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Religio. 1997, vol. 5, iss. 1, pp. [21]-35

ISSN 1210-3640 (print); ISSN 2336-4475 (online)

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/124782>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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Biology, Sociology and the Study of Religion: Two Lectures

Luther H. Martin

In the following two lectures, I should like (1) to suggest a thoroughly *natural* rather than *supernatural* (or metaphysical) basis for the study of religion and (2) illustrate this approach from the Hellenistic mystery cults.¹ In juxtaposing the natural with the social sciences and with the humanities, I do not intend to join the discussion about the relationship *between* science and religion, a discussion that has as its goal some sort of scientific validation for traditional religious claims. Rather than such an exercise in apologetics, my intent is to suggest a scientific explanation for religion and, consequently, for its study.

1. Biology, Sociology and Religion

The study of religion has made remarkable progress since its nineteenth-century origins out of liberal Protestant theology, especially in those institutions unattached to divinity schools – state university in the United States, for example. Nevertheless, metaphysical „survivals“ still characterize our field. These are most evident in the various *sui generis* definitions of „religion.“ If we are to take seriously an academic or scientific *study* of religion, however, we must distance our study from its discursive *practice*, viz. theology, and with it the metaphysical legitimization with which it has been so implicated in Western culture at least since Aristotle (*Metaph.* 1026^a19; see 1064^b3).

The term „metaphysics“ was not, of course, Aristotle’s but was employed by his Hellenistic commentators in reference to the untitled group of texts he wrote „after those he wrote on nature“ (*meta ta physika biblia*). Medieval

1 These lectures were first delivered in December 1996 at the Institute for the Study of Religions, Masaryk University, Brno; the second lecture was sponsored also by the Czech Society for the Study of Religions. They are presented here in revised form. I am grateful to Dr. Dalibor Papoušek, Head of the Institute for the Study of Religions, for inviting me to deliver these lectures, to Dr. Iva Doležalová for her careful and tireless translations to my Czech audience, and to all of the members of the Institute for their warm hospitality. My stay at the Masaryk university, Brno, was realized thanks to the kind support of the Open Society Fund (Higher Education Support Program, grant no. HC11/96), and to the Dean’s Fund, College of Arts and Sciences, The University of Vermont.

philosophers, however, imputed to „meta“ a philosophical rather than its simple prepositional meaning, transforming its temporal into a transcendental sense.² Since the Enlightenment, however, epistemology has been returning from the metaphysical to the physical sciences in the study of reality – including the study of the ubiquitous reality of religious practice. The most appropriate physical science with which to begin a study of human behavior is, of course, biology.

In his recent book, *Creation of the Sacred*, the classicist and historian of ancient religions, Walter Burkert, has urged a merger of cultural studies „with general anthropology, which is ultimately integrated into biology“.³ One’s „biological makeup,“ he suggests, „forms preconditions or ‘attractors’ to produce [cultural] phenomena in a consistent fashion“. Consequently,

the details and sequences in rituals, tales, works of art, and fantasies hark back to more original processes in the evolution of life; they become understandable not in isolation nor within their different cultural contexts, but in relation to this background.⁴

Though indeed produced by „cultural choice“, „religion“, Burkert concludes, „keeps to the tracks“ of this biological „landscape“.⁵

Burkert is working out of a naturalist tradition that has its origins in the Enlightenment, with David Hume, for example (*Dialogues concerning Natural Religion*, 1779), and has its immediate roots in the ethological research of Konrad Lorenz and the sociobiological theories of Edward O. Wilson.⁶ Whereas Lorenz’s research sought to extend observations about animal behavior to that of humans,⁷ Wilson defined sociobiology more comprehensively „as the systematic study of the biological basis of all forms of social behavior, in all kinds of organisms, including man“.⁸ Wilson considered the „predisposition to religious belief“ to be „the most complex and powerful force in the human mind and in all probability an ineradicable part of human nature“.⁹

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- 2 Roger Hancock, „Metaphysics, History of“, in: Paul Edwards (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, New York: Macmillan Publishing Co. & The Free Press 1967, Vol. 5, pp. 289-300: 289.
 - 3 Walter Burkert, *Creation of the Sacred*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1996, 8.
 - 4 *Ibid.*, 22.
 - 5 *Ibid.*, 23, 28, 33.
 - 6 *Ibid.*, 8-12.
 - 7 Konrad Lorenz, *On Aggression*, New York: Harcourt, Brace & World 1966.
 - 8 Edward O. Wilson, *On Human Nature*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1978, 16.
 - 9 *Ibid.*, 169.

Perhaps the most significant development for understanding a biological basis for religion has been the explosion of research since mid-century among the cognitive sciences. Understood as the empirically based effort to explain the basis of knowledge, human as well as nonhuman,¹⁰ the ultimate, and distant, goal of cognitive psychology is a global understanding of the physical structure of the human nervous system and how it operates to produce intelligent, including religious, behavior. By paying attention to the role that human minds play in the production of cultural forms and expression, such a cognitive „mapping“ of the architecture of human thought and behavior promises not only to contribute to our knowledge of religion and its persistence in human history, but to suggest also a formal, species-specific framework for the comparative work that is so central to the academic study of religion.¹¹

All of the approaches mentioned above – ethology, sociobiology, cognitive science – share the perspective of contemporary evolutionary biology. This is not the social Darwinism of an earlier time, however, for one of its disconfirmed, assumptions, is the notion of survival based upon collective successes. Rather, focus has shifted to the survival of genes and not of groups or even individuals.¹² Rather, human cultural diversity is understood by contemporary or neo-Darwinian theorists „as products of a single human nature responding to widely varying circumstances“,¹³ „a generic, species-wide developmental program that absorbs information from the social environment and adjusts the maturing mind accordingly“. ¹⁴ Whereas these theorists trace differences among people to environment, they understand a „deeper unity within the species“ to reside in genetically governed rules for mental development.¹⁵ Nevertheless, Burkert presumes that „a certain survival fitness of religion has to be granted“, „because on the whole the history of religions has been a story of success“. ¹⁶

In his review of Burkert's book, the cognitive scientist, Daniel Dennett, following Richard Dawkins, poses the question: „survival fitness for

10 Howard Gardner, *The Mind's New Science: A History of the Cognitive Revolution*, New York: Basic Books 1985, 6.

11 See especially the work of E. Thomas Lawson and Robert N. McCauley, *Rethinking Religion: Connecting Cognition and Culture*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1990, Pascal Boyer, *The Naturalness of Religious Ideas: A Cognitive Theory of Religion*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1994, and Dan Sperber, *Explaining Culture: A Naturalistic Approach*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers 1996.

12 Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, New York: Oxford University Press 1989.

13 Robert Wright, *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life*, New York: Pantheon Books 1994, 8.

14 *Ibid.*, 9.

15 *Ibid.*, 7-10.

16 W. Burkert, *o.c.*, 13.

whom?" – an elite, the social group as a whole, certain so-called self genes?¹⁷ Dawkins has also suggested the possibility of „selfish vehicles of cultural transmission“ which he termed „memes“, units of culturally acquired information which tend to replicate themselves even though they may not be of any benefit. Dennett suggests that religions might be just such memes, replicating themselves by „parasitically exploiting proclivities ... in the human cognitive-immune system“.¹⁸ Thus, as Burkert concludes, „[i]nformation survival asserts itself side by side with and even instead of genetic survival“.¹⁹

The presence and persistence of human universals must, in the conclusion of Burkert, „be presumed to fulfill basic functions for human social life in all its forms“.²⁰ One such human universal is social life itself. Human beings are social beings and, apparently, innately so. It is not difficult to imagine the evolutionary benefit to humans of this trait. This recognition of a biological basis for human sociability undermines the conviction of much social science about the autonomy of social fact and the determinate role of culture.²¹ Rather, social fact and cultural determinates are themselves effects to be explained.

In his groundbreaking study of *The Religion of the Semites*, W. Robertson Smith recognized not only the ubiquity but the naturalness of human society. Smith averred that „[e]very human being, without choice on his own part, but simply in virtue of his birth and upbringing, becomes a member of ... a natural society“.²² Membership in these societies is modelled upon biological patterns of descent; they are, in other words, kinship societies.²³

The sociological significance of kinship societies is heightened with the emergence of a second type of human social organization – kingships. In Smith's formulation:

the primitive equality of the tribal system tends in progress of time to transform itself into an aristocracy of the more powerful kins, or of the more powerful families within one kin ... [with the consequence that] wealth begins to be unequally distributed.²⁴

17 Daniel C. Dennett, „Appraising Grace: What evolutionary good is God?“, *The Sciences*, January/February 1997, pp. 39-45: 41. A revised and expanded version of Dennett's review will appear in a special issue of *Method & Theory in the Study of Religion* devoted to reviews of Burkert's book, forthcoming 1998.

18 *Ibid.*, 41.

19 W. Burkert, *o.c.*, 24.

20 W. Burkert, *o.c.*, 4.

21 E. O. Wilson, *o.c.*, 33.

22 W. Robertson Smith, *The Religion of the Semites. The Fundamental Institutions*, 1889; (New York: Schocken, 1972, 29).

23 Wilson (*o.c.*, 22) and Burkert (*o.c.*, 4) also list „kin groups“ among their human universals.

24 W. R. Smith, *o.c.*, 73.

Initially, kinship alliances were established through marriage, as Lévi-Strauss has shown.²⁵ Subsequently, and alternatively, alliances were effected by agreement (treaty) or imposed by force.

All social relationships may be understood as relationships of power as Michel Foucault has emphasized.²⁶ Consequently, the difference between „kinship“ and „kingship“ as types of social organization might be formulated in terms of differing distributions of power.²⁷ Whereas power in kinship groups is disseminated more or less equally throughout the society, kingships are characterized by consolidations of power. These consolidations of power present a threat to the autonomy of kinship organizations and their local distributions of power even as the continuing existence of local power challenges the pretensions of imperial sovereignty and their legitimating state religions.

The maintenance and persistence of kinship societies in face of social tendencies to consolidation is not solely a matter of biology but of sociology. As Smith put it, „[t]he idea that kinship is not purely an affair of birth, but may be acquired, has quite fallen out of our circle of ideas“.²⁸ Although largely neglected by Smith, the preeminent technique for kinship recruitment apart from birth is adoption.²⁹ Such fictive kin status could be extended not only to sons (and daughters) but to ancestors and ancestral heros and deities as well. It is these common and commemorated ancestors, linked to the present by narratives of descent, that provide collective identity for any particular group;³⁰ and the transgenerational authority of these attested ancestors guarantees the stability and continuity of the putative descent group.³¹

25 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*, trans. J. H. Bell, J. R. von Sturmer and R. Needham, Boston: Beacon Press 1969.

26 See the helpful summary of Foucault's use of „power“ by Alan Sheridan, *Michel Foucault: The Will to Truth*, New York: Methuen 1980, 183-85.

27 Independently of Foucault, Eli Sagan has offered this same distinction between „kinship“ and „kingship“ in *At the Dawn of Tyranny: The Origins of Individualism, Political Oppression and the State*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf 1985, 236, 240.

28 W. R. Smith, *o.c.*, 273. Fustel de Coulanges, one of the influences on Smith, noted that agnation, from ancient Greece until imperial Rome, was cultic and not physiological. Fustel de Coulanges, *The Ancient City: A Study of the Religion, Laws, and Institutions of Greece and Rome*, Gloucester, MA: Peter Smith 1979, 51, 59.

29 See W. R. Smith, *Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia*, new ed. 1885; (London: Adam and Charles Black 1903, 52-54).

30 W. R. Smith, *Semites ...*, 40-41. See Patrick H. Hutton, „Collective Memory and Collective Mentalities: The Halbwachs-Aries Connection“, *Historical Reflections/Réflexions Historiques* 15, 1988, 311-322. Hutton builds upon the work of Maurice Halbwachs, one of Durkheim's students. See especially Halbwach's *La Topographie légendaire des évangiles en Terre Saint*, Paris: PUF 1941; also Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1987, 115-117.

Smith was perhaps the first scholar of religion to recognize that religion must be accounted for by its social nature.³² Although scholars of religion regularly acknowledge that religion is a social phenomenon, we have not developed any timely social theory of religion, relying instead still on the pioneering but dated theories of Marx, Weber and Durkheim. Rather, religious studies have been sidetracked by:

a lingering fascination with a romantic individualism ... [which has been v]alorized by the Enlightenment, cultivated within the humanities, and moralized [especially] in American ideology.³³

Certainly such „individualistic“ values have informed the study of the religions of antiquity, as I argued in my recent article on „The Individualistic Ideology of Hellenistic Culture“.³⁴

I should like to suggest Smith's typology of „kinship“ and „kingship“ as „ideal types“ or poles of a continuum which describe all human social organizations and, consequently, their religious communities. In light of the above, we might redefine Smith's „natural“ or kinship societies as cultural elaborations of biology in terms of varying distributions of power. And, we might understand religion to be the effective means of legitimating this political power, in whatever manner that power might be distributed, by claims to superhuman power. Such superhuman powers may also be imagined as supernatural; and they may be imaged anthropomorphically, theriomorphically, dendromorphically, technomorphically, etc. The object of the history of religions, consequently, may be identified as the history of those socio-cultural elaborations of biology that are legitimated by claims to superhuman power.

I have argued that sociability is a universal characteristic of the species, *homo sapiens*, and thus programmed by evolution and biologically, i.e., genetically, transmitted. I have argued further that the kinship/kingship model of social organization, based upon the natural family, is a cultural elaboration of this innate characteristic of human existence shaped by social distributions of power. This universal typology of social organization is applicable also to an understanding of religious communities.

31 W. Burkert, *o.c.*, 15.

32 B. Malinowski, cited by Abram Kardiner and Edward Preble, *They Studied Man*, New York: New American Library 1961, p. 73, n. 2.

33 Burton Mack, „Caretakers and Critics: On the Social Role of Scholars Who Study Religion“, A paper for the Seminar on Religion in Society at Wesleyan University, September 14, 1989 (unpublished).

34 Luther H. Martin, „The Anti-individualistic Ideology of Hellenistic Culture“, *Numen* 41, 1994, 117-140.

We can illustrate this thesis historically from Hellenistic religious communities. In my book on *Hellenistic Religions*, I identified three types of discourse and practice that are usually grouped together as „religious“ in contrast to the „official“ or state religion(s): piety, mystery, and gnosis. I should like to associate these discourses and practices with the sociology of differing forms of kinship organization.

Pietistic practices are the most exemplary of kinship societies. Piety (Gk: *eusebeia*, Lt: *pietas*) designates a traditional system of „right“ relationships,

conventional practices concerning home and family and, by extension, those practices which surround and are part of being at home in one's world under the rule of a family of gods....[Such practices] are always articulated in terms of a particular locale or place and are transmitted through local tradition. They represent the expression by a particular people of their local order of things.³⁵

So defined, piety belongs to the sociology of kinship societies, the correctness of the relationships being defined by each such society and legitimated by their local, or even kin-specific, deities.

Less noted are the claims by various gnostic traditions to kinship bonds established through descent from a common divine ancestor or deity. The clearest example is those claiming descent from Seth;³⁶ however, it is characteristic of all gnostic anthropology to claim consubstantiality with hypercosmic power and elaborated, consequently, in myths of cosmogonic fall.³⁷

Finally, the Hellenistic mystery cults may be understood as „fictive“ kinship groups, as their frequent use of kinship terminology suggests. Their existence is legitimated by appeal to a universalized native deity and, concomitantly, non-native membership in these alternative kin groups is established through initiation modelled upon the kin-recruitment process of adoption.

The family cults, mystery religions, and the gnostic traditions represented three differing types of kinship groups, all of which stood in tension with the imperial power of Hellenistic kingships, both politically and, in the case of the emperor cult, religiously. Whereas „family cults“ and gnostic claims are rather explicit in their claims to kinship identity, the Hellenistic mystery cults are much less obvious in this regard. Consequently, it is this socio-

35 Luther H. Martin, *Hellenistic Religions*, New York: Oxford University Press 1987, 11-12.

36 Luther H. Martin, „Genealogy and Sociology in the Apocalypse of Adam“, in: J. E. Goehring (ed.), *Gnosticism and the Early Christian World*, Sonoma, CA: Polebridge Press 1990, 25-36.

37 Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, Boston: Beacon Press 1958, 44.

historical example to which I should like to devote a more detailed analysis in my second lecture.

2. Sociology and the Study of Religion: The Case of Hellenistic Religious Communities³⁸

The whole range of ideas in the philosophy of history and in the theory of development [of Christianity] had to date been treated as history of ideas, as with Hegel and Dilthey. It occupied the central place in every philosophy of religion ... Then I came under the spell of that overwhelming personality, Max Weber, who had long been well aware of wonders which for me were just dawning. At the same time, I was captivated by the Marxist doctrine of infrastructures and superstructures. Not that I simply considered it correct, but it does contain a mode of questioning which can never be evaded, even though each separate case must be examined individually. Its mode of questioning was how far the origin, development, change and modern plight of Christianity is sociologically conditioned, and how far it itself operates as a formative sociological principle. These are extraordinarily difficult questions and scarcely any useful preparatory studies had been done on them. And yet, it was no longer possible to speak solely of a history of doctrine or a history of ideas approach to Christianity [or to other religions] once this problem had been grasped.

Ernst Troeltsch³⁹

In my first lecture, I responded to the challenge formulated by Troeltsch by suggesting a sociological view of religious communities based upon biology, that is, upon social elaborations of the „natural“ family and organized according to cultural distributions of power. In this lecture, I should like to illustrate this view by example of the Hellenistic mystery religions understood as fictive kinship societies, that is, precisely as social elaborations of natural kin associations that were occasioned by new cultural conditions.

Autonomous associations, alternative to the public institutions of larger society, are documented from Greece as early as the sixth century B.C. when Solon accepted their legality „provided they were not contrary to the laws of the state“ (Gaius, *Dig.* 47.22.4). Such associations proliferated during the Hellenistic period and, despite sporadic attempts by the Romans to suppress or at least control them, they perdured well into the Christian period.⁴⁰ The

38 This lecture is a revised version of my paper, „Akin to the Gods or Simply One to Another? Comparison with Respect to Religions in Antiquity“, presented at the annual meeting of Die Deutsche Vereinigung für Religionsgeschichte, Bonn, 3-6 October 1995.

39 „My Books“ (1922), *Gesammelte Schriften* IV, Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck) 1925; rpt 1966, 3-18: 11; Eng. trans. and cited in *Ernst Troeltsch: Writings on Theology and Religion*, eds. R. Morgan and M. Pye, Atlanta: John Knox Press 1977, 46-47 (trans. edited by L. H. Martin).

40 Marcus N. Tod, *Sidelights on Greek History*, Oxford: Blackwell 1932, 73. The classic work on Greek associations remains that of F. Poland, *Geschichte des griechischen*

Hellenistic groups seemed to function initially as associations whereby ethnic „brethren“, separated from their natural kin by military service, perhaps, or by commercial enterprise, might nevertheless commemorate some aspects of their native society and maintain, consequently, the cultural requisites of their traditional social identity in light of the cosmopolitan pressures of Hellenistic empire.⁴¹ These requisites would include care of their ancestral dead and the patronage of some native deity. Over time, care for the ancestral dead would be replaced by care for the dead of the new diaspora community and the native deity would either become universalized so that it might provide patronage for its internationally dispersed clients or be replaced altogether by a deity more appropriate to the new cosmopolitan context. Unless new members from the homeland continued to replenish these groups and their memories, their native character would eventually dissipate, as a consequence of continued mobility, for example, or of assimilation into the new and larger Hellenized context. Since the first priority of any social group is to maintain itself, new members would, in such cases, need be recruited from the surrounding non-ethnic population. As successive kingships more or less successfully established an internationalized culture around the Mediterranean basin, such associations of disperse „ethnic“ kin, many of which called themselves „mysteries,“ would become groups in which a local non-ethnic membership might be made kin through initiation (*myein, telein*) and become, consequently, devotees of formerly native deities.

We can understand the development of the Hellenistic mystery cults as the transformation of associations of ethnic kin. Their Hellenistic development seems to have been modelled largely upon various interpretations of the Greek ideal of initiatory cult exemplified by the ancient and prestigious mysteries of Demeter celebrated at Eleusis.

The fictive kin groups that developed into mystery cults, and of course not all of them did, seemingly went through a development from family cult to open membership analogous to that of the Eleusinian celebrations. As Erwin Rohde observed:

Originally this festival ...admitted only the citizens of Eleusis, perhaps only the members of certain noble Eleusinian families ... [Later, a]dmission to it was thrown open to all Greeks – not merely Athenians, but every Greek without distinction of race or country, whether man or woman, was welcomed at Eleusis.... What a contrast

Vereinswesens, Leipzig: B. G. Teubner 1909. On the Latin associations, see J. Waltzing, *Étude historique sur les corporations professionnelles chez les Romains*, Louvain: Peeters 1895-1900. See now the studies in John Kloppenborg, (ed.), *Voluntary Associations in the Graeco-Roman World*, New York: Routledge 1996.

41 A. D. Nock, „The Historical Importance of Cult-Associations“, *The Classical Review* 37, 1924, 105-109: 105.

to the exclusive cult-unions into which a man had to be born in order, as citizen of a state, member of a *phratry*, clan, or family, to participate in the advantages they offered!⁴²

Ernst Samter extended Rohde's argument to conclude that the mystery cults, generally, developed from such exclusivistic family cults.⁴³

Conceived as fictive kinship groups, we may speak of two types of mystery associations, both modelled upon interpretations of the Eleusinian mysteries: the first defined by associations of fictive siblings, and a second defined by claims of fictive descent from the cult deity, both types of relationships established through rites of initiation.

In the first type of mystery group, the initiates, in the observation of Franz Cumont, „considered themselves brothers no matter where they came from.“ And, as Cumont recognized, these „communities of initiates“ were replacements for the „ancient social groups“.⁴⁴

In the second type of mystery group, it was, as W. K. C. Guthrie concluded, „kinship with the gods [that] was the real qualification for a blessed immortality“.⁴⁵ These communities were related to the later development of gnostic groups with their understanding of relation to deity through descent. This shared understanding of some form of kinship with deity seems to have been mediated by middle and neo-Platonic elaborations – from the Axiochusto Apuleius to Plotinus – on the Platonic ideal of *homoiōsis theō*, ‘likeness to God’ (*Thē.* 176B).⁴⁶ Whereas a fraternal structure of fictive sibling relations established group solidarity, structures of descent ensured the transgenerational continuity of the group.

The sole Hellenistic text that clearly speaks of kinship to deity, again with reference to the Eleusinian Mysteries, is the second or first century B.C. pseudo-Platonic dialogue, *Axiochus*. In this dialogue, Axiochus is named as *gennētēs tōn thōn*, ‘kin to the gods’, as a consequence his initiation (371 D).⁴⁷ As a precedent, Guthrie cites the episode in the *Odyssey* where Menelaos is promised an afterlife on the Elysian Plain as a consequence of

42 E. Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of the Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks*, trans. W. B. Hillis, London: Kegan Paul 1925, 221.

43 E. Samter, *Familienfeste der Griechen und Römer*, Berlin: Georg Reimer 1901, 102.

44 F. Cumont, *Oriental Religions in Roman Paganism*, New York: Dover 1956, 27.

45 W. K. C. Guthrie, *The Greeks and their Gods*, Boston: Beacon 1950, 292.

46 J. Dillon, *The Middle Platonists*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1977, 44, 192; J. P. Hershbell, *Pseudo-Plato, Axiochus*, Chico, CA: Scholars Press 1981, 18; Luther H. Martin, „Self and Power in the Thought of Plotinus“, in: A. Komendera (ed.), *Man and Values*, Cracow, forthcoming.

47 J. P. Hershbell, *o.c.*, pp. 68-69, n. 76; E. Rohde, *o.c.*, Appendix XI, 601-603. On the dating of the *Axiochus*, see J. P. Hershbell, *o.c.*, 20. As W. Burkert, has noted, *initia* is the Latin translation of *mysteria* (*Ancient Mystery Cults*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 1987, pp. 7-8 and n. 33).

„his adoption into the family of the gods ...through his marriage to Helen“ (Od. 4.561ff). Like Samter, Guthrie extends thereby the argument of Rohde about the Eleusinian rites as an expanded family cult to suggest that the privileges of Elysium were extended at Eleusis from kin by marriage (the example of Menelaos) to kin by rites of initiation modelled upon the legal practice of adoption.⁴⁸

To the extent that the mysteries were in some sense fictive kinship groups, adoption, the juridical category of kinship recruitment, provided a natural model for the rites of initiation.⁴⁹ Coulanges had already suggested that such ceremonies as marriage, birth, adoption, installation of a new slave were initiation rites through which new members were received into the cult of the house.⁵⁰ Subsequently, Albrecht Dieterich argued that initiation into the cults of Orphism and Mithraism was equivalent to a symbolic adoption by their respective deities,⁵¹ a position later argued by Hugo Hepding for the cult of the Phrygian Mother.⁵² And, as has been much discussed, Paul uses the juridical term for adoption, *huiiothesia*, to describe those redeemed by God's son as themselves adopted sons of God (Gal. 4:4-5; Rom. 8:14, 23).⁵³

The „real and original meaning of all adoption,“ according to Rohde, was that:

One who has no son to leave behind him will make haste to take a son from another family into his own house, who, together with his property will inherit also the duty of offering a regular and enduring cult to his adopted father, and his new ancestors, and of caring for the needs of their souls.⁵⁴

An example of this kin reassignment is provided by early Christian developments, themselves a part of the larger Hellenistic religious situation, and the Christian establishment of novel social formations at the expense of their ancestral kin: „leave the dead to bury their own dead“, Jesus says to a potential follower, and „follow me“ (Q: Mt 8:22//Lk 9:60). The subsequent

48 W. K. C. Guthrie, *o.c.*, 291-92. But see F. R. Walton, „Kinsman of the Gods?“, *Classical Philology* 58, 1953, 24-27.

49 G. la Piana, „Foreign Groups in Rome during the First Centuries of the Empire“, *Harvard Theological Review* 20, 1927, 183-403: 325.

50 Rather than adoption, Samter suggests marriage as the analogy for mystery initiation (p. 100). To the extent that the intent of initiation was to establish (fictive) kin relationships, (fictive) *affine* relationships established by marriage would not be to the point. In either case, however, kinship established through rites of initiation are derived from or modelled upon initiation into the family cult (E. Samter, *o.c.*, 9).

51 A. Dieterich, *De Hymnis Orphicis*, Marpugri Cattorum: Elwert 1891, 38; but see E. Rohde, *o.c.*, 601-602; A. Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, 1903 (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft 1966, 136-137).

52 H. Hepding, *Attis: seine Mythen und sein Kult*, Geissen: J. Ricker 1903, p. 178 and n. 4.

53 A. Dieterich, *Eine Mithrasliturgie*, 152-153.

54 E. Rohde, *o.c.*, 172.

institutionalization of an „orthodox“ Christianity in the third and fourth centuries was accomplished not only by a condensation of religious power from the heterogenous possibilities of its socially marginal predecessors, a consolidation not without political implications, but also by the adoption of new, distinctively Christian ancestors – the martyrs. Christians, like many of the Hellenistic societies before them, began to accept funerary responsibilities for their members (see e.g., Tert. *Apol.* 39), exemplifying a persistent, transgenerational pattern of relationship among their members. As part of this process, one of these „Christian special dead“, as Peter Brown calls them,⁵⁵ became commonly accepted as the divine founder of Christianity.

Citing Rohde's observation that adoption was represented as a rebirth from the womb of the new mother,⁵⁶ Guthrie notes that „rebirth was [for this reason] a category applied also to initiates in certain mysteries“.⁵⁷ Specifically, he cites Apuleius' *Metamorphoses* in which Lucius' status in the Isis Cult is not attained by his birth or inheritance (*Met.* 11.15) but by a rebirth (*renatus*) (*Met.* 11.16), a transformation explicitly identified with cult initiation (*Met.* 11.21; compare Plutarch, *De Is. et Os.* 35 on the „rebirth“ of Osiris).⁵⁸ What Guthrie does not note is that in Book 5 of the *Metamorphoses*, Venus, who later is identified with Isis in Lucius' famous prayer to the „Blessed Queen of Heaven“ (*Met.* 11.2), castigates her son, Eros, for his disobedience, and despite her advanced age, threatens to „produce another son much better than“ him through „adoption“ (*adoptatio*) and to make over Eros' inheritance to this adopted son (*Met.* 5.29).⁵⁹

In the face of the Hellenistic kingships, the threatened existence of perduring kin groups began to be expressed through a rhetoric of secrecy. The closed nature of such groups was not a *sui generis* characteristic of their „mystery“ or religiosity but simply of their bounded identity: their non-exclusivity with respect to one another is well documented – one might be and often was initiate in any number of these groups.⁶⁰ Claims of secrecy

55 P. Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1981.

56 L. Gernet notes that both „Greeks and Romans remembered the ancient custom of adoption in *cubiculo*, i.e., simulated childbirth by the mother of the new family“ (see Diod. Sic. 4.39.2; Pliny, *Pan.* 8), in: *The Anthropology of Ancient Greece*, trans. J. Hamilton and B. Nagy, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press 1981, 196.

57 W. K. C. Guthrie, *o.c.*, 292.

58 See on these passages, J. G. Griffiths, *Apuleius of Madauros, The Isis-Book (Metamorphoses, Book XI)*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1975, 258.

59 See R. Merkelbach, *Roman und Mysterium in der Antike* München: C. H. Beck 1962: „jeder Myster durch die Initiation Adoptivsohn der Isis wurde“ (p. 28). Merkelbach also notes with respect to *The Story of Apollonius King of Tyre*, which he states „liegt ursprünglich ein griechischer Isis-roman zugrunde“ (p. 160), that „[d]ie Adoption und Weihe [of King Antiochus' daughter] als Priesterin [im Tempel der Diana] werden im Ritual identisch sein“ (p. 165).

were, in other words, a prophylactic against the homogenizing power of the inclusive state which characterized the Hellenistic world since Alexander, a political power increasingly reinforced by the cult of the emperor.⁶¹ The respersion of Roman power from Augustus to Theodosius increasingly vitiated the role of the „secret“ or bounded societies and occasioned the possibility of social organizations with universalistic claims, societies such as the Isiac, the Mithraic, and the Christian. Only the latter consolidated itself into a viable alternative to the declining fortunes of Roman political power and to the ascendant claims of its religious rivals.

If this analysis rests indeed upon biology, it stands as a general bio-social hypothesis of religious groups to be tested by those with expertise in other cultural domains. By way of conclusion, therefore, I should like briefly to suggest two further examples where the kinship/kingship model of social organization would seem to be relevant to the religious situation.

A first example is provided by the Chinese consolidation of independent warring states into a common cultural entity under the Han dynasty, a period that parallels the Hellenistic (206 B.C. – 220 A.D.). This political transformation was paralleled by a social relocation of the ancestors from their traditional habitation in a this-worldly, if transgenerational, realm of local kin-relations to a common transcendental heavenly place shared by all.⁶² In the emergent imperial context, as in the Hellenistic, secret societies provided those whose kinship bonds had been broken an alternative affiliation by which to promote their interests.⁶³

For a second example, we might turn to the contemporary religious situation in Latin America. Similar to the Hellenistic and Chinese context, new religions have been occasioned by consolidations of power – in this case, largely economic – in and around major cities. The consequent rush to urbanization has undermined local, traditional lifestyles and uprooted much of the population. The religious formations that result are constructed by numerous, newly constituted groups from various native practices but expressed in terms of a colonially imposed Christianity.⁶⁴ As in modern

60 Luther H. Martin, „Secrecy in Hellenistic Religious Communities,“ in: H. G. Kippenberg and G. G. Stroumsa (eds.), *Secrecy and Concealment*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1995, 101-121.

61 Luther H. Martin, „Genealogy and Sociology in the Apocalypse of Adam“, *o.c.*, 35.

62 Joseph Needham, *Science and Civilization in China*, Vol. V: *Chemistry and Chemical Technology*, Pt. 2: *Spagyric Discovery and Invention: Mysteries of God and Immortality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1974, 77-82; see Luther H. Martin, „The Manichean mission: systemic or syncretistic?“ in: D. Kangsheng – Z. Xinying – M. Pye (eds.), *Religion and Modernization in China*, Cambridge: Roots and Branches 1995, 187-196: 192-193.

63 George Weckman, „Secret Societies“ in: M. Eliade (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, New York: Macmillan 1987, Vol. 13, pp. 151-154: 153.

64 Elio Masferrer Kan, „Religious Transformations and Social Change in Latin America“,

comparative studies generally, Latin American „syncretistic“ formations have typically been explained as the consequence of similarities perceived between native religious practices and Catholic Christianity.⁶⁵ More recent scholarship, however, has emphasized the „noncorrespondences and contradictions“ preserved by these religious formations.⁶⁶ As in studies of Hellenistic religions, the employment of the category „syncretism“ as explanatory has masked the emergence of novel social formations.

What I have tried to suggest is that the study of religion, if it is to avoid metaphysical musings, on the one hand, and ethnocentric excess, on the other, might best proceed on the basis of inherent, species-specific characteristics. I have selected one of the most fundamental of these traits, our apparently innate social character. As Robertson Smith already argued, human beings are necessarily social creatures engaged in social formation. Following Smith, anthropologists have agreed that there are but two types of social – and hence religious – formations: kinship and kingship, differing distributions of power subject, however, to an infinite number of social variations and cultural permutations. The study of such social formations, then, must lead to history, the study of the development of these formations over time and in terms of the contingent characteristics of different places. I am suggesting, in other words, a theoretical progression from biology to sociology to history and to the history of the stipulated object of historical investigation, in our case, religion.

in: Luther H. Martin (ed.), *Religious Transformations and Socio-Political Change*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter 1993, 207-219.

65 B. C. Hedrick, *Religious syncretism in Spanish America*, Museum of Anthropology *Miscellaneous Series*, No. 2 (Greeley, CO: Colorado State College, Museum of Anthropology, 1967), p. 3.

66 Carlos Alberto Torres, *The Church, Society, and Hegemony: A Critical Sociology of Religion in Latin America*, trans. R. A. Young, Westport, CT: Praeger 1992, 105.

RÉSUMÉ

Biologie, sociologie a studium náboženství

Stať rozvržená do obecné a případové studie se zabývá „naturalizujícími“ koncepcemi jako možnou základnou studia náboženství. V první části „Biologie, sociologie a náboženství“ jsou připomenuty dosavadní „naturalizující“ teorie náboženství počínaje přirozeným náboženstvím osvícenství, přes etologii a sociobiologii až po současné zkoumání v kognitivních vědách, na jejichž pozadí formuloval Walter Burkert ve své nejnovější práci tezi o kulturních konstrukcích jako výtvorech vyrůstajících z „biologické krajiny“.

Oborovým polem, v němž byla podle autora koncepce kultury nejzřetelněji vypracována „nad“ biologií, je sociologie. S odvoláním na W. Robertsona Smithe autor klade proti sobě společnosti budované na principu příbuzenství (kinship) a společnosti vyrůstající z konzolidace moci (kingship) jako dva ideální typy všech společenských formací, jež univerzálně charakterizují lidský druh. Studium těchto sociálních formací, včetně formací náboženských, vede ke studiu dějin, tj. ke studiu těchto formací v čase a v pojmech podmíněných prostorovou odlišností. Jinými slovy jde o teoretický posun od biologie, přes sociologii k historii, a to – v našem případě – k historii náboženství.

V druhé části „Sociologie a studium náboženství: Příklad helénistických náboženských komunit“ se autor pokouší ilustrovat uvedenou tezi historicky, prostřednictvím tří typů religiozity, které vymezil ve své knize *Hellenistic Religions*. V protikladu k mocenským typům náboženství jako je náboženství oficiální, státní či říšské (kingship) vymezuje „pietistickou“ zbožnost, která je nejnázornějším příkladem náboženství založeného na principu příbuznosti (kinship), a gnostické tradice, které se otevřeně dovolávají principu příbuzenství se samotnými božstvy. Autor usiluje o prověření dokladů pro třetí a nejspornější příklad – helénistické mysterijní kultury, které se pokouší interpretovat jako fiktivní příbuzenská společenství odpovídající dobrovolným helénistickým sdružením.

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