Artigos

Systems theory and religion

Teoria dos sistemas e religião

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Abstract: The article deals with the systems theory to religion, in particular the Luhmann's approach. This point of view enables to evade at least two dilemmas. The first concerns the topic of secularization, or the decline *versus* the revival of the sacred. The second one concerns the question of whether religion is a finite province of meanings or a superstructure that depends on something else — be it the economy or the genetic code, the neurological structure of our minds, or disorders of our psyche. Considering a religion as a system in relationships with various, multiple and changing social environments, religion suffers a relative loss of social weight, or a declining consent, during certain evolutionary periods of its relationships with the environment, while at other times it revives. Decline and revival actually mean the recurrent cycles of socio-religious inflation and deflation. It describes the belief system's capacity to distinguish itself in order to stand the test of a changing environment, persisting and maintaining its internal coherence (self-reflexivity).

Keywords: Religion. Systems theory. Luhmann. Secularization.

Resumo: O artigo trata da teoria de sistemas para a religião, em particular a abordagem de Luhmann. Este ponto de vista permite escapar de pelo menos dois dilemas. O primeiro diz respeito ao tema da secularização, ou o declínio *versus* o renascimento do sagrado. O segundo diz respeito à questão de saber se a religião é uma província finita de significados, ou uma superestrutura que depende de outra coisa – seja a economia ou o código genético, a estrutura neurológica de nossas mentes, ou distúrbios da nossa psique. Considerando-se a religião como um sistema em relação com ambientes sociais diversos, múltiplos e cambiantes, a religião sofre uma perda relativa de importância social ou um consentimento em declínio durante certos períodos evolutivos de suas relações com o ambiente, enquanto em outros momentos ela se revitaliza. Declínio e revitalização realmente significam os ciclos recorrentes de inflação e deflação sociorreligiosa. Eles descrevem a capacidade do sistema de crenças de diferenciar-se, a fim de resistir ao teste de um ambiente em mudança, persistindo e mantendo sua coerência interna (autorreflexividade).

Palavras-chave: Religião. Teoria dos sistemas. Luhmann. Secularização.

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Introduction

Can the systems approach be useful in the sociology of religion? More specifically, can the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann help the sociologists of religion to overcome the impasse of the secularization paradigm?

The purpose of this paper is precisely to discuss the concept of the self-referential system applied to the systems of religious belief, assuming the *operative constructivism* (Wan, 2011) adopted by Luhmann. In other words, I would like to argue that this approach suggests to shift from considering religion as a *real object* to an *object of knowledge*. It implies at least two relevant consequences: firstly, from an epistemological point of view, a de-ontologization of the object we usually call religion (Luhmann, 2002); secondly, as regard the methodological assumptions, focusing on religion as horizon of meanings, the sociological analysis can study the multiple dimensions by which a religious system observes itself (Luhmann, 1995). The observation always "involves an observer and as such it is always biased. An observation is already an interpretation" (Rasmussen, 2004, p. 185). Instead of looking at the decline of the religion in modern society, the Luhmannian systems approach can provide useful conceptual tools to the contemporary sociology of religion in search of a new theoretical perspective, that could re-connect religion to the general social theory (Beckford, 2003).

In the following pages, I will firstly discuss the notion of system in Clifford Geertz, and then I will sum up some crucial elements for a systems theory of religion.

The notion of system in Clifford Geertz

In his *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 87) wrote:

> Two characteristics of anthropological work on religion accomplished since the second world war strike me as curious when such work is placed against that carried out just before and just after the first. One is that it has made no theoretical advances of major importance. It is living off the conceptual capital of its ancestors, adding very little, save a certain empirical enrichment, to it. The second is that it draws what concepts it does use from a very narrowly defined intellectual tradition. There is Durkheim, Weber, Freud, or Malinowski, and in any particular work the approach of one or two of these transcendent figures is followed, with but a few marginal corrections necessitated by the natural tendency to excess of seminal minds or by the expanded body of reliable descriptive data.

Based on these critical considerations, the author first recalls the starting points that withstand time, which come from the four classics that he mentioned, he presents his theory on the cultural dimension of religion, referring explicitly to Parsons and Shils. In a handful of pages dense with meaning, Geertz (1973, p. 90) arrives at a proposed definition that sounds like this:

> A religion is: (1) a system of symbols, which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.

Geertz's notion of system resembles that of Talcott Parsons (1979), for whom religion is a belief system that *ultimately* serves the purpose of integrating the social norms with the practical actions of individuals, providing non-negotiable grounds for the ethical and religious values to which those norms refer. Like Parsons, Geertz also sees religion as contributing to representing the world and the order that reigns therein as an "actual state of affairs", a social order that is also a mental and emotional order at the same time (Geertz, 1973, p. 90). It makes people see as orderly, sensible and united a world that would otherwise not seem so, which is why our author can claim that very often "sacred symbols function to synthesize a people's ethos" (Geertz, 1973, p. 97).

Religion as a cultural system is thus a source of information that individuals draw from (either because they are trained to do so, or because they are driven by the urge to explore the meaning of human experience) in order to lend meaning not only to their own lives as individuals, but also to their life together in society. Religious symbols model the world and, by doing so, they provide those adhering to them with conviction with sensitive dress codes, lifestyles, norms of conduct, passions and inclinations — in a word, the symbolic resources they need to act. Adhering to such a universe of symbols could be more rightly called believing. For Geertz, people believe primarily in an authority, on which they rely to understand or explain the world and the mysterious and profound order governing it. "He who would know," writes Geertz (1973, p. 110), "must first believe".

In the light of his field work, conducted in places as far apart as Indonesia and Morocco, Geertz was aware, however, that religion as a cultural system is not a compact and unchangeable symbolic universe; it evolves and changes in relation to changes taking place outside (and sometimes despite) the boundaries that religions, or religious traditions, are actually able to control. In fact, they

tend to represent themselves as the depositaries of an immutable truth, and this enables them to emerge unscathed from the storms of history and social turbulence that often induce radical changes in entire human societies.

Religion as system of symbols and set of rituals interacts with the social environment, so it suffers the backlashes of changes taking place in the society where it operates, but possibly only in the longer term. As an example, an analysis of how the syncretic rituals typical of rural and village society on the island of Java have been progressively disrupted by the advancing urbanization processes shows, according to Geertz, that the short-range solidarities that kept the little farmer communities relatively close-knit withered and crumbled, giving rise to new social tensions that contribute to emptying of meaning all the syncretic religious rituals (such as the funerals that the village community held when one of its members died, regardless of whether they were Hindu, Muslim or animist). Up until the eve of these social changes, the villagers combined the symbolic elements of all three cultural worlds, but when many of them moved more recently from the country to the towns, they started to cling to their original religious identity, emphasizing their respective differences and consequently abandoning any practices that we might call inter-communitarian and inter-religious.

In such cases, the structure of a cultural system on a religious basis is no longer able to serve its purpose of furthering social cohesion as it did in the past, so either it goes into decline or it is largely reshaped: instead of integrating, the religious symbol begins to separate, accentuating the differences between Hindus, Muslims and followers of the Religion of Spirits. This goes to show that the conservative function of religion can by no means be taken for granted — the idea that culture is a set of symbols learnt once and for all, capable of forging immutable collective identities, is naive and unacceptable, as many have effectively illustrated (Gallisot, Kilani, Rivera, 1997; Mantovani, 2004; Sen, 2006).

Social changes are sometimes so deep that they are not registered by the cultural systems with the speed and intensity with which they occur (and religion can be included among the cultural systems). When this happens, as history has often shown, the change affecting the social structure as a whole may not necessarily be fully reflected in the system of (cultural and religious) meanings shared by the society's members. So, through interaction with the social environment, a cultural system changes and becomes reorganized (if it is able), but it does not necessarily reflect —as a certain naive and abstract functionalism would sometimes have given us to believe— the changes that have taken place in the social structure. In its interaction with a changing

environment, a cultural system may be defeated, or it may initially fall apart, but subsequently succeed in reassembling itself in a new way of imagining and believing, of *religiously* thinking the order of things in another way.

The above considerations drawn from Geertz's writings demonstrate that a cultural system called religion can be observed as if it were a living organism that, by adapting to the environment, can serve a plurality of functions: not only to engender solidarity and social cohesion, but also to elaborate conflict. The idea that religion means the preservation of the social balance cannot stand the test of the social sciences if the latter critically adopt the systemic paradigm. Religions as systems are susceptible, by definition, to the pressures of a changing environment, so they tend to measure themselves with what changes in the latter (exogenous change), sometimes autonomously making changes to their own internal layout (endogenous change) in order to adjust somehow to the social changes underway. Just as the hypothesis of a linear decline of the sacred in modern society was hardly very convincing, the assumption that religion invariably serves the purpose of social integration and preservation is likewise open to question.

The systems theory of religion

The difference between Geertz's approach and systems theory applied to the analysis of the religious phenomenon can be identified in two crucial aspects.

The first concerns the idea that religion can be seen as a cultural system and therefore in much the same way as any other ideology configured as a complete, all-around view of the world. Geertz is aware of this too, since he dedicates a whole chapter to the topic of ideology (1973, p. 247-294). This means that not only do we question the supposed relative autonomy of religion vis-à-vis other collective belief systems (of which the all-around ideologies, and political ideologies in particular, are an important example), we also and more importantly risk conceptually separating the structure of religion from its function. In fact, Geertz basically continues to wonder about the function of religion in relation to the social order, be it stable or in the throes of change.

The approach of belief systems theory departs instead from the assumption that it is more fruitful in cognitive terms to consider religion as a structure that has a specific function that cannot be readily absorbed by or reduced to other functions characterizing other structures or systems. This particular function has little to do with the relationship between religion and social order (religion guaranteeing order), and more with the highly-specific way in which a system of religious belief *functions* internally in order to interact with the outside

social environment. The difference between Geertz's idea of system and the systemic approach thus lies essentially in one word: *self-referentiality*.

Religious belief systems appear to be capable of self-reference and self-reproduction, not only because "society changes", but also because they function as systems required primarily to make sense of their characteristic internal complexity. This is the only way for a system of religious belief to withstand time despite profound and radical changes taking place outside in society, beyond its control (in the sense that it can neither determine them, nor prevent them), from economics to science, from politics to communication media. To withstand time, they must develop their own internal complexity, not just the capacity to filter the external complexity. A system of religious belief may be efficient (in terms of performance) not because it knows how to weather the storm of social change, but rather because it succeeds in creating its own internal elements and corresponding relationships between them, so as to be able to tolerate the external complexity —with a relative degree of autonomy in relation to the social environment and other social systems or subsystems— without necessarily having to undergo radical changes or any definitive replacement of the elements comprising its network of links (be they symbolic, ritual, mythological, or whatever). This is what was also called *self-referentiality* in the second phase of Luhmann's thinking, which took shape in the 1980s.

Second questio. To switch from wondering "*what* is the purpose of religion" (taking the classical structural-functionalist approach) to wondering *how* a religious belief system functions, as seen from the inside, enables us to overcome several paradoxes that have become apparent both in the secularization theories and, to some degree and more recently, in the theories that focus on *rational choice* or the religious economy. The former made the mistake of taking a linear, and consequently causal approach to studying the relationship (stated in a nutshell) between modernization on the one hand and the decline of the sacred, or of religiosity on the other. Although the latter restored value to the organizational autonomy of religious institutions in relation to the demand for sense of potential "customers", who move freely in an abstract religious market, they have proved unable to grasp the particular operating principle of (religious) belief systems, because they have limited themselves to making the point that the strictest organizations on the market, the most conservative in defending their doctrines, have better chances of success nowadays than their more relaxed and liberal competitors. In other words, they reduce the complexity of a belief system to its *entrepreneurial* capabilities. Among the proponents of rational choice, in fact, there are those

who speak explicitly of a religious *portfolio*, imagining a customer demanding a *faith* policy on the one hand, and a series of able *faith promoters* on the other (Jannaccone, 1988, 2008). The theoretical assumption here is that of a free market, where religious supply and demand meet and strike the right balance, establishing a causal relationship between a growth in the *membership* of a religious organization and its presentation of a "reliable" product (clear and distinctive in its doctrinal principles, strict in fixing the boundaries between what is allowable and what is not, precise in distinguishing between good and evil, and so on) and, vice versa, between a loss of consent and a liberal attitude to the promotion of symbolic-religious goods (Pace, 2006; Stolz, 2008).

In both cases, the problem for a theory aiming to deal with the *question*, stubborn as a stone, facing the social sciences, lies in the more or less explicit assumption that we can only understand religion if we establish a link of cause and effect between religion and something else, i.e. with people's structural tendency to calculate the costs and benefits of their actions (including those of religious type), or with the dependence of religion on the socio-economic variables of a social system, meaning that it varies with changes in the latter. I therefore cannot answer the question of why religions persist. I might claim, as many have done before, that they intercept an anthropological need (for sense, something that transcends ordinary life, and so on) or a genetically-programmed need (but, that being the case, it is hard to see why individuals believe differently, or even not at all), or a deep-seated layer of our neural structure. All these approaches seek to find a place for religion from an observation point that is no longer mainly social, but biological, neurological, psychological or economic, as the case may be. From the methodological standpoint, this operation is in some ways rather bizarre for anyone wishing to analyze the religious phenomenon socially. It is as if we were to depart from our own discipline, not to see the other's cards (i.e. to learn how the same thing is considered by an ecologist, a neuroscientist, or a cognitive psychologist), but to steal his job, transposing the patterns, methods and concepts from one field to another, generating the illusion that, once sociology has gained possession of a language that is seemingly strictly scientific, or more scientific than the one it normally uses at least, it can finally rise to the ranks of the exact and hard sciences, thereby renewing the 19th-century dream of positivism imagined by the father of sociology, Auguste Comte.

Religions as expert systems

When social scientists analyze the phenomenon of religion, they cannot avoid taking the point of view of individuals who wonder about the sense of

life, asking questions that human beings have recurrently asked themselves — presumably while looking empirically at the force that religions have always had in the past and present. In so doing, the sociologists deduce that, if religions persist and remain alive, it is because they (and probably only they) manage to specialize in providing reassuring answers to fears of death and hope of immortality. With this, we grasp only a part of the truth, as anthropological and sociological research, as well as comparative studies on the history of religions have demonstrated. But we do not give sufficient emphasis to the specialized function of this particular knowledge that religion itself, in its broadest sense, generates and represents. In other words, religions are expert systems, organized on the strength of their specific ability to develop an understanding of the final destiny of human beings and humanity. This expertise boasted by religions is something that other cultural systems do not have to the same degree, or with the same level of complexity.

If I grant religion this structure, then I can take another step and ask myself whether this very structure is the autonomous principle of religious belief systems. This means that, even before I study a religion's social performance —its manifest and latent functions, to return to a known distinction applied to religion by Bryan Wilson (1982)— I need to start, from a methodological standpoint, by assuming that:

a) Religion is a system that has continued to build and rebuild its relationship with the social environment, which changes with time; unless we focus on this inseparable relationship, we risk failing to understand the dynamics of the religious phenomenon;

b) The process that constructs and defines the symbolic boundaries of a system of religious belief takes place in an environment *crowded* with religious symbols and other belief systems (religious and others); in defining itself, a religion has the problem of distinguishing itself from this environment and of increasing its internal complexity in the process; it consequently tends to withdraw within itself, emphasizing its own identity specifically in order to better interact with, and be open to, changing and multiple environments;

c) Differentiation lies at the very origin of a belief system because, before the system exists, there are *virtuosi of improvisation*, mobile personalities who shifts the boundaries of the historically dominant beliefs in a given environment and, by means of variations on the earlier symbolic themes, they invent a new way of interpreting them; from this point of view, every system of religious belief contains *variation* and *mobility*, and the more these two characteristics are present in

the beginnings of the system, *before* the system has existed, the more we must expect these characteristics to be transferred in the *system building* process. Much more than Weber, Troeltsch (1912) has given us an exemplary demonstration that we can study Christianity, for instance, from a historical and sociological standpoint, as a generative grammar of both spiritual and organizational models that are highly differentiated, not only in relation to the different settings in which a religion has been successful, but also by virtue of its original charge as a religion *in motion*, designed as if it had *moving partitions*;

d) The differences between systems of religious belief depend not only on the environment where they are born and gradually become established, but also on their *genealogy* (Asad, 1993), on the relationships of interdependence that they have known historically and socially since the dawn of their existence and in the course of their diachronic evolution and territorial expansion. Systems based on religion are complex by definition, because they have to learn to distinguish themselves from the environment in order to *survive or resist*. They must learn how to reduce the complexity they encounter in the environment, internalizing it to some degree.

The above considerations lead me, in short, to a definition, not of religion *per se*, but of the purposes it serves as a *belief system*. It is more useful for the analysis of the religious phenomenon to shift our attention from the *social function* of religion to its *systemic function*, which implies studying not only its role in *social integration*, but also and more importantly its role in *interpretation*. By this latter formula, I mean the ability of a religious belief system to function as such, with a relative degree of autonomy, drawing on its own internal forces to establish relationships with an unstable environment and represent itself as a set of self-sufficient symbols and rituals, in opposition to those proposed by other belief systems and to the free circulation of these same symbols and rituals in time and in human societies.

Conclusion

For a more or less elaborate belief system, interpreting primarily means using a self-reflective capacity: for it to be able to interpret the world, a belief system must be capable of introspection, and the more it nurtures this capacity, the better it is able to distinguish itself from the environment. This is the only way for it to withstand time and escape the buffeting of social changes. History is a veritable graveyard of deities, but also a river of symbols that continue to circulate freely even after the gods have fallen. A system of

religious belief is often rather like a cliff, built in layers — not mechanically, one on top of the other, but held together so that they seem more or less harmoniously arranged, in an orderly and disciplined hierarchy. Nothing has been left to chance. This is the result of the work of interpretation that belief systems are obliged to undertake in their relations with the environment in which they are born and continue to live and thrive, and even more so when they spread elsewhere, reaching faraway places and different peoples with distinctive cultural characteristics, which may be very different from those of the religion's origins. The most effective means of communication with such remote, different cultural and religious worlds lies in the use of rituals, which are generally an excellent vehicle for enabling communications between different layers of symbols and beliefs, establishing the right hierarchy between the dominant, official beliefs and others that are merely tolerated or made partially compatible with the former.

Applying the Luhmannian systemic approach to religion thus enables us to evade at least two dilemmas. The first concerns the topic of secularization, or the decline versus the revival of the sacred, both of which are probably partially true.

If we consider a religion as a system of relationships with an environment, it is easier to see that the religion suffers a relative loss of social weight, or a declining consent, during certain evolutionary periods of its relationships with the environment, while at other times it revives. If we translate decline and revival into other words, as an increasing and decreasing social complexity, or cycles of socio-religious inflation and deflation, and if we measure a belief system's capacity to distinguish itself in order to stand the test of a changing environment, then we can legitimately say that a religion may go through all the phases of *social success*, depending on its ability to absorb the new excesses of sense generated in a given environment in its own interpretative categories.

Just to give an example, the organizational format adopted by the new charismatic and Pentecostal churches, or by the charismatic movements born within Catholicism seems to indicate that the religious belief system that we call Christianity has become flexibly differentiated to suit the various socio-cultural environments that it has encountered in the course of its history, and particularly between the end of the 20th and the start of the 21st centuries. In the eyes of an outside observer, Christianity can be seen as a living *system* in the world today, because it has demonstrated its capacity to absorb the differences in the environments of its inculturation and thus extend the symbolic boundaries of the sense to attribute to "being Christian". How many

ways are there today for a person to be a Christian? It is hard to say, and nobody has yet succeeded in repeating Troeltsch's exercise in social and religious imagination to construct a historical typology of Christianity, from ancient times up until the present day. How many social doctrines of the Christian groups and churches would the German sociologist have to examine nowadays in order to classify them in his classic church/sect/mysticism typology? In attempting to do so, he would probably discover the need to invent other ideal types, reflecting a social and religious reality that is becoming increasingly diversified, its symbolic boundaries much dilated, where symbols *marked as Christian* circulate with considerable degrees of freedom, to such an extent that they may be adopted by new *religious entrepreneurs* and even by new prophets, reformers and preachers wandering around the worldwide web, the cyber-religion (Pace, Giordan, 2013). Faced with such a dilated panorama, we must avoid making the mistake of only considering the great historical churches that have drawn life and legitimization from Christianity; we should look at everything that is moving, with a marked degree of turbulence and effervescence, just outside them or along their borders. Christianity is a world-system, like Islam or Buddhism, highly differentiated historically as well as in the multiple, diverse relationships that it continues to weave with a great variety of social environments.

So I can still speak of secularization, provided I clearly understand what I mean by the word. It is not a measure of a declining interest in holy things, or of religion's loss of social plausibility, but rather a process that describes the increasing differentiation (Dobbelaere, 2002) experienced by an evolving religious belief system at certain times in history.

Such systems have a life cycle: *they are born* (thanks to a capacity for improvisation), not out of nothing, but within an environment already inhabited by symbols; *they grow* (establishing their symbolic boundaries, on the strength of which they expand through identity and difference) and *they become mature*, developing the capacity to reduce the external complexity and, in so doing, they succeed in standing the test of time and reproducing. If they fail to develop this capacity, *they perish*. Systems can cope with the risk of decline and disappearance if they are able to preserve the original spirit of mobility that animated them at the start, thanks to their founder's capacity for improvisation.

Neither Muhammad nor Buddha, nor Christ, nor anyone else could have imagined such an abundance of movements, groups, sects, schools of thought, spiritual pathways, types of church and other organized forms of belief as we have seen branch off from these great world religions. A detailed analysis

and classification of all these forms (impossible to achieve using the limited cognitive tools of one discipline, such as sociology, alone) might be a useful empirical exercise, not only to demonstrate the degree of differentiation that these religions soon came to experience, often in the crossfire of recurrent (sometimes harsh and violent) conflicts, but also to illustrate how the driving force of these religions' respective founders —which extended beyond the symbolic confines of pre-existing and previous beliefs and traditions to imagine other possible worlds of sense and action— remains alive, generating continuous upheavals in the evolution of the belief system.

The organizational element is consequently fundamental to the strength of a system of religious belief, both when the chosen organizational model is relatively independent of other social systems (and forms of political power in particular), and when it is more or less directly indebted in its organizational aspects to a political power, and especially if emperors and sovereigns have decided to adopt a given religious confession as the state religion. Belief systems that become the cultural and ideological regulators of such organized systems as states (from the state religions to the political theologies functional to the theories and practices of the powers that be) naturally acquire a greater organizational strength than belief systems that are not lucky enough to pervade the political system. There is clearly a huge difference between Christianity, which has become a church, and Gnosticism, which has remained an organizational nebula with countless clusters that have never succeeded in adopting a precise structural configuration: in the former case, the belief system construction and consolidation process could rely on an organizational format that enabled the system to define its contours and acquire a level of self-referentiality that the Gnostic groups and networks never achieved (Filoramo, 1993). Gnosticism, meanwhile, has become a set of symbols that have continued to circulate in the history of Christianity, interacting within the Christian churches and outside them. It has entered into relations with a plurality of cultures in the course of its history. For the historically-established Christian churches in particular, Gnosticism has represented the excess of sense that could not otherwise be absorbed in the canonical and orthodox dialect imposed at some point by the various churches. Those symbols have consequently continued to circulate freely and be available to whichever *first bidder* sought to adopt them, interpret them and revive them at various times in the course of history, right up until the present day.

The second dilemma that the systemic approach enables us to overcome concerns the question of whether religion is a finite province of meanings, to return to the term used by Schütz (1967), or a superstructure that depends

on something else — be it the economy or the genetic code, the neurological structure of our minds, or disorders of our psyche. Even classic functionalism tends to see religion as a geometry of symbols whose centroid lies elsewhere, in the collective need for social cohesion, in a society's need to represent the fundamental foundations of its social order, and so on. Systems theory, on the other hand, helps to clarify that a religion —being a system— must first develop an independent, internal capacity to function for the very reason that it is founded on differentiation vis-à-vis the environment, and secondly because the more it becomes self-referenced, the better it succeeds in reducing the complexity of the environment. Belief systems thus evolve and mature when they see themselves (and are seen by others) as functionally specialized, expert systems distinguishable from other social systems or subsystems (politics, economics, law, science, etc.).

They evolve, not from simple to complex in the classic functionalist sense, but from segmented to differentiated. To be part of a *local* history, adhering to a given social and historical segment, linking their future to a population, or to a given social organization (be it a tribal society or nationalist ideology), or to become a system suited to *different, differentiated environments*: that is the question — a tightrope on which a religion must constantly strive to keep its balance. A tightrope because it may unexpectedly meet with accidents along the way: a religion may become the ethnic emblem of a nation; it may be adopted as a symbolic shield against another religious belief system; it may find itself integrated in a society where it becomes the dominant cultural regulator, and consequently incapable of acknowledging the pluralism of faiths that it had previously housed; or it may succeed in retaining its universalistic vocation and avoid being imprisoned in political-ideological or ethnic frameworks.

The great religions' universality (or their claim thereto) is basically a measure of how successfully a belief system has gone beyond the limited horizons of the environment where it was born, from where it started out, and thus escaped the risk of being wholly identified with the culture of a given population or nation. Peoples and nations tend to build their collective memory along the lines of one religion or another, but that does not mean that all this obeys a rule. As Weber (1991) says, there are world religions claiming that they are able to speak to the heart of all human beings, everywhere and for all time, so —in principle— there is no need for them to become tied to the destinies of one civilization rather than another.

Finally, the proposed systemic approach may help us to put the sociology of religion back on its feet because, with the admirable intention of becoming

specialized, this discipline has placed the problem of the theoretical statute or explanatory paradigms needed to analyze the phenomenon of religion between brackets, as it were. Many of us feel the need (and Jim Beckford [2003] recently returned to this topic) for a social theory in which to frame our analysis of religion, and methods for studying the related social phenomena. Therefore, I hope to have demonstrated that this can be done by exploring new lines of research, instead of having to restrict ourselves to retracing the steps of the classics of sociology, as Geertz rightly said in the passage I quoted above.

The fathers of our science have taught us a great deal, but it is time to look around and take stock of what has been done in other disciplines —such as systems theory, the neurosciences and the cognitive sciences— with a view to constructing theoretical approaches suited to the complexity of contemporary religious phenomena.

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