

RELIGION AS A GAME OF MIND: IOAN P. CULIANU'S PERSPECTIVE, AN OPEN DOOR FOR INTERCULTURAL DIALOGUE

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Abstract: *Ioan Petru Culianu (1950-1991) was a Romanian-born scholar. He graduated Letters in Romania (University of Bucharest), and Religious Studies in Italy (Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Milan), finished his PhD in France (Université Paris-Sorbonne, Paris IV), worked in the Netherlands (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen) and finally in the United States of America (University of Chicago Divinity School). Starting as a historical-approach specialist in Gnosticism and Renaissance Magic, Culianu moved in his last years toward a cognitive approach of religion, to conclude in his last book, *The Tree of Gnosis* (first published in 1992) that religion can be described as a game of mind.*

This paper will delineate from many of Culianu's finished articles and books, and from some projects he never had the chance to finish, what he understands by "religion as a game of mind", and what are some possible outcomes of such a viewpoint. One of the most important achievable results is the door for a peaceful intercultural dialogue that it opens.

Keywords: *Ioan Petru Culianu, Religion, mind game, intercultural dialogue*

Introduction

Human brain has not changed much since the beginning of *Homo sapiens*, and yet humans are so different. Our differences manifest not only in physiognomy, but also in culture; including languages, traditions and religions. Many were the objects of dispute during our history. One of the most long-lasting issue that has generated (and still do) wars and casualties is religion.

'Religion' is a generic term for many things: firstly, there is the belief: in gods, spirits, sacred, supernatural, and so on; secondly, there are the myths, rituals, taboos, etc.; thirdly, there are the theologies (including the confessional study of a particular religion) and the structures involved (e.g. Catholic or Orthodox Church); finally, religious is normally opposed

only to profane, but today there is a trend called “spiritual but not religious” (SBNR)¹ which differentiates between people who consider themselves as being only ‘spiritual’, not profane or religious, and people who belong to a specific religion.

Adjacent to religion in all these meanings, there is the academic research of it, named here Scientific Study of Religion (SSR; the eliadian name conventionally used in Romania, i.e. History of Religion, is included as a subspecies of SSR).

This study concentrates on Ioan Petru Culianu’s (1950-1991) scientific point of view regarding religion. Culianu called it with a name used by a savant he admired, D’Arcy Wentworth Thompson: *morphodynamics*. His innovative perspective was exhaustively illustrated in the study case of Gnosticism, one of the domains of Culianu’s expertise. This article will delineate briefly the main lines of Culianu’s viewpoint (named here, as in other studies: *Culianu’s model*²) and the way he defines religion, focusing in the end on a major possible (and desirable) outcome: intercultural dialogue between people of different religions.

Culianu’s model

Culianu is mainly known (by the general public) as a disciple of Mircea Eliade. But their relationship is more than a master-disciple one³: maybe it started as one, but in time Culianu proved that he mastered also the domain of Religious Studies. Eliade remained Culianu’s mentor for all his life, but their methods of research and scholarly approach of religion were completely different. Here it is not the place to insist more on this issue⁴, because the purpose is to apprehend Culianu’s model of religion as a game of mind. In his last books and studies he developed more his intuitions, but these appeared in his earlier books and articles as well. For example, in *Les Gnosés dualistes d'Occident* Culianu already stated: the dualism is “un proces de gândire care, o dată pus în mișcare, produce de la sine o infinitate de variante perfect previzibile, plecând de la o simplă analiză logică” (“a thinking process that starting from a simple logical analysis, once set in motion produces by itself an infinity of

¹ See a recent review of this issue in Boaz Huss, *The Sacred is the Profane, Spirituality is not Religion*

² A concise study in Dorin David, *Conceptualizing Culianu’s Model*

³ Dorin David, *De la Eliade la Culianu* [From Eliade to Culianu]

⁴ For details, see Dorin David, *De la Eliade la Culianu* [From Eliade to Culianu], *Religion and Power in Ioan Petru Culianu’s View and From Morphology (Eliade) to Morphodynamics (Culianu)*.

predictable variants"; *my translation D.D.*). Some of these variants remained simple virtualities, some struggled hard to survive, but only few won. For example, in the case of Christianity, it is known today only by specialists or historians that from all many variants of early Christianity, Arianism replaced the Trinitarian Christianity as the official religion for a short period of time (359-364). Arius claimed that Jesus was created and inferior to God the Father, and not equal to the Father, one with the Father, and of the same substance (*homoousios*). It was Theodosius I, the last Emperor of the Roman Empire who replaced back Arianism with Christianity; the first was extinguished, the latter won. As it is well known, soon the Roman Empire will divide in two: Latin or western part, and Greek or eastern part, a division between Rome and Constantinople that will lead to the Great Schism of Christianity in 1054.

The dispute regarding the nature of Christ, i.e. 'divine' versus 'human', is clearly explained by Culianu's model: all the controversies that took many years and consumed a lot of energy, from which some ended in powerful doctrines, are in fact variants starting from the same premises, and which could be deduced logically. They can be illustrated as in Figure 1, where it can also be seen the arborescent structure intuited by Culianu.

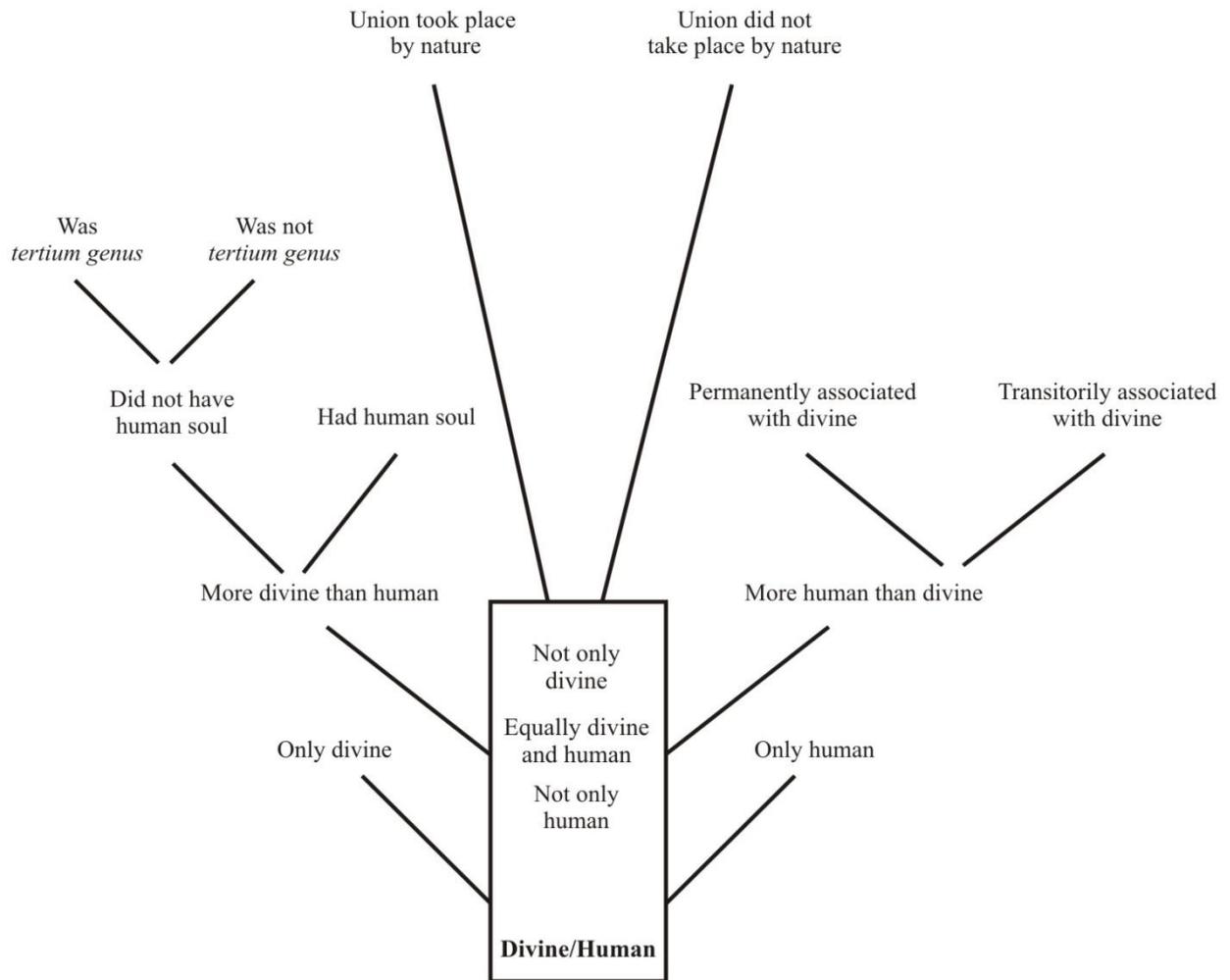


Figure 1. The nature of Christ in Culianu’s model

The same applies to religion in general: Culianu saw it as a thinking system, started by the human mind, and moved through history by a specific set of rules; in Culianu’s words, as a combination of ‘ideal objects’. What are those? “Ideal objects are systems operating in a logical dimension and cannot go beyond their (generally quite simple) premises. Systems are fractalic in nature, that is, they tend to produce solutions ad infinitum according to (simple) production rules. And they interact with each other in quite strange ways, forming other systems whose general pattern of uncanny complexity may be called history”.⁵

Understood like this, Culianu’s model has not only the obvious “consequence: it solved the problem of the false origin of religion or the inexplicable transmission of similar

⁵ Ioan Petru Culianu, *The Tree of Gnosis*, 21

‘traditions’ or ideas from and in places that could not be linked together”⁶; it also change the way people consider history, in general, and history of ideas, in particular, by adopting themorpho-dynamism in current historical disciplines. Morphodynamics means updating History with Einstein’s theory: “the study of events in space-time”⁷; in other words to see events both synchronically and diachronically, in the same time. By adopting a cognitive approach, Culianu understood that his model showed that all ideas appearing to us as being separated in time, were in fact synchronous: they formed ideal objects, which “cross the surface of history called time as the spoon crosses Soupland, that is, in an apparently unpredictable sequence of temporal events.”⁸

Even one understands how the system works in Culianu’s view, the main problem is the complexity of data one cannot handle in a lifetime. Culianu is optimistic that sometime our technology will develop enough to help us understanding history in the respect. Until then we can see how morphodynamics system works by using simpler, but also complex enough amount of data, e.g. the approach of many gnostics to the Book of Genesis.

Culianu imagines a game board not much different from a chess board. With today performance acquired of computer games, we can easily imagine a virtual game board, where each section (that corresponds to a square of the chess board) opens a new and unlimited world of surprises⁹. In the first section, gamers face these choices: I. There are two principles: 1. God and 2. The Abyss, the Darkness, and the Waters (taken separately or collectively). II. God created everything (including the Abyss, the Darkness, and the Waters); II.1. Genesis omitted to say so. III. Not God, but someone created everything; God of Genesis is not the “True” God.

Next sequence takes us to the 1:26, the plural God uses: I. God is the Creator of humanity, and I.1. The plural is just the *plurale maiestatis*; I.2. God had a collaborator in the creation (e.g. Sophia). II. The god of Genesis is not the true God, and: II.1. The plural is ignored, and humans were created by the god of Genesis alone; II.2. The god of Genesis created humanity with the help of Archons.

⁶ Dorin David, *Conceptualizing Culianu’s Model*

⁷ Ioan Petru Culianu, *The Tree of Gnosis*, xii

⁸ Ioan Petru Culianu, *The Tree of Gnosis*, 3. About the analogy with the soup (*Flatland*), see also Dorin David, *From Morphology (Eliade) to Morphodynamics (Culianu)*, 746

⁹ All details, with examples, in Ioan Petru Culianu, *The Tree of Gnosis*, 245-247

We move to 2:7 and find out that someone blew the breath of life to Adam: 1. the Creator of Adam did; 2. someone else did; and he or she blew: a. his/her own breath; b. someone else's breath. These give us four possible combinations: 1.a. the Creator of Adam blows his/her own breath into Adam's nostrils; 1.b. the Creator of Adam blows someone else's breath; 2.a. someone else than the Creator of Adam blows his/her own breath; 2.b. someone else than the Creator of Adam blows somebody else's breath.

Few squares away there is another sequence (3:1) where the Snake makes its appearance. So: 1. the Snake is the representative of God; 2. the Snake is not the representative of God; 2.A. it is the representative of the Demiurge; or. 2.B. it is the representative of someone else.

This was the kind of a game that theologians, gnostics and philosophers played very seriously. It should have placed only in mind of these individuals, without the interference of authority. Which did not happened, and the results were awful for those who did not have the power. When the game of mind is replaced by the game of power, usually the consequences are undesirable.

Religion as a game of mind, an open door for intercultural dialogue

From the above summary of Culianu's model, and from his own assumptions, it is obvious that his theory did not limit to Gnosticism or Christianity, but to religion in general. Moreover Culianu's model could be applied to philosophy¹⁰, to science and even to literature. These are still waiting for scholars willing to concentrate their research in this direction. In what regard religion, by understanding Culianu's model and its application, people will soon realize that many of the certainties taken for granted are nothing more, but nothing less than conventions adopted at some particular moment, and transformed in dogmas. Therefore the declaration of Culianu is quite accurate:

To many the description of religion as a game of mind will come as a shock, and many believers will be repelled by what may seem a diminishment of their faith. They should not be. They should rather consider the extraordinary fact that, from a systemic perspective, there is no contradiction between religion and science (which are to the same extent mind games), and, moreover, there should be no

¹⁰ First attempt to apply Culianu's model in Philosophy was made in Dorin David, *A Different Perspective on Arche using Culianu's Model*, submitted to a peer-review Journal

contradiction among religions either, for where data of sufficient complexity are available, religions can be shown to correspond not only in operation (which is the operation of the mind) but likewise in the territories of reality they explore. And even when religions do not overlap, they still can be contemplated as the morphodynamic development of certain basic rules, perfectly intelligible and sometimes even sensible.¹¹

Understanding religions in this way can be only profitable for everyone; it commences the communication between people of different religions, and that is the most important outcome; a gate opened for the desirable intercultural dialogue, on a larger and larger scale, ideally to be globally as soon as possible.

Acknowledgments: *This paper is supported by the Sectoral Operational Programme Human Resources Development (SOP HRD), financed from the European Social Fund and by the Romanian Government under the project number POSDRU/159/1.5/S/134378.*

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¹¹ Ioan Petru Culianu, *The Tree of Gnosis*, 268

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