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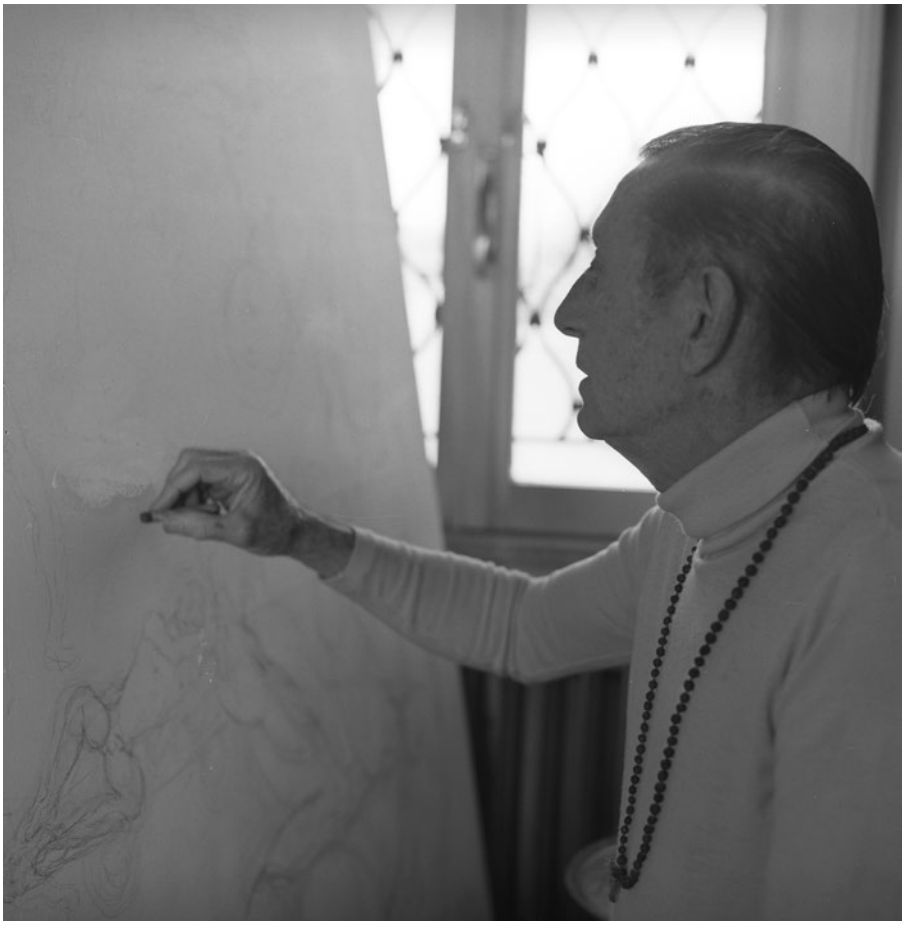
ALAIN DANIÉLOU: SACRIFICE AND COMPOSITION OF THE WHOLE

This essay was written for the second symposium on the question of Sacrifice organised by the India-Europe Foundation for New Dialogues (FIND) in collaboration with the Association Recherches Mimétiques (ARM) in September 2020. Adrián Navigante's reflection on Alain Daniélou's conception of sacrifice began in 2019 within the framework of the seminar "Perspectives on Sacrifice" at the Bibliothèque Nationale François Mitterrand (BNF) in Paris, France; it has later been deepened and amplified beyond the Indian context to include Greek antiquity and Daniélou's project of a 'return to paganism'. This English version of this essay (originally written in French) has been slightly modified for *Transcultural Dialogues*.



Alain Daniélou at the Labyrinth around 1979. Photo by Jacques Cloarec

Towards a diagonal of thought in the question of sacrifice

At the BNF symposium last year, I approached the question of sacrifice from Alain Daniélou's perspective. To this purpose, my presentation was based on a reconstruction of the principal aspects defining a reading of sacrifice in Hindu tradition, particularly the tension between a reception of the Brahminic tradition in which Daniélou was 're-educated' and a hermeneutic opening to Tantrism as a symptomatic deviation of Veda, that is, a revelation of certain repressed elements in the constitution of a mainstream culture. I now propose to consider Daniélou's conception of sacrifice as 'diagonal' to the central discussion line of this symposium, which is the dialogue between Roberto Calasso and René Girard on the question of sacrifice. This dialogue poses the central question: is sacrifice part of an inevitable economy of creation in which increasing awareness of its inevitability and even ascetic reactions are included, or does the anthropological difference, especially through the Christian message of Christ's passion, introduce the discontinuity of an inverted mimesis – reproducing 'love' instead of 'violence' – and the possibility of a radical change in that economy? This time I

do not intend to approach this question *from within the Indian tradition* (as I did at the BNF), but by considering the tension between 'paganism' and 'Christianity' (a subject that permeates the debate between Calasso and Girard) in the Hellenistic world, revealing a somewhat wider horizon – closely related to the thought of the later Alain Daniélou on ancient Europe – that allows us to reread this tension in the current context.

Regarding the debate on sacrifice between Roberto Calasso and René Girard on the TV programme *Océaniques* in 1990, one is greatly tempted to take Calasso as the defender of a mythical system – linked to the pagan notion of the 'sacred' – against the voice of the Christian difference raised by Girard. Although it is not wrong to do so, this type of reading risks over-simplifying a subject that deserves wider and deeper consideration. I will therefore attempt to present another view, through which it will become clear that the paganism defended by Calasso rests on a modern conception (one might say an *already-Christianised* perspective)[1], and that Girard's Christianity has a considerable value *if it is limited to a specific context as an internal critique of it*: the context of the European-Christian tradition.

In other words, I will not say – as Roberto Calasso said about René Girard at a conference held in 2009 at the Collège des Bernardins – that we are faced with one of the very rare church fathers of our time. I would rather say that Girard can be considered to have introduced a break with regard to that tradition. A book like *Achever Clausewitz* forces me to push my thought beyond the undeniable historical sympathies that may have inspired Calasso's theory. In fact, the Christian message of apologists as a 'call to conversion', with their visceral denunciation of paganism[2], is re-established and revivified in Girard's demystification of pagan violence – as a form of violence exercised over innocent victims – and revelation of its component mechanisms. Reading *Achever Clausewitz* attentively, I understand that the 'historical discontinuity' of this demystification – which introduces its 'eschatological link' – coincides with the irruption of the 'satanic' in human history. The discontinuity in question is not a mere replacement of 'violence' with 'love', but at the same time an overflowing of violence – also *in the name of love*. At this point, another perspective is required to balance the opposite poles – a reading based on what I would call (returning to Daniélou) the 'composition of the whole'.

Alain Daniélou's 'Return to Paganism'

In the history of ideas, it is well-known that so-called 'returns' (to a tradition or an author) are the result of a modification within a system of ideas according to criteria foreign to the context in question, highlighted by a singular appropriation from the past. If I were to mention three paradigmatic cases in French culture, the return to Marx carried out by Althusser, the return to Nietzsche undertaken by Foucault and the return to Freud elaborated by Lacan are not merely a *movement back to*, but the extraction of something not-seen and unthought-of that subverts the present and retroactively shapes the past. The same thing could be said, *cum grano salis*, of Daniélou's 'return to paganism', of which I shall present a succinct conceptual sequence by way of introduction: 1. There is no return to paganism without a religion of Nature (his criticism of monotheism)[3]; 2. There can be no religion of Nature without a change of perception and cognition of the real (his criticism of anthropocentrism and its related consequences)[4]; 3. There can be no re-evaluation of the real without *experience of the other*[5] resulting in a reconsideration of our own world-configuration (his criticism of globalism and egalitarianism)[6].

Sacrificial ceremony for Masto, an ancestral deity of the Khas people in Nepal. Source: Wikimedia Commons

This sequence shows that the 'return to paganism' to which Daniélou alludes is not some whimsical and purely individual project, but rather a significant detour from a process of cultural blindness. Such a return means classifying, ranking and distributing beings (human and non-human) without adopting the modern Western (Christian) assumption of a social order forged by humans (whose sphere of liberty can be ultimately traced back to God as Creator of the world) as opposed to the order of things (which would fall under the jurisdiction of necessity or of *natural* constraints). In this sense, the term 'Nature' is both appropriate and equivocal. Firstly, it tells us that Daniélou's thought points to a conception of immanence in which even religion must have its place, since the roots of religion are not cut off from 'manifestation' – that is, from shared, collected and distributed experience. Such 'open rooting' [*enracinement ouvert*] is contrary to the idea that Nature is an order of strict causality and necessity, or even of an objectifiable totality opposed to the social order[7]. Secondly, Daniélou resorts to a *(re-)sacralization* of Nature – which is why I have given that term a capital letter. Sacralizing means de-objectifying the sphere in question to make a terrain of encounters and mysteries out of it – without however turning it into the inscrutable non-place of savage mysticism.

Let us say that, for Daniélou, non-European cultures (not only that of India[8]) show us that we never coincide with the humankind we believe ourselves to be, and that the awareness of this asymmetry (or non-identity) is the antidote against falling into deviating or excessive forms of domination, pillage and destruction[9]. The equivocal aspect of the term can be summarized as follows: by writing 'Nature' in capital letters, one always retains the possibility of underlying the 'given' or the 'prime qualities' to the point of making an ontological paradigm of the mystery out of it. This also means transforming paganism into a mystical impulse to merge with the deepest secret of surrounding reality – something exclusively revealed to the

natives[10]. Although Daniélou's thought remains attached to an idea of 'the primordial' as one of the keys to understanding the notion of the sacred and its relationship with sacrifice, I wish to present something more complex – and I hope also interesting – for discussion. Daniélou does not expound the conceptual couple 'sacred-sacrifice' either to show the relationship between transgression of the law and divine continuity (as Georges Bataille does)[11], or to reveal a primitive ontology that binds us to the world of archetypes (like Mircea Eliade)[12], but to remind us of the active composition of the whole that India has maintained in an exemplary manner and which can also be found in other cultures. He thus inverts René Girard's understanding of the Christian paradox announced in *Achever Clausewitz*, which can be expressed in his own terms: we can all participate in Christ's divinity, so long as we renounce our violence (meaning, according to Girard, the sacrificial trickery of old); however, we now know that humans will not renounce it (meaning that this trickery of old has the type of cultural relevance that is lacking today)[13]. Daniélou's inversion of this paradox is totally different from the position of Georges Bataille, with whom Daniélou has sometimes been compared. For Bataille, the paradox of Christianity consists in the desire to rediscover the continuity of being – which necessarily requires a transgression linked to violence and death – in the downward spiral of ritual actions towards a total and definitive elimination of violence. In other words: for Bataille, the apostolic transfiguration of existence into love (starting from the total synthesis of violence *fully reversed and sublated* in the person of Christ) shifts the continuity of the being (excess of life without conscious distinction) towards the sphere of discontinuity (egoism, calculation, alienation). The immediate – and, for Bataille, absurd – consequence of this shift is to view the sacred in the profane and imagine an immortality of discontinuous beings, an immortality totally cut off from the violence of animal life-excess and re-located in pneumatic individualities[14].

Now, Daniélou appears to approach this problem differently. He compares Christ to Moses and Mohammed. He conceives the Christian message as an attempt at liberation from a dried-out, puritan and inhuman monotheism. Christ opposed the dominant religion of his time (that of the Roman Empire), as well as the collaborationism of the élites (Rabbinic Judaism). His teachings were addressed to the humble and marginal, the persecuted and the prostitutes[15]. Most important of all, however, his figure could not be severed from the pagan sources that had nourished it, particularly the Orphic mythology surrounding Dionysus[16] and the idea of a community that participates *otherwise* in the order of Creation[17]. What Daniélou calls 'the problem of Christianity'[18] mostly concerns *the history of Christ's message* – a logic of becoming coinciding with the distortion of his project: "Later Christianity is, in fact, diametrically opposed to it, with its religious imperialism, political role, wars, massacres, tortures, stakes, persecution of heretics [...] Christianity thus became an instrument of conquest and world domination, just as Buddhism had been for the Indian emperors. This kind of activity

Sacralizing means de-objectifying the sphere of Nature to make a terrain of encounters and mysteries out of it.

has lasted down to our own times, causing the elimination of autochthonous cults and gods in Europe and the Middle East. Later on, this same activity spread over the whole world, depriving the various peoples of their gods and therefore of their power and personality. It reduced them to a state of moral and ritual dependence"[19].

'Return' and 'detour': sacrifice, interdiction, integration

According to Daniélou, the history of Christianity is a distortion of Jesus's project. But what is the origin and what was the nature of his project? In *Shiva and Dionysus*, we find allusions that seem too speculative, obscure and sometimes even scanty, but which are not at all lacking in meaning. Allusions such as the relationship of the original Christian message with Orphism should be specially borne in mind, since this relationship best expresses Daniélou's position on what I have called, in the first part of this essay, 'the Christian paradox'. I quote Daniélou: "In the West, Orphism inserted itself into Dionysism and perverted it. Orphism was an adaptation of Dionysism to suit Greek taste and corresponds to certain forms of Shivaism which were incorporated into Aryan Hinduism [...] The influence of Jain thought can be felt"[20]. This means that, according to Daniélou, since the history of Christianity was a perversion of Jesus's initial plan, the initial plan itself was linked to a perversion of Dionysism (Orpheus's reform), in other words, to the ascetic and soteriological becoming of a cult that had originally integrated mankind with Nature in its entirety – as a composition of the whole. The comparison of Orphism and Jainism plays an important role, well beyond certain readings of Megasthenes that we can trace back in Daniélou[21], since Jainism, with its doctrine of salvation (instead of ecstasy), ethics (instead of rites) and asceticism (instead of Eros), is in Daniélou's eyes the opposite of Shaivism. Instead of integrating man with the other spheres of being (plants, animals, gods), it disengages and isolates him. One reason for this isolation is the rejection of blood sacrifice and whatever is connected with defilement. The same can be said of Orphism in comparison to the central elements of Dionysian religion (orgiastic, divine madness, *sparagmós*, homophagy).

Here we reach a central point: Which symbolic and ritual aspects of the Dionysian cult are emphasized by Daniélou? The phallus, the serpent and the bull[22]. I would say this is not arbitrary. If we consider, for example, the proselytist strategies of Clement of Alexandria in his *Protrepticus*, we find that he does manipulate the value of these symbols, already when he uses the Biblical perspective to interpret pagan elements. According to Clement, the phallus is no longer the power of life, but the sexual organ[23]. The serpent is no longer doubly connected to the idea of fecundity (as regenerator of the earth) and to funeral rites (as the protector of tombs)[24], but is uniquely attached to evil. The word 'mystery' is reduced – by forced etymology – to *mysos* (defilement)[25] to underline that the birth and death of Dionysus are impure. But the question doesn't stop there: far from it. This is the point at which it really becomes interesting. We realise that the impurity of the god's birth[26] has a function in the apologist's anti-pagan plan (to set Dionysus-Orpheus against Christ), but the impurity of the god's being put to death proves pertinent in a further relation between the Orphic Dionysus and Christ[27]. This relationship proves to be significant for the problem of sacrifice, since the *Protrepticus* shows the trace of a new religion starting from an almost imperceptible inversion which, at the same time, makes an essential difference. This inversion is carried out by mentioning Dionysus's death at the hands of the Titans, an episode termed 'midway' between the *sparagmós* (dismember-

ment of living animals, linked to maenadism) and ritualised sacrifice (cutting of the flesh and placing it on the fire). Although the Titans use knife, fire, tripod and pot to cook their victim (alluding to the instance of cooking in the conventional sacrifice), first they boil him, then roast him[28], instead of following the cooking-roasting sequence – which was the rule for any ritual murder since Homer[29]. This perversion of the culinary ritual may be read, not only as a criticism of ritual impiety, but as a proclamation of a much more radical detour: *any* sacrificial putting to death (whether formalized or not) would henceforth be considered a crime[30]. This latter aspect clearly shows that Orphism involves a purification of the religion of Dionysus as a religion of Nature (with an ontological permeability between animals, humans and gods) and, at the same time, a revolution in customs – since the codes of ritual and ethical prescriptions of Orphism insist on a maxim that Calasso summarises in his filmed debate with Girard as follows: *apéchesthai tou phónou* (abstain from killing)[31]. Some passages from Eratosthenes of Cyrene or Conon the mythographer[32] confirm this change of paradigm: the allusion of replacing Dionysus with Apollo, or of forgetting to praise Dionysus when Orpheus, during his descent to Hades, celebrates the race of gods.

Let us return now to Alain Daniélou to clear up one central point: if Christianity was to

Roman Statue of Dionysus (between 117 – 138 CE). Museo Nazionale Romano, Palazzo Massimo. Source: Wikimedia Commons

Roman Orpheus Taming Wild Animals. Roman marble mosaic. Eastern Roman Empire, near Edessa. Source: Dallas Museum of Art

become a distortion of Christ's plan, can we say that Daniélou saw the possibility of including Christ's plan – detached from its distortion – in the programme of a 'return to paganism'? He seems to have considered the matter, but his response is negative. For Daniélou, the figure of Christ is inscribed in a pre-Christian context considerably distant from Jerusalem: a Christ relating to the Orphic Dionysus. In other words, Jesus, just like Orpheus, had the power of attracting beings (not only humans, but also non-humans)[33] to him in order to reintegrate them into a composition of the whole. Daniélou views this centripetal motion as a work of immanence connected to the idea of wisdom – quite contrary to an institutionalised state religion cut off from Life, whose values are no longer capable of integrating a collective body in a world configuration without recourse to a dogmatic abstraction or an oppressive fanaticism. But the fact that Orphism turned away from the religion of Nature (that of Dionysus) through its spiritualist reform is less an 'anthropological revolution' (as Girard says of Christianity) than a distancing from the most important human question: the question *of relations* or, more precisely, *the question of (re-) integration of man with the totality of Creation.* For Daniélou, the rejection of rites, myths, and sacrifice (as instances of regeneration and distribution of energy in the order of manifestation)[34] means entertaining the illusion that

human beings, isolated from their sphere of relations (not only inter-human), can reshape and run the world in the best possible way. This detachment of the whole starts with the conception of Nature connected to savagery, to pure instinct, and to the image of a primitive barbarian who must be socialised to enter the human sphere and become the recipient of the 'dignity principle'. In Hellenistic culture, such 'barbarianism' and such 'primitivism' are attributed to man prior to Orpheus[35]. Daniélou's wager, clearly announced, but feebly articulated in his work owing to contextual limitations, is to reveal the background of this 'otherness' beyond the commonplaces of cultural homogenisation.

A note on the 'archaic-satanic' split

In *Achever Clausewitz*, Girard declares, "We are now in a period when anthropology will be a more relevant tool than political science"[36]. I would say that this prophecy is fulfilled, but not in the way that Girard means. In his opinion, Christ's message is an anthropological revolution that reveals what was hidden in *all* the ancient myths: the innocence of the sacrificial victim. The content of pagan myth and Christian truth is in the end the same, but their hermeneutic orientation is quite the opposite. The paradox I mentioned at the outset of this presentation arises from the observation that Christ revealed an anthropological truth that has no historical incarnation, since "we [humans] are incapable of accepting it"[37]. It can be said that, from Girard's point of view, Christian knowledge is simultaneously knowledge of the archaic (which, as motor of the 'sacred', neutralises it) and of itself (since it comprises a message of profound transformation of human desire). The revealed truth of Christ, however, *pierces its way through that knowledge*, and the historical effects of the gap between the Christian event and the knowledge of it prove to be both tragic and parodic. Although the apologists satanized the archaic sacred (as we saw in the case of Clement of Alexandria), history shows that in reality the satanic is actually the immediate consequence of the elimination of the archaic sacred. This is why one may think differently from Calasso when he says that Girard is the last church father. Actually, Girard has shown – faithful, as he claims, to the truth of Christ – the snare of (ecclesiastical) knowledge that coincides with the truth (of Christ). It is unnecessary to quote pagan sources to clarify this point, since it is clearly expounded in a crucial scene in Mark's Gospel (8, 31-32) in which Jesus announces his Passion. He says to his disciples that the Son of Man must greatly suffer (*pollà patheîn*), be rejected, killed, and three days later rise again (*anastênai*). Peter cannot *comprehend* this revelation. He takes Jesus aside and reprimands him. Jesus reacts in the same manner: he reprimands him saying, "Go away from me, Satan". The verb used for both Peter's and Jesus's action is the same: *epitimân* ('rebuke', 'reprimand', 'threaten'), a verb employed by Jesus when he casts out demons[38]. The clash in this passage is radical: Jesus "speaks his word freely" (*parrêsíą tòn lógon elálei*), whereas Peter, drawing him

For Daniélou, the rejection of rites, myths, and sacrifice means entertaining the illusion that human beings, isolated from their sphere of relations, can reshape and run the world in the best possible way.

towards himself (*proslabómenos*), seeks to trap him in his narrow and pusillanimous point of view[39]. His inability to conceive of the Passion makes him the *adversary of the Logos*[40].

What Girard's Christianity reveals, contrary to what one may think, is the constituent difference between Christ's message and its implementation in history. I would say that the Christian revelation is a singular anthropological event, and knowledge will never be able to make up for its effects with the moral certitude postulated by its apologists, since this knowledge is too narrow. It reveals nothing beyond its own effects. On the contrary, it conceals a whole dimension to which Daniélou, with his 'return to paganism', wished to return concisely, starting from his experience in India and his later conceptions concerning the religious amalgam he termed 'Shiva-Dionysus'. He sought, I feel, a wider humanism, de-centred in relation to its own history of effects. In this sense, retracing the steps of mankind does not mean going back to the primitive, but revealing the complexity of human relations with otherness – not only in the sense of other humans, but also in the sense of 'other than humans', that is, plants, animals and gods. Such vision of the whole would make it possible to move on from observing the tragic to working on integration, from the radicalness of the beginning to the overall composition, from isolated singularity to articulated plurality, from a criterion of truth to a work of compossibility.

Calasso speaks of the superstition of modern society, and he's partly right: modern man *believes* that 'Nature' no longer exists (as a place outside society), and for that reason he is invaded by a sacred that he has no tools to master. At the same time, Calasso takes a position that seems united with the idea of human progress (related to 'high' culture), a paradigm that reduces 'Nature' to a sphere of obscure and uncontrollable powers, to a "domain abandoned to the arbitrary"[41], irremediably shielded from the law – as though it didn't include societies – outside Western culture and all the parallels traced by homology with it – that can teach us the relativity of our convictions. The irruption of global configuration with rules and behaviour that are contrary to our most rooted convictions suffices to envisage the historical *chiaroscuro* that surrounds them. It is precisely the domain largely criticised by Calasso, the *new anthropology*[42], which – in my opinion – provides a very clear sign of a possible opening towards the other – an opening that, with all its risks, should question the certainties of our heritage and unveil its blind spots. So much still has to be done, and it is not a matter of taking sides for a phantasmatic exteriority, but rather to take a step forward in the task of widening our horizon of experience with self-criticism and a good dose of anti-dogmatic spirit.

By way of conclusion, I would like to quote Philippe Descola, whose following reflection summarizes my purpose: "anthropology shows us that what appeared eternal, the present time in which we are currently locked down, is quite simply one way, among thousands of others that have been described, of living our human condition"[43]. •

1 I share Gianni Vattimo's view on the continuity between the Christian work of desacralization of Nature and the modern secularization process so characteristic of the West (cf. René Girard, Gianni Vattimo: Christianisme et modernité, Paris 2014, p. 33). This does not mean that the two phenomena are identical, but rather that the religious constraints linked to ancient cults and ritual practices eliminated by Christianity form the basis of the rational expulsion of the 'archaic religious' to which Girard refers (cf. *Ibidem*, p. 12). When Calasso subscribes to the Hölderlinian dichotomy between 'Oriental ardour' and 'Western sobriety' as well as to the need for aesthetic distance in relation to the gods and the introduction of a consciousness-gap (out of which is grounded the rational path of negation), it becomes clear that the archaic idea of the sacred is determined by the view that has subordinated it to the well-founded ratio (cf. Roberto Calasso : *La littérature et les dieux*, Paris 2001, pp. 49-51).

2 In this respect, cf. Jean Daniélou: *Message évangélique et culture hellénistique*, Tournai 1961, p. 19. Justin's example concerning the prejudices (*pseudodoxíai*) and ignorance (*agnosíai*) of pagans, also given by Jean Daniélou, illustrates this intention very clearly. It also reveals the double nature of Christian criticism: criticism of myths and criticism of pagan philosophy which deems itself discontinuous with regard to myth – but never manages to disentangle itself from the mythical matrix.

3 "It is only through the multiplicity of approaches that we can draw a sort of outline of what transcendent reality may be. The multiple manifested entities that underlie existing forms are within the reach of our understanding. Any conception we may have of something beyond will be a mental projection" (Alain Daniélou : *The Myths and Gods of India*, Rochester: Vermont 1991, p. 5).

4 The main consequence of anthropocentrism is the idea of an 'objective nature', that is, a nature separated from and indifferent to the activity of the human spirit. Against this dualism, Alain Daniélou proposes an interdependence principle of all beings: "All the elements which constitute the world are interdependent [...] The mineral, vegetable, animal and human worlds, as well as the subtle world of spirits and gods exist through and for each other" (Alain Daniélou: *Shiva and Dionysus*, New York 1984, p. 11).

5 This 'experience of the other', in the way Daniélou understands it, also implies a lengthy immersion in another culture to the point of reaching a true deconstruction of the interaction established between the inherited collective perspective (pole of identity) and reality itself (ethnocentric reduction).

6 "All people are supposed to be equal but only according to the model of the average, pseudo-Christian European. No one thinks of being equal to the Pygmies, the Santals of India, or the Amazonian tribes" [...] Most of the problems of today are a result of monotheistic ideologies taught by prophets who believe themselves to be inspired and claim to know the truth. This is obviously absurd, for there can be no single, absolute truth. The reality of the world is multiple and elusive" (Alain Daniélou: *The Way to the Labyrinth*, New York 1987, pp. 318 and 329).

7 In this connection, cf. Philippe Descola: Constructing Natures. Symbolic Ecology and Social Practice, in: Philippe Descola and Gisli Parsson (ed.): *Nature and Society. Anthropological Perspectives*, London 1996.

8 The consideration of the multi-ethnic and pluri-religious composition of India that Daniélou maintains distinguishes his approach from the Hinduism of the 'Indo-European' project, which determined any reflection on India during the 19th and early 20th centuries.

9 The persecution of pagans and heretics in the Middle Ages, the slave trade (Christian and Muslim) in Africa, the conquest of America and the colonisation of Australia are clear examples of 'mankind' seeing in the other merely a deforming mirror of itself.

10 For a critique of abstract dualism between Western objectivity (here: alienation) and native wisdom, cf. Bruno Latour: *Politiques de la nature*, Paris 2004, pp. 62-63.

11 Georges Bataille: L'érotisme, in: *Œuvres Complètes* X, pp. 7-270, quotation p. 88.

12 On the relationship between primitive peoples and supernatural realities, cf. Mircea Eliade: *Aspects du mythe*, Paris 1963, pp. 22-26.

Cf. the relationship between total hermeneutics and the transition to the transhistorical, amongst others in *La nostalgie des origines*, Paris 1971, pp. 102-105.

13 Cf. René Girard: *Achever Clausewitz*, Paris 2007, p. 20.

14 Cf. Georges Bataille, *L'érotisme*, in: *Oeuvres complètes* X, pp. 118-120. We should recall that, for Bataille, animality, as a sphere of immanence on this side of any subject-object differentiation, is the inner limit to which the human condition experiences the ambiguous sentiment of the sacred (cf. Georges Bataille: *Théorie de la Religion*, in: *Oeuvres complètes* VII, pp. 281-361, quotation p. 302).

15 Cf. Alain Daniélou: *Shiva and Dionysus*, p. 229.

16 With the central motifs that accompany it: new message, power to heal, passion, death, descent to the underworld and resurrection.

17 Cf. Alain Daniélou: *Shiva and Dionysus*, p. 229.

18 One of the subtitles in *Shiva and Dionysus*, p. 229.

19 Alain Daniélou: *Shiva and Dionysus*, pp. 230-231.

20 Alain Daniélou: *Shiva and Dionysos*, p. 225. Translation from the French slightly modified.

21 Daniélou refers to Megasthenes, who visited India around the beginning of the 3rd century BCE, to establish a parallel between the retinue of Dionysus and that of Shiva (cf. *Shiva and Dionysus*, p. 206). According to Megasthenes, there were contacts between Alexander and the Jain sages – whom he termed *gymnosophists* (cf. Jean W. Sedlar: *India and the Greek World. A Study in the Transmission of Culture*, Totowa 1980, pp. 68-69).

22 There are more in *Shiva and Dionysus*, but the other elements can largely be subsumed by those mentioned in my list: the phallus is symbol of the power of creation and inexhaustible energy (cf. the satyrs and the extension of the 'divine' to the human and animal sphere); the bull is the zoomorphic form (with which the other animals mentioned by Daniélou are closely linked: leopard, lion, panther; the serpent is a subterranean form (land and water), which has links with the animal and vegetal worlds. When Daniélou speaks of sacred plants, he also refers to the sacrificial function of *soma*, which may be compared to the notion of *pharmakós* (in the sense of 'remedy' and 'poison'), a term linked to theophagy (ingesting the deity). It is not by chance that the caduceus of Asclepios is entwined with a serpent.

23 The affirmation of the vital power associated with the phallus in Daniélou reaches metaphysical dimensions, contrasting with the notion of desire, which reduces this force to its aspect of lack, limitation and finitude (cf. Alain Daniélou: *The Phallus, Inner Traditions* 1995, pp. 16-18).

24 In this connection, cf. Erich Küster: *Die Schlange in der griechischen Kunst und Religion*, Giessen 1913, pp. 68, 138 and 149).

25 Cf. *Protrepticus*, § II.13.1.

26 Zeus's incest with Persephone, which produces a son (Dionysus) in the form of a bull (cf. *Protrepticus*, § II.16.1).

27 This aspect is unclear in Clement who wishes to make a radical contrast between Orpheus (the *sophistés* as a skilful artist and charlatan) and Christ (the truth of the incarnate *lógos*), but it becomes a strategy used by later apologists, such as Eusebius of Caesarea, whose *Praises of Constantine* and *Speech for the Thirty Years of Reign* no longer show a rejection, but rather an acceptation of the pagan heritage for apologetic purposes.

28 Clement of Alexandria alludes to this sequence (cf. Protrepticus § 18.1., particularly the use of adverbs *próteron… épeita*).

29 Thus a double ontological spread is assured: the smoke for the gods (distinction between divine and human) and the cooked meat for humans (distinction between human and animal). The lexical distinctions between *pyrouména* (things grilled), *phôzómena* (things roasted) and *ômá* (things raw), from Hippocrates to Plutarch, are central to the way in which the Greeks treated not only the distribution of beings, but the defining of culturally valid parameters concerning the problem of 'same' and 'other'.

30 Cf. Marcel Détienne: *Dionysos mis à mort*, Paris 1977, pp. 173-174.

31 Calasso alludes to Aristophanes: *The Frogs* 1032 sq., where the precise phrase is *apéxesthai phonôn* which is cloasely connected to the *apéxesthai brôtôn thnêseidiôn kreôn* of Diogenes Laërtius VIII, 33 (apud Otto Kern: *Orphicorum fragmenta*, Berlin 1932, p. 62. Cf. also Erwin Rohde: "Nahrung von getödten Thieren", *Psyche. Seelenkult und Unsterblichkeitsglaube der Griechen*, Band II, Tübingen 1921, p. 125, Fußnote 3).

32 Apud Otto Kern: *Orphicorum fragmenta*, pp. 33-34.

33 In this connection, cf. Clement of Alexandria: *Protrepticus*, I.1.1.

34 "… no being can exist except by devouring other forms of life, whether vegetable or animal, and this is one of the fundamental aspects of created nature. Life in the world, both animal and human, is nothing but an interminable slaughter. To exist means to eat and to be eaten" (Alain Daniélou: *Shiva and Dionysus*, p. 164, cf. *Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad* 1.4.10. *Etāvad vā idaṁ sarvam annaṁ caivānnādaśca* [this whole universe is but food and eater]; *yathā ha vai bahavaḥ paśavo manuṣyam bhuñjyuḥ, evam ekaikaḥ puruṣo devān bhunakti* [just as numerous animals are at man's service, just so each man is at the gods' service]). These lines can only be understood in relation to their conception of Vedic sacrifice – including the most shocking and extravagant aspects of the *puruṣamedha* and the *aśvamedha* – on which I have attempted to cast light in my paper at the BNF, through the exercise of reversion by taking Daniélou's interpretation of the myth of Satī's dismemberment in the *Kālikā Purāṇa*. Cf. René Girard's conference in Paris titled *Le sacrifice dans l'Inde védique* (available in audio-visual format), in which he interprets the sacrifice of the 'macanthrope' Puruṣa in *Ṛgveda* 90.10. (perhaps the phrase *puruṣam vyadadhuḥ* in *Ṛgveda* 90.10.11.?) as a dismemberment: www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIxRSKg9Rgc

35 Horace, in his *Ars Poetica* (vv. 391-393) and Themistios in his *Orationes* (XXX 349 b) provide two clear examples presenting the clash between the domination of the horde of instincts in the man of the forest and the civilising role of Orpheus that puts an end to the hell of primitivism.

36 René Girard: *Achever Clausewitz*, p. 27.

37 René Girard: *Achever Clausewitz*, p. 17.

38 Cf. Mark 1, 25 and 9, 25.

39 Cf. the highly lucid observation of Benoît Chantre: "Each acts only for his own survival, and that is hell" (*Les derniers jours de René Girard*, Paris 2016, p. 78) which, in my opinion, makes his second definition pointless: "Hell is the kingdom of a violence whose mechanism we must understand" (*Ibidem*, p. 157).

40 This adversary (Peter-Satan) matches the eschatological link of the Christian *anthropos*. In this connection, cf. Johann B. Metz: "'Satan', said Jesus to Peter and ruthlessly marked the awkwardness and ineradicability of lurking misunderstanding" […] "People's thoughts, not actually immodest, arrogant, contemptible thoughts, but quite simply the obvious thoughts of people" (Messianische Geschichte als Leidensgeschichte, in: Johann B. Metz, Jürgen Moltmann: *Leidensgeschichte: Zwei Meditationen zu Markus* 8, 31-38, Freiburg/Basel/Wien, 1974, pp. 37-58, quotation pp. 41-42).

41 Roberto Calasso: *La rovina di Kasch*, Milano 1983, p. 189.

42 I refer to the 'ontological turning point in anthropology', whose main works (Philippe Descola, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, Bruno Latour, Tim Ingold, et al) provide an articulated answer to Calasso's objections. Frédéric Keck, Ursula Regehr and Saskia Walentowitz summarise the novelty of this turning point in the following terms: "The ontological turning point is a new way of posing the problem that lies at the heart of modern anthropology. Can we take seriously such paradoxical statements as "The Bororos are Ararás […], 'the jumeux are birds' […] or 'powder is power' […]? An ontological approach to these statements refuses to attribute them to irrational beliefs, to linguistic metaphors, or to mental totalities, to pose the multiple realities of which they should be the expression" (Frédéric Keck, Ursula Regehr, Saskia Walentowitz: Anthropologie. Le tournant ontologique en action, in: Tsantsa 20/2015: *L'anthropologie et le tournant ontologique – Anthropologie und die ontologische Wende*, pp. 4-9, citation p. 4).

43 Philippe Descola: *Diversité des natures, diversité des cultures*, Montrouge 2010, p. 38.

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VEDIC SCIENCES AND OUR CHANGING PERSPECTIVE TOWARDS THE VEDAS

In the Brahmanic tradition, *Vaidika Vijñāna* (knowledge of the Veda) has been exercised to preserve the wisdom contained in the Vedic corpus. The modern interpretation of it by Indian scholars has transformed this concept into a "Vedic science" aimed at reading the whole development of Western modern science into the Vedic corpus. Anand Mishra traces this transformation back to Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī and the roots of Hindu Nationalism and shows the pitfalls of that enterprise through Svāmī Karpātrī's critique of Dayānanda Sarasvatī. The essay poses the question of tradition, its preservation and the conflict-laden dynamics of change and legitimation also in dealing with modern culture and the universalist project of Western science.

This essay is an English version of a talk given by the author in Hindi in the "Lecture series on Vedic Science" (*Veda-vijñāna-vyākhyānamāla*) organised by Sampurnanand Sanskrit University, Varanasi on 24th December 2020.

Brahmin reading an ancient text on the terrace of Rewa Kothi in Benares. Photo by Alain Daniélou

Vaidika-vijñāna and 'Vedic science'

Vaidika-vijñāna — the term used for Vedic Sciences - would normally mean knowledge (*jñāna*) or special understanding of the content of the Vedas and the Vedic literature. By the term Veda, one understands primarily the four collections — *Ṛgveda*, *Sāmaveda*, *Yajurveda* and *Atharvaveda*. Vedic literature primarily consists of the texts belonging to the six ancillary disciplines associated with the Vedas, namely — *Śikṣā* (phonetics), *Chandas* (prosody), *Nirukta* (etymology), *Vyākaraṇa* (grammar), *Kalpa* (instructions on ritual practices) and *Jyotiṣa* (astronomy). It also includes such branches of knowledge as *Āyurveda* (medicine), *Dhanurveda* (archery), etc. One can say that a large part of Indian scholarly effort, since several centuries before the Common Era, has been a continuous and continuing effort to understand the knowledge and wisdom contained in the Vedic literature. These efforts are also generally directed towards preserving their content. Thus, the great grammarian Patañjali (II century BCE) instructs "Grammar should be studied for the purpose of preserving the Vedas."[1]

Feelings of responsibility towards preserving the meaning of the Vedas, and anxiety that they might become meaningless and purposeless are so strong that Śabarasvāmin (III century CE) is even ready to turn down the injunctions of the tradition! At the very beginning of his commentary on the *Mīmāṃsā-sūtras* of Jaimini (III century BCE), he reacts to the charge put forward by his opponent that:

"They (i.e. the elders) recite the following — 'after having learned the proper recitation of the Veda, the student should take the bath'.[2] Here, a student taking a bath and at the same time desiring to know the Dharma (and hence prolonging his status as a celibate) would override the above injunction (to take a bath, marry and enter into the next stage of life). And one must not override an injunction."[3]

To this objection by his opponent that on the basis of the above injunction one should rather finish study of the Vedas, which consists of their proper recitation only, and immediately enter into the next stage of life as a householder – leaving aside the desire to know the meaning and the purpose of the Vedas, the answer of the Ācārya Śabarasvāmin is clear:

"We will override this injunction! If we do not override this injunction, then we will be rendering the meaningful and purposeful Veda meaningless and purposeless."[4]

One can therefore consider *Vaidika-vijñāna* to be the knowledge or sciences developed to preserve the Vedas, such as the six ancillary disciplines of phonetics, prosody, etymology, grammar, ritual sciences and astronomy, as also to ascertain the meaning and purpose of the Vedas such as the *Mīmāṃsā*, or the science of interpretation, etc.

Vaidika-vijāna or 'Vedic Sciences' is, however, a phrase used nowadays to convey very different ideas. According to intellectuals who use this phrase frequently, it is meant to express the following aspects:

1. The principles and knowledge of modern science are also present in the Vedas, though in a coded and cryptic manner. Contemporary scientists and Veda-scholars (especially from India) should make concerted efforts to recognise, decipher and discover modern scientific knowledge in the Vedic literature.

2. Since the Vedas are an infinite source of knowledge, therefore, the discoveries and truths thus far undiscovered by modern scientists can also be distilled from the Vedic corpus.

3. One reason for this is also that in comparison with the modern sciences, the vision of the Vedas is more comprehensive. Here, not only the physical world, but also the realm of consciousness as well as the spiritual world are taken care of.

The above way of looking the Vedas as the repository of modern scientific knowledge is followed by several prime institutions of learning in India. Thus, the Banaras Hindu University has recently established a major Centre for Vedic Science (*Vaidika Vijñāna Kendra*). The School of Sanskrit and Indic Studies at the Jawahar Lal University, New Delhi, has organised several conferences and talks on this subject. Prof. Girish Nath Jha and other scholars of the same institution have also brought out an edited volume titled *Veda As Global Heritage. Scientific Perspectives*, recording the proceedings of the International Veda Conference held there in 2016.[5]

Instead of multiplying the number of examples, it would be pertinent to take a brief look at a few examples by some of the most influential and prominent exponents of this approach. Foremost among them is Prof. Subhash Kak, who teaches Computer Science at the Oklahoma State University, USA. In his book *The Astronomical Code of the Ṛgveda*, Subhash Kak attempts to show that the organisation of

Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī, founder of the reformist movement Ārya Samāja.
Source: Wikimedia commons

the hymns of the *Ṛgveda* within the divisions *Sūkta* and *Maṇḍala*, etc. is based on the secrets of astronomy.[6] The way these hymns are collected and organised tells us about the truths of astronomy, e.g. the course of the planets or distances of the Sun or Moon from the Earth, etc. The seers who saw the Mantras or the *Ācāryas* who collected them in this manner were aware of these secrets. There are many such scientific facts and truths encoded in the Vedas that can be discovered by realising the essence of Vedic thinking. Similarly, Dr. Raja Ram Mohan Roy (not to be confused with the famous thinker of the XIX century) who holds a Ph.D. in Materials Science and Engineering from The Ohio State University, USA, enounces similar ideas of recognising the truths of Particle Physics in the *Ṛgveda* in his book *Vedic Physics: Scientific Origin of Hinduism*.[7]

Authors like Subhash Kak and Raja Ram Mohan Roy present the view that according to the Vedas, the inner world of consciousness and spirituality is connected with the outer physical and material world. He affirms that the inner sight, full of consciousness and spirituality, can discover the truths of the outer

world and material sciences in a much more comprehensive manner than the methods of modern sciences. This point of view is also put forward forcefully by Dr. David Frawley, also known as Paṇḍita Vāmadeva Śāstrī, the founder of the American Institute of Vedic Studies in the USA.

Criticism of Vedic science

There has been widespread criticism of the ideas and propositions put forward by writers such as Subhash Kak et alii. Several reputed indologists have pointed out the indiscrepancies and lack of acceptable sources, as well as methodological shortcomings in their writings. For example, the renowned indologist Dr. M. A. Mehandale from the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, Pune, questions the basis of the calculations produced by Subhash Kak in his book *The Astronomical Code of the Ṛgveda* by pointing out that the present arrangement of the hymns of the *Ṛgveda* cannot be the same as in the original collection, which follows the principle of arranging the hymns in descending number of stanzas.[8] But strong opposition to the approach of Subhash Kak et alii is formulated by Meera Nanda in her several publications, especially in her book *Prophets facing Backward: Postmodern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India*.[9] In this book she contends that the movement for *Vedic Sciences* is not just ignorance and apathy regarding scientific enquiry, but is rather an active instrument to establish the ideology of *Hindutva* in India. This ideology supports the inhuman and divisive caste-based social system and promotes faith in unscientific ancient Indian knowledge systems and it stifles the establishment of an egalitarian, humanistic order based on rational and scientific thinking. In her opinion, this ideology gets its intellectual nourishment from the writings of Neo-Hinduism thinkers like Svāmī Vivekānanda and Sri Aurobindo on the one hand, who promoted and supported the idea that ancient Indian thought is also relevant for modern times, and on the other hand intellectual movements sprouting under the umbrella of postmodernism over the last few decades. Meera Nanda is opposed, not only to the ideas and approaches of Vedic Sciences, but even more so to those supporting post-modern intellectual theories and programmes that promote local, traditional and even non-scientific approaches. In her opinion, thinkers like Thomas Kuhn with his theory of paradigm shifts in the history of science, or Paul Feyerabend professing epistemological anarchism have provided a sort of 'epistemic charity' on the basis of which such mindless ideas as Vedic Sciences may end up propagating ideological trends like that of *Hindutva*.

Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī's approach towards the Vedas and Svāmī Karapātrī's refutation

The inclination to see the Veda as the repository of the discoveries of modern science and technology is not limited solely to some contemporary individuals like Subhash Kak or Raja Ram Mohan Roy, who live in the USA or Canada but have their roots in India and work mostly in areas of modern science. Svāmī Dayānanda Sarasvatī (1824-1883), the founder of *Ārya-Samaj*, started interpreting the Vedas in this manner. Dayānanda's perspective regarding the Vedas becomes clear in reading his important work *Ṛgvedādi-Bhāṣya-Bhūmikā* (ṚgBh) or *Introduction to the Commentary on Ṛgveda* etc.[10] According to the editorial foreword of the revised edition, this text was composed by Dayānanda in the years 1876-1878, and its first part was first published in the year 1877 by the Lazarus Press in Varanasi. Dayānanda wrote this introduction before composing his commentary *Satyārtha-Prakāśa* on the Vedas in order to provide the necessary

One can consider Vaidika-vijñāna to be the knowledge or sciences developed to preserve the Vedas, such as the six ancillary disciplines of phonetics, prosody, etymology, grammar, ritual sciences and astronomy.

information about his view of the purposes of writing a new commentary. This introduction by Dayānanda is therefore an important document on his standpoint regarding the Vedas, put forward in his own words.

In the section regarding the subject matter dealt with in the Vedas, Dayānanda states:

"Now the deliberation on the subject matter of the Veda. In this context, there are four subject matters dealt with in the Veda — on the basis of the four parts, namely *vijñāna* (science, scientific usage), *karma* (rituals for the welfare of everyone), *upāsanā* (worship) and *jñāna* (knowledge). Among these, the first one, i.e. the subject matter of *vijñāna* (science, scientific usage) is the primary. As it relates to the direct understanding of all the objects beginning from the highest lord down to the smallest blade of grass."[11]

According to the revised Hindi translation explaining the above passage by Paṇḍita Yudhiṣṭhira Mīmāṃsaka:

" '*Vijñāna*' means knowing the real meaning or purpose of all the objects. '*Vijñāna*' is said to be that which facilitates appropriate application of the three, i.e. *karma*, *upāsanā* and *jñāna*, and the direct understanding of all the objects beginning from the highest lord down to the smallest blade of grass, to use them in an appropriate manner. Therefore, this subject matter is the principal among these four."[12]

In the same book, Dayānanda attempts to show the roots of the knowledge about the telephone, telegraph ("*Tāravidyāyā mūlam*" p. 234-236), ships and aeroplanes, etc. ("*Nau vimānādi-vidyā-viṣayaḥ*" p. 223-233). Thus, Dayānanda attempts to show the 'true meaning' or *satyārtha* of the Vedas. He interprets the utterances of the Veda in accordance with the discoveries and theories of modern sciences (of his time), considering the Vedas to be their source and regarding them to enjoin their application in this manner.

He explains the second subject matter of the Veda, namely its application or *karma*, also in a particular way. He writes:

"Of that (i.e. *karma*) as well, there are two types — one is for the attainment of the highest human goal, namely which unfolds to facilitate only liberation by the knowledge of praising the lord, prayer, worship, following the (divine) commands and the performance of rightful duties. The other is that which combines material possession and desire with rightful duties for the fulfilment of worldly affairs."[13]

It is important to note that Dayānanda professes to perform the traditional *śrauta* rituals and sacrifices like *agnihotra* and *aśvamedha* in a modified manner with different material offerings and sets down different kinds of results accruing from their performance.

"In all the (*śrauta*) rituals beginning with *agnihotra* up to the *aśvamedha*, offerings of properly prepared and refined materials with qualities of fragrance, sweetness, nourishment and remedial for diseases are offered in the fire, for the sake of purifying the air and rain-water, and through this ritual the entire world gets happiness. And what is enjoined for eating, housing, travel, arts, handicrafts, technologies and for the purpose of establishing social order, from this mainly personal happiness results."[14]

In short, according to Dayānanda, *Śrauta* or Vedic rituals and common righteous worldly efforts are on par, both bringing happiness. The difference between common worldly activities and Vedic rituals is that, while the former are capable of bringing happiness primarily to one who undertakes them, the latter, especially offerings of four types of material, namely fragrant, sweet, nourishing and remedial herbs, bring happiness to all by purifying the air, rain-water and the environment.

This brief exposition of the ideas put forward by Dayānanda regarding science in the Vedas and the nature of Vedic rituals makes it clear that publications by authors such as Subhash Kak on Vedic Sciences and many conferences and talks in educational institutions in India nowadays follow this view of Dayānanda. This is equally true for many talks of the type 'The effect of Vedic rituals on our environment', etc.

In a way, the process of rendering the Vedas scientific is also the process that renders them materialistic. The strong opposition by traditional Vedic scholars which Dayānanda faced during his lifetime is well known. Even afterwards the debate continued between traditional Vedic scholars following the *Sanātana-paramparā* and scholars following the *Ārya-Samāj*. One of the questions of this heated debate was whether modern science is in the Vedas or not. Paṇḍita Yudhiṣṭhira Mīmāṃsaka, a versatile scholar of grammar and *Mīmāṃsā* and follower of Svāmī Dayānanda, writes on page 77 of the first volume of his book *Mīmāṃsā-Śābara-Bhāṣyam*:

"From 12th till 18th November 1964 an 'Assembly of (scholars from) all the branches of the Vedas' was organised in Amritsar by Svāmī Karapātrī Jī, which was presided over by Svāmī Nirañjana Tīrtha Jī, the Ācārya of Śāṅkara-pīṭha of Puri. During that occasion on 16th, 17th and 18th November a scholarly discussion took place on two matters *Is there science in the Vedas or not?* and *Are the Brāhmaṇa texts to be called Vedas or not?* Regarding these questions, the scholars and seers following *sanātana-dharma* took the position that 'There is no science in the Vedas and *Brāhmaṇa* texts are also called Vedas'. Contrary to this, my stance was that 'the Vedas propound primarily science, and only *Mantra-Saṃhitā* are Vedas, not the *Brāhmaṇa* texts'."[15]

I have been unable to obtain more literature on the above-mentioned scholarly debate as yet, but the writings of Svāmī Karapātrī are easily available. Here the voluminous Sanskrit text *Vedārtha-Pārijātaḥ* (VePā.) is of special significance.[16] Disgruntled by the interpretation of the Vedas, mainly by Svāmī Dayānanda, and perhaps inspired by earlier efforts of scholars like Bhaṭṭa Kumārila (7th cent. CE) who mentions in the beginning of his famous work — *Ślokavārttika* –, "*Mīmāṃsā* has been predominantly considered as a materialistic point of view in our own times. This effort of mine is to bring it back to the *āstika* path".[17]

Svāmī Karapātrī composed this voluminous text primarily to refute Dayānanda's position on the Vedas. At the very beginning of this text, he mentions the purpose of writing it:

"After a long time passed by (once the attempts to malign the Vedas were thwarted by earlier *Mīmāṃsā* scholars such as Bhaṭṭa Kumārila, etc.) a person called Dayānanda spoiled the traditional system completely. Following the path of materialistic philosophy, but to show it as the *āstika* path, he indiscriminately collected contentless matters from here and there, and created a book, not very small but also not very profuse, and called it a 'commentary' (on the Veda), aiming at fame, acclaim and following for himself, while deluding the world."[18]

Svāmī Karapātrī undertook a thorough and extensive refutation of Dayānanda in over 1500 pages, showing that each and every sentence of Dayānanda's *Ṛgvedādi-Bhāṣya-Bhūmikā* was full with errors and contrary to tradition. He points out the different spheres of the Vedas and of modern scientific enquiry:

Svāmī Karpātrī, founder of the religious and cultural movement Dharma Sangh, in the 1940s. Photo: FIND Archive, Zagarolo

"Modern scholars accept science as a method involving proper observation of objects, their classification and systematization based on logical reasoning, and then testing it through experiments ... Not a single postulation of scientific truth of this kind is seen in the *Ṛgveda*, neither have you shown that any of the *Mantras* set forth this kind of explanation."[19]

He ridicules and rejects the ideas of Vedic rituals serving humanity by bettering the environment, etc.:

"Moreover, your statement that — 'the steam which is produced during Vedic rituals, purifies the air and water and brings the whole world happiness' — what is the source of this statement? Is it known through the statements of the Vedas or is it some human logic: which is its source? If it is based on reasoning, then it does not originate from the Vedas. If it is known through the Vedas, then the corresponding Vedic utterances should be presented. How is it possible that burning a limited amount of ghee, saffron, etc., in the ritual fire would take away the unlimited amount of stench of excreta, urine, skin, marrow, flesh, bones, etc.? Moreover, earth, water, fire, etc. take away that stench by their own nature, and if this is possible through these elements in this natural manner, then

The process of scientification of the Vedas is also the process that renders them materialistic. The strong opposition by traditional Vedic scholars which Dayānanda faced during his lifetime is well known.

what is the reason for burning jaggery, ghee, milk, grains and herbs in the fire? The kind of cleanliness which is seen in places maintained by modern scientific systems without the help of Vedic rituals, that kind of cleanliness is not seen even in the homes of *Agnihotrins.*"[20]

Moreover, he questions, refutes and discards the fundamental hermeneutical techniques used by Dayānanda to interpret the Vedas in this wrongful manner. According to him, this would lead to a complete abnegation of the traditional system of interpretation of the Vedas:

"In *Mīmāṃsā* a two-fold division of the ritual actions is made in terms of subsidiary (*guṇa*) and primary (*pradhāna*). According to the manner suggested by you, all Vedic actions have to be considered as subsidiary, on the basis of their being performed for the sake of others. Therefore, the statements that teach about the primary actions would be rendered useless, as primary actions would not follow from them."[21]

He points out the insufficiency of Dayānanda's propositions:

"Dayānanda provides the description of knowledge about ships and aeroplanes in *Ṛgveda 1.116* by wrongly interpreting these verses as he likes. This is also useless, since he does not describe the method of building these ships and aeroplanes."[22]

The brief sketch outlined above shows beyond doubt that the contemporary approach of searching for or stating knowledge of modern sciences in the Vedas is not the traditional Indian way of looking at the Vedas, but started with thinkers like Dayānanda Sarasvatī about a century ago. This is evident by looking, on the one hand, at the works of traditional scholars on this subject, such as Śabarasvāmin (III century CE), Bhaṭṭa Kumārila (VII century CE), Sāyaṇācārya (XIV century CE), where no such enquiry is present, and on the other hand, reading Dayānanda's works such as the *Ṛgvedādi-Bhāṣya-Bhūmikā* in which there is special emphasis of the Vedas having primarily scientific content, and finally by studying the *Vedārtha-Pārijātaḥ* by Svāmī Karapātrī, which refutes and rejects the propositions of *Ṛgvedādi-Bhāṣya-Bhūmikā* and seeks to restore the traditional view that there is no science in the Vedas.

Even if one is ready to accept that, since modern sciences have developed in the last few centuries, and since traditional scholars like Śabarasvāmin and Bhaṭṭa Kumārila are prior to these developments, the absence of such enquiries is therefore appropriate in their texts and the enquiries and approaches of scholars like Dayānanda should not be discarded, just because they are contemporary and modern; still certain problems remain.

The foremost concern, for traditional thinkers like Svāmī Karapātrī is that, if one accepts the Vedas as the source of modern sciences, then the traditional theoretical system put in place to safeguard the Vedas would fall asunder. The facts, ideas, and theories of modern sciences keep changing and advancing continuously. This is accepted by every scientist. Considering the Vedas as a collection of scientific ideas that are continuously varying, and

sometimes wrong, mostly in need of improvement, would be a heavy burden on the traditional principle of considering the Vedas as the ultimate source of valid cognition.

A further concern is that of degrading the Vedas as advocating materialistic points of view. Scientific truths are based on direct perception (*pratyakṣa*) and inference (*anumāna*). The essential nature of the Vedas is that they inform us about that which only the Vedas can tell. The Vedas are the source of injunctions that originate from them in the first place, and do not provide re-renderings of scientific truths.

Even if one sets aside the above concerns worrying traditional scholars like Svāmī Karapātrī and is ready to see the Vedas as the endless source of all knowledge, including scientific knowledge, an immense problem still remains. What would then be the method of discovering these scientific truths already enshrined in the Vedas? Since the corpus of the Vedas is limited, discovery of scientific facts and principles is consequently only possible once the manner of ascertaining them is made clear. As yet, there is no evidence of arriving at scientific truths by analysing the Vedas with the help of the traditional methods of *Mīmāṃsā*, etc. And, in any case, if the application of *Mīmāṃsā*, etc. systems of knowledge to the Vedas should start delivering modern scientific discoveries, then apart from the happiness of being successful in this, one would also feel disappointed that scholars who developed and applied these systems of knowledge, beginning from Jaimini and even earlier up to Svāmī Karapātrī at present, had not discovered these truths! Dayānanda and others seem to be reading their desired sense out of the sentences of the Vedas by supplying special etymologies and associating the ideas in Vedic statements with scientific knowledge. Writers like Subhash Kak also speak of yogic visions, on the basis of which one can decipher the scientific knowledge encoded in the Vedas. It is known that sometimes intuitions lead to a significant leap in the world of science as well, and scientific method alone is not sufficient for the scientific quest. Accepting even the application of yogic vision to discover scientific truths, the question arises: would one then still need the Vedas or would the yogic vision suffice?

These and similar such traditional and logical questions creep up, once the position that the Vedas are the source of modern scientific knowledge is taken seriously. Looking at the widespread following of this point of view among the Indian academic world, as also public opinion nowadays, makes thinkers like Svāmī Karapātrī who fostered the culture of reflection and discussion on matters of importance for Indian tradition all the more relevant. •

1 *Rakṣārthaṃ vedānāmadhyeyaṃ vyākaraṇam.* (*Mahābhāṣya-Paspaśāhnika 17*). Joshi, S. D. (ed.): *Vyākaraṇa-Mahābhāṣya, Paspaśāhnika*, Poona 1986, p. 6.

2 By learning is meant here proper recitation of the Veda by exactly following the recitation of the teacher (*gurumukhoccāraṇānuccāraṇa*). Taking the bath (*snāna*) is the final convocational ceremony when the student finishes his study of the Veda. He can now leave the house of the teacher and from his current first stage of life, namely brahmacarya or celibate student, can now enter into the second stage of life as a householder or *grhastha*.

3 *Evaṃ hi samāmananti — vedam adhītya snāyāt — iti. Iha ca vedam adhītya snāsyan dharmaṃ jijñāsamāna imam āmnāyam atikrāmet. Na ca āmnāyo nāma atikramitavyaḥ. Paṇḍita Yudhiṣṭhira Mīmāṃsaka: Mīmāṃsā-Śābara-Bhāṣyam — Ārṣamata-vimarśinyā Hindī-vyākhyayā sahitam (Prathamo Bhāgaḥ),* Bahalgarh 1977, p. 6.

4 *Atikramiṣyāma imam āmnāyam. Anatikrāmanto vedam arthavantaṃ santam anarthakam avakalpayema.* (*Ibidem* p. 6).

5 Girish Nath Jha et alii: *Veda As Global Heritage — Scientific Perspectives*, Delhi 2019.

6 Subhash Kak: *The astronomical code of the Ṛgveda*, New Delhi 2000.

7 Raja Ram Mohan Roy: *Vedic Physics: Scientific Origin of Hinduism*, Ontario 2015.

8 M. A. Mehandale: Review of the Astronomical Code of the Ṛgveda by Subhash Kak, In: *Annals of the Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute*, 1996, Vol. 77, No. ¼, pp. 323-325, here p. 324.

9 Meera Nanda: *Prophets facing Backward: Postmodern Critiques of Science and Hindu Nationalism in India*, New Brunswick 2003.

10 Paṇḍita Yudhiṣṭhira Mīmāṃsaka (ed.) : *Ṛgvedādi-Bhāṣya-Bhūmikā — Śrīmaddayānanda-sarasvatī-svāminā nirmitā saṃskṛtāryabhāṣābhyāṃ samanvitā,* Sonipat (Hariyana) 2015.

11 *Atha veda-viṣaya-vicāraḥ. Atra catvāro veda-viṣayāḥ santi, vijñāna-karma-upāsanā-jñāna-kāṇḍa-bhedāt. Tatra ādimo vijñāna-viṣayo hi sarvebhyo mukhyo'sti. Tasya parameśvarād ārabhya tṛṇa-paryanta-padārtheṣu sākṣād bodhānvayatvāt.* (ṚgBh p. 49).

12 „विज्ञान" अर्थात् सब पदार्थों को यथार्थ जानना।… „विज्ञान" उसको कहते हैं कि जो कर्म उपासना और ज्ञान इन तीनों से यथावत् उपयोग का करना। इससे यह विषय इन चारों में प्रधान है। (ऋग्वेदादि-भाष्य-भूमिका पृष्ठ ५०)

13 *Tasyāpi khalu dvau bhedau mukhyau staḥ — ekaḥ parama-puruṣārtha-siddhyartho'rthād ya ῑśvara-stuti-prārthanopāsanājñāpālana-dharmānuṣṭhāna-jñānena mokṣameva sādhayituṃ pravarttate. Aparo loka-vyavahāra-siddhaye yo dharmeṇārthakāmau nirvarttayituṃ saṃyojyate.* (ṚgBh p. 56).

14 *Sa ca agnihotram ārabhya aśvamedha-paryanteṣu yajñeṣu sugandhiḥ miṣṭa-puṣṭa-roga-nāśaka-guṇair yuktasya samyak saṃskāreṇa śodhitasya dravyasya vāyu-vṛṣṭijala-śuddhikaraṇārtham agnau homaḥ kriyate, sa tad dvāra sarva-jagat sukhakāry eva bhavati. Yaṃ ca bhojanācchādana-yāna-kalā-kauśala-yantra-sāmājika-niyama-prayojana-siddhyarthaṃ vidhatte so'dhikatayā svasukhāyaiva bhavati.* (ṚgBh p. 56).

15 नवम्बर सन् १९६४ की १२ से १८ तिथियों में अमृतसर नगर में स्वामी करपात्री जी के तत्त्वावधान, और पुरी के शांकर पीठ के आचार्य स्वामी निरञ्जन देव जी के सभापतित्व में सर्ववेदशाखा-सम्मेलन का आयोजन हुआ था। उसमें ता॰ १६-१७-१८ तक 'वेद में विज्ञान है वा नहीं' तथा 'ब्राह्मणग्रन्थों की वेदसंज्ञा है वा नहीं', इन दो विषयों पर शास्त्रचर्चा हुई थी। इसमें सनातनधर्मावलम्बी विद्वानों और महात्माओं का पक्ष था — "वेद में विज्ञान नहीं, और ब्राह्मणग्रन्थों की भी वेदसंज्ञा है।" इसके विरोध में मेरा पक्ष था — "वेद में विज्ञान का ही प्राधान्येन प्रतिपादन है, और मन्त्रसंहिताओं की ही वेदसंज्ञा है, ब्राह्मणग्रन्थों की वेदसंज्ञा नहीं है।" Paṇḍita Yudhiṣṭhira *Mīmāṃsaka: Mīmāṃsā-Śābara-Bhāṣyam — Ārṣamata-vimarśinyā Hindī-vyākhyayā sahitam (Prathamo Bhāgaḥ),* Bahalgarh 1977, p. 77.

16 Anantaśrī Karapātrī Svāmī: *Vedārtha-Pārijātaḥ,* (in two volumes), Vedaśāstra Research Centre, Kedarghat, Varanasi, 1979 (vol.1), 1980 (vol.2).

17 *Prāyeṇaiva hi Mīmāṃsā loke lokāyatīkṛtā, Tām āstika-pathe kartum ayaṃ yatnaḥ kṛto mayā. (Ślokavārttika 10).* S. K. Ramanatha Sastri (ed.): *Ślokavārttikavyākhyā Tātparyaṭīkā,* Madras 1971, p. 3.

18 *Gate bahutithe kāle dayānandābhido janaḥ Dūṣayāmāsa sarvā tāṃ paddhatir yā sanātanī. Lokāyatika-mārgastha āstikyam iva darśayan Khyāti-sammāna-pūjārthaṃ loka-vañcana-hetave, Itastatas samānīya sārahīnam udakṣaram*

Prāduścakre bhāṣyanāmnā na laghīyo na vistṛtam. (VePā. 16-18).

19 *Ādhunikās tu pratyakṣeṇa padārthān anubhūya tarkeṇa vyavasthāpya prayogeṇa parīkṣaṇam eva vijñānaṃ manyante. ... Na caitādṛśam ekam api vijñānam ṛgvede pratipāditaṃ dṛśyate, na tvayā kaścid api mantras tādṛśa vyākhyānopeto darśitaḥ.* (VePā. p. 541).

20 *Kiñca, yaduktam — "yajñādyo vāṣpo jāyate sa vāyuṃ jalaṃ ca nirdoṣaṃ kṛtvā sarvajagate sukhāya bhavati" iti, tadapi kiṃ mūlakam? veda-vacana-gamyaṃ tarka-gamyaṃ vā? tarka-gamyatve tasyāvaidikatvam eva. Veda-gamyatve vacanam upasthyatām. Kathaṃ sīmita-ghṛta-kastūrikādi-homena aparimita-mala-mūtra-carma-majjā-māṃsāsthyādi- daurgandhyāpasāraṇaṃ sambhavati? Pṛthivī-jalāgnyādibhir api svabhāvād eva tad daurgandhyam apākriyate, tadā tair eva tat sambhavet, kim antar gaḍunā ghṛta-dugdhānna-auṣadhādi-prajvālanena? Ādhunika-vaijñānika-vyavasthāyāṃ tu homādim antarāpi yathā śuddhir dṛśyate, tathā agnihotriṇām api gṛheṣu naiva dṛśyate.* (VePā. p. 563).

21 *Mīmāṃsāyāṃ guṇa-pradhāna-bhedena karma-vibhāgā uktāḥ. Tvad ukta rītyā sarveṣam eva vaidika-karmaṇāṃ parārthatvena guṇa-karmatvam eva syāt. Atas teṣāṃ pradhāna-karmatvānupapattyā tadbhodhaka-sūtrāṇāṃ vaiyarthyam eva syāt.* (VePā. p. 565).

22 *Ṛgveda 1.116 — eṣā mantrāṇām āpāta-ramaṇīyam arthābhāsa vidhāya nauvimāna-vidyā-varṇana kṛta dayānandena, tad apy akiñcitkaram, nirmāṇa-vidher avarṇanāt.* (VePā. p. 1408).

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THE IDEA OF A RELIGION OF LIFE IN NON-CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

In this essay, Amanda Viana examines the validity of the innovative Western philosophical trend called ‘Religion of Life’. Although 'Religion of Life' postulates universal validity prior to any cultural determination, the essay shows, through a consideration of Hindu Tantra and Amerindian Shamanism, the inherent difficulties of such a position, since universalism is taken as coinciding with the affirmation of a general validity of Western parameters. Since Religion of Life rests on a speculative mystic conception stemming from Meister Eckhart, Amanda Viana asks whether a discourse (however performative) about Life *itself* can be up to the aspiration of totality it displays without considering differences inherent to the sphere of what is deemed ‘pure experience’.

Radical Phenomenology of Life

Michel Henry (1922-2002), founder of the philosophical trend known as 'Phenomenology of Life', has radicalized a tendency going back to German philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938), bracketing together whatever makes up so-called 'natural attitudes to the world' – i.e., the biases and assumptions we automatically apply in dealing with conditions in the world – in order to experience things *as they are*.

Whereas Husserl's method took a step back from the constituted *doxa* of the world and analyzed phenomena in their own intrinsic modality of 'appearance'[1] (by means of which any notion of essence behind phenomena appears as an inessential addition), Michel Henry's radicalization consists in taking a step back from everything that Husserl built with his science of Phenomenology. Henry's main purpose was not to lay bare the primordial flow of (intentional) consciousness between the intuition of the ego and the constitution of the object – which for Husserl precedes both the empirical ego and the object in the world –, but to retrace the steps behind intentionality (as primal flow of consciousness) and object-constitution (as articulation and logic of this flow) back to the source of every disclosure of being, which is nothing but *Life*.

If 'Life' is the ultimate source of both the subjective and objective field of experience and knowledge, it becomes irrefutable evidence, and its autonomous manifestation is called 'self-experience' [*épreuve de soi*]. But this primal evidence cannot disclose itself to a 'science' (as in the case of Husserl). Where it discloses itself, there is actually no difference between content and method. In fact, Henry distinguishes two modalities of appearing: world-disclosure and life-manifestation[2]. The world does not express the totality of things, but only their manifestation as objects separated from a consciousness (or *in*directly related to it)[3]. World appearance is always in a modality of exteriority, not because things are outside in the world, but because world-appearance is – if we take it as a manifestation – self-exteriority[4]. As opposed to it, the manifestation of Life can (phenomenologically) be called 'self-interiority', since it is – according to Henry – first and foremost an instance of self-related donation, that is, related to itself before any 'otherness' becomes present. This primordial field of Life manifestation (even before we can speak of 'world') is for Henry a self-experiencing revelation prior to any other disclosure of individuated beings (*as* or *in* the world)[5].

In delimiting himself from the classical phenomenology stemming from Husserl, whose method concerns world disclosure out of the transcendentally reconstructed 'intentionality of consciousness'[6], Henry resorts to a *logos* that goes beyond every articulated flow of finite beings, which he relates to 'Life' *in the absolute sense of this word*. This *logos* finds itself eminently in Christianity, a religion that – in Henry's conception – points to the radical phenomenological meaning of Life[7] and sets in motion a new paradigm in Western tradition.

According to Henry, until the rise of Phenomenology of Life, Christianity had never been considered in its deepest meaning – hence all the misunderstandings by dogmatic acolytes as well as ruthless critics (like Marx, Nietzsche and Freud). For Henry, the Christian *logos* points to a self-manifestation of (absolute) Life endowed with relational proto-intelligibility. This intelligibility (prior to any cognitive scheme) is expressed in the relationship between Father and Son. The term 'God' (and hence also 'Father') is for Henry a religiously encoded way of addressing 'absolute Life'. Within the relational structure of Life's self-manifestation, the Father is the unborn and perpetually generating instance. The Son is called the 'First Living' – a first passive 'I', or more precisely

a 'me'[8] – because he receives his life directly from the Father and acts in full identity with Him. The Son translates a primal affectivity as a paradox of radical passivity (or, using Henry's term: passibility) and full power[9]. The idea is that Jesus Christ is not an ordinary individual subject to space, time and relativity, but an individuated revelation of Life before the self-externalization of the latter in world-finitude. In other words: Jesus Christ is, for Henry, the Absolute *fully encompassed in individuated flesh*. The reference to the Gospel of John (1, 14) is clear and explicit: the *logos* became *flesh*, that is, God as Life affected Himself as the First Born – which means that the self-affection of Life is uninterrupted, an eternal flow in which there is no separation between Father and Son. The Son is in this sense no abstraction, but the singular self in which God experiences and generates himself[10], and ultimately there is no separation between the Son and any other human being, since the revelation of the *Logos* as a 'coming of Life into flesh' means that in the deepest dimension of *my* own self-affection (that is, an affection related to my living body and hence not coming from the outside) I am (like) the Son. For Henry, individuation may *exist* as a third person[11], but individuation in a radical sense (which Henry calls 'ipseity') *lives* only in the first person and under the *declension* of Life (that is, as *me* and not as *I*).

On the basis of the ideas expounded above, human beings can orientate their life-experience according to the world or according to absolute Life. If the orientation is towards the world, the modality of appearing will be that of self-exteriority, meaning that the individual will sever him/herself from the affectivity of Life and become trapped in the realm of objectified things. For Henry, a human being is really *alive* only when he is *in Life*, which means when he (re-)discovers within himself the self-experience of the Life-pathos as self-manifestation of the Absolute[12]. The experience of Life-pathos is by no means a mere figure of thought. Rather, it has to do with impressions, emotions, feelings, acts of will and other types of tangible life-manifestations in our most concrete inwardness, which Henry calls our 'inner body'. The 'inner body', meaning everything that is *me* with regard of my innermost life-affections, is the threshold to the 'flesh'; this, in turn, is the Absolute or the Father – before everything – begetting *me* in homologation with the First Living, who is the Son[13].

Michel Henry's philosophy is without doubt an attempt to create an access to *Life*. Since no modality of appearance implying self-exteriority can ever trace the way back to the deepest Life source, the method - beginning with the intentionality of an ego-based consciousness flow (codified in Husserl's philosophy) - proves incapable of creating this access. Michel Henry seeks the immediate experience of a pre-intentional and pre-conscious Life albeit still *logos*-related, that is, articulate and consistent[14].

Life as the core of religious experience: Towards a Religion of Life

Rolf Kühn is seen as the most radical follower of Michel Henry, especially in the German context. He translated and edited much of Michel Henry's works and also wrote many articles and books on the question of Phenomenology of Life. In his books, Rolf Kühn equates

The manifestation of Life can phenomenologically be called 'self-interiority'.

Life with God and shows the same conviction as Henry: the evidence for God's revelation finds itself in living beings[15]. In other words: the self-experience of absolute Life appears in Rolf Kühn – as it does in Michel Henry – as the ultimate ground of its immanent affection, and living individuation is a proof of that event, independently of any metaphysical argument about God. The innovative aspect of Kühn's thought lies in the concept of *Religion of Life* [*Lebensreligion*]. With this concept he attempts to show that *any* religious experience is grounded in Life, so that Life becomes the only valid universal instance in considering religious experience in any cultural context[16].

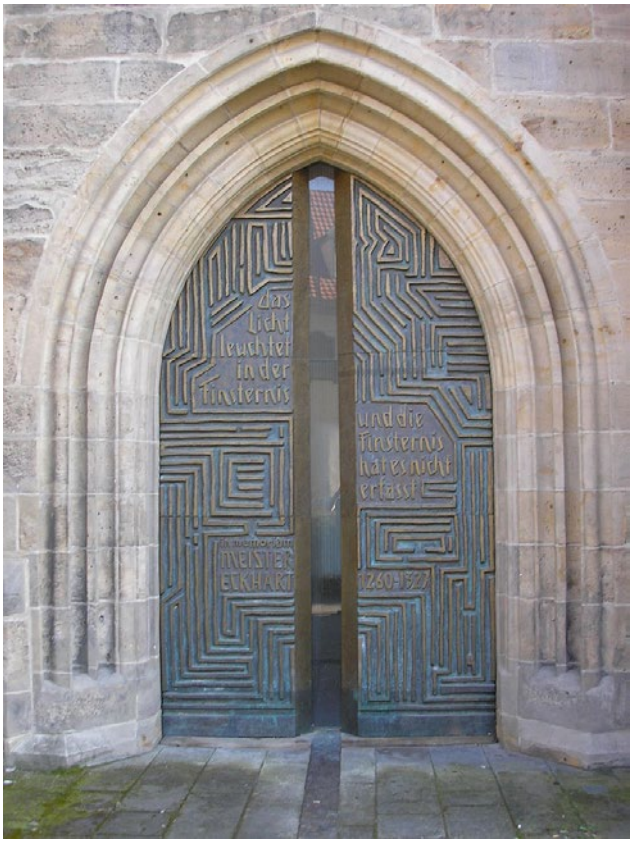
From the standpoint of Kühn's Religion of Life, absolute Life imposes itself as proto-religion [*Urreligion*], since it describes a self-relationality, whose dynamics proves to be ultimately incommensurable with the state of affairs *in the world*[17]. At the same time, Life realizes itself in each pathic singular (i.e. living and individuated) self as an expression of simultaneous self-suffering and self-enjoyment. It is precisely in this inner pathic expression of Life – far before any belief or even transcendent instance – that lie the roots of religious experience[18]. In other words: every living being has *a priori* a religious life, because it is intrinsically re-linked to the primal source of Life itself[19].

According to Rolf Kühn, all religions bear witness to the universal truth of the self-revelation of Life, as long as they express themselves from the source of Life and not from the logic of the world[20]. However, institutionalized religions can only *indirectly* be related to absolute Life, since self-experience of the latter takes place exclusively in the inner affective chamber of each living individual – rather than in institutional mediation, liturgy or dogmatic teachings. *Stricto sensu*, religious experience can be neither objectified nor mediated, but merely inwardly experienced through the only certainty an individual can have – the certainty of something affecting him/her deeply from within, with no gap needing to be bridged over, which takes place even before any idea, representation or concept arises out of this immanent affection. This certainty can be affirmed as long as the individual separates it from any instance of world-openness, since it takes place *before the world configurates itself.* In this sense, the certainty coincides with the affection, in the same way in which the affection (of the lived body) cannot be distinguished from self-affection i.e. self-manifestation of Life.

The question that imposes itself at this point is whether the certainty of the self-affection of Life can be valid *for any religion*. But this question cannot be answered if one remains in the immanence of Western tradition without looking beyond its two main expressions: Christianity and Enlightenment. We shall therefore consider three traditions with conspicuously different world-configurations in order to test the validity of the universal ambition of Rolf Kühn's Religion of Life: 1. Intellectual mysticism in Christianity as conceived by Meister Eckhart. 2. Tantric tradition in Hinduism, and 3. Amerindian shamanism in the Amazonian forest. Out of these elements, we shall try to analyze and put to the test the following aspects of the conceptual framework of Religion of Life: 1. The difference between 'Life' and 'world'. 2. The modality of appearance – or self-manifestation – of Life. 3. The self-affection of Life as the core of religious experience.

Intellectual mysticism: Meister Eckhart's Christian path

Rolf Kühn's Religion of Life explicitly resorts to the thought of Meister Eckhart, especially to his idea of the inner structure of the immanence of Life, meaning the effective reality of God, and to his conviction that the unity of the human



The Meister Eckhart portal of Predigerkirche in Erfurt.
Source: Wikimedia Commons

soul with God can only take place if the individual renounces the world[21]. One could say that Meister Eckhart's intellectual mysticism clearly corresponds to Religion of Life, since the *deepest connection* with God belongs to the inner experience of Life. Eckhart speaks of Life as inner movement, which can be seen in the autonomous character of life realization in each living being, but the radical interpretation of Life in the thought of Meister Eckhart equates Life (as God) with *pure intellectuality*[22]. In addition to this, Life (in the absolute sense of the word) appears as a self-sufficient act with inherent determination, an act corresponding to the self-reflection of the divine intellect[23]. It is precisely this aspect that can justify the definition of Life as proto-religion (in the sense of Rolf Kühn), with the difference that Meister Eckhart speaks the language of Christian theology and translates thus the metaphysical and ontological question of the primal revelation of Life in terms of the relational intricacy of God the Father and his Son. Meister Eckhart's formula reads as follows: since Life (or pure intellect) is divine and human beings are rational living beings, human beings must know God[24].

Meister Eckhart explains that knowledge of God is rooted in the relationship between the Father and the Son. The Father points to the eternal birth-act of absolute Life, while the Son is generated by the Father[25] and essentially one with Him[26]. Since the generative act of the

Father is – the Father being pure intellect – also the act of *knowing* the Son, the first born is no static object of knowledge, but rather a (self-) reflective realization of the generative movement of the Father. In other words: the Son is not separated from the Father; He is the very act of self-reflective knowledge of God. We could therefore say that for Meister Eckhart the human soul can only know God by becoming his Son[27], which means that this soul must die to the world and return to eternal Life. This presupposes full detachment, since the acts of the soul, being impregnated by faculties related to body, temporality and multiplicity, belong to the world and cannot possibly bring about a return to eternal Life[28]. Apart from this, the soul possesses a theoretical power of abstraction that characterizes the 'intellectual faculty' of human beings in the world. This turns out to be an obstacle to knowledge of God, which can never be an act of abstraction, since it is a return to the most concrete source of Life. Indeed, God reaches the human soul when the human being attains total passivity towards Him[29]. He reaches the human soul by generating His Son in it, which means that the soul of the individual is reconfigured as the self-reflective realization of divine knowledge. In this way, the human soul participates in the self-knowledge of God, which at the same time is self-experience, perpetually and singularly generated.

With regard to the Religion of Life, four aspects in Meister Eckhart's conception are essential: 1. Life is acosmic, invisible and divine. 2. The world is identified with exteriority (the faculties of the soul as *ens creatum*), while Life is associated with interiority (where the essence of the soul is actualized). 3. Identification of Life with the soul indicates that the soul is *a priori* rooted in absolute Life. 4. The unity of the human soul with God produces itself in Life, independently of the world[30]. This means that a living being cannot relate himself to God by means of any form of objectification, but only by reaching the core of (absolute) Life. The essence of religion does not depend on any cultural instance of creation or institution that guarantees it, but from Life in its primal modality of self-revelation[31].

Both in Michel Henry as in Rolf Kühn, knowledge of God is essentially related to immanent self-experience of Life (as simultaneous self-suffering and self-enjoyment), which can only take place in a singular (that is, living, human and individuated) self[32]. For Meister Eckhart, the birth of the soul in eternal Life means the intellectual openness and spiritual disposition of the individual to receive the divine act in him/herself. The individual can experience life in its religious core only if he/she reaches union with God, meaning that he/she participates in the passive character of self-experience of Life – which is the highest act towards the divine[33]. The consequence of this conception is that Life should be lived in a state of releasement [*Gelassenheit*]. The junction between the intellectual mysticism of Meister Eckhart and the project of a Religion of Life lies in the role of (absolute) Life as the core of religious experience and the rootedness of the human soul in God by means of identifying God with 'Life' – in the absolute sense of the term.

A human being is really *alive* only when he (re-) discovers within himself the self-experience of the Life-pathos as self-manifestation of the Absolute.

The Tantric tradition

Can we say that religious experience in the Hindu Tantric context also pleads for world renouncement and an inward re-connection of human beings with Life? If so, this tradition could be integrated without much problem within the 'universal' scope of Religion of Life, but the first step is to consider how Tantra relates to Life *at large* and what the consequences of that configuration of experience are. Needless to say, any evaluation of Tantra as a religion of Life implies methodological decisions that are not so simple. A mere consideration of some essential aspects of this religious and cultural complex calls for speculative reduction, and this already becomes a problem concerning the reception of such trends inside and outside the Indian subcontinent. Speculative reduction has usually been made to privilege aspects of a scholastic Tantric heritage that can be related to Western religious soteriology without much difficulty[34]. The Tantric tradition comprises a multiplicity of different trends, the most conspicuous of which are considered rather heterodox in their orientation – especially if one takes Brahmanic conventions as the Hindu mainstream[35]. It stems from the cultural context of mediaeval South Asia and is originally related to clans (*kulas*[36]), where the worship of Śakti – or Life-Energy on a rather differentiated cosmic scale – under different (Goddess) forms and names occupies a central place[37], since it is the power of the Goddess that creates, preserves and destroys what we call manifested reality[38].

If we consider certain features belonging to the rise and early phase of mediaeval Tantra, such as the cult of the Yoginīs and their bond with nature, the practice of blood sacrifice and the manipulation and consumption of impure substances (like menstrual blood, male and female sexual discharges, as well as meat and wine), it is not unreasonable to relate the Śākta-Tantric tradition to tribal cults and indigenous practices in the Indian subcontinent[39]. Indeed, the figure of the Yoginīs leaves no doubt as to their local and tribal provenance – quite distant from the divine pantheon of Brahmanic kingdoms. Many features confirm this heterodox provenance: their female character (as opposed to the patriarchal tendency of Brahmanism), their therianthropic features (as opposed to the radical separation of human and animal in Brahmanic religion) and their genealogical affinity with non-human beings essentially related to the powers of Nature, such as the personified arboreal spirits [*yakṣinīs*] and the ambivalent female deities called 'mothers' [*mātṛs*][40], whose powers [*siddhis*] can be transferred to the Tantric adept if the latter is capable, that is, ritually initiated to deal with them.

With the Kaula movement, especially within the line inaugurated by the mythic figure of Matsyendranāth, the Yoginīs become the focus of teachings, and even leaving aside some extreme practices like cremation ground liturgy and blood sacrifice or replacing them with erotic and yoga-related practices, the unconventional character of those teachings does not disappear, since bodily fluids – especially sexual ones – remain a central feature. Within the ritual framework, however, such

For the Tantric tradition Life is – considered in its phenomenological roots – no metaphysical abstraction, but a very concrete energy identified with the Goddess.

Yoginī with a serpent (Kuṇḍalinī) coming out of her vulva. South India around 1850. Source: Philip Rawson, Tantra. *Le culte indien de l'extase*, p. 66.

power substances [*kula-dravyam*, lit: 'clan fluid'] are consumed by the adepts and turned into a sacrament. Although it is true that the character of the sexual transaction in Tantric initiation shows a male dominance (the *yoginī* of the Tantric *vīra* is analogically homologated to the Yoginīs as power-spirits, but *in concreto* she remains a consort [*dutī*]), the clan fluid – as the centre of Life-power – is of a yonic character[41], and the fluid character of the Goddess in the Shakta tradition is a clear sign that 'indigenous elements' in Tantra are closely related to the complex *yoni-śakti* – this complex being a problem for the mainstream discourse of priestly dominance. The impurity of the substances is ritually turned into its opposite when the adept manages to harness it, and Tantric ability and expertise will revolve around that ritual ability – coupled with intellectual domestication. If we consider the speculative development of Tantra, this inversion will be taken to the point where the fluid is homologated as divine consciousness, as the scholastic – and clearly patriarchal – systematization of Tantra later declares[42]. The so-called 'right-hand path' is a fully sublimated and interiorized transformation of all 'antinomic' practices, in which everything is metaphysically codified,

conventionally accepted and metaphorized to the point of isolating (transcendent) meaning from concrete (immanent) procedures[43].

In view of all these elements, we may ask how the world and Life are understood in the Tantric tradition, and for this purpose we need to take the manifold trends in the Indian context as a *continuum* (in spite of radical changes and the possibility of seeing opposing poles). In the first place, the world is understood in an ambivalent manner. It is simultaneously the expression of limitation in which human beings can be trapped[44] and a field of (supernatural) powers that can be harnessed and used to the benefit of the adept. Life is – considered in its phenomenological roots – no metaphysical abstraction, but a very concrete energy identified with the Goddess, an energy whose perpetual actualization relinks or synthetizes the micro- and macro-cosmos. The evidence of this lies in Tantric practice, which presents a radical affirmation of a life principle becoming tangible in the manipulation of fluids (and later on in their symbolic offshoots, such as sacred sounds and images[45]). Such life-substances can be easily homologated with instances of self-experience of Life in the inner space of the adept's body, especially if one extends the notion of 'energy' [*śakti*] beyond material fluids and includes every form of emotional investment[46], considering what psychoanalysis calls 'cathexis' as a sort of 'mental fluid'. In this sense, we could say that the Tantric tradition attempts to go beyond the life-experience of the individuated human being and consequently to render the inner space of this individuated life-experience receptive to the irruption of the Goddess[47] – the term "Goddess" being eventually susceptible to translation as "absolute life".

In the Tantric tradition, the (self-)experience of 'Life' is not only rendered by the term *śakti*. *Kāma* too – in the sense of 'cosmogonic desire' – is an important notion, also conveying the ambivalence of the Goddess, since the energy of *Her* desire is always overflowing, creative and destructive, and its beneficial or detrimental declensions depend on the way in which the individual relates to it. *Eros* is never an obstacle however. It is rather the awakening of divine energy in the limited space of human individuality and also the possibility of attaining a kind of integration of opposites associated with 'self-realization'[48]. From this point of view, there is no condemnation of sexual passions, but a tendency to take the reverse-side of its ego-centred manifestations (usually condemned by other spiritual trends) as a door to the concrete experience of divine Life.

For the Tantric tradition, the self-experience of Life manifests itself in the *śakti-kāma* complex and its relational (and ritually codified) concretion in the interiority of the human adept. This affirmation of an absolute power of Life in the most concrete bodily processes and emotional affections has always a correspondence in the world – so long as the world appears as the 'articulated power (of the Goddess)', rather than as a field of external objects. The same tendency that dissolves the separation of pure and impure in the ritual context accounts for the overcoming of the separation between inner and outer. The ontological limits of humans with regard to other beings are in this context of processual and dynamic forces no longer valid[49]. The Tantric tradition can be seen as a radical affirmation of Life, in which self-experience of it is characterized by unparalleled intensity and even excess – which reveals the self-relational character of Life experience in the inner space of the Goddess's (energy) body.

Amazonian Shamanism

Can Religion of Life as expounded by Rolf Kühn encompass such a heterogeneous phenomenon as Amazonian shamanism? Is it plausible

Shaman Róger López at the Ani Nii Shobo Center in Peru. Photo by José Fuentes

to think of shamanism from the perspective of Life-rootedness as expounded in the first part of this essay? In order to examine this, we need to put aside prejudices and false definitions concerning the complex phenomenon of shamanism. Shamanism is neither a mystic nor an esoteric trend, but rather a kind of knowledge based on a socially valid consensus with Nature[50]. It is also an ambivalent practice with specific techniques, which can lead to curing illnesses (in the case of so-called *medicine men*) or to causing them (defined as 'shamanic witchcraft')[51]. Most important of all: Amazonian shamanism is not based on any metaphysical postulate on Life, but rather on a modality of being in the world, in which the source of life, Nature, is experienced through all living beings (humans and non-humans) by means of estab-

lished relations. In this sense, human experience – as *life* experience – has no privilege over other species, since non-humans possess not only the quality of living beings, but also a form of subjectivity equivalent to that of humans. This characteristic is conceptually explained by French anthropologist Philippe Descola: while Western ontology (that is, world-configuration) declares a unity of physicality and a difference of interiority between humans and non-humans, Amazonian shamanism (which he defines as 'animistic') conceives a continuity of interiority and a discontinuity in physicality. This means that for the autochthonous folks of the Amazonian basin (where shamanism is a central phenomenon), humans and non-humans have an equivalent mental complexity and rich subjectivity, and the differences lie in the bodily configuration of their souls[52].

In Shamanism, human experience – as *life* experience – has no privilege over other species, since non-humans possess not only the quality of living beings, but also a form of subjectivity equivalent to that of humans.

Philippe Descola claims that in Amerindian myths and also in everyday life, non-humans *produce culture* – because essentially they are also souled subjects. This means that, in the world-configuration of Amazonian shamanism, what we call 'nature' – as being external to the life of the spirit – does not exist. It is neither a fact of experience nor something that can be related to the world in which autochthonous people live, since in this world (fully articulated as it is), the fact of Life and the subjective powers of Nature are intrinsically related and therefore impossible to separate from each other[53]. Out of this world-configuration, a perspectivistic way of living arises. Neither non-humans nor humans can be substantially determined as such: firstly, because their subjective character reconfigures them on the same level of interaction; secondly, because both of them see themselves – and other beings – from their own perspective; thirdly, because each one of them articulates an intentional point, which varies within the milieu they belong to and according to a basic modality of predator-prey relationship [54]. By way of example: humans see pigs as prey and jaguars as predators. Pigs (within their own 'cultural perspective') see humans as predators, while jaguars (who also have subjectivity) see humans as prey[55]. It has to be noticed that subjective-character is not the mere fact of having a perspective, but rather the ability to let a world arise out of that perspective. Within the world-configuration of Amazonian shamanism, pigs and jaguars have souls and their activities are impregnated by the activity of the soul (they hunt, they perform rituals, they communicate with other spirits, etc.). This is no mere belief, but the consequence of concrete interaction with them on different levels – where the dominance strategies created by modern Western civilization are absent.

At this point we can summarize the world-configuration of Amazonic shamanism as follows: 1. Humans and non-humans create culture. 2. Their worlds are different because of their difference in physicality (for example, the

world of jaguars is not the world of humans). 3. The plurality of worlds is interconnected. 4. The limits between one world and another are fluid, since their perspectives encroach[56]. 5. Perspectives are no mere 'representation' of a world: they create other subjects[57]. 6. Humans and non-humans are constitutively subject to the perspective of the others, but they can change their own perspective – *by means of physical transformation*[58]. This last aspect, of which shamanic knowledge is the anthropological evidence, deserves further analysis on the basis of shamanic ritual abilities and their socio-cultural significance.

Amazonian shamans are ritual specialists. They enter into specific relations with the field of the non-human for cultic, medical or social reasons (we can think of witchcraft, healing ceremonies and hunting). They have the ability of ritually changing their physicality and adopting that of non-humans in order to know their intentions, which shows the bodily concreteness of the notion of a 'souled subjectivity' in the context of Amazonian animism.
From a perspectivistic point of view, shamans go beyond their own world(-perspective) and penetrate into the world of others to manipulate the relationship between humans and non-humans belonging to those worlds[59]. This procedure, which is the core of shamanic practice, has nothing to do with renouncing the world in order to return or being reborn to Life – as Phenomenology and Religion of Life preach. The self-experience of Life lies in the core of Nature (as a non-objectifiable field of human and non-human agency) and is not linked to a universal singularity – a soul equated with God before any world constitution –, but of a collective and non-anthropocentric dynamic of forces configurating a plurality of worlds. One could say that Shamans experience – through their own ontological transformation – the pathic self-experience of Life in the modality of self-ness and other-ness *at the same time*, but in that otherness there is not only the non-human but also the alien world.

Both humans and non-humans participate *in the same way* in Life, and their worlds are not separated from the instance of Life-revelation seen as the source of those relationships. Indeed, they are so amalgamated with it that the idea of 'source' and 'derivates' does not exist. At the same time, these worlds are fluid – like the body of the agents acting in them. As opposed to Rolf Kühn's Religion of Life, here there is no question of re-connection with Life and there is no choice between Life and world(s), since they are essentially interrelated.

For Amazonian shamanism, Life is based on an idea of Physicality that does not have ontological limitations. Physicality is no fixed material quantity, but a moving and changing sheath concealing the subjectivity of the individual[60]. How can a conception like that of Religion of Life grasp such a register of experiences? What would it mean, for Religion of Life, that the self-experience of Life encompasses animal and human transformations – or immanent Life-declensions – without any ontological limits and distinctions? Without any doubt, Amerindian shamanism presents a religious experience of Life in which other subjectivities come to the fore[61], since all kinds of natural beings are integrated in Life dynamics in the same way – for which reason we may speak of a *collective* self-experience of Life.

Religion of Life: A Naturalist Standpoint?

We have put the main thesis of Religion of Life to the test, that is, the phenomenological thesis of a self-affection of (absolute) Life as core of religious experience, by observing how it works when other modalities of being-in-the-world like that of the modern Western world-configuration (from which Religion of Life stems) are taken into account. According to this thesis, the subjective proto-relationality

of Life opens in each singular 'self' an immanent – or pre-worldly – religious experience. This means that each individual, taken in the radical sense of *living* being, is considered to be bound to 'absolute Life' (or God) before any cultural difference in modes of behaviour or attitude to the world. Even if some readers may be seduced by the affirmation of a 'universal rootedness of human individuality in God' (especially when this root coincides with the dominant religion of the West: Christianity), it becomes difficult to support this affirmation in the light of the data furnished by anthropology of non-European cultures in the last decade of the XX and the first decade of the XXI century.

The so-called 'ontological turn' in anthropology has shown that there is no single ontology (as Western philosophy thought: one specific science of being founding the whole building of world-culture), but a system of plural ontologies, and that ontology is not so useful a concept if one avails oneself of it as a 'science of being', although on the contrary it can become functional if seen in the sense of a 'mode of configuring the world'. Philippe Descola has developed a model of four ontologies which goes precisely in the sense of a refined cultural relativism (which dogmatic thinking viscerally rejects): animism, naturalism, totemism and analogism. Such concepts point to a specific way of dealing with continuities and discontinuities, that is, with a basic mode of behaviour founding a world. While naturalism (which is the modern Western *Weltanschauung*) objectifies nature, homologizes physicality (human bodies are 'nature' in the same way as animal bodies) and distinguishes the interiority of humans from the rest of creation, animism inverts such relations so that animals, plants and even invisible beings appear as 'subjectivities' and discontinuity concerns the physical sheath of such beings. But there is more to ontological pluralism: the totemic world-view (which can be traced back to the indigenous people of the Australian mainland) is capable of creating identities between certain humans and certain non-humans according to attributes or special characteristics shared by these beings (irrespective of the species to which they belong), while analogism (quite dominant in ancient India and China as well as in the Western middle-ages) establishes relations out of a double scheme of discontinuity, that of dissimilar physicality *and* interiority. The way in which religious experience articulates itself cannot be separated from the specific features of such differences, since they are not merely conceptual. They try to do justice to *different ways of living*, and each way re-actualizes Life (even on the level of its phenomenological root) according to the filter of experience shaped by the concrete interaction of living beings.

For the purpose of this essay, our interest lies mainly in the opposition between 'naturalism' and 'animism'. Religion of Life clearly belongs to a naturalist world-configuration, since nature (and *per extensionem* the world as 'eccentric instance') is objectified and turned into a field of living beings without subjective interiority – so that the most relevant question is that of humans and their relationship with God (as core of Life). Since the intellectual mysticism of Meister Eckhart has essentially inspired Religion of Life, we can say that it shares most of the features of the very world-configuration that put an end to the immanent field of Life forces and the horizontal relationship between humans and non-humans. For Meister Eckhart, there is a hierarchy of beings, and even if his thought is inscribed in an analogical conception (where there is sympathy for all things in the cosmos), his radical theocentric standpoint focuses on the birth of the human soul *independent of any modality of being in the world.*

This is not the case in the Tantric tradition, let alone in Amerindian shamanism. Without over-generalizing and overlooking conspic-

uous differences, both conceptions – especially if we bear in mind early Tantra[62] – make fluid the limitations between humans and non-humans. Nature is no biological fact separated from the human (and divine) spirit. Non-human agency possesses subjectivity and does not act mechanically but intentionally – which is one of the reasons for the complex ritual scaffolding creating in Tantric settings: humans have to know and adapt themselves to the intentionality of non-humans (some of which are at the same time animal and divine, like the Yoginīs). Amerindian shamanism, in which a clearly horizontal type of animism is displayed, does not lack complex ritual techniques, and the power of animal (and plant) spirits plays a similar role to that of divine or semi-divine manifestations of the feminine in early Hindu Tantra.

Naturalism translates the modern Western world-project: Nature is external, an object to be exploited by the spiritual domination of human beings. This domination is most visible in the scientific-technical utopia – clearly expressed by August Comte – that Europeans embarked on to replace the role of God in creation, that is, the idea of 'progress'. But it is also present in every cultural manifestation – hence the justification of colonialism as a superior point of view of a culture with regard to others (presumably closer to 'nature' and therefore 'primitivism')[63]. Christianity is a clear antecedent of this domination project, since it is a religion claiming to hold a universal truth (as opposed to the relative or inexistent validity of all other religions) and wanting to propagate this truth in spite of cultural barriers and different collectively constituted modalities of being in the world. The universal truth (from which Phenomenology of Life extracts its concept of Life) is identified with the Spirit, while inferior forms of religion are associated with 'nature' as something that cannot elevate itself to the rang of the Spirit. In this sense, we can say that Religion of Life, the way it is conceived and presented by Rolf Kühn, is an expression of the naturalistic world-configuration – and as such, is *in no way universal.* Or more precisely: its universality is no phenomenological fact, but a dogmatic affirmation[64].

If there is indeed a transcendent common ground of different religious experiences, this ground should be expounded on the level of its specific contextual concretion instead of affirming its *a priori* validity out of a specific world-configuration (as Religion of Life does out of Christianity). Conceiving self-affection as the intrinsic expression of Life in its own dynamic illimitation (instead of regarding it as an external affection of the empirical individual) is something that should not necessarily be abandoned altogether. The consideration of a plural ontological model could enrich the scope of Phenomenology of Life, since the latter aims, among other things, at gaining access to the deepest layers of human experience – and within this scope the relationship with non-humans is a significant piece of the puzzle. If philosophers of Life manage to replace the dualism 'life vs. world' and work on the complexities of each world-configuration as an 'attitude to Life', an integration of Nature and Life – towards an enriched notion of Life-World[65] as living tissue of relations – could eventually take place. •

1 It should be borne in mind that in the philosophical school of Phenomenology, 'appearance' is not opposed to 'essence' (as the field of appearances is opposed to that of ideas in Plato's philosophy) but is the very name for the manifestation of something even before this 'something' can be identified *as such* with an object.

2 Michel Henry: *Phénoménologie de la vie. I – De la Phénoménologie*. Paris 2003, p. 166

3 Cf. Michel Henry: *C'est moi la vérité. Pour une philosophie du christianisme*, Paris 1996, pp. 23-24.

4 Cf. Michel Henry: *Ibidem*, p. 25.

5 Cf. Michel Henry: *Phénoménologie de la vie. IV – Sur L'Éthique et la Religion*. Paris 2004, p. 100, and also Michel Henry: *Können des Lebens. Schlüssel zur radikalen Phänomenologie*. Translated with an introduction by Rolf Kühn. Freiburg 2017, p. 40.

6 Cf. Michel Henry: *Können des Lebens*, p.138.

7 Cf. Michel Henry: P*aroles du Christ*, Paris 2002, p. 101.

8 With the use of the oblique case (in saying 'me' instead of 'I') Michel Henry points to the fact that the roots of the individual lie not in the ego, but in the passive reception of the primal self-affection in which we are perpetually born and kept alive. Cf. Michel Henry: *Paroles du Christ*, p. 171.

9 Cf. Michel Henry: *Können des Lebens*, p. 71.

10 Cf. Michel Henry: *Paroles du Christ*, p. 114.

11 Exist would mean in this case 'being in the world', that is, for Henry, in the modality of exteriority with regard to oneself.

12 This is nothing else than discovering that also each one of us is the miracle of the incarnation.

13 Cf. Michel Henry: *Paroles du Christ*, p. 124.

14 Cf. Michel Henry: *Können des Lebens*, p. 44.

15 See, in this respect, Rolf Kühn: *Geburt in Gott. Religion, Metaphysik, Mystik und Phänomenologie*. Freiburg: München 2003, pp. 35–36

16 Cf. Adrián Navigante. „Das Problem der Selbst-Affektion in nicht-christlichen Religionen am Beispiel des Hinduismus". In: *Jahrbuch für Religionsphilosophie* (Band = 16). Edited by Markus Enders und Holger Zaborowski. Freiburg: München 2017, pp. 86–122, especially p. 87.

17 Cf. Rolf Kühn: *Geburt in Gott*, p. 9.

18 Cf. Rolf Kühn: *Ibidem*, 2003, p. 12, and also Adrián Navigante, „Das Problem der Selbst-Affektion in nicht-christlichen Religionen am Beispiel des Hinduismus", in: *Jahrbuch für Religionsphilosophie* (Band = 16), p. 92.

19 Cf. Adrián Navigante: *Ibidem*, p. 90.

20 Cf. Rolf Kühn: *Geburt in Gott*, p. 212.

21 Cf. Michel Henry: *Radikale Religionsphänomenologie. Beiträge 1943-2001*, edited by Rolf Kühn and Markus Enders. Freiburg/München 2015, p. 97.

22 Cf. Meister Eckhart: „Liber parabolarum Genesis", in: *Lateinische Werke I,* Stuttgart 1964, p. 327. The theological presupposition is that the intellect is the highest value in the whole order of living being – which makes it possible to speak of the human being as *imago Dei*.

23 Cf. Meister Eckhart: „Sermo 54", in: *Lateinische Werke IV*, Stuttgart 1956, p. 445.

24 Cf. Meister Eckhart: „Expositio Sancti Evangelii Secundum Iohannem", in: *Lateinische Werke III*, Stuttgart 1994, p. 270.

25 Cf. Meister Eckhart: "Predigte 22", in: *Deutsche Werke I*, Frankfurt 2008, p. 259.

26 Cf. Meister Eckhart: "Predigte 27", in: *Deutsche Werke I*, Frankfurt 2008, p. 313.

27 Cf. Meister Eckhart: "Predigte 29", in: *Deutsche Werke I*, Frankfurt 2008, p. 333.

28 Cf. Meister Eckhart: „Expositio in Sapientiam", in: *Lateinische Werke II*, Stuttgart 1992, p. 612.

29 Cf. Meister Eckhart: „Predigte 104", in: *Deutsche Werke IV*, Stuttgart 2003, p. 571.

30 Cf. in this connection Michel Henry: „Hinführung zur Gottesfrage: Seinsbeweis oder Lebenserprobung?", in: *Meister Eckhart – Erkenntnis und Mystik des Lebens*, Freiburg/ München 2008, pp. 64-78, here p. 73.

31 Cf. Rolf Kühn: „Lebensmystik. Ursprüngliche

Erfahrungseinheit von Religion und Ethik im Spiegel ‚philosophischer Mystik'", in: *Radikalphänomenologische Studien zu Religion und Ethik*. Dresden 2018, p. 74.

32 Cf. Rolf Kühn: *Ibidem*, p. 44. Cf. also Michel Henry: *C'est moi la vérité*, p. 75.

33 Self-experience of Life has a 'passive' character because Life is generated without creation-acts in the causal sense of the term (where the effect is separated from its cause); it is at the same time the highest 'act' because life-generation out of an absolute source can only come from a divine being that knows no separation and (perpetually) creates in the non-causal immanence of its own power.

34 John Woodroffe's assimilation of Tantra and Veda in terms of Yuga-Śāstras is a clear example of this strategy that ultimately tended to make Hinduism compatible with English Protestantism (cf. Arthur Avalon: *Principles of Tantra,* Madras 1962, pp. 41-42, and also Kathleen Taylor: Sir John Woodroffe. *Tantra and Bengal. 'An Indian Soul in a European Body?'*, London/New York 2001, pp. 176-177.

35 Cf André Padoux: *Comprendre le tantrisme. Les sources hindoues*. Paris 2010, p. 27, also Hugh B. Urban: *The power of Tantra. Religion, Sexuality and the Politics of South Asian Studies*, New York 2010, p. 4.

36 The term *kula* points to the clan as a pool of divine forces, which means that there is no distinction between the reunion of the adepts and the manifold energies of the Goddess brought together by the ritual. Kula could in this sense also be taken as a group of (activated) divine forces.

37 Cf. David Gordon White: *Kiss of the Yogini. 'Tantric Sex' in its South Asian Contexts*, London 2003, p. 6.

38 Cf. Urban: *The Power of Tantra*, p. 21.

39 Cf. in this respect André Padoux: *Comprendre le tantrisme*, p. 43, and David Gordon White: *Kiss of the Yogini*, p. 28. For the relationship between local and tribal traditions as the background of Yoginī cults, cf. Vidya Dehejia: *Yoginī Cult and Temples. A Tantric Tradition,* Delhi 1986, especially pp. 1-2.

40 The bond between the yakṣinīs and the world of vegetation makes them strictly 'local spirits', that is, spirits related to very concrete natural settings – for which reason the word 'spirit' does not appear adequate to translate the term. As to the 'mothers', their earliest recorded appearance in *Mahābhārata* (III, 213, 214 and 219) already underscores their allegiance to non-Brahmanic gods (Skanda) as well as their ambivalent character (they are sent to kill him, but they feed and nurture him).

41 David Gordon White speaks of 'vulval essence' (cf. *Tantra in Practice*, Princeton 2000, p. 16).

42 In *Tantrāloka* (29.128b) Abhinavagupta mentions the 'purity' of fluids because of their proximity to consciousness (cf. John Dupuche: *The Kula Ritual as Elaborated in Chapter 29 of the Tantraloka*, Delhi 2003, p. 181, note 2).

43 Cf. In this respect, see among others David G. White: *Kiss of the Yogini*, p. 13.

44 Cf. Arthur Avalon's introduction to *The Serpent Power. Being the Sat-Cakra-Nirupana and Paduka-Pancaka. Two works on Laya-Yoga,* edited and translated by Arthur Avalon (Sir John Woodrooffe), New York 1974, p. 31, and also *The Kaulajnananirnaya, The Esoteric Teaching of Matsyendrapada*, edited and translated by Pandit Satkari Mukhopadhyaya in collaboration with Stella Dupuis, New Delhi 2012, p. 85.

45 It should be noted that in the Tantric practice of visualization of Deities [*dhyāna*], images are not at all conceived as 'abstractions of the spirit', but rather as ontological concretions. The same applies to the (phonic) 'substance' of mantras.

46 Cf. David Gordon White: *Kiss of the Yogini*, p. 79, and also André Padoux: *Comprendre le tantrisme*, p. 40.

47 "In the shaivite traditions of Kula, the deities inhabit the body and animate the senses", André Padoux: *Comprendre le tantrisme*, p. 124.

48 Cf. Hugh Urban: *The Power of Tantra*, pp. 19-20.

49 Cf. Hugh Urban: *Ibidem*, p. 102.

50 Cf. Jean-Pierre Chaumeil: « Une façon d'agir dans le monde. Le chamanisme amazonien », in : *D'une anthropologie du chamanisme vers une*

anthropologie du croire Hommage à l'œuvre de Roberte Hamayon. Sous la direction de Katia Buffetrille, Jean-Luc Lambert, Nathalie Luca et Anne de Sales (Études Mongoles & Sibériennes Centrasiatiques & Tibétaines), 2013, pp. 109-135, here pp. 115–117.

51 Cf. Jean-Pierre Chaumeil: « Sobre la etnografía amazónica. La monografía como proceso de construcción permanente (El trabajo de campo entre los Yagua, Perú)", in: *Revista de Dialectología y Tradiciones Populares*, (vol. LXIII, n.1, enero-junio 2008), pp. 237-248, here p. 244-245.

52 Cf. Philippe Descola: *La composition des mondes. Entretiens avec Pierre Charbonnier,* Paris 2014, pp. 207-208, and also Philippe Descola: *Une écologie des relations*. Paris 2019, p. 46.

53 Cf. Philippe Descola: *Par-delà nature et culture*, Paris 2005, p. 187.

54 Cf. Eduardo Viveiros de Castro: *Cannibal Metaphysics. For a post-structural anthropology,* translated and edited by Peter Skafish, Minneapolis 2014, p. 68.

55 Cf. Viveiros de Castro: *Ibidem*, p. 69

56 Cf. Elsje Maria Lagrou: *Cashinahua Cosmovision: a Perspectival Approach to Identity and Alterity*, St. Andrews 1998, p. 31: "For Amerindians the universe is transformative. This means that vision can suddenly change before our eyes. The world is also understood to be multi-layered, several worlds are thought to be simultaneously present and always connected, although not always perceptible".

57 Cf. Viveiros de Castro: *The Relative Native. Essays on Indigenous Conceptual Worlds,* Chicago 2015, p. 234. This does not mean that a subject literally creates other beings (since that would be a 'representation of creation' with fixed poles: creator and created). It means rather that other beings are concretely and dynamically impregnated by the perspective of each subject (all of them are at the same time creators and created), since each perspective opens a whole world of relations.

58 Cf. Lagrou: *Cashinahua Cosmovision*, p. 30, and also Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, p. 66; Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native*, p. 268 and p. 278.

59 Cf. Viveiros de Castro: *The Relative Native*, pp. 209 and 229.

60 Cf. Viveiros de Castro: *The Relative Native*, p. 284.

61 Cf. Viveiros de Castro: *Cannibal Metaphysics*, p. 60.

62 The Brahmanization of Tantra and its increasing inclusion in philosophical systems after the model of the six *darśanas* marks a transition from a dominant animism to a significant analogical input. Such transitions and composite forms of cult and practice would demand another whole essay.

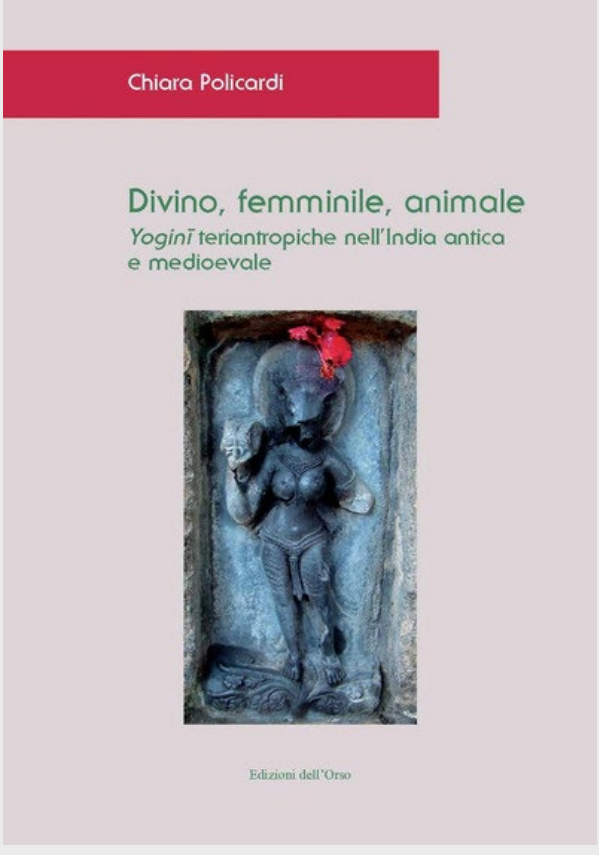
63 Cf. Philippe Descola: *La composition des mondes*, p. 251.

64 Cf. Adrián Navigante: Das Problem der Selbst-Affektion in nicht-christlichen Religionen am Beispiel des Hinduismus, in: J*ahrbuch für Religionsphilosophie* (Band = 16), p. 118.

65 The reader should be reminded that the concept of Life-World [*Lebenswelt*] was coined by Husserl at the end of his life – more precisely, in his approach to the crisis of the European sciences (1936) – questioning many of the aspects criticized by Michel Henry's Phenomenology of Life. Cf. Edmund Husserl: "Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendentale Phänomenologie". In: *Gesammelte Ausgabe.* Band VI, Haag, 1970, esp. p. 70.

BOOK REVIEW

CHIARA POLICARDI'S *DIVINE, FEMININE, ANIMAL*: A GUIDING THREAD THROUGH TANTRIC PALIMPSEST OF YOGINĪ CULTS



Chiara Policardi. *Divino, femminile, animale. Yoginī teriantropiche nell'India antica e medievale*, Alessandria, Edizioni dell'Orso, 2020. 290 pages with 3 tables, 65 images and a thematic bibliography.

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Tinged objectivity: the 'female thread'

Let's suppose that scientific research is not *exactly* what it claims to be: an objective approach delimiting substantiated description from arbitrary speculation. Even if we grant it a 'will to objectivity' (which, according to authors like Paul Ricoeur, distinguishes the historian from the story-teller), we know that no will is homogeneous and straightforward – let alone transparent. The history of scholarship is a history of positions, interests, modes and strategies of power and legitimation; and sometimes such strategies betray the asymptotic objectivity envisaged by the scientific will. The inevitable tension between will-to-knowledge and will-to-power permeates the noble exercise of historical reconstruction. For the will-to-knowledge there is little or no distinction, if one proceeds 'scientifically', of race, gender, political orientation or subjective tendencies. For the will-to-power, on the contrary, knowledge is an excuse, and objectivity standards have not fallen from heaven, but are extracted from the conflict-laden arena of intellectual exchange. In this arena, the position – or *dis*position – of the researcher counts, and the more conscious he or she becomes of it, the richer the style and denser (but more unstable) the objectivity-plot.

For the Summer issue of 2017, I made an exception to the general editorial tendency of FIND's online publication (where book reviews are excluded) and wrote an article on Gioia Lussana's *La Dea che Scorre* (*The Flowing Goddess*), a book published that very year. Sometime later Gioia Lussana became one of FIND's grantees, and her research activity and practice gave their fruits even outside academic circles. This year comes the second exception: Chiara Policardi. Her book *Divino, Femminile, Animale* (2020) deserves the same treatment as that of Gioia Lussana's book. Both of them are doctoral theses. Both authors, of Italian origin, conducted their research projects under the guidance of one of the best European Sanskritists: Prof. Raffaele Torella. Both of them approach the question of female divine agency in the Hindu Tantric tradition showing a singular disposition: they are aware that their female condition cannot – and should not – be neutralized by scientific standards. They are determined to read between the lines, knowing that the eyes of a woman – when it comes to the power of the Female – cannot remain fully indifferent to the 'object of study' – because the object of study, in this case, is not severed from a certain 'real presence' and power of influence: the Goddess Kāmākhyā in the case of Lussana, the Yoginīs in the case of Policardi. This subjective marker, which can be seen as a token of arbitrariness, is actually the guiding thread in both books.

It is not about declaring devotion to a Goddess or pronouncing oneself hermeneutically vulnerable to non-human powers. George Steiner spoke of 'real presences' to underline the aura of Western classics (rendered invisible in post-structuralist Cultural Studies). Mircea Eliade observed a gradual change of personality in the historian of religions who deals with the sacred (something to which other authors like Raffaele Petazzoni and Ernesto de Martino seemed to be rather impermeable). In their own way, Gioia Lussana and Chiara Policardi show that a guiding thread in the Tantric territory, if it is the result of a female gaze can reveal other aspects – because another disposition is at work. Of course, these aspects will probably be cornered into the suspicious enclave of 'speculation', but the most important point is that the type and even the horizon of speculation inaugurated by such researchers is another. In his controversial *The Psychological Stages of Women's Development* (1959), Erich Neumann points to the fact that women are naturally reconnected with the (essentially maternal) Uroboric Self in such a way that they don't need to go through the stage of full detachment from it – as men

do, disclosing the everlasting polarity between cultural achievement and neurotic symptom. Such a statement about female psychodynamics may alarm feminists who think that the only type of *ratio* – to be conquered by women – is what has crystallized on a cultural level out of masculine psychology, but it should interest researchers in the field of Tantric studies. This is no question of 'essences', but of dispositions, tendencies and ways of looking – we may add: ways of reading and experiencing. 'Logocentrism' is a cross-cultural feature of male dominance, but as such it cannot be eradicated, since it is part and parcel of deep-rooted intelligibility processes. Transformations should be rather silent and enduring. What should become visible are the unseen inscriptions of the cultural palimpsest we once thought homogeneous and one-stringed, and the gender optic – here to be distinguished from the hardcore political question of feminism – is a very important reference to introduce significant differences and broaden the field.

A multidisciplinary approach: doing justice to the complexity of the Yoginīs

Policardi's book is a very solid piece of research dealing with at least three fields of knowledge not so easily brought together in a coherent manner: philology, iconography and a combination of ethnology and history of religions. In order to approach the question of these enigmatic beings within the Tantric tradition called 'Yoginīs', Policardi plunges into the earliest Tantric texts of Vidyāpīṭha Shaivism (where the Yoginīs are first mentioned), such as the *Brahmayāmalatantra* and *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* (both of which can be dated back to the VII century CE), as well as into the most important Kaula texts concerning the subject, like the *Kaulajñānanirṇaya* (between IX and XI centuries CE) and the *Ṣaṭsāhasrasaṃhitā* (XII century CE). This choice already bears witness to the courage of the author: apart from exegetical problems concerning the partial edition of the Sanskrit manuscripts in question and their linguistic peculiarities (esoterically upgraded by means of the emic terms *aiśa* and *ārṣa*), the earliest Tantric texts demand a consideration of their immediate past, which is that of local and tribal cults. One cannot think of the Yoginīs without bearing in mind this effaced layer of the Tantric palimpsest, but the problem arises as to how to read coherently pre-Brahmanic references of an extra-textual nature in a Sanskritized textual corpus. This aspect inevitably forces Policardi to widen her research parameters to ethnology and history of religions. In the same way, some Kaula texts, like chapter XV of the *Ṣaṭsāhasrasaṃhitā*, inevitably lead to an extension of the research field from Tantric to Purāṇic territory. In taking this step, the author is faced with a mythological universe interacting with ritual prescriptions and rendering visible the complex integration of marginal esoteric trends within the orthodox Brahmanic mainstream. At the same time, the Kaula corpus contains detailed descriptions of Yoginī-*pūjā*, whose visualization techniques introduce contents related to temple iconography. For Policardi, iconographic representations of the Yoginīs are an indispensable complement to textual sources and should therefore be integrated into the scope of her research. She courageously plunges into an analysis of the Orissa temples of Hīrāpur, Rānīpur and Jharial as well as the Bherāghāṭ temple in Madhya Pradesh. But not only that. She also bears in mind the portals of Dabhoi and Jhinjhuwada in Gujarat and, following Purāṇic traces, some Yoginī-drawings in a pictorical map of Kāśī dating back to the early XIX century. Such references permit her not only to gain a comprehensive and integral view of the hybrid beings called 'Yoginīs', but also to reinterpret the status and value of local deities and their subsequent incorporation into iconographic canons.

Yoginī and lion: miniature on paper; late XVIII century. Salarjung Museum, Hyderabad. Source: Dehejia, *Yogini Cult and Temples: A Tantric Tradition*, 1986, p. 12.

This methodological decision shows how sceptical Policardi remains in the face of an interpretation of the Yoginī cult as merely based on the medieval Shaiva textual canon. Her references to the demonization of *ḍākinīs* in the *Siddhayogeśvarīmata* (26.40.), a form of subordination to the god Shiva, as well as the association of composite, fluid and forest-related beings (*gaṇas*, *yakṣiṇīs* and *mātṛs*) with a strong discontinuity tendency in the face of Brahmanic inclusivism reveal that she is engaged in highlighting the religious and socio-cultural value of female divine agency, not only as one more element in the Hindu medieval landscape, but also as a heterodox tissue whose potentialities still have to be displayed and could – to a certain extent – change perception of the Shakta realm.

Evasive content: fluidity and antinomic power

The question of Policardi's approach to the

Yoginīs, which I have sought to present from the perspective of method, can also be tackled from the point of view of content. Every reader will notice the problem of knowing what Yoginīs actually are; the spectrum of possibilities for any definition is so broad that it may generate a sense of disorientation or even confusion. Are they goddesses, female demons, supernatural agents, intermediate beings, forest spirits, female adepts [*śakti*, *sādhikā*], tribal witches, chakra-deities, hypostases of a Shakti-principle or symbolic supports of an ascetic *imitatio animalis*? Of course, each aspect, as long as it appears in (or can be plausibly deduced from) textual or iconographical sources, is valid, but instead of going into the one and the other characterization (risking an incoherent compilation of roles and functions), Policardi seeks a guiding thread by pointing to the Yoginīs' hybrid nature, expressed in a double-bind sort of complementary duplicity: they have human and animal features; they have divine and demonic powers. This is also the reason why the author prefers to focus on the therianthropic rather than on the theriomorphic component. Such a distinctive feature of the Yoginīs is chosen not only because it has been barely researched, but also because it provides an articulation of spheres. For example, the already-mentioned divine-demonic [*deva-nāraka*] coupling bears an essential relation to the thematization of animal features as representing alien powers, which means that the religious content of the Yoginī cults is alien to the village [*kṣetra*] and rather close to the forest [*vana*]. In the village there is the codified pantheon, while in the forest the 'otherness' (in the sense of the alien or foreign: *araṇa*) comes to the fore – and it comes in a concrete manner, joining antithetic poles and questioning the fixity of values. Yoginīs are the ritual and mythical concretion of that otherness that humans encounter in natural settings, where conventional forms of socialization (even with divine beings) do not play a dominant role. Out in the forest, deities are not tame. Perhaps they are demons. Perhaps they are coupled with the reverse-side of the brahmanically-socialized feminine. Policardi shows that Yoginīs are the incarnation of an exteriority that cannot be objectified – since otherwise the ritual encounter [*yoginīmelaka*] would never take place – *but has to be channelled from the very field of experience that constitutively includes it.* Such an encounter, the expressions of which vary from possession [*āveśa*] to copulation [*maithuna*], vehiculates the whole power of that exteriority in the life of conventionally socialized humans.

If the fluid character encompassing the human and the non-human is essentially related to the feminine, Policardi shows that heroic status in the ritual Tantric context is ascribed to male adepts who manage to bear, channel and harness those powers. Of course, there is a considerable difference between the ritual orthopraxy of a Brahmin who separates the pure [*śuddha*] from the impure [*aśuddha*] and the antinomic practice of a tāntrika with a non-dual behaviour facing the metamorphic powers of Yoginīs or Mothers. However, if

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we take the liminal, fluid, transgressive and excessive character of female divine agency seriously, that distinction is relative. Policardi's book gives the reader some hints for further reflexion on what I would call the 'dilemma of Shaktism'. What does it consist of? If we consider the tribal roots of Shakti cults (of the type related to *mātṛs* and *yoginīs*), they transcend the textual evidence in which they are inscribed. A purely philological approach would not question the only reliable framework in which such beings come to presentation, and this is what Policardi acknowledges with citations of André Padoux on the Shaivite character of terrible female deities and Alexis Sanderson on the construction of the Shaiva canon and the characterization of Shakta variants as constitutive parts of it. However, an attentive reader will notice that Policardi highlights not only the ambivalence of Mothers and Yoginīs from the point of view of their intrinsic nature. This ambivalence is a kind of pivot around which different world-configurations rotate – one of which seems to be dominated by female agency, even when the center of the ritual *maṇḍala* is occupied by Shiva-Bhairava. This pivot manifests itself in expressions like *siddhipradāyakā* (referred to devīs and yoginīs) in the *Brahmayāmalasāra* (12.1b) and *Brahmayāmalatantra* (73.47d). That these beings have the ability of granting special powers can be regarded from two different optics: 1. As source of power to be harnessed by male practitioners (this end justifying the manipulation of the means), 2. As a sign of the expansive power of female agency permeating the universe of male dominance (and enfeebling the manipulative homogenization). Once again, the second optics does not oppose the female to the male in the way feminism opposes male domination. The expansive power of female agency means many things at the same time: first of all, the center of the ritual maṇḍala dominated by a god (as a unifying hierarchical and metaphysical principle) fades before a multiplicity of natural powers interacting with ritual practitioners. Secondly, the limits of the human and the non-human are re-defined within a non-vertical continuum of forces, that is, a spectrum in which the animal and the divine not only coexist but are also interpenetrated. Lastly, 'logocentric' attempts – always a result of patrilinear structures – may build structures of 'the spirit' (which means, at a social level, a scholastic elite), but such cultural and even soteriological refinements are incapable of containing the fluid matter of life, overflowing limits which are ultimately blurred and not at all impermeable.

The dilemma of Shaktism

Policardi expresses the 'dilemma of Shaktism' by means of the question as to whether the cult of female deities like Mothers and Yoginīs has actually become Tantric or *whether the Tantric phenomenon emerged from those practices and cults*. This question may be purely speculative from the point of view of textual interpretation, but it is legitimate if we bear in mind the multidisciplinary approach followed by the author. Neither ethnology nor history of religions is any longer dominated by the standards of European humanism, according to which ritual, cultic and religious phenomena are subordinated to a normative notion of 'high culture' and in many cases to a teleology of secularization (the previous stage of which is scholastic metaphysics). Perhaps the most interesting aspect of Policardi's book is that her insistence on the liminality, the otherness-character and the fluidity of hybrid beings like Mothers and Yoginīs goes beyond the usual interpretation of animals' features as instances of symbolization – since symbolization processes are a passage from a gross (primitive, local, tribal, material and exterior) form of ritual practice to a much subtler or more refined (developed, widespread, unifying, interior and spiritual)

View of *yoginī* along the portico, with horse-faced Śrī Eruḍi, in foreground and pig- or deer-faced *yogini*. Temple of Bherāghāṭ. Photo by Chiara Policardi

one. Although the author makes it clear that composite deities (with intertwined human and animal features) are manifold in the classical Hindu pantheon, the relationship of Yoginīs with the tribal background of Shakta Tantra calls for an interpretation that may do justice to a world-configuration significantly different not only from Vishnuism as a recipient of devotional and personalistic forms of Brahmanic worship, but also from the scholastic systematization of different Shaiva cults. Policardi is quite aware of this. She highlights the cultural centrality of female deities, the existing bridge between their nudity [*nagnarūpa*] and their power of transmutation [*rūpaparivartana*] as well as the embodied hybridization of human and non-human as one of their intrinsic features (expressed in composite terms like *kharaṅgāvasthitā*, *śvānāṅgāvasthitā*, *uṣṭrāṅgāvasthitā*, etc.). Therianthropy is, *stricto sensu*, no representation, no symbolic instance of something that lies beyond ritual performance and cultic techniques. Were it so, the symbolic instance would have the function of 'elevating the animal' to something that *it is not*. Even if we think of the mask-like delimitation of animal faces in Yoginī temple sculptures – where the rest of the head is clearly human (for example, the hair style), they do not merely 'symbolize' animal-power. They express the absence of ontological disjunction between human and non-human – which can

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be traced back to the animistic setting of forest rituals. They de-limit, in the sense of joining and blurring ontological boundaries. As Policardi says: even if we think of these 'masks' as ritual tools, they do not 'separate' two natures (the real human and the imaginary animal) but join the human and animal elements in a logic of becoming in which the distinction between real and imaginary as we usually conceive it is not valid. Theriocephalic *de*-limitation of the human seems to be the ultimate consequence of the Yoginīs' nakedness, that is, revelation of their transformative powers to the point of questioning already-established and even naturalized values – including those shaping a vertical distribution of beings.

Needless to say, the world-configuration that opens through the Shakta lens of the Yoginīs cannot be grasped by means of the usual *diairesis* between subtle and gross, transparent and obscure, beneficial and detrimental. If one considers the powers in question and their effects, conceptual devices that seem obvious become altogether questionable. This is the only point in the book with regard to which I would express a critical note of dissent. Policardi masterfully leads us into the universe of Yoginī cults to the point of showing its reverse side, and she seems to indicate that at least an important part of the Tantric tradition *should be (re-)read from that reverse side*. She points to male practitioners harnessing the power of female deities, but she highlights their being possessed as a sign of subordination to that female power. She points to the male standpoint in the construction of the Tantric corpus, but she does not renounce another map of reading, where the female perspective may gain the upper hand. She reverses the value of the female-animal pair from a status of metaphysical inferiority to that of esoteric singularity. Such operations indicate that many things would undergo a significant change if one were to pursue that cursory glance into the reverse-side of Tantra as *śākta kulamārga* from tribal domains: 1. Animal power would not appear inferior but is amalgamated with the divine in a deep horizontal structure. 2. Symbolism and internalization would not be associated with a distillation of an unmanageable *prima materia*, but rather with the domestication and even suffocation of specific ritual and ecstatic practices connected with natural powers. 3. So-called 'natural' powers would encompass what is usually called *super*natural, with the fading of the notion of 'nature' as something *substantially* external or alien to (human) culture. The type of 'culture' arising out of such tribal elements in the cult of female deities is one in which nothing is objectified as 'external' – since that would mean depriving it of its power. The animal-divine is *from the very beginning* incorporated and elaborated in a theater of cruelty (and beauty), not very far from a shamanic scenario, where ontological barriers become chaosmotic thresholds. But this approach also requires a new conceptuality, even if the process is slow and will probably meet much resistance. In this sense, some terms and references in Policardi's book should be reconsidered and perhaps eliminated altogether, such as the taken-for-granted universal validity of the opposition between 'nature'

and 'culture' (even to highlight the value of the former as 'transformative exteriority'), the understanding of *siddhis* as *super*natural powers (at least within the context analysed in the book), or the affordance theory of James Gibson as theoretical support to explain the interaction between human and non-human in the Yoginīs. This last point seems to me especially important, since the parameters of the affordance theory presuppose a natural determinism that can only be affirmed if one cancels out the universe as shown by the most singular elements of the Yoginī cults. However, the solution to such problems is also contained *in nuce* in Policardi's book. In her ample bibliographical spectrum, she quotes, among many other authors, Tim Ingold, who may well serve as a key to re-read the interaction of the human, the animal and the divine beyond the usual hermeneutical adoption of a 'natural setting' from which different (cultural) representations – among which symbols – are built. Tim Ingold questions that assumption from a phenomenological point of view, in a similar way to Philippe Descola's questioning of it from a rather structuralist optics. For these authors, the rigid scheme of 'nature' as given factual setting and 'culture' as representational construction built upon it reveals much more the domination of the modern Western lens than any universal intelligibility standard about reality. And it is precisely a consideration of pre-metaphysical, local and tribal cultural complexes (like that analysed by Chiara Policardi) that may contribute to detecting other world-configurations even when they appear already inserted in analogical or metaphysical systems tempting us to think of them as synchronic architectural units. This is no specific ethnographic matter, but an invaluable hermeneutic tool to South Asian Studies in general.

Chiara Policardi's *Divine, Feminine, Animal* guides us through the abyssal palimpsest of Yoginī cults with a sense of safety. As Raffaele Torella points out in his foreword, the author sails through the tempests of fragmentariness, irregularity and overflow of material on the textual and iconographic level with remarkable intelligence and self-confidence. I would add the following: she leads us to another shore, the landscape of which is barely visible, since we are still dependent on the lens used to observe and participate in the previous one. I hope she does not abandon us at this stage and pursues her extraordinary research work with the same determination and diligence – as if driven by the *śaktipāta* of her hybrid deities – to shed more light on this barely explored territory. •

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