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Paweł ZAŁĘCKI
Cultural Studies Department
Institute of Sociology
Nicolas Copernicus University
Poland

Cognitive and Ideological Dimensions of Religion

"And when I gaze upon you,
Who mutely stand above the desert plains
Which heaven with its far circle but confines,
Or often, when I see you
Following step by step my flock and me,
Or watch the stars that shine there in the sky,
Musing, I say within me:
"Wherefore those many lights,
That boundless atmosphere,
And infinite calm sky? And what the meaning
Of this vast solitude? And what am I?"

Giocomo Leopardi
A nomadic shepherd in Asia is poising his questions to a moon

Religion and Faith

The main purpose of this present text is to draw readers' attention to some virtual and real potential. Religious discourse has to describe the world not only in terms of a descriptive instance, but as a tool of cognitive or even ontological nature, that is the tool that establishes the principles of the reality we experience.

Religion and faith are interconnected through some unique and specific ties. Even though faith in its most rudimentary forms may do without religion as its external and organisational aspect, religion itself cannot reject beliefs in order to be perceived as such. In their deepest roots, both religion and faith touch or approach some mystery which escapes satisfactory description in

majority of analytic discourses. And it is faith that delimits human thought. However, this limit is surpassed by some in their human experience, when they do go beyond our own limitations of existence to encounter something which does not belong to the order of 'domesticated' spheres of our reality.

In the sphere of Judeo-Christian and Islamic culture, the best known example of a man of faith is the son of Terach, the father of Isaac and the whole chosen nation – Abraham, who is said to have lived in the 15th century B.C. In the Bible, in chapters eleventh and the following of Genesis, one can read that God induced Abraham to leave Chaldean Ur and lead the Jewish tribes to Canaan. At the same time Yahve demanded from him a burnt-offering of his own son. Taking into account our modern knowledge on the ceremonials of those Hebrew peoples, we can guess that this demand was a total surprise for Abraham, and it went beyond the known religious practices of those peoples. Even though Abraham did not understand God's intention, he accepted a faithful attitude and decided to sacrifice his own son. Finally, Abraham, with his hand raised and ready to hit, is addressed to by God's Angel: "Don't hurt the boy or do anything to him. Now I know that you honour and obey God, because you have not kept back your only son from me" (Gen 22,12). Abraham believed in some divine sense of that, in human terms, infanticidal command. He believed in sanctity, good-ness, wisdom and excellence of his Creator. In the Biblical tradition, he gained the 'title' of the father of the faithful. The etymology of the Hebrew notion of 'faith' is not simple. Most frequently it is derived from two stems: 'aman' (the sense of confidence and power) and 'batah' (certitude and trust) (Leon-Dufor 1990:1025).

It seems that social sciences and, in a broader perspective, any other field of science, have not much sensible to say as for the explanation of this mystery. The outstanding Russian writer and philosopher Lev Sestov (actually – nomen omen – Lev Isaakovich Szwarcman) when claiming that there is nothing impossible for God and that faith gives us the access to an absolute certainty, makes social scientists feel cognitive envy. However, inability to know sacrum in its deepest dimension does not limit a scientific discourse completely. The sociology of religion, for example, in its analyses and in its descriptive paradigm referring to reality, focuses exclusively on something which is just a social dimension of religion and religious faith. And this key limitation should always be kept in mind.

Religion seen as a specific sphere of human performance, or in other words a specific dimension of human existence, is understood in a variety of ways. Let us omit totally the so-called common sense notions of religion, as well as those commonly shared by overwhelming number, rank and file depositaries of culture. It seems that since the dawn of our history humans have been familiar with the experience, which is now called a 'religious experience'. That *mysterium tremendum et fascinas* embodies, both in an individual and group context, the mystery, the vast unknown which fills man with fear but at the same time it

elicits a sense of fascination and love in him (see: Otto 1950). In a way, in all known societies there has always been (and still is in some of their sectors) a collectively shared feeling of adoration and fear to something which is perceived as going beyond the sphere of ordinary and worldly things.

From the very, not so remote any way, beginning of an academic career of sociology, its students have insisted on the claim that religion constitutes the essential characteristic of society. This claim has been far from being unique. Sociological thought referring to this phenomenon, unlike in other scientific disciplines, does not focus entirely on the study of religion *per se*, but rather on the relationships between religion and society. Religion is then understood here as a human venture. It is described as a collection of beliefs, and it is to constitute one of the main dimensions of human culture. At the same time, religion seen as a social institution, is related to some structured patterns of religious behaviour and activities perceived as an element that stabilises and supports the functions of society. Understood by its researchers as an element of a social structure, religion reveals to them its organisational aspect in various religious groups and organisations and religious social roles connected with their performance (see: Wach 1961).

The outstanding French sociologist Émile Durkheim noticed that the recognition of sacral and profane aspects of life and reality allows us to identify the presence of religion in any culture (1990: 19-42). However, he claimed (which is now frequently forgotten) not all experiences of awe or sanctity are of religious nature. For him, for instance, magic and religion have entirely different nature. Religion is a communal activity: "Thus in the history no religion without the church is met" (1990:38). Focusing on sanctity is, for him, a fundamental group experience which can be identified as religion. For these reasons, it seems, a formal Durkheim's definition of religion reads: "Religion is a system of interrelated beliefs and practices referring to sacred things, that is to things that are separated and forbidden, beliefs and practices that unite all believers in one moral community called the church" (1990: 41). He claimed, that all cultures have their religious dimension. In fact he believed that religion is the 'sanctification' of society. The sense of the consecrated imperative experienced by individuals and groups was perceived by him as a factor essential to the support of society's existence, the factor that incites individuals to undertake actions which they would not otherwise want to undertake. Then individuals become apt to sacrifice for the sake of a broader society, at their own expense as well. Moreover, the sense of holiness would constitute the source of unity and harmony. Durkheim found the collection of common values to be a key factor for the society to survive. Even though not all of those assumptions are now accepted by modern sociologists, many of them believe in the existence of a religious dimension of all cultures.

In many societies the feeling of community and unity of meanings are provided by traditional religion. If any single religion is shared by an over-

whelming majority of the society, then it may become the source of national unity, and its clergy can strive to explain the national glory or national decline in terms of religious symbols and religious values. However, in the society in which religious pluralism occurs, none of the religious groups is able, on the basis of its own social and cultural resources, to perform such a function. In fact, different religious groups may become a hotbed for interstate conflicts and hostility, rather than a source of common social harmony and unity. In a pluralistic society there must be something else than religion that can play the function of the basis upon which social consensus develops and that makes the activities of a national group purposeful. Pluralism requires also its own system of meanings which, after having undergone the process of sanctification, begins to play the role of a specific form of religiousness. In the sociology of religion, the result of such, among others, processes would be called a civil religion (see: Bellah 1988) or an invisible religion (see: Luckmann 1996).

The distinction between the sacred and the profane (*sacrum* and *profanum*) constitutes not only one of the most important elements of the analyses carried out in sociology, but often it is thought to be one of the major problems of sociological or anthropological thought in general. The most important distinctions referring to this field are found in Émile Durkheim's works (partly also in those of Mircea Eliade). Let us have a brief look at these distinctions.

For Durkheim, and in fact for all later sociologists of religion, the recognition of an absolute nature of the distinction between these two terms has become something fundamental for their field of study – both as a social fact and as something that requires explanation (Thompson 1991). The classical distinction made by Durkheim was introduced through the following way of reasoning: "All simple or complex religious beliefs reveal the same common feature: they assume the classification of real and ideal things imagined by people into two categories, two opposite types, usually denominated with the two separate terms which express the terms profanum and sacrum pretty well. The distinctive feature of religious thought is the subdivision of the world into two spheres which include: one – everything which is sacred; another one – everything which is secular. Beliefs, myths, dogmas, legends are either representations or systems of images that express the nature of sacred things, of characteristics and power ascribed to them, history, mutual relationships and relations with secular things. However, through the term sacred things one should not understand any personified beings such as gods or spirits. A rock, tree, spring, stone, a piece of wood, house or any other object can be sacred. This feature can be specific for a ritual. Moreover, without this feature no ritual can exist. There are phrases, words, formulas which can be pronounced by holy persons only; there are gestures, movements which cannot be made by everyone' (1990:31-32).

Émile Durkheim spent a remarkable part of his academic career studying religious phenomena, and in particular focusing on religions in small

traditional societies. His 'The Elementary Forms of Religious Life', first published in 1912, has become the most influential study in the sociology of religion. Durkheim, unlike Carl Marks had done earlier, did not linked religion to its original relationship with social inequalities or power but to the general nature of social institutions. He based his work on the study of totemism practised in Australian aborigine societies, and found totemism to be religion in its simplest or elementary form – hence the title of his book.

Originally, the totem was to embody a particular animal or plant which were distinguished because of their symbolic importance to a given social group. The totem became a sacred object, approached to with proper reverence and respect and wrapped with the ascribed ritual practices. Durkheim defines religion in terms of distinctions between what constitutes sacrum and what constitutes the profane. The sacred objects or symbols, he claims, are found to be separated from ordinary forms of existence, that is separated from reality in the sphere of profanum. Thus, consuming, for example, any totemic animal or plant beyond special ceremonial events is usually forbidden, and the totem as a sacred object is thought to be equipped with divine features which make it totally separated from, for example, other animals which can be hunted, or plants which can be harvested and consumed.

Why is the totem sacred? This is because – according to Durkheim – It is a group symbol in itself and as such it embodies some values essential for the group or community. Therefore, the reverence the totem is approached with would in fact result from the respect paid to the most important fundamental social values. Within religion the object of worship and prayer is established by the central social values.

Durkheim strongly emphasised the fact that religion is not only the question of beliefs. All religions entail the existence of regularly practised ceremonies and rituals with the participation of the whole community. In fact, before Durkheim, all scholars dealing with the subject of religions, had focused on the objects of religious interest, whereas Durkheim, in a way, concentrated upon some subjective experience (in an individual perspective). He claimed that in our dreams and feelings, alike in natural elements, there is nothing meaningful enough to stir any deep religious worship. In some cultures stars acquired supernatural meanings, in others they did not acquire them; some cultures developed cosmologies connected with the circulation of the Sun or Moon, others found the sunsets or moonsets to be something natural and ordinary.

Thus, since the objects in which the faith is shared by a group do not constitute religion in themselves, then it is the practices and attitudes towards the beliefs are religion. Beliefs and religious practices present outright limitless number of variations but the approach of the believer to religious reality reveals in general a high degree of uniformity. Humans, as Durkheim noticed, refer to some classes of phenomena, actions, objects and people with the sense of some special kind of adoration or even fear. The objects of

that adoration are perceived as distinct and located beyond daily reality, and they are thought to be endowed with a specific category of inconsistency with our daily experience. For Durkheim it is this category of experience that belongs to the sphere of sacrum, the experience which is reverse or opposite to the reality that belongs to the sphere of profane, temporal and worldly. Although ordinary mortals can "mingle" with *sacrum*, but they can do it only after some special requirements and conditions were fulfilled through the application of various usually strictly formalised "demarches", and provided that they never, even for a while, lose their respect to the object of interest. As opposite to this reality, there is a safe and easily accessible mundane world (profane) which can be used for clearly pragmatic purposes. This subdivision of the empirical world into the sacred and worldly one is, according to Durkheim, the most primitive form of reality classification, and it constitutes the foundation of any dualistic thought. In this way Durkheim managed to omit any binary subdivisions which could have become the basis for dualistic thought. It may have been the result of his attempt to apply a purely sociological method of explaining (description) of any phenomena.

Whatever was the source of Durkhemian distinction "sacrum-profane", it seems, even though many tend to forget it, that this source may have been rooted deeply in Durkheim's youth. As a grandson of a supreme rabbi of France, Durkheim must have known the words of *Havdalah*, the prayer said every Saturday evening in order to recall or indicate the link between this feast day and the first Sabbath day. Let us remember one of the verses in this prayer: "May You be adored, our God, King of the Universe, the one who instituted the border between sacred and worldly, between the light and darkness, between Israel and other peoples of the world, between the seventh day and another six days of the week. May You be adored Master, our God, the one who constituted the border between the sacred and worldly".

In the dualism of this prayer, some clear oppositions are visible: sacred vs. worldly, light vs. darkness, Sabbath vs. ordinary day, Israel vs. the rest of the world. The last opposition, so important after all, is a well-known distinction "We vs. They". However, Durkheim believed that it was the first distinction – "sacred vs. Worldly" that became a fundamental element for the construction and survival of human societies.

Sacred objects can look totally identical with profane objects, but the adoration (and sometimes fear) arbitrary ascribed to them, as well as their distinction, result in clear differences. This is the reason why Christians usually do not use holy water for hygienic purposes, neither do they use sacramental wine (or to be more exact the alcohol in it) to cheer their mind and to put their labyrinth in the state, sometimes pretty pleasant, of embarrassment.

Religious meanings, also those arbitrary established, do not seem to be accidental. They define the sense of some definite situations and events, but only with reference to the totality of culture. Finally, Durkheim noticed this

too, and after having revised his opinions on possible sources of some religious sentiments, he undertook the elimination which lead him to recognise that the sense of sacred is generated by human societies.

What is that power we are afraid of but we are not able to find its definite location, the power that makes religion to stimulate definite behaviour and which is obscure to our daily experience but somehow rooted in it? For Durkheim, society is the only source of sacrum, because it is only society that meets those criteria. Society is in us and among us, but it is something different from every single individual and all individuals taken together, because it transcends the individual – that is it takes it beyond the limits of individual existence and governs itself according to its own imperatives. It also has control over our activity and intervenes with our sense of identity, thus in the processes humans recognise intuitively but as a rule they do not objectify them. Then, society transcends life, co-shapes consciousness, affects people who become one of the more important qualities of sacrum after all. He claims, that the main purpose of religion is to transcend man beyond himself. Perhaps, while analysing the work of a classic, it would be proper to accept the opinion, to some extent not shared by the majority of Durkheim's interpreters, that he did not claim that humans worship society or pray to it. In fact, what he said was that some religious sentiments come from society. Thus, religion was born in social life, and at the same time, as Durkheim emphasised, it reflects that life.

In turn, for Mircea Eliade, sacrum as a form of existence in reality constitutes a qualitative distinction from Durkheim's assertions. For Eliade, sacrum is elusive because it exists beyond time and space, beyond any conceptual perception of reality. The only thing which can be somehow described is a sacral nature of sacrum – "holiness of sacrum" which exceptionally allows us to touch itself during various ceremonies and rituals. Thus, there is a fundamental difference between Eliade's and Durkheim's concepts of sacrum; the former is super-social, the latter is subject to the influence of the worldly (social) reality. According to Durkheim, sacrum reflects the social set of values and central group norms. For Eliade, sacrum embodies the pattern of individual desires, purposes and aspirations.

Let me remind you that the most essential of the Romanian scholar's ideas (even though the idea itself is not as original as its use by him) seems to be his assumption that religious phenomena, and finally religion itself, cannot be reduced to something accessible in sociological or historical research. After all, Eliade is not very enthusiastic about the application of the very category of "religion". He prefers talking about sacrum and its experience, and finds sacrum to be earlier than religion or even to the concept of deity. In his analyses he focuses on some comparative description of hierophany – the manifestations of *sacrum*.

And where in this whole system is the place for religion understood as a cognitive ideology? This problem appears here in a deeper and not entirely

obvious dimension. The notion of ideology, introduced in broader terms in the 18th century by Antoine Louis Claud Destutt de Tracy, is most frequently understood as the system of interrelated beliefs, ideas, opinions and creeds which are shared by a certain collectivity of individuals at the same time, and which are always connected with some judgements and qualitative statements and more or less precise instructions how to act. The ideas included in the ideology can be of varied nature (religious, scientific, political, social ideas etc.), and on the grounds of a given system of knowledge they can be either true or false. In sociology, ideology is usually viewed as a product of some active social groups, and as such it is involved in some social situations, the most important of which is the protection of some essential interests of this social group.

Self-consciousness of social groups, as well as self-consciousness of the individual, is mainly formed through social interaction and expression of various elements of the system of culture. Thus, to much extent, it is the product of social conditions. Our common sense knowledge (or, if the so-called strong version of sociology of knowledge is accepted, any kind of knowledge) is then rooted in group practices. Acquiring knowledge and the participation in its structures and contents is, *de facto*, a manifestation of various cognitive processes. These processes, in turn, are subject to various cognitive acts that consist of beliefs, judging, thinking, inference, memory, intuition, senses, etc., as well as the result of these acts in the form of a more or less internally coherent system of statements about the world or its elements. Religion, among many other systematic ways of the world description, characterises, due to its logic and social rooting in human culture, one of the most powerful ability to condition and shape the specificity of human cognition. It is religion, that in many cases decides about our deepest and the most accepted beliefs referring the nature of the world, its dynamics or even its theleological character.

Among many various definitions of religion, the comparisons of substantial definitions (those which tell what religion is) and of functional definitions (those which explain what religion does) are most frequently the cause of the arguments between the followers of a particular type of definition. The works of one of the best-known modern sociologist of religion – Peter L. Berger – let us trace these two approaches (see 1961, 1969a, 1969b). Berger finds religion to be a specific form of legitimating of the human world of evidence. He also answers the question 'what religion does'. Thus religion legitimates the products of social world and establishes the consensus as for the contents of the socially objectified knowledge. It becomes both the form of normative legitimisation (how it should be), and – which is more interesting for us here – the cognitive legitimisation, presenting the knowledge on **what it is and what it is like.** Not only does the process of legitimisation of social world's contents reminds us that we shouldn't make love to our own mothers or fathers, but it also gives us knowledge that we are children of our parents, and they separately are our mother and father. This kind of world description is obviously much more extensive than a

religious description of reality. However, there is a strong link between these two phenomena. Berger notices that religion in historical terms has become the oldest, the most widespread and extremely efficient instrument to structure human cognition and the contents of both social and individual experience. The efficiency of religious legitimisation is that strong because it refers to some ultimate, and in a way liminal, problems of our existence that go beyond the meanings of our daily life, and due to this it touches things which are thought by the participants of social life as unconditioned beings and phenomena. Not only does it legitimise social institutions, but it places our cognition in relation to the cosmic order – thus, it introduces that holy *cosmos* in *nomos* into the human principle of life (see: Berger 1997: 61-88).

Religion in its external form, is the most strongly manifest in the range of ritualised forms of activity of co-believers and official depositaries (functionaries) who attempt to keep the necessary orthodoxy. In some great social and political systems (for example fascism or communism) their leading ideologists were well aware of this type of interdependencies and struggled against various forms of religious cult and strictly religious beliefs. However, it was difficult for them to quit the functional counterparts of a ritual aspect of religion, because it is this aspect that usually performs the function of reinforcement for a legitimising – cognitive dimension of a definite social and cultural system. And so, over the seventy years of the Soviet Union's existence, the soviet system succeeded in introducing and implementing an extensive substitute of religious rituals, a specific kind of "opiates for people". This system included, among others, a range of calendar holidays (celebrated in the form of grand festivals), such as the celebration of the Soviet New Year accompanied by the decoration of post-Christmas trees, presenting children with gifts, boozed feasts and the restitution of folk images of Frost Dad and his companion Snow Flake. At the same time, the whole set of transition rituals were developed (for example giving the name to a new-born infant), mass demonstrations were organised, the cult of the individual was promoted, for some time, and the places of nation wide pilgrimages were established (with particular regard to Lenin's mausoleum with its quasi-religious framing). The things were much alike in the thirteen-year existence of the thousand-year old III Reich (among others the cult of Führer, folk festivals of pagan provenience, the rituals of ceremonial entering the social and political organisations by young people, recollections of the past heroes' lives). In spite of numerous similarities between the process of public rituality in these political systems, differences in their specificity are noticeable. And thus, it's generally thought that the Soviet system regarded its rituals as a political instrument to introduce cultural domination, whereas the Nazi system made the ritual its very essence (Aldridge 2000: 153-159).

Obviously, many of us find the distinction between knowledge and religion. After all, both notions are compared in terms of opposition, in terms of

comparison between their domains as "knowledge versus faith". And in this context in particular, "knowledge" refers to scientific knowledge, and "faith" to religious faith or some of its specific forms, even to such as "the cosmic religiousnes" of Albert Einstein or Spinoza's belief in God-Nature or even a communist vision of the world order mentioned above. Some religious images of God, Supreme Being, Creator of the World or Divine Mechanic, let us notice that both in a semantic and logical sense God is an **object** of faith understood in such terms. However, although this sanctified reality is, as many believers maintain, experienced, but it is not a straightforward equivalent of something which we would be ready to regard as the event empirically factual. Therefore, the claim that Supreme Being exists can easily be understood in terms of faith. However, it should be taken into account that the phrases such as "God exists, he is excellent, merciful and just" in their predicative words obtain the character of knowledge irrespectively of the relation between that knowledge and empirical reality in the above sense. This kind of utterances refer to the knowledge of existence, and knowledge not necessarily must be based on any proved conclusions. After all, it seems that remarkable part of the so-called scientific knowledge is built up as based upon quite numerous suppositional estimates (called scientific hypotheses then) which are included in the area of scientific ignorance. Those hypothetical suppositions, even if they finally prove to be false, are found to be extremely important, necessary and worthy.

Science, alike religion, co-creates a specific paradigm in the description of the world. To accept it entails the expression of a certain cognitive orientation, structured by both emotional and intellectual dimensions of human cognition and which co-decides about our picture of the world and its elements. Religiousness understood as a life orientation is then seen – like a scientific orientation – as a form of philosophy of life, that is as the totality "of human attitudes to the world (oneself, other people and any other real and imagined objects, as well as interrelationships between these objects). The individual psyche involves in a certain manner this philosophy of life, which influences its motivation" (Socha 1993: 115, see: Socha 1994). In my opinion, such a sharp, contrasting confrontation between science and religion in this perspective loses much of its grounds. Thus, some frequent arguments between reason and faith become less attractive if both faith and science, as well as other kinds of "broad" systems of knowledge are thought to be manifestations of some definite ideological or philosophical systems, and their defenders should be perceived as the "believers" in those systems.

Even when keeping in mind Søren A. Kierkegaard's ideas referring to the theory of cognition and his ontological opinions on the relationships between God and Man (and in particular to the role of faith in the process of achieving complete human nature) (1981), one cannot refuse the right of Friedrich Nietzsche analyses in his "The Antichrist" in which "a believer of any kind" is a human dependent out of necessity (1907).

Religion – which seems the simplest and most obvious conclusion – is not only one of the most efficient instruments of cultural domination used more or less consciously by functionaries of social institutions which embody various systems of power, but it also performs an extremely important role in shaping our cognition, even if only at the level of subjective religion. Interesting enough, some forms of originally religious cognitive or normative legitimisation are frequently found among persons who can be defined as basically irreligious. I did talk frequently to some commuters at a Toruń tram stop who would stare at a huge graffiti slogan sprayed on the opposite wall which reads: "God can see you and knows your name" (By the way, this slogan reminds me of another one sprayed in the billboard next to a stop in some other city: "Have you got any idea where you are heading for? – God"). If everything which has been written here were simply rubbish, how to explain that strange feeling of anxiety in people who read such slogans?

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