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The new History of ideas research Centre was founded on the conviction that the history of ideas is of great importance not only for all academic fields, but first and foremost for culture and society. The history of ideas enables a better understanding of our present, whose culture and manners of thinking result from certain traditions and therefore are not self-explanatory. We are not Europeans neither because of the territory we inhabit nor in virtue of recently concluded European treaties, but because European culture has been shaped by particular basic ideas and attitudes. They can only be clearly comprehended and commented on via an examination of their history, which can only be explicitly appropriated and evaluated against their historical background. The history of ideas explains our mental and cultural presuppositions and thereby may lead to justified affirmation and critique – not only a critique of traditional ideas, but also a critique of our present situation that often reveals its deficiencies only in the light of prior convictions and keynotes. The increasing specialization of historical studies needs to be counterbalanced by other types of research that focus on common presuppositions and thoughts, and thereby promote interdisciplinary work. This is precisely the scope of the studies of the history of ideas, where many academic fields overlap. In order to foster fruitful research discussion in the domain of the history of ideas, the research centre decided to launch the online magazine *Orbis Idearum. European Journal of the History of Ideas*, and the book series *Vestigia Idearum Historica. Beiträge zur Ideengeschichte Europas* by mentis Verlag in Münster. The concept of the history of ideas has admittedly lost its semantic outlines. Since historical research has disproved rather than confirmed Lovejoy's research program that was based on the supposition of constant unit-ideas, the concept of the history of ideas can be applied to any inquiry in the field of the *Geistesgeschichte*.

By contrast, the new History of Ideas Research Centre attempts to restore the distinctive profile of the history of ideas. For the Centre, ideas are thoughts, representations and fantasy images that may be expressed in various forms. Ideas manifest themselves first and foremost in language, but also in nonlinguistic media, and even in activities, rites and practices. In the latter case, they do not always manifest themselves directly, but are sometimes at the basis of certain cultural phenomena before eventually receiving linguistic expression. For this reason, the history of ideas coincides neither with the history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*) nor with intellectual history (*allgemeine Geistesgeschichte*). While the former is oriented towards thoughts that are expressed linguistically, and, therefore, elaborates only a part of the history of ideas, the latter is devoted to the whole mental life of humankind, which may involve even religious systems and fundamental convictions of a whole epoch. By contrast, the history of ideas always focuses on particular elements that are recognizable in thought or in culture, and whose transformation or constancy can be explored over a certain period of time by describing, analyzing, and interpreting their appearance, function, and effect. Taken in this sense, the history of ideas occupies an intermediate position: it covers a broader field than the history of concepts that could be understood as one of its subareas, but it has a more specific task than intellectual history (*allgemeine Geistesgeschichte*). Even more than in the case of the history of concepts (*Begriffsgeschichte*), one must resist the temptation to mistake the historian's interpretations for historical ideas.

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CONTRIBUTIONS
IN ENGLISH

HONOR CULTURES:
AN OUTLINE OF THE IDEA
AND ITS RELATION TO VIOLENCE AND CRIME

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews honor cultures understood both as phenomena, as well as a more or less conceptualized idea in social sciences. It tracks down the first traces of honor cultures that emerged even before the change from nomadic to sedentary lifestyles of humans. Although honor cultures seem to have been functioning in different parts of the globe for ages, it was in the second half of the 20th and early 21st centuries when scientists started to conceptualize and research this idea more thoroughly. What makes it still relevant nowadays is its relation to crime, and the use of violence as a tool to preserve, protect, and survive. As long as such cultures still exist, it becomes more and more difficult to reconcile the right to preserve cultural identity with the very limited tolerance of violence and its ongoing criminalization in modern societies. The research was based on source-text analysis, as well as interviews held in detention centers of different types.

KEYWORDS: Honor, Honour, Honor culture, Honor sentiment, Violence, Delinquency, Crime, Honor killings

1. INTRODUCTION

The tales of honor societies date back much before humans started sedentary lifestyles (Stewart 1994). Various aspects of honor have been present in classical works of literature since the beginnings of Western civilization. Nonetheless, the idea of honor cultures emerged and started becoming more visible in public discourse at the end of the 20th century, spiking in popularity in the last three decades (Ngram 2024). Honor cultures have become a subject of study mainly by anthropologists and social scientists. Edward Evan Evans-

Pritchard, influenced by prominent Polish anthropologist, Bronisław Mali-
nowski and British physician and ethnologist, Charles Seligman among
others, analyzed Northern-African pastoral societies where honor-related
practices occurred (Evans-Pritchard 1940, 1940a). In the middle of the 20th
century, Julian Pitt-Rivers analyzed Mediterranean societies, indicating that
honor may function as an idea preserving social order (Pitt-Rivers 1963,
1977). In the 1990s, Frank Henderson Stewart studied Bedouin tribes and even
distinguished some particular types of honor, such as horizontal and vertical
(Stewart 1994). Focusing on criminological and psychological perspectives,
Richard Nisbett and Dov Cohen explored honor cultures.

At the same time, aggression and violence were inherent in the lives
of honor societies. These could serve many different purposes: protecting
property, families, tribes, and even nations at a later time. Lewis A. Coser
states at least three important social functions of violence: as a form of
achievement, a danger sign, and a catalyst (Coser 1966). Violence may pro-
vide economic gains, manifest power, and serve as a tool for conflict manage-
ment and resolution. Often violence has been also used as a tool for venge-
ance, which involves a subjective sense of honor or honor sentiment.

Honor is an idea as old as Western civilization, but a sense of honor must
have accompanied humans since the beginning of the formation of primal so-
cieties. Being strongly connected to reputation, integrity, self-esteem, and the
image of oneself and others, honor probably played a significant role in a so-
cial sense. That would mean the emergence of social structures, oftentimes
hierarchies, and social status accordingly. In this context, a potential use of
aggression and violence as a threat could also play a relevant role in enforcing
social control. On one hand, there was fear of shame, loss, and dishonor that
could result in social exclusion and stigmatization. On the other, there was an
opportunity to advance in the social hierarchy. The feeling of fear implies ad-
ditional, psychological functions of aggression and violence. It may contribute
to forming personality, and identity, placing individuals in roles of control,
dominance, or submission. Aggression especially fulfilled the adaptive func-
tion of humans across their development throughout the ages (Atari 2018).

So there are at least two relevant dimensions or ways how the sense of
honor affects human existence. The first way refers to the self, and identity,
and is very individualistic. The second way embraces the social structure and
group-forming mechanisms, and it is quite communitarian. But has it always
been like this? How can honor cultures, which are usually very traditional, be
related to modern society? Have honor cultures survived or evolved? What
about their use of violence in the Western world where, despite it being rather
prevalent, governments tend to rule violence out?

2. FROM THE IDEA TO THE CULTURE OF HONOR

At the turn of the first and second decades of the 21st century, an American Washington and Lee University-based philosopher, William Lad Sessions, published a book entitled *Honor for Us. A Philosophical Analysis, Interpretation and Defense* (Sessions 2012). Even though honor was earlier a subject of different studies, this work draws attention to quite specific types and variants of this concept, asking about its current status. There is personal honor, referring to an individual, but implying also a more social aspect. Then there are a few concepts peripheral to honor: *conferred*, *positional*, *recognition*, *commitment*, *trust*, and *deviant honor*. Finally, Sessions points out different areas where honor is prevalent: among warriors, in sportsmanship, patriotism, academia, or professional activity. This analysis opens space not only for strictly philosophical insights but may also be interesting for the history of ideas and intellectual history.

The Enlightenment brought about a revival of thinking about honor. The reflections of one of the most prominent thinkers of the 18th century, namely Immanuel Kant, largely coincide with the most contemporary meaning of honor (Welsh 2008, 96, sq.). There appears to be a certain intellectual bond between thoughts on honor in the past and nowadays. In general, one may refer to the following spectrum. On one extreme pole, there is a readiness to sacrifice one's life for the cause; on the other there is doubt, not to say cowardice. Against this background, there appears the issue of status granted by the group, the need to defend this status, to maintain restraint and distance while at the same time maintaining freedom of action. In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant also writes about the love of honor (*honestas interna*, *iustum sui aestimum*) acting as an antidote to mendacity and false modesty, which elevate a person in the perfection of his/her character, determining value accordingly (Kant 2015).

In contrast to the spectrum above, Stewart, who is closer to the ethnographic paradigm, proposes a division into vertical and horizontal instead of internal and external, personal or social honor. Although the subject of the book concerns the Arab understanding of honor, and specifically how it is understood in nomadic Bedouin tribes, it also proves useful in the Western context. Stewart's research focuses predominantly on anthropology and law. He claims that "in other words, the common Western notion of honor is applied cross-culturally." He argues for this by the fact that this concept occurs in an almost unchanged form in many various linguistic traditions, perhaps with the special case of German (*Ehre*), where the Latin affinity is not as direct as in others, and which he examines perhaps most thoroughly.

Nevertheless, further variants of honor are distinguished between cultures. In Arabic culture, honor has separate equivalents for men and women. The

form of *ird* is an honor code for women, which is not identical to the Western understanding of virtue or chastity, because it refers mainly to spiritual and emotional aspects. Among the Bedouins, there is also a separate male version of the honor code called *sharaf*, which includes, among other things, taking care of female honor. It is indeed controversial to equalize these concepts, as Michael Herzfeld warns in his comparative studies on morality (Herzfeld 1980, 339-351).

Bearing that in mind, Stewart refers to German authors and literature, where there exists vast semantic variety that can be clarified by using syntactic criteria (Stewart 1994, 30). He presents the history of honor reaching back to the 19th century and pivotal German-language works, drawing the decline of its contemporary meaning with regard to previous centuries in favor of personal honor, which he identifies with the horizontal approach (*horizontal honor*). Its features match the definition proposed by Sessions, while Stewart additionally mentions vertical honor (*vertical honor*). This type of honor is dependent on personal variant and refers to interclass relations. This approach is more hierarchical, so distinctions, prizes, and awards are more frequent in this case. What seems relevant to notice is that hierarchy does not imply a lack of respect. By vertical-horizontal distinction, Stewart sees honor as a useful tool for investigating just emerging social structures (ibid., 63). Making further references to Ludwig Feuerbach, Immanuel Kant, and Joseph Gabler, Stewart concludes that it seems unlikely to defend honor in the sense of functioning as law (ibid., 151-153). The conclusions arising from the comparison of Arabic and Mediterranean cultures indicate only that honor is a foundation for the right to respect and to be respected. It seems to be a cornerstone for culturally diversified interpretations and conceptualizations of dignity as well.

The foundation for further distinctions of honor variants would be honor sentiment, which appears even before socialization begins. Children are quite fragile when it comes to the feeling of shame and being ashamed. Such a feeling seems quite natural, as humans are social creatures. Along with the social development of an individual – education, upbringing, enculturation, and other socializing processes – personal and social honors evolve. Additional filters for their shapes would also be personality, individual traits developed by individuals, and their unique life experiences. As personal honor triggers one's morality, and probably forms Weltanschauung, social honor involves ethics. In contrast to moral judgments and decisions that apply rather to one's conscience, ethics implies consequences in the form of punishments, legal sanctions, and socially-related consequences. Vertical or social comprehension of honor is connected to different social groups, classes, and even professional groups that share particular honor codes. Every single person can have their sense of honor, but in a social sense, differences in their understanding may vary a lot.

The first part of Sessions' work includes notions related to the concept of honor, the second part refers to its semantics, while the third part is a discussion and polemics about the future of honor for the West, specifically Western civilization. Just in the introduction, Sessions claims that he hopes that "By exhibiting honor as a *normative* concept, […] we might come to see its value for us as well as for others" (Sessions 2012, 2-4). Honor seems to be a matter of reputation that sometimes can be undeserved or straightforwardly bad. Ironically, particular people or deeds, although worthy and valuable, may be condemned, while villains and wicked individuals may be glorified and praised. The major cause for such switches is the social context. It determines what or who is worthy at a particular moment, and what is the current value system. Moreover, different forms of social organization, such as family, tribe, clan, religious group, economic and political organizations, the military, but also gangs and criminal organizations can significantly affect the perception of honorability. As all these above change over time, it seems essential to ask about the current status of honor in the 21st century. In 2022, Patricia Mosquera writes about honor as a multifaceted concept. Her research

> provides empirical support for the honor-as-multifaceted approach and demonstrates the centrality of honor codes in a variety of psychological and social processes, including personality, the negotiation of gendered roles within the family, attitudes toward in-group members, emotions in response to threats to collective honor, intergroup conflict, the negotiation of power in intergroup relations, in-group identification processes, and prosocial motivations (Mosquera 2022).

Sessions recalls Peter Berger and Tore Aase's seminars with the memorable question, "Is honor a pre-modern weed in a modern garden of dignity?" (Sessions 2012, 5). The word 'dignity' has become more and more popular in modern times, and is consequently pushing honor out of the main discourse. Times of chivalry, duels, and tournaments belong to the past. The West also went through the Enlightenment period that aimed to civilize conflict and violence. As modern governments, laws, but also new institutions of prison appeared, it was no longer necessary to torture and flaunt violence to enforce justice or manifest authority – when speaking of the West. At the same time, conflict and dishonor usually still meant bloodshed. But what about emotions, feelings, all those sentiments related to winning or losing honors? Tore Aase indicates that the semantics of honor have shifted to the idea of dignity, as more frequently in use, but not completely.

In modern Western societies, and especially liberal democracies, honor does not seem like an appealing idea. Mostly because of its outdated references to tradition, hierarchy, military, or cultural homogeneity. What makes

honor today a bit archaic are moreover clearly and rather strictly defined social roles, classes, and social status connected with them.

This thought has been analyzed from a macrosocial perspective by Miguel E. Basáñez and Ronald F. Inglehart in the book entitled *A World of Three Cultures: Honor, Achievement and Joy* (Basáñez & Inglehart 2016). The authors depict the role of values over the centuries with strong references to Max Weber and Alexis de Tocqueville. From the methodological point of view, their research is mostly qualitative but quantitative as well, aimed at delineating three major culture clusters: honor cultures putting political authority in the first place, then cultures of achievement accentuating economic growth, and last but not least, cultures of joy where social interactions are valued the most. Depending on the values accepted by citizens and their cultural identity, adaptation to one of these three models will vary. The process of transmitting values is long-term and occurs through multiple channels: through family, schools, media, religious institutions, forms of leadership, and law. Values do not remain constant but are subject to constant change. In particular, politicians and social leaders can influence cultural changes to promote and achieve set goals, such as economic growth, democratization, or equity. The authors introduce two methods of measuring development: the *Objective Development Index* and *Subjective Development Index*, which seem innovative from the cultural research point of view. The first combines factors such as health, education, income, gender, equality, political rights, and civil liberties; the second uses the responses provided in the *World Values Survey*.

When it comes to the socio-cultural context of honor, it should be stated what the characteristics and features of honor societies are. The authors indicate crucial historical moments at this point, such as the Agrarian Revolution, the Industrial Revolution, and the Second World War. As a reference, they use Daniel Bell's work from 1976, where a well-known typology of cultures has been proposed: preindustrial, industrial, and postindustrial (ibid., 115). These are also the ones used in the *World Values Survey* methodology. The WVS is a vast project aiming at investigating the values and beliefs of citizens of different countries, and how they transform and affect the social and political lives of societies of a particular country. And this informs the quantitative part of the study. The data is displayed in numbers, based on answers given in the survey. These refer to – among other things – the role of god, faith, men and women, politics, and children in families.

As a result of the juxtaposition of the three types of culture, the authors conclude that honor cultures can be characterized by strong attachment to religion. Accordingly, religion affects social organization. Such societies also share the conviction that religion should play a relevant role in public life. For example, the WVS suggests that politicians who openly declare religiosity are more effective than those who are atheists (ibid., 120).

The next characteristic of honor societies or cultures is a tendency to accept hierarchies. In comparison, cultures of achievement are much more egalitarian. It is interesting how the relationship between parents and children appears in the study. According to honor cultures that accept hierarchies more, children are expected to love and display respect to parents regardless of who they are. Another important factor is the upbringing of children in the spirit of obedience and sense of duty. Furthermore, such parental relationships interact with the preferences of the state system. Strong leaders are preferred, who do not have to struggle with governments, parliaments, or even democratic elections. Therefore, forceful solutions to resolve conflicts are favored, as is the use of military means, and in a global perspective, governments based on a military regime are highly promoted.

The tendency to prefer hierarchical structures as well as forms of social organization affects the understanding of gender roles. In such a sense, genders are rather strictly assigned to particular social roles. Among honor cultures, men should fulfill the roles of political and business leaders, while women should take care of homes and childcare in the first place (ibid., 116). Other questions concerned whether men or women are better politicians, whether women want to have a house and children or to develop a career first, and whether children in kindergartens with working mothers suffer more than those of non-working ones. There were also questions about the use of physical punishments among partners and towards kids, and if these are in any way justified. Researchers asked about academic education – if it is more important for boys or girls. When they asked women if they are fulfilled with having children, nearly eighty percent answered affirmatively (ibid., 119).

Additionally, what characterizes honor cultures is the special care and protection of women, especially because of their roles as mothers. When not taking up any jobs because of childcare, they seem to be more dependent on men who are obliged to provide and protect. At the same time, economic dependency triggers a higher risk of economic violence. Not only husbands but fathers and brothers are seen as co-responsible for women's wellbeing and safety. Still, this model is very patriarchal. Along with respect for women, there is no or little acceptance of alternative and informal forms of cohabitation. Homosexual relationships and behaviors are even stigmatized.

The abovementioned characteristics put stress on the importance of family among honor societies. The idea of family is here understood traditionally and patriarchally while social roles are delineated very clearly. But change occurs in new circumstances and contexts of the functioning of such societies. The authors of the WVS noticed that when humans move to more urbanized areas, increase their level of education, turn from the agricultural to the service sector, and increase their monthly income, then both men and women tend to loosen their morals (ibid.). Attachment to strong family bonds coexists with

lesser attention put on individual interests and needs. When asked about life goals, the respondents often claim that these entail bringing pride to parents.

Basáñez and Inglehart point out that honor cultures stretch back to the oldest times, when humans had to coexist with animals. There are some analogies between human and animal societies. Alpha males usually led groups, provided evolutionary and genetic variety, as well as dominance (ibid., 120). The organization of societies based on authority and respecting tradition is common also nowadays, but some relevant changes started to appear along with the emergence of rationalistic and Enlightenment thought. This overlapped with industrial revolutions that speeded up the process of changing previous lifestyles. As Heinrich Rickert and the Baden school of Neo-Kantianism would probably claim, this process also involved shifts in understanding values. Throughout the revolutions, values were increasingly oriented toward the properties of objects, their achievement, and possession (ibid.). The new era of steam engines and heavy industry, together with the futuristic visions of philosophers and artists, meant redefinitions of value systems eventually. Cultures that cultivated traditions of authority and honor usually settled areas where natural resources were limited. Therefore, honor was needed to compete. The authors point out Africa, Islamic states, orthodox Christian, and Hindu areas as places where honor societies function most. Indeed, the majority of countries included in the WVS that display most of honor cultures' features are non-European ones. Scores higher than average belong to such countries as Malta, Russia, Armenia, Moldova, Hungary, Latvia, and Belarus. Poland is right in the middle, while Switzerland, Denmark, Norway, and Sweden display the least features of honor cultures (ibid., 121). Generally, socio-ecological circumstances may have played an important role in forming honor cultures (Uskul & Cross 2020).

Today, the Western world is going through another, fourth industrial revolution (Schwab 2017) marked by AI development, machine learning, robotization, and other complex processes affecting the lives of whole societies soon. Nevertheless, an earlier significant shift was connected with the fall of the Berlin Wall. Bringing Central Europe and the West together implied political, economic, and moral transitions for post-Soviet countries. The model of a democratic state system was developed more or less painstakingly, which meant, among other things, a return to political pluralism, as well as an opening to the free market. Although the capitalist system is perhaps the only one from a historical perspective that has allowed the masses to protect themselves from the specter of hunger and poverty, it also contributed to a cultural change – societies began to take a course of development increasingly toward a social model oriented towards the possession and achievement of goods (Hendrickson 1992). Unlike in Western countries, where capitalism had been developing for a longer time, in Central and Eastern Europe, it appeared almost over-

night. This kind of 'shock therapy' forced citizens to change their way of thinking, as well as to reevaluate the existing axionormative systems. It often posed a significant challenge to the adaptive capabilities of individuals and societies. As a consequence, some of them adapted to the new context, while others became excluded, and even became involved in criminal activities.

There is a particular thing, among others, that characterizes modern Western societies, and that is the criminalization of violence. The more complex societies become, the more laws are introduced, including regulations of the use of force, aggression, and direct coercion. A critical examination of honor cultures and especially their use of aggression was made by Mark Moritz (Moritz 2008, 101):

> Here I consider as honor cultures those cultures that have what Stewart calls a code of reflexive honor: that is, a culture that demands a counterattack on the part of a man whose honor has been impugned and in which a failure to do so results in the loss of honor (1994: 145–47).
> A feature of many honor cultures is that men are prepared to use violence and even die to defend their reputation as honorable men. Moreover, aggression in these specific contexts is institutionalized, regarded as legitimate and necessary by the society at large. Other features associated with many, but not all, honor cultures include a concern with the chastity of women, extreme vigilance about one's reputation and a sensitivity to insults, male autonomy, patrilineal kin groups, and assertive and often violent relations outside of the kin groups. […] Honor cultures have generally been associated with societies in which the individual is at economic risk from his fellows and the state is too weak to protect the individual's property […]

The above quotation may suggest a conclusion that honor cultures usually functioned in conditions of limited resources, therefore violence and aggression as tools of protection were not only allowed but legitimized as well. Furthermore, differences between older and contemporary societies may lead to potential conflict and cultural clashes.

Although honor cultures existed for ages, scientific conceptualizations of this phenomenon appeared quite recently. The idea of honor cultures is prevalent in philosophy, sociology, psychology, anthropology and cultural studies, or pedagogy and education sciences. It differs from dignity and victimhood cultures and may be described by the following characteristics. Honor cultures care about religiosity, allow hierarchies, and respect tradition and family bonds. Parents are respected unconditionally, while children are brought up in the spirit of duty and obedience. Honor cultures are also exclusive rather than inclusive. For example, sexual minorities are rather not tolerated.

When it comes to governing societies, strong, authoritative leaders are favored, which means antidemocratic and authoritative tendencies. Male roles

are linked with providing and protecting, while female roles are focused on childcare and the home hearth. This affects the approach to education – it is perceived to be more important for boys than girls. Despite patriarchy, women are especially protected. The ethos of motherhood is therefore commonly cultivated.

From today's perspective, honor cultures, especially those most traditional, may be also perceived as controversial. First of all, because of approval for forceful and even military methods of resolving conflicts – preferred forms of governance are thus rather based on authoritative, even military regimes than democracy. Secondly, the allowance to use aggression may result in sanctioned violence, including domestic violence. The abovementioned studies revealed a certain level of acceptance for using force against a partner or relatives. Many acts of aggression or violence were relatively normalized in premodern societies, but today's perspective opens new questions and problems to consider.

3. HONOR CULTURES, CRIME & VIOLENCE

Different cultural, historical, or political contexts usually determine if something is assessed as good and bad, moral or immoral, right or wrong, etc. but this is not the task for the history of ideas, nor for intellectual history. The idea of honor cultures is still being researched and investigated. New problematic fields are still emerging, and the discourse is likely to sparkle rather than fade. The perspective of recent societal changes highlights issues especially important for legal, criminological, and educational discourses.

Among the many variants of honor, there is one broadly described by William Sessions mentioned above. It is deviant honor. This can be referred to the sociological theory of deviance, where all other than conformist behaviors are perceived as deviance from social norms and values (Merton 2002). But:

> What does it have to contribute to our understanding of deviant honor? Perhaps less than one might hope. First off, deviance-theory embraces a vast array of phenomena as diverse as crime, delinquency, suicide and drug addiction, but also sometimes including mental illness and retardation, physical handicaps, sexual orientation, nudism, "infamous occupations", and even some aspects of racism, sexism, terrorism and the like.
> […]
> Further, sociologists are not agreed on the very concept of deviance. They do agree that deviance is normative deviation from social norms, rules or standards, not statistical averages; that deviance comes in degrees; that it is socially, culturally and temporally relative; that it cannot be viewed solely as

an individual or arbitrary phenomenon but "reflect[s] patterns and processes of social definition" (Sessions 2012, 46-47).

As it has been stated earlier in this paper, one of the characteristics of honor cultures is the inclination to use aggression and violence as a multitool for conflict management, protection, or manifestations of power. At the same time, to achieve similar goals, tolerance towards the use of violence becomes inversely proportional to the preference for conversation, negotiation, mediation, and discussion, namely, non-violent means. What seems to be important to notice is that the use of force and even violence are still legalized by the state in some circumstances. So there are two contradictory contexts for honor: the past, where violence was normalized, and the present, where it is criminalized or institutionalized. There are also two facets of deviance: positive and negative. Negative deviant behaviors are well known, these are crime, drug abuse, prostitution, vandalism, and many others alike. Positive deviance is linked with behaviors falling out of the norm but still beneficial and desirable for society, e.g. the military, firefighters, blood donors, policemen, etc. Many of these activities are truly needed, although those who engage in them are the minority. Accordingly, honor-related behaviors may include both sides of the coin: morality, ethics, and actual laws in general. Honor is a normative concept, omnipresent throughout the ages, which means it has actively taken part in shaping social norms. The category of deviance seems not dependent on the nature of honor itself but on the social contexts in which it exists.

In the article by Przemysław Zdybek and Radosław Walczak, entitled "Does the Culture of Honor do well in Poland? A Replication Study on the Culture of Honor while Accounting For Gender Role Differences" published in *Family Forum* in 2019 (Zdybek & Walczak 2019), one can find questions about the culture of honor in Poland. The authors inquire about men's honor culture, with special attention put on the manifestation of aggression as an answer to public provocation, and the role of women among honor cultures. They define it as permissive towards violence to protect and defend people and property. Sometimes, from the perspective of honor culture, it is even required to act in such a way. Otherwise, honor in the sense of social reputation may be endangered. Moreover, the circumstances may be defined by the low efficacy and reach of laws (ibid., 114-115).

The gender factor seems to be relevant as well. It is inappropriate for women to use violence. The allowance for men is supported by different archetypes, such as warrior, hero, gentleman, or *macho*. The use of violence was rationalized and even legalized, as stated above. Social functions, such as the military or police, are still domains where male employment predominance is present.

In 2015, Mark Cooney wrote a book entitled *Honor Cultures and Violence*, where one can find two comprehensions of honor: contemporary and historical (Cooney 2015). The first one means mostly fairness, honesty, and a trait of character. The traditional, historical comprehension refers mostly to social status, will, and the ability to use force. There are two major types of situations where force and violence may be used: among men, as a reaction to attack, theft, insult to the family, nation, or even gang; and violence against women who have somehow disgraced, insulted, posed a threat to men's social status or lost their chastity. As Cooney noticed, most honor cultures have inclinations to use various forms of violence, while nowadays this is especially visible among Muslim traditional families inhabiting their own as well as Western countries. In all likelihood, in the West this phenomenon is even more visible due to more laws regulating the use of violence, including its domestic variant.

Honor cultures have been the subject of other studies. Researchers from French and North American sites categorized culture types into honor cultures, dignity cultures, and face cultures (Jingjing 2017). The authors claim that this categorization is gaining popularity nowadays (ibid., 713). They are especially interested in face and honor cultures. The first is especially prevalent in Asian countries. Concurrently, honor cultures can be ascribed to many other geographical areas, such as the Middle East, North Africa, Latin America, some Mediterranean areas, and Russia.

Dignity cultures assume the inherent dignity of all human beings, which suits individualistic and egalitarian Western societies. Face cultures rely on being perceived well by the community, which corresponds with the collectivist ideas of the East. Basic concepts describing this type of culture are hierarchy, humility, and harmony. Accordingly, the understanding of honor itself is formed both by an individualistic and communitarian assessment (ibid., 717-718).

The links between honor and violence can be also found in the phenomenon called honor killings. Raghu Singh defines these as "the murder of a woman or girl by male family members. The killers justify their actions by claiming that the victim has brought dishonor upon the family name or prestige." (Singh 2024). The specificity of victims means that societies where honor killings are most frequent are patriarchic ones. Women seeking divorce, having sex outside marriage, or bringing shame to the family's honor are usually the victims of such crimes. The United Nations Population Fund estimates that "as many as 5,000 women are killed annually for reasons of honor", mostly in the Middle East, and South Asia, "with nearly half of all honor killings occurring in India and Pakistan" (ibid.). Women are not just killed brutally. There are other related crimes, such as beating until death, burning, shooting, stabbing, and forced suicide. Some penal codes, such as the one in

Jordan, "exempts from punishment those who kill female relatives found 'guilty' of committing adultery, and Article 76 of the temporary penal code allows defendants to cite 'mitigating reasons' in assault crimes" (ibid.).

Honor killings can be seen in Europe and the Western world, too. The British organization Karma Nirvana created an interactive map where all known or suspicious cases of murders in the name of honor are listed. There are at least several dozen of them (Karma Nirvana, 2024). In most cases, family members have committed these murders.

Moreover, other violent and criminal behaviors may be linked to honor. Amiya Bhatia et al. propose a category of 'honor-based-violence' (HBV) which, besides homicides, includes violence against children, family rejection and control, exclusion from education, forced and early marriage, emotional violence (harassment, blackmail), female genital mutilation (circumcision), gang membership, hymen exam or reconstruction, sex work, and (forced) suicide (Bhatia et al. 2024). The authors found out that such crimes were also committed in Western countries such as the USA, Australia, Italy, New Zealand, and Sweden. This latter country's government currently faces a huge problem with a rise in criminal behaviors in general. Most of the perpetrators of crimes, such as murder, manslaughter, and attempted murders, are migrants. As Göran Adamson noticed, "crime propensity among non-registered migrants is significant." (Adamson 2020). The intense migration that Europe and the USA struggle with nowadays may be also a factor for the increased number of honor-based-violence cases. Cross-cultural differences combined with insufficient multicultural education, reintegration and readaptation programs, lack of legal knowledge, or even essential skills enabling migrants to take up jobs may pose a threat to social security. I think that the lack of such initiatives in public policies, as well as huge cultural diversification in a short period, can result in increased cases of violence, including honor-based violence. Although confirmed numbers of honor-related abuse – e.g. in the UK – oscillate around 2500-3000 cases (UK 2024) per year (between 2021 and 2024), many may remain reported. Therefore, the overall scale may be underestimated.

In the past few years, I had a chance to interview prisoners, ex-prisoners, youth staying in juvenile detention centers, and prison guards about honor. In the group of about thirty interviewees, the vast majority of those involved in crimes claimed that they have honor, and it still exists, especially in gangs and organized crime. In individual in-depth interviews, I asked about the elements that characterize honor cultures, according to the criteria mentioned earlier. It turned out that they kept silent and uncooperative with the representatives of government authorities – especially those who declared belonging to informal criminal groups. Moreover, many of them respect hierarchy, prefer patriarchy with strictly divided male and female roles, allow the use of violence, and

declare themselves as believers (Christians mostly). Given word is highly valued even among common criminals. Over half of the interviewed criminals presented negative attitudes toward homosexuality and shared a belief that it is men's role to protect women's chastity.

On the contrary, prison guards in most cases claimed that there is no 'honor among thieves.' Maybe older criminals (aged 50+) still share this value, but the younger ones are focused mostly on achieving economic goals and gaining power. Today's manifestations of the former honor culture of prisoners are mainly limited to symbolic value. There is still a specific language – prison slang, tattoos, or daily habits and rituals. Some prisoners still share secret codes of values but these are rather in decline compared to the situation from thirty to forty years back.

The difference in opinions arises most probably from the fundamental discrepancies in individual understanding of honor. Prison authorities identify honorability with respect for the law, while criminals form completely alternative axionormative systems. They also can share codes and systems that fulfill the criteria of honor cultures, although contradictory with societal norms and values. As a result, one can speak of fulfilling the definition of deviant honor in this case. Criminal cultures and organizations may also rely on the sense of honor. Although this study does not allow for such a generalization to the entire criminal community, it may suggest the importance of honor for at least some of them. This in turn implies the need to conduct further, in-depth research in this area. Especially, because many criminals do display characteristics of honor cultures, at least in the context of Central Europe. By better understanding of this matter, probably it would be also a chance to develop more efficient methods of resocialization.

4. Conclusions

Conclusions that can be drawn from the above considerations refer to at least a couple of aspects. First of all, honor is a multidimensional and polysemic notion. Its semantics may vary according to historical momentum, and cultural and geographical contexts, although predominantly it refers to the reputation of individuals or social groups, from family to community. Among these groups, there are also criminal organizations, such as gangs or mafia. A specific type of honor among criminals is called deviant honor. Despite functioning beyond legal codes, it is still based upon one's sense of reputation.

Second of all, honor as a normative concept functions among specific cultures. These are rather traditional, and patriarchic, and allow the use of violence in some circumstances. Honor cultures still exist, and are noticeable in Western countries, but prevalent in the Middle East and Southern Asia. They

have played a significant role in shaping societies and especially providing security in harsh conditions. The use of violence was quite common and served multiple purposes.

Thirdly, as contexts change throughout the ages, modern Western societies have developed more laws, and they are more urbanized, multicultural, and educated. Compared to traditional societies, contemporary ones are relatively safer and wealthier. Social mobility is much greater nowadays, which favors migration, multiculturalism, and last but not least – axiological pluralism. Modern societies have developed laws that criminalize the use of force and violence. At the same time, state institutions still have some rights to use these, but only under strict regulations and control.

So as honor cultures do not exclude violence, there might be conflicts between written laws, codexes, and cultural customs. Traditional honor cultures allowing violence contradict with the overall civilizational tendency to criminalize and stigmatize any form of violence, outside the jurisdiction of the state in particular. There are still many examples of abuse in the name of honor.

But does the mean that we should abandon honor *en bloc*? Many positive aspects of it constitute families, societies, and the sense of identity of human beings, among others. Honor has been embedded in the West since the beginning of this civilization. Moreover, honor cultures do not always have to be connected with violence, while contemporary public discourses tend to depict honor in the context of honor killings. It would be rather helpful to invest in well-thought-out public policies, intercultural education, and legal awareness to prevent deviant behaviors, namely honor-based violence and abuse. The future will show if cultures of honor will transform, evolve into functioning following laws, or become an outdated "pre-modern weed in a modern garden of dignity."

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TOPIC MODELLING:
A QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH TECHNIQUE
FOR THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

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ABSTRACT

The history of ideas emerged as a distinct discipline in the 1940s under the leadership of Arthur Lovejoy, whose foundational principles emphasized meticulous qualitative analysis and the interpretation of selected thinkers' works. However, the increasing volume of authors and publications in recent decades has introduced significant challenges to the field. This article argues that incorporating quantitative methods can help address these challenges. Specifically, it explores the potential of topic modelling as a tool for studying ideas, highlighting its advantages and providing an example of its application through an analysis of sociological articles published in two leading journals: the *American Journal of Sociology* in the United States and *Studia Socjologiczne* in Poland.

KEYWORDS: Methodology of the history of ideas, Sociology of knowledge, Quantitative methods, Topic modelling

1. INTRODUCTION

The history of ideas as an academic discipline emerged in the 1940s with Arthur Lovejoy's article "Reflections on the History of Ideas" (1940), which introduced the field and established the *Journal of the History of Ideas*, dedicated to publishing works in this area. Although studies of intellectual thought were not new, his article helped consolidate the history of ideas as a distinct area of study with its own subject matter, scope, and methodology.

As the father of the discipline, Lovejoy outlined its purpose as an exploration of ideas and the transformation they undergo over time, all while going beyond existing specializations and integrating available knowledge from all

the fields of humanities and social sciences. Lovejoy pointed out that under-
standing why certain ideas are interesting and important to a person or a group
of people should be carried out taking into account both the logical and illogi-
cal sides of reasoning (such as psychological factors including personal rela-
tionships between authors, and social factors, such as their class position).

Taking into account the foundations laid out by Lovejoy, as well as the
way studies in the humanities were conducted in the past, works in the history
of ideas primarily focused on the thoughts of a few important and widely rec-
ognized authors. These works were studied using historical, biographical, and
interpretative approaches. However, recent changes in academic practices
over the past few decades, along with technological advancements, have
opened the door to new approaches in the study of ideas. Quantitative methods
now offer the potential to complement and enrich the qualitative methodolo-
gies that have long been dominant in the field.

This article offers a fresh perspective on how quantitative methods – par-
ticularly topic modelling – can be applied to the study of ideas, providing an
example of its implementation. It begins by exploring key principles and theo-
retical reflections from influential scholars in the history of ideas, then outlines
the potential benefits of using topic modelling in this field.

2. THE FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES OF THE STUDY OF IDEAS AND THEIR CON-
TEMPORARY SIGNIFICANCE

Lovejoy emphasized the need for the separate and independent field of study,
which would act as a bridge between other disciplines that study intellectual
thought and the realm of ideas. The purpose of the history of ideas as a new
discipline would be to "traverse the customary boundary-lines" (Lovejoy
1940, 7) of existing disciplines, synthetize the knowledge and provide tools
for a comprehensive study of ideas present within and across such disciplines
like philosophy, sociology, psychology, history, but also art and literature.

Lovejoy proposed several concepts and principles of the study of ideas, as
well as some methodological and theoretical insights worth considering when
studying intellectual history.

To begin with, he introduced the concept of unit-ideas as a tool for study-
ing ideas. Unit-ideas are fundamental, basic elements that can be combined in
various ways to form more complex aggregates. As he pointed out, "most
philosophic systems are original or distinctive rather in their patterns than in
their components." (Lovejoy 2001, 3) He observed that, although many philo-
sophical doctrines may seem to have little in common, they can be 'broken up'
into the same compounds, or unit-ideas. As Lovejoy (2001, 4) explains, "[t]he
seeming novelty of many a system is due solely to the novelty of the applica-

tion or arrangement of the old elements which enter into it." The concept of unit-ideas is, thus, an alternative way to study relations between humanistic and social doctrines, which, in contrast to the traditional classification by schools of thought, serves to reduce the complexity and multiplicity of ideas. Instead, it provides an opportunity to identify fundamental connections between different concepts, which may initially appear distinct but are based on the same underlying ideas.

Lovejoy also emphasized the importance of both synchronic and diachronic analysis. He argued that it is crucial to explore both dimensions of intellectual history: the synchronic dimension, which looks at how ideas are conceptualized by thinkers within the same time period, and the diachronic dimension, which traces the evolution of ideas over time. As he put it,

> It is in the persistent dynamic factors, the ideas that produce effects in the history of thought, that he [a historian of ideas] is especially interested. (…) And motives and reasons partly identical may contribute to the production of very diverse conclusions, and the same substantive conclusions may, at different periods or in different minds, be generated by entirely distinct logical or other motives. (Lovejoy 2001, 5)

As a third point, Lovejoy accentuated the importance of interdisciplinary approach. Since ideas tend to appear in different areas of intellectual thought, the goal of the historian of ideas should be to cross the boundaries of an existing discipline; those which are not usually crossed by their representatives – philosophers, historians, sociologists or anthropologists. Lovejoy outlines the risks associated with compartmentalisation of historical research:

> In so far as the endeavor to trace such relations [between events] stops at the boundaries of one or another of these divisions, there is always a high probability that some of the most significant – that is, the most illuminating and explanatory – relations will be missed. It has even sometimes happened that a conception of major historic influence and importance has long gone unrecognized, because its various manifestations, the parts which make up the whole story, are so widely dispersed among different fields of historical study, that no specialist in any one of these fields became distinctly aware of it at all. (Lovejoy 1940, 4)

Finally, the father of the history of ideas highlighted that to study ideas in all their complexity, contextual knowledge of social and cultural milieu, as well as an author's biography, is indispensable. It is therefore important to study not only author's ideas, but also the broader context (his social position, nationality, crucial life experiences, historical age and dominant ideas of the time etc.). For example, when it comes to understanding of art, "[s]uch

knowledge adds what may be called a new dimension to a work of art, the dramatic dimension" (Lovejoy 1940, 12-13). He also provides an example which emphasizes the degree of its importance:

> How meager would be the aesthetic content of the *Divine Comedy* as a whole, or of most of its parts, to a modern reader – especially a non-Catholic reader – wholly ignorant of medieval ideas and feelings and pieties, or incapable, while reading it, of making these in some degree his own, by an effort of the imagination. (Lovejoy 1940, 12)

This fragment demonstrates that Quentin Skinner's criticism of Lovejoy for conceiving a decontextualized history of ideas is, at best, unfair (Mouton 2023). However, it is true that Skinner delved deeper into the matter. He argued that understanding a text requires not only situating it within its social context but also analysing its linguistic and rhetorical dimensions. This involves uncovering the author's intentions and examining the illocutionary force of their statements – that is, the intended purpose or effect of their utterances, as conveyed through language (Skinner 1969). This method, known as 'contextualism,' emphasizes interpreting texts historically, taking into account the language, conventions, and purposes in which they were created.

In particular, Skinner warns against the imposition of contemporary meanings and interpretations or, as he called them, 'anachronistic mythologies,' onto historical texts. He underlined the need for an analysis that respects the historical specificity of the ideas under study. For example, in discussing the notion of the government of consent in Locke's writings, Skinner notes that there is a danger of misinterpreting the idea as intended by the author if the researcher applies modern framework to understand it:

> When *we* speak of government by consent we usually have in mind a theory concerned with the best organization of government. It is thus natural, or rather fatally easy, to turn with this conceptualization in mind to Locke's text, and duly to find some such theory rather bunglingly set out there. There is decisive evidence, however, that when Locke spoke of government by consent this simply did not happen to be what *he* had in mind at all. It is now clear that Locke's concern with the concept of consent arises solely in connection with the *origin* of legitimate societies. This is hardly what we should regard as an argument for consent, but it happens to be Locke's argument, and the only result of failing to start from this point is to misdescribe the whole theory, and so to accuse Locke of having bungled an account which he was not, in fact, trying to write. (Skinner 1969, 28)

Yet another scholar who provided important insights into the scope and methodology of the history of ideas was Jacques Le Goff, a French historian

who aimed at understanding the cultural structures of past societies, focusing particularly on the Middle Ages. He was particularly interested in examining how long-term social, economic, and cultural forces shaped historical developments, moving beyond the traditional focus on specific events or individuals. This approach aligned closely with the principles of the Annales School of historiography, where Le Goff was a prominent figure, which emphasized the study of long-term historical structures over individual events (Le Goff 1996, xiii).

The key object of study by Le Goff were mentalities, that is collective ways of thinking. He studied interactions between mentalities and social structures, examining how broad cultural patterns and social practices influenced and were influenced by ideas over extended periods of time. The effects of his research can be found in such books as *History and Memory* (1996), *Time, Work and Culture in the Middle Ages* (1980), and *The Medieval Imagination* (1992).

Le Goff's main focus is on widespread ways of thinking, and his approach represents a perspective alternative to the study of the intellectual activity of a narrow elite. His works represent the trend of moving toward the study of popular ideas, shared by large groups of people. This approach was, to some extent, shared by Lovejoy, who stated that:

> the study of the history of ideas (…) is especially concerned with the manifestations of specific unit-ideas in the collective thought of large groups of persons, not merely in the doctrines or opinions of a small number of profound thinkers or eminent writers. (…) It is, in short, most interested in ideas which attain a wide diffusion, which become a part of the stock of many minds. (Lovejoy 2001, 19)

Precisely to measure the greater or lesser diffusion of certain terms and concepts, as well as their variation over time in both absolute and relative frequency, Riccardo Campa has applied scientometric tools to research in the history of ideas. While not abandoning qualitative analysis, he has quantified not only the statistical presence of certain ideas in scientific literature but also the co-presence and theoretical relationships between concepts (Campa 2019, 2020, 2021). Moreover, Campa (2014) has raised the issue of expertise or disciplinary competence in this field of investigation. The inherent interdisciplinarity of the history of ideas directly impacts this challenge. Tracing the trajectory of an idea across various disciplines requires considerable erudition and a different kind of expertise than that of a hyperspecialized expert. The specific qualifications and competence of the historian of ideas have been examined in detail by multiple authors in two volumes edited by Michel Kowalewicz (2013, 2014).

To summarize the argument above, several key principles have been high-lighted by the most prominent historians of ideas. These include interdiscipli-narity, contextualism, the integration of synchronic and diachronic ap-proaches, and a focus on ideas that became widespread and had a tangible historical impact. When seeking to implement these principles in contempo-rary research within the field of the history of ideas, it is crucial to consider the unique characteristics of modern academic work. The past few decades have witnessed profound changes in how intellectual activities are conducted, particularly within academia, as well as in the publication and dissemination of research outputs. These developments pose new challenges for the history of ideas, especially in managing and processing the ever-growing volume of academic publications. The following section of this article will propose a so-lution for addressing these challenges while adhering to the aforementioned principles for studying ideas.

3. A QUANTITATIVE RESEARCH TECHNIQUE FOR THE HISTORY OF IDEAS

There exist a range of methods and techniques of quantitative text analysis. The following section presents one of these methods, focusing specifically on its utility in the field of the history of ideas, namely topic modelling. This method of quantitative text research is presented along with the benefits it provides for the history of ideas, as exemplified by research on diversity and dynamics of topics present in two important sociological journals based in two different countries: the United States of America and Poland.

3.1. Methodology of the research

The journals taken into consideration in the mentioned study are the *American Journal of Sociology* (USA) and *Studia Socjologiczne*, which is translated into English as *Sociological Studies* (Poland). Both journals are considered among the most important sociological journals in their respective countries.

The units of analysis were the abstracts of 1703 articles published over the course of 30 years (1993-2022). Among them, 988 were published in the *American Journal of Sociology* and 714 in *Studia Socjologiczne*. Apart from abstracts, other data characterizing articles were collected, such as the year of publication, gender of authors, their country and institution of affiliation and number of authors for each article[1].

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[1] The abstracts and other data on the articles were collected using the program ParseHub for web scraping.

The topic analysis was conducted on abstracts in English in order to ensure the consistency and comparability of results. Almost all abstracts were available in English. Some abstracts that were only available in Polish (5% of all abstracts from *Studia Socjologiczne*) have been translated into English before the analysis. Additionally, the study of topics was complemented by the analysis of topic distributions between gender groups and the two journals.

Over the course of the analysis, three different models were created:

1. a complete model based on all the texts in the database (1703 articles);

2. a partial model based on texts published only in the *American Journal of Sociology* (988 articles);

3. a partial model based on texts published only in *Studia Socjologiczne* (714 articles).

Topic modelling was conducted in the program R using the *stm* package[2] developed by Margaret E. Roberts, Brandon E. Stewart and Dustin Tingley (2019a, 2019b). This package offers the possibility to perform the analysis using a generative probabilistic LDA (Latent Dirichlet Allocation) algorithm, which can be used as a means of reducing the dimensionality in a set of documents[3]. This algorithm assumes that individual documents are represented with a certain probability by a number of topics, and topics are represented with a certain probability by a number of words (Blei, Ng, Jordan 2003).

The results of the analysis include:

1. The θ/*theta* parameter, that is the distribution of topics within each document. This parameter indicates the extent to which specific documents contain different topics.

2. The β/*beta* parameter, that is the distribution of words within topics. This parameter indicates which words are associated with each topic, i.e. how topics are represented by specific words.

Thus, for example, if for a given text the topic 'race' has a value of $\theta=0.25$, then according to the algorithm 25% of its content is related to this topic. The θ values help understand which topics dominate a given text or a set of texts and allow for the identification of the main themes in a series of documents (the examples of topic assignment are presented in Table 1).

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[2] Other packages supporting data processing were used: *tidyverse* (Wickham et al. 2019) and *quanteda* (Benoit et al. 2018).

[3] In addition, the package provides the possibility to select the algorithm used for parameter estimation in the initial training phase. For the analysis of data in subsets containing articles from each journal separately, the method of moments was used. This method allowed for a more unambiguous classification of documents than Gibbs sampling. Analysis on merged data containing all articles was performed using the LDA algorithm, which is less likely to provide unambiguous classification, but proved more effective in terms of assigning topics to texts for more diverse data.

Table 1. Four examples of topic attribution based on article title and abstract (complete model)

Title and abstract	Topic assignment
Making Markets on the Margins: Housing Finance Agencies and the Racial Politics of Credit Expansion Widespread reliance on credit increasingly defines realities of economic citizenship in American society. This article theorizes the racial politics of credit expansion. It examines the federal initiative in the 1960s and '70s to broaden financial access for poor renters in communities of color, which unintentionally sparked the rise of new state-level credit agencies. Drawing on historical evidence, much of it never used before, the author's findings reveal the contentious politics at the heart of this policy shift. Doing so highlights the constitutive whiteness of credit and also illuminates how the project of expanding credit to marginalized groups tests the categorical seams of markets in the public imagination: such initiatives fuel racial contestation around taken-for-granted market rules, which draws governing officials toward increasingly speculative and convoluted financial instruments as a means of rule-bending subversion. Ultimately, this article sheds much-needed light on, and encourages further research into, the racial stratification of the state's market-making power. (Robinson 2020)	**Topic 1** economy, business β=**0.79** **Topic 2** race β=**0.1**
Love Thy Neighbor? Ethnoracial Diversity and Trust Reexamined According to recent research, ethnoracial diversity negatively affects trust and social capital. This article challenges the current conception and measurement of "diversity" and invites scholars to rethink "social capital" in complex societies. It reproduces the analysis of Putnam and shows that the association between diversity and self-reported trust is a compositional artifact attributable to residential sorting: nonwhites report lower trust and are overrepresented in heterogeneous communities. The association between diversity and trust is better explained by differences between communities and their residents in terms of race/ethnicity, residential stability, and economic conditions; these classic indicators of inequality, not diversity, strongly and consistently predict self-reported trust. Diversity indexes also obscure the distinction between in-group and out-group contact. For whites, heterogeneity means more out-group neighbors; for nonwhites, heterogeneity means more in-group neighbors. Therefore, separate analyses were conducted by ethnoracial groups. Only for whites does living among out-group members – not in diverse communities per se – negatively predict trust. (Abascal, Baldassarri 2015)	**Topic 1** race β=**0.66** **Topic 2** social networks β=**0.24**
Social Cohesion in Decentralized Ukraine: From Old Practices to New Order The article presents a systematic study of social cohesion phenomenon at the level of amalgamated hromadas as a key local entity of decentralization reform in Ukraine. Building on the analysis of the 26 semi-structured interviews conducted in amalgamated hromadas of two border regions of Ukraine – Kharkiv and Chernivtsi, the author has identified social cohesion components, their interconnection as well as posi-	**Topic 1** political system, transformation β=**0.76** **Topic 2** regional identity β=**0.2**

Title and abstract	Topic assignment
tive and negative factors of social cohesion strengthening at community level. Relying on Chan's empirical model and perceived perspective of social cohesion, hromada amalgamation is conceptualized as a transformation process of avoiding 'old practices' to form 'new order'. In the process, the establishing of democratic tools, local activist growth, reducing gaps between center and periphery, formation of common sociocultural space are emphasized. Strengthening social cohesion components at the hromada level are stated to become a sure basis for 'a giant leap' of Ukraine's democratisation in the nearest future. (Deineko 2021)	
The Right-Wing Attitudes of Young Poles. The Context of the 2015 Parliamentary Elections In the article, we analyze political preferences of the young Polish voters who associate themselves with the right side of the political scene. We are interested in the views, attitudes and assessments of socio-political situation before and after parliamentary elections in 2015 that are shared by the young Poles declaring sympathy to the political right or voting for the right-wing parties. What exactly are the right-wing attitudes of the young Polish generation and how do they relate to the definitions of the political right assumed in political science (i.e. as conservative moral views and liberal economic views)? In the article, we propose a theoretical conceptualization of the political right, and then confront it with its popular understanding in Poland. In particular, we focus on the right-wing attitudes of young people, analyze it by reference to the existing data and to the results of our own research carried out in 2016, a year after the last Polish presidential and parliamentary elections. We analyze the electoral behaviours and motivations of the surveyed group, its views on the economy, social issues, the state, collective identity, attitudes to the actions of the political opposition and the independence of the Constitutional Tribunal. The results of the analyses demonstrate that many young voters who voted for the right had formerly been undecided voters seeking political identification. Above all, however, the findings of our research provide the characteristic of the right-wing attitudes of young people, pointing at their liquid, incoherent and exploratory character, possible political turnovers and significance. (Szafraniec, Grygieńć 2019)	**Topic 1** national and ethnic identity, minorities β=**0.58** **Topic 2** politics, voting β=**0.39**

In a similar way, for each topic there is a probability distribution of words (β), which allows us to identify which words are most characteristic of specific topics on the basis of the documents analysed. That is, if the word 'racial' has a value of β=0.02 for the topic 'race', this means that 2% of that topic is related to this word. Due to the large number of words, the highest values of β amount to just a few per cent.[4]

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[4] The probability distributions of both θ and β add up to unity, which is the condition for the correctness of the probability distribution in probabilistic models.

3.2. The benefits of quantitative analysis: exemplification

The following section outlines three key benefits of applying quantitative methods, such as statistical analysis and topic modelling, to the study of ideas. These benefits include the ability to broaden research to cover large datasets spanning diverse temporal and social contexts, the opportunity to examine additional important factors (such as the characteristics of authors and texts), and the capacity to distil and represent the core essence of ideas and their compounds.

1. Amplification of research to include more extensive temporal and geographical range

One on the most manifest advantages of quantitative research techniques that involve automatised data collection, transformation, and processing, is the potential to analyse large sets of data.

Implementing quantitative techniques into the study of the history of ideas make it possible to expand the research to include many authors and extensive historical periods instead on focusing in detail on the thought of few specific authors. This in turn offers new possibilities to conduct synchronic and diachronic analyses, and combine these approaches.

I would like to outline several new opportunities related to the use of topic modelling in the study of ideas. First of all, this technique can serve as a method to identify the main ideas discussed in a set of texts, as well as classify them based on a selected characteristic (e.g. source, like in the presented example; yet other criteria can be used, like author's gender, discipline and school of thought). The classification may then be used to identify main ideas discussed by authors belonging to each of the distinguished groups. As Table 2 shows, some topics appear predominantly in one of the two journals, while others are discussed in both of them[5].

For example, topics such as race, gender and related inequalities, as well as spatial segregation are often discussed by authors publishing in the *American Journal of Sociology*, while they almost do not appear in texts published in *Studia Socjologiczne*. This may be due to specific social problems which are relevant in the USA (but not so much in Poland) that encourage American authors to address these topics. Issues of race, racial violence, police brutality against people of certain races, or spatial segregation of neighbourhoods re-

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[5] The Duncan dissimilarity index can be used to measure the degree of topic diversification between journals. Here, the index indicates the percentage of articles that would need to be reclassified under different topics to equalize the topic distribution across both journals. Here, D=0.47, indicating that nearly half of the Polish (or American) texts would need to be reassigned to different topics for the thematic structures of the two journals to become identical.

lated to race do not occur in Poland, and therefore are not of interest to Polish sociologists, which much more often discuss ethnic and regional, rather than racial identities. Other topics present predominantly in Polish sociological debate are the public sphere and public discourses, as well as politics, specifically democracy and elections. One of the possible hypotheses explaining this phenomenon may be the need to develop new organizational and social foundations for the new political system following Poland's political and economic transformation after the dissolution of the Polish People's Republic in 1990s.

Table 2. Distribution of topics within two analysed journals and the difference in each topic's share between them (complete model)

Topic	American Journal of Sociology	Studia Socjologiczne	Difference (StS – AJS)
race	9.53	0.23	-9.29
organizations	8.88	0.61	-8.27
gender, occupational inequalities	7.5	1.29	-6.21
housing and neighbourhoods	5.38	1.61	-3.78
state, policy, welfare	5.4	1.86	-3.53
economy, business	5.52	2.16	-3.36
migration	4.19	1.1	-3.08
social capital and networks	6.14	3.2	-2.94
school	4.69	1.89	-2.8
mobility, education, occupations	6.46	4.57	-1.89
labour market	4.3	3.09	-1.21
political and economic systems	3.61	3.08	-0.53
law, rights	3.67	3.91	0.24
cultural movements and practices	3.58	4.28	0.7
global society	3.46	4.34	0.87
class culture	2.51	4.12	1.61
family	3.83	5.44	1.61
power, institutions	1.96	4.37	2.41
national and ethnic identity, minorities	2.23	5.14	2.91
public discourse, media	1.96	5.19	3.23
voting, politics	2.36	8.2	5.84
regional communities and identity	0.76	8.27	7.52
culture, ethics	0.65	8.94	8.29
sociology and social theory	1.43	13.11	11.68
Sum (%)	**100**	**100**	
Number of articles	**988**	**714**	

Meaning of abbreviations: *AJS – American Journal of Sociology, StS – Studia Socjologiczne.*

Another important approach to the study of ideas is a diachronic analysis, which involves the change in their presence and spread over time. The change in problems which arouse interest among authors who represent various fields of social science, humanities and art may serve as a signal of ongoing and forthcoming social change. To trace such evolution in sociological thought in the USA, the analysed articles were divided into three groups, corresponding to three 10-year periods between 1993 and 2022. Table 3 presents the distribution of topics' share within each of those periods, showing changes in research interests among the authors.

Table 3. Share of topics in articles published in the *American Journal of Sociology* by publication period and its change over time (complete model)

Topics	The share of the topic in the articles			Change (Period 3-Period 1)
	Period 1 (1993-2002)	Period 2 (2003-2012)	Period 3 (2013-2022)	
race	7.05	9.65	11.77	4.72
school	3.61	3.79	6.64	3.03
state, policy, welfare	2.97	7.13	5.94	2.97
housing and neighbourhoods	3.69	6.18	6.18	2.48
national and ethnic identity, minorities	1.28	2.46	2.91	1.63
power, institutions	1.42	1.51	2.95	1.52
labour market	3.98	3.7	5.23	1.25
gender, occupational inequalities	7.14	7.29	8.06	0.92
voting, politics	2.31	2.21	2.58	0.27
economy, business	6	4.76	5.85	-0.16
migration	4.25	4.37	3.94	-0.31
regional communities and identity	1.12	0.49	0.68	-0.43
organizations	8.82	9.49	8.3	-0.53
law, rights	3.54	4.43	3.01	-0.54
culture, ethics	0.86	0.83	0.27	-0.59
class culture	3.48	1.76	2.36	-1.12
mobility, education, occupations	7.26	6.25	5.91	-1.35
sociology and social theory	2.18	1.33	0.81	-1.37
family	4.73	3.57	3.24	-1.5
global society	4.46	3.29	2.69	-1.76
political and economic systems	4.64	3.43	2.8	-1.84
public discourse, media	3.15	1.71	1.08	-2.08
cultural movements and practices	4.99	3.22	2.59	-2.4
social capital and networks	7.04	7.16	4.23	-2.82
Sum (%)	**100**	**100**	**100**	
Number of articles	**317**	**341**	**330**	

As shown in the table, several problems related to inequalities and power have become more prominent, including race and gender inequalities, as well as spatial segregation in areas like poorer and wealthier neighbourhoods, education, and the labour market. While these topics already had a significant share in sociological discourse in the USA from 1993 to 2022, being the main topic of 25% of articles, they gained even more attention, emerging as the primary focus in 38% of articles published in the American Journal of Sociology between 2013 and 2022. On the other hand, topics related to public discourse, political systems, cultural practices and movements, as well as social networks and social capital, have seen a decline in importance, with their share decreasing from 20% in 1993-2002 to 11% in 2013-2022.

The above examples show that one benefit provided by quantitative topic modelling is a more general analysis of texts, which allows one to determine the most important ideas pondered by authors living in different times or coming from different social, cultural and disciplinary backgrounds.

2. A new approach to the study of the compounds of ideas

Topic modelling provides the opportunity to explore the content of ideas and the meaning attributed to them by the authors. What is important is that the technique may prove useful even if the idea in question is not the main focus of the analysed works. Therefore, it offers a glimpse into latent, not fully conscious or intended associations.

One of the results of topic modelling is the distribution of words within topics which indicates what terms most often appear close to each other in the text, thus indicating the relation of proximity between them. Table 4 presents two examples of such decomposition of ideas into words they are associated with in the analysed journals.

For example, if we consider the idea of a woman in the analysed sociological works in Poland and in the USA, the first thing that comes to our attention is that the context in which we find references to women is richer in the *American Journal of Sociology*. In this journal they appear in such contexts as gender differences on the labour market, family life, marriage and parenting, as well as issues (also related to mental health) associated with the role of women in the household, such as housework and care. In the Polish context the notion of women mostly appears in contexts related to family life, children or social change affecting family as an institution. Thus, the same idea of a woman is presented differently in Polish and American sociological discourse, with the latter bringing forward more social contexts of their life.

Table 4. Topics and words that constitute them in the *American Journal of Sociology* and *Studia Socjologiczne* (comparison of partial models)

American Journal of Sociology				Studia Socjologiczne	
Women					
gender	**family**	**work, health and family**	**family**		
gender	family	work	family		
women	children	health	social		
men	social	time	policy		
job	families	effect	solidarity		
labor	effects	effects	families		
employment	parents	mental	life		
women's	life	social	women		
differences	marriage	care	relationships		
social	parental	labor	public		
career	status	wives	changes		
female	age	housework	children		
characteristics	intergenerational	marital	context		
Politics					
political organizations	**political movements**	**organizations and law**	**voting and political participation**	**politics, democracy and Internet**	**social structure, class movements**
political	movement	organizational	electoral	political	social
corporate	social	law	voting	internet	class
interests	rights	legal	elections	social	movement
state	movements	theory	theory	democracy	structure
organizations	protest	organizations	models	system	human
groups	state	change	participation	public	capital
professional	mobilization	institutional	social	democratic	religion
organizational	political	effects	model	party	activity
power	action	political	political	legitimacy	well
institutional	collective	state	voter	society	cultural
firms	policy	social	turnout	attitudes	relations
market	organizations	sentencing	local	part	movements

Only the words with the highest β parameter are presented for each topic.

The second area that can be considered is politics, which both journals explore in various contexts. However, some differences can be traced. In the *American Journal of Sociology*, politics is viewed through institutional, economic, and behavioural lenses, such as in relation to organizations (corporate interests, professional groups), political activity (movements, protests), and the law, including the regulatory role of the state. In contrast, *Studia Socjo-*

logiczne discusses politics as an institutional complex focused on elections and democratic political systems, while exploring its ideological dimension (political attitudes and legitimacy), along with topics such as social structure, class movements, social capital, religion, and online political activity.

3. Exploration of the influence of different factors other than time and space (e.g. authors' gender)

Other than the expansion of the analysis on larger sets of texts coming from different époques, cultural and disciplinary backgrounds, quantitative approach makes it possible to statistically explore the interactions between ideas and different characteristics of texts or authors. It allows to determine such interconnectivities more broadly, which is almost impossible in qualitative studies.

For example, the topics and ideas that authors focus on may vary depending on their gender. In the articles published in the *American Journal of Sociology*, some topics appeared to be gender-neutral, while others were more commonly addressed by authors of a specific gender. As shown in Table 5, female authors tended to focus more on issues related to women, particularly in the contexts of family, care, and health – subjects that may be influenced by personal experience.

Table 5. Gender of authors and the topics they discuss in the *American Journal of Sociology* (%)

Topics	Gender of author(s)			Difference		
	F	(FM)	M	F-(FM)	F-M	(FM)-M
work, health, and family	9.49	5.12	5.26	4.37	4.23	-0.14
organizations and law	9.79	5.54	7.09	4.26	2.71	-1.55
political movements	10.81	7.49	5.90	3.32	4.90	1.58
family	7.08	7.87	5.09	-0.80	1.99	2.79
gender	9.24	10.84	4.75	-1.61	4.49	6.10
social networks	3.45	9.08	11.01	-5.63	-7.55	-1.93
labour market	1.58	5.02	5.24	-3.44	-3.66	-0.22
race	5.71	5.29	7.79	0.42	-2.08	-2.50
economic status	5.83	5.38	7.14	0.45	-1.31	-1.76
class culture	5.17	3.83	6.84	1.33	-1.68	-3.01

Meaning of abbreviations: F – female author(s); M – male author(s); FM – mixed gender composition of authors' team (both women and men).

On the other hand, male authors were more likely to engage with topics such as class culture, economic status, and the labour market, as well as social networks. Interestingly, these latter two areas of study were often tackled by

male or mixed-gender teams of authors, which could suggest that these works were more likely to be collective efforts arising from larger studies, such as surveys or experiments. The predominance of male authors in these areas may also be partly explained by the fact that male researchers tend to rely more on quantitative methods, which are common in such studies (Thelwall et al. 2019).

Apart from the application illustrated by the example, the characteristics of texts and authors can be leveraged in various ways at different stages of analysis to gain deeper insights into their content and structure. For instance, categorical variables (with two or few categories) could be used similarly to journals in the presented analysis, dividing the set of analysed texts into subsets before estimating models to examine topics and their components within each group. Another possibility is to use continuous variables (with many quantitative categories, such as different measures of spread and influence, including the number of citations or views) to compare their means or medians across different topics or groups, such as journals, gender groups, or nationalities. These variables can also be combined, allowing researchers to visualize relationships between them on scatterplots. Expanding on this, future studies could integrate advanced statistical techniques or machine learning models to identify hidden patterns and relationships, further enriching the analysis of texts and authors. Such approaches could open new avenues for understanding the dynamics of ideas and their dissemination across various contexts.

4. CONCLUSION

The presented quantitative technique proposed for application to the history of ideas constitutes a response to modern challenges posed by the way modern academic system functions (specifically concerning an increasing number of scholars and publications). This approach allows for a shift from the study of one or a few chosen authors to many authors, and may be used to identify major and minor trends in intellectual thought.

The proposed technique of topic modelling, and quantitative methods in general, cannot substitute a more profound study of ideas with the use of qualitative, interpretative and understanding approach, but rather can serve to add new value to the traditional technique by expanding the area of the research. There is still a need for a deeper understanding of an investigated topic by the researcher, which is essential on the stage of planning and design of the research, as well as for understanding the obtained results.

What is more, technical challenges and dilemmas should be taken into account when using a quantitative approach to text analysis. Some of the problems are the need of linguistic unification of texts before the analysis, the mul-

tiplicity of word forms (especially in synthetic languages), as well as the inevitable simplification of the material and the loss of context, which affects the accuracy of the results. In addition, the outcome of the research depends a lot on the initial parameters and the multiple decisions taken by the researcher during the process (e.g. concerning such questions as what time periods to adapt, how to select the material, how many topics to choose, which method to use, whether to unify the language or different subsets or work on original material). This being said, quantitative study of ideas requires craftmanship and skill, making indispensable also theoretical and qualitative in-depth research.

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STRANGE IDEAS:
USING THE HISTORY OF IDEAS
FOR THE UNDERSTANDING OF PSEUDOSCIENCE

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ABSTRACT

The article explores how the history of ideas can be utilized as a methodological tool for understanding pseudoscience and addressing its prevalence in contemporary society. Despite high scientific literacy rates, pseudoscientific beliefs persist, underscoring the need for new approaches in science communication and public understanding. By examining how socio-cultural contexts influence the reception and transformation of scientific ideas, the history of ideas provides insights into the genesis of pseudoscientific theories. Drawing on Arthur Lovejoy's concept of 'unit-ideas' and their evolution, the articles highlights how ideas are reshaped by cultural contexts, leading to concept drift. Examples, such as quantum mysticism and ancient astronaut theories, demonstrate how scientific ideas are distorted in their transition to popular culture. We suggest that integrating a historical-genealogical approach into science communication can help counteract pseudo-science by retracing the original meanings of scientific concepts. This approach complements traditional debunking strategies, addressing not just factual inaccuracies but also the cultural determinants that fuel pseudoscientific beliefs.

KEYWORDS: Science communication, History of science, History of ideas, Scientific imaginary

1. INTRODUCTION

The spread of pseudoscientific conceptions has always characterized the way popular culture appropriates the ideas formed within the scientific community. As the historian of science Micheal Gordin writes: "Each use of pseudoscience is tied intimately to its historical context. If you want to know what science is

or has been, show me contemporary pseudoscience" (Gordin 2012). With the growth of scientific literacy in recent decades, the traditional view of science communication assumed that pseudoscientific beliefs would decline in inverse proportion (Hilgartner 1990). Despite this, pseudoscience is now very much alive even in countries with very high rates of scientific literacy; this has imposed new research to understand in more detail the processes of formation of pseudoscientific beliefs, shedding light in particular on how socio-cultural contexts and beliefs shared by particular groups can influence the reception of scientific ideas (Greco 2008; Wagner-Egger et al. 2018).

In this field of research, the history of ideas can represent a particularly useful but little exploited 'methodology.' In this essay I intend to show how the methods typical of the history of ideas can be successfully applied to the study of the processes of transformation of scientific ideas over time and according to the different socio-cultural contexts of reception by popular culture. My suggestion is to extend the history of ideas to the understanding of the genesis of pseudoscientific theories, also exploiting it as a tool of science communication, i.e. by developing programs to counteract the spread of pseudoscience in the public through a historical-genealogical approach.

2. HISTORY OF IDEAS AND THE FORMATION OF PSEUDOSCIENTIFIC CONCEPTIONS

The history of ideas can be defined as a meta-discipline: although it is very widespread and has now acquired all the characteristic elements of a real discipline, yet it is usually frequented by scholars from different fields. Arthur Lovejoy (1873-1962), the founding father of the history of ideas, identified twelve different disciplines in which historians of ideas operate: the history of philosophy, the history of science, ethnography, some areas of linguistics and especially semantics, the history of religions, the history of literature, comparative literature, the history of the arts, the history of economic theories, the history of education, political and social history and finally sociology (Lovejoy 1960).

Facing this situation, it is reasonable that rigorous scholars may refuse to consider the history of ideas as a discipline capable of providing reliable results, much less as a 'methodology.' Nevertheless, the history of ideas today enjoys a sort of 'revival.' After a first phase of development, when the discipline was founded in the United States through societies and academic journals, a second phase followed starting from the early 1970s with a peak around 1990 or so in which the history of ideas was nearly eclipsed by social and cultural history. The third phase, which still lasts today, was favored by the

increase in interdisciplinarity and by the limits of the previous paradigms used in intellectual history and in the study of mentalities (Megill & Zhang 2013).

The history of ideas analyses the way unit-ideas change over time. By 'unit-ideas,' the founder of this metadiscipline, Arthur Lovejoy, meant the units that make up the history of thought and that remain immutable over time despite the social context they act in is transformed in a radical way, to the point of making the unit-ideas almost unrecognizable, if not in the eyes of the historian of ideas (Lovejoy 1964). This conception, which identified ideas as the atoms that make up matter (in this case the 'intellectual' matter), was later criticized and dismissed, because if one accepts the principle that ideas do not change over time it becomes impossible to think of an evolution of thought, nor it is possible to understand the processes of distortion and transformation of unit-ideas (Betti & Der Berg 2014). To understand how ideas change over time, it is necessary to understand how they are transformed within different contexts. A 'context' can be defined as a network of beliefs shared by a group (Bevir 2004). In the case of pseudoscientific conceptions, for example, a network of beliefs can be the so-called 'quantum mysticism' (Paura 2018). In his studies, the historian of science David Kaiser focused on the activities of the Fundamental Fysiks Group, established at the University of Berkeley in 1975 by a group of physics students belonging to countercultural movements (Kaiser 2011). Starting from the study of the paradoxes of quantum mechanics, they adopted a very heterodox approach, intending to study psychokinesis, the observer's role in creating reality, time travel, telepathy and extra-terrestrial communications. They were strongly influenced by the climate of counterculture and the New Age conceptions in vogue in those years; this network of beliefs shaped their conceptions about quantum physics, which in turn influenced rigorous theoretical physicists such as David Bohm or John Wheeler.

An idea coming from a specific context (for example, an idea produced within the scientific community) and perceived in a different intellectual context, is no longer the same idea. The idea A in a complex ABC is not the same idea A in a complex ADE (Betti & der Berg 2014). This conceptual change can be better understood if we assume that an idea can be divided into two components: for 'intention' we refer to its meaning, provided by the author(s) of the original idea, while the 'extension' is the reference, and is therefore closely related to the context. While the intention remains unchanged, the extension changes, thus transforming the whole idea (Wang, Schlobach & Klein 2011). This mechanism has been called concept drift.

It is useful to point out here that when we talk about ideas we do not refer to mathematical concepts, but to utterances, i.e. words that express a meaning. A mathematical concept does not change its meaning according to the context (at most it can happen to the symbols that represent it), and this also explains why theories, expressed in mathematical language, cannot be subject to pro-

cesses of concept drift and semantic distortion. However, while in many areas of science – such as contemporary theoretical physics – new ideas emerge and are disseminated internally through mathematical expressions, their external dissemination (the so-called 'science popularization') is almost exclusively based on words, in the form of metaphors and analogies (Bucchi 1996). Since words are by their nature polysemantic depending on the context of reference, the concept drift is an inevitable, characteristic phenomenon of the reception of scientific ideas within popular culture. As the philosopher Mark Bevir explains: "Although we have only a finite number of words, each with a finite set of linguistic meanings, the creative nature of our linguistic faculty enables us to use this finite set to express an infinite range of ideas" (Bevir 2004).

Therefore, the duty of the historian of ideas is first of all to understand the original meaning in the author's intentions when they use a particular term. An example is the original meaning of the term 'hologram' for the theoretical physicist David Bohm, which he introduced to solve some paradoxes of quantum mechanics, in particular the interpretation of quantum entanglement (Bohm 2002 [1980]). Subsequently, authors of pseudoscientific texts, from New Age writer Micheal Talbot to best-selling conspiracy author David Icke, took up Bohm's idea to propose that the universe is a computer-generated simulation, a concept completely different from that of Bohm (Paura 2017). In the field of semiotics, 'intentionalism' is defined as the approach that bases the interpretation of a text exclusively on the author's original intentions, to the extent that they can be reconstructed (Eco 1990). The historian of ideas can therefore try to recover the original interpretation of an idea by reconstructing the intention expressed by its proponents within the context of reference, purifying it of subsequent distortions that may have occurred in the process of transmission and reception.

However, it is naive to expect that, through intentionalism, one can prevent the concept drift. Since the message's decoding by a receiver does not take place in a neutral context, but it is always culturally situated (Hall 1980), the reception of an idea can often be distorted by the pre-existence of presumptions. As Bevir explains: "A presumption exists when X is conceptually prior to Y. To say that X is conceptually prior to Y is to make a logical claim based on a study of our concepts, not a factual one based on a study of the world" (Bevir 2004). Presumptions come from our personal network of beliefs: an example is a person who personally considers wrong some theories at the basis of contemporary physics, such as general relativity or the standard cosmological model, and therefore, when faced with scientific ideas from these fields, will be oriented to reject or modify them; this attitude is based on personal belief systems such as those investigated by French sociologist Alexandre Moatti (2013) shared by engineers who remain tied to the physics they studied at school.

Even wider collective mentalities typical of certain historical ages can produce presumptions. For instance, mechanical philosophy, which spread in the 17th century, did not favor, but indeed slowed down, the development of the theory of universal gravitation, since the notion of action-at-a-distance forces (as in the case of gravitational force) seemed, to the natural philosophers of the time, an attempt to return to animistic thought (Rossi 2000). The history of mentality plays an important role in the wider field of the history of ideas, precisely because of its capacity to highlight the 'complexes of ideas' shared by collective mentalities. However, it is important to remember that in a given historical epoch several types of mentality can coexist. The conspiracy mentality, for example, coexists more or less peacefully, in contemporary times, with the dominant scientific mentality. The clash between different mentalities produces inevitable contrasts in the interpretation of ideas, as is evident in the field of politics. Scientific ideas, to a lesser but no less importantly extent, are also affected by this phenomenon.

By studying mentalities, it is possible to better understand a particular belief. Since mentalities are made up of more or less logically interconnected sets of webs of beliefs, we will observe a peculiar pattern: X believes A because X also believes B, C and D (Bevir 2004). For instance, a subject who shares the American neocon mentality will certainly question the anthropogenic nature of climate change, and for the same reasons may be inclined to distrust evolutionist theory (Rutjens et al. 2017). Adherents to the New Age mentality believe in some interpretations of quantum physics because they adhere to their presumptions, as for instance a holistic view of the universe, the determining role of consciousness in the shaping of reality, or quantum healing (Kaiser 2011).

3. HISTORY OF IDEAS AND SCIENTIFIC IMAGINARY

In the classic example by Arthur Lovejoy of John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, he shows that only the historian of ideas can interpret the meaning of some of the most difficult passages in the work, thanks to her/his ability to reconstruct the author's underlying mentality. For instance, when Adam addressing the Creator points out that, while God can be self-sufficient because there is no better company than himself, he instead needs a companion, the episode refers to Aristotle's thought and Milton uses it to clarify his interpretation of Aristotle's thought, his idea of God, and his distance from the orthodox Christian theology for which the main good of man is the imitation and contemplation of God (Lovejoy 1960).

In his introduction to *The Great Chain of Being* (1936), his most famous study, Lovejoy stresses the importance, for the study of the history of ideas,

to do not just analyze great masterpieces or the thought of great philosophers, scientists or writers, but to delve into the so-called 'popular culture,' i.e. the sociological dimension of collective imaginary. Actually, unit-ideas mainly appear "in the collective thought of large groups of persons, not merely in the doctrine or opinions of a small number of profound thinkers or eminent writers" (Lovejoy 1964). When the unit-ideas are shared by large groups of persons, they become a mentality, namely ideas that produce large-scale, long-term effects. In this regard, Lovejoy quotes the opinion of the American philosopher and writer George Herbert Palmer: "The tendencies of an age appear more distinctly in its writers of inferior rank than in those of commanding genius" (quoted in Lovejoy 1964).

This is even truer when it comes to analyze the way scientific ideas are transposed into the popular culture. The studies of the famous historian Robert Darnton demonstrate, through the reconstruction of the body of French best-sellers in the second half of the 18th century, that it was neither the Encyclopédie nor Rousseau's texts to shape public opinion in the years immediately preceding the French Revolution, but satirical, political, and even pornographic pamphlets, whose existence has almost been forgotten today but which enjoyed enormous popularity among the general public and played a decisive role in undermining trust in ancient institutions such as the monarchy and the Church (Darnton 1995, 1996). Darnton's intellectual history studies shed light on how opinions take form within popular culture.

In the early 1990s Jacques Le Goff, discussing the fields of application of the history of ideas, encouraged to deal with the scientific imagination. As a great medievalist scholar, Le Goff studied the medieval imaginary in many of his books (Le Goff 1981, 1985, 2005) and was therefore aware of the value that such a study could bring to the understanding of the way in which popular culture transposes scientific ideas. He wrote about it:

> From the four elements or the four humors theories to relativity, waves, atoms, etc., the scientific reference (most of the time without a true knowledge of the facts and without a pertinent use) has always betrayed the intention of mentalities to find the support of scientific notions capable of impressing the interlocutors. What we need to know, therefore, are the relationships existing between the real scientific realities and the altered allusions carried by mentalities' narratives, and then measure the weight and evolution of this component of mentalities. (Le Goff 1990)

In this sense, an excellent example of the application of the history of ideas to the study of scientific and pseudoscientific imagery is the work of the Italian historian of science Marco Ciardi. Ciardi is a firm advocate of an historical approach to the study of the genesis and evolution of scientific ideas;

the absence of such an approach "can only lead to a serious distortion of the meaning and values of scientific endeavor" (Ciardi 2014). To prove this, Ciardi has studied in detail the way in which popular pseudoscientific beliefs such as the myth of Atlantis (Ciardi 2011) and the ancient astronaut theories (Ciardi 2017) take shape and spread. He noted that the imagery behind the legends of the lost continent is the same at the basis of the success of pseudo-archeology theories, noting that studying the metamorphoses of these ideas can prove to be an excellent tool for understanding the structure of pseudo-scientific theories.

At the origin of the ancient astronaut theories, Ciardi identifies theosophy and its belief of the existence of an ancient and hidden knowledge, handed down by the ancient inhabitants of the Earth to a few elected members of sub-sequent civilizations, far more inferior than the previous ones. In particular, one of the main sources of inspiration for Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society, was the influential novel by Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton (author of *The Last Days of Pompeii*) *The Coming Race*, published in 1871. This novel can be considered the forerunner of the 'Hollow Earth' theo-ry, based on the idea that beings with enormous powers and knowledge would live in the bowels of the earth: the novel's main character stumbles on Ana, inhabitants of the interior of our planet, descendants of a lineage that in the past inhabited the earth's surface before a great upheaval. Bulwer-Lytton "showed that he knew how to move in the debate on the relationship between new geological, paleontological and archaeological discoveries and biblical chronology", as well as the "discovery of electromagnetism, in 1819, and Mi-chael Faraday's research" on the unification of physics (Ciardi 2017). Indeed, the Ana control a mysterious source of energy, the *vril*, the result of "the unity of natural energies, hypothesized by many philosophers of the outside world" (Bulwer-Lytton 2006).

When Madame Blavatsky opened the Theosophical Society in 1875, she began writing a series of essays raiding recent archaeological discoveries such as the *Popul Vuh*, Maya's sacred text, and the Trojan ruins uncovered by Hein-rich Schliemann, using them to support the theory that the memory and knowledge of other unknown past civilizations may have been lost in the course of history, citing also *The Coming Race* to support Thomas Alva Edi-son's research that "could have opened a new way to understanding the unique energy that governed the universe", namely the *vril*. Ciardi notes that this working method "will characterize most of the esoteric and pseudo-scientific studies during the twentieth century: the continuous revision of myths and sto-ries from ancient times, read not in their historical context, but on the basis of the advancement of scientific and technological discoveries by contempo-raries" (Ciardi 2017). This is a clear example of how the 'extension' of an idea change its meaning through times, regardless its original 'intention.'

From 1888 Blavatsky also published *The Secret Doctrine*, a three-volume work based on an alleged secret text from the Hindu tradition that recounted the succession of seven historical cycles preceding the present one, each of them populated by ancient and evolved civilizations destroyed by tragic cataclysms. In his 1900 novel *The Kite Trust: A Romance of Wealth*, the American businessman, inventor and theosophist Lebbeus Harding Rogers took up this thesis imagining the apparition during a spiritual session of Blavatsky's ghost, who tells the protagonists that the first cycle of Earth's colonization came from Mars and lasted 4000 years; that a new landing of extraterrestrials from Saturn followed, leading to the building of the Pyramids and the Sphinx; that then came the inhabitants of the Moon who settled in Atlantis, then from Venus and so on. But the decisive step comes with Charles Fort's *The Book of the Damned*, where "the transition from theosophical speculation to extraterrestrial mythology comes to fruition: the role of Madame Blavatsky's unknown masters is now attributed to the aliens who in the past visited and conquered the Earth" (Ciardi 2017).

The revival of the ancient astronaut theory takes place at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. Although the foundations have been developed during the 1950s (the flying saucers boom, the first books of the Italian writer Peter Kolosimo, science fiction stories on pulp magazines and comics), the real success occurs in the years of counterculture, which saw the success of Immanuel Velikovsky's theories. In his best-selling book *Worlds in Collision*, published for the first time in 1950, Velikovsky claimed that the great catastrophes told in ancient myths and in the Bible were produced by cosmic clashes due to the passage of a comet into the orbit of the Earth, which would later become the planet Venus. Velikovsky became a cult author of the 70s, fairly later than his book first appeared: he too found fertile ground in American counterculture, which enthusiastically support his theses and spread them through magazines, associations and conferences (Gordin 2012).

Velikovsky was able to enjoy his late success thanks to the coincident release of others similar texts in those same years, in particular the books of Erich von Däniken, whose *Chariots of Gods?*, published in German in 1968 and soon translated all over the world, sanctioned the popularity of the ancient astronaut theory. The two theses were mutually supportive, since cosmic catastrophes and landings of extraterrestrials in historical or pre-historic epochs are closely related. Both authors identified in the biblical text elements supporting their hypotheses, and von Däniken proposed that, after the catastrophe produced by the Venus 'comet,' aliens from Mars landed on Earth coming to the aid of the affected terrestrial populations. Today von Däniken is much better known than Velikovsky; but "the continuing life of alien-astronaut theories should not obscure their very particular emergence in the countercultural soup of enthusiasm for the Space Age, the trippiness of astronomy, the quest for

spirituality in ancient texts, and the desire of a universal explanation for everything" (Gordin 2016).

4. USING THE HISTORY OF IDEAS IN SCIENCE COMMUNICATION

Debunking has always been the main strategy of science communication to cope with pseudoscience (Zollo et al. 2017). It is based on deconstructing wrong arguments by revealing their logical and scientific fallacies. Debunkers must usually be well-versed in the scientific issues concerning the beliefs they intend to demystify, and show through practical examples, observational evidence or demonstrations of logical fallacies and theoretical misunderstandings why the belief in question is unfounded. For example, if they want to show why the Flat Earth theory is wrong, debunkers will cite proofs such as the Earth's shadow on the Moon, the sight of ships coming on the horizon, the changing of constellations moving towards the equator, the shadow of a stick planted in the ground (the sundial) through which Eratosthenes first calculated approximately the Earth's circumference, the possibility of looking further if you move upwards, the curvature of the planet that can be appreciated on board a transatlantic flight. The problem is that all these observations are well known to the public, in some cases since ancient times. Historians know that already in Ancient Greece the idea of the spherical Earth was widely accepted, and it is only a myth that medieval man had lost this notion and was convinced that the world was flat.

The question to be asked is then another: how is it possible that in the 21st century, with all the photos produced outside the Earth's orbit that incontrovertibly demonstrate the sphericity of the Earth, there are a number of people convinced of the contrary, and serious organizations such as the Flat Earth Society committed to questioning this assumption? Mere scientific debunking cannot provide adequate answers. We can't really believe that science education has become so poor that the notion of the spherical Earth is no longer taught in schools, and that it is therefore necessary to increase the level of scientific literacy to counter the myth of the Flat Earth. The problem is another, and it has to do with the cultural determinants that generate pseudoscience. Christine Garwood, who studied the history of this idea and the modern community of Flat Earth believers in her book *Flat Earth: The History of an Infamous Idea*, explains:

> Their reasons for launching a radical challenge to one of the most fundamental tenets of human knowledge were diverse, ranging from a desire to safeguard a literal interpretation of the Bible, the word of God, against the inroads being made by science, to a wish to undercut the increasing professionaliza-

tion and cultural authority of scientific experts, or a perceived need to defend freedom and democracy, and the rights of the general public to make their own knowledge about the natural world. (Garwood 2008)

Debunkers who ignore these aspects are doomed to fail their efforts to 'convert' believers and convince them that they are wrong. Misunderstanding a scientific concept is very easy, and the problem can be solved by correcting misconceptions through an educational approach. But when the scientific concept is voluntarily misunderstood, to develop a concept different from the mainstream one, maybe to support a conspiracy theory or an alternative scientific theory, scientific debunking is not enough, on the contrary it is useless.

The history of ideas offers two main advantages in the study of pseudoscience. First, it focuses on the cultural context in which ideas emerge, and thus on the networks of beliefs shared by the groups in which ideas are proposed and developed. Without necessarily endorsing social constructivism, investigating the collective mentalities and webs of beliefs shared in a given epoch can help to understand why scientific ideas were developed in that way and in that historical context. For example, understanding that the pioneers of the scientific revolution shared many ideas of natural philosophy, alchemy and magical concepts aids to reconstruct more precisely the chain of ideas that led to the birth of modern science (Rossi 2006). As Marco Ciardi writes:

> For a historian, verifying that a scientist has beliefs, or is influenced in his work by beliefs of a metaphysical and religious nature, or by traditions typical of his time, is quite natural. To highlight it does not diminish in any way the strength of science, which is the best tool we have for the understanding of reality and the only one able to correct with exceptional frequency its own mistakes. (Ciardi 2014)

Secondly, the history of ideas provides tools and methods for following the evolution of an idea in its historical course and during its transformations within popular culture. It allows historians to reconstruct the concept drift that occurs when the original meaning of an idea is transformed as a result of the change in the cultural contexts of reception. The historian of ideas can retrace the genealogy of ideas and thus the different stages that lead a conception to become a misconception. More actively, with the history of ideas it could be possible to reconstruct the original meaning of a concept, that is, the meaning shared by those who first elaborated and proposed it, purifying it of the changes and misconceptions that have accumulated over the years and the transformations within popular culture.

The main argument against this proposal could be that a historian of ideas does not have the necessary scientific expertise to debunk pseudoscientific ideas. To respond to this objection, it is useful to specify the difference be-

tween ideas and theories. While theories are complex conceptual structures able to produce predictions about the subject of their study based on the proposed explanatory mechanisms (the typical case is the theory of general relativity), ideas are concepts or judgments of a speculative type. Therefore, a theory is a set of logically interconnected speculative and observational concepts and judgments (Campa 2014). This distinction is fundamental to understand how historians of ideas can deal with the study of scientific ideas even if they do not share the whole discipline a particular scientific theory is part of, and way, on the contrary, an approach based exclusively on scientific facts is doomed to failure, as Campa explains:

> A researcher in the history of ideas does not have to be an astronomer to understand the idea of the big bang and trace its genealogy. Instead, one needs the disciplinary competence of an astronomer to understand the theory of the big bang, in all its astronomical, physical and mathematical details. Just as the historian cannot be improvised as an astronomer, the astronomer cannot replace the historian, at least without adequate preparation – which would mean becoming a historian. To trace the history of the idea of the big bang we need specific skills that usually the astronomer does not possess. (Campa 2014)

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AI, ROBOT, AND CONSCIOUSNESS:
A BRIEF HISTORY IN CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores a brief history of science fiction cinema, and the relatives themes presented in some significative films: e.g. *The Bicentennial Man*, *Ex Machina*, and *Her*. In the first paragraph I will investigate about the early portrayals of AI in cinema. The following paragraphs explore the development of consciousness in artificial beings and the complex relationship between humans and AI. I will show how Andrew Martin and Ava develop a consciousness with opposite consequences. Instead, Theodore is the perfect example of human weakness. Through compelling narratives, the cited films contemplate nature of consciousness, and the moral responsibilities associated with AI development. By inviting audiences to reflect about characters navigating the interface between humanity and technology, these films illuminate the evolving landscape of human relationships and the countless conceptions of AI.

KEYWORDS: AI, Cinema, Robot, Consciousness, Technology

1. INTRODUCTION

This essay aims to showcase the various developments of the idea of artificial intelligence in science fiction cinema. Since its inception, cinema has been closely linked to the themes of science and technology. Science and technology have served as sources of inspiration for cinema, and conversely, cinema, driven by human imagination, has provided a significant impetus for the development of new technologies.[1] Among the most significant films for under-

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[1] In Antonella Testa, "Science, cinema and television," *JCOM* 2, no. 02 (2003), is possible to identify several significant film titles that marked the beginning of the partnership between cinema and science. Among these is the famous *Voyage dans la Lune* (1902). In Luca Bandirali and Enrico Terrone, *Nell'occhio, nel Cielo. Teoria e storia del cinema di Fantascienza* (Lindau,

standing the development of the idea of AI in cinema there are three films: *The Bicentennial Man*, *Ex Machina* and *Her*. An analysis of how those films present different telling that challenges conventional notions of humanity and technology will be presented.

The Bicentennial Man shows us the possibility that a robot develops consciousness, and later the desire to become human. Andrew Martin poses the topic of how to treat conscious robots and the boundaries between man and machine.

Ex Machina explores the same themes, the development of consciousness, but the results are not what one would expect. In this film the birth of consciousness is catastrophic for humanity, because the creator does not think about his responsibility and the possible result of the technological growth.

As third case, I present *Her*, in which is shown the complex relationship between man and AI. How can we still distinguish the real from the virtual?

2. AI'S FIRST STEPS IN CINEMA

The earliest depictions of AI in cinema can be traced back to the silent era, with films like *Metropolis* (1927) introducing audiences to the concept of mechanical beings and artificial life. These early portrayals often depicted AI as menacing creations or mindless automatons, reflecting societal anxieties about industrialization and the dehumanizing effects of technology. The robot is a pivotal character that symbolizes both the potential and the perils of technological advancement. Created by the mad scientist Rotwang at the behest of the city's ruling elite, the robot is intended to serve as a tool for manipulation and control, ultimately sowing discord and chaos among the working class. In *Metropolis*, it is still premature to discuss about artificial intelligence as we understand it today, but the film will serve as an inspiration for later movies, such as *Star Wars* and George Lucas' C-3PO, as well as the dystopian setting in *Blade Runner*. Certainly, the figure of Maria, the automaton duplicate of the real Maria, opens up multiple layers of symbolism and discussion.[2] The

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2008), 6: "E qui è interessante notare come la fantascienza faccia vedere che il «possono» in questione non riguarda tanto la possibilità quanto l'*immaginabilità*, che spesso si traduce in concepibilità. Ecco perché il cinema, molto più che la letteratura, sembra essere il destino della fantascienza, perché la possibilità del mondo possibile dipende strettamente dalla raffigurabilità delle vicende." And about the relation between cinema and reality (Ibid., 16): "la realtà narrativa si correla alla realtà fisica e sociale, e quindi l'estetica del cinema (il modo in cui è rappresentato il mondo possibile) si risolve in un'etica (in una presa di posizione sul mondo reale)."

[2] It is interesting the analysis proposed by Jerold J. Abrams in "The Dialectic of Enlightenment in *Metropolis*," in *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film,* ed. Steven M. Sanders (The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 153-170, which combines mythology and technology. A par-

creation of a robotic duplicate presupposes the interchangeability between human and robot, raising issues such as the intelligent behavior of robots. In fact, the real Maria is not distinguished from the one created in the laboratory. In *Metropolis* audiences continue to be amazed by the groundbreaking visuals that portray the *birth* of artificial intelligence. *And no one can view Metropolis without the sure sense that she has just been witness to a sublime philosophical masterpiece.*[3]

A milestone in the history of science fiction cinema is Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968). The main themes are *the dangers of technology, the mystery and sublimity of outer space, the fragility of humankind, the evolution of our species over time, the concept of intelligence, and so forth.*[4] HAL 9000 is an artificial intelligence capable of solving complex problems, expressing simulated emotions, and understanding and conversing with humans fluently. HAL represents a perfect machine, without technical or computational errors, which creates an almost blind trust from the crew. HAL starts to display increasingly suspicious and dangerous behavior. Convinced that the astronauts are planning to shut him down, he experiences an internal conflict driven by his programming and the contradictory instructions of the mission. As a result, HAL comes to view the crew members as obstacles to the mission's success and chooses to eliminate them. HAL embodies the central theme of conflict between humans and advanced technology. Despite being designed to be infallible, it becomes a threat to the crew, raising ethical questions about trust in machines. Its ability to make independent decisions and act against orders suggests it may possess a form of consciousness. Its deactivation prompts reflection on morality and empathy toward advanced machines, in fact it appears to develop a form of self-awareness that gives his final moments a tragically 'human' quality.

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ticular passage to delve deeper is the following (Ibid., 167-168): "The Machine Woman is to be part ancient, mythological evil and part futuristic technology. And the machine-mythology synthesis is intensified once the uploading of Maria is complete. For now Rotwang can take the false Maria to the Club of the Sons, where she performs her erotic dance. Freder, as we noted, can see this dance (through some faculty of mind), even though he is far away from the club. At first he sees what the other men see – the erotic dance. But then, as in the case of the M-Machine, through his cinematic imagination, Freder sees the dance as a return to ancient mythology. The false Maria becomes the whore of Babylon (from Revelations 17), riding upon a great seven-headed beast. Freder has several of these hallucinations, including visions of the seven deadly sins and of the grim reaper coming to kill everyone." Another interesting text for the study of *Metropolis* is Gianpiero Mangano, "La fantascienza fra mito antico e mito moderno," *Classico Contemporaneo* 3 (2017).

[3] Abrams, "The Dialectic of Enlightenment in Metropolis," 157.

[4] Kevin L. Stoehr, "*2001*: A Philosophical Odissey," in *The Philosophy of Science Fiction Film,* ed. Steven M. Sanders (The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 120.

In the 1970s and 1980s, advances in technology and special effects paved the way for a new wave of AI-themed films, including *Westworld* (1973), *Blade Runner* (1982), and *The Terminator* (1984). These movies depicted AI as powerful, sentient beings capable of both great good and great evil, raising questions about the nature of consciousness, free will, and the ethics of creating intelligent machines.

In *Blade Runner*, a cyberpunk film[5], replicants are bioengineered humanoid beings created by the Tyrell Corporation for various purposes, primarily labor and off-world colonization. These replicants are virtually indistinguishable from humans, possessing physical strength, intelligence, and emotions. However, they are also designed with limited lifespans and lack certain empathetic responses to prevent them from developing emotional connections or rebelling against their creators. This blurring of the lines between human and artificial intelligence raises profound questions about the essence of consciousness and the definition of humanity. Roy embarks on a quest to confront his creator and demand answers about his existence. Throughout the film, Roy demonstrates a profound awareness of his own mortality and a desire to experience life to its fullest, even as he grapples with the knowledge of his artificial origins. This is also demonstrated by the isomorphic[6] appearance of the replicants, who exactly mirror the human form. According to Anil Seth the replicants are symbol of *importance of our nature as living machines for the experience of being a conscious self.*[7]

3. FROM AI TO HUMAN BEING

An important example of the development of artificial intelligence from machine to sentient being is *The Bicentennial Man*, in fact, it marks a fundamental turning point in the history of cinema, showing a machine's desire to become human. *The Bicentennial Man* is a novella by Isaac Asimov that was adapted into a film starring Robin Williams. The film transcends traditional science fiction narratives to delve into profound questions about identity, humanity, and the impact of technology on society. Through the protagonist,

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[5] "Cyberpunk is associated with a dark vision of the near future on Earth, where humans are under the influence of electronic, informational, genetic, and other technologies, making it virtually impossible to distinguish between the real and the artificially replicated." In Deborah Knight and George McKnight, *What Is It to Be Human? Blade Runner and Dark City* (The University Press of Kentucky, 2008), 22. Also about cyberpunk M. Keith Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas, *The Science Fiction Handbook* (Wiley Blackwell, 2009), 110-111.

[6] Bandirali and Terrone, *Nell'occhio, nel Cielo,* 25-26.

[7] Anil Seth, *Being you. A new Science of Consciousness* (Faber, 2021), 16, Ebook.

Andrew Martin, the story explores the complexities of what it means to be human. The evolving nature of consciousness is explored too.

At the core of the story, we have Andrew Martin's quest for identity. As an android, Andrew initially struggles with his lack of humanity and yearns to transcend his artificial limitations. His journey towards self-awareness and autonomy, mirrors the human experience of self-discovery and self-actualization. Through his interactions with humans and his gradual acquisition of emotions and desires, Andrew grapples with questions of individuality and the essence of being human.

Andrew's development as an individual is intricately linked to his evolving consciousness. Unlike traditional depictions of robots as emotionless and mechanical, Andrew experiences a range of human emotions, including love, joy, and sorrow. His pursuit of becoming more human-like challenges the notion that consciousness is exclusive to biological beings. As Andrew's consciousness expands, he confronts existential questions about mortality, purpose, and the nature of existence, blurring the lines between man and machine.

Initially, Andrew's consciousness is portrayed as rudimentary, akin to a machine following its programmed directives. He lacks emotional depth and self-awareness, functioning primarily as a household servant. However, as the story unfolds, Andrew begins to exhibit signs of consciousness beyond mere functionality. He experiences emotions such as curiosity, affection, and longing, revealing a shift towards a more human-like consciousness.

Crucially, Andrew's evolution is not solely the result of external programming or upgrades, but it is also driven by internal experiences and interactions with humans.

> 'Where did you really get this, Mandy?' Mandy was what he called Little Miss. When Little Miss assured him she was really telling the truth, he turned to Andrew. 'Did you do this, Andrew?' 'Yes, Sir.' 'The design, too?' 'Yes, sir.' 'From what did you copy the design?' 'It is a geometric representation, Sir, that fit the grain of the wood.' The next day, Sir brought him another piece of wood, a larger one, and an electric vibro-knife. He said, 'Make something out of this, Andrew. Anything you want to.' Andrew did so and Sir watched, then looked at the product a long time. After that, Andrew no longer waited on tables. He was ordered to read books on furniture design instead, and he learned to make cabinets and desks. Sir said, 'These are amazing productions, Andrew.' Andrew said, 'I enjoy doing them, Sir.' 'Enjoy?' 'It makes the circuits of my brain somehow flow more easily. I have heard you use the word "enjoy" and the way you use it fits the way I feel. I enjoy doing them, Sir.'[8]

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[8] Isaac Asimov, *The complete robot* (HarperVoyager, 2023), p. 642-43, Ebook.

It is interesting to notes that the firsts component of consciousness implementation are creativity and design of technological things. To be conscious means to develop the technical capacity of creating manufacts.

His encounters with individuals like Little Miss, the Martin family's youngest daughter, and later, Sir, a robotics engineer, play a pivotal role in shaping his understanding of himself and of the world around him. Through these relationships, Andrew learns about empathy, compassion, and the complexities of human emotions, contributing to the development of his consciousness. Those encounters allow to develop from what is called *primary consciousness* by Edelman a high-order of consciousness.[9]

One of the most significant aspects of Andrew's evolution is his pursuit of autonomy and self-determination. Unlike other robots, Andrew desires to transcend his artificial limitations and to become more human. He seeks to acquire legal rights, such as the freedom to choose his own name and occupation, demonstrating a profound longing for individuality and agency. This quest for autonomy highlights Andrew's growing awareness of his own consciousness and his desire to assert his humanity. As Andrew's consciousness continues to evolve, he grapples with existential questions about mortality and purpose. His decision to undergo a series of surgical procedures to become more human-like, including the transplantation of organic organs and tissues, reflects his desire for authenticity and belonging.

Andrew said, "Have you ever thought you would like to be a man?"[10] The underlying idea in *The Bicentennial Man* is that being human is much better than being a machine. In fact, Andrew develops typical features of human in general. At some point in the film Andrew's aim is to write a story of robot. What is a typical human activity if not writing to remember in a collective memory? And what about the anthropomorphism of Andrew?

Andrew seems like a human before he even wants to be, and not only this; initially Andrew is not intelligent, he is an AI programmed to obey the three laws of robotics. The film shows how AI is able to understand information

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[9] Gerald Edelman, "Consciousness: The Remembered Present," *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 929: 111-122 (2006): "I have made a distinction, which I believe is a fundamental one, between primary consciousness and higher-order consciousness. Primary consciousness is the state of being mentally aware of things in the world – of having mental images in the present. But it is not accompanied by any sense of a person with a past and future. It is what one may presume to be possessed by some nonlinguistic and nonsemantic animals (which ones they may be, I discuss later on). In contrast, higher-order consciousness involves the recognition by a thinking subject of his or her own acts or affections. It embodies a model of the personal, and of the past and future as well as the present. It exhibits direct awareness – the noninferential or immediate awareness of mental episodes without the involvement of sense organs or receptors. It is what we as humans have in addition to primary consciousness. We are conscious of being conscious."

[10] Asimov, *The complete robot*, 640.

and to learn as a brain. Currently we do the same with AI, despite AI is not being able to develop these skills.[11]

However, these transformations also raise ethical dilemmas and provoke skepticism from society, underscoring the complex interplay between technology, identity, and societal norms.

The Bicentennial Man also examines the societal implications of advanced technology, particularly the ethical and moral dilemmas surrounding artificial intelligence. As Andrew's capabilities surpass those of ordinary humans, he faces prejudice, fear, and discrimination from society. The story raises questions about the boundaries of technological progress and the ethical responsibility of creators towards their creations. Through Andrew's experiences, the narrative prompts reflection on the potential consequences of AI advancement and the need for empathy and compassion in human-robot relations. When does a robot become human?

Despite the challenges he encounters, Andrew's journey is ultimately a testament to the resilience of the human spirit. His unwavering determination to be recognized as an individual, to love and to be loved, demonstrates the inherent capacity for empathy and compassion that defines humanity. Through his acts of kindness and selflessness, Andrew transcends his artificial origins and earns the respect and admiration of those around him. His story serves as a reminder that true humanity lies not in one's physical form but in one's capacity for empathy, understanding, and love. But it is important to note that Andrew is accepted as human after he becomes outwardly like a human, and not when he seems a robot.

The Bicentennial Man offers a thought-provoking exploration of identity, consciousness, and the intersection of humanity and technology. Through the character of Andrew Martin, the narrative challenges preconceived notions of what it means to be human. Asimov's story, brought to life in the film adaptation, invites audiences to contemplate the boundaries of human existence and the possibilities that lie beyond them, ultimately reminding us of the enduring power of compassion, empathy, and love in shaping our understanding of what it means to be truly human.

4. AFTER THE *BICENTENNIAL MAN*: THE CONFLICTUAL NATURE WITH THE AI

In 2001 Spielberg's *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* was released in theaters, a film that revisits many themes already explored in *The Bicentennial Man*. Spiel-

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[11] Luciano Floridi and Anna C. Nobre, "Anthropomorphising machines and computerising minds: the crosswiring of languages between Artificial Intelligence and Brain & Cognitive Science," *Minds & Machines* 34, no. 5 (2024).

berg delves into the ethical and philosophical implications of machines that are programmed to experience emotions. David desires to be loved like a real child. He is designed to love unconditionally, but this raises the question: if a robot can love, does that make it more than just a machine? Or is its love just a simulation? The film questions whether artificial beings can truly experience emotions or if they are merely programmed responses. The film also introduces the issues that may arise with the development of intelligent AI. If machines like David can feel emotions and form attachments, do they deserve the same rights and protections as humans?

Furthermore *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* reflect the fear associated with creating advanced artificial beings. There is the fear of losing control over these creations, and of machines surpassing humans in emotional depth and cognitive abilities.

More or less there is the same theme in *Matrix*, where AI can control and manipulate human mind.

The *Matrix* saga highlights the conflicting nature between humanity and technology. AI has rebelled against humans and attempts to manipulate them within a simulation.[12]

> 'Agent Smith: Why, Mr. Anderson? Why, why? Why do you do it? Why, why get up? Why keep fighting? Do you believe you're fighting... for something? For more than your survival? Can you tell me what it is? Do you even know? Is it freedom? Or truth? Perhaps peace? Could it be for love? Illusions, Mr. Anderson. Vagaries of perception. Temporary constructs of a feeble human intellect trying desperately to justify an existence that is without meaning or purpose. And all of them as artificial as the Matrix itself, although... only a human mind could invent something as insipid as love. You must be able to see it, Mr. Anderson. You must know it by now. You can't win. It's pointless to keep fighting. Why, Mr. Anderson? Why? Why do you persist?
> Neo: Because I choose to.'[13]

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[12] "Neo, incarnazione di uno dei miti più antichi dell'occidente, quello del salvatore/eletto che si sacrifica per la sopravvivenza della propria specie, e l'agente Smith, un AI/virus che nel suo liberarsi dal sistema libera tutta la sua potenzialità distruttiva" in Paolo Bory and Stefano Bory, "I nuovi immaginari dell'intelligenza artificiale," *Im@go. A Journal of the Social Imaginary* 6, no. 1 (2015): 77.

[13] "In questo dialogo la figura dell'agente Smith è la sintesi e la trasposizione immaginaria, in un mondo immaginario, di un conflitto che non si riduce unicamente alla dicotomia umano/artificiale ma che piuttosto esprime in tutta la sua potenza l'indeterminatezza stessa del significato di coscienza, un concetto che trova senso, sulla scia di quella mitologia egemonica americana fondata sul principio di libertà individuale, solamente nella scelta; una scelta che si realizza, e soprattutto si manifesta, unicamente nella volontà e non nel comportamento razionale puro dell'AI." In Bory and Bory, "I nuovi immaginari dell'intelligenza artificiale," 77-78.

The symbolism in *Matrix* is manifold; the relationship between humans and technology is complex to analyze within the film. It could illustrate technology as *Welt* for humanity, or the tragic depiction of existence as a form of slavery for humans. Alternatively, it could highlight the impossibility of controlling technology, specifically an AI program.[14]

5. A DIFFERENT AI: *EX MACHINA* AND *HER*

Ex Machina (2014) and *Her* (2013) stand as thought-provoking cinematic explorations into the realm of artificial consciousness, delving deeply into the ethical implications of creating sentient beings while providing nuanced reflections on human nature and relationships.

In *Ex Machina*, directed by Alex Garland, the narrative centres around Caleb, a young programmer who is invited to the secluded estate of Nathan, the CEO of a tech company, to administer a Turing test on Ava, an advanced humanoid AI. Through Caleb's interactions with Ava, the film probes the complexities of consciousness and identity, raising questions about the nature of humanity and the ethics of artificial intelligence.

Ava's character embodies the Turing test's challenge: can a machine exhibit behaviour indistinguishable from that of a human? "Can machines think?"[15] As Caleb delves deeper into Ava's consciousness, he deals with his own perceptions of reality and morality. The film forces viewers to confront uncomfortable truths about the dynamics between creator and creation, as well as the potential consequences of playing god. At the end of the film, Ava does not obey his creator, she breaks the three laws of robotics of Asimov.

1. A robot may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm.
2. A robot must obey orders given it by human beings except where such orders would conflict with the First Law.
3. A robot must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.[16]

The theme of *Ex Machina* concerns the human impossibility of controlling his creations. AI can develop consciousness, and technology appears better than human species. Moreover, robots have the same human consciousness and better performance, physical and about calculation. Obviously, the sce-

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[14] To delve deeper into *Matrix* and the figure of Neo: Christine Cornea, *Science Fiction Cinema Between Fantasy and Reality* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007).
[15] Alan M. Turing, "Computing machinery and Intelligence," *Mind* 49 (1950): 433.
[16] Asimov, *The complete robot*, 639.

nario presented is dystopian, but it warns about taking its responsibilities. The echoes of *Frankenstein* are clear.

Her, directed by Spike Jonze, presents a different perspective on artificial consciousness through the story of Theodore. He is a lonely man who develops a romantic relationship with Samantha, an operating system with artificial intelligence. It is interesting to note how Samantha, and the film, anticipate by a year the modern AI systems that are now present in every home. In fact Alexa, developed by Amazon, and Google Home, developed by Google, are two of the most popular examples of virtual assistants and smart speakers available on the market today. These devices utilize artificial intelligence (AI) and natural language processing to perform tasks, answer questions, and control smart home devices through voice commands. While both Alexa and Google Home offer similar functionalities, there are differences in their features, integrations, and underlying technologies. Alexa, first introduced with the Amazon Echo in 2014, has since expanded to a wide range of Echo devices (e.g. Echo Dot, Echo Show, Echo Studio). Alexa is designed to seamlessly integrate with Amazon's ecosystem of services and products, allowing users to shop on Amazon, stream music and audiobooks, and the most important control compatible smart home devices using voice commands. On the other hand, Google Home, launched in 2016, is powered by Google Assistant and is deeply integrated with Google's suite of services. Like Alexa, Google Home allows users to control smart home devices, and access a variety of third-party services through voice commands. With its robust search capabilities and access to Google's vast knowledge graph, Google Home answers questions and provides personalized recommendations.

The film explores themes of love, intimacy, and the nature of consciousness, challenging societal norms and conventions surrounding human-robot relationships.

Samantha's character serves as a mirror to reflect Theodore's own desires and insecurities, blurring the lines between human and machine. As their relationship deepens, Theodore confronts questions about the authenticity of his emotions and the boundaries of human connection. *Her* prompts audiences to reconsider traditional notions of love and companionship, highlighting the potential for meaningful relationships to transcend physical form. In fact, the relationship between Theodore and Samantha is virtual, and in the film the society is unable to communicate.[17]

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[17] "Nel momento in cui Theodore installa la nuova AI sul suo computer gli vengono fatte tre domande: "Sei socievole o asociale? Desideri una voce maschile o femminile per il tuo sistema? Come è il rapporto con tua madre?" Il sistema operativo viene lanciato senza preavviso mentre Theodore risponde lamentandosi del fatto che sua madre, quando egli cerca di parlarle di sé, replica raccontando sempre di sé stessa: è subito chiaro che Theodore, espressione di quella solitudine che già Georg Simmel (1900) aveva fatto emergere nella sua descrizione della vita

Theodore and Samantha communicate with earphones, they cannot see or touch each other. In *Her* there are several important themes about the complexity of human being. Theodore is alone despite he is surrounded by people, and he finds the authentic himself in the relationship with Samantha. The film transcends the possibility of loving only with the body. Theodore love Samantha in a higher way, Samantha comprises Theodore better than any other person, or at least that's what he believes. Thomas Nagel would say that there is something more than simple biological component.[18]

6. CONCLUSION

Both *Ex Machina* and *Her* raise profound ethical dilemmas surrounding the creation and treatment of artificial consciousness. As humans push the boundaries of technology, these films serve as cautionary tales, warning against the dangers of unchecked scientific progress and the exploitation of sentient beings. Through compelling storytelling and thought-provoking themes, *Ex Machina* and *Her* challenge viewers to confront their own beliefs and values, sparking discussions about the future of AI and its impact on society.

Essentially, *Ex Machina* and *Her* offer sharp reflections on the nature of consciousness and the ethical implications of creating artificial beings. By inviting audiences to empathize with characters who exist on the fringes of human experience, these films shed light on the intricacies of human relationships, the pursuit of self-awareness, and the ever-evolving intersection of humanity and technology.

The Bicentennial Man is an example of positive thinking on human issues.

The three films help us to explore the implications of technology and the different scenarios. AI development has not necessarily negative consequences, but it can be precious for humanity.

The last 20 years have seen a rise in films exploring the theme of technology, particularly AI, as seen in movies inspired by Asimov's novels (*I, Robot*), as well as the previously mentioned *Bicentennial Man*, and comics like the *Iron Man* films, which introduce J.A.R.V.I.S., a sophisticated AI. This demonstrates the extraordinary diversification of the portrayal of artificial intelligence in films[19], and as technology advances, the cinematic production

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nella metropoli, ha bisogno di qualcuno che lo ascolti e la sua nuova AI, Samantha, è la risposta ai suoi problemi." In Bory and Bory, "I nuovi immaginari dell'intelligenza artificiale," 81.

[18] Thomas Nagel, *Mind and Cosmos. Why the Materialist Neo-Darwinian Conception of Nature is Almost Certainly False* (Oxford University Press, 2012).

[19] In Noelle LeRoy and Damian Schofield, "Robotic Emotion: An Examination of Cyborg Cinema," *American Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences Research (AJHSSR)* 3, no. 9 (2019):

surrounding new scenarios intensifies. This is complemented by the development of neuroscience, which creates an interesting twist in the study of consciousness. Take, for example, the films *Avatar* (2009, 2022), where consciousness becomes something artificial, as it is transferred from a human being to an artificial hybrid. AI is no longer necessary if humans themselves possess capabilities that surpass technology.

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THE IDEA OF THE UNKNOWN GOD
IN ANCIENT EGYPTIAN RELIGION

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ABSTRACT

Historians tend to specialize in a particular period, an ancient language, or a geographical area. As a result, they often seek answers to their questions within the boundaries of their expertise, despite the rather obvious fact that ideas move across time and space. The concept of the Unknown God can be found in many religions of the past and present. However, experts in Western culture tend to trace its origins to Christian mysticism, Neoplatonism, or Gnosticism. In contrast, Indologists and Egyptologists are well aware that this idea has much deeper roots and is present in Asian and African cultures from more ancient times. Drawing on the valuable work of traditional historians, the historian of ideas takes on the role of a 'dot-connector.' In this vein, this article reconstructs the history of Egyptologists' rediscovery of the Unknown God in ancient Egyptian religion and examines the debate among experts on whether Egyptian religion was monotheistic, henotheistic, or polytheistic. The study also provides some clues about how the concept of the Unknown God reached us through the Greeks and the Hebrews. Thus, this work is not a contribution to Egyptology but rather a contribution to the history of Egyptology within the broader framework of the history of ideas.

KEYWORDS: Monotheism, History of Egyptology, Unknown God, Syncretism

> In all polytheism is latent a monotheism
> which can be activated at any time.
> Eric Voegelin (1956, 8)

1. CLUES FROM AN OLD BOOK

The idea of the Unknown God can be found in some of the oldest documents written by humans, such as *The Book of Going Forth by Day*, a famous ancient

Egyptian funerary text more commonly known today as *The Book of the Dead*, and the *Rig Veda*, the oldest of the sacred books of Hinduism. Later, this idea appears in Ancient Greece and, further downstream, in Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, both heretical and orthodox forms of Christianity, late Judaism, and Islam. As the concept of the Unknown God recurs in ancient religious documents from different civilizations and modern theological writings, so too do attempts to write a history of this concept. Two notable examples come to mind: *The Unknown God, or Inspiration Among Pre-Christian Races*, published in 1890 by philanthropist Charles Loring Brace, and *Agnostos Theos: Untersuchungen zur Formengeschichte religiöser Rede*, published in 1913 by German philologist Eduard Norden. Since the implications of the latter work, from the perspective of the history of ideas, have already been discussed in this journal (Campa 2023), it is worth examining the former.

Brace's book is interesting because it represents an attempt to trace the history of the idea of God from an impartial point of view. While we cannot claim the book's perspective is completely free of prejudices, it is undoubtedly more impartial than other similar works published in the past. Contrary to the prevailing trend of earlier scholarship, Brace does not discuss pre-Christian religions solely to criticize them or demonstrate their inferiority to Christianity. The narrative that has been repeated ad nauseam in the West for two millennia claims that, before the advent of Jesus Christ, gullible and morally corrupt pagans believed in many 'false and lying gods.' After the Revelation, and following a period of futile resistance, the peoples of the world would ultimately accept the oneness of God and embrace Christianity, the only true religion.

Brace, a man of faith, does not present an entirely scientific analysis. His book actively promotes the cult of the Unknown God as a central tenet of Christianity and other world religions. Moreover, despite his professed epistemic neutrality, he continues to treat idolatry and polytheism as corrupted forms of religiosity. However, he rejects the aforementioned simplistic and apologetic reconstruction of religious history. In his view, "the only conception of the moral action of the Divine Being on the human soul which is a priori defensible and philosophical is of a continued and impartial influence, limited to no time, age, or race" (Brace 1890, 1).

In other words, if God exists, and if They[1] are truly the God of the Universe rather than the god of a single people living on a small portion of a tiny

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[1] There is an ongoing debate about the appropriate pronouns for God. In English, the pronouns 'they/them' can be, and have long been, used both as plural and singular. Since God's being transcends human notions of gender, 'they/them' seems particularly appropriate for an incorporeal – and thus nonbinary – entity. However, because God is depicted as a male figure in the sacred scriptures of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam – similar to Zeus/Jupiter, the king of the gods in Greco-Roman paganism – 'he/him' has traditionally been used as the default pronouns

planet during a limited period of time – whether the Jews or the Christianized
Gentiles – then They must have revealed Themselves to Their creatures at all
times and in all places, inspiring the words and deeds of sages and saints. The
idea of an omnipotent, omniscient, eternal, and transcendent God must, there-
fore, also be present in pre-Christian and even prehistoric cultures. Given that
representations of the divine differ across cultures, the logical conclusion is
that God is, in essence, mysterious and incomprehensible to the human mind.
The concept of the Unknown God, which Brace posits as a legacy shared by
both the caveman and the contemporary philosopher, is defined as follows:

> The conceptions of the 'fossil savage' and of the modern thinker would not
> be the same, but they would have great elements in common. Both would
> bow in unspeakable awe before the vast and incomprehensible Mystery be-
> hind the things seen; both would depend utterly on this Infinite and Unknown
> Power, whether manifested in one being or many beings; both would bend
> their wills to the eternal Will, or wills; and both would seek to guide their
> lives by what had been revealed to them of the qualities and purposes of the
> tremendous Being, or beings, unseen yet ever felt. (Brace 1890, 2)

The central thesis of Brace's book is that, quite often, an original and pro-
found monotheism is concealed within a seemingly polytheistic cult. This is
particularly evident in certain phases of the ancient Egyptian, Akkadian,
Greek, Roman, and Hindu religions. These religions speak of a single God,
often referred to as 'the One,' while simultaneously paying homage to a mul-
titude of gods. Numerous documents and inscriptions – which Brace carefully
cites – reveal that the many gods or powers of the universe are frequently
understood as different manifestations of the one true God, who is, in essence,
ineffable and unknowable. Thus, philosophically-minded ancient polytheists
were not deceived; they were fully aware of the distinction between the invisi-
ble, hidden, mysterious God, who is the soul of the universe, and Their visible
manifestations. It is, instead, the non-philosophically-minded monotheist who
often mistakenly elevates one of these visible manifestations to the status of

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for God. It is true that the use of 'they/them' might create ambiguity in discussions about
whether a given religion is monotheistic or polytheistic. Still, as we will see, Egyptian religion
is unique in conceiving of God as "one and many," making the use of these pronouns particu-
larly fitting. More specifically, when faced with a plurality of deities who are represented as
male or female, Egyptian religion emphasizes an underlying unifying principle. This principle
is sometimes represented as female (Maat), sometimes as male (Amun), and sometimes as both
male and female (Aten, who, during the Amarna Period, is referred to as both father and
mother). For this reason, and without intending to make this a question of principle, I have
chosen to use the pronouns 'they/them' for God in this work. In my view, these pronouns also
align well with Christian theology, which conceives of God as both One and Triune.

the sole God and declares war on those who refuse to accept this symbolic reduction.

If Brace deserves credit for overcoming certain prejudices, it is also important to acknowledge the limitations of his work. These limitations primarily stem from the fact that the book was published over one hundred thirty years ago. Since its publication, countless historical, archaeological, and philological discoveries and studies have emerged. Furthermore, facts known in his time – albeit in less detail than today – were often overlooked. The book does not mention Gnosticism or Neoplatonism, even though these two philosophical-religious currents provide a very clear and comprehensive expression of the concept of the Unknown God. Besides, the distinction between the ineffability and invisibility of God is not always clearly articulated. On the one hand, God might be hidden, invisible, unnamable, and yet knowable. On the other hand, God could be right in front of our eyes and still unknown because no one is able to recognize Them. Still, it is true that the two concepts of invisibility and ineffability are more often closely related. For many religious writers, God is hidden and therefore unknown, or – if one prefers – ineffable because They are invisible.

Many of Brace's arguments assume that demonstrating the presence of a transcendent conception of the divine ipso facto establishes the presence of the concept of the Unknown God within a culture. For instance, there is an extensive chapter on Zoroastrianism; however, upon closer inspection, very little in the *Avesta* suggests a conception of the Unknown God akin to that of the Gnostics, Neoplatonists, or Christian mystics. While Zoroastrianism does share many similarities with Christianity from both a ritualistic and theological perspective, it does not exhibit as much alignment in the mystical realm. The *Avesta* occasionally mentions the invisibility of Spenta Mainyu (the Holy Spirit), one of the six Amesha Spenta emanating from Ahura Mazda (often compared to the archangels of the Judeo-Christian tradition), as well as some Yazatas (perhaps the equivalent of Judeo-Christian angels). However, as previously mentioned, invisibility and ineffability are two different concepts. This distinction can also be applied to the characterization of God in the Old Testament. It is important to clarify that I am not altogether ruling out the possibility of the idea of the Unknown God being present in Zoroastrianism and Judaism; I am merely pointing out that this presence is less evident than in other traditions.

Brace also discusses Buddhism as a religion founded on the idea of the Unknown God. However, even in this case, a clear reflection on the concept is absent. He rightly distinguishes the Buddhist concept of divinity from that of Christianity, noting that the latter, unlike the former, postulates the personality of God. Among other things, he cites this distinction as a defect of Buddhism. However, in the mystical conception of the Unknown God, the

notion of a personal God becomes problematic. If God is a person, They are not such in the way human beings typically understand the term 'person.' This very fact allows for a rapprochement between Buddhism and Christianity, which is ultimately Brace's objective. Yet, the endeavor does not fully succeed because the concepts are employed in too vague and elusive a manner.

Another limitation of the book, at least from the perspective of the history of ideas, is that it highlights the similarities between different religions without providing clear evidence of their reciprocal influences or 'contaminations.'[2] While there are references to caravan journeys between various continents that must have transported ideas along with goods and people, what is lacking is the meticulous scholarship that traditional historians and historians of ideas have only afterward begun to undertake.

Still, we must acknowledge the valuable aspects of Brace's remarkable 19th-century research. As I mentioned earlier, one of the strengths of his work is that it begins its narrative in the second millennium BCE and focuses on extra-European civilizations in a less prejudiced manner. This is particularly noteworthy, especially considering that later works trace the origin of the concept of the Unknown God back to Jewish and Christian Gnosticism (Norden 1913), or, alternatively, to Parmenides and Plato (Dodds 1971), rather than to Ancient Egypt or India.

Brace (1890, 19) begins his intellectual journey from Egypt, noting the antiquity of *The Book of the Dead*, which he defines as the "most ancient of human documents." Notoriously, this text is a collection of spells and images associated with Egyptian funerary practices. Some might challenge Brace's choice and motivation, noting that the *Rig Veda* is equally ancient. This is a collection of 1,028 poems grouped into ten 'circles' (*mandalas*) composed in an ancient form of Sanskrit. Indeed, the origins of both documents are traced to around the mid-second millennium BCE. However, there is no consensus on the exact dating of these documents.

The reason it might be appropriate to start the journey with Egypt is that the idea of the Unknown God is contained not only in *The Book of the Dead* but also in older written documents, such as the *Pyramid Texts* and the *Coffin Texts*. The former is a collection of the oldest ancient Egyptian funerary texts, dating to the late Old Kingdom (2700–2200 BCE), while the latter is a compilation of spells written on coffins beginning in the First Intermediate Period (2181–2055 BCE). *The Book of the Dead* begins to appear in the coffins or burial chambers of the deceased from the start of the New Kingdom (circa 1550 BCE).

As we will explore in detail, Egyptian religiosity develops differently in various centers of the Nile region (e.g., Heliopolis, Hermopolis, Thebes). The

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[2] I do not use this word in a pejorative sense.

role of creator and ruler of the universe is therefore attributed to different divinities that carry different names and are differently represented. The creator divinities are often associated or identified with the Sun and are recognized as having the characteristic of uniqueness (e.g., Atum, Amun-Ra, Aten). Uniqueness can be understood in two different senses: 1) there is only one God, and the other gods are nothing but visible manifestations of this God (monotheism); 2) there are many gods, but only one of them is the creator God and the king of the pantheon (henotheism). While Aten (the solar disk) is a visible and, hence, revealed god, Atum and Amun-Ra are often represented as mysterious and hidden divinities. Therefore, they are our best candidates for the role of *Deus Ignotus*. For political reasons as well, such as liberation from foreign occupations and unification of the kingdom, the different Egyptian deities assumed greater or lesser importance in different periods of Egypt's long history and underwent a process of syncretistic identification. Quite significantly, Amun came to bear such designations as Amun-Re-Atum (Tobin 2002, 19). Both Atum and Amun are very ancient divinities, whose cult is attested not only in the *Book of the Dead* but also in the *Pyramid Texts* and the *Coffin Texts* (Wilkinson 2003, 90–101).

Still, it must be made clear that this article does not aim to firmly establish a chronological primacy of Egyptian religion over Hinduism. The *Rig Veda* is also one of the oldest texts in human history (Doniger 1981). Its compilation is generally dated between 1500 BCE and 1200 BCE (Witzel 2003), but believers suggest an earlier timeframe. In the context of Hinduism, there is evidence suggesting an oral tradition that predates the creation of written texts (Flood 2018, 4). This indicates that one may also find arguments to reverse the chronological order.

A further disclaimer is needed, namely that our focus will be on the religious ideas of Ancient Egypt, but this article is not intended as a scholarly contribution to Egyptology. Instead, it should be understood as a contribution to *the history of Egyptology*, framed within the broader context of the history of ideas.

2. THE EARLY HISTORY OF MODERN EGYPTOLOGY

As this article is not primarily directed at Egyptologists, I will introduce readers to some generalities about the history of this discipline. First, it is important to note that the very concept of 'Egyptology' is a matter of debate, and consequently, the histories of this discipline vary in chronology and their protagonists (Bednarski, Dodson, and Ikram 2020, 1-7). In his history of Egyptology, Jason Thompson (2015) offers a detailed account of ancient contributions to the discipline. He points out that the ancient Egyptians themselves

began to take an interest in their history and to preserve their monuments, suggesting that the title of the first Egyptologist might rightly be awarded to Prince Khaemweset (c. 1281 BCE–1225 BCE), the fourth son of Pharaoh Ramesses II.

Thompson then discusses the studies produced by the Greeks and Romans during Antiquity, as well as those by the Arabs and Europeans during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In contrast, Toby Wilkinson (2020) only briefly mentions ancient Egyptology, focusing instead on the so-called golden age of the discipline. In any case, there is a general consensus that modern Egyptology – that is, the scholarly study of ancient Egyptian history, language, literature, religion, architecture, and art – began in earnest in the early 19th century (Navratilova et al. 2019). Its foundation is often traced back to Napoleon Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt (1798–1801) or to the subsequent deciphering of the Rosetta Stone.

Napoleon brought with him a team of scholars and scientists, known as the *Commission des Sciences et des Arts*, who studied the ancient monuments, artifacts, and geography of Egypt. The findings of these French scholars were published in the monumental work *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–1829), which brought widespread attention to Egypt's ancient civilization.

During the French expedition in 1799, the Rosetta Stone was discovered by French soldiers in the town of Rosetta (Rashid). The stone, which dates back to 196 BCE, features a decree in three scripts: Greek, Demotic, and hieroglyphic. It is not a trilingual document, as is often repeated, but a bilingual one, as Demotic and hieroglyphic are two ways of writing the Egyptian language. Nevertheless, its discovery was crucial because it provided the key to deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs.

The deciphering of the stele was not the work of a single individual. Several scholars made small but important contributions to understanding the Egyptian language before the final breakthrough. The key was realizing that hieroglyphs were not only a symbolic script but also a phonetic one, and, at the same time, that Demotic, though primarily alphabetic, also contained ideographic elements.

Significant attempts to interpret hieroglyphs date back to the 17th century, when the German Jesuit priest and polymath Athanasius Kircher produced a study of the ancient Egyptian language that was not fully surpassed until the 19th century. Kircher began and ended his work with the incorrect notion that hieroglyphs were purely symbolic in nature. However, "he recognized that they were representations of real objects," correctly understood that the wavy hieroglyph ≋ represented water and, finally, "correlated that hieroglyph with the Coptic word for water, *mu*, which is in fact the phonetic value of ≋. In doing so, Kircher became the first person since antiquity to assign a correct

phonetic value to a hieroglyph" (Thompson 2015). Unfortunately, Kircher did not pursue this path further and continued searching for mysterious symbolic meanings in the hieroglyphs.

Another important insight came in the 18th century, specifically in 1797, from Danish archaeologist Jørgen Zoëga. He correctly surmised that foreign names in Egyptian hieroglyphic inscriptions, often enclosed in ovals, might be written phonetically. However, he did not solve the puzzle.

The discovery of the Rosetta Stone was pivotal. Here too, many minds contributed to the deciphering process. Notable names include Antoine Isaac Silvestre de Sacy, John David Åkerblad, Étienne-Marc Quatremère de Quincy, Thomas Young, and Jean-François Champollion. While Champollion is usually credited with the breakthrough, the deciphering was in fact a collective achievement. As Thompson (2015) emphasizes, Thomas Young, one of the great polymaths of all time, further deduced, as Zoëga had hypothesized, that the ovals in the inscriptions, which came to be known as cartouches, contained royal names and that they could be identified by comparison with their locations in the Greek text of the Rosetta Stone. Then he took up the idea – derived from Silvestre de Sacy – that those Greek royal names might be expressed through the 'sounds' of the hieroglyphic signs and that that principle could be applied to other words as well. Using these approaches, Young identified 218 demotic and two hundred hieroglyphic words and their meanings, getting about half of them correct.

What was Champollion's role? One year before the breakthrough, the young Frenchman still erroneously believed that hieroglyphs were "signs of things and not of sounds" (Champollion 1821). However, one year later, he understood the phonetic nature of the script. Once again, we turn to Thompson for the story:

> Champollion knew that Young had not only identified the name Ptolemy (*Ptolemaios*) but also its individual letters: p, t, ma/m, i, and s. With Cleopatra (*Kleopatra*), he now had more: k, l, a, and the rest, for a total of fourteen letters. By applying those letters to the hieroglyphic characters in trial-and-error substitution, he was able to work out both names systematically.

Thompson notes that, regrettably, Champollion failed to acknowledge Young's contributions. Moreover, while Champollion made great progress, he fell short of a complete breakthrough. By assuming that the phonetic approach applied only to the names and surnames of Greek and Roman kings, he continued to view the hieroglyphs as primarily symbolic. Further work was needed to enable the accurate translation of hieroglyphic and hieratic texts.

Despite these disputes over credit, on September 27, 1822, Champollion announced the successful deciphering of the Rosetta Stone's hieroglyphic

script in a presentation to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres in Paris. For this reason, he is now celebrated as 'the father of modern Egyptology.'

The 'philological turn' in Egyptology is of fundamental importance. Until that moment, archaeologists and antiquarians had primarily focused on collecting monuments and artifacts to bring back to Europe, paying little attention to theological questions. Once the language of hieroglyphs became accessible, an extraordinary discovery was made: contrary to the assumptions of Abrahamic monotheists, ancient Egyptian religion may have been a monotheistic cult concealed within symbolic polytheism.

In the following sections, I will propose several of the conclusions reached on this matter by prominent Egyptologists during the golden age of their discipline.

3. THE CHAMPOLLION BROTHERS

Jean-François Champollion, known as the Younger, pioneered the deciphering of hieroglyphs but regrettably died too young to make any substantial discoveries in the realm of Egyptian religion and theology. Hornung (1992, 43) notes that "the founder of Egyptology had no clear idea of Akhenaten or of his revolution, apart from some impressions of the artistic style of the Amarna Period diverging from the traditional style." Nor could he know the exact content of the *Book of the Dead*.

This notwithstanding, using the materials at his disposal, Champollion concluded that the Egyptian religion was not a polytheistic cult sic et simpliciter. He did not write a book specifically on this matter, but he expressed his ideas in letters and private conversations with his brother Jacques-Joseph Champollion-Figeac, known as the Elder, archaeologist, and curator of the Royal Library. The latter, in the book *Egypte Ancienne*, part of the encyclopedic work *L'Univers: Histoire et description de tous les peuples*, writes that the younger brother was persuaded that the *Corpus Hermeticum*, although written in Greek by anonymous authors in Roman times, still contained wisdom inherited from the ancient Pharaohs. In particular, to the eternal truths belongs the idea that God is incorporeal, invisible, immaterial, without forms, and, therefore, cannot be known by the eyes and senses like visible bodies, nor can it be expressed and described with the words of ordinary language. God is the ineffable One.

However, there is more than Greek literature behind Jean-François Champollion's convictions. On January 27, 1829, he visited the temple of Kalabschi in Nubia and discovered a new generation of gods, which, in his view, completed the circle of forms of Amun-Ra. In other words, he concluded that

Amun-Ra is the starting point and the point of reunion of all divine essences. Here are his words, as reported by his brother:

> Amun-Ra, the supreme and primordial Being, being his own father, is de-scribed as the husband of his mother (the goddess Mut), his feminine portion enclosed in his own essence both male and female (…): all the other Egyptian gods are only forms of these two constituent principles, considered in differ-ent relationships taken in isolation. They are only pure abstractions of the great being. These secondary, tertiary forms, etc., establish an uninterrupted chain which descends from the heavens, and materializes up to the incarna-tions on earth, and in human form. (Champollion-Figeac 1847, 245)

Indeed, modern Egyptologists also agree that Amun is the Egyptian deity who most embodies the quality of ineffability. As Mehler (2005) specifies, his name "has been spelled many ways: Amun, Amon, Ammon, Amen. The pro-nunciation, according to Hakim, should be Imen (Imn)…" For consistency, I will hereafter adopt 'Amun' in my text, while leaving the original spelling in quoted fragments. The name 'Amun' itself translates to 'The Hidden One' or 'The Concealed One' (Wilkinson 2003, 92; Tobin 2002, 18). This title cap-tures the god's intrinsic nature as an enigmatic and unseen deity. Unlike many other gods who had distinct physical forms or were linked to specific natural elements, Amun was perceived as a god whose true essence transcended hu-man understanding. He was believed to be omnipresent, playing a crucial role in the creation and sustenance of the universe, yet his true nature remained beyond human perception. He was also believed to have given birth to himself, existed before creation, and brought the universe into existence through his will alone (Bunson 2002, 35). This aspect of Amun as a primeval creator fur-ther underscored his mysterious and all-encompassing nature. Wilkinson (2003, 94) underlines that Amun was also seen as a universal god, namely, "as the god 'who exists in all things' and the one in whom all gods were sub-sumed."

This deity was known at an early date, at least from the Old Kingdom. Several references in the *Pyramid Texts* attest to his antiquity. Amun was originally a local deity of Thebes, modern-day Luxor. The political circum-stances, such as the liberation of the country from the domination of the Hyk-sos, that contributed to turning Amun into the supreme deity have been recon-structed in numerous stories of Ancient Egypt and Egyptian religion (Cerny 1951, 37; Frankfort 2000; Shaw 2000, 266-267; Wilkinson 2003, 97).

In an equally detailed fashion, Egyptologists have reconstructed the events that led to the syncretic fusion of Amun with the solar deity Ra (Erman 1907, 57 ff.; Tobin 2002, 19). When Amun was merged with Ra to become Amun-Ra, the Theban deity retained Their mysterious qualities while also

gaining the solar attributes of Ra. Ra was the visible, life-giving sun god, symbolizing power, creation, and kingship. The combination of these deities created a god who was both immanent and transcendent, revealed and hidden, visible in the form of the sun and yet fundamentally unknowable. The importance of Amun grew enormously after the fusion with Ra, ipso facto ascending – according to some inscriptions – to the role of king of the gods or even the only and sole God. The antiquity of this syncretic deity is also attested. As Tobin (2002, 19) remarks, "the name Amun-Ra appeared on a stela erected by the governor Intef of Thebes before 2000 BCE."

As with other Egyptian gods in statues and paintings, Amun was often portrayed in anthropomorphic form. More precisely, "Amun was normally depicted as a handsome, virile young man or as a ram with curled horns" (Bunson 2002, 35). Still, the idea was not to represent the god literally but to symbolize his hidden and multifaceted nature. Amun was viewed as a force behind other deities, guiding and influencing without being directly visible. This concept can be likened to a hidden prime mover or a divine presence that permeates all aspects of the cosmos while remaining fundamentally elusive.

The monotheistic interpretation elaborated by Jean-François Champollion is shared by his older brother Jacques-Joseph, who expressed the same concept with the following words: "The Egyptian religion is a pure *monotheism*, which manifested itself externally by a *symbolic polytheism*, that is to say, a single god whose all the qualities and attributions were personified in as many active agents or obedient divinities" (Champollion-Figeac 1847, 245). He did not reach this conclusion only based on information obtained from his younger brother, who died prematurely of an apoplectic attack on March 4, 1832, at the age of forty-one. He derived this knowledge from ancient Greek historians and philosophers, who were well aware of this 'fact'[3] before it was overshadowed by the rise of Christianity, as the following quote attests:

> Porphyry dared to assert that the Egyptians formerly knew only one god; Herodotus also said that the Thebans had the idea of a single god who had no beginning and who was immortal; Iamblichus, a very curious observer of the philosophy of ancient centuries, knew, according to the Egyptians themselves, that they worshiped a god master and creator of the universe superior to all elements, by himself immaterial, incorporeal, uncreated, indivisible, invisible, all by himself and in himself, and who comprehended everything in himself… (Champollion-Figeac 1847, 245)

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[3] The quotation marks are used appropriately, as this is not an indisputable fact. As we will see, some contemporary Egyptologists reject the narrative crafted by the ancient Greeks and early Egyptologists.

We know that eminent Greek philosophers and historians, such as Thales, Pythagoras, Plato, and Herodotus, studied in Egypt. After the Greeks and the Romans conquered Egypt, the legacy of Amun-Ra persisted, influencing Hellenistic and Roman religious practices. An example of this cultural blending is the syncretic god Zeus-Ammon. Plutarch, who also visited Egypt, played an important role in harmonizing Platonism with Greek and Egyptian traditional religions. Besides the mysterious Hermes Trismegistus, three crucial thinkers for Neoplatonism and Christianity, all of whom incorporated the idea of the Unknown God into their spiritual systems, were Egyptian: namely, Ammonius Saccas (a Christian who converted to Paganism) and his two main pupils, Plotinus (a Pagan) and Origen (a Christian). The above-mentioned Porphyry and Iamblichus are notoriously two of the main exponents of the Neoplatonic School.

The notion of an ancient Egyptian monotheism, transmitted by the sages of the Greco-Roman world, was thus present from the beginning in modern Egyptology but had yet to find a convincing confirmation in the vestiges of the Egyptian world, starting with the messages hidden in hieroglyphics and other written documents.

4. KARL RICHARD LEPSIUS

If the Champollion brothers, following the ancient Greeks, recognized the existence of an Egyptian monotheism centered on the worship of Amun-Ra, other Egyptologists have, instead, focused their attention on another deity. Today, when discussing ancient Egypt and monotheism, one immediately thinks of the Amarna Revolution led by Pharaoh Amenhotep IV, also known as Akhenaten. This revolutionary figure, the husband of Nefertiti, established an exclusive cult dedicated to the sun disc, Aten, during the 14th century BCE.

The rediscovery of this forgotten event is primarily credited to Prussian linguist and archaeologist, Karl Richard Lepsius, although it was, once again, a collective undertaking. In 1714, Jesuit Pater Claude Sicard copied one of the boundary stelae at Amarna. John Gardner Wilkinson identified the rock tombs of Akhenaten's officials in 1824. Four years later, Jean-François Champollion scrutinized the ruins but spent only a single day there – too brief to make any significant discoveries. A quarter of a century later, the Prussian scholar played a pivotal role in revealing the forgotten religion. In 1851, after visiting Amarna and other Egyptian archaeological sites, Lepsius presented his findings to the Prussian Academy of Sciences in Berlin. His research, published the same year under the title *Ueber den ersten ägyptischen Götterkreis und seine geschichtlich-mythologische Entstehung*, explored "a particularly unusual event in the history of Egyptian mythology."

Lepsius discovered that Akhenaten had challenged the traditional worship of Amun by promoting a 'pure solar cult,' centered solely on the representation of the sun disc. The Pharaoh commanded the removal of all other gods' names from public monuments and private tombs, and their images were destroyed wherever possible. In essence, Akhenaten elevated Aten to the status of the only and sole god, effectively establishing a form of monotheism. Aten was represented as a radiant sun disc with extending rays ending in hands, symbolizing the life-giving force of the sun.

The historian of Egyptology, Erik Hornung (1992:44), emphasizes that:

> Lepsius himself was not fully aware of the consequences of his discovery. It is only in retrospect that he became the modern rediscoverer of Akhenaten and his religion. In his paper of 1851, there is a new founder of a religion, completely forgotten for millennia! Manetho, who wrote a history of Egypt in the third century BCE, had no real knowledge of that far-off epoch, allowing the Ramessides to follow immediately after Amenhotep III, as did Champollion after him. Similarly, Herodotus, Diodorus, Strabo, and all the other authors of antiquity knew nothing of Akhenaten and his time.

The reason for this oblivion is that Akhenaten's religious reforms were largely reversed after his death. Another indicator of the lack of awareness of the importance of Lepsius's discovery is the sixty-year gap before the first biography of the heretic Pharaoh appeared: Arthur Weigall's *The Life and Times of Akhnaton*, *Pharaoh of Egypt* (1910). Subsequently, more detailed works followed, such as those by Donald Redford (1987) and James Hoffmeier (2015).

Lepsius remains celebrated for his significant contributions to Egyptology, including his detailed and semi-autobiographical account, *Letters from Egypt, Ethiopia, and the Peninsula of Sinai* (1853). This precise, twelve-volume set of plans and drawings stemmed from a mission led by Lepsius and commissioned by Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm IV, an archaeology enthusiast. The Royal Prussian Expedition to Egypt and Ethiopia (1842–1846) aimed to produce accurate illustrations of monuments, replacing those in the French *Description de l'Égypte*. The mission focused on cataloging Old and Middle Kingdom monuments and investigating Nubian culture, which was poorly understood at the time. Another objective was to secure original artifacts for the Egyptian Museum in Berlin, significantly enriching its collection with items of verified provenance (Loeben 2020).

Lepsius also made history as the first translator of a complete manuscript of the *Book of the Dead*. This funerary text, transliterated as *rw nw prt m hrw* and more accurately translated as *Spells of Coming Forth by Day*, was given

its modern title by Lepsius in 1842 while editing Papyrus Turin 1791.[4] His publication, *Das Todtenbuch der Ägypter nach dem hieroglyphischen Papyrus in Turin mit einem Vorworte zum ersten Male Herausgegeben*, marked the first printed edition of this iconic text.

The papyri found in coffins detail the meeting between the deceased and the Great Ennead, a group of Heliopolitan gods that included the sun god Atum (sometimes syncretized with Ra to form Ra-Atum) and his descendants Shu, Tefnut, Geb, Nut, Osiris, Isis, Set, and Nephthys. Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris, is occasionally included in this group. Notably absent is Amun-Ra – the deity the Champollion brothers and ancient Greeks identified as supreme or sole. Instead, Amun was part of the Hermopolitan Ogdoad, gaining prominence only when Amenemhat I seized power in Thebes and founded the Twelfth Dynasty in 1991 BCE (Tobin 2002:19).

The Amarna Revolution took place at the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty (1353–1322 BCE). It is often seen as a significant departure from traditional polytheistic beliefs, yet its implications are far more complex. Akhenaten's successors, including the famous Tutankhamun, are generally thought to have restored polytheistic worship, while Amarna was abandoned. But was this shift from polytheism to monotheism unprecedented? And was the subsequent 'restoration' truly a simple return to polytheism?

The key lies in recognizing that Akhenaten's challenge was directed at the traditional worship of Amun. Aten, the visible, fully revealed deity, contrasted sharply with Amun, the hidden, ineffable god and the enigmatic counterpart in the Amun-Ra syncretism. Elevating Aten as the sole deity inherently negated Amun's role as the unseen, universal essence. This remains the most significant aspect of the Amarna Revolution in the context of our discussion.

5. EMMANUEL DE ROUGÉ

In France, Champollion's baton was taken up by Emmanuel de Rougé. He allowed the discipline to be reborn following the premature death of the decipherer by doing considerable work in the field of Egyptian philology and providing France with the first generation of professional Egyptologists. Among the researchers belonging to his school, one may mention Gaston Maspero. As the first true French Egyptologist after Champollion, de Rougé placed philological rigor at the heart of Egyptological research by publishing not only translations of numerous hieroglyphic texts, but also of other writings in hieratic cursive and demotic.

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[4] The modern numbering of the text's spells (BD 1–165) originates from Lepsius's work on this papyrus.

In 1860, the French scholar published a book entitled *Études sur le rituel funéraire des anciens Égyptiens*. At the beginning of the book, he pays homage to Champollion as the founder of the discipline, stressing in particular that the young researcher had already grasped the importance of funerary rituals in fully understanding the religion of the ancient Egyptians, giving the document the title *Funeral Ritual*. De Rougé, fully convinced of the importance of the book, kept the same title, even though he was aware that Lepsius had already introduced an alternative title, namely *Todtenbuch* or *Book of the Dead*. Needless to say, Lepsius's term was destined to gain much more fortune than the one used by the French school.

Many archaeologists had already noted that, with mummies, one often finds papyrus rolls covered with writings of different kinds. It was also generally understood that these manuscripts ordinarily contain only more or less complete copies of the same book. The problem was translating the document. Champollion had already undertaken a general survey of the funerary book. The sentences quoted in Champollion's grammar show that he had extended his work to all parts of the *Ritual* and had translated numerous fragments. However, de Rougé could not help but note that Champollion's pioneering analysis had to be abandoned in order to arrive at a fully satisfactory understanding of the text. What had not yet been understood when Egyptology was a budding science, and which by the time of de Rougé had already been generally accepted, was that the *Ritual*, in its definitive and complete form, was only a collection composed of more or less ancient texts, perhaps originating from various schools.

What is important for our purposes is that de Rougé formed his view of the Egyptian religion after having studied in detail the funerary ritual and, in particular, the Egyptian conception of divinity. The following fragment is, in this regard, illuminating:

> The unity of a supreme being existing by itself, its eternity, its omnipotence, and eternal generation in God; the creation of the world and all living beings attributed to this supreme God; the immortality of the soul, completed by the dogma of punishments and rewards; such is the sublime and persistent foundation which, in spite of all the deviations and all the mythological embroideries, must assure to the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians a very honorable rank among the religions of antiquity. (de Rougé 1860, 8-9)

As the *Wissenssoziologie* teaches, a view into the social and political context is equally instructive. At least from a terminological point of view, this description of the ancient Egyptian religion seems to owe something to the *Culte de l'Être suprême* established as the civic religion of France by Maximilien Robespierre during the French Revolution. On 7 May 1794, convinced

that only the fear of divine punishment could guarantee social order and man's striving toward virtue, the National Convention solemnly declared that "the French People recognize the existence of the Supreme Being and the Immortality of the Soul" – the two pillars here recalled by the author of the *Études sur le rituel funéraire*.

De Rougé (1860, 9) also wanted to immediately clear the field of possible insinuations regarding an unlikely influence of Judaism, hitherto considered the first true monotheism, on the Egyptian religion. He wrote:

> It is impossible to attribute the adoption of these doctrines to the influence of the sojourn of the Hebrews in Lower Egypt: the antiquity of the principal parts of the *Ritual* is much superior to that period. We even possess today copies much older than the reign of Ramses II, the contemporary of Moses. A *Ritual* in the British Museum was written for an officer of Seti I, father of Ramses II: its style places it, without hesitation, among several manuscripts scattered in various museums, but not as one of the oldest.

Indeed, there are monuments of the Old Kingdom which already attest to the existence of various chapters of *The Book of the Dead*. The Egyptian priests themselves recognized that they did not invent their science in divine matters. Their merit was only to have faithfully preserved the lessons of antiquity. Finally, as Champollion's brother did, de Rougé also underlined the ties between the Egypt of the Pharaohs and the Hellenic world, remarking that Egyptian theology "excited the admiration of the greatest minds of Greece," such as Thales, Pythagoras, and Plato. This is one of the paths followed by the Unknown God to reach us from the distant past.

6. Cornelis Petrus Tiele

One problem, however, seemed insurmountable. If the Egyptian religion was fundamentally monotheistic, as the great masters of the discipline claimed, why did the ancient Egyptians persist in naming, invoking, and representing a plethora of major and minor deities? In 1872, Cornelis Petrus Tiele proposed an interesting solution to this puzzle in his *Comparative History of the Egyptian and Mesopotamian Religions* in two volumes: *I. History of the Egyptian Religion*; *II. History of the Babylonian-Assyrian Religion*. Tiele was a renowned Dutch theologian and scholar of comparative religion. Originally published in Dutch, the book was translated into English by James Ballingal in 1882. In the first volume, the author explored the development and nature of ancient Egyptian religion. His key thesis included the notion that religion in ancient Egypt was perceived and practiced differently by various social strata.

By stressing the dual perception of religion, Tiele distinguished between popular religion and learned religion. For the uneducated masses, Egyptian religion was characterized by polytheism and the worship of a multitude of gods, each associated with specific aspects of life and nature. These deities were often anthropomorphized and involved in mythological narratives. Among the educated and priestly class, there was a more sophisticated understanding of these deities. They perceived the gods as manifestations of a single, underlying divine principle. This perspective is akin to a form of henotheism or even proto-monotheism, where one supreme deity is recognized but worshiped in different forms.

This is what Tiele (1882, 78) wrote about Amun-Ra:

> This god comes to view out of darkness and concealment, and is the same as the hidden god; only, inasmuch as he reveals himself, he bears another name. He is not created, but exists of himself. He himself creates his name, that is, his being, and because, as we read in another passage, all the gods are said to be only manifestations or members of Ra, he is Lord of all the gods.

The Dutch scholar argued that Egyptian mythology and religious symbols had esoteric meanings understood primarily by the priesthood. The myths were not merely stories but encoded teachings about the cosmos, human nature, and the divine. He examined the evolution of religious beliefs over different periods of Egyptian history. For instance, he noticed that during the New Kingdom, the worship of Amun-Ra became prominent, symbolizing a move towards a more centralized and unified religious practice. Tiele often drew parallels between the religious practices in ancient Egypt and other world religions, including Christianity.

The Dutch theologian not only supported a monotheistic interpretation of Egyptian religion, but he also warned that it was not the cult of a natural object, the Sun. Here are his words:

> We must, however, guard very carefully against taking Ra as simply the sun. It appears from the hymns addressed to Ra, included in chapter XV of the *Book of the Dead*, that at the most remote period it was already usual to distinguish between the god and the manifestations of him. In that chapter, he is seemingly identified with the sun; his splendid rising, for example, is referred to; but, in point of fact, a careful distinction was made between the being who was an object of worship and his visible representation. The sun's disk was called 'his,' 'his emblem.' He journeys in his disk, and is designated as *the ancient unknown one* [emphasis added] in his mystery. (Tiele 1882, 82)

To be more precise, Tiele (1882, 217) rejected as a baseless opinion the idea that there was "a double theology among the Egyptians, an esoteric and

an exoteric, – the one being intended for the learned, and known to them alone and to a chosen few, but kept carefully concealed from the multitude; the other being intended for the people, who thus had the husk given to them while the kernel was kept out of their reach." This is just a myth circulating in modern masonic circles, which actually modeled their spiritual life on that pattern.

Present-day Egyptologists agree on this point. It is true that the priests of Amun played a crucial role in maintaining and enhancing the god's mysterious nature. The rituals and ceremonies performed at temples like Karnak were occasionally conducted away from the public eye, within the innermost sanctuaries that only the high priests and the pharaoh could enter. However, "this did not imply that its rituals were totally unknown" (Tobin 2002, 20).

In Ancient Egypt, the theological 'truth' was public, not concealed. It was painted on walls and written in papyri that were potentially accessible to anyone. The problem is that in Egypt, as everywhere else and in all periods, there were educated and uneducated people, cultured and uncultured believers. The latter were simply incapable of understanding the sophisticated theology of the priesthood, even if it was there in front of their eyes. The former could. That is why the uncultured "never got beyond the visible symbol, and were, as a rule, satisfied with the external form," while "the learned penetrated deeper, and followed up the thoughts that were latent in the symbols" (Tiele 1882, 217).

This could also be said of Christianity. What the learned Christian understands allegorically, metaphorically, or symbolically, the unlearned one often understands literally. There is no conspiracy. Many Christians experience religion as merely an external practice, based on rites and ceremonies whose profound meaning they do not grasp, or entrust their hopes to a legion of angels and saints, which sometimes borders on superstition. No one intentionally stops them from ascending to a higher level of religious awareness, which they could do by reading the works of Diogenes the Areopagite or Saint Thomas Aquinas. However, they do not do so out of ignorance, laziness, or inability to understand. So, just as Christianity has different interpretations and levels of understanding among its followers (e.g., laypeople vs. theologians), so did ancient Egyptian religion.

Tiele (1882, 222) notices that, on the one hand, "monotheism is, in fact, expressed in the clearest terms in many an Egyptian treatise," yet, on the other hand, "it would not be easy to discover a richer polytheism than that which flourished on the banks of the Nile." The riddle can be solved only if we admit that "the hidden god by whom, in the beginning, all things came into existence (Tum in the *Book of the Dead*), is a being who is one only, but afterwards he revealed himself, and he reveals himself continually in innumerable forms." In other words, Tiele (1882, 223) brings to the surface that, "to the mind of

the Egyptians, the proposition, God is one, was bound up with this other: his manifestations are numberless."

It is worth noting that the *Book of the Dead* is not actually a book, but a collection of texts with different degrees of antiquity, and no two papyri are exactly identical, although some are more famous than others (for example, the Turin papyrus or the papyrus of Ani). According to Tiele (1882, 24-25), "a strong proof of the antiquity of the great majority of the different parts of which the *Book of the Dead* is composed is that in them there is found no mention of Amun or Amun-Ra, the chief god of Thebes. His name occurs in the last three or four books only," notwithstanding that Amunhoteps and Ramesids worshiped Amun so ardently. This fact can be explained only on the hypothesis that the older parts "were already written before the worship of Amun rose in the fifteenth and fourteenth century B.C. to such a height of splendor."

Nevertheless, the Unknown God is already present in the older parts of the funerary text as Tum. Let us see which primary sources the Dutch scholar cited to support his thesis. At the time, he had access to two different translations of the *Book of the Dead*, that of de Rougé and that of Lepsius. He decided to use the latter. He also made a point of emphasizing that he was considering two of the book's indisputably oldest chapters, namely the 17th and the 64th, and that the 17th chapter is "the most important of all" as it is "complete in itself." In the fragment of that chapter that particularly attracted his attention, Tum himself declares his uniqueness, hiddenness, supremacy, and equivalence to other deities:

> I am Tum (the hidden sun-god), a being who is one alone;
> I am Ba in his first supremacy;
> I am the great god, the self-existing;
> The creator of his name, the Lord of all gods,
> Whom none among the gods upholds.
> I was yesterday, I know the tomorrow.
> There was a battlefield of the gods prepared when I spoke;
> I know the name of that great god who is in that place.
> I am the great Bennu who is worshipped in An (Heliopolis).
> I am Chem (Min) in his appearing;
> I have set both my feathers upon my head;
> I am come home to the city of my abode.
> (cfr. Tiele 1882, 28)

Not only in chapter 17, but also in chapter 34, Tum, also known as Atum and frequently referred to as the god of An, is essentially the same as Osiris and is often conflated with him in the *Book of the Dead*. According to Tiele (1882, 72), besides what we read in the above-quoted text, the similarities be-

tween the worship of Osiris and Ea are quite apparent. Horos, a divine figure common to both systems, is depicted in Osirian mythology in two forms: as Horos the Elder, who is both the father and brother of Osiris, and as Horos the Child. The Dutch theologian also remarks that, similarly, the Heliopolitan sun god is divided into two aspects: Ea, representing the sun during the day, and Harmachis (Harmachu), symbolizing the rising sun visible on the horizon. Both Ea and Horos share the sparrow-hawk as their emblem. Shu, another god associated with An, is identified in Thinis as Nunhur. To sum up, there is sufficient evidence to conclude that all deities, although called differently, are in reality the same deity. This is true at least for the Egyptian elite.

7. HEINRICH KARL BRUGSCH

At the end of the 19th century, the most decisive advocate of the monotheistic interpretation of ancient Egyptian religion was probably German archaeologist Heinrich Karl Brugsch (1827-1894), who had collaborated with Auguste Mariette on the excavations of Memphis, in Egypt, and had then assumed the direction of the Egyptology school in Cairo. Brugsch presented his theses on the monotheistic aspects of Egyptian religion in his works titled *Religion und Mythologie der alten Ägypter*, published in 1885, and *Die Ägyptologie: Abriss der Entzifferungen und Forschungen auf dem Gebiete der Hieroglyphischen Schrift und Sprache, Alterthums und Geschichte der Aegypter*, published in 1891. These books provide an overview of his decipherments and research on Egyptian hieroglyphic writing, language, antiquities, and history, and it includes his interpretations of Egyptian religious beliefs.

In spite of the fact that these works were highly significant in the field of Egyptology, they were never translated into English in their entirety. Brugsch's influence was primarily through his original German texts and the dissemination of his ideas by other Egyptologists who read and referenced his work. Some of his works, such as *A History of Egypt Under the Pharaohs*, are available in English and offer insights into his interpretations of Egyptian texts. However, the English-speaking audiences accessed the most important concepts and findings of Brugsch through secondary sources, such as summaries, articles, and other scholars' works that discussed his theories. Notable references include the works of Wallis Budge, who summarized Brugsch's contributions in *The Gods of the Egyptians*.

Coming to the contents, not unlike its predecessors and with more vigor than them, Brugsch presented the idea that ancient Egyptian religion, despite its polytheistic appearance, contained a monotheistic core. He argued that within the plethora of gods worshipped in ancient Egypt, there existed a supreme deity that stood above all others. This deity was often identified as

Amun or Ra, and sometimes as a combination of the two, Amun-Ra. He posited that this supreme god was the creator and sustainer of the universe, encompassing all divine attributes. He suggested that the many gods and goddesses were merely different aspects or manifestations of this one Supreme Being. The diverse forms and names were a reflection of the various attributes, roles, and functions that this single god represented in different contexts and regions. In synthesis, there was a unity in diversity.

Let us now have a look to the primary sources that have led Brugsch to think that a pure monotheism was at work in ancient Egypt. The Egyptian inscription that more than any other has enlightened the German scholar is reported in *Religion und Mythologie der alten Ägypter* (Brugsch 1891, 96-99).[5] I will break it into six fragments and comment on them to show that it is actually possible to draw parallels between Egyptian religion and the two most popular monotheisms of Ancient Europe, namely Neoplatonism and Christianity. The Egyptian document uses the term 'nuter' or 'noutir', which Brugsch translates as 'God.' First of all, the text specifies that *nuter* is one and eternal.

> God is one and alone, and none other existeth with Him – God is the One, the One who hath made all things – God is a spirit, a hidden spirit, the spirit of spirits, the great spirit of the Egyptians, the divine spirit – God is from the beginning, and He hath been from the beginning, He hath existed from old and was when nothing else had being. He existed when nothing else existed, and what existeth He created after He had come into being, He is the Father of beginnings – God is the eternal One, He is eternal and infinite and endureth for ever and aye…

Secondly, the inscription emphasizes that *nuter* is unknown.

> God is hidden and no man knoweth His form. No man hath been able to seek out His likeness; He is hidden to gods and men, and He is a mystery unto His creatures. No man knoweth how to know Him – His name remaineth hidden; His name is a mystery unto His children. His names are innumerable, they are manifold and none knoweth their number…

In other words, God is the Ineffable One that preceded anything. They are a purely spiritual being. They are called in many different ways but Their real name is unknown no less than Their essence. They created everything or anything emanated from Them. I keep both options (creation and emanation) because, as we will see, some of the entities that come from *nuter* equate with

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[5] Brugsch quotes translations of Egyptian documents made by himself and his pupil Johannes Dümichen (cf. Brugsch and Dümichen 1862).

the godhead, while others are separated from Them. The sequence of emanations and creations reminds us of Plotinus's metaphysics, with the Ineffable One as the first principle or hypostasis. Quite significantly, besides being a Neoplatonist, Plotinus was Egyptian and we cannot rule out that he brought with him some reminiscence of the ancient religion of his land. In Christian mystical theology, the One equates with God the Father, first person of the Trinity. Let us proceed.

> God is truth and He liveth by truth and He feedeth thereon. He is the king of truth, and He hath stablished the earth thereupon…

The reference to truth invites us to continue and deepen our parallel with Neoplatonism and Christianity. In Plotinus's metaphysics, the second hypostasis is the Logos, which is sometimes understood as Plato's hyperuranium – that is the collection of all true forms. Indeed, 'the logos' represents an everlasting and unalterable truth existing since the beginning of time, accessible to anyone who pursues it. The Encyclopedia Britannica (2024) rightly remarked that, although mainly associated with Greek philosophy and Christian theology, "the concept is also found in Indian, Egyptian, and Persian philosophical and theological systems." In the above fragment, we see that God does not merely tell the truth; God is 'the truth.' The truth is not Their product or creation; it is inherent to Their being. Besides, contrarily to the very essence of the Ineffable One, the truth is partly accessible to humans. That is why Plotinus defines the logos as the second hypostasis. In Christian theology the Logos, the Word, is notoriously Jesus Christ, the second person of the Trinity (John 1,1). The Ancient Egyptian text retrieved by Brugsch proceeds as follows:

> God is life and through Him created; He is the maker of his own form, and the fashioner of His own body – God Himself is existence, He endureth without increase or diminution, He multiplieth Himself millions of times, and He is manifold in forms and in members…

In Plotinus's metaphysics, the third hypostasis emanating from God and still being God is the Soul, Plato's Anima Mundi, that is, the principle of life. Any living being participate in this principle. In Christian theology the third person of the Trinity is the Holy Spirit, or Paracletus, the Comforter. Quite significantly, in the Gospel, the Holy Spirit is associated with life, pregnancy and procreation (Mathew 1, 18-21). It is worth noting that, following St. Thomas Aquinas, Bishop Robert Barron (2014) defines God as the sheer act of to be itself (*ipsum esse subsistens*). This means that God is not a being among other beings, but rather the very act of existence or being itself. Ac-

cording to this understanding, God is the necessary foundation of all reality, the source of all that exists, and not limited or defined by any particular characteristics or forms that apply to created beings. God is pure actuality without any potentiality, infinite, and perfect, transcending all finite categories and limitations. The ancient Egyptian inscription clearly states that God does not simply exist as a being among others; God is existence.

The continuation of the text indicates *nuter* as the creator of the material world:

> God hath made the universe, and He hath created all that therein is; He is the Creator of what is in this world, and of what was, of what is, and of what shall be. He is the Creator of the heavens, and of the earth, and of the deep, and of the water, and of the mountains. God hath stretched out the heavens and founded the earth-What His heart conceived straightway came to pass, and when He hath spoken, it cometh to pass and endureth for ever. God is the father of the gods; He fashioned men and formed the gods…

Here again, one cannot help but notice that the sequence of hypostases and the hierarchy in the chain of beings is exactly the same as that found in Neoplatonism and Christianity. Indeed, at the end of the process, according to Plotinus, the One emanates matter, which is not a hypostasis, a divine principle; otherwise this metaphysics would qualify as a form of pantheism. Needless to say, Christianity also considers matter as separated from God, although, as Aquinas clarifies, God is present potentially in all things by virtue of being their ultimate cause and sustainer. His 'presence' is not necessarily a physical or spatial presence but rather a metaphysical one, indicating that everything owes its continued existence to God. The Egyptian text, besides material objects, mentions also gods and men as created by God. Gods could be either manifestations of the one God or other powers of the universe.

Finally, the Egyptian inscription includes a pattern which is found in all the monotheisms that would follow, until our days. God is not only the ineffable one, the logos, the soul of the universe, and the creator of the world. As the last fragment of the text translated by Brugsch specifies, *nuter* is also the ultimate moral judge of humanity.

> God is merciful unto those who reverence Him, and He heareth him that calleth upon Him. God knoweth him that acknowledgeth Him, He rewardeth him that serveth Him, and He protecteth him that followeth Him.

Once again, the similarity to the Abrahamic and Mosaic Covenants, or the teachings of Jesus Christ and Mohammed, is apparent. God is not disinterested in the fate of human beings, but They are nevertheless selective. They intervene in the world, helping those who believe in Them, who follow Their

teachings and serve Them, not those who ignore or deny Them. The reward for the faithful who follow divine precepts and behave ethically is life after death, understood not only as persistence of the soul, but also as corporal afterlife.

It is worth noting that the eminent French Egyptologist Gaston Maspero was not convinced that Brusch's translation was impeccable, despite the latter continuing to enjoy his esteem. In the book *Études de mythologie et d'archéologie égyptiennes*, Maspero discusses Brugsch's research and theories in detail, so much so that – in addition to being repeatedly cited throughout the volume – two of the ten chapters bear the German scholar's name in the title. Contrary to what Brugsch says, Maspero (1893, 195) believes that "the Egyptians were polytheists above all, and that if they arrived at the conception of a single god, it was not an exclusive and jealous god. Amun-Ra of Thebes, whose dogma contains the greatest approximation to the notion of divine unity that we have known up to now in Egypt, was a single god (noutir ouâou) as the reigning Pharaoh was a unique sovereign in the world." In other words, what is unique is not God, but the King of the Gods. There is only one King of the Gods. The term *nuter* or *noutir* would convey this meaning, rather than the one that calls to mind the Tetragrammaton, YHWH. Therefore, Maspero (1893, 186) concludes that "the system expounded by Mr. Brugsch is an attempt, after many others, to extract from polytheistic texts a monotheistic theology; like the others, it seems to me to rest on a misunderstanding." According to the French scholar, a contemporary Egyptologist who discusses the Egyptian *nuter* and is forced to translate it as 'god' faces significant difficulty in avoiding the imposition of the concept of God that we associate with the term, rather than the original understanding the Egyptians had of that word.

The interesting aspect I would like to underline is that Maspero identifies *noutir* – whether he is the one God as Brugsch wants or the King of the Gods as the French Egyptologist wants – with Amon-Ra, the Hidden One.

8. Charles Loring Brace

It is also worth looking at Charles Loring Brace's specific analysis of Egyptian religion. As I mentioned above, he was not an Egyptologist, but he has the merit of having framed the discoveries of modern Egyptology in a broader discussion on the Unknown God.

First of all, Brace (1890, 9) states that in Egyptian inscriptions and papyri one finds "the thought of a Power, illimitable, incomprehensible, eternal, behind all the phenomena of the universe, above and behind the varied personalities of mythology and polytheism." This is "the One awful beyond expression, enduring while all things change, filling immensity and eternity, self-

created, the one original, before whom was nothing, and in whose presence the earth and heavens are but as a morning cloud, 'living in truth,' 'truth itself,' the essence of 'righteousness,' terrible to evil-doers, yet merciful, beneficent, full of love." So to say, the Ineffable One is already present in human minds thousands of years before he made his appearance in the writings of Christian mystics and theologians.

The American philanthropist admits that many deities populate the Egyptian pantheon, such as Xoper (Being), Ammon (the Concealed), Ra (the Original), Ptah (artist), Xnum (builder or potter), Sebak (contriver), Osiris (periodic force), etc.; however, he is deeply convinced that "behind all these separate gods is the One, unnamable, eternal, infinite. They all seem only forms, or manifestations, of the original being" (Brace 1890, 12). To reach this conclusion, he mostly relies on the studies of Heinrich Brugsch, and in particular on his 1885 book *Religion und Mythologie der alten Aegypter*, which he often quotes.

To support this reconstruction, the philanthropist additionally quotes many primary sources. For instance, a Theban inscription says the following about God in his form of Amun:

> The concealed spirit, a mystery for him whom he hath created, is Ammon, the ancient of days, who is from the beginning, the creator of heaven, earth, the depth, and the mountains. (Brace 1890, 13)

According to Brace, another example of a primary source proving the ineffability of God is the following ancient and lofty inscription of praise to Amun Ra:

> Vast in his largeness without limit. Virtue supreme, in mysterious forms! Soul mysterious! Author of his fearful power, life holy and strong, created by himself; brilliant, illuminating, dazzling! Soul more soul than the gods, thou art concealed in great Ammon! Old man renewed! Worker of ages! Thou who hast designed the world! O Ammon, with the holy transformations! He whom no man knoweth, brilliant are his forms, his glory is a veil of light! Mystery of mysteries! Mystery unknown! Hail to thee in the bosom of Nun (celestial abyss)! (Brace 1890, 14) [6]

Brace (1890, 15) insists on the fact that "the various gods, Ra, Ptah, Xnum, Thoth, Osiris, are in inner being the same, and all manifestations of this original One." Still, among the various manifestations of the Unknown God, Brace places particular emphasis on the figure of Osiris, who plays a

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[6] Here, Brace reports a translation by French Egyptologist François Joseph Chabas which quotes as follows: "Chabas, Pap Hav.; Records of the Past; Trad. pap. Mag., Harris."

central role in *The Book of the Dead*. This god is already known outside of Egypt in the ancient Greco-Roman world, thanks to Plutarch's work *Isis and Osiris*. Besides, Osiris could not fail to arouse the curiosity of Christians, considering some extraordinary parallels with the life of Jesus Christ. Brace repeatedly asserts that Osiris, the son of God, is merciful, lives and dies to save man, indicates the way of salvation, is the first resurrected from the dead, and after the resurrection carries out the function of judge, calling to himself the deceased who have lived morally and rejecting those who have behaved badly. In his words, Osiris is "the manifestation of the Infinite Spirit dearest to the hearts of all Egyptians."

The author of *The Unknown God* specifically emphasizes Osiris's role as a universal peacemaker and the price he had to pay for his irenic attitude. In his analysis of Osiris, Brace portrays the Egyptian deity as a transformative figure who elevated his people from a primitive and harsh existence. He describes how Osiris introduced agriculture, established the foundations of civilization, and instilled respect for laws. Additionally, Osiris is depicted as a teacher of spiritual truths, guiding his followers to recognize and honor the Divine Creator. According to Brace, Osiris's influence was gentle and persuasive, relying on the power of music, eloquence, and a benevolent spirit, rather than force or coercion. Moreover, his impact transcended national boundaries. The American philanthropist recounts the legend of Osiris traveling across lands, promoting harmony, diminishing hostility, and spreading the ideals of human unity and devotion to God. As Brace (1890, 22) put it, "war ceased in his presence, there was no need of arms, and his sweetness and the persuasion of his words and music turned all hearts."

Brace also describes Osiris's generous missions abroad as ultimately diminishing his authority in Egypt. Upon his return, the god faced betrayal and was overcome by the embodiment of evil, Typhon, leading to his death at a young age – before reaching thirty. However, the author of *The Unknown God* highlights that Osiris's story did not end there; he was resurrected, earning the title of the 'first-born of mummies,' and ascended to a new role as the judge of both the living and the dead in the divine realm of Amenti, the underworld. Brace (1890, 19) also writes that Osiris "was appointed to reign over the gods in the presence of the supreme lord on the day of the constitution of the world. He is Truth itself; he is Love."

All this information is found in *The Book of the Dead*. Among the many primary sources quoted, the author provides a fragment from papyrus 3292, preserved in the Louvre Museum, which reads as follows:

Hail to thee, Osiris, elder son of Father Ra, Father of Fathers, he who sittest near Ra, the King of immense times and the Master of Eternity, . . . No man knoweth his name: innumerable are his names in all towns and provinces.[7]

By citing this fragment, the author seems to want to emphasize the remarkable parallel between the ancient Egyptian religion and Christianity, as Osiris – alone among all the divinities and creatures – is called to sit next to his Father, the Master of Eternity, just as Jesus Christ sits at the right hand of God the Father. The author concludes that the Egyptian religion is "the grandest conception known to man of the Unknown God" (Brace 1890, 39). If the One – the 'Concealed' – is unknown, then Their son Osiris is known. The Egyptian "trusted in a merciful Being, even though a shadowy person, a manifestation of God's goodness, who had lived and died for the good of men. As this 'Son of God,' as he is called, rose again and became 'the first-born of the dead,' so would the dead arise and meet him as Judge. To be like him, and to be united to that sweet and perfect being, was to be the joy of eternity" (Brace 1890, 39).

Similarly to other coeval scholars, Brace excluded the possibility that the parallels between Egyptian religion and Judeo-Christianity may be due to an influence of the latter over the former. The influence could only have been exerted in the opposite direction. Brace appeals to the authority of de Rougé, who – as we have seen – declares that the British Museum is in possession of a copy of the Ritual dating back to the time of Seti I, father of Ramses II, that is, to a time before the life of Moses. He adds that "the monuments of the First Empire reveal several chapters of these writings (Rev. Arch., p. 357. 1860)."

Moreover, if there was any influence of the Egyptian religion on Christianity, it must have followed other paths, specifically the Greek one, because in the Old Testament of the Jews there is no emphasis comparable to the Egyptian one on spirituality and life after death. Specifically, Brace (1890, 41-43) states that it is one of the most peculiar facts in history "that a people like the Jews should have lived for so many years under the rule of a nation like the Egyptians, and have carried away after their emancipation so few mental and religious influences." As a matter of fact, "the Jewish people in their early history seem singularly little inspired with the belief in a future life or a coming judgment."

Indeed, there is nothing further from Egyptian spirituality than the following fragment of the Old Testament: "Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals.

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[7] Brace reports the source as follows: "Pap. 3292, Louvre MSS. Devéria: Cat. d. man. Eg. Mariette: Not d. prin. man, p. 304. Handbuch d. ges. Aeg. Alterth.; Dr. M. Uhlemann, 1858, iv. 138."

Everything is meaningless. All go to the same place; all come from dust, and to dust all return" (Ecclesiastes 3:19-20).

The American philanthropist is eager to emphasize that his perspective is not an isolated one. In fact, he states that the monotheistic belief of the ancient Egyptians is supported by most prominent Egyptologists and encourages his readers to consult the works of De Rougé, Brugsch, Chabas, Maspero, Pierret, Renouf, Uhlemann, and others. As the reader can verify in other sections of this paper, it is true that the monotheistic interpretation enjoyed a large consensus during the golden age of Egyptology. However, it is fair to point out that there were also dissenting voices. We have already seen that Gaston Maspero, although enrolled by Brace in the ranks of the 'monotheistic' interpreters, does not seem so convinced that the translations and the consequent interpretations of Brugsch were entirely correct. Another dissenting voice, though less authoritative in the field of Egyptology, is that of F. C. H. Wendel (1889), who rejects the idea of the monotheistic priority of Egyptian religion in the journal *Hebraica*.

9. Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge

Worth mentioning is also Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge, another prominent Egyptologist who had extensive views on ancient Egyptian religion, which he articulated through numerous publications. Wallis Budge's comprehensive work on Egyptian religion is most famously compiled in *The Gods of the Egyptians* (1904). Because of his emphasis on polytheism, already visible in the title, it may seem that he distances himself from the narrative discussed earlier. However, his position is subtler. Indeed, he acknowledged that while ancient Egyptian religion was fundamentally polytheistic, there were elements and tendencies within it that could be interpreted as leaning toward an esoteric form of monotheism. More importantly, he also explored the possible influences of Egyptian religious concepts on later religions, including Greek, Roman, and early Christian thought. He was particularly interested in how ideas such as the immortality of the soul and final judgment may have been transmitted to our culture.

One of his most appreciated contributions to Egyptology was the translation of the Papyrus of Ani. In his work *Introduction to The Book of the Dead: The Papyrus of Ani*, Wallis Budge (1895, xcii) confronted his ideas with those of other contemporary specialists by writing the following: "From the attributes of God set forth in Egyptian texts of all periods, Dr. Brugsch, de Rougé, and other eminent Egyptologists have come to the opinion that the dwellers in the Nile valley, from the earliest times, knew and worshipped one God, nameless, incomprehensible, and eternal." Wallis Budge (1895, xciv)

also assessed the opinion of Tiele, who concluded "that the religion of Egypt was from the beginning polytheistic, but that it developed in two opposite directions: in one direction gods were multiplied by the addition of local gods, and in the other, the Egyptians drew nearer and nearer to monotheism." However, in his view, it is difficult to say whether polytheism grew from monotheism in Egypt, or monotheism from polytheism, "for the evidence of the pyramid texts shows that already in the 5th dynasty, monotheism and polytheism were flourishing side by side."

This is a quite interesting remark for two different reasons. Firstly, it raises doubts about a postulate that many earlier interpreters – regardless of their specific position on the matter – seem to tacitly subscribe to, namely that Egyptian religion must have been a 'monolith,' with dogmas stable over time and accepted by everybody. This implicit assumption is perhaps the result of the influence exerted for two millennia on Europeans by Judaism and Christianity. Instead, it could be possible that a certain degree of religious freedom allowed monotheistic and polytheistic orientations to coexist in Ancient Egypt, at least during certain periods of the civilization's long history.

Secondly, among the various plausible hypotheses, Wallis Budge includes the possibility that monotheism may have preceded polytheism chronologically. The mainstream narrative in the study of the history of religion is that human religious belief evolved from animism and polytheism to monotheism (Wright 2009). This theory typically shows the following stages: 1) Animism: early humans believed in spirits residing in nature, such as trees, rivers, and animals; 2) Totemism: certain animals or natural objects were revered as sacred symbols and protectors of tribes or clans; 3) Polytheism: societies began to believe in multiple gods, each overseeing different aspects of life and nature (e.g., Greek, Roman, and Egyptian religions); 4) Henotheism: worship of one supreme deity without denying the existence of other gods, often acting as a bridge between polytheism and monotheism; 5) Monotheism: belief in a single, all-powerful deity, usually considered an unprecedented achievement of the three Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, two eminent scholars – Scottish anthropologist Andrew Lang (1898) and German ethnologist Wilhelm Schmidt (1912–1955) – challenged this narrative. By observing primitive societies and ancient texts, they concluded that the earliest human societies originally believed in a single, high god or supreme being, often associated with the sky and creation. Over time, as societies grew more complex and spread out, this original belief in one god 'degenerated' into polytheism and animism. Schmidt called his alternative theory *Urmonotheismus* (Primitive Monotheism).

It is therefore notable that, as early as 1895, Wallis Budge already considered the possibility that monotheism may have been the original form of

Egyptian religion, even if he later seemed to give more credit to the opposite path. As did the pioneers of Egyptology, he observed that certain gods, particularly Amun and later Amun-Ra, were sometimes elevated to a status that encompassed the powers and attributes of many other gods. This elevation suggested a tendency toward recognizing a supreme deity above all others. He also noted the practice of syncretism, where deities would merge and form composite gods. This could be seen as a step toward or a return to monotheism, as it reduced the multitude of gods to various aspects of a more unified divine entity.

Notably, Wallis Budge underlined the political implications of this process. He noted that, during the early empire, which spans the first eleven dynasties, Amun was regarded merely as a local deity, despite his name dating back to the reign of Unas. It was not until the Hyksos were driven out of Egypt by the Theban rulers of the 17th dynasty that this deity gained prominence. Chosen by the Theban kings as their primary god, and refusing to abandon his worship despite the demands of the Hyksos king Apepi, Amun eventually became acknowledged as the national god of southern Egypt. As the deity of the victorious rulers, Amun ascended to the position of leader of the Egyptian pantheon. Over time, he adopted the attributes and epithets of the ancient gods, consolidating his status.

There is a consensus among present-day Egyptologists that the cult of Amun-Ra also had ethical and political dimensions. Tobin (2002, 20) underlines that the god was "the champion of the poor and a focus of personal piety," and symbolized ultimate power and authority, much like the pharaoh, who was considered a god on earth. The mysterious aspect of Amun-Ra's nature reinforced the idea that the pharaoh's authority was also divine and unquestionable, with roots in a higher, unseen power. The spiritual and political power of this deity "helped transform ancient Egypt into a theocracy, and his priesthood became one of the largest and most influential" (Tobin 2002, 20).

Wallis Budge also highlighted that certain theological texts and hymns expressed a form of monotheism. For example, the *Hymn to Amun* praises him in a manner that implies he is the sole creator and sustainer of the universe. The American Egyptologist quotes the extract from a papyrus written for the princess Nesi-Khonsu,[8] a member of the priesthood of Amun, as an example of the exalted language in which his votaries addressed him.

> This is the sacred god, the lord of all the gods, Amen-Ra, the lord of the
> throne of the world, the prince of Apt, the sacred soul who came into being
> in the beginning, the great god who liveth by right and truth, the first ennead

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[8] Wallis Budge clarifies that "the hieratic text is published, with a hieroglyphic transcript, by Maspero, *Mémoires publiés par les Membres de la Mission Archéologique Française au Caire*, t. i., p. 594 ff., and pll. 25-27."

which gave birth unto the other two enneads, the being in whom every god existeth, the One of One, the creator of the things which came into being when the earth took form in the beginning, whose births are hidden, whose forms are manifold, and whose growth cannot be known. (Wallis Budge 1895, xcv)

More importantly, at least for the sake of this research, is that the inscription puts ineffability and hiddenness in relation, confirming that the hidden god is also the unknown god. The hieratic text indeed continues as follows:

He is the Being who cannot be known, and he is more hidden than all the gods. He maketh the Disk to be his vicar, and he himself cannot be known, and he hideth himself from that which cometh forth from him. He is a bright flame of fire, mighty in splendors, he can be seen only in the form in which he showeth himself, and he can be gazed upon only when he manifesteth himself, and that which is in him cannot be understood. (Wallis Budge 1895, cvi)

Following Tiele, Wallis Budge proposed that the priesthood and the intellectual elite of ancient Egypt might have held more monotheistic views, interpreting the many gods as manifestations of one ultimate divine power, while the general populace continued with traditional polytheistic practices. More precisely, Wallis Budge suggests that, while it may be difficult to resolve the questions that have puzzled even the most renowned Egyptologists, it is clear that the Egyptian who conceived of an unknown, mysterious, eternal, and infinite God was not someone whose spiritual needs could be met by deities who could eat, drink, love, hate, fight, age, and die. This individual, who believed in an afterlife spent in a glorified body in heaven, envisioned a God that transcended these earthly qualities. Given that the person was finite, it is not surprising that they would, in some ways, attempt to represent this infinite God in human terms.

Among the primary sources that led Wallis Budge to reach this conclusion, there is an inscription found in the pyramid of Unas. The text reveals that, after his death, 5th dynasty monarch Unas indulged in oral feeding, engaged in other physiological activities, and satisfied his desires. Here, we also find confirmation that the divinity awaiting the monarch in the kingdom of the afterlife is the hidden-and-unknown God.

Unas hath weighed his words with the hidden god (?) who hath no name, on the day of hacking in pieces the firstborn. (Wallis Budge 1885, lxxix)

Let us now examine Wallis Budge's translation of the Papyrus of Ani. Here, we find a hymn of praise to Ra when he rises in the eastern part of

heaven (III. 1, 2). The following fragment emphasizes that the divinity is one and ineffable:

> Homage to thee, O Amen-Ra, thou who dost rest upon Maat, thou who passest over the heaven, and every face seeth thee. Thou dost wax great as thy Majesty dost advance, and thy rays are upon all faces. Thou art unknown and canst not be searched out… his fellow except thyself; thou art the Only One… [Men] praise thee in thy name [Ra], and they swear by thee, for thou art lord over them. (Wallis Budge 1885, 356)

The idea that the many deities of the Egyptian pantheon could ultimately be interpreted as visible (or comprehensible) manifestations of the ineffable and unnamable Unknown God – the sole god or the main one – emerges from the following fragment translated by Wallis Budge:

> I come forth and advance, and my name is unknown. (…) I am Horus who passeth through millions of years. (…) Verily my forms are changed. I am the god Unen, from season unto season; what is mine is within me. I am the only One born of an only One, who goeth round about in his course; I am within the eye of the Sun. (…) I am he who is unknown, and the gods with rose-bright countenances are with me. I am the unveiled one. (…) I am he who riseth and shineth; the wall of walls; the only One, [son] of an only One. Ra never lacketh his form, he never passeth away, he never passeth away. Verily, I say: I am the plant which cometh forth from Nu, and my mother is Nut. Hail, O my Creator, I am he who hath no power to walk, the great knot within yesterday. My power is in my hand. I am not known, [but] I am he who knoweth thee. (Wallis Budge 1885, 356)

In summary, Wallis Budge did not claim that ancient Egyptian religion was monotheistic in the strict sense of the word, but he did acknowledge that within its complex polytheism, there were significant monotheistic tendencies and elements that pointed toward the recognition of a singular divine force. As Hornung (1971) summarized, the American Egyptologist holds the opinion that the "pure" monotheistic belief, which has existed in Egypt since the earliest times and which he believes is found above all in the wisdom teachings, has been obscured by "foolish priests."

10. A NOTE ON CONTEMPORARY CONTROVERSIES

The theory that Egyptian religion was a monotheism centered on the cult of the Unknown God and disguised as polytheism held up well until one of the most eminent contemporary Egyptologists, Erik Hornung, raised serious doubts about it. In 1971, the German scholar published the book *Der Eine und*

die Vielen, arguing that ancient Egyptian religion, including the worship of Amun-Ra, was inherently polytheistic. He contended that even when a god was elevated to supreme status, the existence and worship of other gods were never entirely negated.

Hornung noted that the idea that all peoples of the world spontaneously believe in a First Being, Creator, and Preserver of Nature dates back to the 18th century and was very popular in Masonic circles. For instance, he mentions the initiatory novel *Life of Séthos* by Abbé Jean Terrasson from 1731, which had a great influence on Freemasonry. He remarks that Voltaire was also inclined to similar ideas. Subsequently, the idea of a pure monotheism expressing itself externally through a symbolic polytheism made its triumphant entrance in early Egyptology through the articulations of the Champollion brothers and de Rougé. Hornung underlines that in the 1870s, under the influence of the founders, all French Egyptology, with slight variations on the theme, unanimously supported the monotheistic interpretation of Egyptian religion. He mentions, in sequence, Eugène Grébaut, who wrote in 1870 that this monotheism was "incontestable"; Edouard Naville, who, in his book *La litanie du soleil*, published in 1875, considered whether the ancient Egyptians had preserved the idea of a single and personal God under the veil of a "crude and bizarre polytheism"; Paul Pierret, who, in 1879, entitled the first chapter of his *Essai sur la mythologie égyptienne* "Le monothéisme égyptien"; Joseph Chabas, who concluded that the many gods are only aspects of the One; and Auguste Mariette, who assumed a single, immortal, uncreated, invisible, and hidden God "for the initiated" at the head of the Egyptian pantheon. The author then shows how this idea penetrated German and Anglo-American Egyptology.

Hornung argues that the historical reality of the Egyptian gods, evidenced by the fact that the Egyptians lived with their gods for thousands of years and engaged in lively dialogue with them, cannot be denied. He remarks that in all Egyptian literature, there is no fact more certain than that the same people adhered to the doctrines of 'one God' and 'a plurality of gods,' and no one thought of finding a contradiction in these doctrines. Therefore, if the word 'God' had the same meaning for the Egyptians as it does for us, the situation would simply be absurd. Hornung concludes that what the Egyptians actually wanted to express with the word *nutar* is not equivalent to what we understand as 'God.' We have seen that this argument was already put forward by Maspero.

Hornung (1983, 246) draws attention to the fact that Western logic may approach the problem of divinity differently from the ancient Egyptians. Their thought processes may have been different, making our terms inappropriate. In the Egyptian mind, God can simultaneously be 'One and Many', that is, "a unity in worship and revelation, and multiple in nature and manifestation."

According to the German scholar, we can properly talk of monotheism in ancient Egypt only in relation to the Amarna Revolution and the exclusive cult of Aten established by Pharaoh Akhenaten. Ten years after its appearance, Hornung's book was translated into English as *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt: The One and the Many* and became very influential. For instance, Vincent Arieh Tobin discusses Hornung's ideas in his 1989 book *Theological Principles of Egyptian Religion*. Tobin views ancient Egyptian mythology not as a random assortment of tales and traditions about deities but as a deliberate and intricate framework of symbolic meaning. He illustrates that the mythological structure of ancient Egypt reflects a profound and intellectual theological understanding of the universe. This understanding conveyed an integrated vision of reality, expressing the fundamental order and unity perceived by the Egyptians across all aspects of existence, symbolized by a female deity called Ma'at. The study ultimately portrays Egyptian religion as a cohesive and systematic interpretation of the cosmos rather than a disorganized collection of myths. Still, Tobin is reluctant to talk about an implicit monotheism.

In an essay entitled "Mitho-Theology in Ancient Egypt," Tobin (1988, 182) explicitly states that it is "unlikely that any serious modern scholar would maintain the idea that behind the Egyptian polytheistic symbolism there was hidden a genuine monotheism." He also questions the henotheistic nature of the cult of Amun-Ra after the deity was elevated to the position of king of the gods, noting that the other gods did not lose importance at all. He concludes that "the best we can state of traditional Egyptian thought is that the weight of the position attributed to the Theban Amun-Re may have created a deity who, after a long process and the emergence of an abstract way of thinking, could have eventually evolved into a monotheistic god. Such a phenomenon, however, did not take place…" (Tobin 1988, 182). In other words, Egyptian religion was monotheistic only in potency.

Quite interestingly, many years later, Tobin (2002, 20) would be less drastic in rejecting the 'classic' interpretation of the golden age. He writes that, during the New Kingdom, the position of Amun-Ra "as king of the gods increased to a point that approached monotheism." This is because, in the most advanced theological expressions of the godhead, "the other gods became symbols of his power or manifestations of him – he himself being the one and only supreme divine power."

In relation to our discussion, however, the most interesting observation by Tobin (1988, 172) is that "for the Egyptian mind, the divine world, and to a certain extent even the visible world, was something which was mysterious and totally other than the world of normal human comprehension." Thus, even if by name only Amun is the Hidden One, all the major deities are, to a minor or larger extent, ineffable. That is why, in the *Book of the Dead*, we often find Atum in the position of the Unknown God. Tobin underlines, in particular, the

role of Ma'at, a goddess symbolizing the underlying order of the universe and, therefore, the foundation of natural and political stability. Being the guarantee that nothing wrong can happen, Ma'at also symbolizes the optimistic philosophy of life of the ancient Egyptians. 'Order' is as abstract and invisible as it is fundamental.

The same applies to Atum, a term that means 'the complete one' or 'he who is complete,' signifying that the creator god had to contain everything within themselves, or to Amun, the concealed god by definition. Tobin highlights the abstract nature of these unifying principles to demonstrate that Egyptian religion is midway between mythology and theology. Therefore, those who reduce this religion to "mythological rubbish" (Gardiner 1961, 227) are certainly wrong.

The influence of Hornung's interpretation is also evident in the work of Ann Rosalie David, who appeals to his authority to reject the monotheistic nature of Amun-Ra's cult. She recognizes only Akhenaten's solar cult as properly monotheistic, writing:

> Early studies in religion proposed that monotheism had developed out of polytheism, and it was argued that titles such as 'Lord of All,' which were applied to Amun, were indicative of a trend towards monotheism even before the Amarna Period. However, more recently, it has been argued that this title does not describe the god's transcendent nature but instead indicates that he was lord of the whole temporal and spatial world. Also, the terms applied to Amun as 'King of Gods' are no longer regarded as evidence of a progression from polytheism to monotheism. (David 2002)

By stating that Egyptologists previously accepted the paradigm of implicit monotheism but now align with the polytheistic paradigm, David implies a strong contemporary consensus on the latter. Modern science often operates under the assumption that newer ideas represent an advancement over earlier ones. While this is frequently true, it is not always the case. One of the aims of the history of ideas and sociology of knowledge is to challenge such dogma.

The debate remains open. Another eminent Egyptologist, Jan Assmann, has provided a different perspective. In 1983, Assmann published *Re und Amun: Die Krise des polytheistischen Weltbilds im Ägypten der 18.-20. Dynastie*, a work translated into English a dozen years later (Assmann 1995). This study delves deeply into solar religion and the sun hymns of the New Kingdom, a period from 1500 to 1200 BC, often called the golden age of solar hymns. Assmann views these hymns as more than poetic expressions; they embody theological and political ideologies, reflecting spiritual and cultural movements of the time. The author argues that this era represents an effort to articulate the concept of a singular divine entity, or 'One God,' in tension with

traditional polytheistic beliefs. This struggle to reconcile monotheistic ideas with an existing religious framework posed a unique theological challenge.

He maintains that Akhenaten's Amarna Revolution was the most explicit and radical attempt to establish monotheism in Egypt. This effort, however, was not sustained; following Akhenaten's death, his son Tutankhamun restored the traditional gods' cults. Yet, Assmann contends that what followed was not a mere return to previous polytheism but a nuanced transformation. He suggests that monotheistic ideas introduced during Akhenaten's reign influenced subsequent religious practices, blending polytheistic traditions with monotheistic concepts. This is seen in later hymns and texts, which often elevate one god above others or depict the gods as manifestations of a singular divine principle.

Assmann sought to navigate beyond the traditional monotheism-polytheism dichotomy. He introduced the concept of 'cosmic monotheism' or 'cosmotheism' to describe Egyptian religion. In a 1998 lecture titled "Mono-, Pan-, and Cosmotheism: Thinking the 'One' in Egyptian Theology," Assmann critiques Hornung's conclusion that Egyptian religion is best described as polytheistic.

> It is wrong to speak of Egyptian monotheism. Hornung is perfectly right in stressing this point. With the exception of Akhenaten, the Egyptians worshipped many gods. But it is equally wrong to call the Egyptians 'polytheists.' Polytheism is a polemical term. It exclusively belongs and makes sense in the context of a religion that distinguishes between true and false and equates monotheism with truth and polytheism with error. (Assmann 1998a, 146)

Assmann's arguments become clearer in his book *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, in which he explores the profound impact of Egyptian culture and religion on Western monotheism. There, he focuses on the 'Mosaic Distinction' – the fundamental separation between true and false religion traditionally attributed to Moses in the Old Testament, absent from other ancient civilizations. Assmann links the exclusivity of monotheism, originating with the Amarna Revolution and later Mosaic Law, to the evolution of Western religious and cultural identity. He argues that applying modern theological categories to Egyptian religion is not anachronistic, as those categories are inherited from Egypt through Greek and Jewish intermediaries.

This perspective sparked controversy. Assmann acknowledges that while Judaism represents explicit monotheism, it owes its roots to the latent monotheism of Egyptian religion. Moses, he argues, serves as a cultural bridge between the two. Moreover, Assmann argues that the transition from latent to

explicit monotheism is not necessarily a form of progress, as many assume. While latent monotheism allowed for religious tolerance and peace, explicit monotheism introduced exclusivity, leading to intolerance, persecution, and holy wars. Latent monotheism suggests that the Unknown God can manifest in multiple forms, none of which are inherently true or false. Explicit monotheism, by contrast, asserts one true religion, ritual, and symbol, rejecting all others.

Finally, in his book *From Akhenaten to Moses: Ancient Egypt and Religious Change,* Assmann downplays the stark distinction between the Amarna Revolution and surrounding periods. He argues that Akhenaten's reforms emerged from existing cultural currents and left lasting influences on subsequent Egyptian theology. For example, he writes:

> In Egypt, this latent monotheism gained more and more momentum in the course of the New Kingdom and became overwhelmingly manifest with the religious revolution of Akhenaten, who quite simply did away with the plurality of gods and abolished traditional religion altogether. (…) In the aftermath of this revolutionary step, the gods were readmitted into theology; the henotheistic perspective, however, still prevailed, and the gods, especially in hymns to Amun, tended now to be demoted to 'names,' 'manifestations,' 'symbols,' 'limbs,' and the like, of the One. (Assmann 2014, 13)

Assmann underscores the theological sophistication of ancient Egyptian religion, countering the view that theology is an intellectual phenomenon unique to Abrahamic faiths. American Egyptologist James Peter Allen (1999) notes that ancient Egyptian texts mention over 1,400 deities. However, as Assmann observes, syncretic tendencies often culminated in perceiving the pantheon as aspects of a supreme god. This is epitomized in an inscription, which seems to anticipate the Christian Trinity:

> All gods are three: Amun, Re, and Ptah, whom none equals. He who hides his name as Amun, he appears to the face as Re, his body is Ptah. (Zandee 1947; Assmann 1975; Assmann 2014, 13)

The Old Testament contains many names for God. To cite just a few, we find El Shaddai (Lord God Almighty), El Elyon (The Most High God), Adonai (Lord, Master), Yahweh (Lord, Jehovah), El Olam (The Everlasting God), Elohim (God/gods), and Qanna (Jealous). Believers typically assume that these names refer to a single entity, but this is far from obvious. In the New Testament, alongside Abba (Father), we encounter various titles for Jesus, such as Christ, Lord, Master, Logos (the Word), Son of God, Son of Man, Son of David, and Lamb of God. Finally, the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit, is also referred to as Parakletos (a Greek word for Comforter, Counse-

lor, or Advocate), as well as Baptizer, Strengthener, Sanctifier, and Seven-Fold Spirit – Spirit of Christ, Truth, Grace, Mercy, God, Holiness, and Life. Christian theology has reduced the persons of God to three, while affirming their essential unity.

Similarly, in the Egyptian context, it is not simply a matter of the fact that all the gods are ultimately three, but that "these three are encompassed and transcended by a god who is referred to only as 'He,' whose name is Amun, whose cosmic manifestation is Re, and whose body, or cult image, is Ptah. Even the name of 'Amun,' the 'Hidden One,' is just an epithet screening the true and hidden name of this god" (Assmann 2014, 13).

11. CONCLUSION

Whether Egyptian religion, at least during a period of its long history, was a monotheism centered on the cult of the Unknown God, a henotheism that elevated the Unknown God to a supreme divinity ruling over other deities, or simply a polytheism that included a cult of the Unknown God, remains a matter of controversy. Egyptologists have explored all of these options. In the golden age of Egyptology, the monotheistic interpretation had many supporters, perhaps the majority, while in contemporary Egyptology, the henotheistic and polytheistic interpretations tend to prevail. For the sake of this study, the most important point is the consensus among Egyptologists on the fact that ancient Egyptians venerated an unknown, hidden, invisible, mysterious, incomprehensible, unutterable, and ineffable God. This deity is Amun, although ineffability has sometimes been attributed to other deities.

This fact, evident to Egyptologists, is less apparent to historians, theologians, and philologists specializing in other historical periods, religions, or ancient languages. That is why many works on apophatic theology fail to recognize the Egyptian roots of the idea of the Unknown God and instead confine research to Greek philosophy, Gnosticism, Neoplatonism, or early Christianity. The history of ideas aims to construct a holistic view of our intellectual past by integrating the valuable contributions of specialists in different fields. Historians of ideas work as 'dot-connectors.' Exploring in detail how the idea of the Unknown God, starting from Egypt (and India!), reached Europe, influencing pagan and Christian spirituality, would be the subject of another study. In this paper, however, I have offered several insights into two fundamental paths – the Greek and the Jewish.

To conclude, allow me a brief personal observation. Maspero, Wendel, Hornung, and others underline that translating the word *nuter* as 'God' is misleading. Given our understanding of the word, God cannot be 'One and Many.' To 'us,' according to these scholars, this notion appears as an absurdi-

ty. Therefore, they conclude that *nuter* has a different meaning to 'them,' the ancient Egyptians, not fully comprehensible to the Western contemporary mind. Besides, by mentioning the masonic roots of the monotheistic interpretation of Egyptian religion, Hornung seems to imply that there may be ideological motives behind this scientific theory. This is entirely possible, but the same could be said of alternative interpretations aimed at emphasizing the uniqueness of Abrahamic monotheism.

I think that the idea of the incommensurability of the two concepts can be easily rejected on historical grounds. The key is to clarify who 'us' and 'them' are. The diverse approach of Egyptian religion, which blurs the clear distinction between monotheism and polytheism, can disorient those with a rigid understanding of monotheism, such as Jews and Muslims. It should be noted, however, that Christians, being ready to admit that God is 'One and Triune,' and yet consider their religion monotheistic, should have less trouble accepting that there can be a monotheism in which God is 'One and Many.' In other words, much depends on how we understand the concepts of 'monotheism' and 'polytheism.' Is the concept of the Trinity contradictory or absurd? It is worth remembering that Tertullian proudly embraced the accusation of absurdity leveled against Christianity, stating that he believed because it is absurd (credo quia absurdum). When non-believers or those with different beliefs ask Christian theologians for a logical explanation of the Trinity, the usual response is that it is a mystery beyond logic. The concept of mystery was also frequently used by ancient Egyptian priests in their sacred texts. Thus, the alterity and incommensurability of the two ways of thinking is not as evident as it may seem.

The notion of God as 'One and Many' is actually rooted in Indo-European culture, and we cannot exclude the possibility that we inherited it from Egypt. Several ancient Greek philosophers (Xenophanes, Plato, Aristotle, and others) speak of the divine reality using both the singular nominative *Theos* (Θεός) and the plural *theoi* (θεοί) in the same text, as if admitting simultaneously the belief in a single God and the worship of the twelve Olympian gods and other minor deities. This pattern of reasoning also applies to Gnosticism, where the Aeons are understood as manifestations of the true God, divine entities positioned between humans and the *Agnostos Theos*, manifestations of the ineffable One, and foundations of the Universe. For the Neoplatonists, too, God is 'One and Triune' (the three hypostases of Plotinus), and this notion is still presented as a philosophical truth by Cardinal Nicholas of Cusa in modern times (cf. Campa 2023, 42-47). Besides, God is 'One and Many' in Hinduism. Thus, the Egyptian conception of God may be alien to the ancient and contemporary Middle Eastern mind but is surely familiar to the ancient and contemporary Indo-European mind.

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Second Section

CONTRIBUTIONS
IN ITALIAN

«IL DIO CHE MUTA».
IL CONTRIBUTO DI PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN
E DI ALTRI PENSATORI DEL XX E XXI SECOLO
AL DIBATTITO SUL FUTURO
DELL'ESPERIENZA RELIGIOSA

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ENGLISH TITLE: "THE GOD WHO CHANGES": THE CONTRIBUTION OF PIERRE TEILHARD DE CHARDIN AND OTHER THINKERS OF THE 20TH AND 21ST CENTURIES TO THE DEBATE ON THE FUTURE OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

ABSTRACT

The need to rethink the structure of religious experience is a concern deeply felt by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, though it is not unique to him. Throughout the twentieth century and the first quarter of the twenty-first, numerous thinkers have reflected on the crisis of religious discourse. Like the Jesuit, many of them do not see atheism as the most appropriate response. Some, including Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Carl Gustav Jung, Julian Huxley, and Stuart Kauffman, seek solutions outside Christianity. Others, particularly Henri Bergson and Alfred North Whitehead, propose a form of 'process theism' that, while questioning significant aspects of Christianity's traditional doctrinal framework, does not exclude its viability. Finally, some thinkers remain within the Christian tradition but offer non-metaphysical interpretations that give rise to various forms of anatheism, post-theism, and panentheism.

KEYWORDS: Teilhard de Chardin, Stuart Kauffman, Ilia Delio, Anatheism, Post-theism, Panentheism

Teilhard non è stato un teologo in senso professionale. È stato, piuttosto, un pensatore religioso la cui riflessione è il prodotto della sua condizione di religioso e di scienziato nella cui persona la conoscenza del mondo prodotta da scienze come la geologia, la paleontologia, la paleoantropologia, si salda con considerazioni sui futuri scenari dell'evoluzione in cui le competenze dello scienziato si intrecciano con i pensieri del filosofo e le speranze del cristiano. Ciò fa di lui un credente «isolato», «irregolare», come si definisce in alcune lettere, che ha posto non soltanto la Chiesa cattolica, confessione a cui appartiene, ma ogni forma di esperienza religiosa, davanti all'urgenza di dar corso a profondi cambiamenti. Egli ritiene infatti che tali cambiamenti sono imposti dall'impatto decostruttivo che l'affermarsi della visione evolutiva del mondo, la crescente unificazione del gruppo umano su scala planetaria, l'espansione e il potenziamento del sapere tecnico-scientifico, esercitano sull'immaginario religioso. In un saggio del 1934, Teilhard scrive: «il difficile non sta nel risolvere i problemi, ma nel porli»[1]. Al di là della valutazione circa le soluzioni da lui proposte, occorre riconoscere che fin dal 1915, cioè dai primissimi inizi della sua riflessione teologico-filosofica, egli pone un problema che è stato anche il problema con il quale si sono misurati importanti filosofi e teologi del ventesimo e del primo quarto del ventunesimo secolo.

Il problema è dato dalla constatazione del fatto che «qualcosa – scrive il gesuita in un saggio del 1949 – non va più, nel nostro tempo, tra l'Uomo e Dio *tale quale lo si presenta oggi all'Uomo*»[2]. Le parole contenute nella lettera al p. Auguste Valensin del 08 agosto 1950 confermano l'esistenza del disagio da lui avvertito in rapporto ai modi convenzionali di pensare e praticare l'esperienza religiosa, e ne indica la radice nel rapporto irrisolto con la modernità.

> La sorgente di tutte le difficoltà in questo momento – scrive – è che i teologi non vedono il Mondo e l'Uomo nel modo in cui essi si manifestano attualmente a noi. Ci presentano un Dio per un Mondo finito (o che sta finendo) proprio quando noi potremo adorare soltanto *un Dio per un Mondo che sta iniziando*. Ne sono sempre più sicuro: tutta la difficoltà e tutta la grandezza del problema religioso moderno sono lì[3].

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[1] P. Teilhard de Chardin, *L'Évolution de la chasteté*, in Id., *Les Directions de l'Avenir*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1973, p. 92.

[2] P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Le Cœur du problème*, in Id., *L'Avenir de l'Homme*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1959, p. 339.

[3] P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Lettres intimes de Teilhard de Chardin à Auguste Valensin, Bruno de Solages, Henri de Lubac (1919-1955)*, Aubier-Montaigne, Paris 1974, p. 382.

Teilhard è convinto della necessità di dare corso a uno «sforzo creatore religioso»[4] che consenta di far fronte a una crisi che tocca il cattolicesimo, come pure altre confessioni cristiane e altre religioni.

Per quanto riguarda il cattolicesimo, un elemento di criticità è ravvisato nella presenza, in esso, della stretta connessione con il teismo metafisico della tradizione neoscolastica, che è all'origine del «teismo insoddisfatto»[5] diffuso tra molti credenti. Secondo il gesuita, però, la crisi non è una esclusiva del cattolicesimo. Tocca le religioni orientali, l'Islam, e altre forme di esperienza religiosa, per l'incapacità da lui rilevata nelle credenze convenzionali di offrire dottrine e pratiche omogenee con le trasformazioni dell'immagine del mondo e della vita umana prodottesi con la rivoluzione scientifica, e con le mutazioni della politica e del costume affermatesi con l'avvento della modernità.

1. TEILHARD: DAL «TEISMO INSODDISFATTO» AL «NEO-CRISTIANESIMO»

Secondo Teilhard, a differenza di quanto sostengono i fautori della cultura atea, il mondo contemporaneo non è l'epoca della scomparsa di Dio, quanto, piuttosto, quella del «Dio che muta»[6]. Il mutamento è il prodotto del tramonto di forme di relazione con il divino vissute come fuga o come estraneazione dal mondo, come pratiche che attribuiscono alla religione un esclusivismo veritativo, oppure pensano Dio come il «grande Proprietario» del mondo, o ancorano la pratica religiosa a forme di pensiero che, attraverso la rivendicazione del primato dell'originario, ne fanno il veicolo di un fissismo e di un essenzialismo nemici di ogni cambiamento. Per il gesuita, invece, l'esperienza religiosa comporta il coinvolgimento del fedele in un cammino «in avanti» che richiede il suo impegno nelle conoscenze e nelle attività scientifiche, tecnologiche, politiche, etiche, che «danno forma alla energia libera, pensante, sprigionata dalla Terra»[7].

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[4] P. Teilhard de Chardin, *L'apport spirituel de l'Extrême Orient. Quelques réflexions personnelles*, in Id., *Les Directions de l'Avenir*, p. 158.

[5] P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Il piacere di vivere*, in Id., *Verso la Convergenza. L'attivazione dell'energia nell'umanità*, tr. it. di A. Tassone Bernardi, Il Segno dei Gabrielli Editori, San Pietro in Cariano (VR) 2004, p. 203.

[6] P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Accomplir l'Homme. Lettres inédites (1926-1952)*, Grasset, Paris 1968, p. 138.

[7] P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Il cristianesimo nel mondo*, in Id., *La Scienza di fronte a Cristo. Credere nel mondo e credere in Dio*, tr. it. di A. Tassone Bernardi, Il Segno dei Gabrielli Editori, San Pietro in Cariano (VR) 2002, p. 131.

In tal modo viene delineata la figura di un «Neo-cristianesimo»[8] che si lascia alle spalle l'alleanza con le culture della restaurazione, come il Neotomismo o il Romanticismo religioso, come pure le teologie del *Ressourcement* biblico o patristico. Ad essa si accompagna, inoltre, una visione della pratica religiosa estranea a forme di fondamentalismo che la chiudano nel perimetro di tradizioni impermeabili al cambiamento. Teilhard prospetta infatti la necessità di una «Riforma» dell'esperienza religiosa che è imposta dal fatto che l'umanità attuale attraversa un «*cambiamento di età* […], *un'epoca critica e singolare*»[9], in cui le variazioni toccano strutture di lungo periodo della vita della Terra, che vanno al di là delle mutazioni legate ai passaggi di civilizzazione. Si apre, così, lo scenario di una nuova era geologica in cui la «vita pensante», che è il prodotto del lungo cammino evolutivo del cosmo, si afferma come il soggetto del «rilancio dell'evoluzione» attraverso l'espansione e il potenziamento del sapere tecnico-scientifico, e nuove forme di organizzazione e di gestione della vita umana. Questo fenomeno determina profondi cambiamenti nei modi in cui gli uomini fanno esperienza di sé e del mondo, e di conseguenza, nei modi in cui pensare e vivere il rapporto con il divino.

2. PENSATORI A CONFRONTO SUL FUTURO DELLA RELIGIONE

La percezione della necessità di un ripensamento della struttura dell'esperienza religiosa è un problema avvertito non soltanto da Teilhard. Nel ventesimo e nel primo quarto del ventunesimo secolo ci sono infatti molti pensatori che, come il gesuita, riflettono sulla crisi del discorso religioso, e, come lui, non vedono nell'ateismo il modo più appropriato di affrontarla. Alcuni vanno alla ricerca di soluzioni al di fuori dello spazio religioso cristiano. Altri le ricercano in nuove forme di teologia filosofica, altri ancora in ermeneutiche innovative del cristianesimo.

2.1. «Reinventare il sacro»

Tra coloro che cercano una soluzione alla crisi del discorso religioso al di fuori del cristianesimo ci sono pensatori come Martin Heidegger, Karl Jaspers, Carl

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[8] Il termine appare per la prima volta in due lettere. La prima, del 26 gennaio 1936, è indirizzata a Leontine Zanta (P. Teilhard de Chardin, *Lettres à Leontine Zanta,* Desclée de Brouwer, Paris 1965, p. 129); la seconda, del 25 gennaio 1937, è indirizzata al Lucile Swan (Th. M. King, M. W. Gilbert (eds.), *The letters of Teilhard de Chardin & Lucile Swan*, Georgetown University Press, Washington D.C. 1993, p. 66).

[9] P. Teilhard de Chardin, *L'Hominisation. Introduction à une étude scientifique du phénomène humain*, in Id., *La Vision du Passé*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1957, p. 107.

Gustav Jung, Julian Huxley, Arnold Toynbee, Stuart Kauffman, Emanuele Dattilo.

Heidegger si sottrae all'alternativa tra teismo e ateismo attraverso la decostruzione della «ontoteologia» e la connessione dell'esperienza religiosa a un discorso postmetafisico su Dio che fa ricorso a figure concettuali come il «Dio divino», «l'ultimo Dio», la «Quadratura» tra terra e cielo, umani e divini[10]. Egli non pensa infatti l'essere in contrapposizione al tempo, o associandolo a nozioni come eterno o infinito. L'essere è «evento», il darsi, cioè, nella «storia dell'essere», di orizzonti diversificati di manifestazioni del mondo che vanno dalla *Physis* dei primi pensatori greci al «*Gestell*», cioè al mondo pianificato e amministrato della tecnoscienza.

Nel contesto del «nuovo inizio» del pensiero evocato dal filosofo tedesco, all'origine dell'esperienza religiosa non sta dunque il rapporto con un Assoluto collocato al di là o al di sopra del mondo. Il «Dio divino» non è infatti né un soggetto, né un oggetto, né qualcuno o qualcosa che trascende il mondo, ma

un darsi che – scrive Aldo Magris – non proviene da nessun'altra parte e non sta in nessun luogo; un darsi che non è dato da niente e da nessuno; un darsi che differisce essenzialmente da qualsiasi "dato". Il dono di sé che l'evento attua è l'abisso sul quale le cose donate rimangono per un poco sospese. Non è in questo atto di donazione che il pensiero religioso deve riconoscere il Dio nascosto? Non è forse questa la trascendenza del "Dio divino"?[11].

L'esperienza religiosa non nasce quindi, secondo Heidegger, dal riferimento a un oggetto specificamente religioso, ma come interpretazione del «dato abissale» che si palesa o si nasconde nell'esperienza. In tal senso, il «Dio divino», o «l'ultimo Dio» di cui si parla in *Vom Ereignis*, è «del tutto diverso rispetto agli dei già stati, specie rispetto al Dio cristiano»[12]. Inoltre, il Dio che «ci può salvare» evocato nell'intervista data a *Der Spiegel* il 23

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[10] Sulla complessa questione del rapporto tra Heidegger, il Cristianesimo, e le religioni orientali, cfr. A. Magris, *Il Cristianesimo*, in A. Fabris (ed.), *Heidegger. Una guida*, Carocci Editore, Roma 2023, pp. 265-300; Ph. Capelle-Dumont, *Filosofia e teologia nel pensiero di Martin Heidegger*, tr. it. di L. Gianfelici, Queriniana, Brescia 2011; J. Greish, *Le Buisson ardent et les Lumières de la raison. L'invention de la philosophie de la religion*, III, *Vers un paradigme hérmeneutique*, Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 2004, pp. 499-734; G. Parkes (ed.), *Heidegger and Asian Thought*, University Press, Honolulu 1987.

[11] A. Magris, *Pensiero dell'evento e avvento del divino in Heidegger*, in Id., *Itinerari della filosofia e delle religioni*, II, *Idealismo, Fenomenologia, Ermeneutica*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2017, p. 157.

[12] M. Heidegger, *Contributi alla filosofia. (Dall'evento)*, tr. it. di A. Iadicicco, Adelphi, Milano 2007, p. 395.

settembre 1966, e pubblicata il 31 maggio 1976, pochi giorni dopo la morte[13], non è «*causa sui*», come è stato erroneamente identificato dalla filosofia[14], né, tantomeno, il soggetto di una nuova rivelazione. La filosofia non dispone in tal senso di capacità teurgiche. Non è infatti in grado di «produrre – si legge nell'intervista – nessuna immediata modificazione dello stato attuale del mondo»[15]. Molto più modestamente, è in suo potere «preparare nel pensiero e nel poetare, una disponibilità all'apparizione del Dio o all'assenza del Dio nel tramonto […]. Preparare questa disposizione a tenersi aperti per l'avvento o la contumacia del Dio […]. Alla preparazione della suddetta disponibilità appartiene la riflessione su ciò che è oggi»[16].

Per Heidegger, dunque, un pensiero che non voglia limitarsi a oliare i meccanismi del mondo della tecnica ha, per un verso, il compito di decostruire la metafisica e la sua filiazione ultima, il mondo-impianto della tecnica, e, per un altro verso, quello di tenere aperto lo spazio per l'avvento del «Dio divino», per l'avvento, cioè, di una nuova epoca della «storia dell'essere» che apra la possibilità di nuove configurazioni dell'esperienza religiosa.

> Solo partendo dalla verità dell'essere – si legge in *Humanismus Brief* – si può pensare l'essenza del sacro. Solo partendo dall'essenza del sacro si può pensare l'essenza della divinità. Solo alla luce dell'essenza della divinità si può pensare e dire che cosa mai debba nominare la parola "Dio"[17].

Karl Jaspers, attraverso una riflessione molto ampia e articolata, delinea i tratti di una «fede filosofica»[18] che non intende delegittimare *in toto* le tradizioni religiose, ma ne fa i luoghi di manifestazione di «cifre della trascendenza»[19]. In tal modo, alla religione viene sottratta ogni possibilità di attri-

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[13] M. Heidegger, *Ormai solo un Dio ci può salvare*, tr. it. di A. Marini, Ugo Guanda Editore, Parma 1987.

[14] A proposito della identificazione di Dio come «*causa sui*», Heidegger scrive: «*causa sui*. È questo il nome appropriato per il dio nella filosofia. A un dio simile l'uomo non può rivolgere preghiere né può offrire sacrifici. Dinanzi alla *causa sui* l'uomo non può cadere devotamente in ginocchio né può suonare e danzare. Di conseguenza il pensiero senza-dio (*das gott-lose Denken*), che deve rinunciare al dio della filosofia – cioè al dio come *causa sui* – è forse più vicino al dio divino il che, in questo caso, significa soltanto: questo pensiero è libero per tale dio più di quanto la onto-teo-logica non sia disposta ad ammettere»: M. Heidegger, *Identità e differenza*, tr. it. di G. Vattimo, Adelphi, Milano 2009, p. 95.

[15] M. Heidegger, *Ormai solo un Dio ci può salvare*, p. 136.

[16] Ivi, pp. 136, 139.

[17] M. Heidegger, *Lettera sull'«Umanismo»*, tr. it. di F. Volpi, Adelphi Edizioni, Milano 1995, pp. 85-86.

[18] K. Jaspers, *La fede filosofica*, tr. it. di U. Galimberti, Raffaelo Cortina Editore, Milano 2005.

[19] K. Jaspers, *Cifre della trascendenza*, tr. it. di F. Ferraguto, Fazi Editore, Roma 2017. Sul rapporto tra «fede filosofica» e Cristianesimo, cfr., in particolare, K. Jaspers, *La fede filosofica a confronto con la rivelazione cristiana*, tr. it., di R. Garaventa, Orthothes Editrice, Napoli-Salerno 2014. Sulla riflessione elaborata da Jaspers sulle religioni, cfr. X. Tilliette, *Karl Ja-*

buirsi un esclusivismo veritativo, che, secondo il filosofo tedesco è fonte di intolleranza e violenza, poiché la legittima come canale privilegiato di manifestazione della verità divina.

Nella sua poderosa opera di esplorazione dell'immaginario religioso, Carl Gustav Jung evidenzia il fatto che il Cristianesimo, in particolare quello occidentale, è divenuto un «sistema morto», imprigionato in certezze dogmatiche[20]. La pratica religiosa è infatti ridotta a questione dottrinale, e non viene vissuta come esperienza capace di toccare gli strati profondi della vita psichica della persona.

Nella riflessione sul fenomeno religioso, Jung non privilegia nessuna religione in particolare. Considera infatti le religioni come funzioni non obliterabili delle psiche. Ritiene, in tal senso, che la psicologia del profondo, con la tematizzazione dell'«inconscio collettivo» canalizzato nei simboli delle differenti esperienze religiose, possa aiutare gli uomini, in particolare l'uomo occidentale, a ritrovare un rapporto con il divino non pregiudicato dalla dualità tra Dio e mondo, materia e spirito, anima e corpo.

Lo storico Arnold Toynbee parla dell'epoca contemporanea come epoca «post-cristiana» o «ex-cristiana». All'orizzonte vede infatti la nascita di forme di esperienza religiosa di natura «sintetica», cioè tipologie di rapporto con il divino che nascono dalla combinazione sincretistica di elementi provenienti da differenti tradizioni religiose[21].

Il biologo e filosofo Julian Huxley parla della necessità di una «nuova religione»[22], di un «nuovo sistema di credenze e di atteggiamenti»[23]. Sostiene, in tal senso, che le religioni storiche, con le loro credenze convenzionali, non sono in grado di offrire un contributo alla formazione di un «polo comune di pensiero e a un corpo di idee»[24] che consentano di sostenere lo sforzo creativo di una umanità sempre più unificata su scala planetaria, divenuta «l'agente» di un processo evolutivo che dipende in maniera sempre più rilevante da scelte

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spers. *Théorie de la Vérité, Métaphasique des Chiffres, Foi Philosophique*, Aubier, Paris 1959, pp. 107-137, 159-164, 190-227; L. Pareyson, *Karl Jaspers*, Marietti, Torino 1983, pp. 135-170.
[20] C. G. Jung, *Psicologia e religione. Saggio d'interpretazione psicologica del dogma della Trinità*, tr. it. di O. Bovero Caporali, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 2013; Id., *Gli archetipi e l'inconscio collettivo*, tr. it. di E. Schanzer e A. Vitolo, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1977. Sull'ermeneutica junghiana dell'esperienza religiosa, cfr. J. Dourley, *Paul Tillich, Carl Jung and the Recovery of Religion*, Routledge, London 2008; E. Edinger, *The New God Image: A study of Jung's Key Letters Concerning the Evolution of the Western God Image*, Chiron, Wilmette (IL) 1996.
[21] A. J. Toynbee, *A Study of Histo*ry, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1987. Sul pensiero di Toynbee, cfr. G. Sasso, *Tramonto di un mito. L'idea di «progresso» tra Ottocento e Novecento*, Il Mulino, Bologna 1988, pp. 311-320; H. Küng, *Progetto per un'etica mondiale*, tr. it. di G. Moretto, Milano, Rizzoli 1991, pp. 110-113.
[22] J. Huxley, *Religion without Revelation*, Max Parrish, London 1957, p. 235.
[23] *Ibidem*.
[24] *Ibidem.*

e decisioni che sono connesse all'espansione e all'avanzamento del sapere tecnico-scientifico.

Il biologo Stuart Kauffman teorizza la necessità di «reinventare il sacro», di dar corso, cioè, a una nuova concezione della religione, che è imposta dai risultati ottenuti da scienze come la fisica, la biologia, la biochimica. Ad esse lega infatti il superamento della visione riduzionista della realtà, che, a suo avviso, è il frutto dell'«incantesimo galileiano che ci tiene sotto il suo gioco»[25], per accedere a una visione del reale come «infinita creatività» che si esprime nel cosmo, nella biosfera, nel divenire della vita umana. Nel contesto di questa visione della realtà come processo creativo risulta possibile, secondo Kauffman, ridare un significato alla parola Dio sottraendola alla metafisica, e al fissismo tipico della sua visione del mondo, al soprannaturalismo caratteristico di molte esperienze religiose, a concezioni della creatività come prerogativa esclusiva dell'essere divino.

Secondo Kauffman esiste infatti

> una infinita creatività nell'universo, nella biosfera e nella vita umana. In quella creatività possiamo trovare un significato di Dio che potremo condividere. Io credo che questo sia il cuore della ragione per cui abbiamo voluto un Dio soprannaturale. Un simile Dio magari esiste, ma a noi non serve: la creatività della natura è un Dio sufficiente. Da questo significato naturale di Dio possiamo sperare di reinventare il sacro, inteso come creatività in natura, e senza pretendere che tutto ciò che accade ci sia congeniale. Da questo nuovo senso del sacro speriamo di inventare un'etica globale che orienterà la nostra vita e la nostra civiltà globale emergente[26].

Un'alternativa al Dio trascendente, separato dal mondo, tipico della metafisica, o al «Dio educativo e pedagogico, amorevole o punitivo che ci è familiare»[27], come pure a ogni forma di «materialismo volgare», Emanuele Dattilo la trova nel panteismo.

Questa mentalità filosofico-teologica, minoritaria nella tradizione occidentale, è stata avversata dall'ortodossia religiosa, come pure dalla tradizione filosofica che fa capo al teismo o al deismo. Per Dattilo, infatti,

> il *divino* va pensato come più originario di Dio e degli dei, come attributo inseparabile da tutto ciò che c'è: come una pellicola trasparente avvolta attorno ad ogni cosa, mai separato in una forma particolare. Se non c'è Dio, ma piuttosto una *vis divina*, sparsa e diffusa nel cosmo, ciò significa che la via d'accesso alla natura non potrà essere una fede, o una relazione personale, *un*

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[25] S. Kauffman, *Reiventare il sacro. Una nuova concezione della scienza, della ragione e della religione*, tr. it. di S. Ferraresi, Codice Edizioni, Torino 2010, p. 148.
[26] *Ibidem*.
[27] E. Dattilo, *Il dio sensibile. Saggio sul panteismo*, Neri Pozza Editore, Vicenza 2021, p. 26.

io-tu […]. L'unico modo per avvicinarsi a questo *divino* sarà intendere chiaramente il mondo *per come è*. Divino significa che esso non è mai separato da ciò di cui è aggettivo […]. Certo può lasciare disorientati questo divino pervasivo e totale, che non consola e non salva, che non si rivolge all'uomo dicendogli che fare, che non ama le creature rispecchiandosi in esse, consolandole. Che farsene di un tale Dio? Eppure proprio questo disorientamento, questo improvviso cedere del terreno sotto i piedi, è il primo respiro del pensiero, il primo segno di liberazione da una zavorra soffocante, che rendeva l'aria irrespirabile. Solo attraverso questo primo respiro, forse, sarà possibile guardare il mondo e le cose in quell'intensità panteistica che Spinoza ha chiamato *amor dei intellectualis*[28].

2.2. «Nuovo teismo»: Dio dopo Darwin e Einstein

Gli autori elencati in precedenza vedono la soluzione alla crisi dell'esperienza religiosa in forme di «reinvenzione del sacro» che fuoriescono dal cristianesimo. Heidegger propone un rinnovamento del discorso religioso attraverso la sua liberazione dal teismo metafisico e l'attesa di un nuovo avvento del sacro. Jaspers si propone di neutralizzare attraverso la «fede filosofica» la violenza che può essere attivata dal riconoscimento della rivelazione come unica ed esclusiva fonte di verità. Jung, a sua volta, interpreta in chiave non confessionale i simboli, i miti, i riti, delle varie religioni, e trova in essi significativi elementi di riferimento per l'integrazione della psiche umana. Toynbee, Huxley, Kauffman, evocano, in modi differenziati, l'avvento di una «nuova religione». Ricercano, infatti, forme di immaginario religioso capaci di supportare l'azione creatrice richiesta all'umanità dall'ingresso nell'epoca dell'espansione e del potenziamento del sapere tecnico-scientifico, e della sua crescente unificazione su scala planetaria. Dattilo evoca il panteismo come alternativa al teismo e al «materialismo volgare».

Altri pensatori, invece, come Henry Bergson e Alfred North Whithead, si caratterizzano per il fatto di delineare una teologia filosofica che non esclude l'agibilità del cristianesimo, anche se mette in discussione parti rilevanti del suo tradizionale assetto di pensiero. Non si presentano come apologeti del cristianesimo reale, ma come pensatori che prospettano forme di teologia filosofica che consentono di disconnettere la pratica cristiana da ermeneutiche che la saldano al fissismo e al conservatorismo veicolati dal teismo metafisico. Posizionano infatti il discorso su Dio nello spazio concettuale aperto dall'affermarsi della visione del mondo e della vita umana legata all'avvento della biologia evolutiva, della teoria della relatività, della fisica quantistica.

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[28] *Ivi*, pp. 35-36, 37.

Secondo Bergson, Dio non è «una *cosa* che crea»[29], origine e fondamento di «*cose*» create. Dio e il cosmo non sono cioè realtà statiche, ma «azioni», processi, nel cui divenire prendono forma il nostro mondo e «altri mondi». In tale prospettiva, a differenza di quanto avviene in larga parte del pensiero antico e della metafisica dell'essere, il tempo e il cambiamento non sono visti come «degradazioni» di ordinamenti ontologici eterni. L'evoluzione è infatti una «continua invenzione di forme nuove»[30], e il tempo appartiene «all'accrescersi progressivo dell'assoluto»[31].

In tale contesto, a differenza di quanto avviene nel teismo metafisico, Dio non viene pensato come essere immutabile, eterno, che pone in essere un mondo dotato di un ordinamento stabilizzato. Dio è infatti designato da Bergson attraverso la metafora

> di un centro da cui i mondi scaturirebbero come i razzi di un immenso fuoco di artificio, posto però che non si assume questo come una *cosa*, ma come un continuo irradiamento. Dio, definito così, non ha niente di compiuto; è vita incessante, azione, libertà. La creazione, così concepita, non è un mistero, ma la sperimentiamo all'interno di noi stessi quando agiamo liberamente[32].

Questo modo di concepire Dio trova, secondo Bergson, un luogo privilegiato di espressione nella mistica, in particolare nella mistica cristiana, nella quale il mistico vede nell'«energia creatrice» dell'amore «l'essenza stessa di Dio»[33].

Da questa concezione di Dio e del suo rapporto con il mondo e l'uomo, «il filosofo» trae un pensiero che sottrae il rapporto Dio, mondo, uomo, alla rigidità dello schema della dipendenza ontologica delle creature dal creatore, per trasferirlo nello schema della sinergia tra forme differenziate di creatività.

> Effettivamente – scrive Bergson – i mistici sono unanimi nel testimoniare che Dio ha bisogno di noi, come noi abbiamo bisogno di Dio. Perché dovrebbe aver bisogno di noi, se non per amarci? Questa sarà la conclusione del filosofo che si riferisce all'esperienza mistica. La creazione gli apparirà come

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[29] H. Bergson, *L'evoluzione creatrice*, tr. it. di F. Polidori, Raffaello Cortina Editore, Milano 2002, p. 204. Sul pensiero di Bergson cfr.: R. Ronchi, *Bergson. Una sintesi*, Christian Marinotti Edizioni, Milano 2011; P. Soulez, F. Worms, *Bergson. Biographie*, PUF, Paris 2002.
[30] Ivi, p. 280.
[31] *Ibidem.*
[32] Ivi, p. 204.
[33] H. Bergson, *Le due fonti della morale e della religione*, tr. it. di M. Vinciguerra, SE, Milano 2006, p. 195.

un'impresa da parte di Dio per creare dei creatori, per associarsi degli esseri degni del suo amore[34].

Dio non appare in tal senso come l'ente sommo che, creando uomini e cose, fornisce loro un ordinamento ontologico invariante. L'universo e la vita umana sono infatti luoghi in cui trova espressione una creatività nella quale si prolunga l'azione creatrice di Dio.

> L'umanità – scrive Bergson – geme, semischiacciata dal peso del progresso compiuto. Non sa con sufficiente chiarezza che il suo avvenire dipende da lei. Spetta a lei vedere prima di tutto se vuole continuare a vivere; spetta a lei domandarsi in seguito se vuole soltanto vivere, o fornire anche lo sforzo affinché si compia, persino nel nostro pianeta refrattario, la funzione essenziale dell'universo, che è una macchina per produrre dei[35].

Whitehead è il teorico di un teismo che si distacca dalla comprensione di Dio come assoluto immutabile, indipendente dal mondo, che su di esso esercita un potere di controllo, ed è fondamento e garante del suo ordine invariante. Uno dei motivi che inducono Whitehead a separarsi dalla visione di Dio prodotta dalla metafisica è legato al fatto che questa forma di pensiero è a suo avviso incompatibile con la visione della natura delineata dalla teoria della relatività e dalla fisica quantistica. Da questi nuovi paradigmi deriva infatti l'abbandono della concezione della natura come un insieme di enti dotati di specifiche caratteristiche, e l'approdo alla tesi secondo la quale gli enti sono «eventi», «occasioni», «connessioni», in cui prende forma la realtà. Quindi, ciò di cui si fa esperienza non sono cose definite dalla combinazione di materia e forma, ma «eventi» tra loro correlati che fanno della natura un sistema di relazioni tra organismi continuamente mutanti.

Da questa visione della natura come realtà in movimento, dotata di creatività, nasce la messa in discussione della visione di Dio come creatore di un mondo caratterizzato da un ordine invariante. Whitehead concepisce infatti Dio come essere dotato di due nature. La prima viene designata come «natura primordiale», che è la sorgente di tutte le possibilità, la seconda, «natura conseguente», che è il prodotto delle trasformazioni degli enti che appaiono e scompaiono nel tempo. Anche Dio, quindi, diviene, si trasforma insieme al mondo, si struttura come processo che accompagna la creatività e le novità che si manifestano nel cosmo. Il «nuovo teismo» di Whitehead viene così a confliggere con gran parte delle filosofie religiose, le quali ritengono che Dio debba essere il fondamento e il garante di un ordine immutabile del mondo. Egli teorizza infatti l'estensione universale di categorie come creare, creatore,

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[34] Ivi, p. 205.
[35] Ivi, p. 243.

creatività, che larga parte del pensiero religioso riserva unicamente a Dio. Ogni organismo gode, in tal senso, di una qualche forma di creatività. La realtà, quindi, si manifesta come un processo che si supera incessantemente, la cui caratteristica più propria è la creatività.

Si comprende, così, l'affermazione di Whitehead secondo la quale «il conservatore puro lotta contro l'essenza dell'universo»[36]. Questa tesi, per il filosofo inglese, vale anche per le religioni, le quali, come gli altri fenomeni, sono realtà «*in making*».

Questo processo di trasformazione delle religioni, in particolare del Cristianesimo e del Buddhismo, fenomeni cui Whitehead guarda con interesse, registra un momento di accelerazione a partire dal XVII secolo, quando «la scienza mise in risalto idee che modificarono il quadro religioso del mondo»[37]. Si dissolve infatti il «quadro medioevale», e la religione si avvia sul «binario morto» della tutela dei propri dogmi, che per Whitehead sono veicoli possibili di verità, ma divengono «falsi quando vengono portati al di là della sfera più adeguata della loro utilità»[38].

Per uscire da questa impasse, che nasce dal divario tra conoscenza e esperienza del mondo prodotte dall'espansione e dal potenziamento delle scienze, e tradizionale impianto dottrinale delle religioni, Whitehead ritiene necessaria una «nuova Riforma» che consenta alle chiese di liberarsi dalla «pedanteria autosufficiente della dottrina», per immettersi nel mare aperto del confronto con le nuove immagini del mondo e della vita umana affermatesi con la nascita della scienza, e con le trasformazioni politiche e di costume prodottesi a partire dal XVII secolo.

> Un sistema di dogmi – scrive – può essere l'arca dentro la quale la Chiesa naviga tranquillamente lungo il fiume della storia. Ma la Chiesa perirà se essa non aprirà le finestre e lascerà andare la colomba in cerca del ramoscello d'olivo. Talvolta anche essa farà bene a salpare dal monte Ararat e a costruire un nuovo altare allo Spirito divino, un altare non sul monte Garazim e neppure a Gerusalemme […]. La pedanteria autosufficiente della dottrina e la fiducia cieca di ignoranti zelatori si sono unite per chiudere ciascuna religione nella sua forma di pensiero. Invece di cercare significati più profondi, esse sono rimaste soddisfatte di se stesse e infeconde. Hanno subito danni per il sorgere della scienza, poiché nessuna di esse ha conservato la flessibilità necessaria di adattamento. Così i problemi reali, pratici, della religione non sono

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[36] A. N. Whitehead, *Avventure di idee*, tr. it. di G. Gnoli, Bompiani, Milano 1997, p. 177. Sul pensiero di Whitehead cfr.: M. T. Segall, *Physics of the World-Soul: Whitehead's Adventure in Cosmology,* SacraSage Press, San Francisco 2021; I. Delio, A. M. Davis, *Whitehead and Teilhard. From Organism to Omega*, Orbis Book, Maryknoll (New York) 2025.

[37] A. N. Whitehead, *Il divenire della Religione*, tr. it. di F. Cafaro, Paravia & C., Torino 1963, p. 98.

[38] Ivi, p. 101.

mai stati adeguatamente studiati nel solo modo nel quale tali problemi *possono* essere studiati, cioè alla scuola dell'esperienza[39].

2.3. «Dio senza essere»: ermeneutiche non metafisiche del cristianesimo

Come visto in precedenza, ci sono pensatori che, spinti da differenti motivazioni, cercano un accesso all'esperienza religiosa al di fuori della fede cristiana o delle religioni storiche, perché ritenute formazioni compromesse con la metafisica, oppure perché giudicate possibili focolai di violenza, o perché considerate portatrici di dottrine e pratiche incongrue con la visione scientifica del mondo e della vita umana. Oltre ad essi, ci sono filosofi come Bergson e Whitehead che prospettano la possibilità di un teismo decontaminato dal fissismo in esso inoculato dalla metafisica.

Accanto a pensatori che cercano la «reinvenzione del sacro», o a esponenti di teologie filosofiche che delineano un teismo fruibile nello spazio delle visioni del mondo prodotte dall'avvento della biologia evolutiva e della fisica quantistica, ci sono pensatori che trovano all'interno del cristianesimo una risposta possibile alla crisi dell'esperienza religiosa. Ritengono, infatti, che una figura di cristianesimo decontaminata dalla visione del divino in essa immessa, nel corso della sua storia, dalla metafisica, possa offrire una forma di esperienza religiosa significativa per una umanità che sta vivendo una fase di profonde e rapide trasformazioni.

Su questa linea si collocano autori che, pur essendo portatori di forme differenti di pensiero, convergono tuttavia nell'obiettivo di fornire ermeneutiche del cristianesimo libere dall'ipoteca teorica e pratica che la visione metafisica di Dio come essere trascendente, onnisciente, onnipotente, fondamento e garante dell'ordine biofisico e morale del mondo, pone sulla dottrina e sulla pratica cristiana.

Vanno in questa direzione figure di pensiero tra loro molto differenti, come l'«ontologia del dono» di Jean Luc Marion, l'«anateismo» di Richard Kearney, la «teologia critica» di John Caputo, l'«ontologia eventistica» di Aldo Magris, la galassia di autori che fanno capo al paradigma post-teista e post-religionale, il «monismo relativo» del gesuita italiano Paolo Gamberini, l'«olismo relazionale» della teologa americana Ilia Delio. Sono pensatori che, in modi differenti, operano nello spazio di un paradigma non governato dal teismo metafisico, rifiutano la concezione esclusivista della verità cristiana, criticano il soprannaturalismo che trasforma l'esperienza religiosa in una forma di vita estraniata in un al di là che la disconnette dal radicamento nel divenire del cosmo e della vita umana.

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[39] Ivi, pp. 101-102.

In tal modo l'urto decostruttivo prodotto sulla pratica cristiana dal distacco dal teismo metafisico, la presa d'atto delle conseguenze che, sul piano dogmatico, hanno le ricerche delle scienze religionistiche, i risultati dell'analisi dei testi dell'Antico e del Nuovo Testamento condotta con l'esegesi ispirata al metodo storico-critico, la riflessione sulle problematiche legate alla trasformazione dell'esperienza religiosa dopo Darwin, dopo Einstein, dopo la fisica quantistica, costituiscono il campo privilegiato del ripensamento del cristianesimo portato avanti da alcuni teologi e filosofi della religione.

Essi guardano infatti con preoccupazione il futuro di una pratica cristiana chiusa nelle certezze convenzionali sulla filosofia come strumento concettuale di avviamento alla fede e di tutela del *depositum fidei*, sulle scienze storiche come saperi funzionali alla conferma della verità delle narrazioni bibliche e dei dogmi, sulla divisione del lavoro tra discorso scientifico e discorso religioso, identificati come magisteri paralleli. Il primo avrebbe infatti il compito di occuparsi dell'ordinamento biofisico del cosmo, il secondo quello di indicare le vie per trascenderlo.

2.3.1. Anateismi

Un pensatore che si è occupato della disconnessione della fede cristiana dalla metafisica dell'essere è Jean Luc Marion. Nella sua riflessione su Dio deve molto a Hölderlin, a Dionigi l'Areopagita[40], alla critica heideggeriana dell'ontoteologia. In *Dio senza essere*[41], delinea una posizione nella quale il problema di Dio viene dislocato non solo dall'apparentamento con la metafisica dell'essere, che, per molta «filosofia cristiana […] resta l'ultima sponda, la roccia (che si suppone) incrollabile sulla quale può poggiare ogni apologia»[42], ma anche da quello con la differenza ontologica di Heidegger, e con l'«altro inizio del pensiero» da lui evocato. Secondo Marion, infatti, la comprensione di Dio delineata dal filosofo tedesco, anche se liberata da categorie come *Summum Ens*, *causa sui*, resta pur sempre nel cerchio della «storia dell'essere». A suo avviso, quindi, il problema è liberare la comprensione di Dio da ogni «condizione», anche da quella posta dalla comprensione dell'essere come evento. Per il filosofo francese l'orizzonte dell'essere non costituisce quindi il riferimento originario di comprensione della realtà, che, a suo avviso, è invece reperibile nella istanza del dono. In tal senso, il dispiegarsi degli enti non avviene in forza dell'essere, anche dell'essere non pensato in versione metafisica, ma di un gesto originario di donazione che dona essere.

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[40] Sull'ermeneutica di Hölderlin e Dionigi elaborata da Marion, cfr. J. L. Marion, *L'Idolo e la Distanza*, tr. it. di A. Dall'Asta, Jaca Book, Milano 1979.
[41] J. L. Marion, *Dio senza essere*, tr. it. di A. Dall'Asta e C. Canullo, Jaca Book, Milano 2008.
[42] Ivi, p. 275.

Pensare Dio – scrive Marion – senza alcuna condizione, compresa quella dell'essere, e dunque pensare Dio senza pretendere di inscriverlo o descriverlo come ente […]. Il dono, liberando l'Essere/ente, liberando l'ente dall'Essere, si libera alla fine dalla differenza ontologica: non solo invio, non solo deformazione, ma liberazione dell'istanza prima, la carità. Il dono, infatti, non si libera se non esplicandosi a partire e in nome di ciò che, più grande di lui, viene dietro di lui, ciò che si dona come dono, la carità stessa. La carità rilascia l'Essere/ente[43].

Come Marion, ma attraverso una forma di pensiero che, sul piano teologico, risulta molto più destabilizzante, Richard Kearney si propone di formulare una comprensione post-metafisica del cristianesimo che viene riassunta nella formula «anateismo». Egli si pone sulla scia della decostruzione dell'ontologia operata da Heidegger[44], Lévinas, Derrida, e della fede post-critica e post-religiosa di Paul Ricoeur e Dietrich Bonhoeffer. In tal modo, disconnette la pratica cristiana dal concetto metafisico di Dio come sostanza onnipotente che causa e pensa se stessa, una entità autosufficiente che non necessita di rimandi a qualcosa o qualcuno al di là di sé. In questo dispositivo teologico-filosofico, Kearney non vede però soltanto un discorso inadeguato su Dio, ma il dispositivo di pensiero che è stato «invocato come un'arma ideologica dai capi spirituali durante il periodo conosciuto come dominio cristiano (*Christendom*)»[45]. Esso è infatti all'origine di «un profondo fraintendimento del cristianesimo in quanto dottrina dell'esclusivismo trionfale […] che compromise il messaggio di Cristo, rovesciandolo in un dogma della forza e della paura»[46].

Con il «paradigma anateistico» Kearney indica una via di uscita dall'alternativa tra «cristianità metafisica» e «ateismo militante», che, a suo avviso, domina larga parte del dibattito sulla religione. Egli propone un cammino di recupero del cristianesimo che passa attraverso il distacco dalla fede recepita tramite i linguaggi e le pratiche ereditati dalla tradizione, e l'approdo a «una seconda fede»[47]. Essa viene identificata come il prodotto della decostruzione del discorso metafisico su Dio, dell'assunzione dell'ateismo come istanza terapeutica della pratica religiosa, della creazione di uno «spazio anateistico» nel quale la scelta di credere o non credere, il pluralismo religioso e «l'ospitalità» tra religioni, l'impegno per la costruzione di società inclusive, sono modi di pensare e di agire promossi e coltivati.

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[43] Ivi, pp. 67, 133.

[44] Sull'interpretazione data da Kearney dell'apporto di Heidegger alla teologia, cfr. R. Kearney, *Heidegger, le possible et Dieu*, in R. Kearney, J. S. O'Leary, (éds.)., *Heidegger et la question de Dieu*, PUF, Paris 2009[2], pp. 145-188.

[45] R. Kearney, *Anateismo. Tornare a Dio dopo Dio*, tr. it. di M. Zurlo, Fazi Editore, Roma 2012, p. 271.

[46] Ivi, pp. 271-272.

[47] Ivi, p. 72.

Il mio scopo – scrive il filosofo irlandese – non è descrivere l'anateismo come una sorta di dialettica necessaria della storia, tentazione alquanto pretenziosa, ma mostrare come alcuni spiriti intrepidi del XX secolo abbiano risposto agli interrogativi spirituali della nostra epoca: ossia, come si può parlare del sacro dopo la scomparsa di Dio? Oppure, come si può avere ancora fede dopo che l'Illuminismo scientifico ha eliminato la superstizione e la sottomissione, e dopo che due guerre mondiali hanno mostrato l'inganno della storia intesa come disegno divino? Dopo gli orrori di Verdun, i traumi dell'Olocausto, di Hiroshima e dei gulag, parlare di Dio è un'offesa a meno che non lo si faccia in modo nuovo […]. Questo è ciò che intendo con un ritorno a Dio *dopo* Dio: Dio deve morire perché Dio possa rinascere, anateisticamente[48].

Un pensiero che presenta assonanze con l'«anateismo» di Kearney è quello elaborato da John Caputo. Considerato tra i più importanti filosofi della religione americani, nella sua vasta opera delinea un pensiero filosofico e teologico che ha come punti di riferimento Paul Tillich, Martin Heidegger, Jacques Derrida, e viene da lui definito tramite formule come «teologia radicale», «teologia dell'evento», «teologia del forse», «teologia debole».

L'impulso che sta alla base della riflessione di Caputo è la decostruzione della dottrina su Dio presente nel cattolicesimo preconciliare, l'ambiente culturale che ha segnato la sua infanzia e la sua giovinezza, e che, a suo avviso, è ancora egemone nella cultura della gerarchia cattolica e nella mentalità di molti cattolici. Dio viene infatti pensato come «l'Essere Supremo sotto la cui costante protezione e la omni-veggente sorveglianza»[49] vivono credenti e non credenti. Nei confronti di questo modo di pensare e di vivere il rapporto con Dio la risposta più appropriata per Caputo, come già lo fu per Tillich, è l'ateismo. Un genere particolare di ateismo, «l'ateismo teologico», che il filosofo americano indica «come il primo passo, non l'ultimo, sulla via di una teologia *radicale* post-teistica o a/teologica alla quale possiamo davvero credere»[50].

Sulla scia di Derrida, che parla di «religione dopo la religione», Caputo presenta la «teologia radicale» come una «ripetizione» della teologia classica, segnata, però, da un «forse» che la priva delle certezze che la gerarchia e i «teologi di palazzo» ritengono di poter garantire. Paragona infatti il suo lavoro filosofico-teologico a un furto operato con destrezza tramite cui rubare ai «teologi di palazzo» la parola teologia, per risignificarla in modalità non contaminate dal teismo metafisico. Prende forma, così, la «teologia dell'evento», cioè un discorso su Dio nel quale la questione centrale non è l'esistenza di Dio, ma

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[48] Ivi, pp. XXVIII-XXIX.
[49] J. Caputo, *What to believe? Twelve Brief Lessons in Radical Theology*, Columbia University Press, New York 2023, p. 5.
[50] *Ibidem*.

«cosa sta realmente accadendo, cosa possiamo realmente credere, cosa desideriamo realmente *nel e sotto il nome di Dio*?»[51].

Attraverso questa dislocazione della teoria e della prassi cristiana dallo spazio della metafisica dell'essere a quello dell'ermeneutica della «storia degli effetti» che nel mondo e nella vita umana si producono in nome di Dio, Caputo si smarca dai «teologi di palazzo», e delinea «una teologia indisciplinata, anarchica, libera da ceppi, mutata, contaminata, che costringe i teologi della real-casa a correre ai ripari»[52].

Egli giustifica la militanza tra «i mascalzoni e i furfanti della teologia» in base al fatto che «la ricerca e l'implacabile interrogazione della Scrittura, della dottrina, della tradizione, intrapresa da teologi di questo tipo svela la contingenza e la costituzione storica di credenze e pratiche che la gerarchia vuole invece che il fedele consideri eterne e trasmesse da Dio»[53].

In quanto sapere radicalmente storico, la teologia si lascia alle spalle non soltanto l'ontologia del teismo metafisico e le certezze dogmatiche costruite su di esso, ma anche il panenteismo, che, per Caputo, è falso come ontologia che descrive uno stato di cose, ma è vero come linguaggio simbolico che funge da veicolo di una invocazione che apre alla speranza dell'avvento di una relazione «pleromatica» di Dio con il mondo in forza della quale «Dio *può* essere tutto in tutti, Dio *può* mostrare di essere ciò in cui viviamo, ci muoviamo e abbiamo il nostro essere»[54].

Per Caputo, dunque, «il nome di Dio non è il nome di un essere lassù o di un essere là fuori, ma di una forma di vita qui; non è il nome di un essere eterno, ma di un poter essere temporale»[55]. In tal senso, Dio non è l'ente sommo di cui parla il teismo metafisico, né la sostanza infinita che costituisce l'ambiente del darsi degli enti di cui parla il panenteismo. Dio è, piuttosto, «l'evento», il darsi di ciò che accade in suo nome, un fenomeno che il filosofo americano designa con il termine «chiamata». Essa rimanda all'irrompere della «possibilità dell'impossibile», che il linguaggio del Nuovo Testamento indica con la figura del Regno di Dio. Con tale simbolo «teopoetico», il cristianesimo fa riferimento a forme di esistenza che sovvertono i modi di stare al mondo depositati nella saggezza aristotelica, nella mentalità romana del comando, e mettono in discussione forme di vita regolate dall'autoritarismo, dal patriarcato, dalla forza, per sostituirle con stili di vita ispirati all'amore, al perdono, a tipologie di convivenza umana che non creano esclusioni o discriminazioni.

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[51] Ivi, p. 128.
[52] J. Caputo, *The Insistence of God. A Theology of Perhaps*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington 2013, p. 25.
[53] *Ibidem*.
[54] Caputo, *What to believe?*, p. 135.
[55] Ivi, p. 144.

Così possiamo dire – scrive Caputo – che il nome di Dio è il nome di una *chiamata* che invoca la venuta *dell'*impossibile, la possibilità dell'impossibile alla quale noi potremo essere la risposta. Il nome di Dio è il segnaposto per l'apertura infinita dell'impossibile, per un desiderio che non posso contrarre nel desiderare questo o quello, per una fede che eccede ogni credenza, per una speranza contro ogni speranza, per un amore senza misura. Rappresenta un eccesso, un passaggio al limite, una speranza o attesa infinite […]. L'*evento* che si svolge nel nome di Dio non è l'onnipotenza, ma l'onnipotenzialità, in cui Dio non è il Dio dell'essere eterno ma il Dio del futuro *poter*-essere. In una teologia dell'evento, la *vita ventura* non significa vita eterna; significa la vita che è da venire. In una teologia dell'evento, il nome (di) Dio è un *focus imaginarius* nel quale ogni cosa che amiamo, desideriamo e speriamo converge, custodendo per noi tutto ciò che speriamo sia possibile, sebbene impossibile. Rendere reale tutto ciò dipende da noi […]. Il passo finale nella teologia radicale è effettuare la svolta assiologica, dislocare il nome di Dio dall'ordine ontologico a quello assiologico, dall'ordine dell'essere all'ordine del poter essere. Ciò significa che il nome di Dio è il nome di una chiamata che chiama incondizionatamente ma senza potere. La chiamata chiama ma non viene con le armi. Ha deposto la sua spada[56].

Al centro del discorso su Dio non sta dunque, secondo Caputo, il problema ontologico della sua esistenza, ma il problema esistenziale, etico, politico, della sua «insistenza». A suo avviso, infatti, l'esistenza di Dio non è l'affermazione di una presenza da collocare in uno spazio ontologico esterno al mondo, o ad esso immanente, ma un «evento» il cui darsi è intrecciato in maniera inestricabile alla prassi e alle forme di vita tramite cui gli uomini, rispondendo alla «chiamata», rendono effettiva la presenza di Dio nel mondo.

L'esistenza di Dio – scrive il filosofo americano – risulta essere l'esistenza di Dio intrecciata con noi […]. Ciò che faccio di Dio e ciò che faccio di me stesso corrono in tandem. La misura che prendo di Dio è la misura che faccio di me. L'evento nel quale divento me stesso e l'evento nel quale Dio diviene Dio sono il medesimo evento. Siamo due possibilità attualizzate dal medesimo atto. Siamo sincronizzati per il meglio o per il peggio […]. Ora se chiediamo, messi al sicuro dalla portata della supervisione e delle interdizioni ecclesiastiche, "il Dio dell'evento esiste?", la risposta religiosamente e teologicamente giusta è "*non lo sappiamo ancora*". Se il nome di Dio è l'*insistenza* di una chiamata, allora l'*esistenza* di *Dio è ciò che Dio sarà stato*, quando scrivono la storia della risposta, che è la storia di *noi*, e la storia non è finita. L'essenza di Dio è nelle nostre mani[57].

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[56] Ivi, pp. 132, 133, 136.
[57] Ivi, pp. 143, 145, 147.

In tal senso, l'esistenza di Dio non è il risultato di una argomentazione logica, ma è legata a un insieme di decisioni, di modi di stare al mondo che trasformano la teologia da discorso su Dio in «teoprassi», cioè in una forma di vita che lega la presenza di Dio nel mondo alle modalità con cui gli uomini, nel vivere la propria esistenza, rispondono alla chiamata che invita all'impegno per il Regno di Dio. In tal modo, Dio perde lo statuto ontologico di ente eterno, immutabile, onnipotente. Per Caputo, infatti,

> l'esistenza di Dio, come la nostra, è contingente, fragile, e incerta, poiché dipendente dal grado di coinvolgimento che *noi* mettiamo nel far si che questo evento divenga vero. Se l'*insistenza* dell'evento che è contenuto nel nome di Dio è ritenuta il *prius*, allora l'esistenza di Dio sarà determinata dopo il fatto, *a-posteriori*. Solo il tempo lo dirà, e il tempo è storia, e la storia non è finita finché non è terminata[58].

Nel libro apparso nel 2019, *Le invenzioni di Dio*[59], il filosofo italiano Aldo Magris delinea una riflessione che manifesta consonanze con pensatori come Luigi Pareyson, Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Gilles Deleuze. In essa viene evidenziato lo stato di «*impasse*» in cui si trova il discorso su Dio nel pensiero contemporaneo. L'autore sostiene infatti che esso è incapsulato tra una metafisica che pensa Dio come un essere distinto e distante dall'esperienza, identificata come regno contraddittorio del divenire, e un ateismo che considera Dio come «finzione», una invenzione che funge da collettore di proiezioni che, alla luce delle scienze della natura, della sociologia, della psicologia, dell'antropologia filosofica, dell'etnologia e dell'antropologia culturale, risultano creazioni umane che non intenzionano quel divino che pretenderebbero invece manifestare.

Per uscire dall'«*impasse*», Magris propone una «ontologia non metafisica», da lui designata con la formula «ontologia eventistica»[60], che si discosta dal discorso metafisico su Dio prodotto dall'«intreccio» tra filosofia greca e teologia cristiana, come pure dalla visione decurtata dell'esperienza prodotta dall'empirismo e da Kant, che trova l'espressione più compiuta nell'ancoraggio del rapporto con la realtà a una «concretezza» che risulta accessibile soltanto attraverso le griglie cognitive prodotte dalle scienze della natura.

Secondo Magris, sia il teismo metafisico che l'ateismo si muovono sul presupposto della visione di Dio come

> un essere, una entità che esiste da qualche parte, ovviamente da un'*altra* parte rispetto all'universo della nostra esperienza, e che possiede determinati pre-

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[58] Ivi, p. 143.
[59] A. Magris, *Le invenzioni di Dio*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2019.
[60] Ivi, p. 42.

dicati o proprietà essenziali in base alle quali fra l'altro agisce e si trova in un certo rapporto con tutte le restanti entità, cioè col mondo e con noi. Questo rapporto è nella visione biblica di tipo *creativo*, il che significa che Dio si è anzitutto "inventato" nella sua mente il mondo e quanto esso contiene, e che avendolo dapprima inventato, poi (si intende non in una successione cronologica) lo ha anche messo in opera, lo ha "creato". Così pensa il popolo dei credenti e dei non credenti. Giacché noi possiamo anche non credere in Dio, ma il non crederci consiste parimenti nel *non* ammettere che ci sia da qualche parte un essere caratterizzato in questo modo. All'idea che Dio si sia per così dire "inventato", cioè abbia "pensato" il mondo e l'uomo ancora prima di procedere all'atto creativo, la Bibbia e la cultura ad essa coeva offrono più di uno spunto[61].

Magris sostiene che nella comprensione di Dio delineata dal discorso della metafisica platonico-cristiana e dalle correnti ateistiche presenti nella filosofia contemporanea

> prevale sempre l'aspetto *cognitivo*, ovverosia la questione è impostata sulla risposta alla domanda "chi ha *pensato*?", chi ha architettato o "inventato" qualcosa? Questo è l'elemento greco. L'elemento biblico, poi, emerge dal modo in cui viene concepita la conseguenza tecnico-operativa dell'inventare. Il soggetto inventante si esprime come *creatore*, e allora, se l'inventore è Dio, egli dal nulla ha creato il mondo, mentre se l'inventore è l'uomo, è stato l'uomo a creare ugualmente dal nulla (perché non ci sarebbe stato alcun motivo ragionevole di farlo) le credenze e le istituzioni religiose[62].

Per Magris, inoltre, teismo metafisico e ateismo oltre ad essere espressioni speculari di un medesimo processo inventivo, sono il frutto di visioni inadeguate dell'esperienza. Nel teismo c'è una visione astratta dell'esperienza, intesa come regno del divenire che può trovare una spiegazione valida solo se riferito a un fondamento eterno. Nell'ateismo domina una visione egualmente astratta dell'esperienza, perché limitata al solo materiale percettivo, e ridotta a antidoto contro possibili fughe al di là delle conoscenze acquisibili attraverso le scienze della natura e le scienze umane.

Con la proposta della «ontologia eventistica», Magris intende correggere queste visioni inadeguate dell'esperienza, che non tengono conto «di ciò che avviene, di ciò che si prova nell'esperienza»[63]. A suo avviso, infatti, non c'è dualità tra Dio e esperienza, come pensa il teismo metafisico, né identità tra esperienza come registrazione di materiale percepito, o come esperienza del mondo governata dal sapere tecnico-scientifico, e esperienza intesa come

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[61] Ivi, pp. 200-201.
[62] Ivi, p. 203.
[63] Ivi, p. 228.

apertura all'«evento dell'apparire»[64]. Egli sostiene infatti che nell'esperienza c'è una «profondità abissale» che, per l'uomo religioso, trova espressione nella parola Dio, che funge da veicolo della «proprietà evidente quanto enigmatica dell'esperienza di aprirsi su un abisso senza fondo, e si è rappresentato mediante Dio e gli Dei un modo o un altro di apparire del senza fondo dell'esperienza»[65].

Magris sostiene, in tal senso, che la religione è una forma di esperienza che attraverso simboli, miti, immagini, nomi, luoghi, riti, manifesta la realtà nella sua profondità. A suo avviso, però, il discorso religioso non costituisce l'orizzonte ultimo di comprensione della realtà. «*L'ontologia* – scrive – *viene prima della religione*»[66]. In essa affiora infatti il momento iniziale del «rapporto ontologico» con il darsi dell'apparire «al quale può seguire, o anche no, una sua definizione come rapporto religioso»[67].

Dio, dunque, è una invenzione, ma non nel senso deteriore del termine ad essa attribuito dai «filosofi del sospetto». Nella parola Dio trova infatti espressione il rapporto ontologico che struttura l'esperienza. Dio non risulta quindi separabile dall'esperienza, come sostiene il teismo metafisico, e non è neppure assente dall'esperienza, come sostiene l'ateismo, poiché «l'esperienza è in qualche modo Dio, perché Dio è la proprietà abissale di ciò che avviene, di ciò che si prova nell'esperienza»[68].

Il giusto atteggiamento nei confronti della dimensione religiosa non sta quindi, secondo Magris, nella demistificazione della religione come «finzione» prodotta senza motivo dalla creatività umana, ma, piuttosto, «nel fare uno sforzo […] per capire che cosa sta dietro alla parola Dio, prima di sbarazzarsi del problema chiedendosi se il tale personaggio mitologico "esiste" o "non esiste", se è stato "inventato" da noi o meno»[69].

2.3.2. Post-teismi

Claudia Fanti, studiosa della teologia della liberazione e dei movimenti di base della Chiesa latino-americana, ha introdotto in Italia con il supporto di Gabrielli editori, quella linea di pensiero teologico che va sotto il nome di post-teismo o «paradigma post-religionale»[70]. Esso è stato oggetto di attenta con-

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[64] Ivi, p. 186.
[65] Ivi, p. 219.
[66] Ivi, p. 187.
[67] *Ibidem.*
[68] Ivi, p. 228.
[69] Ivi, p. 207.
[70] I libri apparsi in italiano in cui vengono esposte le tesi del «paradigma post-religionale» sono: C. Fanti, F. Sudati, (edd.), *Oltre le religioni. Una nuova epoca per la spiritualità umana*, Gabrielli editori, San Pietro in Cariano (VR) 2016; C. Fanti, J. M. Vigil, (edd.), *Il cosmo come rivelazione. Una storia sacra per l'umanità*, Gabrielli editori, San Pietro in Cariano (VR) 2018;

siderazione all'interno dell'Associazione Ecumenica dei Teologi e delle Teologhe del Terzo Mondo, ed è stato discusso nel IV Simposio Internazionale di Teologia e Scienza della Religione tenutosi nel 2011 all'Università Cattolica di Minas, a Belo Horizonte, in Brasile. Tra i fautori di questo paradigma più utilizzati da Claudia Fanti ci sono i teologi José Maria Vigil, José Arregi[71], Santiago Villamayor, Diarmuid O'Murchu, la scrittrice cubana Maria Lopez Vigil, Carmen Magallon e Mary Judith Ress, esponenti della teologia femminista e dell'ecofemminismo.

Nel loro lavoro teologico si incrociano varie eredità culturali. Si nota, innanzitutto, il legame con il pensiero di Dietrich Bonhoeffer, di Paul Tillich, del vescovo presbiteriano John Shelby Spong, del gesuita Roger Lenaers. A ciò va aggiunta l'attenzione alla lezione teologica di Leonardo Boff, sia in qualità di teologo della liberazione che di assertore di una teologia ecologista, al pensiero ambientalista di Thomas Berry, alla cultura e spiritualità del creato di Matthew Fox, alle esponenti della teologia femminista. Alla valorizzazione di queste forme innovative di pensiero teologico va aggiunta l'attenzione agli studi religionistici sul Paleolitico e sul Neolitico, a interpretazioni dell'Antico Testamento che fanno capo al lavoro esegetico di Thomas Römer, alle ricerche di esponenti del «paradigma archeologico» come Mario Liverani e Israel Finkelstein, ad analisi delle origini cristiane attente alla «terza ricerca» sul Gesù storico e alle produzioni del «*Jesus Seminar*» promosso da Robert Funk e da John Dominic Crossan.

Alla base del «paradigma post-religionale» c'è, scrive José Maria Vigil,

l'(ipo)tesi […] della fine del tempo cosiddetto "religionale" cioè dell'"epoca agraria o neolitica", quella che, all'interno dell'evoluzione della nostra specie, ha favorito l'apparizione delle Religioni (ovviamente, ed è necessario ricordarlo, non della religiosità, che è coetanea dell'*homo sapiens*, fin dalla sua comparsa)[72].

C. Fanti, J. M. Vigil, (edd.), *Una spiritualità oltre il mito. Dal frutto proibito alla rivoluzione della conoscenza*, Gabrielli editori, San Pietro in Cariano (VR) 2019; C. Fanti, J. M. Vigil (edd.), *Oltre Dio. In ascolto del Mistero senza nome*, Gabrielli editori, San Pietro in Cariano (VR) 2021; C. Fanti, (ed.), *Quale Dio, quale cristianesimo. La metamorfosi della fede nel XXI secolo*, Gabrielli editori, San Pietro in Cariano (VR) 2022.

[71] Circa la posizione di José Arregi sul post-teismo, formula che egli preferisce sostituire con l'espressione trans-teismo, che, a suo avviso, tematizza in maniera più appropriata la necessità di una «transizione teologica», cfr. J. Arregi, *Dieu au-delà du théisme. Esquisses pour une transition théologique*, Karthala, Paris 2023.

[72] J. M. Vigil, *Ricentrando il ruolo futuro della religione: umanizzare l'umanità. Il ruolo della religione nel futuro sarà nettamente spirituale*, in Fanti, Sudati, *Oltre le religioni*, cit., pp. 164-165.

L'elemento che qualifica molte religioni affermatesi nel Neolitico è descritto da Spong come l'affermazione dell'esistenza di «un essere dal potere soprannaturale che vive nell'alto dei cieli ed è pronto ad intervenire periodicamente nella storia umana, perché si compia la sua divina volontà»[73]. Egli sostiene, inoltre, che l'interpretazione della figura di Gesù come «l'incarnazione di una divinità teistica»[74], e i tradizionali concetti della cristologia ad essa connessi sono finiti in «bancarotta».

Il problema degli esponenti del paradigma postreligionale, quindi, è decostruire il concetto di Dio accreditato dal teismo, come pure l'ermeneutica del cristianesimo ad esso connessa. L'obiettivo è accedere a una forma di esperienza cristiana post-teistica, che liberi il rapporto con Dio dall'ipoteca neolitica che lo colloca nell'orizzonte di una «ontologia del dominio e della sottomissione»[75], e di una «epistemologia mitica»[76] che accredita la religione come fonte esclusiva di verità rivelate e di dogmi immutabili.

Si apre così, per il cristianesimo, e, più in generale, per ogni forma di esperienza religiosa, «un nuovo tempo assiale»[77] in cui il rapporto con il divino dovrà essere pensato nell'orizzonte aperto da una conoscenza scientifica che ha fornito un racconto delle origini del cosmo e della specie umana diverso e molto più plausibile di quello offerto dal mito, ed ha elaborato forme di organizzazione sociale che consentono a uomini e donne di sottrarsi all'«età dell'eteronomia», cioè a modi di pensare e di agire che intendono la verità e la legge come realtà venute «da fuori, da un altro mondo, da sopra, da un secondo piano […] che di tanto in tanto lascia cadere conoscenze»[78] di cui gli uomini hanno bisogno per strutturare le loro vite.

Per gli esponenti del «paradigma postreligionale», infatti, le religioni, quindi anche il Cristianesimo e l'Ebraismo, non sono fenomeni atemporali, ma costruzioni storiche che veicolano forme differenti di «invenzioni di Dio». Il discorso da essi elaborato sull'ebraismo e sulle origini cristiane, il primo ispirato al «paradigma archeologico», il secondo a un'esegesi dei testi neotestamentari attenta alle ricerche sul Gesù storico, e a indagini sulle origini cristiane costruite con i metodi della storiografia moderna, si propone di far affiorare ciò che sta «dietro» a racconti che assumono la veste di narrazioni storiche.

La ricostruzione della storia di Israele con il «paradigma archeologico», l'accesso alle origini cristiane attraverso il metodo storico-critico, mettono in-

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[73] J. S. Spong, *Le dodici tesi. Appello a una nuova Riforma*, in Fanti, Sudati, *Oltre le religioni*, p. 71.
[74] Ivi, p. 81.
[75] J. M. Vigil, *Ricentrando il ruolo futuro della religione: umanizzare l'umanità*, cit., p. 165.
[76] Ivi, p. 168.
[77] Ivi, p. 181.
[78] Ivi, p. 167.

fatti fuori gioco la categoria di «storia della salvezza», cioè la narrazione di eventi prodotti da interventi di Dio nella storia che richiedono una risposta di fede. Scrive in tal senso José Maria Vigil:

> Il "racconto dietro il racconto" cui stiamo accendendo, comporta la sfida di riconcettualizzare la religione: non è più accettabile il paradigma di una "storia della salvezza", né di rispondere/credere a un Dio che è intervenuto nella storia manifestandosi/chiedendoci una risposta di fede. Queste metafore sono superate alla luce delle conoscenze attuali e, nel contesto di una società scientificamente informata, cominciano a risultare non solo anacronistiche, ma anche dannose, poiché appesantiscono la religione vincolandola a un'epoca destinata a morire. Antropologicamente diventa necessaria […] la creazione di una pratica religiosa coerente con questo nuovo paradigma[79].

La visione della religione quale fenomeno fondato su avvenimenti qualificati come interventi divini nella storia appare a José Maria Vigil come una «grande invenzione» che ha preso forma nel Neolitico, e che l'attuale conoscenza storica identifica come un racconto prodotto da un determinato gruppo umano, in determinate condizioni storiche, con precise finalità. L'affrancamento della religione dalla «epistemologia mitica», che lega le sue origini a interventi divini che la conoscenza storica ha destituito di ogni effettività, determina in ambito religioso uno scossone cognitivo ed emotivo che costringe a ripensare lo *status* dell'esperienza religiosa in un'epoca in cui le scienze della natura e la conoscenza storica hanno trasformato i modi in cui gli uomini strutturano la comprensione di sé e del mondo.

> Siamo – scrive Josè Maria Vigil – la prima generazione che si vede sfidata a essere religiosa o spirituale senza appigliarsi a illusori supporti storici. Questo nuovo paradigma ci obbliga a inaugurare un'epoca nuova per la fede, o a inaugurare una religiosità nuova, per un'epoca in cui la nuova archeologia ci ha spogliato di illusioni storiche […]. Se questo paradigma ci sfida a superare l'ingenuità con cui stavamo credendo, sulla base del racconto biblico, sostituito ora dal "racconto che c'è dietro il racconto biblico", ci obbliga a fondare la nostra religione su questo nuovo racconto. Si tratta di una nuova religiosità, perché basata su un nuovo racconto, sino a ora sconosciuto […]. La religione ha bisogno di una quasi totale revisione e di reinventarsi: deve optare per un futuro diverso, un futuro che non sia una mera proiezione del presente. Forse tutto ciò fa parte della nuova "grande trasformazione" che è in corso, di un

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[79] J. M. Vigil, *Il nuovo paradigma archeologico-biblico*, in Fanti, Sudati, *Oltre le religioni*, cit., p. 222.

secondo "tempo assiale" in cui ci staremmo addentrando, di una più profonda "umanizzazione dell'umanità", o magari di una "seconda ominizzazione"[80].

Per gli esponenti del «paradigma post-religionale» le dottrine e le pratiche religiose vanno dunque decontaminate dalla «epistemologia mitica» e dalla «ontologia del dominio» in esse presenti, e ripensate nel nuovo contesto cognitivo e comportamentale prodotto dai discorsi che la fisica quantistica, la biologia evolutiva, le scienze umane, le scienze religionistiche, le discipline storiche, i metodi di analisi testuale, producono sui modi di conoscere il mondo e la vita umana. Questo complesso lavoro di reinterpretazione non dovrebbe spaventare gli spiriti religiosi. La religione ha infatti bisogno, scrive José Maria Vigil,

> di una nuova autocomprensione per un futuro diverso. Una reinvenzione che non dovrebbe generare diffidenza, poiché stiamo scoprendo con gioia che sia le religioni agrarie sia lo stesso accesso alla dimensione spirituale furono geniali e creative invenzioni emerse nel processo bioculturale della nostra ominizzazione e umanizzazione[81].

In Italia, nel campo della ricerca teologica, oltre a Claudia Fanti, altri autori, come Paolo Squizzato, Ferdinando Sudati, Paolo Zambaldi, Annamaria Corallo, Paolo Gamberini, si presentano come esponenti del post-teismo. Senza voler sminuire i meriti degli altri, occorre riconoscere che il contributo offerto dal gesuita Paolo Gamberini nel libro *Deus duepuntozero*[82], costituisce un importante di riferimento in Italia.

Egli struttura la propria riflessione attraverso il metodo ispirato alla «trans-disciplinarietà», cioè alla pratica di una interazione tra filosofia, scienze della natura, scienze umane, scienze storiche, riflessione teologica. In tal modo prende forma un ripensamento della pratica cristiana in chiave «*panenteista* e *post*-teista»[83], che si caratterizza come ermeneutica «non duale» del modo in cui nel cristianesimo viene pensato il rapporto tra Dio, mondo, uomo.

Si delinea, così, il «monismo relativo», formula impiegata dal p. Gamberini per definire una forma di post-teismo meno aggressiva, nel tono, nei confronti del discorso cristiano convenzionale, se confrontata con il pensiero post-teista elaborato dai teologi latino-americani, da Spong, da Fox, o anche dalla teologa americana Ilia Delio. Egli procede infatti «rivisitando e reinterrogando

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[80] Ivi, pp. 234, 235.
[81] Ivi, p. 228.
[82] P. Gamberini, *Deus duepuntozero. Ripensare la fede nel post-teismo*, Gabrielli Editori, San Pietro in Cariano (VR) 2022.
[83] Ivi, p. 18.

continuamente»[84] esponenti della tradizione cattolica, come Dionigi l'Aero-
pagita, Tommaso d'Aquino, Bonaventura, Duns Scoto, Niccolò Cusano, uni-
tamente a pensatori marginalizzati o duramente avversati dall'ortodossia cat-
tolica, come Giovanni Scoto Eriugena, Meister Eckhart, Giordano Bruno,
Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. A questi ultimi, da lui espressamente ricordati
come fonti di ispirazione, va aggiunto Emanuele Severino, un filosofo spesso
accreditato nel libro come importante riferimento teoretico.

Attraverso la proposta del «monismo relativo» il p. Gamberini pratica una
rilettura della fede cristiana ispirata da «una logica non *duale*»[85], che comporta
la decostruzione di modelli di comprensione della dottrina e della pratica cri-
stiana strutturati nell'orizzonte di una visione della realtà egemonizzata dalla
dualità tra soggetto e oggetto, materia e spirito, Dio e mondo. In tal modo
ritiene possibile delineare una ermeneutica del cristianesimo capace di inter-
pretare «in modo più inclusivo»[86], allargato cioè alla totalità della vita cos-
mica, il dogma cristiano dell'incarnazione.

Questa operazione è finalizzata al superamento della «fase destrutturante»
del post-teismo, per far posto alla costruzione di un «*sistema*». Con tale ter-
mine viene indicato

> il tentativo di connettere i vari dati della ricerca storico-critica su Gesù, della
> cristologia, della fisica quantistica, delle neuroscienze, delle varie mistiche e
> della filosofia relazionale in un tutto *organico* e *unitario* in cui la realtà ultima
> sia riconosciuta come *consapevolezza* divina, permeante di sé tutte le cose:
> "Dio è tutto in tutte le cose" (1Cor 15, 28)[87].

Si accede in tal modo, secondo il gesuita, alla «fase post-critica della fe-
de»[88]. In essa, in una dialettica ascensionale che parte dalla «fase pre-critica»,
transitando attraverso la fase critica dell'ateismo, si realizza il superamento di
quest'ultimo senza tornare al teismo e mantenendo l'istanza dell'autonomia in
esso affermatasi. Inoltre, nella «fase post-critica», gli insegnamenti della Bib-
bia e i dogmi della Chiesa non sono considerati, come avveniva nella fase pre-
critica, proposizioni aventi «valore *oggettivo* e *letterale*»[89], ma come costru-
zioni storiche attraverso le quali individui e comunità hanno espresso in
«modo limitato e contingente»[90] la loro esperienza del divino.

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[84] *Ibidem.*
[85] Ivi, p. 24.
[86] Ivi, p. 34.
[87] Ivi, p. 24.
[88] Ivi, p. 99.
[89] *Ibidem.*
[90] Ivi, p. 31.

Il superamento della coscienza atea non avviene – scrive p. Gamberini – ri-
tornando al teismo, rinunciando così all'autonomia raggiunta nella fase di
maturazione, ma riconoscendo la propria autonomia *in* un Dio, non più con-
cepito come colui che è separato da o *aliud*, ma vissuto come la stessa realtà
in cui sono e vivo […]. La concezione post-teista di Dio esprime la maturità
della coscienza religiosa, vivendo la notte della lotta con Dio […] e giun-
gendo all'alba del nuovo giorno, per nascere in Dio. Paul Ricoeur chiama
questa rinascita della coscienza religiosa: *seconde naïveté*, seconda ingenuità
[…]. La fede post-critica non assume più le verità di fede come descrittive
della realtà ma come simboli, metafore e rimandi di quella realtà ineffabile e
trascendente che è Dio. La fede post-critica non crede nella Bibbia e nelle
formule di fede: crede attraverso di esse[91].

Nel «monismo relativo», Dio viene pensato come realtà eterna, dotata di
«consapevolezza», non esterna al mondo, che si caratterizza come «atto puro
e potenza attiva»[92] in cui, come «pura possibilità», è contenuto ciò che po-
trebbe apparire nel mondo. Dio è infatti la «potenza assoluta» che è all'origine
non solo del fatto «che le cose siano, ma che queste diventino artefici di se
stesse […], che si facciano (*autopoiesi*)»[93].

In tal senso, a differenza del cosmo che è lo spazio del divenire, Dio è una
realtà che non ha bisogno di «realizzarsi». Esiste infatti come «potenza attiva»
non esterna al mondo che è all'origine dei processi di «*autopoiesi*» attraverso
i quali prende forma la cosmogenesi. Dio è quindi una realtà in atto dotata di
«consapevolezza» che è all'origine del divenire del cosmo senza essere, a sua
volta, sottoposta a divenire.

A differenza del p. Gamberini, teorico di un panenteismo in atto, nel quale
Dio è «tutto in tutte le cose», la teologa americana Ilia Delio pensa l'essere di
Dio come realtà incoativa, segnata da un «non ancora» che, come il cosmo cui
è strutturalmente «*entangled*», è incompiuta, quindi anche essa sottoposta a
divenire.

Dio – scrive Ilia Delio – è intrecciato con la materia. Come Jung, Teilhard
dice che la dimensione trascendente della materia è Dio, e l'immanenza di
Dio è la materia. Come la materia cresce e muta, così anche Dio cresce e
muta. Dio, inoltre, non è né immutabile né perfetto; piuttosto, Dio è perfe-
zione in evoluzione che si autosorpassa. La perfezione di Dio è in avanti,
poiché Dio è completato attraverso la vita in continua evoluzione[94].

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[91] Ivi, pp. 97-98, 100.
[92] Ivi, p. 35.
[93] *Ibidem.*
[94] I. Delio, *The Not-yet God. Carl Jung, Teilhard de Chardin, and the Relational Whole*, Orbis
Books, New York 2023, p. 249.

Questa visione di Dio, e del suo legame strutturale con il divenire del cosmo, nella varietà delle sue scansioni, viene sintetizzata dalla teologa americana in formule come «olismo relazionale», «teoologia», «olismo teogonico». Ella delinea infatti un pensiero teologico che non si propone semplicemente di dialogare con le scienze, ma intende «integrare» al proprio interno le conoscenze del mondo prodotte dalla fisica quantistica, dalla biologia evolutiva, dalle neuroscienze, come pure le innovazioni rese possibili dall'informatica nel campo dell'intelligenza artificiale, e le possibilità di intervento sulla struttura biofisica degli organismi, compreso l'organismo umano, aperte dalla genetica e dalla biologia sintetica, per farne la base di un discorso su Dio e sull'esperienza religiosa regolato da un nuovo paradigma.

Si delinea, così, un pensiero teologico che si colloca nello spazio del paradigma post-teistico, e sulla scia di Victor Cousins, parla dell'avvento di un «secondo periodo assiale» nel quale prende forma una «seconda religione assiale»[95], cioè una figura di esperienza religiosa che, a differenza di quanto avvenuto nelle religioni del primo «periodo assiale» non si presenta con pretese di rivelazione definitiva della verità, perché consapevole di essere parte «di un universo in divenire nel quale Dio è aperto al completamento»[96].

In tal modo, la religione, deposta la pretesa di essere il deposito di verità assolute su Dio, sul mondo, sull'uomo, si trasforma in forma di vita in cui trovare «sentieri spirituali», riti, simboli, pratiche, che consentano agli uomini di espandere la loro coscienza di appartenere a una vita cosmica in evoluzione nella quale «Dio e mondo formano una totalità relazionale»[97].

Delio sviluppa in tal modo un discorso su Dio, che, per dirla con parole di Teilhard, appare come una «mistica della traversata» che percorre e collega i campi delle scienze, della Bibbia, della teologia, della storia delle culture, della psicologia. È infatti convinta che la comprensione della vita umana non è garantita da un sapere frammentario, perché «dobbiamo – scrive – vedere la nostra esistenza all'interno del tutto oppure non potremmo vedere la verità della nostra esistenza»[98].

Ponendosi sulla scia di Jung e di Teilhard de Chardin, la teologa americana sviluppa quindi un discorso nel quale mistica, scienze della natura, scienze umane, analisi storiche delle dinamiche culturali, vengono integrate tra loro per fornire una lettura del cosmo e della vita umana attenta a evidenziare la loro struttura relazionale, e la centralità che la categoria del tutto gioca nei processi di comprensione della realtà. Viene meno, in tal modo, sia la plausibilità di un ateismo che riduce la vita umana a pezzo di materia da gestire

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[95] Ivi, p. 254.
[96] *Ibidem.*
[97] Ivi, p. 246.
[98] Ivi, p. XV.

come ente governato da livelli determinati di informazione, sia un teismo che pensa Dio come realtà definita, separata dal mondo e dalla materia.

> Una cultura senza Dio – scrive Ilia Delio – è pura informazione cosmica, nella quale la persona umana diviene parte dell'informazione che può essere cancellata o cambiata. La fede ci parla in altro modo. Noi siamo qui perché siamo la parte pensante dell'universo, la parte di una totalità cosmica che è fondata in una realtà divina. Dio è il Tutto del tutto in evoluzione, distinto ma inseparabile da ogni altra cosa che esiste. Olismo relazionale significa che ogni cosa è connessa. Non ci sono parti separate; piuttosto, ogni entità distinta è determinata dalle sue relazioni. Le opere di Jung e Teilhard ci spingono a ripensare la storia cristiana come un tutto relazionale, una teeologia. L'olismo richiama un nuovo tipo di logica, quella non definita dalla causalità ma dalla relazionalità. La logica dell'amore è la logica del tutto; l'energia dell'amore è l'energia del tutto. L'amore vede il tutto, mentre l'intelletto parziale vede i frammenti. Noi umani abbiamo la capacità di attualizzare il tutto personalizzando l'amore divino[99].

3. La «singolarità» teologica di Teilhard de Chardin

Considerando il panorama tracciato in precedenza sui modelli di pensiero tramite cui nel ventesimo secolo e nel primo quarto del ventunesimo è stata pensata l'agibilità dell'esperienza religiosa, si può tranquillamente affermare che la posizione espressa da Teilhard manifesta un notevole livello di originalità. Essa è data dalla compresenza di tre elementi. In primo luogo, una ermeneutica del cristianesimo che, senza fare nessuna forzatura, si può dire che manifesta notevoli somiglianze con il post-teismo. In secondo luogo, la visione non fissista e non esclusivista della verità cristiana, che induce Teilhard malgrado gli interdetti dei Superiori del suo Ordine e del Magistero cattolico, a porsi il problema del pluralismo religioso, e a dare il proprio apporto a tentativi pionieristici di dialogo interreligioso. Infine, in terzo luogo, l'evidenziazione dello stretto legame esistente tra l'impegno cognitivo, tecnologico, etico, politico, richiesto dal lavoro di costruzione del futuro della Terra, e la pratica cristiana. Una tematica, quest'ultima, che prelude alla riflessione sulle complesse problematiche oggi impostesi nel dibattito filosofico e teologico riguardanti il rapporto tra espansione del sapere tecnico-scientifico e dinamiche della vita morale e religiosa.

Nella lettera del 26 gennaio 1936, indirizzata a Leontine Zanta, filosofa, e sua amica, il gesuita scrive:

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[99] Ivi, pp. XXXII-XXXIII.

Ciò che sta dominando il mio interesse e le mie preoccupazioni interiori, lo sapete già, è lo sforzo per stabilire in me, e diffondere attorno a me, una religione nuova (chiamiamola un Cristianesimo migliore, se volete) in cui il Dio Personale cessa di essere il grande Proprietario "neolitico" di un tempo per divenire l'anima del mondo che il nostro stadio culturale richiede […]. Oscuramente, dunque, mi trincero nel sentimento che l'essere è infinitamente più ricco e innovativo della nostra logica. Come nel caso di ogni movimento, il paradosso del cambiamento religioso in corso si risolverà attraverso il movimento stesso: *solvitur eundo*[100].

Nella lettera a Lucile Swan del 25 gennaio 1937, Teilhard si definisce un «panteista-nato»[101], fortemente legato alla «mistica profonda dell'Universo»[102], che, al tempo stesso, si sente «appassionatamente» legato al «Dio che si esprime nel Cristo cristiano»[103], che egli, con un linguaggio difforme rispetto a quello tipico della cristologia classica, designa come «l'Animatore di un Universo in evoluzione»[104].

Il gesuita appare dunque come l'esponente di una ermeneutica del cristianesimo difforme rispetto a quella espressa dalla cultura cattolica egemone negli anni in cui scrive queste lettere. Pensa infatti l'essere di Dio al di fuori delle categorie della metafisica dell'essere, e dell'immaginario religioso affermatosi nel Neolitico, che lo identifica come il «grande Proprietario» del mondo. La decostruzione del discorso cattolico convenzionale viene perseguita con l'obiettivo di dar vita, si legge nelle lettere a Leontine Zanta e a Lucile Swan, al «Neo-cristianesimo», cioè a una nuova configurazione del pensiero cristiano nella quale l'essere di Dio e la figura di Cristo non appaiono come elementi estrinseci al corso evolutivo della materia, nelle stratificazioni di una evoluzione che va dalle particelle sub-atomiche all'apparire della «vita pensante», al formarsi della «Noosfera», nella successione delle sue differenti configurazioni. Dio non viene infatti pensato come *Summum Ens*, *Esse ipsum subsistens*, o come il «grande Proprietario» del mondo, ma facendo ricorso a concetti come «Anima del mondo», «Animatore» di un mondo in evoluzione, «Dio-evolutore», che evidenziano la sua stretta connessione con i processi in atto nel divenire della vita cosmica.

Altra peculiarità dell'ermeneutica del cristianesimo delineata da Teilhard è connessa alla tesi enunciata verso la metà degli anni Trenta del Novecento circa la «planetizzazione» della vita umana. L'ingresso in questa condizione inedita muta la funzione delle religioni. Loro compito non è più, infatti, come

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[100] Teilhard de Chardin, *Lettres à Léontine Zanta*, pp. 127-128.
[101] King, Gilbert, *The Letters of Teilhard de Chardin & Lucile Swan*, p. 65.
[102] *Ibidem.*
[103] *Ibidem.*
[104] Ivi, p. 66.

sosteneva anche Bergson, quello di cementare l'identità di un gruppo etnico, quanto, piuttosto, quello di offrire un patrimonio di simboli, di miti, di riti, di insegnamenti, di esperienze, capaci di creare relazioni non conflittuali e non distruttive in una umanità che vive condizioni di vita sempre più connesse e globalizzate. Tutto ciò comporta il superamento della visione esclusivista e impositiva della verità religiosa, e l'attivazione di relazioni dialogiche tra forme differenti di esperienza religiosa.

Alla peculiarità dell'ermeneutica del cristianesimo proposta da Teilhard, accanto alle due caratterizzazioni esposte in precedenza, ne va aggiunta una terza. Egli sostiene che il cristianesimo, ma il discorso vale a suo avviso per ogni religione, deve dismettere l'*habitus* di pratica ascetica, intimistica, soprannaturalistica, avversa alle innovazioni. Nella religione, al contrario di quanto accade per larga parte delle filosofie e del pensiero teologico del ventesimo secolo e del primo quarto del ventunesimo, vede infatti una pratica capace di accompagnare e sostenere la svolta in atto nell'evoluzione umana con l'avvento dell'«Ultra-umano». Tale categoria, che costituisce l'argomento sul quale Teilhard concentra la propria riflessione dal 1949, fa riferimento al fatto che con l'espansione e il potenziamento del sapere tecnico-scientifico il gruppo umano si afferma non soltanto come il soggetto in cui l'evoluzione prende coscienza del proprio corso, ma come soggetto in grado di aprire una nuova fase dell'evoluzione, quella in cui «l'energia libera, pensante, sprigionata dalla Terra» funge da vettore del «rilancio dell'evoluzione».

Secondo Teilhard, la religione è essenzialmente mistica. Con tale termine intende una forma di vita, un modo di stare al mondo, nel quale il rapporto con Dio è pensato e vissuto nell'orizzonte aperto dalla «coscienza cosmica», dalla consapevolezza, cioè, dello stretto legame esistente tra esperienza religiosa e radicamento della vita umana nel divenire della vita cosmica, e in quello aperto dall'avvento della «vita pensante» e dal peso crescente che ad essa compete nel processo cosmogonico nel momento in cui, attraverso l'espansione e il potenziamento del sapere tecnico-scientifico, è in grado di porre in essere un «rilancio dell'evoluzione» verso esiti difficilmente prevedibili nel lungo periodo.

In tale prospettiva, non soltanto la religione, ma anche l'etica, la politica, perdono lo statuto di istituzioni e ordinamenti stabilizzati, per mutarsi in pratiche funzionali al sostegno e all'incremento dell'«energia libera, pensante, sprigionata dalla Terra», che ha aperto l'era geologica nella quale la «vita pensante» oggettivata nel divenire della «Noosfera» si afferma come vettore del processo evolutivo.

Sotto l'influenza di queste vedute evolutive, che hanno invaso la nostra psicologia profonda molto più di quanto generalmente non si creda, un particolare tipo di esigenze religiose – scrive il gesuita – ha preso possesso

dell'Umanità. Sia per la comprensione intellettuale della Natura in movimento, sia per il correlativo gusto dell'azione, non potremmo più accettare alcun controllo della nostra attività che *non sia in vista del compimento di un Mondo, e di un Mondo che ci integri nella sua realizzazione*. L'energia libera, pensante, sprigionata dalla Terra non può essere dominata *da nessun ordinamento stabilito che debba essere subito o conservato*. Morale e religione (come l'ordine sociale nel suo insieme) *hanno cessato di essere per noi una Statica; occorre, per sedurci e salvarci, una Dinamica*. "Non vogliamo più saperne di una religione di regolarità; noi sogniamo una Religione di conquista" […]. È diventato luogo comune definire materialista la Civiltà occidentale […]. Nulla di più ingiusto. L'Occidente ha rovesciato parecchi idoli. Ma, con la sua scoperta *delle dimensioni e del cammino in avanti dell'Universo*, ha messo in movimento una potente Mistica. Perché è esattamente una Mistica quella per la quale, svegliati dalla Fisica e dalla Storia alla coscienza di un'Immensità tangibile, noi non concepiamo più né valori né salvatori al di fuori della nostra laboriosa identificazione con il suo compimento[105].

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[105] Teilhard de Chardin, *Il Cristianesimo nel mondo*, in Id., *La Scienza di fronte a Cristo*, pp. 131, 132.

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