religion is the disposition of the human spirit that engenders these phenomena. (Eugène Goblet d'Alviella, *Introduction à l'histoire générale des religions*, 1887)

Religion . . . is a careful and scrupulous observation of . . . the "numinosum," that is . . . either a quality of a visible object or the influence of an invisible presence causing a peculiar alteration of consciousness. (C. G. Jung, *Psychologie und Religion*, 1958)

For religion is, as a matter of historical and psychological fact, always metaphysical. It is always a naïve or reasoned theory of reality. It is an attempt to explain human experience by relating it to invisible existence that belong, nevertheless, to the real world. (G. T. Ladd, *Journal of Philosophical, Psychological and Scientific Methods*, 1904)

In the sphere of religion the emotion consists in the consciousness that we are in the power of a Being whom we revere as the highest, and to whom we feel attracted and related; it consists in the adoration which impels us to dedicate ourselves entirely to the adored object, yet able to possess it and be in union with it. (Cornelius Tiele, *Science of Religion*, vol. 2, 1899)

In every religious belief, two things are necessarily included: an intellectual element, i.e., an item of knowledge constituting the object of the belief; an

affective state, i.e., a feeling which accompanies the former and expresses itself in acts. (Théodule Ribot, *La Psychologie des sentiments*, 1896)

In all religion the endeavour is made, with the help of the exalted spiritual power which man adores, to solve the contradiction in which man finds himself as part of the natural world, and as a spiritual personality which makes the claim to rule nature. (Albrecht Ritschl, *Die christliche Lehre von der Rechtfertigung und Versöhnung*, vol. 3, 1874)

In the broadest and most general terms possible one might say that the religious life consists of the belief that there is an unseen order and that our supreme good lies in harmoniously adjusting ourselves thereto. This belief and this adjustment are the religious attitude of the soul. (William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 1908)

Religion rests above all upon the need of man to realize an harmonious synthesis between his destiny and the opposing influences he meets in the world. (Albert Réville, *La Religion des peuples non-civilisés*, 1881)

By religion, then, I understand a propitiation or conciliation of powers superior to man which are believed to direct and control the course of nature and of human life. (Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, 1900)

[I]ts function is first to validate and fortify authority, consequently to make the strong and powerful more strong and powerful . . . but second, it goes very far in protecting and supporting the weak, notably women and children, old age, widows and orphans. . . . The influence of the first function is eminently political, while the second may be called ethical. (Ferdinand Tönnies, "The Origin and Function of Religion," 1906)

Religion is at the core of it, for religion is the connection of man's life with the absolute, and the moral law is an absolute law. (Felix Adler, *The Religion of Duty*, 1905)

All religion begins in cosmic emotion. (R. J. Campbell, *The New Theology*)

[Religion is] the sane and normal response of the human spirit to all that we know of cosmic law; that is, to the known phenomena of the universe, regarded as an intelligible whole. (F. W. H. Myers, *Human Personality*)

This universal postulate, the psychic origin of all religious thought, is the recognition, or, if you please, the assumption, that conscious volition is the ultimate source of all Force. It is the belief that behind the sensuous, phenomenal world, distinct from it, giving it form, existence, and activity, lies the ultimate, invisible, immeasurable power of Mind, of conscious will, of Intelligence, analogous in some way to our own; and—mark this essential

corollary,—that man is in communication with it. (Daniel G. Brinton, *Religions of Primitive Peoples*)

All ideas and feelings are religious that refer to an ideal existence. (Wilhelm Wundt, *Ethik*, 1886)

It is important to distinguish two meanings for the word "religion." The one, subjective, envisages religion as an attitude of the soul; it concerns above all the psychologist. The other, objective, sees religion as a reality exterior to individual conscience; it concerns in particular the historian.

In the objective sense, trying to encompass in the definition all the traits most commonly admitted as characteristics and to set aside the solution of contested problems, it seems that one could say: religion is a collection of beliefs and practices (or practical attitudes) concerning a reality, personal or impersonal, unique, multiple or collective, but in some fashion supreme, on which man in one way or another sees himself as dependent and with which he wishes to enter into a relationship. (Henry Pinard de la Boullaye, *L'Étude comparée des religions*, 1925)

### An Absence of Criteria

If the search for a rigorous, coherent definition of religion meets with powerful intellectual prejudices stemming from the Christian tradition and, in a certain way, from the banality of all those that have been proposed for more than a century, one could think that this failure resulted from several factors, foremost among which we see the absence of any systematic thought aimed at determining satisfactory analytical criteria capable of winning unanimity among scholars, simply (and even if this seems surprising) because we have witnessed no true effort aimed at defining what should be the status and function of these criteria. However, for such a sensitive question, it would have been, and still remains, indispensable to ask (beyond the illusory comfort offered by superficial comparisons limited to summary statements or misleading schematizations), what kinds of criteria should have been chosen for this purpose. But the determination of such criteria presupposes that we have defined an exact protocol for research, which then would have reviewed and carefully examined the different options available (conventional, heuristic, empirical, logicistic, deductive, and others), that would have distinguished different possible levels of intervention (factual, structural, functional, symbolic, formal, transcendental, etc.), that would have tried to excise or at least call attention to its most

operative presuppositions, and that finally would have specified where the epistemological conditions and limitations for their use are situated.

But instead of this, what have we seen and do we still observe today? In a general way, that people have casually chosen the Western Christian model as reference, reduced to what is considered its central framework in order to make of it a kind of ideal, intangible norm. What do we most often find in this doxa? Essentially, three things, of which one, the first, is already familiar: (1) the affirmation of the existence of God and of the living link that unites the mortal creature to him; (2) a Church or priestly organization; and lastly (3) sacraments and ceremonies, that is, according to the nomenclature proposed by Hubert and Mauss, beliefs, institutions, and practices.<sup>4</sup> We may note in passing that this tripartite assemblage is to be found almost everywhere (what class of social phenomena does not entail the concomitant action of beliefs, institutions, and practices?), and that as a result it is difficult to recognize any religious specificity here.

But the anthropological illusion began, as noted above, when complexes were distinguished within the continuum of other cultures that consisted *grosso modo* of the same elements but lacked precisely the essential element, that is, of existing as an original structure within these cultures. Admittedly, it is fairly easy to isolate, for example, in the mass of known ancient Indian facts (for example, in the Rig-Veda), a series of apparently comparable elements (gods, a priesthood, and sacrificial rites) and to consider them religious. Yet by so doing, we forget to stipulate that this complex is, in India, artificial, that it corresponds to nothing, since, from the Indian point of view, it refers to no distinct domain or notion.

Let us imagine the inverse situation and ask what we would think of a learned Hindu pandit who eruditely questioned whether the public ceremony celebrated in France on July 14 [or on July 4 in the United States] could be called a *yajña*—a matter of some significance for anyone trying to define the essence of *yajña* (usually translated as “sacrifice”), and who might suppose that it was to be found, albeit in less complete or, frankly, primitive form, among all peoples. Would we for all that admit the universality of the term and, with it, the profoundly yajñic character of humanity or human cultures? How would we feel about this Indian ambition to found a yajñic anthropology conceived in the image of, and as a rival to, our religious anthropology? Mightn’t we call it a caricature of a comparison, and indecent or even sacrilegious? But is what Western scholars have been doing for centuries with the term “religious”—most of them without the least embarrassment—any less ridiculous or pretentious?

Thus the *Aśvamedha* [horse sacrifice] and *Rājasuya* [coronation sacrifice], those great royal rituals of Vedic India, are classified among the most spectacular liturgical celebrations in Vedic religion.<sup>5</sup> But how are they more essentially religious than our ceremonies of July 14 and November 11 [Armistice Day], even when the latter are accompanied by a memorial service? For Vedic thought, one of the essential oppositions was between public rites and private rites (between rites that did or did not include the recitation by Brahmins of texts drawn from *Śruti*)<sup>6</sup> and not between religious and political rites, since the latter two general categories do not exist as such, even implicitly. In the eyes of the ancient Indians, the totality of elements and events of the world depends in any case on an impersonal and probably uncreated cosmic order (*rta* or *dharma*).<sup>7</sup> On what grounds could we assert that some of them were more religious than others? And what definition would then have to be given to this qualifier?

But, in a way that is to some degree itself dictated by the implicit reference to the Christian model, the Vedic example offered above (gods/priesthood/solemn rites) constitutes a case relatively favorable to the Western thesis. In reality, if, beside the gods, we do not forget to cite all the varieties of demons, of supernatural powers and beings, to call attention, with regard to the gods themselves, to their differing ontologies; if, further, we do not neglect to ascribe to the Brahmins the totality of their functions and attributions (poets, jurists, pedagogues, counselors, etc.) and, lastly, if we do not forget that the great, solemn Vedic rites (against which no doubt, innumerable magic practices competed) are more concerned with the permanence of the cosmos and of society than with the obligation to devote an exclusive personal cult to this or that god—then, the tripartite block (gods/priesthood/public rites) established in the Western pattern would be bound either to shatter or be substantially distorted.

Moreover, it is the very existence of this triform block and its relevance that must be questioned afresh here, because the Indian elements noted above, completely reestablished, would show that they are closely associated with others that we call “social,” “economic,” “juridical,” “political,” and so on, which, together with them, constitute an original culture founded on principles worth as much as our own. This does not, however, authorize us to dismember them, to extract them arbitrarily from their context and, finally, to redistribute them in our own mental space.

If we do not respect the structural uniqueness of each cultural continuum, all cultures in effect become comparable, but at the price precisely of that which made them unique. This tendency is accentuated even more



by the substantialist approaches or conceptions of religion, according to which it is understood that every religion ought to possess just such a series of elements (of the gods/priesthood/rites type). But here we face a superannuated conception, the distant heir of scholastic Aristotelianism, which disregards all those more modern conceptions that assert that the essential is situated elsewhere, not in these series of discrete elements, but in networks of relationships, in structural homologies, in information systems, or in symbolic representations and functions.

On the other hand, the arbitrary dismemberment that results from following the Christian norm leads to absurdities or disfigurements that are difficult to accept. Did the warriors of that far-off Vedic era who asked the god Indra for victory in combat and fabulous booty experience sensations similar to those described by Bernadette Soubirous and Thérèse de l'Enfant-Jésus at the end of the nineteenth century? Doesn't the very question seem absurd to us (which in no way prevents us, however, from considering all these facts as religious phenomena)? Nevertheless, if the pragmatic contexts are dissimilar,<sup>8</sup> if the supernatural interlocutors involved are very different from one another,<sup>9</sup> and if, finally, the sentiments felt and the emotions experienced by the human actors are strangely different, how can we say that despite everything, these situations are all equally religious? By reason of the origins that have given it such an original profile, the concept of religion is incapable of integrating or explaining such differences. Its capacity to subsume or encompass this diversity in pertinent fashion without disfiguring or impoverishing it is, in reality, very slight.

In order to create the possibility for it to be universally valid, the notion of religion has often been reduced, as we have seen, to a kind of simplified schema, a minimalist definition. Unfortunately, even in this abstract, quintessential form, we are no more successful in locating it in other human cultures. Thus, we have already called attention to the case of religions (with the understanding that it is we who call them so) that do not possess a significant god or gods, similarly to the Epicureanism of antiquity (Confucianism and Buddhism, for example), religions without true specific institutions (the majority), or show beliefs and practices that are as much political as religious, and so on. Are we, moreover, capable of determining exactly where in traditional or ancient societies the limits of the corresponding domains lie? But this, of course, involves our own conventions.

Would we be exaggerating in saying that the Christian model is without doubt the *least* exemplary and that, had it not been for the support lent

it by Western cultural and military imperialism, it is probably not the point of reference that modern anthropological thought ought to have chosen? But it is equally true that the latter is one of the purest products to emerge from this hegemonic stance.

Lastly, we should not fail to note that all these discussions or controversies have occurred only in the West (or in imitation of the West) with the help of its categories and its terminology alone—no account was ever taken of the others, all the other peoples. If the West has willingly spoken of the religions of the Chinese, Inuit, Papuans, Bororos, and so on, it has never permitted the latter to speak of them in their own tongues. Its few, rare lexical loans from exotic cultures (“mana,” “tabu,” “totem,” “voodoo,” etc.) never served for more than the description or explanation of religions or religious phenomena it considered primitive. No important concept was borrowed by the history of religions from any foreign cultural sphere at all—as if it were self-evident that the Western, Christian, Platonic terminology (“god,” “soul,” “faith,” “belief,” “rite,” “church,” “priest,” “providence,” etc.), specific as it is, held the power to describe everything and understand everything, starting with mankind.

In the same fashion, people speak of Greek or Roman religion, doubtless without noticing in the case of the latter that, as Georges Dumézil observes, “Latin has no word to designate religion. *Religio*, *caerimonia*, the latter of obscure origin, do not cover the semantic field; both are frequently used in the plural.”<sup>10</sup> But what were the content and structure of this pre-Christian religious field? Was it more or less religious (on what grounds and to what degree?) than the one that would succeed it? In order better to measure the ironic scope of this last question, let us try to imagine what would be entailed, solely from an intellectual and psychological point of view, in personal “conversion” to the Roman paganism of the age of Augustus. Must we admit that something, religion, could have preexisted its appearance in history, that it could have preceded the technical acceptance of the word, which is contemporary with the invention of the thing in question? Committing such an anachronism is possible only by tacitly admitting that the word actually refers to something atemporal that appears in all cultures (but a “something” that would assume its consummate form in our civilization alone). Otherwise, if we wish to use the word “religion” as a simple, conventional designation, consequently shorn of all scientific value, it would first be necessary to divest it explicitly of all specific characteristics intrinsically tied to its Western Christian meaning.

Can we imagine for an instant that Western thought could borrow "its" anthropological criteria intended to define religion from sources other than itself? This would be equivalent to recognizing its inability to conceive of the universal, while taking the additional risk of recognizing that these criteria are not suitable for Christianity or, worse, that they reduce it to the status of an aberrant or monstrous example. The risk that is run is in any case purely imaginary, for, it must be asked again, how could Western epistemology ever accept or even conceive of a universally valid terminology that did not originate within itself and that might have been arrived at, for example, on the basis of the terminology of Chinese, Quechua, or Dogon? Under the heading of "universal," invented by us and reserved for our sole use, we arrange facts and attitudes that are at best only abstractions constructed on the very limited basis of our own categories. This is why we so easily manage to convince ourselves that these abstractions are present among us in their most perfect form.

Thus the irreducible specificity of the religious and its universality, so often proclaimed, are perhaps nothing more than an empty core around which the West has wrapped its discourse on religion, on *its* religion. The imprecision and plasticity of the concepts that it has used for this purpose have doubtless assisted, as have the endless interpretations appearing in all the texts that, with the aid of enigmatic symbols or elaborate allegories, evoke the origin of the world or the status of humankind.

- And when, more recently, some European thinkers have tried to substitute for the concept of religion some notion judged by them more essential, they neither propose a more radical change of perspective nor renew the received conceptual apparatus. On the contrary, they are content to go searching in the heart of the traditional religious for something susceptible, according to them, of transcending it, such as faith (according to Karl Barth) or the notion of the sacred (according to several contemporary phenomenologists and theologians). Could we conceive of a vainer campaign than this tireless effort devoted to greater and greater absorption in the Western adjective "religious," in its own narcissistic categories? And to believe that one is escaping history when in fact one submits oneself entirely to it. As Ernesto de Martino so correctly wrote about the ahistorical theses of Mircea Eliade: "Eliade asserts that man is opposed to history, even when he strives to make it . . . but the truth is that man is in history even when he claims to escape it."

Far from opening itself to others or looking to free itself from its theological origins, Western thought directed at religion seems incapable of

pursuing other avenues or of looking for other issues than those that invariably bring it back to its lonely face-to-face encounter with itself.

### **Imprecise and Shifting Boundaries**

If there is one point on which history and anthropology can understand each other and agree, it must be this: every human group, in order to exist and to perpetuate itself as such, is obliged to develop and preserve a set of ideas, opinions, and diverse theses, themselves passed on and deepened by images, symbols, and myths concerning humankind, the world, and society. And this complex set, formed of a tangled multitude, is so indispensable, so intrinsically tied to the existence of the group itself that it finally appears (even if it is, from a metaphysical point of view, perfectly contingent) as its exclusive reference. A fortiori, this illusion is fundamental for its proponents, who have no other way to think themselves and the world than to draw from its own repertory of ideas and notions.

According to the times and cultural shifts, but especially according to the argumentative models that are adopted, the French and English languages, each in its way, have given different names to these complexes, names that extend from the humblest prescriptions associated with everyday life to the loftiest philosophical flights. Depending on the case, people speak of ideology, doctrine, cosmology, global vision or theory, or philosophy, when it is the *speculative* intellectual aspect that is privileged. On the other hand, in conformity with an old dichotomy that was already well known to Greek thought, when the practical aspect is in view, an equivalent is sought among the following terms: wisdom, morality, art or manner of living, discipline, ethics, path, road (*odos* in the New Testament, *tao* in Chinese, *mārga* in Sanskrit).

Our word "religion" (independently of its most specifically Christian characteristics) to some degree signifies all this at one and the same time. On these grounds, it would be more judicious, as has already been proposed, to include it in the vaster, more intelligible category of "cosmographic formations." This term, freed of all religious concern and all Western prejudice, has the advantage of calling attention to the fact that the formations in question possess a global coherence and are at the same time positioned with respect both to representation, that is, *weltanschauung*, and existence, individual or collective, in which the corresponding ideas are incarnated in the form of practices, institutions, ways of being, observances, rules for life, and corporeal expressions.

Since there is as yet no history of cosmographic formations, but only a very Western epistemology or history of religions, it is the limits (if there are undeniable limits) that the latter have attributed to religion(s) that must be identified. But here, too, and just as before when we addressed the questions of definitions and criteria, the inquiry soon meets with disappointment.

We note, to begin with, that limits, however arbitrary and fluid they may be, are indispensable to the exercise of all communication and thought. This is why, while admitting that we are incapable of defining in rigorous fashion what philosophy, religion, or literature might be, we regularly use these terms, which, in this limited general use, have proved to be irreplaceable. This then means that even if the words "philosophy," "religion," and "literature" have no corresponding definitions or stable referents (which would make them, at least on the scale of European culture, universals of a kind), it would still be true that here and now these terms offer numerous advantages, both practical and institutional (what would our schools do without them?), so true is it that, inserted between imprecise limits and the total absence of limits, the conventional nature and pragmatic function of language has made such general terms indispensable.

On the other hand, as we often observe in the human sciences (where supposedly "scientific" terminology is frequently drawn from the vocabulary used by each of us in everyday language) that the hegemony of ordinary language does not permit us to make an easy distinction between casual language and its more idealist uses, or to imagine that any critical function could be assigned to it: the common standard use of the word "religion" does not preclude us—quite the contrary—from giving it a significance that Cratylus would not have disowned (that is, religion, the absolute idea or essence supposed to be present in every religion); this is why this confused situation makes difficult (except at the cost of endless redefinitions and precautions) any hypothetical, experimental—that is, heuristic—use of this same word.

It is undeniable that several effects complicate this matter, none of which facilitates the task of scientific inquiry. John Locke deplored this at length in the third book of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and we can only follow his lead: (1) in order to think and to speak, according to the well-known principle of economy, we need general terms; (2) these general terms exist; (3) unfortunately, each of us constantly uses them ("religion," "philosophy," "literature"), both in everyday language

and in scientific terminology; (4) in addition, spheres of knowledge, fixed by definition and used in the schools, correspond to each of these three terms; and (5) their limits, although quite imprecise and in any case unstable (when they are examined over a lengthy period), apparently correspond to a certain way, conventional and thus arbitrary, of dissecting and organizing the world of intellectual productions.

In this regard, it is even allowed to be quite categorical, since these general terms, and with them their empirical domains and their limits, scarcely have any equivalents beyond the West. How could we consider literature or religion to be universals? To put it another way, these conventional limits (like most limits in this respect) have only a very approximate scientific value, a value that is admittedly most often quite problematic. They too have been produced—and neither immediately nor once and for all—not by a timeless objective mind, concerned uniquely with scientific rigor, but by a historical community preoccupied above all with a concern to preserve the order that dominates its own conception of knowledge about the world and, eventually, with the ambition to impose it on others.

This is why, once we venture beyond Christian cultural space, the use of the word "religion," and in particular the need to say what the term covers, leads to banalities (since there doubtless exists no element, in a premodern society, whose description does not include some supernatural intervention, irrational belief, or symbolic signification, so we quickly find the religious everywhere for lack of being able to define the proper sphere of religion) or we find absurdities. Let me briefly cite a few examples, which return to or advance the observations made above.

By which rigorous criteria—that is, criteria employable in scientific argument, or at least in a serious conversation—can we distinguish what in Plato's work belongs, respectively, to philosophy, theology, and religion? Would we have to agree in advance on what is meant by the word "philosophy"? Would we use it in its modern meaning or as used in antiquity (whether pre- or post-Platonic)? These do not have much to do with each other. But then in the name of what (which history or which concept?) do we group in the same class "philosophers" as different as Iamblichus and Wittengenstein, Pythagoras and Sartre? And we should not forget that "our" Plato is very different from the Plato of the first Christian thinkers who willingly appropriated him, only too happy with the windfall, by making him a disciple of Moses or the Hebrews, just as he is different from that of Proclus, their pagan contemporary. Let us recall that at the time of Proclus, the fifth century of our era, the study of Plato followed that of

mathematics and Aristotle and was preparatory to a consideration of the Chaldean Oracles and the Orphic writings. Could we today imagine a more surprising fate for the work of one of the greatest Western philosophers, thus reduced to serving as propaedeutic to an esoteric theology?

The Stoics pose a problem no less troublesome than Plato, for their teachings, as Émile Bréhier so clearly emphasized, seek precisely to transcend the various arts, sciences, religions, and social obligations in favor of a practical wisdom in conformity with the intuitive grasp of a cosmos, an intelligible and providential nature. And this Stoic ethics coexisted in Rome with civic cults, beliefs that had come from the Orient, mysteries, divinatory arts, an incalculable number of superstitious practices, and the ever-powerful magic. Where, under these conditions (and whatever our definition), are the beginning and end of the religion that we would ascribe to Rome at the beginning of our era? On the other hand, would we say that the official, public cult was more, or less, religious than the conscience of a Seneca? But can we exclude the latter from the moral history and thus, in more than one respect, from the religious history of the West?

Still looking to Rome, to what (in our idea of religion) would we refer the opposition established there between *sacra* and *auspicia*?<sup>11</sup> Is this dichotomy any less relevant (and if so on what grounds?) from the semiotic point of view than the opposition, more familiar to us, of the sacred and the profane, the basis on which so many fine minds have established what they consider to be the foundation of all religious attitudes? The structural organization of a vision of the world founded on the opposition *sacra/auspicia* is as valid as one based on the pair sacred/profane in the sense that both relate to and have value only in the worlds that are built on them. What is universal in this case is not the one rather than the other but the fact that both display the same bipolar organization.

These unstable and intellectually unsatisfactory divisions engender orphans and bastards as well. Does philosophy or religion claim the right to study hermetical writings or the corpus of esoteric works? Who, on an even more general level, is ready to admit that the "occult sciences" (magic, sorcery, astrology, divination, superstition, spiritualism, and the like) effectively represent—in addition to official religion and philosophy, those noble and worthy fields of knowledge—the current that has surely counted for most in the mental history of the West, pagan and Christian? In most cases, the human sciences almost always disregard them or grant them at best a marginal place—like that always ceded to them by official religion, and it is the latter that has drawn the limits and pronounced the

anathema that epistemology, much later, would adopt. But what is the value of a division of learning founded on such debatable grounds?

Similarly, in the name of which scientific criteria has it been decided that magic, divination, astrology, horoscopes, pharmacology, alchemy, sorcery, and secret initiatory teachings do not belong to the religious sphere? In point of fact, no scientific criterion can be invoked. For here again, epistemology has assumed official Christianity's execrations and prejudices. It and it alone has arbitrarily excluded magic, divination, alchemy, and the rest from the religious. It is enough to think of the importance that divination had in Rome; alchemy and the techniques of long life in China; Indian or Mesopotamian astrology; or the magical practices that can be observed (almost) everywhere to understand to which degree these "techniques" are absolutely not dismissible or marginal. In what way is a conception of the world ruled by the movement of the stars, the equilibrium of the five elements, the powers of jade, or the flight of birds less moral, less reassuring, less human, less fantastic than the conception of the world ruled by an ineffable God who expresses himself through winged angels, or seraphim?

But we soon see the threat and danger posed by taking these techniques into account: either Western epistemology, for whatever reason one chooses to imagine, includes them in its canonical definition of the religious, and it would then be our habitual designation that would prove incomplete or false (for we have seen that our own anthropological and sociological conceptions of mankind depend on it), or it excludes them from its definition, but then runs the risk of remaining captive to its contradictions and the Christian heritage. At bottom, it has only two ways in which to be mistaken, either through dogmatic unfaithfulness or through excessive faithfulness, but always in relation to this traditional notion.

The exterior limits recognized for religion are in fact so problematic to define that even here, in the West, the most eminent jurists and most expert theologians prove incapable of saying what distinguishes a religion from a cult, while at the same time appearing to insist on this distinction and at times being prompt to declare it undeniable. Is there no difference between them? Some ironic spirits will ask in the face of this hesitation and discomfort. In reality, this uneasiness is fairly readily explained. Latin *secta* did not have a pejorative coloring, and the word did not acquire one for a long time. Moreover, the first Christian thinkers used it to designate their own community: religions and sects have often been associated. What would American Protestantism be without sects? Contem-

porary sects draw their inspiration, to the point of simulation and even caricature, from the dogmas and ceremonies that can be observed in the various Christian denominations. What is held against the one greatly risks rebounding against the others (in what way is the Roman Catholic catechism taught to young children less divisive than the gospel of the Reverend Moon?). In fact, sects lack only one thing, which is not in itself a defect and is not situated on the level of definition or principle: participation in, or better still, representation of the dominant vision of a large community of individuals. With this they would cease ipso facto to be considered occult, minority groups.<sup>12</sup>

If we really move away from the West, the contradictions and aberrations become so ridiculous that they paralyze all serious reflection. Let's begin again by examining a few examples from a rather different angle.

On what grounds would we say, for example, that the teaching of the Indian Upanishads is religious, since (deliberately putting itself on a level of the gnostic type) it is uninterested in rites, is attached to no church, and is ignorant of any idea of a divine being? Is a metaphysics that leads to practical wisdom a religion? The same question, now asked of yoga, creates the same difficulty: practical philosophy or ascetic wisdom (rather like the Pythagoreans)? Individualist religion? It is, however, true that the Upanishads and yoga do not have exact homologues or equivalents in Western culture (which does not prevent us from thinking—again—that our Western concept itself might have an incontestable universal purpose), any more than the corresponding conceptions of mankind on which they are based.

We have already, with so many others, mentioned the case of the Buddha. Where shall we situate his teaching, which denies the existence of the soul (as individual, immortal principle) and the transcendence of the gods, but which stimulated the birth of various cults around the figure of its author? If these cults merit the term "religious," then so would many heroic cults, ancestor cults, or the one that Mao Tse-tung tried to impose, because associated with these cults were real conceptions of the world and mankind, incarnated in institutions and possessed, as well, of an ethics, a cosmogony, and an apocalypse. On what level are the cults of exceptional persons different—substantially different—from a superstitious believer's worship of the relics of a prestigious saint?

Would we agree with Pinard de la Boullaye that Buddhism is an "atheist philosophy"? But we immediately see that it would follow that a good part of Western philosophy would have to be qualified as theist, count-

ing, as it does, so many theologians and spiritualist metaphysicians in its ranks. And if we decided that the dividing line finally runs between "philosophies," theist or otherwise, that have engendered true collective belief, and "philosophies," theist or not, that have remained simple speculative works, we would have served our idea of religion in no better fashion, for this is a distinction that it accepts only on the condition that theism and atheism not figure on the same side of the dividing line. If it is true that our idea of religion does not admit that a religion can be individual, it is just as inadmissible that it could be atheist.

The best-known paradoxical example remains Confucianism, which the West stubbornly insists on classifying among the great religions of humanity, while in the opinion of the most authoritative experts this "religion" has no "religious basis":

The revelation to which it refers is not divine but human: it is the fruit of the remarkable wisdom of the saintly kings of antiquity, armed with quasi-scientific techniques of divination. . . . These texts then treat of something very different from religion: basically, they deal with all Chinese culture as the particular form of a certain approach to the harmony of society and its positive integration into the entire universe, on the basis of a conception of mankind and the world, of a construction of values and morality, of an organization of institutions and the economy to which China has attached its tradition.<sup>13</sup>

Beyond the contradiction, amusing to note (how can we effectively speak of religion in instances where precisely our most important criteria for the religious are lacking?), it is the "why" that is important. And the response to this question is to be found in the intellectual attitude adopted by the West and by Western anthropology vis-à-vis other civilizations. We prefer to attribute to them a religion (which will in any case be "exotic," "primitive," "uncontrolled," "inferior," "imperfect," "abnormal," or "ignorant," etc.) tacitly conceived on the Christian model, though lacking precisely its constituent characteristics (a unique, omniscient God, the soul, the Church, faith, and so on), rather than challenging the foundations of *our* anthropology. For among this anthropology's principles is precisely the religion that we have already shown to be intrinsically tied to the fate of Western thought and peoples. Quite clearly, this attitude has nothing scientific about it, since in its own way, it expresses the persistence of an attachment to a concept and way of apprehending the world and humanity in which the West recognizes itself, even as we recognize ourselves. Nor

can atheism, conceived in terms of negations of, or antitheses to, religion, make us any less Western.

### Arbitrary Typologies

It is in keeping with the spirit of a signal confusion (whose pernicious character has been noted more than once) that if the history of religions is completely unable to assign precise limits to religion or to the sphere called religious, whatever the extension given this concept, the limits of the history of religions are themselves even less certain, since added to the imprecise boundaries of its object are those of its own scholarly undertakings, these associated in turn with various auxiliary sciences. The philological analysis of a passage of the *Iliad* is counted here just as well as the archaeological study of Germanic bracteates, a philosophical meditation on the notion of the sacred, a sociological investigation into the use of hallucinogenic substances in a Californian sect. Yet each of these approaches at times possesses, along with of a specific philosophy, its own analytical instruments, its own intellectual tradition, and, doubtless, its own way of reconstructing reality.

The taxonomies (admittedly summary) that the history of religions has developed over more than a century in order to try to classify various religions betrays an inefficiency no less great and an ethnocentrism no less fervid. It is perhaps in them that we are best able to observe to what extent Western epistemology, incorrigible as it is, has always under cover of classification created a cult faithful to itself by raising its own prejudices to the rank of universal or absolute categories. But since these prejudices are shared by the majority of Westerners—both scholars and the general public—this illusion is probably destined for a long life.

These successive classification projects, from Hegel to Ricoeur, can be summarized in two great models, which themselves find expression in different ways. The first, binary in nature, is content to contrast and (by the very fact of its choice of descriptive terms) to hierarchize, two types of religion. The second model is evolutionist and allows of several types, although most often just three types, of religion.<sup>14</sup> Here are the best-known examples that correspond to the first model; in some cases, the initial proponent of the distinction can be identified:

- True religion (note the singular)/ false religions<sup>15</sup>
- Revealed religions/ natural religions

- Founded religions/ popular or traditional religions
- Monotheistic religions/ polytheistic religions
- Dogmatic religions/ mythological religions
- Universal religions/ Local and ethnic religions
- Civilized religions/ primitive religions
- Historical religions/ cosmic religions
- Prophetic religions/ mystical religions (R. C. Zaehner)
- Religions of the spirit/ religions of authority (Auguste Sabatier)
- Religions of proclamation/ Religions of manifestation (Paul Ricoeur)

Now the most celebrated formulations of the second taxonomic model:

- Natural religion, artificial religion, absolute religion (G. W. F. Hegel)
- Fetishist, polytheistic, monotheistic religions
- Naturist, animist, mythological, polytheistic, legalist, and monotheistic religions (Albert Réville)
- Religions of nature, or morality, or redemption (Hermann Siebeck)
- Natural religions (polyzoölatric, polydemonic, and polytheistic), ethnic religions (national or universal) (Cornelius Tiele)

Of the reflections that these two lists inspire, let us outline only the most obvious, which annul or condition all the rest. Whether they oppose two types or have several ascending stages succeeding one another, these classifications agree on one point, which when all is said and done is the only one that counts. The positive pole of the opposition or the supreme stage of the evolution is in each case occupied by a type of religion identified with Christianity. The combinatory model, whatever its terms, always shows the same winning side: the Christian West carries off the victor's laurels each time. In the first series, for example, the adjectives successively cited in the first of each pair (the left-hand column if you like) (true, revealed, universal, civilized, and so on) are intended explicitly or in a scarcely indirect way, to designate Christianity, and most often it alone. Whether they view religions from a typological point of view or from a chronological (that is, evolutionist) one, these classifications agree in placing the type of religion with which the West identifies itself at the summit or at the end, the present, of the history of humanity. Thus the

well-known opposition of polytheism to monotheism is resolved chronologically, because polytheism is followed and superseded by monotheism.

In the circumstances, it would be vain to confront these classifications with the facts of history or of ethnology with a view to trying to evaluate their relevance or correct their reductive, not to say naïve and jejune, character. None of them has the least scientific value.

From all this, let us draw at least three partial conclusions.

Despite its scientific trappings, the production of these concepts, taxonomies, and evolutionist schemes is not the prosaic result of ideological preoccupations. It even seems not to have any other objective. Its degree of correspondence with reality, whether in the effort to describe it or to understand it, is subordinate to an infinitely more gratifying end, which is to advance a division and organization of the world that, whatever the criterion selected or the point of view adopted, always leads to the same result: the religion of (or religion according to) the West invariably occupies the most advantageous and prestigious position.

Ethnocentrism can then be seen as much more potent and insidious than the rules of any scientific protocol. One might even ask whether epistemology has not served (as here under the cover of objective neutrality) to give it what appears to be the most undeniable support. This means as well that the relationship that links the West and epistemology is based on an ideological perception of the world that is not fundamentally different from that met in that other pair, the West and religion. In both cases, and by paths more complementary than contrary, the originality and superiority of our culture are clearly stated and proclaimed.

If people today have generally abandoned the project of classifying religions according to their greater or lesser degree of perfection,<sup>16</sup> it is not at all certain that the influence of this ethnocentric prejudice has disappeared from Western consciousness. Does not the diffuse, subterranean action of its mode of classification persist in our ways of thinking? Does it not subsist, partially unaltered, even into our learned terminology? Is it not with the aid of the latter that Western epistemology represents and thinks the "real" world of beliefs and fictions? Who would dare to claim that the pairs "primitive/civilized," "monotheism/polytheism," "revealed/popular," and "religion/magic" have left no trace in our mentality and in our schoolbooks?

### A Scattering of Monographs

The difficult anthropological objectives of the history of religions, already compromised by the history of its strictly European origins, must confront another difficulty, after all those that we have so far examined. The problem is not exclusive to it, since it is common to all branches of the human sciences, but in the history of religions, it takes on a more pronounced character than elsewhere, one linked to the ambition of its discourse and to the paradoxical nature of its object: analyzing religious phenomena or religions is an activity that almost always brings into the discussion or demonstration theses as general and unverifiable as those of which theology and metaphysics are so proud.

The most undeniable fact tied to the existence of these theses in the field of the human sciences concerns the rather radical division of intellectual work that they sustain and doubtless even stimulate.<sup>17</sup> Although this is not habitually recognized, and its weighty consequences are often not assessed with precision, it must be noted that all the work published in this field obeys a very rigorous principle of classification, which it is probably not too much to say is as old as the Western intellectual tradition (philosophical and theological in particular). As a consequence (here as in many other situations), modern scholarship has been content to perpetuate a model or style of intellectual work without really seeking to validate it or substitute another for it.

On the one hand, we have the thinkers, creators of these general theses, followed by their interpreters (students, disciples, and heirs, gathered or not into schools, networks, and circles), prominent among whom are those who have been in personal contact with the master (the magical sign that is interpreted as proof of orthodoxy and exegetical competence).<sup>18</sup> From the cosmographical prestige generated by their works comes the use of the quotation, the tutelary invocation, we might rather say, which signifies allegiance, adherence to a unique vision of the world. For, on its own, the quotation proves nothing. The immense Western corpus provides enough to guarantee any imaginable opinion or assertion.

On the other hand, there is the nameless proletariat, more and more numerous, of dissertation and article writers, little read, never commented on, and quickly forgotten beyond a narrow circle of specialists.<sup>19</sup>

This division of labor then has its exact counterpart on the level of intellectual production: on the one hand, we have the original works that play the recognized and authorized role of global cosmographies (the status



of religion, description of humanity, signification of culture, role of history, structure of society, or origin of art) and that are admired less for the accuracy and certainty of their information than for their globalizing and totalizing ambition. Improbable, indemonstrable, and, most of the time, unverifiable, the general theses that they defend put them, as Karl Popper saw, beyond the reach of all refutation.

Assertions such as "the unconscious is structured like a language" or "the sacred reveals itself in the world" are gratuitous propositions impossible to confirm. Conversely, to the extent that they allow us to characterize reality by conferring on it a certain signification or general value, they possess undeniable cosmographic effectiveness. However, by virtue of their laconism and their frequent obscurity, these assertions almost always call for extensive clarification. This is why such propositions bring in their wake so many exegeses, commentaries, and controversies, the majority of which are almost as vain as the theological quarrels that stirred the cloisters of medieval universities: Is the unconscious structured like a language or not? Is class struggle the motor of history or not? Is the id really in charge? Is the sacred the opposite of the profane? Is the structure binary?<sup>20</sup>

Asking whether the human mind is as impersonal as it is structural, or perhaps dominated by an insecure, terrifying, libidinous unconscious is in reality a false dilemma, since, presented in these terms, the question that it poses can be resolved only by an arbitrary choice, itself dictated by certain metaphysical preferences. In addition, the apparent rationality of the corresponding concepts ought rather to be compared to that of the autochthonous or indigenous concepts that are the mark of every culture. Their value and signification are never fully relevant except within the limits of their world. Values and significations never exist save as a function of these limits, and the converse is true as well, since they are mutually self-constructing.

Such works, and this is another of their remarkable characteristics, propose only exclusive, isolated, and incomparable visions of their worlds. Closed, deaf worlds. The world according to Marx and the world according to Jung are two incommensurable universes, forever alien to each other—two worlds that it is impossible to inhabit at the same time. And if a third work, at the cost of who knows what effort, advanced a synthesis of them, it could do so only by imagining a third world.<sup>21</sup> The unconscious of Lévi-Strauss and the unconscious of Freud are in the same way two radically distinct entities. This is why it would be vain to seek to correct these works on this point or other, or to improve on them without affecting their premises.

But it would be just as illusory to propose a modification of these premises. What sense is there in correcting a myth or a theological assertion?

Inevitably, facing these canonical mammoths distinguished by their personal style (another decisive criterion), there are a host of learned works written in a duller, impersonal, almost "gray" style—a color taken as proof of objectivity, without the contradiction really surprising anyone. The quality of the latter's information is often superior, and their findings are often more trustworthy, but these qualities unfortunately do little to counter an insurmountable defect: these studies cannot respond to any of the essential questions, such as those concerning the origin, meaning, or function of the complexes to which the objects and individual facts that they examine pertain. In addition, in order to fulfill the mandate that all serious scientific work today imposes, they must increasingly specialize and—a constant corollary—pulverize the study of reality and reality itself into domains and specialties that are more and more microscopic. The monograph contributes to the analysis of reality, to its decomposition, while the canonical text, the scripture, seeks on the contrary to encompass it in a single theory.

This fragmentation or atomization of the real is effected without there symmetrically being any comparable effort (actually it would have to be much greater) intended to counterbalance the influence of these learned studies by trying to utilize them as a basis on which to reconstruct and rethink intelligible syntheses. Today, we infinitely multiply the number of dissertations and monographs without seeking at the same time to conceive of models (heuristic or problematic) destined to permit the systematic (and not simply cumulative) recapitulation of their results. In return, and with disconcerting ease, the totalizing theories contained in the scriptural works are capable of assigning a place, a status, or a meaning to specific facts, while these, as numerous as they may be (and especially when they are) and however detailed their description (and especially when it is) are incapable of generating, through simple summation, such a global vision. This is why visions of the whole, general explanation, the unveiling of origins, or the attribution of an unchanging meaning finally fall to the master works alone, whose most evident and perhaps sole decisive contribution this is.

Because they are above all represented by such learned, atomized research, many disciplinary fields, in their global representations of these fields and their corresponding domains, maintain in parallel fashion veritable doxas, whose scientific relevance (nature and definition of concepts,



rigor of protocols preceding demonstration, heuristic value of the perspectives thereby opened, etc.) is very weak, if not practically zero, though one might find a certain philosophical or poetic charm in them and recognize that they are indispensable in a certain way, since they alone allow us to conduct the necessary operation of subsuming the particular under the general. These general doxas naturally have intimate ties to the great works mentioned above, since they frequently offer schematic versions of them, reduced to two or three central themes.

If we can easily cite several reasons at the origin of this separation, this division of intellectual labor, we also see very clearly the most disastrous consequences that follow from it. The requirements for rigor that contemporary epistemology imposes, the pitiless constraints of learning and modern methodologies, the dizzying growth in the number of publications along with the obligation to publish quickly and at length, the compartmentalization of scientific disciplines and—let us state it bluntly—the absence of intellectual originality imposed by the composition of an academic dissertation, all this prompts researchers to choose objects of study that are increasingly narrow and circumscribed. But this tendency, which we observe in all scientific branches, but especially in the human sciences, leads to disaster, for, pulverized into fragments isolated from one another, reality as an intelligible whole disappears (if, indeed, reality is intelligible). It is as if it escaped our grasp the more attentively we studied its multiple elements. We have an apparently insurmountable paradox: the more a scientific discipline breaks up into numerous subspecialties, the more the field itself and the reality supposed to correspond to it fade away as totalities.

Contemporary epistemology, then, finds itself confronted with two kinds of dissimilar writings, the fragment and the whole, whose results and conclusions, far from adding to each other or correcting each other, most often remain mutually indifferent. On the one hand, learned monographs that do not dare to address a general problem, a crucial question (the domain reserved for the “thinkers” on whom the epigones will tirelessly comment in their seminars); on the other, ambitious syntheses, cosmographical “isms” (Freudianism, Marxism, phenomenology, and so on) that do not hesitate to take a stand in the most irresolvable debates, but to which the facts assembled in monographs correspond in only partial and imperfect fashion. The heuristic concepts common to these two kinds of works are rare indeed, and the rifts that separate them are ever deeper.

The history of religions cannot escape this dismal division. The majority of the learned works that it stimulates divide up fairly clearly into

these two categories—and without it being necessary ever to raise insoluble metaphysical problems.

On the one side, we have a few great, general theories of religion, probably fewer than a dozen, that have over time become exemplary and emblematic.<sup>22</sup> Their general premises, which can only be void of scientific value, transcend the results of learned monographs by offering intelligible global visions, since this intelligibility concerns, if need be, the overall significance of history just as much as it concerns the vital destiny of humankind. These few global theses (relating to the origin of religions, their nature, and their status) draw their premises from conceptions that are in the final instance metaphysical in nature. According to the individual case, they address the innermost part of human beings, social life, or the unreal world of mystical inventions. The manuals and treatises reproduce and unflaggingly comment on these theses, while their authors have accepted the notion of religion as self-evident, *a priori* and without the least critical examination.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, they have never attempted to give the history of religions trustworthy methods, usable within the framework of a debate or a scientific program.

On the other hand, we have impressive numbers of monographs, characterized by fragmentation, dispersion, and erudition. All seem determined to isolate fields or objects for study that are more and more cramped and heterogeneous but at the same time challenge the indexing and storage capacities of modern databases. For their part, the separation of disciplines (philological, historical, archaeological, sociological, etc.) and the rival methods that inspire them (descriptive, interpretive, structural, hermeneutical, etc.) do little to make these monographs any less disparate. It is enough to go over the tables of contents of a few specialist journals in the history of religions to measure the degree to which modern epistemology, in its most learned productions, has become atomized. The heterogeneity, quantity, and dissemination of articles and collected materials are such that they prevent any effort to construct a global synthesis of any kind. Specialized analysis, decomposition, and fragmentation have reached such a stage, have developed techniques so radical, that rethinking totalities on the basis of their results has now become illusory.

No human mind would be capable of absorbing “in real time” the sum of the annual publications produced by historians of religion (let alone all those written over the past fifty years!), much less make a synthesis of them. On the other hand, each of us can gain an idea of the origin and status of religion by reading or rereading Lucretius, Hobbes, Spinoza, Feuerbach,

Freud, or Marx. Another major point: it is obvious that no person, even an honored academic, can do without such a global vision. Is it not such a vision that so often dictates the choice and the manner of interpreting this or that fragment, when the latter is not the object of a strict and considered description?

If it is clear that such a global vision of the world or of religion has no great scientific merit, conversely we must immediately recognize that it is practically impossible to think outside such a synoptical representation, or *übersichtliche Darstellung* (Wittgenstein). These main alternatives (learned blindness on the one hand and metaphysical vision on the other) doubtless represent the major paradoxes confronting the perspicacity of modern epistemologists. Academic studies, doctoral dissertations in particular, whether or not they try to disregard these debates and avoid this fatal choice, have only very limited room to maneuver, perhaps none at all, for are they not finally condemned to show a preference for one of the two following attitudes?

*Either* they can detach a fragment of the real as minuscule as possible and isolate it arbitrarily from the uncertain whole where it belongs, consequently refusing the (too visible) assistance of any *übersichtliche Darstellung* but nonetheless helping to break up the universe of human experience into innumerable discrete fragments. But by thus fragmenting the world, we render it unthinkable.

*Or*, there too, they can accept the traditional division of our spheres of learning into "academic disciplines" (literature, philosophy, history), to which those classes of objects or phenomena supposed to possess a particular quality (religious, political, literary, sociological, etc.) have been allotted, and then, within these ideal domains, adopt global, exclusive explanatory positions (historicism, Freudianism, Marxism, structuralism, nominalism, and so on). This amounts in effect to projecting onto our scholarship an essentially Platonic conception of knowledge: to objects and their parallel explanations correspond the ideas and schemas, ontologically pure, now organized into a kind of ideal, timeless world.

But human beings, it is true, cannot easily accommodate themselves to such a sharply divided choice. And so we observe among the most lucid (or the least satisfied) of them that the division of labor sketched above can be found in their own work: scholarly articles are reserved for certain journals or publications, while more general reflections find a place in others.

Unfortunately, this defensive choice, which makes the existence of the difficulty official instead of resolving it, condemns the study of reli-

gions to remain captive to its own contradictions. Such a choice amounts in fact to admitting that the explanation of religious facts could lie elsewhere than in the facts themselves or, if you like, that the explanation of these facts makes necessary recourse to global conceptions drawn from speculative fields that never consider them other than with lofty condescension. Clearly, this situation turns into a windfall for all those who admit or claim, at the price of a tautology that does not frighten them, that the explanation of religious facts cannot, in essence, be other than religious, that is, supernatural. The difficulty or epistemological paradox is then at once transformed into metaphysical controversy. Now of all debates, metaphysical debates are the most conventional, and the arguments and positions taken are the most traditional. Immutability and absence of innovation are the hallmarks. (What unexplored arguments could we add to the providentialist theses the West has used for more than two thousand five hundred years?)

These obstacles are not exclusive to the history of religions, and we easily find them in numerous other sectors of modern anthropological thought, especially when such thought faces up to ultimate questions in which its own scientific legitimacy is at stake. But we know that the history of religions is not a discipline quite like the others. Some of the debates troubling this sensitive field up the ideological stakes of ordinary epistemological controversies. Thus, materialist theses relative to the origin of religions stimulate passionate discussion that goes beyond the history of religions, a discussion the field has only recently inherited, and one that originated in the era of Democritus, Protagoras, and Critias, when the Greeks started raising questions about the origin of the gods. In fact, whether we regret it or not, every thesis of a certain scope, proposed (or redeveloped) within the framework of the history of religions finds its echo in the Western religious consciousness, since the sphere of religious ideas and that of ideas on religion have never ceased to communicate with and influence one another. This confusion is facilitated by the fact that the two employ the same notions, the same vocabulary, and share several common conceptions (on how to think of humanity, the world, society, etc.). Comment on religion in the West, even when it is surrounded by all the necessary precautions dictated by modern epistemology, can doubtless never be made without some sensibilities immediately feeling that they are affected.

This situation, associated with a division of intellectual labor between works offering synthetic explanations and monographs focused on atomized, circumscribed objects, is further clouded and complicated (always at

the expense of our understanding), by the presence of a substantial supplementary obstacle, connected with the existence of "inexplicable disproportions" between "material causes" and "cultural effects."<sup>24</sup> Although the theoretical difficulties that thereby arise are pertinent to all fields of the human sciences, these disproportions stand out starkly in the case of the history of religions by virtue of the fact that in our eyes, its preferred object often represents the quintessence of the phenomenon of culture. Here we cannot address every aspect of this problem, and I shall only describe their general tenor.

However much care they take in fixing their object by isolating and concatenating the causal relations, the scholarly monographs that have here been contrasted with metahistorical works cannot, any more than the latter, avoid noting that there exist "unexplained disproportions" between the "material causes" and the "cultural effects," and that the cultural effects do not prolong and do not reflect the material causes. A contemporary anthropologist, Mondher Kilani, rightly speaks in this respect of "symbolic transubstantiation."<sup>25</sup>

Everything in human social life, down to the most elementary needs, is symbolic in nature, that is, is subject to metamorphoses that transform and transfigure reality into signs. The food swallowed by human beings is never a simple material element in a physico-chemical (or economic) process intended to keep them alive; at the very same time, it is invested with very diverse imaginary and affective values. It is present in a great number of our myths and works of art; it gives rise to complicated rituals; it serves family and social cohesion by way of meals in common under various circumstances, solemn or private; it possesses any number of metaphorical equivalences; it partially calms our anguish, just as it can also haunt our dreams. And all this does not prevent it from giving us pleasure and keeping us in good health.

The complex whole, rich with innumerable nuances, that is made up of all these associations (with the body, life, society, the imaginary, myth, etc.) allows food, now become a symbolic object, to be connected in turn with other animated, interlaced expressive networks. Certainly, the image of a jumble, of an indescribable mix-up, remains the most accurate to evoke the high degree of complexity achieved by these symbolic networks. But as if to balance it off, they have a resistant texture, one that is nevertheless flexible, as well as a stupefying capacity to generate new synapses. This also explains why the formalization of cognitive and symbolic processes constitutes a formidable logical problem. How are we to describe with algorithms

or mathematical equations an enormous plate of spaghetti that never sits still, that keeps multiplying and metamorphosing?

These significations and symbolic forms are dynamic and possess a considerable degree of morphological autonomy. Unfortunately, the innumerable interactions that are produced among all the domains of human experience (social, psychological, sexual, individual, historical, economic, etc.) and all the registers of symbolic life (objects, practices, gestures, dreams, fictions, discourse, signs, institutions, and so on) also exceed the capacity of our current crude analytical models. This is why epistemology, when it interests itself in the issue, is forced once again to have recourse to vast global explanations intended to simplify and impose order on this complex reality. In particular, these are the explanations provided by the irreplaceable "isms" mentioned above, those grand cosmographical works whose objective it is to tell of the world, history, and humanity, while giving preference (most of the time) to their own version of the symbolic function.

This is why Marxism, Freudianism, structuralism, and so forth are not fundamentally distinguishable, when we consider only their cosmographic aims, from Orphism or Platonism. Like them, they claim to set out a homogeneous conception and to offer a uniform explanation of reality. From the perspective of cosmographic formations, a certain number of distinctions that we Westerners judge to be critical (such as those among the political, philosophical, religious, and even scientific domains) lose a portion of their legitimacy. Their relevance is perhaps neither as absolute nor as universal as we like to think.

In the face of these huge, mobile, and infinitely complex symbolic complexes, the explanations offered by the history of religions often turn out to be feeble. Either they invoke supernatural processes and a mysterious Beyond that is the source and receptacle of absolute signification, or they borrow their interpretations from some other discipline—depth psychology, sociology, or even biology.<sup>26</sup> Eliade is a quite remarkable example in this respect, especially if we recall that he incarnated one of the principal and most powerful currents of thought in the modern history of religions, and that as such he was received and honored by the most prestigious universities.

Today, every general theory of the symbolic function seen in its totality entails, in the first instance, that it address the symbols and define the status, that is, the conditions (social, historical, psychological, ideological, etc.) of their production, their principal semiotic characteristics, their

formal and/or logical-semantic properties, possible modes of reading or interpreting them, and, lastly, their multiform role in the lives of individuals and groups.<sup>27</sup>

To these requirements, despite the fact that he put the symbol at the center of his conception of the religious universe, Eliade gave only vague and dogmatic responses, inspired by a summary metaphysics, which, for this reason alone, cannot be subjected to a detailed evaluation or rigorous examination. The responses are rather characterized by a kind of lyrical paraphrase punctuated with mysterious expressions, almost incantatory and clearly endowed with only a weak conceptual value, such as the "deep sources of life," "the act of coming into being," "the sign of the beyond," "primordial religious signification," "mystery of the totality," "superior mode of being," "sacred presence," "mystical communication with nature," and so on.

Moreover, although he was their contemporary, Eliade never discussed modern linguistic, philosophical, or semiotic conceptions at all.<sup>28</sup> Reading him leaves one ignorant of even the names of the authors who have made the most valuable contributions to the comprehension, analysis, and history of theories of the symbol.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Eliade neglected to face up to the formidable theoretical difficulties that various examples of hermeneutic research have revealed (from Schleiermacher to Dilthey, Gadamer, Husserl, Wittgenstein, and Ricoeur) in an effort to account for the production and interpretation of meaning. This is to be regretted, for it is evident today that the principal issue for epistemology does not consist in naively proposing a supplementary interpretation (a fortiori an interpretation based on premises of a mystical type), since it will never be more than one paraphrase among all the others. At issue, rather, is our understanding of the subtle mechanisms that govern the complex processes (poietic, rhetorical, argumentative, pragmatic, and so on) that unfold within the various semantic domains created by human cultures.

These examples are offered to remind us that Eliade's work, even though it may have seduced a good number of academics, keeps a prudent distance from any serious or challenging epistemological debate. Eliade's assertions are rather drawn from the category of poetical, mystical pronouncements, of which one may say, in the best of cases, that they contribute to creating a strange distortion of the world and to disguising reality, but certainly not to understanding them better. In addition, they offer nothing very original. Their implicit model, which consists of opposing the gnosis reserved for the elect few to the trivial knowledge of the vulgar, is situated

in the distant exegetical and allegorizing tradition of the Neoplatonists.<sup>30</sup> This is also, from the *Corpus Hermeticum* to the illuminated work of René Guénon, one of the clichés of the Western esoteric tradition.

### Arbitrary, Narcissistic Objectivization

The various positions adopted by historians of religions and the debates that divide them reproduce, faithfully enough to be immediately recognizable, those found elsewhere in the philosophical tradition and more generally the intellectual tradition of the West—in particular the cardinal opposition that is illustrated at the beginning of this section in the quotations taken from Plotinus and Lucretius respectively, which might for brevity's sake be called "the great Western paradigm." It is as if the history of religions had condensed within itself the master plan for the West's major intellectual positions and controversies and had not been capable of inventing other substantial debates than those that had preceded it (at times in the far distant past) in the long history of Western thought.

The close, almost incestuous relationship, that unites religion and the West, to the point of making them inseparable, can be summarily explained by invoking the following set of facts:

Religion, that is, the thing that is ours because our history invented it and transmitted it to us, is part of our dominant cosmographic formation. It even represents the core or central axis of it, since it is in relation to religion, to its definitions of the world, humanity, and history that most of the other categories of knowledge are defined. This is why it seems to us as indispensable as it is irreplaceable. None of our books of history, sociology, literature, music, law, philosophy, psychology, or the like can avoid including one or more chapters devoted to religion or to the influences of religion. And when their authors write them, there are few who ask themselves why, or seek to justify this inclusion. For them, it concerns a type of evidence that the philosophers called "apodictic," which does not have to be discussed. On the contrary, it would be prudent to imagine books conceived according to other cosmographical structures and thus ignorant of what we call and classify under the word "religion." The major error that we spontaneously commit (or the transcendental illusion into which we fall) consists in seeing in it the key to all culture, while it in fact is only one very specific way of seeing things, intrinsically tied to the history of the Western vision of things (a vision for the moment considered fairly homogeneous, at least in its special features).

The history of religions has probably committed a capital blunder in unquestioningly adopting a word inherited from tradition, for in so doing it has sided with and become dependent on everything (the concepts, debates, theses, or general conceptions) that supports it and intellectually justifies its acceptance. The first historians of religions in the mid nineteenth century should, at the outset, have reflected a bit more or a bit more effectively, as the true anthropologists or historians that they should have been, so as to organize the nascent discipline around a more neutral concept (in a word, one less European), which might have been capable of subsuming the whole of what are here called cosmographic formations, in order to give the discipline truly universal status. But they were far too European, far too persuaded of their exemplary superiority even to conceive that they might adopt such an iconoclastic attitude. On the contrary, they hastened to generalize, to universalize this indigenous notion (in accord with a movement that followed the last great colonial surge of the Christian West), even if it meant being faced, in their capacity as "scientists," with insoluble paradoxes. I have called attention to some of these above in examining the difficulties encountered in efforts aimed at establishing definitions, criteria, and assignable limits to religious phenomena. But we must assume that an ideological constraint weighs heavier and more decisively than scientific ambitions, especially when the intellectual destiny of a culture is unknowingly at stake. Also at work is the fact that the implied contradiction is easier to bear—whatever the epistemological cost—than the renunciation of intellectual sovereignty, the certainty of being the sole possessor of the truth.

What the West and the history of religions in its wake have objectified under the name "religion" is then something quite unique, which could be appropriate only to itself and to its own history. And with this notion, it was those very intellectual categories of the West that were objectified, raised to the dignity of points of reference or unassailable norms. This is why we can affirm that such an objectification is arbitrary, since it is content to generalize, to extend to all humanity the utility of a concept that is autochthonous as well as narcissistic—to the extent that it recognizes and integrates only its own notions and ways of thinking. This explains why the history of religions (not the only "science" to be the victim of this incapacity) finds itself totally powerless when it attempts to conceive of the anthropologies of other cultures (even when these are called religious). For it, there exist only, for example, the person, body, soul, and human aspirations, in conformity with the model progressively elaborated in the West.

And we should not forget that these notions are included in only a rather limited number of combinations, configurations for debate that are themselves associated with a few major philosophical positions (Platonic, Christian, Kantian, materialist, and so on).

In all these respects, we would not be exaggerating to say that the history of religions is a Western academic discipline or epistemology, in that its methods, concepts, ways of posing questions and formulating problems have meaning only when referred to the West's own history. Must we add as well that the objects and objectivity that such a science recognizes are never different from those that this history fashioned and recognized? Perhaps all culture is no more than this play of mirrors and reflections.

The process that concluded in the formation of this Western epistemology, which somehow transformed its objectives into evidence, rests in the final analysis on three conjoined pillars: (1) The most immediate and least debatable experience reveals the presence of a notion that is both central and diffuse in our culture: religion. This is an undeniable historical fact. (2) Incapable of resigning ourselves to considering that we, our civilization, and this very notion might be unique and contingent, we prefer to think that we are dealing with the privileged expression of something that in fact concerns all mankind indiscriminately, whatever the time and place.<sup>31</sup> This deduction is in turn explained by a fact that is inherent to Western thought, for it alone (be it Stoic, Christian, or heir to the principles of 1789) invented the idea of generic Man (to retain the vocabulary of the times), even if in reality he is not and never was conceived of in other than the very idealized image of his Western model. (3) Whether this common notion is considered an anthropological invariable, a transcendental category (or innate tendency of the human mind), or transcendent essence, it claims an exclusive original cause. This is the most visible result of a positivist epistemology (but one doubtless influenced by the creationist model of Genesis) for which the causal relationship precedes and determines all the others.

As a consequence, the scientific status of the idea of religion is illusory, since it in fact results from a complex process that mixes together trivial observations, deductions founded on our own intellectual prejudices, and explicatory schemas borrowed from the most narrowly positivist epistemologies.<sup>32</sup> In addition and at the same time (the concomitance of the phenomena is of capital importance here), the information drawn from philology, history, and ethnography has been systematically retranslated into the religious categories of the Christian West. This substantial, ceaseless work of acculturation (and falsification!) has had as result the erasure of all

strangeness, every alterity. Siberian shamanism, Roman civic rites, voodoo ceremonies, prehistoric rock carvings, and many other phenomena have been indistinguishably "formatted" to the dimensions and calibration of our mental frameworks. We could naturally amuse ourselves by imagining the reverse process: to ask, for example, what the Christian theology of the Trinity would look like if translated into the Algonquin, Quechua, or Buryat languages. To think of the symbols of the papacy or the functions of the exorcist on the sole basis of voodoo categories would be a no less instructive or invigorating exercise.

In all this has intervened another factor whose major influence must not be underestimated. Cultures put in contact with, or under the direct influence of, the West, sometimes for centuries, have been constrained to invent a religion for themselves by taking a leaf from the West's book. This perverse effect, the "religion effect," if we absolutely have to give it a name, proceeds from the acculturation unceasingly exercised by our hegemonic and conquering civilization, since the age of the great discoveries, on a larger and larger number of foreign cultures, which it condemned to adopt terminologies, frameworks of thought, and distinctions borrowed from (or imposed by) the West.

To speak with a Hindu in English of "his" religion does nothing to prove the universality of the phenomenon of religion; it shows only that a concept is capable of traveling, that this idea has a certain flexibility, that the elements of a specific cultural reality can always be redistributed in a more comprehensive general framework (especially when such a framing structure does not exist in situ), and that unforeseen (or even improbable) syncretisms will see the light of day if they are relevant to certain dominant interests. In addition, the idea of religion did not emigrate on its own. Along with it, British India adopted many other ideas that concerned important aspects of its own existence (political institutions, union organizations, economic regulations, juridical statutes, etc.), so that in the end, India constructed a good part of "its" contemporary reality based on the Western model. How could religion not have been included in this process?

In Japan, demand for a national religion that would rival those of the West led the political establishment to reinvent Shintoism, taking its cue from its prestigious Western rivals: "Shortly after the Meiji restoration (*meiji ishin*) of 1868, when the new government was exploring the notion of a religious system that would be proof of a civilized, modern nation, it turned towards Shinto which, for the first time in its history, then rose to the rank of an independent religion."<sup>33</sup>

The invention of a religion, that is, of an organized set of beliefs, practices, and institutions, conforming in broad outline to what the West has conceived by this term, does not represent an extravagant or unattainable goal. This is all the more so when this complex astutely flatters the chauvinistic spirit of a nation or the reflex toward identity-building of a small community that finds itself in competition or conflict, real or imagined, with what this West, so scorned and simultaneously so envied, personifies in its eyes.

That this Western model, so long part of our familiar sphere, has somehow reached the point of generating its own neurotic, stereotyped forms is further proven by the fact that this adventure now attracts so many unbalanced minds and personalities afflicted with megalomania.<sup>34</sup> Nothing in fact combines a greater collection of worn-out clichés than the modern religious sects that compete with stupefying zeal among themselves in the field of bad taste and kitsch. It is no less true that the Western religious imagination has long been living off its assets and has ceased to invent anything new. As for knowing why one of these efforts should succeed while another fails, this is one of the ritual questions that the West has been asking itself for some two thousand years. Saint Augustine had already long reflected on this topic in the early fourth century with his interrogation of the fate of the Roman empire.

How, at a time when the all-powerful representatives of the West were dominating and subjugating them, could the peoples of Africa and Asia have come up with intellectual weapons enabling them to meet the West on its own ground? This acculturation retrospectively gives the West the feeling of having been right, of possessing the truth, or at least the key to reading it, and in any case of itself being the norm with reference to which other cultures ought to be evaluated. The West not only conceived of the idea of religion, it has constrained other cultures to speak of their own religions by inventing them for them. Religion is not only the central concept of Western civilization, it is the West itself in the process of thinking the world dominated by it, by its categories of thought.<sup>35</sup>

The history of religions played a role in this process. For did it not, where and as best it could, stand epistemological security for the vast colonial enterprise that finally spread over the entire world? Did it not contribute to hardening and fixing all sorts of original cultural configurations by transforming them, at their own expense, into religions? (As if its own categories had had a retroactive effect on the situation of things by subjecting those things to the definition that was a priori ascribed to them.) Did it not,

in other words, privilege Western narcissism by allowing it to find echoes or reflections of itself everywhere? For the West's procedure has always remained the same: find its own image elsewhere, in order not to have to renounce what it thinks are universal categories (which are precisely those on which its own structure rests), but always in another, less perfect form, in order not to be obliged to renounce its hegemonist objectives.

When historians of religion proposed various definitions for religion, when others recognized that they were not capable of defining it, and when still others apparently chose to attack the dominant religion's central reference point, the idea of God, few indeed were those who questioned the very notion of religion itself. Atheist or materialist theses denied the existence of God, but not that of religion. Are not these contrary theses the very ones that cling most fervently to the notion of religion? This proves, if only in paradoxical fashion, the attachment of European scholars to the idea, for it is precisely those who recognize that they are incapable of defining religion, or of saying with any precision in what it consists, who nonetheless continue to maintain the fiction of its existence. And on this pseudo-object are built up competing theses that in turn become the subjects of interminable theological debates.

Why does the word "religion," despite everything, despite all the difficulties that its use raises, continue to be employed so frequently by historians and professional anthropologists? Created by the West, enshrined in Western epistemology, and central to its identity, the concept of religion eventually came to be the core of the Western worldview. Since this notion is intrinsically linked to all the philosophies, complementary or competing, that have been invented in the West, the West cannot, at the risk of its own disintegration, do without it, because these global conceptions would then decompose into scattered or juxtaposed fragments. The same disaster would strike our language, to the extent that we admit that it is not only an assemblage of words but also an organized memory containing semantic networks that are nothing less than cosmographic elements. We cannot use the words "humanity," "nature," "history," and "providence" without the association of ideas bringing up cosmographical schemas deeply buried in our ways of thinking.

Would not abandoning the idea of religion be the equivalent for Western thought of abdicating part of its intellectual hegemony over the world? A world bereft of this idea would no longer be a world that was thinkable and thus controllable by Western categories alone. This is why the West prefers to continue to espouse bad epistemology rather than abandon the

description of reality according to its own canons, that is, in a fashion that in the last analysis simply does not work: Western epistemology creates or constructs the reality that it studies, since it does so only with the aid of traditional, conventional notions that it has itself in great part constructed.

Through the idea of religion, the West continuously speaks of itself to itself, even when it speaks of others. For when it does so, it is implicitly in relation to the perfected model that it thinks itself to be. This is narcissistic objectification.