

Patterns in Comparative Religion



by

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AUTHOR'S FOREWORD

MODERN science has restored a principle which was seriously endangered by some of the confusions of the nineteenth century: "It is the scale that makes the phenomenon." Henri Poincaré queried with some irony whether "a naturalist who had studied elephants only under the microscope would think he knew enough about those animals?" The microscope shows the structure and mechanism of the cells, a structure and mechanism which are the same in all multicellular organisms. But is that all there is to know? At the microscopic level one cannot be certain. At the level of human eyesight, which does at least recognize the elephant as a phenomenon of zoology, all uncertainty departs. In the same way, a religious phenomenon will only be recognized as such if it is grasped at its own level, that is to say, if it is studied as something religious. To try to grasp the essence of such a phenomenon by means of physiology, psychology, sociology, economics, linguistics, art or any other study is false; it misses the one unique and irreducible element in it—the element of the sacred. Obviously there are no *purely* religious phenomena; no phenomenon can be solely and exclusively religious. Because religion is human it must for that very reason be something social, something linguistic, something economic—you cannot think of man apart from language and society. But it would be hopeless to try and explain religion in terms of any one of those basic functions which are really no more than another way of saying what man is. It would be as futile as thinking you could explain *Madame Bovary* by a list of social, economic and political facts; however true, they do not affect it as a work of literature.

I do not mean to deny the usefulness of approaching the religious phenomenon from various different angles; but it must be looked at first of all in itself, in that which belongs to it alone and can be explained in no other terms. It is no easy task. It is a matter, if not of giving an exact definition of the religious phenomenon, at least of seeing its limits and setting it in its true relation to the other things of the mind. And, as

Roger Caillois remarks at the beginning of his brilliant short book, *L'Homme et le sacré*: "At bottom, the only helpful thing one can say of the sacred in general is contained in the very definition of the term: that it is the opposite of profane. As soon as one attempts to give a clear statement of the nature, the *modality* of that opposition, one strikes difficulty. No formula, however elementary, will cover the labyrinthine complexity of the facts." Now, in my researches, what have primarily interested me are these facts, this labyrinthine complexity of elements which will yield to no formula or definition whatever. Taboo, ritual, symbol, myth, demon, god—these are some of them; but it would be an outrageous simplification to make such a list tell the whole story. What we have really got to deal with is a diverse and indeed chaotic mass of actions, beliefs and systems which go together to make up what one may call the religious phenomenon.

This book deals with a twofold problem: first, what *is* religion and, secondly, how far can one talk of the history of religion? As I doubt the value of beginning with a definition of the religious phenomenon, I am simply going to examine various "hierophanies"—taking that term in its widest sense as anything which manifests the sacred. We shall, therefore, only be able to consider the problem of the *history* of religious forms after having examined a certain number of them. A treatise on religious phenomena starting with the simplest and working up to the most complex does not seem to me to be called for, given the aims I have set myself in this book—I mean the sort of treatise that starts with the most elementary hierophanies (*mana*, the unusual, etc.), going on to totemism, fetishism, the worship of nature and spirits, thence to gods and demons, and coming finally to the monotheistic idea of God. Such an arrangement would be quite arbitrary; it presupposes an evolution in the religious phenomenon, from the simple to the complex, which is a mere hypothesis and cannot be proved; we have yet to meet anywhere a simple religion, consisting only of the most elementary hierophanies; and it would, besides, run counter to the aim I intend—that of seeing just what things *are* religious in nature and what those things reveal.

The path I have followed is, if not easier, at least surer. I have begun this study with an account of certain cosmic

hierophanies, the sacred revealed at different cosmic levels—sky, waters, earth, stones. I have chosen these classes of hierophany not because I consider them the earliest (the historical problem does not yet arise), but because describing them explains on the one hand the dialectic of the sacred, and on the other what sort of forms the sacred will take. For instance, a study of the hierophanies of sky and water will provide us with data enabling us to understand both exactly what the manifestation of the sacred means at those particular cosmic levels, and how far those hierophanies constitute autonomous forms. I then go on to the biological hierophanies (the rhythm of the moon, the sun, vegetation and agriculture, sexuality, etc.), then local hierophanies (consecrated places, temples, etc.) and lastly myths and symbols. Having looked at a sufficient quantity of such material, we shall be ready to turn in a future book to the other problems of the history of religions: "divine forms", man's relations with the sacred, and handling of it (rites, etc.), magic and religion, ideas on the soul and death, consecrated persons (priest, magician, king, initiate, etc.), the relationships of myth, symbol and ideogram, the possibility of laying the foundations for a history of religions, and so on.

This does not mean that I shall discuss each subject separately as in articles in an encyclopædia, carefully avoiding any mention of myth or symbol, for instance, in the chapter on aquatic or lunar hierophanies; nor do I promise that all discussion of divine figures will be restricted to a chapter on "gods". In fact, the reader may be surprised to find quite a lot about gods of sky and air in the chapter on hierophanies of the sky, and to observe in that same chapter references to, and even discussions upon, symbols, rites, myths and ideograms. The nature of the subject necessitates constant overlaps between the subject matter of one chapter and another. It is not possible to talk of the sacredness attributed to the sky without mentioning the divine figures that reflect or share that sacredness, some of the sky myths, the rites connected with its worship, the symbols and ideograms in which it is personified. Each one in its own way shows some modality of the sky religion or its history. But since each myth, rite and "divine figure" is discussed in its proper place, I do not hesitate to use these

reflect. I have endeavoured to give each chapter a different plan and even a different style, to escape from the monotony which threatens every didactic work, and I have so arranged the paragraphing as to make reference as easy as possible. But the point of this book cannot be grasped except by reading it right through; it is in no sense a handbook for reference. The bibliographies are intended as a spur to elementary research; they are in no case exhaustive. I have, however, tried to include in them representatives of as many schools and methods as possible.

A great part of the morphological analyses and the methodological conclusions of this book was given as lectures in my courses on the history of religions at the University of Bucharest, and in two series of lectures at the Ecole des Hautes Études of the Sorbonne (*Recherches sur la morphologie du sacré*, 1946; *Recherches sur la structure des mythes*, 1948). For this English edition, corrections have been made in the text, and the bibliographies have been brought up to date.

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terms in their precise meaning in the chapter about the sky. In the same way, when dealing with the hierophanies of earth, vegetation and farming, my concern is with the manifestations of the sacred at these bio-cosmic levels; all analysis of the forms of the gods of vegetation and agriculture will be left to the chapter on these forms. But that does not mean that I do not allude to the gods, rites, myths or symbols of vegetation and agriculture in the preliminary study. The object of these preliminary chapters is to examine as closely as possible the pattern to be found in the cosmic hierophanies, to see what we can discover from the sacred as expressed in the sky, in water, in vegetation, and so on.

If one is to weigh the advantages and disadvantages of this method of proceeding, I think the former are considerably greater, and that for more than one reason:

(1) We are dispensed from any *a priori* definition of the religious phenomenon; the reader can make his own reflections on the nature of the sacred as he goes.

(2) The analysis of each group of hierophanies, by making a natural division among the various modalities of the sacred, and showing how they fit together in a coherent system, will at the same time clear the ground for the final discussion on the essence of religion.

(3) By examining the "lower" and "higher" religious forms simultaneously, and seeing at once what elements they have in common, we shall not make the mistakes that result from an *evolutionist* or *occidentalist* perspective.

(4) Religious wholes are not seen in bits and pieces, for each class of hierophanies (aquatic, celestial, vegetal, etc.) forms in its own way, a whole, both morphologically (for we have to deal with gods and myths and symbols and every sort of thing) and historically (for often enough the study must spread over a great many cultures widely divergent in time and space).

(5) Each chapter will present one particular modality of the sacred, a series of relationships between man and the sacred, and, in these relationships, a series of "historical moments".

This, and this only, is what I mean by calling this book "Patterns in Comparative Religion"; what I intend is to introduce my readers to the labyrinthine complexity of religious data, their basic patterns, and the variety of cultures they