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## Discreet charm of the primary forms of religious life

From pettiness to indispensable value, such is the spectrum of opinions expressed among the men of thought on the subject of the primary forms of religious life<sup>1</sup>. I think it instructive to examine the circumstances that bring certain people to regard something as worthless what others hold in high esteem, or even as worthy of following. It would also be instructive to trace the rationale behind such negative or affirmative attitudes. Furthermore, it is instructive to note the fact that both sides have been reasserting their arguments from time immemorial, but that the battle for the place of primary forms of religious life in culture seems to be nowhere near an end. This draws me to the conclusion that they radiate a singular charm, capturing the imagination of their advocates and critics alike.

### Ancient traditions

Written accounts considering the primary forms of religious life first appear with ancient myths and mythology, whilst deeper reflection regarding the topic comes with the advent of philosophers and philosophy. One source acknowledging this is Diogenes Laertius' *Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*. In the *Introduction* to his work, he states that "some say that the study of philosophy originated with the barbarians. In that among the Persians there existed the Magi and among Babylonians and Assyrians the Chaldaei, among the Indians Gymnosophistae, and among the Celts and Gauls men who were called Druids and Semnothei, as Aristotle relates in his book on Magic, and Sotion in the twenty-

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<sup>1</sup> By the primary forms of religious life I mean here forms that emerged prior to religions, which either adopted from them some beliefs and cultural practices or replaced them with ones of their own kind. In this sense, both the Hellenic and Etruscan creeds can be considered primary forms of religion of the Roman world (cf. Jaczynowska, *Religie świata rzymskiego*, Warszawa 1987). The primary religions of Christianity could be found both in ancient Judaism and religions existing in Europe and on other continents before their Christianisation (cf. Piekarczyk, *Barbarzyńcy i chrześcijaństwo*, Warszawa 1968).

-third book of *Succession of Philosophers*"<sup>2</sup>. This short excerpt already gives us the idea that ancient philosophers found it clear that philosophy had, or could have had, its roots in the primary forms of religious life. Whilst further into the *Introduction* Laertius does inform us that not all beliefs and religious or quasi-religious practices philosophers found commendable, some being even downright objectionable, he nevertheless pictures the complex attitude philosophers had towards the problem they set out to study<sup>3</sup>.

A similar view on the primary forms of religious life is held by Plato (427-347 BC). In *Timaeus*, he contained a number of critical remarks regarding divination and augurs, commenting that "God has given the art of divination not to the wisdom, but to the foolishness of man. No man, when in his wits, attains prophetic truth and inspiration; but when... either his intelligence is enthralled in sleep, or he is demented by some distemper or possession"<sup>4</sup>. With this Plato undoubtedly positions himself as a harsh critic of this form of religious life. But he seems to be more favourable towards myth and mythology. Giovanni Reale argues that "Plato re-evaluated myth alongside the notion of logos; and, beginning from the *Gorgias* until the late dialogues, he attributes a singular importance to them". A recognised scholar of the field, Reale shows reasons behind Plato's revisiting of the myth. "These reasons are to be found in the re-evaluation of some basic theses of Orphism and of its mystical tendency, and, in general, in the predominant power of the religious component, beginning from the *Gorgias*. Myth, in sum, in Plato arises not only as an expression of the imagination, but rather as an expression of what we may call faith (Plato used the term *hope* in the *Phaedo*). Platonic philosophical discourse on certain eschatological themes, actually, from the *Gorgias* onward, in the greater part of the dialogues, becomes a form of rational faith: myth seeks a clarification of the logos and the logos complements myth"<sup>5</sup>.

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106-43 BC), famous politician, writer and philosopher of the Roman era, held a not less complex view on the primary forms of religious life, which at times defies unambiguous classification. He explored the topic in his treatises, most notably in *On the Nature of the Gods* and *On Divination*. In the former, he poses a fundamental question whether believing in the existence of gods has any legitimate grounds. He seeks to unpack the problem by applying indirect speech, that is, by adducing opinions expressed by other philosophers. The conclusion is that the existence of gods is "most probable", at least such is the "judgement" of those "led by nature". Nevertheless, Greek

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, London 1853, p. 3-4.

<sup>3</sup> For instance, Laertius finds it unacceptable "to think it impious to destroy the bodies of the dead by fire" but at the same time "allow... men to marry their mothers or their daughters" (*ibidem*, p. 8).

<sup>4</sup> See Plato, *Timaeus*, Rockville 2009, p. 152.

<sup>5</sup> "The power of faith is explicated in the myth, Plato entrusts sometimes with the task of carrying and elevating the human intelligence into the ambit and sphere of a superior vision, to pure dialectical reason, alone, in which pure reason fails to ascend but can nevertheless take possession in a mediate form; at other times, instead, Plato entrusts to the power of myth the task, when reason has achieved its extreme limits, of intuitively overcoming these limits and thus to crown and complete this effort of reason, by elevating the intelligence to a vision or at least to a transcendent tension". See G. Reale, *A History of Ancient Philosophy: Plato and Aristotle*, New York 1990, p. 30.

philosophers, whose judgement must be considered by anyone following reason, expressed diverse positions on this subject. For example, "Protagoras doubted whether there were any. Diagoras the Melian and Theodorus of Cyrene entirely believed there were no such beings". It is not only the very existence of gods that is disputed, but also whether they are concerned with things human or not. "For there are some philosophers, both ancient and modern, who have conceived that the Gods take not the least cognizance of human affairs. But if their doctrine be true, of what avail is piety, sanctity, or religion? For these are feelings and marks of devotion which are offered to the Gods by men with uprightness and holiness, on the ground that men are the objects of the attention of the Gods, and that many benefits are conferred by the immortal Gods on the human race... Piety, like the other virtues, cannot have any connection with vain show or dissimulation; and without piety, neither sanctity nor religion can be supported; the total subversion of which must be attended with great confusion and disturbance in life. I do not even know, if we cast off piety towards the Gods, but that faith, and all the associations of human life, and that most excellent of all virtues, justice, may perish with it. There are other philosophers, and those, too, very great and illustrious men, who conceive the whole world to be directed and governed by the will and wisdom of the Gods; nor do they stop here, but conceive likewise that the Deities consult and provide for the preservation of mankind"<sup>6</sup>. One way or another, it is not only belief in the existence of gods, but also that they "take cognizance in human affairs", which constitutes the very fundament of communal existence.

Cicero draws, however, a distinct line between the object of worship suited for the common people, and that of philosophers. Some examples of the philosophers' object of worship are an obscure Platonic God-Demiurge ("the operator and the builder of the World, the god of Plato's *Timaeus*"), or Stoic Pronoia ("the old prophetic dame, the 'Pronoia' of the Stoics, which the Latins call Providence"). Cicero dismisses these as "the prodigies and wonders, not of inquisitive philosophers, but of dreamers". He supplies more examples of such "prodigies and wonders", but "it is tedious to go through all, as they are of such a sort that they look more like things to be desired than to be discovered". What, then, would possess the quality of "discovery"? First and foremost, there can be no certainty neither in this subject of inquiry, nor many others related to the human conception of the nature of gods. The same goes for the nature of the world we live in, or human nature. Therefore, if no certainty can be attained, one should seek what is of utilitarian value.

In *On Divination*, Cicero asks what are the benefits of divination. *Book I* of the treaty contains the history of divination, beginning with its emergence in public and private life (first in Assyria, later in Chaldea, Egypt and Rome), as well as the opinions of philosophers who gathered "certain very subtle arguments to prove the trustworthiness of divination... Of these – to mention the most ancient – Xenophanes of Colophon, while asserting the existence of gods, was the only one who repudiated divination in its entirety; but all

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<sup>6</sup> Ciceron, *Pisma filozoficzne*, vol. I, Warszawa 1960, p. 8.

the others, with the exception of Epicurus, who babbled about the nature of the gods, approved of divination, though not in the same degree"<sup>7</sup>. Cicero, however, restricted his inquiry primarily to the Stoics, largely neglecting other philosophers "approving of" divination. A selective approach is adopted also with regard to the presentation of the divination practices of "our ancestors" (where preference is given to those of Roman origin). Cicero also suggests that divination was ridiculed by the exponents of the Middle Academy, such as Carneades, for example, who illuminated the discussion with "many pointed and exhaustive arguments".

A rational conclusion regarding the topic at hand is to be arrived at not only by the means of the presentation of the philosophical "pros and cons" in the subject of divination, but also through inquiry into its origins and the role it fulfils within the society. Cicero may insist that in such matters it is much more desired to "examine results rather than the causes", but he is quick to add that "there is a certain natural power, which now, through long-continued observation of signs and now, through some divine excitement and inspiration, makes prophetic announcement of the future". Further along he concedes that certain practices of augurs take "effect" (but "why they have it I do not know"). General conclusions and systematisations offered on the basis of such presentation are designed to be a rationalisation of sorts – to clarify the point, let us quote the distinction Cicero makes between two kinds of divination: "one, which is allied with art; the other, which is devoid of art"<sup>8</sup>. In subsequent parts of the treatise Cicero formulates a number of questions casting doubt whether divinatory beliefs and practices stand to reason (or rationality), suggesting, on the basis of his arguments, that they enjoy popularity not due to their rationality, but rather their answer to deep-seated, although not entirely conscious human needs, such as the desire to know one's future or steer clear from all sorts of calamities. For the philosopher, this "foretelling" offered by diviners is no more than "trifling, not to say foolish". But the common folk (and those remain in the great majority) are not philosophers, and do not need philosophers, nor a philosophy that seeks to undermine their sense of rationality.

## Modern traditions

Traffic between the new and the old world and subsequent waves of emigration pouring from Europe to other continents played a role in rekindling the interest of Mod-

<sup>7</sup> "For example, Socrates and all of the Socratic School, and Zeno and his followers, continued in the faith of the ancient philosophers and in agreement with the Old Academy and with the Peripatetics". See Cicero, *O różniarstwie*, in: *Pisma filozoficzne*, vol. I, op. cit., p. 234 ff.

<sup>8</sup> "Those diviners employ art, who, having learned the known by observation, seek the unknown by deduction. On the other hand those do without art who, unaided by reason or deduction or by signs which have been observed and recorded, forecast the future while under the influence of mental excitement, or of some free and unrestrained emotion". See *ibidem*, p. 250 ff. One may assume that the former is the more rational one. One may however also conclude that only the first one possesses the quality of rationality.

ernity in the primary forms of religious life. To name just a few examples illustrating the point at issue, very much in fashion were Oriental studies or seventeenth- and eighteenth-century travel books, or suffice it to mention the great success of Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*. Also philosophers had their say in the process, particularly those dismissing religion and Christian religiousness while championing, for various reasons and by different ways and means, pre-Christian religions. Allow me to invoke here just two exponents of this current.

The first would be Voltaire (born Francis-Marie Arouet, 1694-1778), an avid traveller, however always within the confines of Christian Europe. His voyages led him to the conclusion that there has never been a religion more distasteful than Christianity, hence his plea: *Ecrasons l'infâme!* (*Let's crush the infamous!*). He was not only an outspoken supporter of this cause, but displayed particular zeal in putting the idea into life. As a man of letters he pursued his life-long vocation through his writings, mastering the craft admirably. Much has been said in this matter, I shall therefore only allow myself to remind the reader that Voltaire was a tremendously prolific writer (his legacy tallies as much as 52 volumes), but there is no single work in which Christianity would be cast in a role other than that of a black character.

One fitting example of this thoughtfully devised and unrelentingly executed attack on Christianity is his treaty *On Tolerance in connection with the death of Jean Calas* (1763). It speaks not only of tolerance, but also intolerance, much like the one leading to indictment and capital punishment of the individual figuring in the title<sup>9</sup>. Right at the beginning of the treaty Voltaire explicitly refers to the case as the "murder of Calas", stating that "in this strange incident we have to deal with religion (the convict was a protestant – my remark), suicide, and parricide. The question was, Whether a father and mother had strangled their son to please God, a brother had strangled his brother, and a friend had strangled his friend; or whether the judges had incurred the reproach of breaking on the wheel an innocent father, or of sparing a guilty mother, brother, and friend"<sup>10</sup>. After a brief recapitulation of the "Calas affair", followed by a ruling in favour of the defendant and against the concerned tribunal, Voltaire proceeds to formulate an accusation addressing certain specific pillars of Christianity, not least "[Catholic] confraternities" ("One would say that they had taken vows to hate their brothers [Huguenots]"), or pontiffs<sup>11</sup>.

Primary forms of religious life appear later in the treatise and serve the purpose of demonstrating that ancient civilisations were more tolerant than the ones founded

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<sup>9</sup> Voltaire came across the Calas case when reading court records; he later publicised it to such an extent that during the French Revolution those in power at the time proclaimed the victim a martyr and symbol of Catholic injustice.

<sup>10</sup> "The murder of Calas, which was perpetrated with the sword of justice at Toulouse on March 9, 1762, is one of the most singular events that deserve the attention of our own and of later ages". See Voltaire, *Traktat o tolerancji napisany z powodu śmierci Jana Calasa*, Warszawa 1956.

<sup>11</sup> On the subject of pope Alexander VI, Voltaire wrote that he "had openly bought the papal tiara, and his five bastards shared its advantages", and in the matter of pope Leon X he suggested that he "paid for his pleasures, sold indulgences, as the taxes are sold in the open market".

upon Christian principles. In any case, Voltaire was not trained in the field of historical studies, nor did he have relevant historical sources at his disposal; nonetheless, "it seems to... [him] that not one of the ancient civilised nations restricted the freedom of thought" and, let us add, conscience, as "each of them had a religion, but it seems to me that they used it in regard to men as they did in regard to their gods. All of them recognised a supreme God, but they associated with him a prodigious number of lesser divinities. They had only one cult, but they permitted numbers of special systems". In support of his thesis Voltaire invokes the example of Epicureans, who "[should] deny providence and the existence of the soul", but nevertheless enjoyed tolerance. One exception to the rule seems to be "Socrates, who approached nearest to a knowledge of the Creator, is said to have paid for it, and died a martyr to the Deity"<sup>12</sup>. Similar can be said of the ancient Rome – "you will not find, from Romulus until the days when the Christians disputed with the priests of the empire, a single man persecuted on account of his opinions. Cicero doubted everything; Lucretius denied everything; yet they incurred not the least reproach". The particular instances that Voltaire provides are designed to refute the opinion disseminated by Christians that the "Romans were persecutors" (except for those several "disasters that befell a few half-Jewish, half-Christian men and women at Rome under Nero")<sup>13</sup>.

Upon demonstration, in subsequent chapters of the treaty, of the "danger of false legends" and tales of Christian oppression in ancient Rome (it is, in his words, "untruth... imposed on men too long"), and exemplification of grave "abuses of intolerance" on the part of the Catholic Church (for instance, "they approved, acclaimed, and consecrated the massacre of St. Bartholomew"), Voltaire advances to discuss the tolerance and intolerance of Jews, dedicating two chapters to examine the issue, as the problem appeared to him much more complex than it was the case with the ancient Greeks and Romans. First, he answers the following questions: "whether intolerance was of divine right in Judaism, and whether it was always practised?" Clearly, the answer to both is negative, but before he supplies it, Voltaire clarifies what he means by "divine right". It appears that he refers to the "precepts" handed down to the Jews by God commanding that Jews "should eat a lamb cooked with lettuces, and that the eaters should stand, with a stick in their hands, in commemoration of the Passover". Even those barely acquainted with Voltaire's mode of reasoning will instantly recognise the calculated mockery derogating Jewish cultural practices<sup>14</sup>. Further references to Jewish traditional customs, their holy scriptures

<sup>12</sup> "If that was really the cause of his condemnation, however, it is not to the credit of intolerance, since they punished only the man who alone gave glory to God, and honoured those who held unworthy views of the Deity. The enemies of toleration would, I think, be ill advised to quote the odious example of the judges of Socrates", *ibidem*.

<sup>13</sup> "It is incredible that there was any inquisition against the Christians – that men were sent among them to interrogate them on their beliefs – under the emperors. On that point they never troubled either Jew, Syrian, Egyptian, Druid, or philosopher. The martyrs were men who made an outcry against what they called false gods". *Ibidem*.

<sup>14</sup> Himmelfarb argues that "[Voltaire] made no efforts to conceal, in public as in private, his 'horror' of Christianity – or, even more, his horror of Judaism. The Old Testament was nothing else for him than a chronicle of cruelty, barbarism, and superstition.. (...) Many of the entries in the *Philosophical Dictionary* were

and prophets are, on the one hand, designed to convince the reader that Voltaire has mastered the subject he discusses; on the other hand, they aim to instil doubt whether Judaism passes the test of reason (rationality)<sup>15</sup>. In response to his question: "what kind of religiousness is it?", Voltaire may not go straight to the point, but his message is nevertheless clear. What kind of religiousness it may be if "Solomon was quite at his ease in idolatry. Jeroboam, to whom God had given ten parts of the kingdom, set up two golden calves", "some of the prophets secured the interest of heaven in their vengeance", and "Jews did offer human sacrifices". "We do not find in the whole history of this people any mark of generosity, magnanimity, or beneficence; yet some ray of toleration escapes always from the cloud of their long and frightful barbarism". The "ray" in question would be, for example, tolerance towards various forms of idolatric practices, customs, austerity, and so on. To prove his point, Voltaire gives an example supporting his claims regarding each "ray", with the general conclusion being that the Jewish God "not only tolerated other peoples, but took a paternal care of them"; provided, of course, much to Voltaire's doubt, God ever existed<sup>16</sup>.

Another philosopher displaying disdain for Christianity while finding considerable value in pre-Christian religions was David Hume (1711-1776), the author of, among other works, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*. Printed originally in 1777, they passed almost without notice. It was not until later in the year and publication of other essays – that is, *Of the immortality of the soul*, *Of suicide*, and the autobiographical letter titled *My own life* – that Hume captured the attention of readers, not least ecclesiastical circles, which branded the author an atheist.

*Dialogues* picture religion as a phenomenon that has little in common with divine actions, rather, its source being closer to the base practices of men. It is not by accident that it is "imprinted" in the minds of children – for they are absorptive, sensitive and not yet capable to grasp religious obfuscation and absurdities: "Having thus tamed their mind to a proper submission and self-diffidence, I have no longer any scruple of opening to them the greatest mysteries of religion". In effect, at a mature age, they "give often their assent,

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on modern as well as ancient Jews, vilifying them, in the classical mode of modern anti-Semitism, as materialistic, greedy, barbarous, uncivilised, and, again and again, usurious". See Himmelfarb, *The Roads to Modernity. The British, French, and American Enlightenments*, New York 2004, p. 156-157.

<sup>15</sup> Also, in the relevant footnotes Voltaire refers to the faculty that allows each man to judge the rationality or irrationality of things, this being "the light of natural reason" or "common sense", later distinguishing between people with "cultivated minds" and those devoid of such a virtue.

<sup>16</sup> Voltaire recognised the existence of God, but modelled after a Deistic, not Theistic, conception. He frequently touched on the idea in his writings, believing it to be a Deity that exists by necessity as something eternal (for "only nothingness can come out of nothingness"), "force and centre" (for "the universe is composed of forces and centres that have their own purpose bespeaking the omnipotent and omniscient creator"), and which is reflected in the Newtonian principles of the physical world. Apart from this, little more can be said of such a conceived God. Questions inquiring whether this Supreme Creator is infinite, omnipresent or unconfined to any place would provoke a reply in the form of another question, that is, "how can one answer such questions with our finite reason and cognition?" See Weischeld, *Die philosophische Hintertreppe, Die grossen Philosophen in Alltag und Denke*, München 1973, p. 155.

not only to the great truths of Theism and natural theology, but even to the most absurd tenets which a traditional superstition has recommended to them. They firmly believe in witches, though they will not believe nor attend to the most simple proposition of Euclid". *Dialogues*, however, does not advance atheism, but deism, namely, that "nothing exists without a cause; and the original cause of this universe (whatever it be) we call God; and piously ascribe to him every species of perfection", with the universe taken to be "nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain"<sup>17</sup>. For obvious reasons none of the Christian denominations could legitimise such an opinion. There is also no evidence that Hume sought to satisfy them. Much more than smuggling his convictions, Hume's choice of the genre of the dialogue played between Philo, Cleanthes and Demea serves as an excuse for an intellectual game challenging the reader with guessing which views are Hume's own.

In his *Natural History of Religion*, Hume, without further quizzing, presents his approach to "popular religions". He suggests that the first and most natural religion of humanity was not monotheism, but "polytheism or idolatry", that "the Gods of all polytheists are no better than the elves or fairies of our ancestors, and merit as little or any pious worship or veneration", and that "theism originates from polytheism" (adding that "the vulgar, in nations, which have embraced the doctrine of theism, still build it upon irrational and superstitious principles"); he finally arrives at its Christian form to list its internal and external defects – for example, that the "Virgin Mary... had proceeded from being merely a good woman, to usurp many attributes of the Almighty", or that terrible crimes were committed for the sake of sublime ideas ("the greatest crimes have been found, in many instances, compatible with a superstitious piety and devotion")<sup>18</sup>. All these remarks, greatly spiced with irony, mark Hume's attempt to distance himself from the religions and forms of religiousness popular throughout the eighteenth century as well as those followed in pre-Christian times.

## Sociological approach

The first to exercise a sociological approach were Émile Durkheim (1858-1917) and Max Weber (1864-1920), both greatly contributing to founding sociology as a scientific discipline. They did not simply provide a theoretical framework for this science, but applied it in practice. One significant component of the discipline was the study of the primary forms of religious life, although in this regard they expressed a difference of opinions that becomes evident upon comparison of the two seminal texts of Durkheim and Weber, respectively, *The elementary forms of religious life* and *Economy and society*. True

<sup>17</sup> See Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, in: Hume, *Principal Writings on Religion*, Oxford 2008, p. 45.

<sup>18</sup> See Hume, *Natural History of Religion*, in: Hume, *Principal Writings on Religion*, Oxford 2008, p. 182.

to their methods, both sociologists treat various religions and forms of religiousness as social phenomena that can be described and explained by accessible scientific tools. Also, each follows assumptions that constitute a sort of a methodological model that has since become a benchmark for sociological studies. The thing is, however, that the Durkheimian and Weberian methods remain in stark contrast, each producing different results, not least with regard to the primary forms of religious life.

Durkheim laid down his approach in *The rules of sociological method*. In the preface to the first edition (1895), he states that sociology is a science about social facts, providing the pertinent definition further along: "a social fact is every way of acting, fixed or not, capable of exercising on the individual an external constraint; or again, every way of acting which is general throughout the given society, while at the same time existing in its own right independent of its individual manifestations"<sup>19</sup>. By all appearances, beliefs and religious practices are social facts. Sociologists should undertake to find within them "fundamental representations or conceptions and... ritual attitudes which... have the same objective significance and fulfil the same functions everywhere. These are the permanent elements which constitute that which is permanent and human in religion". This, precisely, is the chief theme of *The elementary forms of religious life*, Durkheim's summary of the long-term research and reflections on the topic<sup>20</sup>.

Initial parts of the study contain ethnographical reports on the beliefs and religious practices of indigenous Australians and North Americans, reflecting Durkheim's fascination with this subject, expressed by such remarks, like: "there are no false religions. All are true in their fashion: all respond, if in different ways, to the given conditions of human existence". Durkheim subjected religious beliefs to scientific inquiry, introducing along the way a number of differentiations and distinctions, one of such differentiations being between beliefs and rites ("The first are states of opinions and consist of representations; the second are fixed modes of actions"). From among beliefs, he distinguished "religious thought" that divides "the world into two comprehensive domains, one sacred, the other profane"<sup>21</sup>. "This does not mean that a being can never pass from one world to the other", but it "implies a true metamorphosis", which can only succeed, in the mind of the believer, if one subjects oneself to the rite of initiation ("The initiation is a long series of ceremonies whose purpose is to introduce the young men to religious life"). Nonetheless, "the two worlds are not only conceived as separate, but as hostile and jealous rivals". Basing on these differentiations and distinctions, he then constructs definitions of *sacrum* (things sacred)

<sup>19</sup> See Durkheim, *The rules of sociological method*, New York – London, 1965 p. 13.

<sup>20</sup> "Publication of this work (in 1912 – my remark) was preceded by a long period of intense intellectual activity, during which Durkheim did not publish anything of the size of the book. (...) This volume is the most ethnological of all Durkheim's books, based entirely on ethnographic records. It was heralded by a handful of minor studies, also utilising data gathered by the anthropologists and relating, among others, to primitive societies". See Tarkowska, *Introduction to the Polish edition of The forms of religious life*, Warszawa 1990, p. xvii.

<sup>21</sup> "But sacred things should not be taken to mean simply those personal beings we call gods or spirits. A rock, a tree, a spring, a stone, a piece of wood, a house, in other words anything at all, can be sacred". See Durkheim, *The elementary forms of religious life*, Oxford 2001, p. 36.

and *profanum* (things profane) – and in the light of his findings, "sacred things are those things protected and isolated by prohibitions; profane things are those things to which such prohibitions apply and which must keep their distance from what is sacred". On this occasion Durkheim also proposed a definition of religious beliefs ("Religious beliefs are representations that express the nature of sacred things and the relations they sustain among themselves or with profane things"), and rites ("Rites are rules of conduct that prescribe how man must conduct himself with sacred things"). With this broad concept of religious phenomena, one may assume that magic and religion mutually complement and "fulfil" each other ("magic is full of religion, just as religion is full of magic"). Building on his detailed analyses, Durkheim also formulated a general definition of religion: "A religion is a unified system of practices and beliefs relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions – beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church"<sup>22</sup>.

A significant part of the study is consumed by analyses and an exposition of totemism existing among the indigenous Australians. Durkheim uses totem and clan as two key categories to unlock the religious landscape of the culture in question. "Each clan has its own exclusive totem; two different clans of the same tribe cannot have the same totem". Members of the tribe perceive their clan identification specifically, that is, they "consider each other part of the same family" on the premise that "they acknowledge mutual obligations identical to those that have always been incumbent upon kin: obligations of assistance, vengeance, mourning, the obligation not to intermarry, and so on". In other words, not only can Australian totems not socially function without clans, but also clans cannot function without totems. When considering the possible forms they can take in the tribe, Durkheim says that "certainly in most cases the objects that serve as totems belong to either the plant or the animal kingdom, but chiefly to the latter" ("the totem is normally not an individual [animal] but a species or variety"). In unusual cases, totems are associated with natural phenomena, ancestors or group of ancestors ("In this case, the clan takes its name, not from a thing or a species of real things, but from a purely mythical being"). But their possible form is not the only significant matter here, as it is also important what is the manner in which the "totemic name is acquired"; this "is more important for the organization and recruiting of the clan than for religion; it belongs to the sociology of the family rather than to religious sociology". What is also of significance is how totems have been passed through generations, as Australian tribes have developed a great variety of manners of succession. In some, "the child takes the totem of its mother, by right of birth", in others it is "transmitted in the paternal line", while still others have it that "the totem of the child is not necessarily either that of the mother or that of the father; it is that of a mythical ancestor who came, by processes which the observers recount in different ways, and mysteriously fecundated the mother at the moment of conception". This subject matter never ceases to mesmerise, but it also invites deeper reflection of a general character,

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<sup>22</sup> Ibidem, p. 46.

namely, what is the nature of obedience, coercion, authority, individual and collective creation, or integration and disintegration – or religious force, which may have been revealed to be "only the sentiment inspired by the group in its members, but projected outside of the consciousness that experience them, and objectified"<sup>23</sup>.

In the works of Max Weber fascination with such, and similar, primary forms of religious life gives way to scientific speculation – if such a name can be given to his theory of the world enchanted by various magi, sorcerers and priests, followed by disenchantment carried out by philosophers and scholars – which nevertheless leaves unsettled the dispute whether this disenchantment somehow does not enchant the human world anew. A key category of the theory at hand is not the notion of "social fact", but of "social action". In the light of the explanation supplied in the introductory part of *Economy and Society*, "social action, which includes both failure to act and passive acquiescence, may be oriented to the past, present or expected future behaviour of others (...) The 'others' may be individual persons, and may be known to the actor as such, or may constitute an indefinite plurality and may be entirely unknown to the individual"<sup>24</sup>. Below, Weber discerns several features of social action: "it may be: (1) instrumentally rational, that is, determined by expectations as to the behavior of objects in the environment and of other human beings; these expectations are used as 'conditions' or 'means' for the attainment of the actor's own rationally pursued and calculated ends; (2) value-rational, that is, determined by a conscious belief in the value for its own sake of some ethical, aesthetic, religious, or other form of behavior, independently of its prospects of success; (3) affectual (especially emotional), that is, determined by the actor's specific affects and feeling states; (4) traditional, that is, determined by ingrained habituation"<sup>25</sup>.

Subsequent parts of *Economy and Society* consist of minute analyses of actions, primarily instrumentally rational and value-rational. For it is these that best illustrate what constituted a leitmotif of the general cultural refashioning advanced by the "product of modern European civilization", namely, that it was inclined to progress "in a line of development having universal significance and value", conceived as ever broader, deeper and with a more complex rationality of thinking and practical action<sup>26</sup>. Let us just add that "examples of pure value-rational orientation would be the actions of persons, who, regardless of possible costs to themselves, act to put into practice their convictions of what seems to them to be required by duty, honor, the pursuit of beauty, a religious call, personal loyalty, or the importance of some 'cause'..." On the other hand, "action is

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<sup>23</sup> "To be objectified, they are fixed upon some object which thus becomes sacred; but any object might fulfill this function" (ibidem, p. 174).

<sup>24</sup> Weber, *Economy and Society. An outline of interpretive sociology*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 1978, p. 22.

<sup>25</sup> See ibidem, p. 24-25.

<sup>26</sup> This general direction of development followed by the "product of modern European civilization" is indicated in the *Author's Introduction to the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, London – New York 1992, p. xxvii. For extensive study on Weberian approach to rationality see Schluchter, *The Rise of Western Rationalism. Max Weber's Developmental History*, Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 1985, p. 9.

instrumentally rational when the end, the means, and the secondary results are all rationally taken into account and weighed. This involves rational consideration of alternative means to the end, of the relations of the end to the secondary consequences, and finally of the relative importance of different possible ends. Determination of action either in affectual or in traditional terms is thus incompatible with this type<sup>27</sup>. All this is intellectually confusing, to the point that the so called "product of modern European civilization" would not make head or tail of it, never mind be aware of the scale of the problem towering before him. This comes as no harm because, according to Weber's "interpretive sociology" (a phrase featuring in the subtitle of *Economy and Society*), he is not meant to clarify the problem, nor to explain it to others (this task is left to scholars like Max Weber). What he is meant to do is to pursue actions that influence others and bear the ensuing responsibility, be it succeeding in achieving the desired ends (in which case it may be deemed rational), or failing (in which case it may be deemed irrational); "from the... point of view of [instrumental rationality], value – rationality is always irrational. Indeed, the more the value to which action is oriented is elevated to the status of an absolute value, the more 'irrational' in this sense the corresponding action is". But let us not blur further this already complicated Weberian discourse.

Let us now examine Weber's view on the primary forms of religious life. He presents his approach in *Economy and Society*, but precedes it with an analysis of "sociological categories" (the above enumeration is far from complete), basic sociological categories of administration, types of governance, social orders of administration and domination, and communal relationships within ethnic groups. He examines these topics first, since they all involve complex social relations, a natural component of which has always been religious life. Primary forms of the latter are discussed in paragraphs containing the analysis and exposition of "religious groups". More precisely, Weber discusses this topic in points: (1) the origins of religion, further subdivided into "the original this-worldly orientation of religious and magical action, the belief in spirits, demons and the soul, naturalism and symbolism, pantheon and functional gods, ancestor cult and the priesthood of the family head, political and local gods, universalism and monotheism in relation to everyday religious needs", etc.; (2) magic and religion, including "magical coercion versus supplication, prayer and sacrifice, the differentiation of priests from magicians, reactions to success and failure of gods and demons, ethical deities and increasing demand upon them, magical origins of religious ethics and rationalisation of taboo, taboo norms: totemism and commensalism", etc. The presentation of the primary forms of religious life includes also a point where Weber dissects the notion of "prophet". Note, however, that the term must be invariably marked with inverted commas, as he effectively embarks

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<sup>27</sup> "Choice between alternative and conflicting terms and results may well be determined in a value-rational manner. In that case action is instrumentally rational only in respect to the choice of means. On the other hand, the actor may, instead of deciding between alternative and conflicting ends in terms of a rational orientation to a system of values, simply take them as given subjective wants and arrange them in a scale of consciously assessed relative urgency" (ibidem, p. 26).

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on a desacralisation of this social "functionary" (exposing, for example, underpinnings of his "certain personal charisma" and social function). *Economy and Society* is a rather lengthy work (its English translation is almost fifteen hundred pages long), of which approximately fifty pages are devoted to analyses and presentations of the primary forms of religious life, and these are hardly driven by fascination or admiration. Rather, what drives the book is intellectual distance and evaluation in categories of this bygone world that has largely lost its capacity to enchant modern Europeans. To cut a long story short, in *Economy and Society*, Weber demystifies not only this world, but also the very charm it exerts, the same charm empowering Durkheim's *The elementary forms of religious life* (and many other contemporary works of ethnologists and cultural anthropologists).