HIERARCHIES OF CONSCIOUSNESS AND THE PRINCIPLE OF UNITY: RELIGION AT STAKE

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Abstract

Recent research in the integrative area of consciousness studies mainly focused on the mind & body interaction, exploiting tools, methods and contents particular to natural sciences or cognitive studies. The resources available in the multidisciplinary field of religious studies are still precariously utilized. New research methodologies are to be configured in order to integrate the contribution of the religious studies area to the understanding of the phenomenology of the mind.

The present study revisits, in this new light, the key-concepts of 'sacred', 'ultimate principle' and 'hierarchy' as theorized in philosophy of religion and comparative religion, aiming at highlighting the possible elements and triggers which might re-orientate the applied study of religion toward the exploration of human mind and its apprehension of reality.

The assumption is that there is a link between different states of consciousness and different levels of reality, described or envisaged in the religious discourse as 'divine hierarchy.'

Keywords: Divine hierarchy, sacred, ultimate principle, movement, mind, consciousness, methodology

Introduction
Preamble

Recent studies aiming at fostering scientific research in the area of consciousness studies mainly focused on the mind & body interaction, engaging methodologies particular to natural sciences (especially neuroscience, clinical studies, quantum Physics, string theories etc.) or cognitive studies (as an interface field between Humanities and Natural Sciences).

The resources available at length in the field of religious studies are still precariously brought into attention, due to either a specialized, mono-disciplinary (and often apologetic)

approach, or to an interiorized and fragmentary discourse. It is evident that new methodologies are to be configured in order to recuperate and reintegrate the data provided by this field and its important contribution for the understanding of the phenomenology of mind.

Introduction

The study revisits key-concepts utilized in the field of religious studies (history of religions, philosophy of religion, comparative religion), in order to extract and underline those elements and triggers which might re-orientate the applied study of religion toward the exploration of human mind and its apprehension of reality.

The terms put forward for analysis are 'divine hierarchy', 'sacred', 'principle', 'movement (of the soul)'.

The work will engage in a critical re-discussion of the above-mentioned keywords conceptually employed in the field of religious studies and adopted in research as methodological reference points in approaches to the phenomenon of religion.

The question that forms the starting point of my study may be expressed as follows: is it legitimate to employ certain terms conceptually in order to analyse and isolate particular characteristics of the religious phenomenon?

Is it appropriate to apply to different conceptual spaces a terminology that came into being within the space of European thought? What does an 'academic' study of the religious phenomenon mean? What are the appropriate methods and tools to carry out research in this field?

In order to understand and clarify the meanings of the term 'hierarchy', with especial reference to divine hierarchies, it is necessary first of all to elucidate the meanings attributed to the terms 'sacred' and 'principle', as 'hierarchy' is to be defined etymologically (and therefore originally) in relation to *hieros* ('sacred') and *arkhê* ('principle').

The intrinsic threefold structure of the study is aimed at highlighting the meanings and role of the divine hierarchies in approaches to the religious phenomenon, framing the discussion between the two methodological reference points, the idea of the *sacred* and the idea of the *principle*.

My supposition is that there is a tight connection between the understanding of consciousness and the understanding of the principle of unity as employed and theorized in different religious and/or philosophical traditions, on one hand, and between different states of consciousness and different levels of reality, usually envisaged as divine hierarchy, on the other hand. Particular contexts will be brought into discussion, by referring, from a

comparative perspective, to texts pertaining to different religious and/or philosophical contexts.

The access to different states of consciousness through practice, ritual or specific techniques, reflects at the same time the access to particular worlds, realms or dimensions. The guiding line is represented by the tight relationship established between the states of consciousness attained in the religious experience and the apprehension of the divine hierarchies. Specific ways of producing, interpreting and utilizing representations are re-contextualized as means of mapping or vehicles of transgressing different states/realms of consciousness.

The approach will focus on the relation among different states of consciousness and the correspondent levels of reality. Special attention will be paid, in this light, to reappraising the possible meanings and significances of the 'ultimate reality' alluded by the problematic concept of ultimate principle and its relation to multiplicity.

But what is consciousness? Could the hierarchies of consciousness offer a possible answer? Is consciousness definable? Can it be measured since it assumes no particular form, shape, substance, configuration, direction or property? It is usually referred to or recognized as a 'state' or a 'happenstance'. We talk about 'passages' from one state of consciousness to another. Is consciousness the unchained continuum separating and, at the same time, bringing together its 'happenings'?

Main Text
On the sacred
The 'sacred' is conceptually a category that was established relatively late in the field of religious studies. The term is used as an instrument in approaches to and interpretations of the religious phenomenon, and its role is methodological rather than descriptive. This explains the multiple meanings of the idea of the sacred, which researchers of religion have theorised differently and, more often than not, ambiguously.

Outstanding in this sense are the theorizations of Otto (1977) and Eliade (1987), which have been adopted and continue to influence significantly our understanding and conceptual and conceptualising use of the term.

In a multivalent and apparently contradictory way, and often in a metaphorical manner, the 'sacred' simultaneously denotes an *a priori* category, in the Kantian sense, a dimension of subjective experience, a relation, a certain area of the geography of the real (or a particular time), the real itself, and 'ultimate reality'. Dadosky (2004, pp. 7-43) traces, in this respect, a

detailed and meaningful conceptual history of the 'sacred', from Schleiermacher, Otto, and Van der Leeuw to Eliade and Lonergan.

It therefore results that it is impossible to extrapolate a set of attributes that might provide a clear definition of the term 'sacred'. Rather, the term is used in order to suggest and capture a certain *quality* and *intensity* in regard to the manifestation of the divine or in relation to it, as the divine itself cannot in any way be circumscribed.

Interpreting the visions of Eliade and Lonergan, Dadosky (2004, pp.1-2) concludes that the sacred is better understood as a 'structure of religious knowing':

'In a series of lectures at Boston College in 1968, Eliade declared: 'In discussing the sacred, we always return to viewing it as a structure of the human consciousness rather than as a set of historical data'. This does not mean that Eliade reduces the sacred to the structure of human consciousness; rather, more precisely, he claims that the sacred is '*part* of the structure of human consciousness.' However, Eliade never developed much in the way of a theory of consciousness.'

The conceptual use of the term 'sacred' in the philosophy of religion, the history of religious ideas and comparative religion remains problematical, inasmuch as its conceptual dimension is purged of the meanings of the same term or the corresponding terms from non-Indo European languages employed *in situ*, although the academic claim is that the term describes and expresses what the various religious traditions wish to say or point to. A similar view is held by Anttonen (1996), who particularly underlines the inherent risks of conceptualizing religion: 'The sacred as a scholarly concept in the study of religion should be reassessed in accordance with the latest findings concerning the role of categories in human language and cognition' (p. 38).

This gap between the conceptual, 'ahistorical' and artificially configured use of the term, on the one hand, and its multiple uses in religious language, on the other, together with the multiple uses of the corresponding terms from traditions other than those expressed in the Indo-European languages, represents a major problem of appropriateness at the level of content and research methodology.

The sacred and representation

Spatialized visual representations of understandings of the sacred will bring to the fore either the idea of the *centre* or the idea of the axis as the *axis mundi*, with an especial valorisation, in the second of the two, of the *terminus* (the 'pinnacle', the 'peak', the 'upmost height', etc.).

The hierarchy will unfold either in a circle, around the centre, or vertically, along the axis between 'high' and 'low', or by combining the two modes of representation in different proportions.

As a result, 'imaginal' will follow the two types of perception, suggesting chiefly movement towards the centre or ascension. I use the term 'imaginal' as it was introduced by Corbin (1964, pp.3-26; 1972, p.335f).

> "There were essentially three reasons why Corbin used the term imaginal. First, he sought to differentiate it from the word 'imaginary' which, according to him, was the equivalent of 'signifying the unreal, something which remained outside of being and existence, in short utopian.'; Second, he was anxious to depict in terms of space the representative field of the creative imagination as it appeared in Iranian theosophy. Third, he sought to stress the specific noetic or cognitive function of this imaginative 'order,' a function that showed itself to be both spiritualizing and creative. In this sense, the imaginal refers to an 'organ of perception' whose object is an *imago terrae*, a subtle topography. It is an interworld, or 'eighth climate' situated beyond the 'seven climates' of the phenomenal world, between the perceptible and the intelligible. Thus, it can be located only in a sacred cartography. The subtle organ that perceives this 'psychospiritual' reality is, according to Corbin, the 'imaginative conscience' or the 'cognitive imagination'." (Shariat, p. 84)

Likewise, polarity is suggested variously as centre and periphery, respectively up and down.

Concentric representations place the emphasis not so much upon the spatialization of the message in the levels of a real geography as much as upon the transcendence of dimensions, as inner worlds, sequentiality being described in relation not to space but to time, under the category of the concomitant, the synchronous.

Axial representations place the emphasis upon the spatialization of the transitions in the levels which, as a rule, can be likened to or placed in correspondence with the spaces of a real geography. These transitions will follow one another consecutively. Space and time will to a certain extent preserve the same pairing as within sphere of the worldly.

My first observation would be that those religious traditions that tend towards concentric representations place an emphasis upon interiority, while those religious traditions that chiefly employ axial images place an emphasis upon the exteriority of the worlds, levels and dimensions.

Interiority will privilege subjective experience, while exteriority will attempt to confer objectivity and real existence upon the levels.

Matter therefore becomes a key concept for understanding interior and exterior multiplicity.

The *arkhê*, as the One and unity, will always be defined differently in relation to *matter*, i.e. multiplicity. The *via negativa* is what will assume the 'material' attributes of the multiple only to negate them in relation to the One.

On movement

Circular movement has a definite trajectory in relation to a centre. Consequently, *concentration* of the attention, of the gaze, upon a single point gives rise to circular movement, as a movement of the soul.

For this reason, higher entities (be they celestial beings or 'spheres') have been imagined as having the attributes of circularity (circular movement and/or spherical form). Likewise, it has been presupposed that the 'bodies' of angels, of intelligences separate from matter, can only exist in the fashion of a sphere, as the intellect's connexion with the sphere is of a different nature than the connexion between soul and body, given that the sphere follows the movement of the intelligence and is configured in concord with it (and the movement of the intelligence is circular inasmuch as the attention is, with all its being, focussed on the ultimate principle). Prominent are in this respect the theoretical developments in Aristotle's *Physics* (VIII, 9, 265a-266a), Avicenna's *Metaphysica* (1973, pp.96-100) or Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* (II, 2-12).

Circularity will thus reveal a certain kind of perfection through the ability and power to focus on the One as centre. Angelic entities in the Hebrew Bible, for example, do *only* the will of the Lord: as the prophet says, 'whither the spirit was to go, they went; they turned not when they went.' (Ezekiel 1:12 JPS)

Avicenna will provide a comprehensive vision of movement. Movement is described in Aristotelian terms as a movement of bodies and a movement of the soul.

Circular movement, which is the more noble, is specific to higher beings whose gaze is *centred*. The impulse for movement is represented by that which attracts or which attracts us as an object of desire, from love.

That which is loved constitutes the *centre* of attraction and of the soul's movement.

'[...] the intelligent being is the aim of other entities because it is the being to which one hopes to conform and which one aspires to resemble. One of the many signs of friends and beloveds is that one hopes to imitate the other to the highest degree possible. Furthermore,

any mover will undoubtedly want to resemble his beloved. [...] Love is the cause for seeking a resemblance, and seeking a resemblance is the cause of that motion.' (Avicenna, 1973, pp. 98-99)

Rectilinear movement stands as a sign for the multiplication of reference points, for the deviation and turning of the gaze, of desire, from one centre to another (or others). Duplication as decentring, followed by multiplication of points fixed as a reference or goal, creates rectilinear movement and, as a first reflex, differentiation at the level of the form of bodies in the earthly world.

It may be deduced that the type of the soul's movement makes its mark on the type of connexion with matter (through the occurrence of multiplicity) and the corporeal schema. The body and material form occur as an expression of interior movement. Thus, duplication already presupposes matter, through the concomitant presence of space and time.

The broader question of the possibility of the existence of multiplicity in the absence of matter was widely debated in the mediaeval period and ultimately formulated aporetically. Such a theorization can be found in the work of Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica*, q. 50-53, q. 108).

To go back to the Aristotelian and Neo-Platonic debates of the mediaeval period, movement is of two kinds: the movement of bodies and the movement of the soul.

In the first hypostasis it is a question of movement in space (as translation and therefore a modification of place) and time (as becoming and therefore modification of a state without there necessarily being any change of place/position).

In the second hypostasis it is a question of the soul's inner movement, which does not depend on matter (at least not in the same way in which the movement of bodies in space and time manifests itself). This movement, which is subtle and usually 'invisible' to us, emerges along other co-ordinates. It might be described as intention or attention, or inner gaze, or thought, or emotion, or mood. The aim or goal, the 'place' or 'time' of inner 'actions', constitutes the reference points or centre of this type of movement. The 'speed of thought', of mood, confers instantaneity and spontaneity upon the soul's movement.

For this reason, the non-material and immaterial body of the angel could not be anything other than circular, spherical. This is because inwardly the angel cannot do anything but praise God, gaze upon Him rejoicing and do His will.

The same effort of concentrating the whole being is to be found in every religious tradition when persons regarded as having reached perfection are depicted. The techniques that have been handed down and/or established by spiritual leaders require concentration

upon a single reference point or the presence of the whole being in a certain 'place' and/or 'time'.

I would like to give just two examples: the meanings of the formula *panim el-panim* in the exceptional case of Moses, in the Hebrew Bible, who thus fulfils the desideratum subsequently expressed through the first commandment (Exodus 20:2-3; see also Deuteronomy 6:5), and *ekāgratā*, concentration on a single point as a yogic technique.

There are countless illustrations. As far as we are concerned, what is important is to point to the mechanism that forms the basis for 'unification' and the unity of interior action, whose corollary is the occurrence of circular movement.

To return to the two types of the movement of bodies – translation (as movement in space) and becoming (as movement in time) – both of these depend, as a mode of manifestation, upon the space/time matrix that enables matter (as an expression of inner, non-uniform, decentred movement, giving rise to rectilinear movement).

The connexion between the nature of matter (respectively, the nature of bodies) and inner movement seems to be achieved, according to what has been pointed to so far, via time as a mediating dimension.

Movement in a state, described as becoming, presupposes preservation of the centrality of place and duplication only on the temporal plane. Movement in a state in fact means transformation.

Movement in space presupposes a dual duplication: at the level of space (via the change in spatial reference) and at the level of time (via sequentiality).

Unmodified sequentiality of place is the basis for what we call becoming. Temporal transformation of sequentiality in concomitance, spontaneity, synchronicity will, significantly, determine the leap from becoming to trans-figuration as trans-mutation and therefore as a modification that brings with it transcendence of the world as space/time and the establishment of *presence* as a link with the founding principle through the appropriate movement of the soul.

Movement represents a key element for understanding the living structure of the world/worlds and for clarifying the ways in which the divine hierarchies can be embodied and traversed.

Different states of consciousness correspond, following this line of thought, to different levels of the divine hierarchy, understood and reinterpreted as levels of apprehension. The passage from one state to another is made possible by the movement of the soul indicating toward the re-contextualization of the connection with the ultimate principle.

How does one tend towards the centre?

How does one tend towards the centre? Either by receiving and desiring the guidance of the One – obedience sublimely expressed, for example, in Tibetan Buddhism, through the image of the two stags gazing at (and listening to) the *dharma* wheel – or by *circumambulating*, as a physical movement of the body around a 'centre' (expressed either by the temple or by another delimited space or point within real geography), or by rotating (for example, in the case of ritual, festive or meditative dances), or by *circumscribing*, 'encircling' everything (see, for example, the function of a mandala, or the significance of circumcision, etc.). However curious and strange it might seem, this aspect can be found 'camouflaged' in the profane (as Mircea Eliade would probably say), in the 'scientific' desire for and urge to 'systematic' knowledge and procedure – this is a question of a circle that is 'made' (rather than received by embracing all things), if not (often) 'counterfeited', which provides only the appearance of complete, all-inclusive encirclement, presented as the potential (and achievement) to explain and explicate the world in its totality. One such example is the philosophical and scientific systems that set out to explain the world and more often than not claim to have provided a key to understanding man and the universe.

Consequently, either you 'receive' the centre while not focusing on *anything* mundane, or you create an arc (or a circle) that isolates the mundane while attempting to explain it – an attempt forever doomed to remain partial.

As long as it does not manage to incorporate the spiritual, the scientific remains condemned to partiality. A new vision would bring with it a radical shift in emphasis and perspective: there would be a shift from the attempt to understand the 'objective' world to an attempt to understand man, not in order to develop the fields of science and technology, but to develop man in harmony with all things that exist. Secondarily, as an expression of the development of man, technological development would be reoriented, from a new viewpoint on man's relationship with the world and others.

The hierarchy implicitly presupposes a certain *order* of stages, a certain harmony of connections, within a network, as a link is never solitary, and networks are infinite.

What does science (and man) need to regain?

1. 'The multiple as *Multiple*': the joy of the particular, of uniqueness, of what is relative *as relative*, through acceptance of the part *as part*, without any pretention to exhaustiveness or the rejection of what is incomplete;

2. 'The One as *One*': the non-rejection of what cannot be circumscribed, understood, systematized or reduced to one's own capacity for understanding and accepting the world.

Objectivity can be classified as a viable register between the unique, clearly delimited individual and the incommensurable 'divine'. Only within this correctly evaluated interval can it make any sense. Clarifying are, in this respect, the guiding dialogues edited by Zajonc (2004), highlighting the limits of scientific discourse and the essential correlation between objectivity and subjectivity.

The subjective experience of traveling 'beyond' expressed in different religious traditions through diverse and equivocal terminological constellations, is replaced, in the scientific approach, by the objectivity of the experiment expressed through univocal languages. The shift operated in philosophy between transcendent and transcendental could still reframe the debate regarding consciousness, re-appraising the subjective experience and subjectivity in a different key.

On levels and hierarchies

What do religions and, in our case, the divine hierarchies point to as the privileged realm that might reveal the 'core' of a religious tradition?

The divine hierarchies represent, at the same time, an authentic expression of the religious experience and the 'grounding' of knowledge regarding the higher worlds in a secularised or institutional form, as a tradition (be it oral or written) or theology.

The hierarchies in fact represent the bridge opened from the direction of the principle (here taken as a generic term) towards man and inverse. The modes in which the divine hierarchies are embodied in different traditions are relevant to the understanding of man's relationship with the 'divine', which usually placed under the sign of *re-ligion* (etymologically, 'religion' derives from the Latin *re-ligo*, i.e., the prefix *re-*, 'again', 'anew', and the verb *ligo*, 'to tie', 'to bind', 'to connect', 'to link', 'to fasten').

Regardless of the tradition in question, the 'religious' dimension is opened up through a distinct type of relationship, not to be found in other mundane contexts: to be more exact, the religious will circumscribe those aspects that *bind* man, in his interiority (and exteriority), to what transcends the visible, perceptible and knowable limits of the mundane, to an 'ultimate reality' not containable in things and creatures, which is beyond all other things, while at the same time establishing them, and whose presence here can be suggested or experienced in ways that take either the form of ritual and symbol (for others) or the form of religious experience as a subjective experience (for the self). The witness to this link in various

religious traditions is to be discovered firstly in the form of representations of the divine hierarchies.

The manifestation of the presence of the connection through the birth of representation as a first embodiment will stand witness to the reality and possibility of religious experience towards which it will point or guide. Recognition of the connection and thus its re-establishment for us causes the representations and consequently the visible and all that entails to be completely recovered in this relationship.

The horizon of understanding and transmitting such an experience will also differ from the common modes of understanding and transmitting mundane knowledge. It presupposes a 'transfiguration' as an implicit acceptance of a dislocation: what can be seen is only a sign of the presence of what cannot be embodied, but only suggested, brought closer, pointed to via the manifold images of this world.

At the level of representation, the divine hierarchies are the first embodiment of the connection described as manifestation of the divine presence. This *connection* does not bear the features of an ordinary relationship: the connection presupposed by the religious dimension refers to a relationship in which the 'interlocutor', the 'partner', the 'other' is not a creature or thing from the sphere of the mundane, but a presence beyond the appearances known to us, which, however, may take any appearance, manifesting itself to us in visible forms. This particularity of the relationship gives rise to the religious as a privileged modality of man's knowledge and experience.

The divine hierarchies are therefore the materialization – through experience, image or text – of this connection, reinterpreted from others as a witness regarding the higher worlds.

The manifestation of the divine presence through embodiments, creatures, things, levels is achieved either as an inner journey through the worlds (at the level of representation) or as an objective perception and as objectifying here and now, in this world. Consequently, the manifestation of the divine presence in conjunction with the matter of this world, or in other words as far as the trans-figuration of our world, marks higher levels of the (religious) experience of the connection. Some of them have established, through 'externalization', rites, practices and symbols that have subsequently given rise to religious movements or traditions. I take over the conceptual usage of the term 'externalization' as introduced, with particular reference to biblical theophanic contexts, by Savran (2005, pp. 148-189).

The novelty of the representations that occur in relationship to the divine resides in the fact that the forms whereby these representations arise do not refer reflexively to themselves, but present themselves from the outset as being 'vehicles' that express the ultimate reality in

its manifestation to us. These representations, which are *transparent* at the level of signification, thus mirror that which is unimaginable.

Dwelling in 'presence', through 'activation' of a *re-ligious* link, brings with it an orientation of the gaze towards particular, intra-mundane objects, towards their principle, which becomes manifest *through* them. Thus, the things of this world, be they places, creatures or objects, are 'sanctified' by receiving a new identity, a new function, and a renewing signification. This new gaze ennobles the multiple, remaking the connection with the founding principle. In this new perspective, each individual will become a 'vehicle' as a means for manifestation of the divine and trans-position in the 'place' whence the connection is remade.

The levels of achieving the connection are described as levels of ascent, of the soul's ascent, on the one hand, and levels of descent, as 'embodiment', manifestation, or discovery of the divine, here and now, on the other. The two 'movements' are in fact synchronous: the ascent of the soul makes present, closer and at increasing intensities the manifestation of the principle.

Spiritual perfection is accompanied by the signs of the presence of the sacred, here, at the level of the matter of this world, which is thereby trans-figured.

The spiritual leaders of the various religious communities and the founders of the major religions succeed in transmitting the message of the 'connection' not only by pointing towards the founding principle, but also by making manifest the presence of the principle as far as the level of the body and this world.

In other words, the founding principle is not somewhere far away, exiled outside us and the world, but manifests itself and is inherent (in us) *hic et nunc*.

The ultimate consequence of entering into the relationship will be the trans-figuration of the self, i.e. the death of what we represent as an individual, as one among the multiple, and rebirth as a mediator of the One within multiplicity.

In other words, the trans-figuring manifestation of the divine presence can be made felt: 1) at the level of representations (in waking or sleeping visions), therefore at the level of what the mediaeval period called the 'intellect' and 'imagination'; 2) at the level of the world exterior to the body, via a place, creature or thing; and 3) as far as the level of one's own body, which is transfigured into light or transformed (see, for instance, the famous cases illustrated by canonical and apocryphal texts of the Jewish and Christian traditions: Elijah's ascension to heaven, 2 Kings 2:1-18; Enoch's ascension and transfiguration, Genesis 5:21-24; 1 Enoch, Book I:17-36; 2 Enoch 22;3 Enoch 1-16; the shining face of Moses, Exodus 34:33-

35; the ascension of Moses, Appendix to 3 Enoch, 15B; Christ's Transfiguration, Matthew 17:1-13, Mark 9:2-13, Luke 9:28-36).

The apocalyptic or messianic visions to be found in traditions where the divine presence is manifested discontinuously (only in certain places, through certain persons, at a certain time, etc.) presuppose the total trans-figuration of this world 'at the end of the ages'.

The possibility of entering into a connection, with all one's being, as the ultimate level of perfection, in its turn presupposed the total fluidity of the individual who allows himself to be trans-figured by and through the power of the principle, becoming its 'mediator', its guide, the 'angel'.

At the level of the trans-figuration of matter, this brings with it the reshaping power of the principle, which can take any shape. Thus, there are cases in which the body of the mystic or initiate is transformed into light and 'ascends' to heaven, or shifts its shape, or multiplies itself, or appears and disappears by will.

Separation, the difference to which the meanings of the *sacred* refer in various traditions, points to the presence of the divine connection or the connection with the divine, which, becoming manifest through a place, through a creature, through a thing etc., must never be dissolved, as this would be *sacrilege*.

In order to remake the connection where it was precarious or had been lost, *sacrifice* was established as the restorer of the sacred and therefore of the possibility of the divine presence manifesting itself here, for us.

On the One

The One, to which the hierarchies variously embodied in multiple traditions and visions point, stands for the centre, respectively the 'pinnacle' of the hierarchy. As we have seen, the One is established through absolute difference, without being a part or a level of any hierarchy, as this would mean that the One would have the nature of things grounded, would resemble them and therefore have an image, structure, configuration, form and, ultimately, matter.

But the first principle has none of these attributes, as it founds but is not founded. The One is not established as the first in a series. For this reason, there is no two, in other words, the attempt to place the One within a series would mean detachment from the One and a return to the manifold, in which the One would be identified incorrectly, as it cannot receive any total and appropriate embodiment among things grounded.

Thus, the identification of the divine or the sacred with places, parts or levels of the hierarchy is equivalent with succumbing to idolatry, through the inappropriate borrowing of

an image and a false identity, whence the impossibility of dwelling in living *connection* with the One.

Consequently, the One is not part of a hierarchy and nor is it the same as any numeric value, as it cannot be included in a series. It is the One through absolute difference to the multiple founded by/through it. Therefore, it will have no determination belonging to this world, but it will manifest itself through all the things that exist, conferring upon them *unity*.

The connection with the One will obviously have the nature of a *union*, which has led many practitioners and authors, when suggesting this relationship, to use erotic metaphors: love, kissing, embracing, caressing, the wedding, nuptial union, etc.

The attainment of *union*, the union with the One, for this reason presupposes union with all things through the One. Nothing among all the things that exist can be 'outside' the hierarchy and this is because there is nothing except the One (which cannot be limited by anything) and the multiple founded by/through it. These arguments have been refined in Judaic, Christian and Muslim theology in the form of the 'ontologic argument' that proves the existence of God.

The One *is* beyond all things and all the things that *are*, are through it. The union with the One will bring with it a new vision of the world, which will realign the multiple, restoring it, in original connection with the principle.

On the One, the multiple and the harmony of the levels

If the One is not liable to any determination, given that, paradoxically, it possesses all determinations, things stand differently when it comes to the manifold, as we have seen.

Not only does the manifold accept determinations, but also these determinations *de-fine* its nature, constituting, through partiality and delimitation, both identity and specific difference. The final and unique link in the chain of the identity of all things is provided by the connection with the One. But the chain of particular identities is derived and establishes itself as part of a whole accessible to us as a 'hierarchy'.

In other words, the parts of the whole are distinguished from one another, but preserve the unity of the whole. The hierarchic principle presupposes a sequence of levels, just as various hierarchies can be found at the level of the mundane universe for example.

The manifold covers a *spectrum* whose levels are in harmony, through their placement in a certain, natural order, just as the colours of the spectrum are arranged in a certain order. It therefore results that the hierarchy incorporates all the levels inclusively and brings with it an order that reveals itself, by its nature, as a harmony of levels.

The hierarchic universe, in its connections with the One at each level and its totality, suggests a harmonic and harmonious model.

Hierarchic harmony presupposes not only agreement between the parts, but also, completeness, integrality as harmony of all the parts. Thus, one or more levels taken together cannot be in harmony except through the harmony of the whole. There is no harmony of the part except within a harmonious whole. Hierarchy is therefore characterised by multiplicity and completeness *by virtue* of the One.

The principle of completeness can be found at the level of religious traditions either in the auroral visions of an original time, or in apocalyptic, messianic visions or mystic visions, through the restoration of order here and now

The transfiguration of the *whole* world is therefore inscribed in the fulfilment of the desideratum of integrity, respectively of restoration through the remaking of the connection with the One.

The principle of multiplicity brings to the fore specific difference and the birth of the individual as a part separate and necessarily different from the other parts. This implicit *difference* confers *uniqueness* upon each separate part and level.

Consequently, at the level of the manifold, each part or level is unique and has its own place in the harmony of the whole.

The connection with the One is established at the level of each part or rung and at the level of the whole in its totality.

In the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* (2006, pp. 234-272), for example, all the phases of the intermediate state are presented by employing the correspondence with the light spectrum, but also the possibility of illumination through the 'clear light' at each level.

At the level of the individual, uniqueness is an irreplaceable and unrepeatable expression of the One.

Within a hierarchy, duplication is impossible, both at the level of the One and at the level of the part. The hierarchy establishes the *series* only through the difference from one level to another. There is no identical series, because the principle of harmony would thereby be abolished.

Religious traditions presuppose the restoration of the original harmony or connection with the One. The feeling of disharmony and incompleteness represents a state of 'crisis' that demands to be overcome.

The natural question is therefore how do disharmonies arise and perpetuate themselves?

From what has been presented hitherto, preserving the same explicative principles as a methodological option, it results that the disharmonies occur as a result of infringement of either the principle of completeness or the principle of identity at the level of the multiple.

To be more precise, it is a question either of negation/rejection of the integration of certain parts or levels into the hierarchy (which makes harmony impossible as the integrality of parts), or of duplication/multiplication of the parts and levels, respectively of the One, through the loss of uniqueness and the 'cancerous' proliferation of a configuration that is 'parasitic' upon the hierarchy, attempting to become autonomous by virtue of principles other than the One.

By its nature, the hierarchic principle excludes addition (through multiplication of the part) or deficit (through negation or omission of a part or through replacement).

The uniqueness of the part also implicitly includes the determination of the specific locus in the hierarchy. Consequently, preservation of specificity in the absence of the proper locus will lead to the loss of *uniqueness* and to the creation of a 'malformation' within the hierarchy, through translocation. In other words, the *order* of the phases and the parts is essential, and the slightest reversal will produce disharmony in the system as a whole.

The order will also be found in traversing the levels, which is expressed at the level of ritual, for example the liturgical traversal of the spaces within the temple/church, and the 'steps' and canon of prayers that make up the ceremony.

Correspondingly, there will be rites and techniques to restore the order and integrality of the hierarchy through the liturgical or symbolic repetition and re-traversal of the levels.

It is in this context that we may interpret, for example, the rites connected with the New Year or the return *in illo tempore* in order to remake the original matrix or structure of the world.

On the One and hierarchy

The separation of the world into levels, registers or 'worlds' and their spatial and/or temporal detachment from each other gives rise to the hierarchy. The first separation/detachment occurs through the gesture of 'extracting' or imposing difference by virtue of a criterion or principle other than the principle of the One (usually described as the 'first' or 'ultimate' principle or as the creative, founding etc. principle). This 'movement', this reorientation of the gaze that isolates, temporalizes and spatializes, enables the emergence of the hierarchic structure through the return from the One and from the connection of the One with the many (arising from the decentring of the gaze) and thus the connection with the manifold.

As it is in connection with the One, the gaze does not detach the manifold from the One, but rather sees and discovers the one in the manifold in all things without differentiation. As it is connection with the manifold, the gaze turns from the One and in its attempt to rediscover it among the many gives birth to judgement and the scale of 'values', developing the 'principle of hierarchy'.

Hierarchy is the first consequence of (self-)exile, of distancing from the One. It is born in the 'distance' established by the turning of the gaze away from the One.

The ultimate religious experience, that of return, is described differently, as the manifold is re-signified either as a transfigured reality (in the Messianic perspective, for example, in Judaism and Christianity), or as an illusory reality, as a veil (in schools belonging to the Hindu tradition), or as a sole reality, without being able to emerge from the sphere of the 'sacred' (see different perspectives related to shamanism).

Just as white light passing through a prism decomposes into the spectrum of colours, so too, by interposing one's own gaze, which is different from the source of light, the levels of the world are born.

How can the 'colours' be recomposed in order to return to the white light? *Mutatis mutandis*, this is the question to which the religious traditions attempt to provide an answer.

When the sacred is delimited as belonging to a 'beyond' or a particular space and time (as Eliade suggests) through (radical) difference from the other registers or when it is identified with the manifestation of the divine presence as subjective experience and therefore with the occurrence of a religious state whose intensity essentially marks the same 'difference' (this time in comparison with the other states, regarded as common), the 'ultimate principle' will, via distance and separation, be established as *different* from all the other principles, respectively, and according to the case, the 'state of enlightenment' as *different* from all the other states.

In Hinduism and Buddhism, the transition from the 'connection with the manifold' to the 'connection with the One' is expressed via the transition from karmic enchainment to the state of enlightenment.

In Christianity, the transition is from connection with the 'Law' to the connection with 'grace'.

In Judaism, a telling example is provided by Abraham Abulafia, a thirteenth-century cabalist, who underlines, in his *Sitrei Torah*, the connection with the Name, i.e., the Tetragrammaton, which 'untie all the knots.'

The 'leap' from the gaze that establishes the hierarchy to the unifying gaze marks the final stage of spiritual perfection in the religious traditions that develop a 'theology' of separation, of rupture, of differentiation between the levels.

At the final level, the manifold will be repositioned differently. In the Hebrew Bible, for example, we find the host of angels that glorify the Lord (Isaiah 6:3), an expression of the manifold that finds itself in a privileged connection with the One.

In Christianity, the multiplicity that finds itself in connection with the One is described through the dogma of the Holy Trinity: three-personed Being. This paradoxical connection is to be found in the person of Christ. The dogma of theandry expresses in human language the mystery of the ultimate unity: Christ is, fully and simultaneously, perfect man and God. In other words, He is not 'only' the perfect man and not 'only' God, and the 'roles' do not change sequentially. Space and time are dissolved through the manifestation of the divine presence: the manifold is not destroyed, but mysteriously transfigured.

The negation of sequentiality and the 'co-birth' of our world as 'space-time' is exemplarily illustrated in Buddhism in the virtuoso discourses regarding 'dependent origination'.

On connections

The logic of the system is not given 'from within' the network, but through the spontaneous, unpredictable connection with the 'principle of the network', which cannot be captured in the network and is does not possess the nature of the network. Any manipulation or control of the development of the network, through the imposition of a systemic criterion or an algorithm of generation, will destroy the network (or system) through the blockage or deviation of natural, living development. This mode of 'functioning' is viable, up to a point, only in the case of artificial systems, specifically technology. This is why I consider the approach of Barabási (2002) pointing to the new science of networks highly controversial and problematic from a broader perspective.

In the case of the 'complex systems' that emerge naturally, the privileging of types of relation and the deviation realised by their imposition in order to 'obtain' a predictable and measurable coherence, they end up omitting the 'remainder' of the possibilities for manifestation and controlling the spontaneous generation of connections, which sooner or later leads to the artificially configured system becoming diseased.

In my opinion, this was Ioan Petru Culianu's mistake when he attempted, using the model of 'mind games', to find an algorithm for the generation of the maps of the human mind, presupposing that he could thereby discover the 'key to the universe', which would become

wholly predictable, controllable and measurable. This is to a certain extent also the claim of current science: to produce 'generally valid' knowledge of repeatable, measurable and therefore predictable phenomena.

Magic above all is what feeds on the manipulation and control of connections (which become predictable) and therefore on the employment and influencing of the production of 'connections' within the 'network' (which already presupposed, by a deviant interpretation, a certain principle of systemic ordering). Magic will employ knowledge of the production of causes and effects, substituting itself, in a deviant way, for the ultimate principle of the 'hierarchy'.

One initial prejudice (which has become a commonplace in research) is to talk about the centre or 'pinnacle' of the hierarchy as if it were a natural continuation or extension of the other levels. Graphic representation is what, to a degree, in our perception, has erroneously configured and perpetuated the 'sequentialist' and 'sequentializing' vision of the spatiotemporal separation of the levels. Thus, the 'pinnacle', the 'principle' of the hierarchy, is interpreted, setting out from graphic projections, as lying 'next to' the other registers, as their continuation and culminating point.

The centre or 'pinnacle' of the hierarchy, even if it is represented graphically within the same plane as the other levels, as the terminal point of an ascent and/or descent, is not in fact what has been represented, given that it absolutely eludes not only representations but also, above all, any placement in a series or concatenation.

Furthermore, through the renewing gaze of the One, each level becomes, in a fractal way, equivalent to the first and, in the final instance, the hierarchy will be completely 'reabsorbed' through this re-centring appropriate to the gaze that guides the religions in different ways.

The two 'loci' – the centre (where concentric representations are concerned) and the 'pinnacle' (where axial representations are concerned) – are the *portals* to the One in multiplicity, are the key to the hierarchy. In fact, the centre is not 'there', just as the final rung of the ladder is not 'at the top', given that they are not a circumscribed 'part' of the hierarchy. Paradoxically, the final rung, although it is not to be found at the level of the hierarchy, manifests itself in all the other rungs, establishing itself simultaneously through absolute difference and as a founding principle.

Consequently, the adequate connection with the One will bring with it this 'completeness', this perfection through union with all things, which has been described in religious languages as the experience of union or unity, and in academic language has been denoted using the term *unio mystica*.

I shall now provide a comic but nonetheless highly suggestive image to illustrate the *a-topia* and *a-chrony* of the centre and the pinnacle of the hierarchy: a well-known scene from a Tom and Jerry cartoon. Tom apparently dies and rides an escalator up to heaven, where we are shown another, similar world, but one that works according to different (spiritual, ethical, physical, etc.) principles.

If the worlds were spatially and/or temporally positioned as extensions of each other, it would mean that each level 'began' where the previous one 'ended' and 'continued' with the one immediately following it. But things are not like this: the levels of the hierarchy are not crossed sequentially, like an existing and therefore spatiotemporally locatable ladder. For this reason, the other worlds are only suggested by those who have reached them, have been allowed to travel or been guided through them and then returned to this world. The geography of those worlds is unknown, and the images of them, as many as exist, are symbolic, translating into mundane language that which is by its nature different.

In the passage referring to the ladder of Yaakov in the Hebrew Bible, for example, Elohim does not speak from the topmost rung of the ladder, but from *above* or *beyond* the ladder, an image suggested ambiguously by the Hebrew expression *'alav* (Genesis 28:13).

The *apophatic* approach, in all those religious traditions that employ this path, reveals precisely this difference in regime: the ultimate principle is not part of the hierarchy, but is present *through* each level. Otto (1977, p. 25) highlights particularly this aspect through his expressive formula *Ganz Andere* ('the wholly other'), appropriate mainly for the framework of the Abrahamic religions.

It results that the common modes of representing and understanding the hierarchy are deviated and deviant, leading to the possibility of the production and sequential existence of worlds, respectively identification with the final level as the ultimate principle or, according to the terminology employed in this study, with the One.

Conclusion

The critical investigation of the four key concepts in the study of religion – hierarchy, the sacred and the principle, and the movement of the soul – opens new registers of investigation for current research in the field of consciousness studies:

From the *methodological* point of view, the use, in the study of religion, of an artificial, jargonistic conceptual language runs the risk of imposing content, stereotypes and prejudices which, uprooted from the 'soil' of different traditions (analysed by resorting to the dynamic content and languages proper to them), will contaminate the discourse about the religious

phenomenon, producing deviated, sterile and 'objectless' interpretations. Correspondently, a phenomenology of mind should not reduce its research to intellectual, conceptualized theories or to merely 'objective' experiments. The study of consciousness needs to equally refer, in a critical scientific manner, to subjective experiences as genuinely expressed and interpreted in different frameworks, using different languages.

From the point of view of the *content*, with direct reference to the meanings of the four terms under analysis, I have tried to underline the importance of going back to the source texts in order to nuance and decipher meanings, showing that every interpreter and consequently ever researcher is indebted, through a creative hermeneutic, to employ concepts while preserving their dynamic, instrumentalizing them in order to make them permeable to multiple meanings, depending on the context of each particular interpretation, without harming rigour or methodological appropriateness thereby. The correspondences established in order to re-appraise the possible significances of consciousness reveal that, in the same manner, the term 'consciousness' has to remain open for its continuing and enriching re-fining and re-defining process. Since consciousness is not an 'object' to be researched as such, the different ways of approaching consciousness represent, in a reflexive manner, its very possibilities of being expressed and objectified.

Reinterpretation of the question of the divine hierarchies by translating the Europeanizing debate on the principle into terms of 'the One' may provide a methodological solution suited to bringing together the discourses proper to the different religious traditions in connection with the meanings and stakes of the religious phenomenon as a universally human phenomenon. Once this bridge established, the reorientation of the gaze toward mapping the mind is not only feasible, but inevitable, and hereafter the study of religion can bring its contribution to understanding consciousness.

Acknowledgements

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