

## Chapter 2

# Ethnographic field-work and the problem of inequality

### ***“There and Back Again”***

*In the mid-20th century CE, cultural anthropology was very much the practice of prolonged field-work within a very narrow spatial and temporal horizon; it was the time when Epstein (1965), and Jongmans & Gutkind (1967) produced their rich collections on field methods – but reflection on the ethical and existential side of such field-work as an intercultural encounter tended to be reserved for the anthropological institute’s common room, and with some exceptions (e.g. Laura Bohannan’s / E. Smith Bowen’s Return to Laughter – 1954) hardly entered into text. Sjaak van der Geest had gone to Africa not as an anthropologist, but as a prospective Roman Catholic missionary, studying anthropology at the University of Ghana, Legon,<sup>183</sup> in order to be more effective in his chosen main task.*

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<sup>183</sup> There is a remarkable parallel here with the career of the leading Belgian anthropologist René Devisch, who likewise first went to Africa as a young Jesuit missionary, and who in that capacity did his first studies of anthropology at an African university (though dominated by expatriate Roman Catholic clergy), the Louvanium at Leopoldville / Kinshasa. Cf. Devisch & Nyamnjoh 2011. Although the missionary involvement with Africa is often denounced on the ground of its generally hegemonic and culture-imperialist implications, it was often, even more than straight-forward anthropology, in the forefront of the search for solutions to the epistemological and humanitarian challenges of the colonial situation. Placide Tempels’ work on *Bantoe-filosofie* (1955) is a case in point (inevitably, and justifiably, this – in all its shortcomings – remarkable pioneer work has been commonly under attack in the context of a recent and militant politics of knowledge). Academic philosophy in Africa would scarcely exist if not as a result of over a century of missionary Christian efforts – whatever the negative implications of the latter. In Chapter 12,

Soon, he was overtaken by science, the lure of sexuality (cf. Bleek / van der Geest 1978) and the blessings of marriage, but his original humanitarian and charitable concern inspired him to a challenge of the ethical foundations of field-work: was not field-work simply theft of valuable cultural information under the pretext of friendship? Did it not amount to a conman's trick, merely meant to further the field-worker's own, distant career, at the expense of people without shoes? As his fellow-student in Köbben's PhD class I felt compelled to disagree with him, naively (but, also in hindsight, largely correctly) assuming that there was a redeeming justification in the valid knowledge which field-work was supposed to produce (in combination with the authentic nature of intercultural encounter in the field). However, in subsequent decades the same questions continued to haunt me, and (in a way much closer to van der Geest's original argument) they formed an important strand in my book *Intercultural Encounters*, where many of the same themes were taken up again (2003, esp. chs 1 and 15).

For many years, participatory field-work has been a distinctive feature of anthropology, taking on a significance far beyond its status as just one particular research technique. For many anthropologists, field-work is nothing less than a way of life. If anthropology is an art form, field-work, much more than writing, is the discipline's creative vehicle; and like art, field-work carries its own fulfilment, even though at the same time it provides the data for our writing. Introduction to this professional myth has dominated our training. The myth organises and legitimises our professional life-world, and enables us to identify with fellow field-workers. As believers, we are bound to react violently against any challenge to this myth.

Field-work has often come under attack from people calling for less soft methods, which would have greater reliability and validity. Yet a majority of anthropologists would still claim that we can only acquire insight in other people's society by prolonged personal exposure to the material and social life of their community and particularly by entering into close relationships with them.

In 'Envy and Inequality in Field-work,' Wolf Bleek (1979) launches an attack on precisely this article of faith. He wonders if field-work is ethically acceptable when relations with poor people are used instrumentally, are even exploited, in order to enhance the academic success and income of the anthropologist. Moreover, once the anthropologist realises his insincerity, field-work becomes unbearable to him. Finally, the anthropologist's participation is largely an illusion: given his far greater wealth and brighter prospects, he may take recourse to 'sop behaviour' (substituting token gifts for 'true sharing'); and the informants, perceiving this, become so envious that they jeopardise the research.

What makes Bleek's allegations so threatening is that he is 'one of us.' His past allegiance to the field-work myth is well documented. Unlike most advocates of alternatives to field-work, he has done field-work himself and with success (e.g., Bleek 1976). His research gained him an academic appointment. And as to

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below, we shall see how these home truths are certainly recognised by one of the greatest African intellectuals of today, Valentin Mudimbe, who himself (as a seminary student, and a Benedictine novice) was in many ways a product of missionary education – as I myself am.

the reliability of field-work data: in his publications Bleek makes an implicit comparison between such data and those deriving from surveys, and he treats the former as superior (1976: 14 *et passim*, 1978).

So what made Bleek suddenly denounce the field-work myth? An all too easy answer is that his misgivings may not really apply to himself:

‘...my financial position was not very different from that of other men in the town (although my prospects were much brighter than theirs). I lived among them and almost every aspect of my life was visible to them. They could see that I did not spend more money than they and yet they were not convinced’ (Bleek 1979).

Although all anthropologists are doomed because of their greater wealth and life chances as compared to their informants, Bleek (the future Prof.Dr. J.D.M. van der Geest, for three decades the cornerstone – with commensurate salary – of medical anthropology in the Netherlands) presumably is closer to salvation because he was genuinely poor during the restricted period of time spent in the field...

But let us concentrate on his general argument. It is based on field-work among the Kwahu inhabitants of a Ghanaian rural town, and revolves around three claims:

(1) *True participation presupposes economic equality.*

This assumption is evidently false. All human societies pattern inequality, including economic aspects, according to such variables as sex and age. Is true participation between economically unequal men and women, elders and youth, fundamentally impossible? If so, anthropologists would find little to study in the world around them, provided they themselves could have survived till adult age (benefiting, as resourceless infants, from the generosity of parents and others who were incomparably superior to them in wealth and power). Most societies have developed systems of social inequality beyond sex and age. And even in societies where the dominant societal ideology is egalitarian (as among the Kwahu, presumably), informal economic differentiation is likely to exist. All societies seem to revolve, *inter alia*, around the process through which people come to terms with social inequality. There is no *a priori* reason why this process cannot be extended to such inequality as the field-worker (or any other outsider) represents.

(2) *Given the economic inequality between the anthropologist and his informants, it follows (assumption 1) that the researcher cannot participate in the latter’s lives.*

Participation is the great unknown in Bleek’s argument. Let us try to define it.

A society (or social group) persists not only by virtue of the social processes that take place within it, but also through the processes that take place at its boundaries, and that define it in relation to the outside world. No society is entirely bound within itself: since it consists of individuals who are born, go through life and die, any society must make provision, through boundary processes, so as to accommodate new members and to dispose of members who depart. Intrasocietal processes are patterned and rendered meaningful by cul-

tural codes, many of which are not consciously perceived by those adhering to them; it is precisely this anchorage in the subconscious that enables members of society to identify with what goes on in their society, and to largely remain within its boundaries. Much social action (particularly in such spheres as ritual and leisure-time behaviour) entails statements and actions articulating the society's boundaries, and the exchange, among members of society, of signs by which they mutually identify within those boundaries.

In this set-up (simplified to absurdity), the anthropologist's role is that of a professional crosser of intersocietal boundaries. Little wonder that this crossing becomes imbued with mythical connotations reminiscent of intrasocietal ritual. This is not the place to explore the nature and antecedents of such structural and historical peculiarities of modern North-Atlantic society as have led to this unique institution (in the form of anthropological field-work) of systematic extension outside our society's boundaries (which is rather different from what conquerors, traders, missionaries, and development agents try to do: spread their own society across geographical, societal and cultural boundaries). Archetypically, the anthropologist would appear a routinised white-collar Prometheus: stealing cultural essentials abroad and, to his own eternal punishment, taking them back home. Or he might be Ahasueros: exiled not so much because of his temporary and partial entrance into a different society, but because of the fact that his consciousness of cultural relativity no longer allows him to consider as absolute the codes of his own society. The liminal archetype of death and rebirth is no less applicable. However worn the phrase is, field-work is an initiation. Assuming such roles as any society has ready for people on their way-in (children, novices, immigrants), the anthropologist during field-work acquires the more obvious codes of the host society. Her or his participant observation is a day-to-day test as to the extent to which the field-work, in the eyes of the born locals, has already managed to internalised important local codes, and to bring them out in actual behaviour.

The field-worker does not become a member of this society in the sense of wholly internalising the culture or entirely sharing its economic concerns. Her or his overall tasks in the field remain defined by the professional subculture of the field-worker's own society. Rarely do the boundaries of the field-worker's life-world end up coinciding with those of the host society (for a case in which this almost happened, see Heinz & Lee 1978). And if such does happen, the researcher is lost for anthropology; for, like Bilbo Baggins, he should go *There, and Back Again* (see Tolkien 1975). Yet all this does not preclude genuine participation.

One does not learn a cultural code from tapes, but through close, prolonged association with people. And as the code sinks in and reaches the anthropologist's subconscious (only if and when it does, will she or he be able to act spontaneously in the host society), these codes will gain something of the same power over the field-worker as they have over the born members. Then friend-

ship, which at first may have been feigned and instrumental, can (and often does) find the cultural idiom to come to life. The fictive kinship terms by which, in many field-work settings, people address the researcher, may assume such reality that they become effective claims in which both the anthropologist and the informants phrase, and manipulate, their mutual relationships. Misfortune, illness, death, on one level of the anthropologist's mind continue to mean 'data'; but on another level they begin to represent sorrowful events happening to the field-worker's temporary but close associates, and by extension, to herself or himself.

Is this mixture of identification and distance ethically objectionable? Actions on the boundary between two cultures are somewhat difficult to evaluate by the ethical codes of only one culture. Anthropologists would agree that an element of transaction, distance, and calculation is part of any human relationship, no matter how close. In fact, Foster's (1972) analysis, which Bleek (1979) applies to the anthropologist's role, discusses informants' strategies *vis-à-vis* each other. However, no researcher should make the mistake of adopting only the manipulative aspect of a local idiom of relationship, failing to honour the aspects of commitment and identification that are usually built in along with the manipulative aspects. It is a mediocre field-worker whose informants have the following experience, described by Bleek (1979) as if it were standard:

The discovery that the 'friendship' was mainly strategic and lasted only the time of the interview must be particularly frustrating to the informant'.

Much anthropological enquiry is conducted in settings where, due to the relative unimportance of formal bureaucratic organisations, evaluation of human character is less of a rare skill than in North-Atlantic urban society. Anthropologists in the field are under constant and expert scrutiny; but not so much (as newcomers to field-work often fear, on insufficient ground) with regard to their strict observance of explicit, formal codes of behaviour, but rather with regard to their general humanity and their willingness to associate and identify with the people they have come to study.

In the context of these evolving relationships, it is only logical that one provides small, or not so small, services and gifts: not in order to buy off the informants' envy or one's own feelings of guilt (as Bleek claims to be common practice), nor in order to launch a one-man potlatch (as he seems to advocate), but in order to express one's commitment to these relationships, rendering them productive for the informants just as they are for the researcher. Of these services, Bleek says (1979) that they

'can be regarded as strategies which allow the field-worker to avoid the basic issues of participation in social life...'

I think he is utterly mistaken. Not only is this exchange largely what social life is about but also Bleek does not define these basic issues – unless he seriously means complete sharing of wealth. But are informants really so naïve as to con-

sider the anthropologist's provision of goods and services an attempt at leveling our differences in wealth? Would they really rise in envy and spite if the cargo is not delivered in full? Is Bleek not underestimating them? Do not most peasants in the world share a knowledge and experience of local and regional others who are incomparably more powerful and wealthy than the average peasants themselves? Would they not rather look upon such gifts as most inhabitants of the North Atlantic region would: as tokens that are limited yet valuable, since they underpin such positive relationships as are already in the process of being established by other, including non-material means?

The ability to shape one's field relationships in accordance with models of behaviour that informants can recognise as meaningful, right, and human is the hallmark of the good field-worker. And it is here that field-work borders not only on art, but also on wisdom and, indeed, love. Field-work is often a frustrating and tiresome exercise – also for the informants. Sometimes it does yield data that given the time, money, and ambition to write them up, may one day contribute to the anthropological discipline. But what field-work can nearly always yield, both for researcher and informants, is the cathartic confirmation of a common humanity that cuts deeper than the most entrenched cultural idiosyncrasies.

This is briefly what I mean by genuine participation. Numerous field-workers have seen the myth of field-work come to life, including myself – and including Wolf Bleek. Applying, in this context, notions of insincerity, exploitation, and sop behaviour, as Bleek does, is a violation not only of the field-work myth, but more important, also of the very real and precious intimacy between a researcher and the people she or he studies.

What does it mean that anthropologists often study 'poor people'? It means the imposition, upon the situation of intercultural encounter, of a folk-political category of a North-Atlantic society. Concentrating on the informants' 'poverty' amounts to concealing that in terms of local knowledge and competence, for instance, the latter are immensely superior to the blundering stranger in their midst. Why should it be ethically suspect if the researcher gains academic recognition on the basis of his field-work? Why should the informants be so scandalised at the researcher's relative wealth? Even in an egalitarian society, would they not be more interested in the general humanity and sociability of the researcher? While the poverty Bleek stresses is a powerful symbol of such *communitas* as we would like to establish in the field (*cf.* Turner 1975: 231-32), it is neither a feasible nor the only possible form participation can take. It is, in the hands of someone who should know better, a stamp of absolute otherness.

The personal example Bleek gives contains little indication that his informants were envious of his wealth. No productive relationship was established at first. That much is clear, and we may commend Bleek for his frankness; this is certainly not a 'laundered' account (*cf.* Johnson 1977). The social situation described was a funereal collection; it was therefore inevitable that such usual

blunders as the novice-field-worker made would revolve around money. But was it specifically the *While man’s money*<sup>184</sup> as, specifically, *a cause of envy?* I am not convinced. The people became impatient with the researcher as he failed to explain the reasons of his presence in their society, yet intruded at a sensitive moment and apparently refused to contribute money, although he was known to have given generously on other similar occasions. The informants made an effort to accept him on his own terms; but because of defective communication, they were at a loss as to what these terms were. One lady present started to mock his puzzling research role, asking him, in parody of his habitual interviewing: ‘What is your mother’s name?... Write it down for me!’ Some of Bleek’s comments show that he realises that the case revolves not around wealth but around defective field relationships; but he should then have proceeded to explore the problems of establishing such relationships, instead of reading into the case an economic meaning that however indispensable for his argument, it seems to lack.

In an age when the personal has been discovered to be political, the intimacy of field relationships is its own ethical justification. Meanwhile I can be brief about Bleek’s third claim:

(3) *Because the anthropologist is debarred from true participation, his data are invalid.* In response I would say: On the contrary, many anthropologists do truly participate, and this gives them a unique, and partly subconscious and intuitive, working knowledge of the culture they are studying. Every anthropologist would agree that this knowledge is terribly defective: relative insiders wear masks for each other no less than for outsiders (*cf.* Berreman 1962). Yet there is no comparable alternative. As Bleek himself realises (1976: 15-16), only on the basis of participation can we surmise the conceptual and logical space within which our informants’ ‘lies’ can be retraced, and can we begin to understand what they mean when they do tell us ‘the truth.’

Field relationships, however, are only one side of the medal. The field-worker has to leave the host society in order to report on it in his or her own society. Therefore, the field-worker has to strike a balance between getting data (through personal relationships) and keeping sufficiently fit to write them up. As field-work settings differ, it is pointless to prescribe how this balance should be worked out in practice. Bleek did field-work as a bachelor in a rural town of 4,000 inhabitants, with a regular food supply, adequate road transport, a hospital, schools, and churches (Bleek 1976: 8-9). Many of us (including I myself) have worked, with our families, and for many months if not years, in far remoter places, and it does not do to reproach us for bringing a motor vehicle, medical supplies, food, or proper clothing.

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<sup>184</sup> I am punning here on the expression ‘God’s money’, which plays a certain role in Edward Albee’s (1962) once popular play *Who is Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

Upon the completion of the field-work, the anthropologist has to mentally (and usually also physically) move away from the field, translating her or his data into writing that is meaningful in her or his society and profession. This withdrawal often produces great strain in field-workers. In the field, the commitment to personal relationships with informants would normally compensate for the instrumental use to which these relationships were put. During the process of writing up (which is often also a period of painful readjustment to one's own society after perhaps years of absence in the field), the subjects of enquiry risk to be reduced to just objects, categories. Given the arid conventions of academic prose, very little of the intensity of feeling that characterised the field situation is allowed to seep through in the written report. It is natural that at this stage many anthropologists feel guilty of betrayal.<sup>185</sup>

However, intimacy and subsequent withdrawal are built into field-work. To phrase in economic terms one's distress at the logic of the anthropologist's role is facile. The income and prestige accorded after field-work (but what about the increasing number of unemployed anthropologists?) are only symptoms of the field-worker having returned to her or his own affluent society. The international injustice on which such affluence is based may well bother the field-worker; but it should form a cause for political action, not for denouncing virtually the only means to truly participate in other societies, despite and beyond

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J.J. LOVE THY INFORMANTS. If I may give a personal example here: My first, and immensely passionate and rewarding, field-work was in the highlands of North-Western Tunisia, 1968 and 1970. When in the late 1970s I gave a paper on my statistical findings at a conference of colleagues having frequented the same region, our joint field supervisor Douwe Jongmans warned me afterwards:

'You must be more careful. You know what they are saying? "He does not even seem to love the local people at all" !'

I was shocked. How could I *not* love them? How could there be doubt about my commitment to these people who had shown me the beauty and meaning of the countryside, of peasant life, of popular Islam, of intercultural encounter, of peasant women with their defiant presence, their moving piety in the context of popular Islam, and with their unique body language and pitch of voice? But I had to admit: in my argument I had reduced them, even namelessly, to data points in a complex mathematical model. To make up for this one-sidedness, they surfaced again – with all the splendid attributes just outlined – in my poetry, in my novel *Een Buik Openen* ('Opening Up a Belly', 1988), and in the name of my first child, *نجمة* *Nezjma* – named after my principal female informant, invoking (with one of these inimitable and unforgettable hand gestures Berber women have contributed to the 'immaterial masterpieces of humankind') the full splendour of the star-spangled night-sky as she explained the meaning of her name to my wife, *Nezjma's* expectant mother. And after nearly fifty years, I still know by heart most of their names, patronyms and extended genealogies into five generations, and still celebrate the semi-annual festival (ألزردة) *az-zerda* for Sidi Mhammad with my family, eating a *baraka*-saturated meal with kouskous and properly slaughtered lamb over which His name has been pronounced. How could I *not* love them? It was one of the first times that I began to regret and criticise the distancing stance of religious anthropology.



these injustices. We should not equate the problems of the modern world with the problems of field-work. The real problem of field-work lies in the fact that our professional subculture does not help us to come to terms with the merging of strongly emotional with strongly instrumental aspects of field relationships.

Meanwhile the following recommendations may help to reduce common feelings of guilt. Realise that instrumentality is a common aspect of relationships, also in the host society. Keep promises made in the field, *e.g.*, as to writing government recommendations, or popularised and locally available accounts of the topics studied; or as to keeping in touch. Produce scholarly work that although not immediately meaningful to your informants, is yet of such quality that it does justice to the intensity of the field-work experience. Try for once to produce anthropological texts in which the subjects are not dehumanised into mere puppets. Engage in political action to further the interests of the people studied, involve them in such action, and prevent that your academic work is being used to reinforce or legitimise such material exploitation as they are subject to. Realise that although your report is cast in the mould of current anthropology, which is just one ephemeral subsystem of one historic society, it is also a contribution to a more lasting undertaking: the pursuit of human knowledge, which may hopefully transcend our own society and its embarrassing incentives. And as a last resort, write a paper like Bleek’s; for although this does not solve the problems, it helps at least to state them.<sup>186</sup>

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<sup>186</sup> I consciously adopt an idealist position here. I am aware of the alternatives. Anthropology could be seen as an intellectual tentacle of imperialism, the anthropologist as an agent of cultural and even political domination (*cf.* Copans 1975; Asad 1975). Also, the dilemmas of field-work such as discussed by Bleek could easily be rephrased in the Marxian contradiction between use value and exchange value, where the anthropologist (often operating in domestic or pre-capitalist niches of the capitalist world system) tries to manipulate such claims as provided by a non-capitalist idiom of social relationships (kinship, friendship), in order to secure data that he then profitably transforms into commodities for the capitalist academic market. My present argument would then amount to bourgeois false consciousness. But while such perspectives would add system and precision to Bleek’s ideas, they do not do justice to the field-work experience. Where is the materialist or radical analysis of field-work as a model that compels the anthropologist *to do both: lovingly embrace the idiom of the host society, and sell it out?*



## Chapter 3

# Crossing disciplinary boundaries while crossing cultural ones

## From anthropologist to *sangoma* in search of an intercultural approach to health

*The periodical by which this short Chapter was first commissioned, is the print medium of a movement in rural development propagating an holistic approach in which modern science is to go hand in hand with time-honoured local traditions. Thus the driving force behind this movement, Bertus Haverkort, who holds a PhD in crop sciences, holds – not unlike Sheldrake & Fox, see Chapter 7 below – that crop pests may be most effectively countered by a combination of manufactured modern chemicals on the one hand, and prayers and chanting under expert local religious leadership, on the other. My experience with veridical traditional divination has somewhat converged with these ideas, although I have always been concerned lest such surprising experiences would be captured and used out of context by New-Age adepts, whose saving grace is that they are prepared to see the world as it is in all its complexity and contradiction – but who have the handicap (devastating, from a scientific point of view) that they do not consider themselves answerable to any intersubjective theoretical and methodological codes and procedures, so that anything goes; more on this moot point in Chapter 10, below (on Guatari), and in my forthcoming book Sangoma Science. The present Chapter cursorily treats topics also covered in much more detail and scope of argument in my book Intercultural Encounters (2003: Chapters 5-8, 15, and Introduction).*

In this Chapter I briefly share my personal experiences as an anthropologist, initiated African healer and intercultural philosopher. My experiences and re-

flections have led me to believe that North Atlantic science cannot claim to have the monopoly of truth. The knowledge and healing experiences of the many therapy systems outside the North Atlantic region may be taken seriously as potentially authentic and valid.

How can we describe, understand and discuss local knowledge in different cultures without destroying it in the process? When analysing local therapy systems and their efficacy, do we have to submit to the conventions of modern, North Atlantic social and medical science?

In the 19th and 20th century CE, Western medical science spread following the course set by Western colonialism. Social science, like cultural anthropology, defined its objectives, theory and methods accordingly. North Atlantic science claims to represent universality, with the suggestion that this universal truth is lacking in other scientific, therapeutic and religious traditions.

People identifying with these other regional traditions, however, increasingly resent being relegated to an inferior position. But how can they assert their independent, original validity without being forced to look at themselves through the eyes of North Atlantic science?



note the domed saint's grave (middle ground, centre left); another, more senior shrine finds itself on the nearest hill top in the background, immediately under the arrow.

*Fig. 3.1. The valley of Sidi Mḥammad as seen from my house, °Aḡaḡfa, °Ain Drāham District, Tunisia, 1979.*

### **3.1. Experiences of an anthropologist**

Born in the Netherlands, I was trained as an anthropologist and specialised in religion. My first field-work was in 1968 in rural Tunisia, North Africa, where I studied saint worship and the ecstatic cult. This is where my struggle with the problem of intercultural truth, which I now consider to be the central problem of inter-culturality, began.

During this field-work I engaged with gusto in anthropologist's main form of data collection in the field: participant observation. I sacrificed to the dead saints in their graves, danced along with the ecstatic dancers, experienced the beginning of mystical ecstasy myself, and built an entire network of fictive kinsmen around me. Yet in my anthropological writings based on that experience, I tended to reduce the very same people to numerical values in a quantitative analysis. Who was I that I could afford to take apart in my analytical writings the undivided, serious religious and therapeutic commitment of my research participants? Several of them played a decisive role in my life as teachers, spiritual masters, fathers, mothers, siblings, and lovers.

At the time I knew no other way to describe their religious representations than as the denial of North Atlantic science (van Binsbergen 1971). It was only twenty years later when, in the form of a novel (1988), I found the words to testify to my love of the North African life forms that I had had to distance myself from as an anthropologist. Meanwhile, the two-volume English-language manuscript, the product of my first anthropological research, has lain idle on the shelf for another 25 years...

### **3.2. Becoming a diviner-priest**

In 1971 I took up a teaching job at the University of Zambia. Soon I became deeply involved in standard-type anthropological field-work throughout Zambia's capital city, Lusaka, which included female purty rites and healing cults as staged among the Nkoya people, a minority group of urban migrants from the western part of the country. I became increasingly drawn into the study of traditional healers.

I also studied local history and kingship, which brought me so close to one of the Nkoya kings that I came to be considered a member of the royal family. This situation was formalised when the king died in 1993 and I inherited his royal bow and arrows, and a large piece of land.

I continued to work in Western Zambia on and off until the mid-1990s. At the same time I also ventured into other field-work locations. Gradually I came to have doubts about the tradition of empirical detachment in which I had been trained.



Fig. 3.2. Fellow-sangomas supervise one of the principal acts marking Wim van Binsbergen's (left, squatting) final initiation as a sangoma: the sacrifice of a goat at the male ancestors' shrine in Matshelagabedi village, North East District, Botswana, 1991.

As a result, in Guinea-Bissau in 1983, I did not only observe the oracular priests, but became their patient, like almost every other member of local society. From 1988 onwards, during field-work in the booming town of Francistown, Botswana, I decided to throw overboard some vital professional, anthropological considerations. Not only did I become the patient of the local diviner-priests, or *sangomas*, but at the end of a long therapy course I became one of them. I had become a believer in the local collective representations.

At the time, I justified this as a primarily political deed. As a White man I was publicly distancing myself from White monopoly capitalism and racism, which had held Francistown in its grip ever since its creation at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. CE. Now, more than at the time, I realise that mine was also a revolt against professional anthropological hypocrisy. It was a decision which in fact temporarily distanced me from cultural anthropology, and which paved the way for my commitment to intercultural philosophy.

For me, this step initially liberated me from the narrow Western scientific framework, although later I realised that without some such a framework, all knowledge production would amount to an idle, gratuitous claim. After a while, becoming a *sangoma* myself also liberated me from the far-reaching spiritual dependence on my cultic mentors and fellow cult members that had originally characterised my *sangomahood*. Becoming a local diviner-priest, although

something that – in terms of the local, ancestor-centred discourse – no individual can choose for himself until the ancestors choose that person, emerged as my personal answer to the contradictions of the practice of intercultural knowledge production that had occupied me for decades.



Note the container including the bovine horn filled with palm wine, and the pile of sacrificial meat in the background to the right

*Fig. 3.3. A senior Manjaco diviner-healer in Calequisse, Canchungu District, Guinea-Bissau, 1983, inspects the entrails of a chick in terms of the colour opposition black (the spirit's denial, rejection) / white (the spirit's confirmation, acceptance) in the course of a ceremony by which a new oracular shrine is being consecrated for the benefit of one of his colleagues.*

### **3.3 Intercultural philosophy**

Becoming an intercultural philosopher meant taking one step further. It amounts to integrating one's individual experience into a systematic and reflective framework in order to explore its social relevance. For, what is at stake here is not merely an autobiographical anecdote. My struggle with intercultural knowledge coincides with a similar problem that faces the modern world where intercultural knowledge production is a major challenge.

It seem to be possible for me to be a Botswana diviner-priest, a Dutch profes-

sor, husband and father, and an adoptive member of a Zambian royal family at the same time. This does not just say something about me, a tormented, post-modern, boundless person, who has lost his original home but found new physical and spiritual homes in Africa. Provided we take the appropriate distance, it also says something about what 'culture' is and what it is not.

It implies that culture is not tied to a place; that culture is not unique but multiple; that culture may be combined, blended and transgressed; that culture is not tied to a human body, an ethnic group, or a birth right. And it suggests that ultimately Europeans (for such was my initial identity) may be much better off as nomads between different cultures from all over the world, than as self-imposed prisoners of Eurocentrism.



*Fig. 3.4. The wooden tablets which have played a central role in my intercultural quest for knowledge – a gift from Mrs Rosie Mmadhlovu Mabutu, one of my teachers of sangoma; after the latter's death they were consecrated in the blood of my sacrificial animal victims by her 'sister' / cousin, Mrs Elizabeth MmaShakayile Mabutu, Francistown, 1989-1990.*

### **3.4. Four wooden tablets**

In the 1990s the route from anthropology to intercultural philosophy led me to a further exploration of the relation between cultures. Once I had become a *sangoma*, I had at my disposal a fairly unique, specialist body of cultural knowledge and status as a local religious authority. But, could I find a new perspective from which my transcultural position could be combined with a some kind of professional scientific knowledge production?



I now possessed the four mysterious wooden tablets of the *sangoma* oracle, given to me by one of my spiritual leaders. These tablets seemed to represent a strictly local cultural phenomenon. It was as if they had arisen in Southern African village society during some indefinite primordial age.

The local oracle of these tablets had already been described by missionaries some four hundred years ago. Each of the four tablets had a name: 'The old woman like a stone', 'The old male witch like an axe', 'Itching pubic hair like a young woman's', and 'The uvula like a youthful penis'. Their various combinations, when they are ritually cast, have connotations with witchcraft, ancestors, taboos, sacrificial dances, and all varieties of local animal totems. What could be more authentic and more African?

But, to my surprise, the interpretation scheme and the names of the sixteen possible combinations of the *sangoma* tablets could be compared to tenth century CE Arabian magic which had featured, just like the Chinese 易經 *yì jīng* / *I Ching*, configurations of whole and broken lines. At the same time their astrological implication had been elaborated much earlier in Babylonia. I had to accept that the tablet's romantic suggestion of extreme African locality was a mere illusion. Beneath it lurked a long-range, transcontinental reality with enormous consequences for my theoretical and existential stance as an anthropologist and world citizen.<sup>187</sup>

### 3.5. Distant offshoots

As a consequence, the local cultural orientation in which the inhabitants of Botswana had entrenched themselves, and from which I initially felt painfully excluded, turned out to be something quite different from an absolute, unbridgeable otherness.

Instead, like my own cultural background as a North Atlantic scholar, it was a distant offshoot of civilisations in the Ancient Near East, such as Babylonia and Egypt. Moreover, both North Atlantic scholarship, and Southern African *sangomahood*, had been effectively fertilised by an earlier offshoot from the same stem: the Arabian civilisation.

For years I had been struggling with 'the African culture' as if it had been an unassailable, utterly alien totality. Now, parts of it turned out to be familiar, kindred, and available for respectful appropriation. This insight triggered a comprehensive research project, which over the years has resulted in several

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<sup>187</sup> For details see van Binsbergen 1996c, 1995c, 2012, and my other studies of geomantic divination as listed in the bibliography of this book; there also ample references to the existing literature are given.

publications including *Black Athena: Ten Years After* (1997 / expanded as *Black Athena Comes of Age*, 201e), and *Before the Presocratics* (2012d).



*Fig. 3.5. Sangomas in action: The younger sister, Kwani, expresses her genuine surprise at the particular fall of the divination tablets from the hands of her elder sister, Molly; Monarch township, Francistown, Botswana, 1988.*

### **3.6. Another unexpected find**

In the mid-1990s I was privileged to spend a year as the sole anthropological member of the Working Group on 'Magic and religion in the Ancient Near East' at the Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS), Wassenaar, the Netherlands. Here I was quite unexpectedly struck by the various parallels between the ceremonies and

mythologies of the Nkoya kingship in Zambia, and those of Ancient Egypt, Ancient Mesopotamia, and classic South Asia (van Binsbergen 2010a, and in press (a)).

These parallels were so striking and detailed that I was forced to seriously consider the possibility of cultural diffusion between these regions and South-Central Africa. Once again there was the suggestion of cultural continuity in space and time; across thousands of kilometres and several millennia.

The tablets of the *sangoma* divination system in Botswana and Nkoya kingship in Zambia are two concrete examples of cultural convergence and diffusion across the Old World. Such convergence and diffusion has occupied a central place in my empirical research ever since 1990.<sup>188</sup>

Supported by scholarly literature and the involvement with colleagues and research students I have developed the hypothesis that very considerable correspondences exist between the different local cultural orientations. These turn out to stretch far beyond the strictly local horizons of classic anthropology and far beyond that we common understand by 'cultures'.

In many respects the scholarly work I produce today still qualifies as 'anthropology'. However, it is a kind of anthropology that is far removed from the way I was trained. In the 1960s my academic discipline prescribed that I gaze from a distance at the local other. The knowledge claims based on that distant gaze are now being increasingly questioned as being potentially Eurocentric and hegemonic, from the perspective of intercultural philosophy.

### 3.7. Crossing cultural boundaries

My 'becoming a *sangoma*'<sup>189</sup> confirmed, on the level of personal thought, experience and belief, the possibility of crossing cultural boundaries in a local therapeutic context. The outcome of the subsequent historical and comparative studies has been even more striking, however. They have offered concrete reasons for believing that the boundaries between the seemingly unrelated therapy systems across the world are relative and porous. In addition to being rooted in the shared experience of the human body and mind, to some degree they share

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<sup>188</sup> Specific projects in this endeavour include a study of the global distribution, and history, of leopard-skin / granulation symbolism (van Binsbergen 2003k, 2004d, 2009a, in press (h)); extensive work on comparative mythology, in which context, *e.g.*, I traced the Eurasian parallels of the mythology of the Nkoya people of Zambia (van Binsbergen 2010); an international conference (Leiden, 2012 now being edited for publication; *cf.* van Binsbergen 2012e, 2012g, 2012c); and new field-work in Cameroon (2015), on 'Africa's transcontinental continuities in pre- and proto-history' – as well as a reconsideration in the light of this transcontinental theme, of my very extensive data on the Nkoya (in press (a)).

<sup>189</sup> Title of van Binsbergen 1991a.

a common inspiration and a common intellectual past.

As a result, I argue that North Atlantic science cannot claim to have a monopoly of truth. The experience of knowledge and healing in numerous other therapy systems should be studied seriously as potentially authentic and valid, free from the constraints of North Atlantic models.

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## ***Part II. Religious hegemony and some of its remedies***

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## Chapter 4

# “See no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil”

## Towards a cultural anthropology of evil in present-day Africa

*In the North Atlantic intellectual tradition, the expression ‘the problem of evil’ usually designates the apparent contradiction between belief in a benevolent Supreme Being, on the one hand, and the experience of evil (malice, poverty, violence, calamities, illness, death) in human life, on the other – how can a loving, omnipotent God allow such adverse influences on the human existence, is a question that has occupied Western philosophers and theologians, and their predecessors in the Ancient Near East and Graeco-Roman Antiquity, for four millennia. Raised and educated as a Roman Catholic, I was a devout altar boy, and in my troubled adolescence I had unmistakable and, in hindsight, highly alarming mystical experiences (having acoustic hallucinations of hearing – not for the last time in my life – the voice of God calling me by my name, and occasionally even turning into the delusion that I, of all people, was an incarnation of His son...); but all this abruptly came to an end when (through the catalytic influence of a school friend, a budding poet like myself) I allowed myself full consciousness of the pain and sorrow that had surrounded me day in day out in my family environment (van Binsbergen 2015). In my training as a religious anthropologist I somehow managed to steer around ‘the problem of evil’, until it struck me forcibly in my early years in Zambia (1971-1974), not so much as aspect of my own life, but when friendship with a prominent eye-witness to the final, fatal years of Alice Lenshina’s Lumpa Church caused me to wonder what could be the existential sources bringing Christian believers to engage in armed struggle, sacrificing themselves and even their little children. At the time, the Lumpa prophetess Alice Lenshina, having served her prison sentence, was living her last years as a market vendor in Lusaka, only a few kms from my home. In the same period I did a University-funded survey of religious organisations (Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and Hindu) in Lusaka, and*

this brought me in close contact with the spirituality of many African urbanites of all walks of life. The post-Independence decline of the Zambian economy had not yet set in, people were engaging in the acquisitive concerns of upward mobility, quite a few could afford motor-cars; their conflicts, insecurities and anxieties in this process often allowed me glimpses of their moral struggles with evil and signification. Somewhat to my amazement (considering what little Christianity then seemed to have done for me – later I came back on this juvenile, dismissive assessment) I could see that for many urbanites a profound, passionate sense of total conversion away from sorcery, away from their own evil as well as from that of their neighbours and kin, was a major source of inspiration, relief, safety and happiness – well worth the many hours per week and substantial financial costs which church participation was usually claiming from devout Christians. However, rather than following up these illuminating and emphatically urban paths of investigation and insights I soon allowed myself to be co-opted by the then still somewhat despised Nkoya minority (an ethnic cluster from Western Zambia). Being drawn into their urban networks and weekend rituals (ecstatic cults, female puberty rites, and funerals) allowed me enduring participation in the expression of their intimate world-views and moral conceptions. Thus I became acquainted with cults of affliction / healing cults as the dominant religious expression (next to Christianity) in South Central Africa ever since the 19<sup>th</sup> c. CE. These research activities tied in with trends in international African Studies at the time. Especially evil, witchcraft and witchcraft eradication were major topics in Terence Ranger's attempt to begin to write 'the history of African religion', with the aid of dozens of historians and anthropologists rallying around him on the strength his innovative visionary approach and his inexhaustible Ford Foundation funding. With my colleague at the University of Zambia, the historian Sholto Cross (who was then finishing a PhD thesis on the Watchtower Church as a witchcraft-eradication movement in South Central and Southern Africa in the early 20<sup>th</sup> c. CE), Ranger launched a book project on 'The Problem of Evil in South Central and Southern Africa' – but there the problem was defined, not so much as the time-honoured Western struggle indicated above, but simply as the two questions

- 'how did Africans conceptualise evil in recent centuries? and
- how did this inform, and was it in turn informed by, Christianity and modern politics?'

Prompted by a wealth of fragmented data which my field-work, library research and archival research had yielded, and by such ordering and streamlining of the data as my emerging Marxist theory of societal and religious change was beginning to provide, specifically for the Ranger & Cross project, I tried (in addition to my work on the Lumpa movement) to reconstruct the complex history of conceptions and practices around evil in South Central Africa during the last half millennium, deeply into pre-colonial i.e. proto-historic times. Although Schoffeleers told me, with relish (and some envy), how Ranger and he had been spell-bound reading together my long draft text for this book on the borders of Lake Malawi, yet the 'Problem of Evil' book project aborted, and instead my argument on evil found a place in my PhD thesis (1979), the basis for my book *Religious Change in Zambia* (1981). Thus pioneering historical and Marxist approaches to sorcery, cults of affliction, Christian conversion, and the struggle for Independence, I was to revisit<sup>190</sup> similar problems one or two decades later, when globalisation studies and the innovative attempts by Geschiere and the Comaroffs had made (two decades after Ranger, and after Douglas 1970) the study of witchcraft once more into a fashionable industry among Africanists. However, having made my mark on the study of witchcraft and evil in the 1970s, my subsequent work in this general domain was to concentrate on the ecstatic healing cult known as *sangoma*, on evil as a concern approached through four-tablet divination, and on the comparative mythology of evil. In the mid-2000s, my Leiden colleague Walter van Beek launched a comprehensive research project and an international conference on a socio-biology approach to evil. I gave a paper there, but again no proceedings were ever published. Scholarly projects on evil apparently tend to fall victim to their own evil orientations. Recently I was asked to comment on five papers for another evil-centred collective volume, which led, once more, to the unfortunate result discussed, above, under the Provenance of the present Chapter.

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<sup>190</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen 1997d (reprinted in the present volume as Chapter 1), 2001c.



## 4.1. Introduction

The five papers in the anthropology of evil that formed the original target of the present Chapter, were intriguing in that, from methodologically and theoretically very different angles, they showed different yet surprisingly converging and recognisable North Atlantic images of evil in present-day Africa. To review these papers in detail and point out their strengths and weaknesses has been the editors' privilege, and I am sure they have discharged it with acuteness as well as ethnographic and theoretical competence. I have seen my commission rather as an invitation to try and articulate the hidden implications of the pieces in this cluster of the proposed volume, from my own specific point of view as, in that chronological order, an Africanist anthropologist, an African diviner-healer in the Southern African *sangoma* tradition, an intercultural philosopher, and a long-range transcontinental cultural historian focusing on Africa. Given limitations of space and time my argument can only be extremely selective and truncated, largely relying on my own experiences over the years, and implicitly referring to my published work on the subject as listed.



Fig. 4.1. Young women and their mature female chaperones harvesting rye in the vicinity of the shrine of Sidi Buqasbāya al-Kabīr, valley of Sidi Mḥammad, Aīn Drāham District, Tunisia, 1968.

In post-Independence sub-Saharan Africa, to which I shifted my oral-historical and ethnographic research in the early 1970s (after earlier, similar work on

North African popular Islam), *evil* stood out in many ways as the greatest puzzle confronting me as a researcher. Brought up a Roman Catholic in an urban West European society at the very threshold of secularisation, I had often listened, with a mixture of adolescent skepticism and childish fascination, to the stereotypical stories about the continuous and heroic battle against sorcery and witchdoctors, with which missionaries returning from Africa would, at that time, captivate West European pious audiences. Such stories were usually narrated in terms of the missionary's personal *encounter with evil* in the shape of a village diviner-healer ('witchdoctor'). Personal encounters with evil in the context of my nuclear family, and terrifying dreams of the devil, had been a daily feature of my childhood; and I was less than nine years old when precocious rationality came to my rescue, enabling me to conclude that the devil was merely a personification of evil and had no independent personal existence – and that (in the best Roman Catholic tradition) children, including myself, were incapable of sinning.


## 4.2. Tunisia

Organised around spectacular rural central places of pilgrimage and animal sacrifice, and with such unhesitating reliance on a transcendent Being ('Rabbi' rather than 'Allah') as the nominal, folk Islam of my research hosts in Ĥumīriyya (Eastern Atlas mountains, Tunisia) could afford in times of great misfortune and bereavement, 'evil' played a relatively small role in my first, North African field-work (1968, 1970). The obvious central focus of evil was human infringement of divine law, through evil (حرام *harām*) deeds. Beyond that vast theistic realm, rather amorphous, unfocused and fragmented evil was lurking in the shape of جنون *jenūn* (plural; sing. *jinn*) around wet and marshy places outside the inhabited hamlets especially there where once powerful hamlets had gone extinct. A school example of Durkheim's (1912) argument on the ambiguity of the sacred (also cf. Isambert 1976) was meanwhile provided by the fact that such land spirits were also supposed to concentrate (as if they were the saint's henchmen) in the immediate surroundings of the dozens of small shrines (مزارة *mzāra* – usually minor megalithic structures) with which the landscape is dotted. Evil was moreover suspected and obliquely identified in the putative malice of neighbours casting the evil eye (العين *al-<sup>c</sup>ain*) or magically stealing (أشلاب *ash-shleb*; cf. Creighton 1981) milk – an absolute life's necessity – from animal's udders and mothers' breasts. Evil was suspected again in the terror that, at the end of the ecstatic dance in favour of the local saints residing in their nearby graves, seized the adept فوقره *fūqra* / dervishes as if overcome by far-from-saintly forces (explicitly conceptualised as dark) from across the Sahara

(whence, in Mali and Nigeria, the *Bori* cult<sup>191</sup> had exerted considerable influence on the ecstatic forms of North African popular religion). And finally, and as another *spirit of the wilds* next to the *jenūn* but far more formidable, the ominous mythical being of غربان *Ġrbān*, who would suddenly materialise in lonely places on the mountain slopes, and strike you with his fingers – leaving you with as few days to live as he left dark bruises on your skin.

J.J.J. THE MYTHICAL BEING ĠRBĀN IN THE LIGHT OF COMPARATIVE MYTHOLOGY.

Ġrbān (apparently a cognate with the Arabic root غرب meaning 'West') is a puzzling demonic being, but comparative mythology helps us to situate it fairly convincingly. I am indebted to my brother Peter Broers, a Romance and Hebrew scholar and a former Franciscan friar novice, for spontaneously identifying Ġrbān as the *daemon meridionalis* at a very early stage, shortly after my first field-work. There is a frequent occurrence of Jewish elements in Ġumīrī life and its popular Islam (van Binsbergen forthcoming; e.g. the standard local name for God is not الله *Allāh* but ربي *Rābbī*; the injunction 'Thou shalt not seethe a kid in his mother's milk' (*Exodus* 23:19) was spontaneously cited to me there; and a common man's name is there كشرود *Kašrūd*, cf. Hebrew כשרוד *Kašrūd* 'state of purity'). Rural North Africa is permeated with Judaism – e.g. the author of the main Islamic geomancy, Muḥammad az-Zānātī, is named after the Zānāta Berber tribe well-known for its Jewish elements. Therefore, a connection may be sought between the name Ġrbān and the Hebrew קרבן *korban*, in Judaism the standard expression for 'approach, sacrifice' (de Vries 1968: 16, 167), which makes sense both phonologically and semantically (the human victim apparently being considered as sacrifice), but does not bring out all the layers of implication apparently involved. The Ġumīrī description reminds us of the Ancient Persian 'Lord of the Noonday Heat' (Hinnells 1973). In early Christian conceptions of sin – which certainly once obtained in this part of Tunisia, not far from St Augustine's Hippo – a demon was recognised under the name of *accidie* or 'midday demon' (cf. *Psalms* 90:6), with similar sinister connotations as Ġrbān, although originally just a sense of sloth and extreme fatigue bringing monks to fall asleep in their cells (Taylor 1908-1920). There is also a connection with the zodiacal sign of ♌ Leo, since the sun (which rules Leo in astrological discourse) is at its highest culmination at the noon hour. Other associations are with Saturn, under the Ancient Assyrian name of Ninib (Graves 1988: 264, n. 1). The destructive connotations of the noon sun have still more pre-Christian antecedents: they are also found in the Ancient Mesopotamian god Nergal (Ions 1980: 14) and in Ancient Egypt in the

destructive figure of the Sun's Eye,  Hwt-Ḥr / Hathor, who (according to texts inscribed in the graves of Seti I and Ramses III) would have destroyed the whole of humankind if the sun god Ra<sup>c</sup> had not tricked her with beer she mistook for human blood (Smith 1984; Spiegelberg 1917; Dumas 1975-1986; Obbink n.d.: 10 f.). Under the heading 'climatic anxieties in the tropics', Kennedy (1990) describes the same belief system and confirms my identification here. The obligation to be the first to greet Ġrbān, on penalty of grave misfortune or death, reminds us of the unilateral mythical being which plays a considerable role in comparative mythology (von Sicard 1968-1969, with all major sources for Africa and the rest of the Old World). The comparative mythology of the unilateral figure includes, for instance, the South Asian god Aruna / Dawn, unilateral because he was born from the broken one of the two eggs

<sup>191</sup> From the extensive literature I only mention: Tremearne 1914, 1915; Onwuejeogwu 1971; Monfouga-Nicolas 1972; Masquelier 1995.

his mother Vinata laid (Cotterell 1989). Grossato (1987) points at other unilateral characters in the South Asian context. Vinata is reminiscent of Leda mother of the Dioskouroi, Helena and Klutaimnestra in Greek mythology.<sup>192</sup> The global distribution of the mytheme of the unilateral figure was traced by me in van Binsbergen 2010a: 198 f.; and I used this distribution along with that of other Old-World traits (geomantic divination, the *mankala* board-game, the spiked wheel trap, the Bantu language phylum), to argue the typical Pelasgian distribution pattern: widespread in sub-Saharan Africa, yet in all probability originating in Asia (van Binsbergen 2010b). The Eurasian distribution of the Luwe figure is considerable; the Dutch writer Augusta de Wit even evokes it for rural Java (de Wit 1903), and it also crops up, surprisingly, as a legendary human 'Medio-hombre' (a soldier who in combat lost an arm and a leg), in the recent novel *Caesarion* by the Dutch author Tommy Wieringa (2009).<sup>193</sup> The Mwendanjangula unilateral figure with first-greeting obligation is also described for Southern Africa, e.g. as the unilateral Tintibane, 'Child of God and Child of Earth', *alias Thobege a Phachwa*, 'Dappled / Speckled Lame-leg' (Matumo 1993 / 1875). Speckledness has, of course, leopard-skin connotations,<sup>194</sup> which according to Brown (1926) is the god whose name is most common among the Tswana. Working in Western Zambia, the missionary Jacotet (1899-1901) has published many vernacular texts in which Mwendanjangula plays an important role. Interestingly, in that connection the figure is possessed of a staff – which seems to return in the North African myth of Sidi Mhammad, who (like the South Central African figure) is a cow herd and uses the staff to put a spell on the cows, so that the saint may go to sleep without his charges coming to any harm.<sup>195</sup> That mythological themes in Africa, especially in the hands of pastoralists, may span the entire continent has been noted before; for instance, unmistakable echoes of Ancient Israelite mythology and ethics were picked up among the Masaai herders of East Africa (Julien n.d.; citing Merker 1904, but also H. Baumann's criticism of Merker's findings). Cognate with the unilateral figure seems to be the Graeco-Roman figure of Herakles / Hercules<sup>196</sup> is likewise in possession of a club, and in my opinion one of its references is the *celestial axis* – around which also the Ancients, just like we ourselves today, could see the circumpolar stars rotate every clear night. The emergence of such mythical motifs on the two extremes of the African continent suggests once more a confirmation of a principle which comparative mythologists have been familiar with for some time: *that North African mythology tends to contain very ancient layers of World mythology*. At the back is another, well-known principle: that ancient cultural material is best preserved in a periphery, where the seething of cultural initiative and innovation has been less overwhelming.

In Ĥumiriyya, however, most misfortune, meanwhile, was not even interpreted in terms of such evils, but as the result of perfectly rational and justified vengeance by invisible local saints with whom the living villagers had entered into

<sup>192</sup> Apollodorus III.10.7; Hyginus, *Fabula*, 77; Homer, *Ilias* III, 426, *Odyssea* XI, 299.

<sup>193</sup> *Belles lettres* are full of surprises; Mwendanjangula is the name of the unilateral figure in Zambia and Angola (cf. van Binsbergen 2011a), and there is also a recent Dutch study of AIDS in Zambia with that name – exploiting the fact that under the AIDS epidemic of the last few decades, the terrifying theonym Mwendanjangula became a nickname for the disease (van Kesteren & van Amerongen 2000).

<sup>194</sup> van Binsbergen 2003k, 2004d, and in press (h).

<sup>195</sup> van Binsbergen 1971, 1980a, 1980b, 1985a, 1985b, and forthcoming.

<sup>196</sup> Herakles / Hercules, who, as Melqart / 'Town Lord' was almost certainly associated with some of the Ĥumiri shrines in Antiquity, before these were Christianised and subsequently Islamised.

contract

(e.g. سيدي *Sidi*,<sup>197</sup> let my flock multiply and I will sacrifice every newborn male animal to you),

usually only to fail to honour their end of the deal.<sup>198</sup> Against the background of comparative mythology, much of these fragmented, non-theistic hints at evil suggest very ancient layers of conceptualisation and cosmology. These layers most probably predate by several millennia the arrival of Islam in this region (late 1<sup>st</sup> mill. CE). In my recent work<sup>199</sup> I have been inclined to interpret them in terms of the Pelasgian Hypothesis: West and South Asian Neolithic cultural traits redefined in the Bronze Age Mediterranean. Anyway, the demonisation of unintegrated relicts of the past is a shaky basis for a wholesale *cosmology of evil* as an ethnographic construct.

### 4.3. South Central and Southern Africa

Against such an utterly personal, self-referential and accidental ethnographic baseline, my next and still active field-work context, South Central Africa, appeared soon to be alarmingly (though, in the end, deceptively) close to Conrad's (1899 / 1971) stereotypical *Heart of Darkness*; to be, in other words, a 'Witchbound Africa' (the title of Melland 1923 / 1967, writing on the Kaonde of North-Western Zambia – the Northern neighbours of the Nkoya on whom my Zambian field-work was to concentrate over the decades). In addition to the Nkoya and Lumpa research referred to in the introduction to this Chapter, I was conducting library research on royal, environmental and prophetic cults all over South Central Africa; and on Christian missionary churches, African Independent Churches and other syncretistic forms emerging mainly in urban environments. The closer I came to my Zambian research hosts (and I have ended up as the adopted son of one of their kings, as a nominated sub-chief in my own right, and as a recognised diviner-healer, while occasionally preaching in Christian churches, when requested), the more it was driven home to me that, from their subjective perspective, the default perception of social life seemed to be that of a *continuous battle against evil* – an evil that, in the absence (for most people in most situations) of the existential reliance on a personal, transcendent Supreme Being, seemed to reside, in the first place, in, and to be pro-

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<sup>197</sup> The formal mode of address for saints, and elder brothers.

<sup>198</sup> E.g., breach of such human contracts with land spirits / land shrines (cf. the deceased local saints of North Africa, with which similar contracts are made) turned out to constitute the main interpretation of misfortune during my field-work among the Manjacos of Guinea-Bissau (1981-1983), which however I do not include in this overview; cf. Crowley 1990.

<sup>199</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen 2010, 2012; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011.

jected from, the malice of fellow human beings incessantly competing for power, privilege and wealth with sinister, magical means whilst shunning public displays of violence; but at the same time a battle in which practically everyone seemed prepared to join in with equally evil means and intentions. The concept of natural death proved surprisingly absent; or, even if admitted as a theoretical possibility under the influence of modern biomedicine, education, Christianity and the media, yet tended to be dismissed in practice as a rationalisation under which the ulterior explanation persisted: that of humans perpetrating sorcery in a quest for power, wealth, and simple malice. Two main ways out of this tangle appeared to present themselves.

1. In the first place, a small minority of devout modern Christians believed to have found in their ardent faith (as a result of their first- or second-generation conversion) not only immunity from the sorcery of others – but even liberation from the evil inside themselves, and from the very concept of sorcery as the prime explanation of misfortune.<sup>200</sup>
2. In the second place, even though persisting right into post-colonial times,<sup>201</sup> the default sorcery-centred conception of misfortune was challenged not only by Christianity (mainly in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century CE), but also by cults of affliction which spread like wildfire from the Indian Ocean coast into the interior of South Central and Southern Africa, from the 19<sup>th</sup> century on. In the aetiology and diagnostics / divination methods (mainly through trance dancing) of these newly arriving cults, misfortune was no longer attributable to human malice (or to irate ancestors *punishing* human malice), but to the accidental, morally-neutral contamination by non-anthropomorphic *spirits* – and consequently, the redress of misfortune was sought, not in the identification, social isolation and extermination of perpetrators of evil and the neutralisation / destruction of their material instruments (as happened commonly in the witchcraft eradication movements that spread over Southern and South Central Africa in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. CE), but in the identification, recognition and subsequent veneration of these vagrant spirits, and in the comforting, ritual care, and often elevation to ritual leadership, of those diagnosed to be possessed by them.

I found that these two alternatives, (1) and (2), represented totally different cosmologies (the former hinging on salvation, the latter on contamination) as

<sup>200</sup> In South Central and Southern African studies of an earlier generation, similar analytical approaches to misfortune abounded, to be applied to urban migrants in a bid to explain their existential predicaments; e.g. Mitchell 1965; Hammond-Tooke 1970; West 1975; Kiernan 1982, 1984.

<sup>201</sup> And, according to some influential analyses, even acerbated under the latter conditions; Geschiere 1997, 1998, 2013; this view is contested in van Binsbergen 2001c, and in my piece (1997d) that is reprinted in the present volume as Chapter 1.

compared to the 'evil-as-human-malice' cosmology on which kinship-dominated life in villages appears to have thrived in this part of the world for centuries if not millennia.

In subsequent decades, I have had the opportunity of revising the above sketch in a number of ways. I came to reject my initial 'Heart of Darkness' stereotype for being racist and essentialising; and I likewise came to reject the notion of 'evil' as a *'fait social total'* (Mauss 1923-24 / 1966) – an integrative *i.e.* centrally relevant and heuristically illuminating ethnographic datum. Among the Nkoya people, power figures (kings, diviner-healers, entrepreneurs, blacksmiths; may I add ethnographers?) have proved to be considered exceedingly good and exceedingly evil at the same time – the ambivalence of (locally conceived) evil appeared as a typical African elaboration of Durkheim's thesis on the 'ambiguity of the sacred'. This suggests that – somewhat at variance with more or less explicit *emic* (*i.e.* explicitly locally articulated) models of evil that circulate in, *e.g.*, Nkoya society (where witchcraft *emically* oscillates ambivalently between wilful act and innate condition), *evil is not an intrinsic quality but a socially elaborated relationship* – in the sense of my (2001) definition of witchcraft as 'virtualised boundary conditions of the kinship order'. In witchcraft eradication movements at a local, regional, or even (*e.g.* the Chitawala / Watchtower movement throughout South Central Africa in the first half of the twentieth century CE) supra-regional scale, communities would periodically cleanse themselves from witchcraft, often through iconoclastic and homicidal means,<sup>202</sup> as if evil could be acerbated in certain persons and objects but in fact would be present in everyone and everything. The rationale of anti-witchcraft action resides perhaps primarily<sup>203</sup> in the very *act of violent confrontation*, while the attribution and identification of *evil* might be secondary, a mere pretext, a tautology given the assumption that reality is permeated by both good and evil.

This inkling concerning the secondary and derived nature of witchcraft and evil remained merely theoretical for me, until, in Botswana in the late 1980s, in the course of field-work into urban culture, I became a fully-fledged local diviner-healer myself.<sup>204</sup> Then I had to come to terms with the fact that

*it is in the first place the diviner's (including, often, my own) explicit enunciation in terms of evil in his proclaimedly supernaturally-sanctioned rite of divination, that produces and perpetuates*

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<sup>202</sup> *E.g.* the notorious 1930s witchfinder Tomo Nyirenda also known as *Mwana Lesa*, *i.e.* 'God's Child'; Ranger 1975a; Fetter 1971. Also *cf.* the caption of Fig. 16.1, below.

<sup>203</sup> As Girard would have it; Girard 1972, 1982; Deguy & Dupuy 1982; van Beek 1988; Simonse 1992; also reminiscent of Freud 1913 / 1940.

<sup>204</sup> The particulars of this somewhat surprising, post-modern development (it runs counter to the professional canons of classic, modernist, field-work-based anthropology, and seems to explode the researcher's objectivity and analytical distance) have been recounted by me in several publications, *e.g.* van Binsbergen 1991 and 2003.

*an explicit social idiom of evil which, until then, had tended to remain implicit, dormant, ambiguous, allusive rather, in the mind and the statements of the client as local actor, and of the latter's kinsmen and neighbours.*

There is almost a vicious circle here: as a locally recognised, greatly feared manifestation of evil in his / her own right (while at the same time vindicated as good and as healing, through evil's ambivalence), the diviner-healer *creates* the evil that he or she names, and thus is not so much 'beyond good and evil' (Nietzsche 1886 / 1966) – as we would hope and pretend especially *anthropologists* to be, of all people – but, on the contrary, *the diviner turns out to be the very focus of evil*, at the heart of a web that she or he spins herself.<sup>205</sup> The fascination with evil as a specialist's construct has tempted many African ritual specialists to display the locally conventionalised symbols of evil and menace, in attire, gestures, and statements, and to train their apprentices accordingly. The *sangomas* parading through the neighbourhood in full ceremonial dress with leopard and snake elements and overlaid by black cloaks, having their ecstatic séances in public places, publicly drinking (like in Kali-associated ecstatic cults in South Asia, cf. Mwali!) the sacrificial blood from the still throbbing necks of their animal victims while emitting raucous cries – in all these ways they are deliberately conjuring up locally recognised images of transgressive evil that lend awe, authority and credibility to these specialists' other professional manifestations, which (as a result?)<sup>206</sup> tend to be highly paid for. It is an explicit view, generally shared among such specialists, that in order to confront evil in divination and therapy, one must personally be fully conversant with the practice of evil – even to the extent (as I learned as an initiand at the Mwali shrine at Nata, Botswana) that some senior diviner-healers have come to be excluded (on the grounds of their practices involving child murder) from the very High God shrine that confers the highest confirmation upon their high-ranking priestly office. I repeat, *evil is not a condition or a quality, but a social relationship.*

As indicated in the introductory lines to the Chapter, some of my early explorations into an anthropology of African concepts of evil were triggered in the context of 'The Problem of Evil in Central Africa', an abortive book project started in the 1970s CE by my lifelong friend and sometime external PhD examiner Terence Ranger, the seminal historian of African religious system – in conjunction with my University of Zambia colleague Sholto Cross. At the time, Ranger's incisive though merely document-based explorations (*e.g.* Ranger 1972, 1975a, 1978) into South Central African witchcraft and witchcraft eradication made a deep impression on me.

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<sup>205</sup> There is a deliberate parallel here with my image of the ethnographer as such a spider in its web, cf. van Binsbergen 1992.

<sup>206</sup> The connection is not so straightforward. Cf. van Binsbergen 2005, where the *sangomas'* own explicit claim of 'being in this for the money' is deconstructed as a strategy to *reduce* the client's sense of prolonged psychological dependence on these spiritual advisors.



There was nothing wrong with Ranger's project's title, apparently, until we realise that *the problem of evil*, as conceived in the European tradition, reflects a puzzle of Christian and post-Christian theology which we cannot simply project onto African cultural history without very serious ethnocentric, Eurocentric / hegemonic distortions. From an accepted Christian point of view (e.g. Niven 1908-1921), *the problem of evil* is the apparent contradiction between the Christian tenets of an omnipotent, loving, all-good God, and the apparently undeniable and inexplicable prevalence of 'evil' in the world as we humans know it – how could a loving and omnipotent God condone such evil? This problematic is specific in time and space, peculiar to the Christian North Atlantic region. Its proposed solutions, notably:

1. qualifying (as less than total) the extent to which God is good, loving or omnipotent, or
2. qualifying (as less than total) the extent to which evil is really evil; etc.,<sup>207</sup>

however much a gauge of evolving Western thought since Late Antiquity (St Augustine) and Early Modern times,<sup>208</sup> can in no way be considered a human universal through space and time.

For one thing, before the advent of Christianity and Islam, the South Central African High God, variously called Nyambi, Lesa, etc., appears as a *deus otiosus* whose mythical interaction with the world and with humans was confined to the early times of creation.

#### 4.4. The relative nature of evil

Nor is South Central Africa the only place in the world where radically different notions exist from the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic cosmology of evil centring on a personal and active god. Already the Ancient Iranians, whose considerable influence both on Ancient Greek thought and on Ancient Judaism is generally

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<sup>207</sup> On this point, an interesting history of ideas is to be appreciated, which may escape the present-day intellectual observer who is not a theologian. In the *Old Testament*, the devil is often, but not always, God's adversary – as this figure appears in the *New Testament*. In line with much older usages in the Ancient Near East (cf. Abusch & van der Toorn 1999; Thompson 1903-1904; Wolkstein, & Kramer 1983) the devil appears as God's attorney, not God's opposite and enemy, e.g. in the book *Job*. *Satan*, one of the devil's names, appears to have been originally cognate with the name of Satanaya (Colarusso 1989), or Setenāy (Smeets 1999), a mother goddess in the Caucasus (with which Ancient Judaism entertained surprisingly close links, e.g. situating the post-Flood Noah there – *Genesis* 8:4); Satanaya in her death aspect may have had sinister aspects like all Great Mothers of the Ancient World, but she was also the nurturant source of life.

<sup>208</sup> Notably in the works of Suarez (cf. Gracia & Davis 1989) and von Leibniz (cf. 1710 / 1874) with his idea of *theodicy*, 'God made the best possible world'.

acknowledged, had yet fundamentally different conceptions of good and evil, Ahura Mazda and Ahriman constituting *two irreducible principles of good and evil*, whose continuous interplay would provide, *prima facie*, a much more convincing, dualist or ‘Manichaeic’ (*i.e.* Late Iranian) solution for ‘the problem of evil’ than anything Christianity has had to offer.<sup>209</sup> As noted above, distorted and attenuated traces of this dualism may be found in the *Old Testament*: *e.g.* *Job*, where the devil appears as God’s attorney; or *Genesis* 3, where the snake seems to autonomously represent evil in its own right.<sup>210</sup> In Ancient Mesopotamia, evil was not in the first place conceived as the result of human or supernatural malice but as a breach of natural order threatening the king and the state, and manifested by freak phenomena which gave rise to an extensive *omina* literature.<sup>211</sup>

Such examples could be multiplied *ad libitum*. In Early Modern times right up to the 20<sup>th</sup> c. CE, North Atlantic specialists working on East Asia have often been scandalised by what they perceived there (from their Graeco-Judaeo-Christian perspective) as the blatant absence of a divinely sanctioned transcendent personal moral sense of good and evil – in other words, ‘sin’. In many cultures, ‘sin’ has to do with the infringement of inflexible taboos in Man’s interaction with non-human Nature, rather than with the harming of fellow-humans. It is not as if some universal, converging notion of ‘evil’ can be argued to be constitutive of the human condition in general.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>209</sup> Cf. Scheffelowitz 1922; Widengren 1965; Boyce 1975.

<sup>210</sup> Linguistically an interesting perspective opens up here. In the *Genesis* passage in question, references abound to the earth as the snake’s appropriate habitat. According to popular traditions not accommodated in that passage (and, incidentally, also according to the modern science of palaeontology – which has identified the atrophied extremities in fossils), the snake was originally four-legged like other reptiles, and (but here modern science hives off) only lost its legs in punishment for its role in the Fall of Man – in other words, for being instrumental in bringing evil into the human world. Most of the Hebrew Bible received its redaction c. six centuries before the Common Era, in the medium of the Hebrew language which is a branch of Semitic as one of the constituent phyla of the Afroasiatic linguistic macrophylum. However, in some sections of *Genesis* there is are considerable Indo-European traces to be detected: it is only in the Indo-European phylum (as a branch of the Eurasiatic or Nostratic macrophylum from which Afroasiatic is usually excluded especially by leading European (notably Russian) exponents of the Nostratic Hypothesis) that the semantic fields ‘earth’ and ‘snake’ are expressed by virtually indistinguishable lexical items: proto-Indo-European *\*dǵʰem* ‘earth’ (also a likely etymology of the name Dagon for the Canaanite / Philistine god, corroborating the latter’s Indo-European orientation), and *\*gʰem-* ‘snake, worm’ (Pokorny 1959-1969: I, 662 f., 790). In Greek mythology, the arch-snake or dragon Typhon was parthenogenetically produced by the mother goddess Hera (rationalised to be in revenge for her husband Zeus’ producing Athena parthenogenetically), whereas Python, the serpent adversary of Apollo, was a child of Gaia / Earth.

<sup>211</sup> Leighty 1966; van Binsbergen & Wiggermann 1999.

<sup>212</sup> Among many dozens of universals of human culture (*i.e.* of Anatomically Modern Humans – our 200,000 years old sub-species which has been dominant ever since the extinction of the Neanderthals c. 20,000 years ago), Brown (1991) lists ‘good and bad distinguished’ – but his grounds may be less than convincing, and anyway the actual conceptualisation of such difference will vary enormously through space and time, and it may be an exception rather than the rule that ‘evil’ is conceptualised as a separate ontological category in its own right – as in the

Evil does not even have to be a predominantly moral, agency-centred category – as we have already seen in the case of the South Central African cults of affliction. Moreover, in many societies across space and time, misfortune has been interpreted not so much as resulting from malicious human agency or from human agency in general, but from offences, however unintentional and accidental, against a natural order which specifically reveals its existence by punishing the offence. ‘Taboo’, instead of ‘sin’, as the local concept of evil – but still having sacrifice as a likely method of expiation.

Plato in some of his works (*Protagoras*, *Gorgias*, *De Re Publica*, and *Timaeus*; 4<sup>th</sup> c. BCE / 1975) discussed evil, and already distinguished between evils springing from nature *e.g.* disease and earthquake, and those springing from human volition, *e.g.* avarice, murder. If evil can be considered a social relationship (inevitably tending to ambivalence, like all social relationships), it does not constitute a human universal of cosmological and moral conceptualisation, but can only have a very specific scope in space and time – culturally defined and ethnographically or textually to be ascertained.

Admittedly, the presence of lexical items for ‘bad, badness’ and ‘witch, witchcraft’ in various reconstructions of proto-Bantu (Meeussen 1980 and n.d.; Guthrie 1967-1971 and n.d.) suggests a common basis for thinking about good and bad in considerable parts of Africa. Yet, beyond the Bantu phylum such convergence can no longer be detected: across the world’s linguistic phyla and macrophyla of the past and the present, there is a well-recorded, immense variation and extreme semantic heterogeneity among the lexical expressions for concepts more or less reminiscent of the modern, Western, Christian or post-Christian semantics of ‘evil’.<sup>213</sup>

#### **4.5. Possibly hegemonic implications of the study of evil**

To my mind, the fascination which the concept of evil clearly retains for modern scholars, Africanists and others, resides not in its unmistakable and widespread *emic* significance on the ground, but in the fact that, as an *etic* concept in the hands of scholars and other analysts, is it importantly constitutive of the Judaeo-Christian-Islamic worldview and its secularising aftermath, and as such it belongs to the extensive package of narrowly Western traits that deceptively (by being surreptitiously imposed on ethnographies and histories world-wide) pose as universal, thus

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Judaeo-Christian-Islamic ‘cosmology of evil’. Anyway, such a distinction is much less specific than the theodicy problem with which Suarez and von Leibniz have grappled.

<sup>213</sup> Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008, ‘all data bases combined, meaning = “evil” ’

revealing their Western-hegemonic nature – in other words, it belongs to the ideology and mythology of modern globalisation.

For the ethnography of evil the above argument, however succinct and one-sided, has some consequences. Before we can speak of *evil* in reference to a specific socio-cultural situation defined in space and time,<sup>214</sup> we need to ascertain what lexical and otherwise symbolic means locally exist for the expression of semantics that in North Atlantic present-day academic discourse are often associated with the concept of evil, and how these semantics are mediated (no doubt, in ambiguous and contradictory ways) in everyday life, ritual contexts, myths, dreams, *etc.* Some anthropological approaches to evil do just that,<sup>215</sup> but not all.

Here the above distinction between *emic* and *etic* comes in handy<sup>216</sup> – as long as we realise that our ‘etic’ rendering, in terms of the concept of ‘evil’, of complex *emic* *i.e.* local, semantics and practices, implies not the objective representation of one African local system in terms of an objective, ‘scientific’ universal *etic* equivalent, but instead the biased (because: partisan) comparison of two *emic* systems focusing on ‘evil’ – of which one is locally African, the other (deceptively posing as *etic* and universal) locally North Atlantic: the analysts’ own.

In representing the African *emic* side (and not just in the study of evil), we need to postpone any meta-analysis until the polyphony of African voices has sounded long and loud enough, and in its own tongue. We must show explicit awareness of the potentially hegemonic nature of North Atlantic professional attempts at an ethnography of evil, all the more so, because the colonisation of the mind through formal education and Christian conversion over the past century and longer, inevitably can be considered to have profoundly informed both apparently local *emics* of ‘evil’, and the cosmopolitan ethnographer’s own perception of the latter. We need to realise that, in a globalising world tending (that is, until a few decades ago!)<sup>217</sup> to North Atlantic hegemony, the locus from which the ethnographer speaks, is a major problem in its own right; all the more so, if that locus is suggested to be entirely self-evident, and self-sufficient as the centre of the world. Such self-evident self-centredness is only too manifest from at least one of the papers that formed the original inspiration for my present argument,

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<sup>214</sup> *E.g.*, an African city, or the Mijikenda people around the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> c. CE, – two examples taken from the original set of five papers to be commented upon.

<sup>215</sup> *E.g.*, in the original set of five papers, those by Devisch, van Beek, and Ciekawy.

<sup>216</sup> Devisch explicitly employs the distinction in his original argument among the set of five papers.

<sup>217</sup> In the mid-2010s, when this was written, North Atlantic hegemony, taken for granted since the 19<sup>th</sup> century CE, had dwindled as a result of major economic and military developments, including the decolonisation Asia and Africa, the global oil crises of the 1970s, the rise of militant Islam, the North Atlantic inability to win the wars in Vietnam, the Persian Gulf, Iraq, Afghanistan, the 2001 attacks on several locations on the USA eastern seaboard (‘9-11’), the world financial crisis of the late 2000s, the rise of the economies of South and East Asia and of South America, the rekindling of the Cold War in the mid-2010s, *etc.*

where, in a discussion of African evil, unmarked reference is made to

*'Place de l'Italie [ where? which city? oh, of course, Paris, how could I be so blind! ], drinking coffee'*

and (by the absence of any local voice, any local utterance) in another paper, manifestly lacking not only the profound first-hand local knowledge that is the hallmark of the accomplished ethnographer, but also global context, when passing reference is being made to

*'a Nigerian city before it was rocked by unprecedented Christian / Muslim violence'*

puzzlingly, only four days prior to the, structurally similar, devastating event that shook the modern world more than anything else, notably: 9 / 11.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>218</sup> The topic of the next Chapter.



## Chapter 5

# Towards an intercultural hermeneutics of post-‘9 / 11’ reconciliation

## Comments on Richard Kearney’s ‘Thinking After Terror: An Interreligious Challenge’

*I was a student of Islam before I ever set foot in sub-Saharan Africa. Moreover, throughout my academic career I have engaged in research on the African state, with special attention to the role of traditional rulers, state formation, state penetration, religion and ethnicity. A violent religious expression had played a central role in my first major academic book, Religious change in Zambia (1981), where one of the leading questions was: how could a pious prophetic movement end up engaging in violent combat with national troops at the very moment of Zambia’s Independence? Meanwhile, as a European and African kinsman, as a healer, and as someone who easily gives offence, I have constantly grappled with the nature and strategies of reconciliation. In the context of the Netherlands Research Programme on Globalization and the Construction of Communal Identities (1992-1999), the transcontinental nature of our network and its attending opportunities for global travelling outside Africa (not commonplace for an Africanist!) brought home to me the potential especially of South Asia as a felicitous critical vantage point from which relations between Africa and the North Atlantic appear in a new and particularly revealing light – comparable colonial experiences, different human and material resources, an entirely different path through modernity and post-modernity. So I did not hesitate to oblige, when the editor of the India-based Journal of Interdisciplinary Crossroads invited me to critically respond to the views on ‘9-11’ (i.e.: the surprise attacks on various targets on the USA eastern seaboard on 11 September 2001) as articulated by the prominent Irish and American, most probably Roman Catholic, philosopher Richard Kearney. I was aware that in those years of the ‘war against terrorism’, any*

appearance of condoning, defending or even attempting to understand these attacks was considered unpatriotic and unlawful, even for non-USA citizens like myself. However, the task of an intercultural philosopher is not to defend but to think through, and thus to bring to light hidden contradictions and implications. In connection with '9 / 11', far more prominent philosophers than myself, notably Derrida and Habermas, had not hesitated to do just that – although with a blatant North-Atlantic chauvinism that surprised me, not only as a dormant Islamologist but especially as an active, counter-hegemonistic Africanist, and as an intercultural philosopher. Preceded by Richard Kearney's original paper and comments by other scholars, and followed by further comments and by Kearney's rejoinder, my paper appeared in January 2006. In the decade that has elapsed since, the faces of militant Islam and of the USA have changed so much, and the effects of violence and devastation in the Middle East / the Arab World, the North Atlantic, and the world at large, have accumulated to such an extent and have so thoroughly warped the judgment, expectations, and confidence of so many, and so many different, categories of people, that today I can only read my paper as a remote period piece. It makes me realise that of all events, '9-11' and its aftermath have shown me, more than anything else, the potentially futile logocentric idealism of intercultural philosophy. In particular, I am compelled to admit the alarming fact that intercultural philosophy, which seeks to defer judgment for the sake of communicative and empathic communication and interaction, risks to make itself ridiculous in the face of an intolerant, radical modern mutation of Islam (or should we say: the atavistic revival of a medieval mainstream version of Islam?) which, in the guises of Al-Qaeda, Taliban, Islamic State etc., celebrates intolerance, extreme violence, iconoclasm, human decapitation, effective genocide, as well as barbarism, and lends a license of kill to criminal elements that no longer can lay claim to the respect usually extended to religious expressions. Driven to the brink of irrelevance, we have to admit that intercultural philosophy is predicated on the tacit assumption that all parties concerned affirm a shared humanity. Those who opt out of that affirmation (like the varieties of radical Islam listed, but also like the parties in certain other conflicts in our time: Hutu-Tutsi, Balkan, late-colonial responses to Independence movements in Africa and Asia e.g. former Dutch Indonesia, or Central-European Nazism in the 1930-1940s, or the perpetrators of Christian auto-da-fés and Israelite and Canaanite exterminating bans in Medieval and Ancient times) must, alas, still be considered as eminently, exceedingly, human, but we have no option but protecting the rest of humanity from them, not in the first place by verbose argument à la intercultural philosophy, but by radical containment and defensive measures including, perhaps, legitimate and determined violence.

Working at the forefront of hermeneutical philosophy, widely known, *inter alia*, as mediator in seminal round tables on the gift and on forgiveness around Derrida and Marion, and combining a professorial position in Ireland with one in Boston, USA, Kearney is particularly well situated to reflect on the way out from the *aporia* generated by the attack on various locations on the eastern USA seaboard on 11 September 2001, commonly known as '9 / 11'. With the article under discussion here (Kearney 2005), he does so in a journal published in South Asia yet electronically circulating world-wide, which adds another element of potentially global relevance to his argument. However, for such potential to materialise, a number of further conditions need to be fulfilled:

- the attempt to adopt a truly global perspective;
- the avoidance, therefore, of parochial myopias of a denominational and geopolitical nature;
- and closer reflection on the practical mechanisms of reconciliation.



My comments explore how these themes may illuminate and may render even more effective Richard Kearney's thoughtful and sympathetic argument.

Early in his argument, our author takes for granted that '9 / 11' is to have an effect on inter-religious dialogue, in the first place. But why should this be so? Must we assume that '9 / 11' was part of a primarily *religious* conflictive interaction? The victims cannot all be taken to have been Christians, or even religious people, at all. The same holds for the USA at large, to which the victims largely belonged. And although the perpetrators may have justified their deeds in terms of their particular understanding of Islam, they did not in the least act with a mandate from all, or most, Muslims in the present world.<sup>219</sup> I doubt whether '9 / 11' can be legitimately construed to constitute a *religious* event.<sup>220</sup> And if it cannot, what then is the place of religion in this context of a non-religious event? What is it in religions that suggests they have a role to play in the aftermath of events like '9 / 11'? Kearney sees the problem (for he speaks of *misappropriation* of religion, implying that this is what the perpetrators were guilty of in addition to their heinous physical violence and the violation of common human combative codes), but Kearney does not offer an answer on this point.

With rather a poetical or homiletic turn that is not supported by explicit discursive reasoning either, Kearney suggests that the perpetrators' misappropriation of religion ought to be countered by a corresponding re-appropriation of non-violence among the other camp – loosely but significantly identified as 'us', 'we'. But who is re-appropriating what, here? The vision of non-violence has formed a widespread code governing intimate face-to-face relations in the sphere of kinship and co-residence in the majority of human societies throughout known human history (cf. van Binsbergen 2001a), – long before it became a precept for the relations between non-kin and strangers, in the wider public space, in formal codes of law, ethical philosophies, and world religions – and a deliberate strategy

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<sup>219</sup> While this remains true, many commentators over the past ten years, with many accumulating instances of similar mass violence being inflicted in the name of militant Islamism, have wondered why, apparently, it should be so very difficult for most moderate Muslims to unequivocally denounce such attacks, and explicitly distance themselves from them.

<sup>220</sup> Such an argument would revolve on the meaning given to جهاد *jihād*, 'Holy War'. Considered as one of the five pillars of Islam, and interpreted as the mandatory war on infidels with the aim of converting or destroying them, *jihad* (including '9 / 11') would be as much a religious act as pilgrimage to Mecca, or a Christian wedding, or a Parsi funeral, or an African ancestral sacrifice. However, there have been other interpretations of *jihad* (e.g. as personal spiritual cleansing, or a mere reconversion of *renegade Muslims*), and even regardless of these relatively fine distinctions one may wonder whether a surprise attack in an undeclared – in fact, non-existing – war could qualify as *jihad*. With such considerations, are we not guilty, as outsiders to the Muslim faith, of trying to tell the believers what is the proper interpretation of their own religious tenets? Where did we get that right? We may invoke the somewhat worn clichés of the limitations of freedom, which come into view when what I do on the basis of what I consider my freedom threatens the freedom of others. We are all fellow-humans, inhabiting the same earth, and we are all potential or actual victims of such *jihad* – that gives us the right.

(in the hands of Gandhi and his South Asian followers; and in the hands of African Independence leaders such as Kaunda and Nkrumah heeding Gandhi's example) of forcing macro-political issues by pressing into service the extent to which the enemy is constrained (by law and especially by home public opinion) by general considerations of common humanity and respect for human life. The vision of non-violence is nobody's and everybody's property. It calls for application, re-dedication, revival, rather than re-appropriation.

However, the operative word here is 'we', rather than 'non-violence'. If such re-dedication to non-violence, also in the public sphere, even in intercultural, inter-ethnic, interreligious and intercontinental relations, is to provide 'the solution' to the '9 / 11' aftermath, as Kearney suggests, this presupposes that there is one and only one problem: that there is a unanimous set of people (the unidentified 'we' featuring in Kearney's argument) who are evaluating the events of '9 / 11' (and the chain of events leading up to and following the '9 / 11' drama) from a shared perspective, groping for one interpretation common to them all. However, the fundamental fact to face in the context of '9 / 11' is that there are a number (at least two, probably several more) of distinct positions, from which very different evaluations will be attached to recent intercontinental history, including '9 / 11'.

When – as in the case of '9 / 11' – a small set of humans is brought to violate widespread and fundamental codes such as the respect for human life, for civilians, for the latter's beloved ones, for other people's property and for the fruits of human labour (in the form of buildings and airplanes), for the orderly conduct of armed conflict, and even turn out to be prepared to sacrifice their own lives in the process, then, in principle, the whole of humanity qualifies as victims – materially, by association, vicariously, and by implication; and this even includes the perpetrators themselves, whose postulated feelings of historical injury and dehumanising hatred we, the other humans, can only begin to fathom inside ourselves. This implies the possibility of a 'we' that encompasses the whole of mankind, and that contains in itself the conditions for all suffering and for all reconciliation.

Yet, unmistakably, Kearney's 'we' means mainly 'USA citizens and others identifying with them', including himself. Admittedly, and somewhat courageously if considered from a mainstream USA standpoint, he qualifies the 'we' perspective in several ways: it should not imply condoning the torture (even though 'legal' in the USA) of Iraqi and Guantanamo Bay prisoners; it should not imply the mutual demonisation in which not only the perpetrators but also, in turn, the USA leadership have publicly engaged; it should combine a Christian inspiration with a Buddhist, Hinduist, and Graeco-Roman classical one, and even have some room for Muslim mysticism (we note that African, South American, and Oceanian spiritualities are implicitly overlooked); it should not be entrapped in a naïve 'we' / 'them' dichotomy; it should not fall into the Huntington (1996) trap of conceptualising the conflict in terms of a *Clash of Civiliza-*

tions (but neither overstress pardon at the expense of justice, i.e. trial and punishment). Yet despite all these qualifications, the 'we' in Kearney's argument remains a North Atlantic 'we' that is loyal to USA concerns. It does not shun from criticism of the USA leadership, it does acknowledge the existence (but scarcely the contents) of a highly critical assessment of the USA performance like Virilio's (2002), yet carefully matches such criticism with ample attention for no-nonsense patriotic statements of such hawks as Dooley and Hitchens, who are cited in (apparent?) approval. Also for an Irish intellectual there are, apparently, limits to what one can write if one has a part-time professorship at Boston, which is from whose airport the '9 / 11' airplanes took off on their way to destruction.

However, given his practical commitment to USA society Kearney probably needs to wrap up his unmistakable criticism in this way. He needs to create a context of mainstream credibility in which he can yet pose his courageous question '*How do we even begin to imagine pardoning Bin Laden?*' without immediately disqualifying this question as rhetorical, as implying '*such pardon is absolutely impossible to imagine under whatever circumstances*'.

Kearney claims that inhabitants of the North Atlantic region (or rather, by implication, their intellectual, journalistic and political spokespersons) tend to look at modern wars 'uniquely in terms of politics, economics and sociology'. Again he skips one step, failing to argue why sudden violent attacks on civil targets, without prior declaration of war and without being immediately claimed by a particular nation or political movement in the affirmed pursuit of a specific and declared aim, qualify as 'war'.<sup>221</sup> Somewhat uncritically, he adopts the naïve definition of the situation as offered by the USA leadership, in terms of a 'War on Terror'.

Probably Kearney's hermeneutical position is primarily responsible for his seeing '9 / 11', legitimately, as a religious event: he is trying to represent what he has reconstructed to be the protagonists' own views of the matter. The demonising idioms, the emotional repertoire of images, employed by the leadership on both sides suggest that one is not dealing here with a secular conflict but with one saturated with religious overtones, on both sides. 'Axis of Evil' (in the idiom employed by the USA leadership) is not a secular but a religious term – it reminds me (van Binsbergen 1981) of the discourse used by the freshly acceded President Kaunda of Zambia when justifying (1964) his use of extreme military violence against the Lumpa Church, in terms of their 'evil', using language un-

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<sup>221</sup> Are we not all trying to interpret '9 / 11'? In a collection I edited, von Trotha (2003) insightfully argues that so-called 'terrorist' attacks constitute a totally new category of warfare in their own right, characterised *inter alia* by the fact that one derives one's weapons not from the arms trade but from among the diffuse technological complexity and vulnerability of North Atlantic urban mass society itself: the Internet, civil aviation, postal services, the convergence of large numbers of people around train stations, etc.

mistakably identifying Lenshina and her pious followers as witches, and thus issuing to himself, his United National Independence Party, and his army a license to kill.

Yet I suggest we must go beyond what Kearney advocates: we must not only discover the religious imagery here which we may at first have risked to ignore, – we must also analyze that religious imagery and see what implications it has for understanding, controlling, and resolving this intercontinental conflict that has already claimed many thousands of lives and that threatens to endanger world peace for decades to come. The gain of empathy and representation inherent in the hermeneutical position, may also be its loss: it allows us the identification and exegesis of the protagonists' public pronouncements, but does not allow us to speak of their hidden or dissimulated agenda's, let alone to analyse, distantly and objectifyingly, the political economy and other structural constraints to which the protagonists may be argued to be subjected even without them consciously, explicitly realising so – or without us having evidence that they do. In terms of an established usage in cultural anthropology, hermeneutics allows us an *emic* analysis but not an *etic* one. The dilemma also reminds us of the classic Gadamer / Habermas debate of the 1960s-1970s – of which Ricoeur has been a major commentator.<sup>222</sup> If, complementary to a hermeneutical perspective, we would feel free to adopt a distancing analytical perspective, we would ask ourselves whether the '9 / 11' confrontation between the (dominant elites of the) North Atlantic region and the world of militant Islam, in addition to the emic religious overtones, is not also a rational conflict over scarce resources in the political and economic domain (on the USA side: solidarity with Israel, a new phase of geopolitical expansion into the Middle East, and reliance – for industry and for highly-valued individual mobility – on cheap mineral oil; on the side of the militant Islamists: acknowledgment of historical wrongs done to Muslims in recent global history, and recognition of the validity of the view that Islam as a path through modernity and globalisation offers a valid alternative to dominant North Atlantic patterns). Such an analytical perspective would do something very important that is utterly beyond the hermeneutical approach: *it would allow us to view '9 / 11' in terms of global hegemony and counter-hegemony*. In more practical terms, it would make it possible to contemplate the extent to which the USA leadership themselves may have been partly responsible for the escalation leading to '9 / 11', so that the firm rhetorical distinction between perpetrators and victims begins to dissolve, and one obvious (if only partial) way out after '9 / 11' would become discernable: trying to undo, on *both* sides, the conditions that led to such escalation.

If Kearney insists on the religious dimension yet takes his distance from Huntington, this makes sense. For Kearney the fact that the '9 / 11' conflict has pro-

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<sup>222</sup> Cf. Gadamer 1965; Habermas 1968, 1970 1971, 1977a, 1977b, 1981; Okolo 198; Ricoeur 1974, 1981a.

found religious aspects, means not that it is unsolvable (which is Huntington's position), but, quite to the contrary, enables Kearney to point at the potential of religion to cross or overcome boundaries and to move towards reconciliation. In that respect his approach is far more sympathetic than Huntington's. Yet it is similarly myopic in failing to explore – given the non-religious aspects of the conflict I have just indicated – non-religious roads to conflict resolution. Remarkably, Kearney insists – and this makes up most of his article – that religion has a great conflict-resolving potential, but he does so

- without offering an explicit argument as to why this should be the case – and
- while apparently glossing over the contradiction that both parties in the '9 / 11' conflict articulate only their irreconcilable enmity, but not their preparedness towards reconciliation, in terms of the world religion they respectively adhere to. It is as if Kearney is saying:

'you who are casting your post-"9-11" enmity in a religious idiom, and who are capitalising on the perennial association between religion and violence,<sup>223</sup> please realise that the same idiom contains such elements as would allow you to overcome your enmity – and, incidentally, the same elements also appear in other religions and worldviews, e.g. in those of South Asia'.

This is profoundly meaningful, yet two crucial conditions continue to inform the situation and render Kearney's recommendations rather ineffective:

In the first place, the overall appeal to wisdom traditions' hermeneutical tolerance fails to identify *the specific social, political and communicative conditions under which the parties involved may reject, or may be prepared to adopt, the proposed shift from a conflictive and boundary-emphasising to a boundary-crossing and reconciliatory selection from among the repertoire of their respective religion*, as exponents of the long history of wisdom traditions in the world. Kearney's strategy in his argument – even though it is published in a South Asian venue – is to address those in the North Atlantic with Christian, Buddhist and Hinduist identifications or sympathies, and show them – with considerable erudition and eloquence – how here a road to hermeneutic tolerance may be

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<sup>223</sup> Kearney acknowledges the intellectual movement (Freud, Girard *etc.*) that sees religion as essentially a product of violence. I have no quarrel with Kearney's rendering of that movement, however succinct, but I think the idea behind the movement is utterly one-sided. Both Kearney (2001) and I (van Binsbergen 1981, van Binsbergen & Schoffeleers 1985, and many later publications, some of which are included in the present volume) have written extensive theoretical arguments on religion, and this is not the place for a debate on this point. Let me merely say this. In my opinion religion is not just about the transmutation or sublimation of violence. It is an (apparently almost inevitable) by-product of human thought organised into patterned action and relatively stable metaphors. It is risky to make presuppositions about an undocumented distant past (the Middle Palaeolithic) when we have evidence of interhuman violence but not of articulate speech. Yet under modern, literate conditions it is safe to say that violence may be as much a product of discursive thought (*inter alia*, religious thought), as that discursive thought (*inter alia*, religious thought) is a product of violence. Cf. Schroeder 1996.

found which would allow them ('us') to forgive the perpetrators (but see above) of '9 / 11'. It is somewhat unfortunate that Kearney's hermeneutical perspective does not extend beyond the dominant groups in the North Atlantic region, especially not to Muslims in general (including those many millions of Muslims currently residing in the North Atlantic region), let alone the militant Islamists behind the '9 / 11' attacks. Only towards the end of his argument there is a passing admittance that also Islamic spirituality provides examples of the hermeneutic tolerance that Kearney advocates as the way out. His argument would have been much more impressive if he would have explicitly addressed the crucial question as to what kind of perspective (religious, political, economic) one would have to offer to Muslims, and to militant Islamists particularly, in order to bring them to the point where reconciliation becomes possible and past deeds may be brought to redressive and reintegrative trial in mutual recognition of their unacceptability. Moreover, it would have been an impressive display of intercultural sensitivity if Kearney had acknowledged traditions of reconciliation world-wide, including those outside the established literate world religions, e.g. in the African and Native American context.<sup>224</sup> Kearney's plea to let the world's wisdom traditions do the work of reconciliation would have been much more effective, and convincing, if this plea had not stressed the North Atlantic philosophical and Christian / theological tradition so ethnocentrically – despite his short excursion into South Asian wisdom traditions. If he mentions mysticism, why miss the golden opportunity of exploring Islamic mysticism (أليلي, ابن العربي, أليلي, أليلي / al-Jili, ibn al-<sup>c</sup>Arabi, al-Hallaj, al-Ġazzali, etc.) as a possible source of a wisdom that might well be persuasive to militant Islamists. If he mentions Aristotle, why not make use of the fact that Aristotle was transmitted to the North Atlantic through Islamic thinkers, and left traces in Islamic thought even after al-Ġazzali had concluded the victory of theology over philosophy, in the world of Islam? The existence of an extensive and enduring Islamic wisdom tradition (Sufism, associated with its exponents' woollen – Arab. *suf* – garments according to some popular etymology, but in fact the pursuit of (Greek) σοφία *sōphia*, 'wisdom') is largely ignored by Kearney. This is all the more regrettable, because Sufism, much more than the formal conceptual and confrontational thought of militant Islamism, has been the popular Islam of the Middle Eastern and North African masses for almost a millennium now.

*The public underpinning of either side's post-'9 / 11' position by reference to a religious idiom may be only a minority option.* Kearney seems to preach for his own parish, which not only is limited to dominant groups in the North Atlantic region, but among the latter, to those with a Christian or South Asian religious identity or at least sympathy. Given high levels of secularisation, the set thus defined only comprises a minority of the current population of the North At-

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<sup>224</sup> On Africa, cf. Ngwane 1996; van Binsbergen 2003b: ch. 11.

lantic region. How are the secularised others to be involved,<sup>225</sup> including those who prefer to see the Christian idiom employed by the USA leadership as mere rhetoric and strategy? How are Muslims to be involved, without first being blackmailed into having to publicly denounce the militant Islamists and the, admittedly totally unacceptable, extremes to which the latter went in the context of '9 / 11'? Surely it would be an interreligious naïvety, not to say insult, to expect Muslims to let other religious orientations than Islam inspire them towards an attitude of reconciliation that is, in the most literal sense, at the very heart of Islam, and informs the etymology of the very name of Islam. Are we seriously to consider the polysemy of the Judaeo-Christian *Bible's Song of Songs*, to which Kearney refers, as an argument that is going to win Muslims over towards reconciliation? Agreed, the *Bible* is one of the universal treasures of humankind and, apart from its uses by Jews and Christians, has been held in considerable esteem among Muslims despite three quarters of a century of conflict over the state of Israel; but given this recent history conflict, why not also look in the abundance of Islamic and Arabic texts for grounds for reconciliation? These cannot be far, since a central epithet of Allah has been الرحمانى *ar-Rahmāni*, 'the Merciful', while the fundamental stance of Islam, brought out by its name, is أسلم *as-salām*, 'surrender, peace'. Moreover (contrary to some of the examples Kearney gives: Griffith[s], Makransky, Tolstoy), as I have already indicated above when speaking of *jihad*, the sensitivity politics of interreligious and intercultural hermeneutics would certainly abhor a situation where outsiders, strangers, to one's own religious tradition are claimed to occupy a privileged vantage point from where to interpret one's own religious tradition; such a claim smacks of condescension and hegemony (cf. van Binsbergen 2003b). How are Muslims to be involved in the post-'9 / 11' reconciliation process, on the basis of *their own* spiritual traditions? This is for Muslims to say; and all non-Muslims need to do is to reserve seats for Muslims around the table, far more explicitly and generously than Kearney has managed to do in his argument, even though his argument was clearly written in the same spirit as my recommendation on this point.

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<sup>225</sup> Failure to appreciate how the vast majority of the North Atlantic population is no longer actively committed to Christianity or Judaism also affects other parts of Kearney's argument. Thus he claims that the tolerance between adversaries is to be increased by the realisation that they both belong to the Abrahamic tradition (but so do the opponents in the Northern Ireland conflict, and in most conflicts that have waged in Europe in the course of the last thousand years, including Christians' treatment of Jews throughout that period), and also (Ricoeur) by reading each others' sacred scripture. Again, the latter recommendation is correct in principle, but how is it going to have a genuine impact on the North Atlantic region today, and on North Atlantic / Muslim relations, if due to secularisation only a minority of North Atlantic inhabitants identify as active adherents of the Christian and Jewish faith any more, while Islam is establishing itself, in the same region, rapidly and self-confidently, and making converts? Christianity may be the rhetorical and performative idiom of the USA leadership, but it is no longer the worldview of all USA citizens, let alone of all citizens of the rest of the North Atlantic region.

Kearney's plea for hermeneutical tolerance is sympathetic, timely and well-taken, but we need to be far more specific if we want it to work. The hermeneutical recognition of polysemy alone is not the answer to '9-11'. The point is not that words can be interpreted in so many ways at the same time. The point is, for instance, that, in the modern world, hardened positions of exclusion and enmity represent a violence of words simultaneous with – often even *preceding* – the physical violence of deeds, while state-of-the-art technologies lend to these violent words an unprecedented new power by diffusing them all over the globe, at the same time lending the technological means to bring them into violent practice. And the point is to recognise militant Islamism, not as an inevitable and perennial core of Islam (despite its attempt to claim a genealogy in medieval Islamic thinkers), but as an ideological product of *the very same* globalisation of our times<sup>226</sup> as has lend, to militant Islamism, its singularly wide-spread appeal (through globalised media) and (in the sense of von Trotha's 2003 argument cited above) its singularly material destructiveness. Militant Islamism, as a performative and thus deliberately atavistic revival of *jihadist* tendencies of the times of the Prophet Muḥammad, is not the intrinsic nor the inevitable format of modern Islam, but a re-invention, the result of the marriage between Islam and globalisation.

Anyway, given the links between words and violence, one place where reconciliation may be found is in the interstices between words and between messages, in *silence*.

But that is not the only place.

As Kearney suggests, a legal framework ensuring fair trial may also be a way to bring about ultimate reconciliation, and would certainly not stand in the latter's way.<sup>227</sup> I do agree on this point, and I am reminded of a case where the

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<sup>226</sup> In other words, I propose to analyse today's modern militant Islamism from the same perspective as that which I applied elsewhere to Southern African *ubuntu* philosophy and to the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission; cf. van Binsbergen 2001b, 2004b, reprinted in the present book as Chapter 9. My approach has however generated considerable controversy, cf. Bewaji & Ramose 2003.

<sup>227</sup> Half a decade after this was written, the leader of Al-Qaeda and obvious brain behind '9-11', أسامة بن لادن Usama bin Laden, was executed (2011) without trial in his home in Pakistan, under the eyes of his family. Many, including myself, would have liked so see the severest penalty inflicted upon this perpetrator – *but only after due process*. Apparently, reconciliation and justice were not a priority of President Obama's administration in this matter. The recently dramatically increased use of drones (unmanned miniature fighter planes) suggests the same. Perhaps it is too late already for such considerations, in the sense that in the face of the immense threats of militant Islam to the West and to humanity in general, who are we to quibble over a few extra corpses. The purpose of even a just war, however, is not only to win that war, but also, and particularly, to uphold justice as a sacred ideal in general. A just war conducted through the infringement of justice, ceases to be just, and destroys the very foundations of our society. Especially in a country like the USA where, in the absence of other historically binding factors (shared provenance, ethnicity, culture and language), the Constitution and the judiciary



emphatic insistence on non-violent patterns of confession, forgiving and reconciliation, rather than on lawful punishment, may have prevented the catharsis that is needed for a true overcoming of the violence of the past: the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.<sup>228</sup> But Kearney does not give the reasons why pardon should be complemented by justice – he simply tells us that this is what Ricoeur posits. The obvious reason, not likely to be found with Ricoeur, is that the opponents on both sides bring to the conflict and its subsequent reconciliation general notions of justice, punishment and retaliation which may be creatively addressed and negotiated in the course of reconciliation (especially by a skilful outsider), but hardly so creatively as to totally eclipse or obliterate these notions; therefore, any reconciliation that does not take such particularistic notions of justice into account, risks to remain only performative, unable to prevent that the conflict simmers on underneath as a form of resentment still demanding satisfaction.



Fig. 5.1. Striking the earth (with a walking-stick, in a powerful semi-circular movement so that the point bounces and leaves a chance number of multiple indentures) in order to produce the entries for an Arabic geomantic divinatory reading; the resulting entries (even = two dots, odd = 1 dot) appear, as geomantic symbols, on the right (after al-Toûnisi 1845).

Another passage makes us wonder just how convincing Kearney's discourse on law – or on Christianity – could be. When he refers in passing to

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are considered to be the very mainstay of social life.

<sup>228</sup> 1994-1998; cf. Salazar *et al.* 2002 with references to the extensive literature; van Binsbergen 2004b – the latter reprinted in the present volume as Chapter 9.

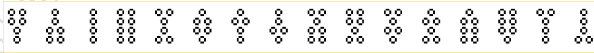
‘those discreet words [ of Jesus ] in the sand that resisted murder’

(cf. *John* 8:6) a number of points may be made. This passage is generally considered, among *New Testament* scholars, to be corrupt, a late insertion. The transmitted Greek text, for whatever it is worth, has γῆ *gē* ‘earth’, not ψάμμη *psammē* ‘sand’,<sup>229</sup> and speaks of ‘writing’ but not of ‘words’ – it may have been magical or divinatory signs,<sup>230</sup> or – as many commentators would have it – mere doodles to buy time.<sup>231</sup>

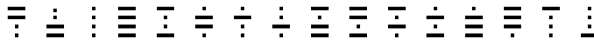
Most important, I am thoroughly puzzled, not to say shocked, that Kearney accuses Jesus’ interlocutors in that situation of *murderous* intentions. In ways certainly to be abhorred from our present-day standpoint,<sup>232</sup> but legal at the time (the beginning of the Common Era), they were about to administer the standard communal punishment (death by collective stoning) for an individual act of transgression (adultery). In principle, murder is the infringement, not the implementation, of the law of the land. Theologically, Jesus’ reconciliatory action in this narrative went against the established law; it illustrates how he off-sets the New Law, which from a Christian standpoint he embodies (that of an accommodating love), against the Old Law, which from a Christian standpoint he is considered to render obsolete: that of formal strictness and retaliation. Kearney’s ethnocentric misreading of this passage (*i.e.* his projection, across

<sup>229</sup> A significant distinction in a time when working out mathematical problems on *sand* was standard academic practice – as we all know from the anecdote of Archimedes and the Roman soldier at Syracuse (Valerius Maximus 1976: 629, 1; Plutarch 1911).

<sup>230</sup> Not for nothing is Arabic geomantic divination, with direct and firm links in Graeco-Roman Antiquity and the Ancient Near East, designated علم الرمل *‘ilm ar-raml*, ‘sand science’, or by another term, ‘sand calligraphy’ خط الرمل *ḥaṭṭ ar-raml*. Its standard procedure is to move a walking stick horizontally over a sandy surface, and letting it bounce so that it makes indentures in the soil (Fig. 5.1) – each such act produces a score as ‘odd’ or ‘even’ depending on the number of indentures, and four such scores make the geomantic sign with a specific reading in the divinatory catalogue of meanings, *e.g.*



or, in the form more commonly used in the Arabic context (although not in Fig. 5.1 despite its Arabic provenance):



<sup>231</sup> The point is not that Jesus could not have written *text* in the sand. To the extent to which he may be considered a historical person (scholarship has made a pendulum swing movement in this respect every half century or so) he may be considered to have been literate; his knowledge of the *Old Testament* is testified throughout the Gospels, and allowed him already as a 12-year old to impress the scholars at the Temple of Jerusalem (*Luke* 2:40).

<sup>232</sup> Informed as this standpoint is by the explicit formulation, canonisation, and globalisation, of ‘human rights’, *cf.* the 1948 United Nations Declaration, after the 1789 model of the French revolution.

time and space, of current North Atlantic notions of the lawful versus the unlawful termination of human life) shows how difficult it is, even for a hermeneutic philosopher of the first rank and of long standing, to develop an intercultural hermeneutics of sufficient sophistication to cope with a situation like ‘9 / 11’. If he cannot even summon intercultural detachment and respect in regard of a narrative bringing together, 2000 years ago, the name-giver of Christianity with another world religion, Judaism, from which Jesus has sprung, how are we going to accept Kearney’s interpretation of present-day, rather more serious, conflict featuring Christianity and another Abrahamic religion, Islam? Undeniably, by North Atlantic national versions of public law, and by the human-rights code adopted by the great majority of states in the hope of thus rendering it universal, the perpetrators of ‘9 / 11’ acted criminally; yet in their own eyes they must have considered themselves legitimated by reference to some higher law, and in the process they were prepared to sacrifice not only other peoples’ lives but also their own. Reconciliation is only possible if we do not deny this conflict of perceptions of legality, but if, instead, we actively invent a discourse (cf. van Binsbergen 2003b, especially the introduction) in which, through creative symbolic sleight-of-hand, both perspectives may be recognised, and hopefully accommodated and overcome.

Thus it is only *in principle* that Kearney is right in his claim that hermeneutic tolerance may be the way out of protracted violent conflicts such as in Palestine / Israel, Northern Ireland, Bosnia, etc. As an instance of hermeneutic tolerance, the founding of Christianity in (as is commonly accepted) the formal, collective acceptance, by Jesus’ earliest followers, of St Paul’s universalism has only limited applicability to such situations, *pace* Kearney. For although that foundation situation may have considerable appeal to Christians as a model for emulation, it was on very small-scale, involving only a few dozen people. Also, it particularly lacked the history of accumulated collective violent trauma in a conscious, identity-constructing historic process, which characterises practically all such protracted modern conflicts including that leading on to, and following, ‘9 / 11’. It is the *historicity of identity formation through violence*, which we have to deal with in the context of ‘9 / 11’, on both sides; and that has no parallels in the *New Testament* except perhaps (obliquely and in largely unarticulated form) in the confrontation between Jews and Romans (which, together with St Paul’s universalism, may well have been a prime factor in the emergence of Christianity) – as popular commentaries on the Qumrān texts have stressed (Wilson 1969 / 1955; Baigent & Leigh 1992). Moreover, the subsequent two millennia of Christian-Jewish relations (which, without much exaggeration, may be summarised as a long chain of intolerance, exclusion, violence and genocide inflicted upon Jews by Christians) has shown that Paul’s universalism has seldom allowed his spiritual heirs, the Christians, to effectively mobilise a similar hermeneutic tolerance towards the co-religionists of the prophet of Christianity, the Jew Yohshua bar Miriam. Nor has the appeal to such hermeneutic tolerance, however admitted to

be foundational to Christianity<sup>233</sup>, inspired the proclaimedly Christian USA leadership to employ that attitude in its stance *vis-à-vis* the perpetrators of '9-11'.

Therefore, after identifying this kind of hermeneutical tolerance as one of the ways out, Kearney would have been expected to spell out how it can be practically deployed in the present situation, by Christians not automatically practicing it, and by Muslims not likely to be impressed by it as long as it is presented in specifically Christian trappings. Of course Kearney far from suggests that such hermeneutical tolerance is specifically Christian: indeed, as I have argued elsewhere (van Binsbergen 2003a), any conflict resolution involving reconciliation depends on it, and it is particularly small-scale African societies that can be shown to have developed this socio-communicative technology to high levels of perfection. In my argument cited, I also explore the inner mechanisms of such reconciliation. These turn out to involve, *inter alia*:

- the recognition that both sides in the conflict are, by their own standards and perceptions, right, and act in rational integrity;
- secondly, the only way to reconcile two such positions is by a hermeneutics that is not only tolerant, but that is to be emphatically inventive and innovative: a new overarching discourse needs to be invented that, in the eyes of both parties, dissolves their irreconcilable positions of incompatible rightness into compromise – which requires a skilful and inspired, charismatic act of social communicative sleight-of-hand;
- this can only be done by virtue of both parties recognising and affirming each other's common humanity which they share – putting an end to all earlier rhetorics of mutual demonisation.

Following Ricoeur, and in a way remarkably similar to mine yet somewhat less concrete and practical, Kearney sees a number of benefits to come from an hermeneutics of tolerance:

1. an ethic of narrative hospitality (*cf.* my 'recognition of a shared humanity');
2. an ethic of narrative flexibility (*cf.* my 'sleight-of-hand');
3. narrative plurality (*cf.* my recognition that both parties are right and endowed with rational integrity);
4. the transfiguring of the past (*cf.* my 'creative and innovative'); and is to ultimately lead on to
5. 'exceptional moments (...) where an ethics of justice is touched by a poetics of pardon'.

I could not agree more. Yet my opening question remains: *What is it in organ-*

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<sup>233</sup> Badiou's idea (2003) as cited by Kearney – correct but far from new.

ised religion, that would privilege it to bring about these five stages, over and above other communicative and performative repertoires available in the modern world, despite the fact that the latter is by and large involved in a process of secularisation? Kearney tells us that the poetics of pardon is usually of a spiritual or religious nature, but does not argue his case. The extent to which, and the reason why, the process of reconciliation should have religious overtones, remains the crucial question behind his argument. It needs to be answered, especially in the light of the fact that both opposing parties so far have cast their demonising idiom in the terms of the world religion they claim to adhere to.

And again, in Kearney's concluding passage, there is the ominous 'we': for 'us', it is difficult to forgive the perpetrators of '9 / 11' – but where is the empathic argument that makes their position at least understandable, and would allow 'them' to forgive 'us', or that would allow humanity ('history') to forgive both 'them' and 'us'?

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## Chapter 6

# Jacques Derrida on religion

## Glimpses of interculturality

*In the present Chapter I investigate Derrida's long essay 'Foi et savoir' (1996) in a bid to derive, from that study of religion, pointers towards a philosophy of interculturality. I identify Derrida's strategies of investigation, and find them to consist in:*

- *dialogue with the philosophical canon;*
- *with Derrida's own work;*
- *a further development of the latter's own idiosyncratic but effective vocabulary;*
- *reliance on Indo-European etymologies;*
- *on the juggling of place names charged with Biblical and Ancient Greek significance; and finally*
- *a conversational discursive progress.*

*I then criticise Derrida (despite his North-African, Jewish and Afroasiatic roots) for vicarious Indo-European entrenchment and linguistic determinism. It is argued that Derrida's central thesis of the culturally specific nature of the concept of 'religion' (i.e. as an invention of the West, even specifically of Christianity) is not supported from an Arabic and Hebrew linguistic perspective, nor from a cross-cultural distribution analysis of the notion of tolerance, not by the common historical roots of Islam, Judaism and Christianity. Here, growth points for an approach to interculturality may be discerned, but outside Derrida's argument. On the other hand, I much applaud the bifocality which Derrida attributes to religion. I highlight Derrida's ambivalence in his approach to Judaism (cf. Sartre and Levinas). What Derrida describes as religion, has – contrary to the concept of religion in the hands of such disciplines as anthropology or 'comparative religion' – too limited a distribution through space and time, and in fact (with a display of ethnocentrism frequently encountered in Derrida's work) takes the North-Atlantic tradition for granted. This*

becomes especially manifest when – using a paired concept from cultural anthropology – the North Atlantic tradition of religion, as implied to be ‘emic’, is dissociated from an analytical, ‘etic’ concept of religion. I conclude with a sympathetic reading of Derrida’s χώρα ἡ/khōra / ‘space’ concept as having real promise for thinking interculturality.

## 6.1. Introduction

This Chapter does not aim at a comprehensive discussion of Derrida’s writings on religion and related topics. Rather, it is a reflection on only one of his pieces on religion, albeit perhaps the most central one: ‘Foi et savoir: Les deux sources. de la “religion” aux limites de la simple raison’,<sup>234</sup> which was based on his contribution to the 1996 Capri (Italy) discussions on religion in which also Gadamer and Vattimo participated. Having in the past manifested myself as the worst possible reader and interpreter of Derrida,<sup>235</sup> my present piece is not intended to atone for former sins – however much such a gesture would fit into the general thrust of Derrida’s argument, in which sacrifice, wholeness and righteousness become increasingly central as one reads on. No doubt I will still make a fool of myself even with the present, sympathetic reading of Derrida. My intention is not so much to do justice to him or to myself, but to scan his text for *the articulation of philosophical problems of interculturality, and the suggestion of possible routes towards possible answers, specifically from the context of religion* (or, perhaps more generally, ‘spirituality’).

## 6.2. Strategies of investigation

Derrida’s text makes exciting reading. It has without the slightest doubt the pulse beat of our time and age, mediates today’s experience in the inimitable, slightly pedantic, yet devastatingly relevant way which marks the author as a great philosopher of our time. If interculturality is indeed one of the few great modern problems, it cannot fail to seep through in this text – and it does to a very great extent, even if the term interculturality is not used even once.

Derrida proceeds more or less in the manner familiar from his numerous other writings, and from kindred authors both in France and abroad. Much emphasis is

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<sup>234</sup> Derrida 1996 / 1998. Derrida’s piece, under the title ‘Faith and knowledge: The two sources of “Religion” at the limits of reason alone’, was also included, as Derrida’s opening chapter, in Gil Anidjar 2002. The title echoes familiar texts in the history of the philosophy of religion, including Immanuel Kant’s *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* (1983d / 1793); and Henri Bergson, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (1932 / 1948). Specifically on Derrida’s approach to religion, cf. Sherwood & Hart 2005.

<sup>235</sup> van Binsbergen 1999a, with various translations and reprints specified in the end bibliography .



laid, initially, on the anecdotal details that define the situation from which he is speaking and writing – in true post-modern fashion, the very idea of universals has to be nipped in the bud. He has a great deal of very important things to say about the modern world, the structure of the experience it generates, and the reflection of this state of affairs in current religious ideas and practices. Without pretending (for such pretence would defeat his post-modern stance) to have at his disposal a privileged external position from which to look at the world and from where to produce systematic, empirical statements about it by some explicit and systematic social-science methodology, his observations on the modern world and on other empirical matters are presented in an off-hand manner, as if they are not worth the trouble of trying to falsify them. This attitude, after initial bewilderment, grows upon the reader and is rather endearing; moreover, much of what Derrida says is, at the descriptive level, admittedly too familiar to invite closer empirical scrutiny; *much*, but – as we shall see – not *all*. The real challenge of his argument is not the facts of the present-day world, but how to think about the apparent resurgence of religion in this context. His method is not empirical research but a combination of time-honoured philosophical *topoi*:

1. the idiosyncratic but profound and revealing dialogue with very few yet highly relevant philosophical texts by his philosophical predecessors, – texts with which he clearly has struggled for decades and to which he is now returning with a new set of questions
2. brief reference to, and excursions into, his own work where some of the terrain covered in his present argument has been treated at greater length
3. the gradual unfolding of a highly personal vocabulary which is not specifically geared to the philosophical study of religion but which, having increasingly proven effective to convey and to problematise crucial aspects of the present-day experience, turns out to be extremely powerful to highlight the religious problematic
4. the reliance on etymologies of key words from the Indo-European vocabulary to denote aspects of religion
5. the reliance on key words and names which, although once part of a general North Atlantic intellectual education through school and church, can no longer be expected to ring an automatic bell with the modern reader – or do I underestimate the readership if I suppose that not everyone knows that *Moria(h)* was, by tradition, the mountain on which Abraham attempted to sacrifice his son Isaac, as well as the mountain on which the first Israelite temple was erected;<sup>236</sup> that *Patmos* was the island where the Christian writer John claims to

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<sup>236</sup> *Genesis* 22:2 *f.*; 2 *Chronicles* 3:1. 'Moria' was also the name of the Greek Pelopponesus during the Ottoman Empire, but that is evidently not meant in this context.

have started his *Book of Revelations*; that *Delos*, as the reputed birthplace of Apollo, was the most sacred island of ancient Greece, having a specific relationship also with the divine beings Leto, Artemis, Dionysos, and Ariadne; or that the Greek (specifically Platonic) *χώρα hōra*, ‘space, refuge’, contrasts with *τόπος topos* but has nothing to do with the more familiar and somewhat similar sounding *χορός, choros* ‘dance, chorus or choir’.

Any technique is as good as the person using it, and in Derrida’s capable hands this rather unpromising combination of strategies produces a brilliant argument.



Fig. 6.1. Jacques Derrida.

The main philosophical props which Derrida sets up to deliver his argument are eminently familiar: Bergson, *Les deux sources de la morale et de la religion* (1932 / 1948); Plato, *Timaeus* (1975 / 4rd c. BCE); Kant, *Die Religion innerhalb der Grenzen der blossen Vernunft* (1983d / 1793); Hegel, *Die Phänomenologie des Geistes* (1977 / 1807); Heidegger, *Holzwege* (1950; specifically ‘Der Spruch des Anaximander’, 1946), and *Sein und Zeit* (1927 / 1977); Levinas’ entire oeuvre; Nietzsche, entire oeuvre; and more implicitly Guattari & Deleuze, Bataille, and Sartre. In the background is the general post-structuralist, liberating idea (Nietzschean, but also Hegelian and even Herakleitean in origin; cf. O’Brien 1990) to the effect that

every concept, every proposition, every condition, contains in itself the roots of its own opposition and denial – an archaic form of thought which I have identified in language forms and mythologies of the Upper Palaeolithic (van Binsbergen 2012d; van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011), but which especially in the Aristotelian tradition of the excluded third ('if P, then not not-P') has been completely eclipsed from civilised discourse in the West, until its relevance became manifest once more in the study of ancient and South forms of thought – so-called 'savage thought' (Lévi-Strauss 1962a – he reminds us that this is also the standard form of everyday, non-specialist, non-technical thought in the West, even today) because it is free from the logocentrism chided by post-structuralists like Derrida.

In addition to his own assertions in the field of classical Greek and Latin philology (repeated, but it is not clear on the basis of what specific authority), the principal source for Derrida's Indo-European etymologies is: the authoritative (but somewhat dated) work of the distinguished linguist Benveniste – an author whom Derrida occasionally chides for his apodictic and positivist attitude to scholarly truth, but without setting up the proper discursive context in which the assertions, and shortcomings, of Benveniste can be properly assessed.<sup>237</sup> One may well appreciate Gadamer's misgivings (as vented in another chapter in the same book *La Religion*) about Derrida's reliance on etymologies; I shall come back to this.

The format of Derrida's lengthy piece is almost that of the protocol of a conversation, later augmented (by more than 200%!) in a Postscript that step by step reiterates the argument of the main piece (the first 30-odd pages), thus greatly

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<sup>237</sup> Benveniste 1975. Remarkably, a struggling with the same etymologies occupies the opening pages of Mudimbe's (1997) *Tales of faith* – the subject of Chapter 12 of the present volume. With his Louvain PhD on the lexical and semantic ramifications of the word *air*, Mudimbe is in the first place a historical linguist and classicist; cf. Mudimbe 1979. Remarkably and fittingly, considering the homelessness I will attribute to Mudimbe in the Chapter dedicated to him, *air* turns out to be a homeless word without a convincing Indo-European etymology. In the context of my investigations into the Oppenheimer-Tauchmann-Dick-Read Sunda Hypothesis concerning massive prehistoric influence from South East Asia upon West Asia, I found much to my surprise that several pivotal proper names in the Early Bronze Age Eastern Mediterranean could be argued to have an Austric / Austronesian etymology (van Binsbergen & Woudhuizen 2011: Table 28.4, pp. 370-372). I have therefore tended to see *air* as an uninvited guest, in Western Eurasia, from South East Asia, deriving from \*proto-Austric-*air*-, 'water' – in line with the widespread ancient worldview in which the sky is considered 'the waters on high', and birds 'the fishes on high'. One might object that such a view of *air* seems to run counter to the fact that, with 'water', 'fire' and 'earth', also 'air' is counted as one of the four Empedoclean elements, an exalted status to which an emphatically exotic term would hardly be expected to rise. However, Empedocles designates his four elements, not in so many words, but by the names of deities whose identification with elements has caused considerable controversy; and moreover, pre-dating Empedocles by several or even a dozen millennia, a cosmology revolving on the cyclical transformation of elements, far from being an original invention of the Presocratic philosophers, must be considered a very widespread feature of cultural systems in the Bronze Age and even the Upper Palaeolithic, and therefore has very little specifically local or Aegean about it (van Binsbergen 2012d).

adding to the accessibility and transparency of his train of thought. The conversational structure and tone introduce, in a most felicitous manner which I greatly applaud, an element of what I take to be genuine and somewhat embarrassed humility *vis-à-vis* the truly formidable topic which the writer has set himself. He admits that he is not sure where to begin, he starts in the middle and lets the argument gradually unfold itself, and at the end one realises one has witnessed one of today's greatest minds at work, at its best. Gradually the mist of post-structuralist phraseology is dispelled (of course, Derrida has, against the background of his massive oeuvre, the right not to pause too long on the familiar aspects of his past itinerary); with ever greater clarity we see gradually materialise problems of life, thought, truth, righteousness, sacrifice, violence, in short today's experience as filtered through a history of two millennia of Christianity.<sup>238</sup> It almost comes as an afterthought that the real challenge which inspired Derrida's piece, and the Capri conference, in the first place, was not any re-peopling of Christian churches, nor any occasional backsliding of ideally agnostic North Atlantic philosophers and social scientists into a religious stance,<sup>239</sup> but the resilience, militant and intolerant position-taking, and the Northward penetration, of *Islam*. Derrida's piece is, among other things, a brief exploration of the context and structure of Islam in the modern world under conditions of globalisation. It is particularly a statement on the nature of religion as seen against the background of two millennia of (post-) Graeco-Roman culture. It has fundamental things to say about the nature of today's globalisation process and the place of religion therein. And it attempts to explain, on this basis, why it should be today that we witness the resilience of religion – although not so much of Graeco-Roman or Christian religion, but of Islam.

I will not attempt to situate this piece against the background of Derrida's vast general oeuvre. Let me merely indicate a few aspects of this rich text that are somewhat in my field of competence: interculturality and the empirical study of religion.

### **6.3. Religion as a parochial category – lexical determinism**

All these gems of erudition I indicated above are apparently intended to confirm a claim which, although plausible, constitutes one of the important ques-

<sup>238</sup> That Christianity seems to be taken for granted as Derrida's point of departure will soon become understandable from his particular reading of the history of ideas, specifically of the idea of 'religion', yet remains puzzling and disquieting, not least because of Derrida's own, Jewish background.

<sup>239</sup> A phenomenon of which I am guilty myself, among – I now begin to suspect, after reading *La religion* – quite a few others, including for instance Benetta Jules-Rosette (who during field-work in the Zambian capital on the Vapostori Christian churches became an active member), and Matthew Schoffeleers, who, although a Roman Catholic priest, was for many years the main force keeping alive the Mbona territorial cult in Southern Malawi. Cf. van Binsbergen 1991a.

tions of interculturality implicitly raised by Derrida: the idea that ‘religion’ is very far from a universal category but, as a concept, is exclusively tied to the Graeco-Roman-Christian intellectual and institutional tradition from Imperial Roman times onward;<sup>240</sup> we can only think of it, or Derrida could only think of it along with his fellow-philosophers in splendid seclusion on the isle of Capri, because after all there is the shared background of Christian culture – even for Derrida with his background in North African Jewry. Religion is declared not even to constitute a general Indo-European idea, for as Derrida is happy to point out on the basis of Benveniste (whom, however, Derrida chides with as much gusto when the former’s etymologies do not suit him), the Indo-European languages did not originally have a common term to denote ‘religion’. Of course, one level of abstraction lower, they did have a common vocabulary to denote the various aspects of religion, such as ‘priesthood’, ‘sacrifice’, ‘auspices’, ‘deity’. Here and elsewhere Derrida<sup>241</sup> comes dangerously close to the kind of linguistic determinism that has been associated, since the first third of the twentieth century CE, with the Whorf-Sapir thesis.<sup>242</sup>

Derrida is right (1996 / 1998: 11) to question Heidegger’s assumption of the prior understanding of the words we use in a philosophical argument, but such questioning should be recognised to apply to all language use:

- in individual introspection,
- in intersubjective communication between native speakers of the same language, and
- in intercultural translation and, in general, communication, between different languages.

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<sup>240</sup> My argument on the relativity of the concept of *evil*, also supposed to be universal, in Chapter 4 of this book clearly owes a debt to Derrida here.

<sup>241</sup> Cf.: ‘La langue et la nation forment en ce temps le corps historique de toute passion religieuse.’ (Derrida 1996 / 1998: 12).

<sup>242</sup> Cf. Whorf 1956; Sapir 1921; Mandelbaum 1949; Black 1959; Hoijer 1954. The Whorf-Sapir thesis states that what can be thought in a particular culture is overdetermined by the available lexicon and syntax, which in fact wholly define the worldview. Of the several objections that can be brought against this absolute view, I would point to non-verbal thought and communication – many experiences and expressions of the body-self are pre-language or non-language; to the distribution of many mythical motifs across enormously vast extensions of space and time between which there is no mutually understandable language, often not even a shared linguistic phylum (Witzel 2012; van Binsbergen & Venbrux 2010); and the possibility (stressed by Jung and his School) that certain contents of the psyche are endemic in the human species or its branches, as ‘archetypes’, without being demonstrably conveyed by a shared language. But although the Whorf / Sapir Thesis no longer enjoys mainstream support, the premises on which it is based can be seen to have acquired wide acceptance, e.g. in her widely-read collection *Rules & Meanings*, Mary Douglas (1973) has included two readings from Wittgenstein and Bernstein under headings reminiscent of Whorf / Sapir: ‘The limits of my language mean the limits of my world’ and ‘The limits of my language are social’ (Wittgenstein 1973; Bernstein 1973).

A false impression of the transparency of personal introspection and of intra-cultural communication is given if only intercultural situations are singled out as particularly problematic. Intercultural communication, in the field of religion or otherwise, is about as problematic as intra-language and intra-cultural communication. If intercultural translation would be proven to be inherently so defective as to be practically impossible, that would mean the end of intercultural communication, but not of intercultural philosophy: the very field within which such a depressing impossibility could be argued in the first place; so we can afford to be frank. The real point is that, both between native speakers of the same language and in intercultural situations, there can be no exclusively linguistic confirmation of the possibility or impossibility of communication, understanding and translation – indications to that effect (relative indications, and never absolute proofs) can only be derived from extra-linguistic social actions giving evidence of trust, rejection, exchange, violence, or other such demonstrable social interactions that follow as a result of language communication – all these things for which language, in Reichling's (1967) effective definition, may count as a 'vicarious act' (Dutch: 'plaatsvervangende handeling'). And all evidence points to the social fact that the effectiveness of intercultural communication may be unpredictable, yet must be admitted to be by and large at least moderately effective – in other words, *the boundaries between cultures and between languages are demonstrably porous*. By implication, the term 'religion', while having a solid Latin and European ancestry (as Derrida insists), might yet contain possibilities of being generalised beyond the Indo-European language domain and beyond the European historical experience. From the perspective of interculturality this is a crucial point: for all statements on other cultures (including entire scientific disciplines such as anthropology, comparative religion, archaeology) would be revealed to be entirely spurious – which from a point of view of intercultural philosophy they might very well be – if the semantic applicability of words could be demonstrated to be strictly limited to the one culture in which they originated, and if<sup>243</sup> the boundedness of that one culture could be demonstrated to be absolute and non-porous. I shall return to this point below.

This does reveal the one-sidedness of Derrida's approach, but does not render it inherently invalid. He rightly stresses the parochialism of the universalist claim of a particular type of spirituality as 'religion'; particularly when this claim is broadcast by Christian missions and colonial states, and when it is reinforced, as Derrida points out, by the alliance between Christianity, capitalism, and the scientific-technological complex of today. His insight in the potentially deceptive nature of pacifist and ecumenical projects (Derrida 1996 / 1998: 57) is profound. And yet he fails to convince. In an attempt to bring out the parochial, Christian historical indebtedness implied in our thinking about religion, with

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<sup>243</sup> It is specifically this point I contest in my *Intercultural encounters* (van Binsbergen 2003).

his enormous display of etymological claims,<sup>244</sup> he begs the question as to the possibility of radical transcending cultural constraints in intercultural communication. Genealogies, etymologies, histories – the very constitutive elements of a continental tradition in the religious field with which Derrida is familiar and which he stresses greatly can only bring out historical, unalterable generic relationships since that is the idiom in which they happen to be expressed; they cannot reveal formal, structural similarities which may have historical roots now lost to consciousness, let alone *Wahlverwandschaften* (von Goethe: ‘kinship by deliberate choice’ – 1879 / 1809) between people initially pursuing historically totally unrelated cultures, religions and languages. Yet such *Wahlverwandschaften* are among the stuff that interculturality is made of. A tree-like divergence from a common source is all what these historical, etymological and genetic models can conjure up, not convergence, crossing-over, mutation, optionality, transformation – and the latter is very much the standard experience of the modern world. The proper approach is not in terms of either-or, but the admittance of the tension which exist between the parochial and the universalisable approach to concepts of religion, and I suspect that, before a difference – less ‘Roman’, less ‘Catholic’, less ‘Mediterranean’ – audience than the Capri one, Derrida would have admitted as much.

#### 6.4. Islam as religion

This is all the more important given Derrida’s own partially non-Indo-European-speaking background: born in 1930 from Arabic-speaking Jewish parents in a Arabic and Berber speaking Algeria colonised by the French; and educated mainly in French, with one Anglophone academic year in the USA. Arabic and Hebrew (both belonging to the Semitic phylum), and Berber, are all branches on the large tree of the Afroasiatic linguistic macrophylum, which geographically extends from West Africa to Central Asia. One would expect Derrida to dwell, not only on the Indo-European language family to which French, Latin and (perhaps to a lesser extent; Bernal 2006) Derrida’s cherished Greek belong, but also to pay some attention to the Afroasiatic language family; and one wonders what would be the implication, for Derrida’s etymological musings, of state-of-the-art long-range approaches in linguistics, in which Indo-European, Afroasiatic, and most other languages of Central and Eastern Eurasia, are argued to belong to one linguistic super-family, termed ‘Nostratic’ – allowing even for a super-Nostratic extension to which also the other language families of Africa are reckoned (*i.e.* Niger-Congo – including Bantu – and Nilo-Saharan)

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<sup>244</sup> Yet rival etymologies, including non-Indo-European ones, could be adduced in at least some cases cited by Derrida and Benveniste.

with the exception of Khoisan.<sup>245</sup>

But Derrida's position is particularly remarkable given the central position Islam (even long before the terrorist attacks on the American eastern seaboard on '9 / 11' 2001; see Chapter 5 above) has occupied in the debate on multi-culturality in the modern North-Atlantic region, and in Derrida's text. As the prominent Dutch social scientist Bram de Swaan has argued, the term 'multi-cultural' is increasingly being employed as a euphemism for 'Islamic', not only in the Netherlands but throughout Western Europe, with its massive influx of Mediterranean immigrants in the course of the last few decades (Sengers 2002). In a brilliant conversational way, Islam gradually emerges from Derrida's argument both as the 'worst' (violent, sexist, intolerant, anti-literary, anti-human-rights) embodiment of the paradox of resilient religion after the death of God, and as an understandable case (Islam being seen as a deliberate contrast with an exploitative and humiliating Christianity; Derrida 1996 / 1998: 60 n. 24) given the hegemonic North Atlantic subordination to which the Southern shore of the Mediterranean and other predominantly Islamic regions of Asia and Africa have been subjected since the 18th century CE. Derrida's argument is far too subtle and too well-informed to fall victim to the common stereotypes regarding fundamentalism, which tend to equate – lock, stock and barrel – Islam with today's Islamism.

But there is more. In the Semitic, Arabic vocabulary of Islam, and in that of Judaism for that matter, Derrida could have found much of the material not only to illustrate his thesis as to the culturally parochial nature of the concept of religion, but also for the denial of that thesis. It is simply not true, as a statement in intellectual and social history, to affirm, with Derrida, that toleration is a predominantly or uniquely Christian concept. Jews, Parsis, Christians, even Irani and Iraqi worshippers of the peacock demon which happened to be associated with a sacred book, were (as compared to other non-Muslims) privileged in that they were accommodated as *الذمي* *adh-dhimmi* under Islam. *Dhimmi* was a status which, however wrought with humiliating implications, at least meant that they were recognised and tolerated to be different – at a time when, by way of comparison, Christian Western and Southern European planned and executed the crusades in order not to accommodate, but to exterminate, Islam (exploiting and murdering the Jews too, in the process). Or a more conclusive example: in the early twentieth century CE the enlightened

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<sup>245</sup> Cf. Bomhard 1984; Bomhard & Kerns 1994. However, in the dominant, Russian branch of Nostratic studies, and in the authoritative global etymological database Tower of Babel, the status of Afroasiatic as a branch of Nostratic is contested. The claim concerning the African languages is in: Kaiser & Shevoroshkin 1988. The isolation of Khoisan suggested in this nutshell treatment is merely apparent but cannot be elaborated here; however, in the authoritative *Tower of Babel* long-range etymological database (Starostin & Starostin 1998-2008) Khoisan is simply included as a branch of \*Borean, next to Sinocaucasian (with which it shows affinities), Eurasiatic (including Indo-European), Afroasiatic, etc.



Christian theologian Rev. Dr. James Hastings compiled his massive and famous, 12-volume<sup>246</sup> *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* (Hastings 1908-1921), in order to cover every aspect of mankind's religion and philosophy as known to scholarship at the time. The article on *toleration* covers dozens of pages in volume XII, some devoted to Christianity, admittedly, but others to Buddhism (an older and more populous expression than Christianity during by far the greater part of the last two and a half millennia – and incidentally one which had<sup>247</sup> a considerable influence on early Christianity), Islam, *etc.* This is one of the several places in Derrida's argument where his well-taken point of the parochialism of the concept of religion misfires and produces notions which are undesirable and untrue from a viewpoint of interculturality.

By the same token, the concept of religion, however much tied to a particular Latin etymology (*religere?* or *religare?*) in the case of West Indo-European languages and North Atlantic intellectual history, has an almost perfect counterpart in the Arabic concept of الدين (*ad-dīn*, 'religion'). No one would expect the semantic fields to coincide completely; but then again, the semantic fields of the term 'religion' as used in the various European languages where this term appears, or even by different native speakers of the same European language, also greatly differ and only partially overlap. It is largely the actual social situation of interaction which determines translatability and its demonstrability.

### 6.5. Towards a philosophical theory of religion

Admittedly, the central thesis of Derrida's piece is not explicitly about interculturality but about the contradiction between what he – with layers of implied reference (*cf.* Bergson) – calls the 'two sources' of religion. Alternately, and fascinatingly, Derrida attaches different labels to these two sources: alternately it is

<sup>246</sup> To which a 13<sup>th</sup>, unnumbered index volume was posthumously added in 1926.

<sup>247</sup> As is *e.g.* indicated by the close parallels between the *Jātaka* accounts of the Boddhisattvas / Buddha's previous lives, and the accounts of Jesus' life in the *New Testament* and the apocryphal books (Cowell 1895; Budge 1923; the latter is a Jataka story that was translated and recast as a Christian story in *Ethiopia!*). Other indications of ancient Buddhist influence on Western Old World include the possible affinity (Robertson Smith 1894: 302 *f.*; Moffat 1908-1926 (a): 401, and (b); Thundy 1993) between Theravada Buddhism (the ancient forms of Buddhism now prevailing in Sri Lanka and Thailand), and the Greek / Hellenistic term θεραπευτής *therapeutēs*, which however has a solid Greek etymology and whose root occurs in several other Greek words. Yet the same term was also applied, in Antiquity, to the Essenes of the Dead Sea (on whose beliefs and rituals Josephus and Philo already give extensive reports in Antiquity, and on whom we are now even better informed through the finds at Qumrān) and of a kindred sect of *Therapeutae* in Egypt (Moffat 1908-1926, with full sources) – both with striking parallels with Theravada Buddhism, including the latter's monastic and hospital tradition. The same could be said of the cult of Asklepios in Ancient Greece (Kerenyi 1960; Fauth 1979; Schouten n.d., with extensive bibliography).

1. the contradiction between sacrificial destruction and the intact integrity, the wholeness or holiness, of the sacred; or
2. the contradiction between the constitutive, transparent force of rationality which informs science, technology, theology, on the one hand, and on the other the *belief* in the soundness and efficacy of such rationality, which cannot be based on rational grounds itself and therefore involves an act of irrationality, absurdity (St. Augustine) and hope formally equivalent to religious attitudes;<sup>248</sup> or
3. the contradiction that Western morality (contrary to the Hellenic moral ideal) may originally be based on Christian theology, but that (as Kant, God's principal through unintentional and privately even pious murderer, has argued) it takes optimum realisation and effect once we are prepared to consider the possibility that God does not exist or is not interested in our existence; or even, towards the end of the argument,
4. the contradiction between the bloated erected penis (evoked with sufficient irony, I would think, to exonerate Derrida from the possible accusation of phallocracy) and the violated female body.

Ultimately, there is the suggestion that at the most formal level the constitutive element of religion is

5. that it is literally elliptic *i.e.* is a construct whose main feature is that it has not one but two foci:

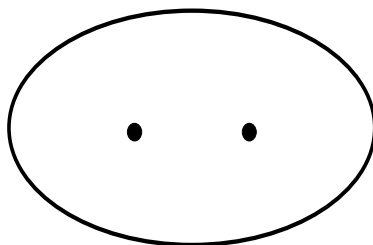


Fig. 6.2. Two foci as the central characteristic of religion according to Derrida.

<sup>248</sup> Cf. the following passage:

'Religion et raison se développent ensemble, à partir de cette ressource commune: le gage testimonial de tout performatif, qui engage à répondre aussi bien devant l'autre que de la performativité performante de la technoscience. La même source unique se divise machinalement, automatiquement, et s'oppose réactivement à elle-même: d'où les deux sources en une. Cette réactivité est un processus d'indemnisation sacrificielle, elle tente de restaurer l'indemne (heilig) qu'elle menace elle-même' (Derrida 1996 / 1998: 41).

According to Derrida's intuition thus the roots of religion are to be sought in a formal, early characteristic of human thought, in a twosome that is partially but incompletely dissociated, perhaps somewhere halfway between individual self-assertion along Cartesian lines (the twosome dissolved into separate object and subject) and the complete participatory merging that we tend to associate with pre-human levels of consciousness. I find this suggestion very inspiring.

But Derrida does not stop there, in the remotest human past – he also, and particularly, probes into the modern conditions of religion. He is aware of how under post-modern conditions of globalisation and ICT, religion unavoidably presents itself as a panoptical ecstasy, with layers upon layers of transmission and performativity. These sections convey a profound insight in religion as a phenomenon, and should be compulsory reading to any researcher in this field. In the light of these penetrating analyses, Derrida manages to interpret modern 'fundamentalism' as a particular, naïve, attempted solution to the kind of contradictions outlined above. It is an illusory solution which could only be articulated under conditions of (post-)modernity. Here Derrida does not necessarily mean fundamentalisms of the Islamic kind: there is also Christian Pentecostal or Evangelical fundamentalism, and – despite Derrida's avowed sympathy for the following two varieties of present-day manifestations – there are also ecological and dietary forms of fundamentalism to be identified in the North Atlantic. That the analysis may be extended to Islam, although this is way outside the Indo-European linguistic tradition, and largely (despite Aristotle's influence on Islamic philosophy, although the latter was subsequently sacrificed to theology) outside the Graeco-Roman-Christian intellectual history, demonstrates that in addition to the parochial nature of the concept of religion, also a more universal, transcultural or intercultural use for the concept, and domain of analysis and debate, may be rightfully claimed – and is in fact claimed, even by Derrida.

## 6.6. Judaism

Derrida realises that it is not only modern Islamism that challenges the anti-religious philosophical interpretation of God's death in the North Atlantic, but also Judaism. He is strangely divided, sarcastic and tender at the same time, when it comes to juxtaposing his own thought on religion and modern times with that of Levinas. With Derrida's insistence that Western philosophy as well as the concept of religion can really only be thought within a Christian context, this leaves Jews as the odd ones out (Derrida 1996 / 1998: 20, citing Nietzsche). Thus we have the puzzling situation of three Abrahamic religions, explicitly paraded as such by Derrida, out of which one only, Christianity, by producing the term 'religion', historically defines the scene of religious enquiry and, via its collusion with capitalism and techno-science, hegemonically forces the rest of

the world into this conceptual mould,<sup>249</sup> whereas the other two, Judaism and Islam, while sharing a common origin (not only because of pre-Islamic Arabian religion, but particularly, in addition to local Arabian religion, because Judaism and Christianity were the Prophet Muḥammad's main earthly sources of inspiration) are reduced to an ethnic, cultural and religious otherness which poses fundamental questions of interculturality.

'Le judaïsme et l'islam seraient peut-être alors les deux derniers monothéismes à s'insurger encore contre tout ce qui, dans la christianisation de notre monde, signifie la mort de Dieu, la mort en Dieu...' (Derrida 1996 / 1998: 20 f.).

'The last ones'... not to say that they are the *only* two, since historically and comparatively monotheism is a rare exception, instead of a common phenomenon. Derrida, himself Jewish, thus gives a new meaning to the expression 'the Jewish question'.<sup>250</sup> The phrase is problematic enough in itself; more than half a century after Auschwitz, one does not want to be reminded of any such question, not as a Jew and not as a Gentile. But there is another *aporia* hidden underneath: *how to negotiate a common origin in the past and a complementary fate in the modern world, if not by virtue of an encompassing concept (such as 'religion') which cannot be completely relegated to the history and nature of Christianity and its antecedents on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean?* The same kind of questions could be asked with regard to the status and translatability of non-Indo-European, non-Latin concepts, not only of the Arabic *ad-dīn*, but also, as explicitly paraded by Derrida, of the Hebrew קדש *qdš*, 'sacred'.

## **6.7. Particularising emic 'Christianity', or generalising etic 'religion'**

There is, still in the context of interculturality, an even more important point to be appreciated here. By insisting that religion has only been thought along Graeco-Roman-Christian lines and in the attending Indo-European language(s), Derrida suggests that there would not be religion outside that initial sphere, unless as a result of the hegemonic assault of the Christian / capitalist / techno-scientific complex upon the rest of the world, in the context of proto-globalisation and globalisation during the last few centuries. That is to some extent an illuminating thought. Yet we have seen that there are reasons to allow for a less

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<sup>249</sup> For a brilliant study of all three in their historical interconnection, cf. Armstrong 1995, where she is particularly subtle in her discussion of Islam. In the study of Abrahamic religion, one of the most seminal texts has been: Robertson Smith (1927 / 1894) *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites, I*; this implicitly also influenced Derrida in his emphasis on sacrifice, as a century ago it was a major inspiration for Durkheim.

<sup>250</sup> Sartre 1946. However, Sartre was merely using an expression that had widely circulated since the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. CE, both in anti-Semitic and in Zionist circles, and that still is not entirely extinct (Herzl 1896 / 1972; Raab 1969).

parochial and somewhat more generalisable notion of religion, which may be arrived at by extrapolation not just from the Christian point of departure, but also from, *e.g.*, the Islamic one. Such an attempt to find a common denominator for religious phenomena beyond the boundaries of any one culture, is an exercise in interculturality. It would have to export the lexical element 'religion' beyond its original linguistic niche of Romance languages. Moreover, in Derrida's hands religion is not only considered from the point of view of lexical definition. As his argument proceeds, he brings out the main characteristics of religion in the Graeco-Roman-Christian historical tradition: the constitutive contradictions which he develops so insightfully and which I have very imperfectly rendered above as (1), (2), (3), (4) and (5), essentially serve to articulate the contents of religion in the North Atlantic tradition. It is thus a highly culture-specific complex of traits which Derrida claims to be describing under the term 'religion', and not the 'elementary basic forms', not the *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Durkheim 1912) as if these constituted a universally underlying model of all religion whenever and wherever – as was Durkheim's claim, unconvincingly based on the study (on the basis of secondary sources, now considered obsolete anyway!) of just one peripheral case, that of the Australian Aboriginals.

Because philosophers are rarely occupied with particularising historical or ethnographic description and (as I pointed out in the Introduction to this book) with their utterly unempirical outlook are inclined to construct the world on the basis of their own experience and introspection, the methodological implications of the problem at hand may somewhat elude them. But that problem is eminently familiar to historians and anthropologists, who are always torn between two formats of social description: *emic* or *etic*. The *emic* format, explicitising the very concepts which the people described are themselves using (although yet rearranged and rephrased in an alien academic idiom – very few ethnographies are written in the language of the people they describe), remains as close as possible to these people's conscious structuring of their life worlds, but in principle defeats all possibility of generalisation. The *etic* format imposes alien, theoretically informed analytical categories upon the people's own structuring of their life worlds, thus rendering the latter very imperfectly, but with the great advantage that via the analytical categories intercultural comparison becomes possible. Of course one can try to have one's cake and eat it, by taking an *emic*, local and parochial category like *mana* or *taboo / tapu* – words derived from specific Polynesian languages and life worlds – and re-coin them into analytical categories; this was the great but clearly deceptive innovation of religious anthropology at the end of the nineteenth century CE. Now Derrida's method essentially amounts to the same deceptive device. It invests a great deal in an *emic* description of Christianity which becomes increasingly rich in contents (bringing in *sacrifice*, *Messianism*, the concept of the *holy* as intact and vulnerable, as polluted and threatened particularly by rationality which yet is invoked to protect the holy

against the very threat it itself represents, the *violence* which this generates, the way that violence finds *a bodily, especially a sexual expression, etc.*)

However, the argument does not remain limited to Christianity exclusively. It immediately extends to include Islam, and soon also Judaism; it might as well extend to modern African cults, to witchcraft eradication movements, and to Christian Pentecostalism which, next to Islam, is becoming Africa's dominant religious expression. Implicitly, the appeal of Derrida's argument derives from the suggestion that what he asserts to be the case for Christianity, in fact applies also and particularly to present-day Islamism, and even to 'all' 'religion'. By sleight of hand, the emic perspective has become an etic one. But this step is fundamentally unacceptable, not only for reasons of methodological rigour, but particularly because the emic characteristics attributed to Christianity, demonstrably, by reference to indisputable empirical data to be derived from historiography, anthropological ethnography and from comparative religious research, are not necessarily found elsewhere, in other... *religions*.

Clearly one major question (a question of interculturality) underlying Derrida's whole argument is whether it is possible to distinguish between

- the concept of religion (as an analytical category capable of generalisation over more than one culture, region, historical period), and
- the specific contents, in the form of empirically demonstrable traits, of any one religion identified with the aid of that analytical concept.

It is the dissociation between the idea of sacrifice (redefined as *bloodless*) on the one hand, and the actual ritual killing of mammals and birds on the other (bloody sacrifice), which separates, on the one hand, both Christianity and Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple, from, on the other hand, earlier Semitic religion and from latter-day popular and even formal Islam. Derrida's intriguing scenario of religion, righteousness, the death of God, and globalisation, however appealing as an original perspective upon Christianity, therefore does not even apply to all three Abrahamic religions, let alone to all the thousands of 'religions'<sup>251</sup> known from empirical research – sacrifice, righteousness, truth, are differently constructed in many of them, and in many others do

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<sup>251</sup> I am aware of a huge underlying problem here and on other points in my argument where I speak of 'one religion' or of a plurality of 'religions'. What is the unit of analysis in the study of religious phenomena? If – as I claim elsewhere (1999a, 2003b: ch. 15) – *cultures do not exist* in the form in which they have been represented through much of the twentieth century CE: as bounded, distinct, integrated more or less natural units, then in all likelihood the same argument would apply to 'religions'. So much I am prepared to admit. However, my rejection of the particular definition of culture as indicated does not make me deny the existence of any cultural systemic specificity, – my point is that in no one such systemic specificity is it possible to live a complete life, one always needs several such specificities. Whatever the case, the problem of the unit of analysis in the study of religion is too important that that it can be treated to any satisfaction here. I have to pretend naïvety on this point, in order to be able to make, concerning Derrida's argument, the more pertinent points as contained in the present Chapter.

not even constitute identifiable traits at the level of the consciousness of the people involved. In other words, Derrida's scenario cannot justifiably be invoked to explain Islam under globalisation, and such light as it appears to cast on that phenomenon is a false halo, a shimmering (not to say a *vicarious*...!) reflection originating from (what is, as seen from the Southern, *African* shore) the opposite side of the Mediterranean, *i.e.* the northern shore.

## 6.8. Place<sup>252</sup>

Moria, Delos, Patmos, Capri...

Derrida's argument is permeated with spatial metaphors. He emphasises from the beginning that is impossible to philosophise without taking a definite spatial position, also in the literal geographical sense. He revives implicitly the Ancient Near Eastern fundamental religious notion of the sun-god from whom there is no hiding, whose light penetrates *everywhere* (thus exploding the concept of 'place') in order to bring illumination, especially in the sense of knowledge of good and evil, justice to be meted out to evil-doers, and righteousness.

His argument further focuses on three spatial evocations of the religious:

- the island,
- the Promised Land, and
- the desert – later even the desert in the desert.

The latter (not ecologically but in terms of the abstraction and lifelessness of thought) sets the scene for a discussion of Islam, which Derrida, with his North African background even though he disclaims all personal relationship with Islam, cannot fail to appreciate as desert-originated and desert-bound.<sup>253</sup>

Derrida calls these places *aporetic* ('that which cannot be traversed'): they re-

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<sup>252</sup> As Derrida (born 1930) grew up in a Jewish milieu in Algeria, his first experience of religion has been a Sephardic variety of Judaism. A full study could be written on the influence of that background upon his thought, highlighting some of the possible antecedents of his rejection of logocentricity (there is hardly a more logocentric orientation imaginable than that of diasporic Judaism after the destruction of the Second Temple!), and his insistence (not without parallels in Jewish mysticism) on the complementarity of opposites implied in every quality and identity. This is not the place to explore this topic any further, and I am ill equipped to do it anyway. One point however should be stressed: when Derrida singles out *place* (even in an Ancient Greek, Platonic or Apostolic conception) as a crucial dimension of the sacred, we might bear in mind that in Judaism *הַמָּקוֹם* *ha-makôm*, 'The Place, The Space' is, next to *הַשֵּׁם* 'The Name', one of the principal names given to God (Weinreb 1982: 95). It is the same word, incidentally, that most elderly natives of the city of Amsterdam, including I myself, know as that city's cherished Yiddish nickname, *Mökam*: 'the place', due to its large number of Jewish inhabitants from Early Modern times on; the shift in stress is an adaptation to West European languages.

<sup>253</sup> We are reminded of Ibn ʿIldun's conception of Berber history: desert nomads conquering the city, but after settling there and becoming urbanised being conquered in their turn by other desert nomads... – as a model of political history under Islam this has remained topical right up to IS

present varieties of being caught and hemmed in, of incapability or unwillingness to access or to escape. This sets the tune for a particular mode of handling space which has considerable implications for the thinking of interculturality.

The three aporetic places, however exemplary for varieties of religious positions, are all of them by implication dry, bounded, and secluded *par excellence*; the island and the desert are per definition the opposite of water, and the Promised Land, however much it may be accessed by crossing a small river (Derrida knows his Bible!), is ultimately, after that *fording*, just that: *Land*. In such solidity and dryness the flow of mediation, boundary crossing, 'inter', stagnates, solidifies, dies.<sup>254</sup> The active dynamics and ambiguity of the notion of *aporia* is therefore lost in these three images that dynamic ambiguity consists in: the temporary or eternal, accidental or inevitable, incapability (hence  $\alpha$ -, *a*-) of fording ( $\pi\omicron\rho\epsilon\upsilon\omega$ , *poreuo*, 'I traverse'), but necessarily: *in the face of a promise or suspicion of fordability*. The three religious positions are defined as if taken once for all, they deny movement, approach, interaction ('fording'). They amount to evocations of non-communication, *as if religion in the modern world is inescapably bounded and bounding, and has no potential whatsoever of crossing, relativising, or destroying boundaries;*<sup>255</sup> cf. once again (cf. above, note 228):

'In our time, language and nation form the historical body of any religious passion.'<sup>256</sup>

Yet what is popularly called fundamentalism is not the only typical religious experience of our globalising age – it is accompanied, among other things, by a proliferation and spatial explosion, all across the globe, of *low-threshold cults* binding and uniting rather than separating people from greatly different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Such cults are found outside Christianity and Islam (like the *Voodoo* cults emanating from West Africa and but capturing the ghetto's of the North Atlantic region; or the cults of affliction of South Central

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<sup>254</sup> It is also as if the 'ban' (Hebrew  $\text{חֲרָם}$  *ḥrm*), the relentless, allegedly divinely-sanctioned (and utterly anti-intercultural) drive at total exclusion and total extermination of the Canaanite population, which the author of the *Book of Joshua* attributed (albeit one half to a full millennium *after* the postulated and probably largely illusory and mythical event) to Joshua after the crossing into Canaan, is already implied in the desert-like metaphors of the *Exodus* story. Meanwhile the reference to the same ban on the Early Iron Age stela of King Mesa of Moab (line 11 and 17) demonstrates that here we have a genuine historic institution, whatever the historicity of its projection onto Joshua and the *Exodus* story; cf. Noort 1998; Albright 1969: 320–322. We cannot overestimate the devastatingly tragic influence of these (originally poetic, nostalgic, and illusory) images of relentless exclusion, violence, legitimation and conquest in the *Book of Joshua*, not only on the modern state of Israel, but especially on two millennia of Christian and European literary expression and expansion in the world – culminating perhaps in the Holocaust of Nazi Germany. If ever there was an aporetic place, it was the gas chambers of the Nazi's extermination camps. If ever evil (cf. Chapter 4, above) was banal, it was not (*pace* Hannah Arendt – 1958) because of its being the expression of a totalitarian state, but because of its blind and unfeeling association with the written word.

<sup>255</sup> The same point is also made, forcibly, in Chapter 8 below, on 'African spirituality'.

<sup>256</sup> Repeating: 'La langue et la nation forment en ce temps le corps historique de toute passion religieuse' (Derrida 1996 / 1998: 12).



Africa and of the Lankan, Thai, and Indonesian shores of the Indian Ocean; or modern pop music cults that are at the threshold of religion), but also inside Christianity and Islam: the Zar and Bori cult of Africa, the Pentecostal format as a worldwide expression, Bori entering the ritual life of North African Muslims, the Ndöp, Tuuru and Samp cults doing the same among Senegalese Muslims). Religion not only separates, it also has a unique potential for unifying against all odds – as Durkheim was to stress in his main contribution to the social science of religion. Entrenchment behind a newly erected boundary is not the only face of fundamentalism. Look who are hiding behind that boundary: people whose religious self-organisation allows them to create, among themselves, a new social identity, a new *communitas*, which they would never have had without that religious expression; whilst creating a boundary between the chosen and the outside world, the diasporic religious situation seeks to efface boundaries among the chosen whatever their pre-existing differences in terms of class, gender, region, itinerary, age, etc.

Exploring spatial imagery, it is remarkable that Derrida did not dwell on the obvious spatial imagery involved in a concept so closely related to ‘religion’: the *cult*, which – for one who, like he himself, believes in the revelatory power of etymologies – has everything to do with the tilling, not of the desert, the island or even the Promised Land, but of the fertile home which is a good mixture of dryness and wetness, and where therefore fordability (in other words, sociability, in part constructed through religious activity and belief) is an implicit given. Needless to say that for me, fordability is synonymous to interculturality; and in my capacity of anthropologist of religion, conducting, over the years, participatory anthropological research in a handful of different African settings, I have always experienced that fordability, building it into the heart of my approach to African religion, experiencing community with the other worshippers as the principal product and aim of religion, and therefore becoming an African believer myself in the process.

For Derrida, two roads, or wells – the imagery becomes unacceptably muddled, but the one important thing implied is: liquidity, flow, movement and transition as the opposite of unfordability – appear as so many *fata morganas* in the ‘desert of deserts’ (a nice Semitic phraseology which Derrida might have employed for extra effect): Messianism (as the hope of a radical transformation of time, truth, and righteousness), and *hora* (*‘khôra’*) / *χώρα* as privileged, and above all, as *shared*, space beyond boundedness.

‘*Khôra*, l’ « épreuve de *khôra*<sup>257</sup> » serait, du moins selon l’interprétation que j’ai cru pouvoir en tenter, le nom de lieu, un nom de lieu, et fort singulier, pour cet *espacement* qui, ne se laissant dominer par aucune instance théologique, ontologique ou anthropologique, sans âge, sans histoire et plus « ancien » que toutes les oppositions (par exem-

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<sup>257</sup> Original reference to Derrida 1993: 95.

ple sensible / intelligible), ne s'annonce pas comme « au-delà de l'être »,<sup>258</sup> selon une voie négative' (Derrida 1996 / 1998: 31).

As intercultural philosophers, we are suddenly quite at home here. For this is 'the inter-' we were looking for. This is also the 'placeless everywhere', the 'ubiquitous utopian never-neverland', to which Mall in his authoritative exposition of intercultural philosophy (Mall 1995) clings, not in the least as an arguable and plausible, identifiable factuality,<sup>259</sup> but as a last resort, lest we give up all hope of the possibility of intercultural communication, translation and understanding. The parallel is not accidental: Mall has read Derrida and expects from the latter's philosophy of difference a way out of the *aporias* of interculturality, even though finding such a solution is not explicitly part of Derrida's project. And given Derrida's insistence on North Atlantic parochialism as unavoidable, more than a Derridean inspiration alone is needed to arrive where we hope to be going as intercultural philosophers.

## 6.9. Conclusion

Later on, Derrida's spatial argument turns out to lead to 'the' place, the place of truth (Golgotha? Patmos? Delos? Mecca? or simply Capri, after all?), monopoly of which is the main claim and counterclaim in the rise and fall of religion. It is tele-techno-science which dispossesses and delocalises, which takes away space and threatens space. Is religion the answer to this process? Could it be? Is that what Islamism mediates despite its repulsive trappings of fanaticism, infringement of human rights, sexism, violence, mass beheadings, undeclared war, war under false yet quasi-democratically negotiated pretences, *etc.*? Is an answer possible regardless of our theory of interculturality, or is it only through a theory of interculturality that we may understand more about the present-day resilience of religion?

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<sup>258</sup> Is this perhaps an oblique reference to: Levinas 1981 / 1974?

<sup>259</sup> Cf. van Binsbergen 1999b; English version included in my *Intercultural Encounters* (2003b: ch. 12). Here I demonstrate that Mall's insistence on the placeless everywhere as the focus of intercultural philosophy is deliberately utopian in the strict sense of wishful thinking. *But so, of course, is my own approach to African religion.*

## Chapter 7

# In search of spirituality

## Conceptual and theoretical explorations from the cultural anthropology of religion and the history of ideas

*Initially my new working environment from early 1998 on, in the Philosophical Faculty, Erasmus University Rotterdam, proved enormously stimulating. Drawn into my new colleagues' current and new projects, I was brought to an even more than usual productivity, exploring the interface between social science and philosophy. Initially also the Dutch / Flemish Association for Intercultural Philosophy (NVVIF), whose statutory President I had become as incumbent of the chair, constituted a dynamic environment in which philosophers from other universities participated actively – especially through the Research Group on Spirituality, an initiative of Henk Oosterling, and realised by the two of us. Here I could do what the administrative burdens, the explicit research priorities (even though largely set by myself), and the obligation to display broad, interdisciplinary intellectual leadership had largely prevented me from doing during the preceding twenty years at the African Studies Centre, Leiden: to vocally represent religious anthropology as the centre of my training and research. Three of the Chapters in this Part of the present book were drafted, and stimulatingly discussed, in the context of the Rotterdam / NVVIF Working Group, and they testify to the efforts many of my philosophical colleagues were initially taking to make my incumbency of the precious chair of Intercultural Philosophy a success, even though – from their perspective – it proved an up-hill battle against my inveterate social-scientism and naive empiricist realism. However, it was only slowly that I warmed to the topic of spirituality: it had played no role in my religious anthropology so far, at least not under that name, and much of the present Chapter expresses my reluctance to accord that concept the dominant place it was increasingly acquiring in theology, philosophy, sociology and even anthropology – reflecting the change of perspective on spiritual matters, commensurate with the final phases of secularisation of North Atlantic society. So my 'search for spirituality' was not wholehearted – I did not genu-*

inely think that we needed that concept; contrary to Henk Oosterling, I was scarcely inspired by such then popular thinkers as de Certeau and Marion, who felt otherwise. I had not yet had reason to delve deeply in the literature on spirituality, which was already proliferating at the time (around the year 2000).<sup>260</sup> My primary and secondary education at institutions controlled by the Roman Catholic Church had brought me familiarity with that church's spirituality (a major current in Western religion across the centuries, anyway); but finding that it could not help me in my adolescent crises, I had turned away from this childhood orientation at age 15, and – although saturated with Biblical and Roman Catholic images and texts, as to this very day my poetry may testify – I no longer considered myself a Christian. But while in the 1970s to '90s I manifested myself as a materialist, agnostic Marxist at the theoretical level, in cultic practice I had followed the inspiration of my field-work to take an interest in popular Islam, to preach in African Christian churches whenever asked (for in Africa, a European is usually supposed to be an accomplished Christian), and to finally adopt and take on responsibilities of leadership in an African 'pagan' cult. So by and large I adopted a most tolerant attitude vis-à-vis Christianity, and clergy-men were among my best friends; although I secretly distrusted and resented their own tolerance vis-à-vis my apparent irreligiosity. Confronted with the renewed general intellectual interest in spirituality, notably in the Rotterdam and NVVIF context, I was mainly suspicious lest Roman Catholicism with its doctrinal and moralising overtones would re-enter through the backdoor, into the religious anthropology in which I had found a refuge for fragments of the spirituality of my childhood. With all these reservations, this Chapter has little more to offer than the attempt to convey some of the central themes of mainstream religious anthropology to a philosophical audience – without even taking up the obvious philosophical implications of such themes.<sup>261</sup>

## 7.1. Background and outline

At the first session of the Research Group in Spirituality of the Dutch-Flemish Association for Intercultural Philosophy, a kick-off to the theme of 'Spirituality' as a focus for intercultural philosophy was given by means of three papers by Henk

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<sup>260</sup> I am indebted to Eric Venbrux, for bringing me into contact (in the most literal sense) with the Nijmegen *magnum opus* on spirituality, by Kees Waaijman (2002); had it been available yet when the present Chapter was drafted, many of my points would have received a more profound and conclusive treatment.

<sup>261</sup> Out of an entire library on the philosophy of religion, I mention, from an *embarras de choix*: Quinn & Taliaferro 2000; Deussen 1915; Burt 1951; Cohen 1910; Collingwood 1916; Diop 1985; Feuerbach 1857; Hegel 1988 / 1895 / early 19<sup>th</sup> c. CE; James 1902; Kant 1983d / 1793; Loades & Rue 1991; Marx & Engels 1975 / mid-19<sup>th</sup> c. CE; Mbiti 1982; Ray 2003; Skorupski 1976; van Dijk & Pels 1996; Smart & Srinivasa Murthy 1997; Tillich 1987; Vaihinger 1924 / 1986; Vedder 2007; von Schelling 1804. Also cf. some of the other Chapters in the present book, including the ones on Derrida (Chapter 6) and Mudimbe (Chapter 12). Later I came to realise that the very concept of spirituality allowed even myself to articulate important aspects of my own religious practices and research, in contradistinction from those of others, without having to enter into a discussion of the ontological status of the invisible beings thus invoked, and of the truth claims apparently implied in my own religious practices. Thus, under a title which included the word spirituality, I wrote, in Dutch, on the prominent Dutch philosopher Duintjer (van Binsbergen 2012f). Also see the last footnote to Chapter 12, below, on Mudimbe, where I go into the apparent contradiction between practising Southern African *sangomahood* for decades, yet claiming 'not to believe' – a theme to be taken up again in my *Sangoma Science*.

Oosterling,<sup>262</sup> written at different phases in the development of his perspective on the philosophy of difference. For those somewhat familiar with, and sympathetic towards, that intellectual position, a few major questions stood out at the end of that meeting:

- how can we make specifically intercultural philosophy out of Oosterling's ideas?
- how do we accommodate, in this connection, the tension (which could be argued to be at the heart of any endeavour towards intercultural philosophy) between universalism and relativism?
- how can we apply Oosterling's ideas – or modifications thereof –, which are now implicitly centred on the modern North Atlantic urban society under post-modern conditions of globalisation, to settings peripheral to, or even outside, that context, e.g. in present-day African villages and small towns, whose forms of (I suppose) 'spirituality' have been explored in numerous forms of empirical research from the part of social scientists including myself?
- in the context of such empirical research, social scientists have build up a considerable experience with the theoretical and conceptual aspects of 'spirituality'; how can we mobilise these intellectual resources pressing them into service for the benefit of intercultural philosophy?<sup>263</sup>

The present Chapter seeks to make a contribution to only a selection of these huge questions.

In search of a theoretical frame of reference I start out by presenting, in a nutshell and with extreme simplifications, some of the more central theoretical resources of the sociology and anthropology of religion. This will culminate in a brief inspection of how these approaches might serve us to make sense, from an intercultural perspective, of religion in a context of *pluralism* or – as is the fashionable term today – the *multicultural society*. Although the heritage of classic social-science research in the field of religion would not seem to be directly employable in the context of the latter project, I hope to demonstrate that a first perusal of this tradition from the perspective of 'spirituality' throws light not only on this tradition but also on dimensions of spirituality (e.g. the social, economic, political and psychoanalytical aspects) which will help us along in

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<sup>262</sup> Cf. Oosterling 1999a, 1999b, 1999c, 1996.

<sup>263</sup> When this Chapter's argument was first drafted, the Erasmus University's concern to make an academic contribution to the 'Rotterdam Cultural Capital in 2001' project was in the air. However, this concern never materialised into concrete action in the context of the Netherlands / Flemish Association for Intercultural Philosophy (NVVIF) Research Group on Spirituality in question, and therefore it has been largely omitted from the present version, although it comes back in the right-hand column of Table 7.1, below.

further phases of a multicultural project. Meanwhile another urgent concern of our Research Group is the concept of *spirituality* itself. I investigate a few usages of this word, from the sociology of religion and from a *New-Age* discussion on 'morphic resonance'. I then proceed to characterise the concept of 'spirituality' as recent and strategic, as a reflection of specific concerns typical of our condition of globalisation today. The term turns out to carry all sorts of connotations whose philosophical implications we shall have to consider carefully before we can even commit ourselves to make spirituality a leading theme of our forthcoming researches.

## **7.2. Some theoretical resources in the anthropology and sociology of religion**

### **7.2.1. Overview**

Let us here provisionally define 'spirits' as 'immaterial beings as conceived, individually or collectively, by certain humans, who moreover tend to endow these beings with anthropomorphic traits, notably with the capability of interfering in the ordinary, material world of common human experience'.

Taylor, in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century CE one of the founding fathers of Anglo-Saxon cultural anthropology,<sup>264</sup> was one of the first social scientists to stress the widespread distribution of the belief in spirits (defined along roughly the above lines) across the societies of humankind past and present. He defines religion as simple 'the belief in spiritual beings'. This brings Taylor to identify the belief informing divination with the use of a material divinatory apparatus, and gambling with the use of dice or lots, in the following terms:

'spiritual beings standing over the diviner or the gambler, shuffling the lots or turning up the dice to make them give their answers'.(Taylor 1948: 78)

Taylor's definition of religion was soon challenged and broadened, when the ethnography of Oceania came to stress such local concepts as *taboo* / *tapu* and *mana*, referring not to personalised, anthropomorphic spiritual beings but to spiritual forces rather comparable to static electricity (then scarcely a century old as a physics concept) and to absolute, numinous prohibition. Especially since Otto's *Das Heilige* (Otto 1917) religious anthropology and comparative religious studies became aware of the fact that in many human contexts (specific in time and place) the non-personalised, non-human connotations of what is locally constructed to be the sacred, are at least as important as the anthropomorphic connotations. The latter may allow people to think of the sacred as just another interaction partner, comparable to fellow-humans in their capability of rational maximalisation, and

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<sup>264</sup> Tylor 1871, 1994. On the German side, another precursor was the leading philosopher Immanuel Kant (1783c / 1798) in his pre-critical phase, almost a century before Tylor.

therefore capable of manipulation, flattery, coaxing, deceit, propitiation. But these anthropomorphic aspects tend to be offset against ungraspable, numinous, fundamentally non-human aspects, and in fact the constant oscillation between these two poles was soon recognised as a major dimension of religion in general. Meanwhile the Tylorian approach offered useful guidelines in those many contexts of the ethnography and historiography of religion (e.g. in North and West Africa, in Graeco-Roman Antiquity and in Mediterranean popular religion), where humans apparently conceptualised their involvement beyond the material world in terms of rationalising, maximalising interaction with specific spirits, speaking to them, striking contracts with them, seeking thus to enlist their superior powers for their own personal goals and interests.

Perhaps we would not readily apply the term 'spirituality' to such conceptualisations of the sacred: they would strike us as being too pedestrian and down-to-earth for such a qualification, which for many of us would imply overtones of 'aspiring to a higher order of being'. But arriving at a useful working definition of 'spirituality' is precisely the purpose of this Chapter; therefore, let us not skip essential parts of the argument.

Although much later there have been attempts to revive Tylor's 'spiritual' or 'rationalistic' definition of religion (Spiro 1966; Goody 1961), these could not prevent that the main stream of religious studies in the social sciences opted for a totally different and far more subtle approach, in which religious belief is recognised to be a *representation*, notably of the social experience of the believers, so that *a theory of the religious symbol, rather than a model of rational maximising interaction after the human model, is installed at the heart of religious studies*. Of course, such recognition was already attained by Feuerbach, and in reaction to him, by Marx and Engels. But the crucial study here is Emile Durkheim's *Les Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse* (Durkheim 1912), which still after a century dominates the social scientific study of religion as no other.<sup>265</sup> Durkheim departs from what he considers<sup>266</sup> the fundamental condition for

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<sup>265</sup> Cf. Robertson 1970. In my own career, Durkheim's paradigm was the first with which I was infatuated, at a very early stage (van Binsbergen 1966 – written under the supervision and inspiration of the New Guinea specialist A.E.M.J. Pans – and moreover 1967 / 2007, 1968), it was the theoretical framework informing my first field-work, on shrines and social organisation in the highlands of North-Western Tunisia, and it has dominated the output from that research to this day (van Binsbergen 1971, 1985b, and forthcoming). Only later, during teaching and research in Zambia, and inspired by the leading South African intellectuals and political activists Jack Simons, Ray Alexander, and Max Gluckman, did I bring to fruition the Marxist inspiration (originally planted by Wim Wertheim a decade earlier) that is at the heart of my first major book *Religious Change in Zambia* (van Binsbergen 1981b, 2012a, *pace* 1988a; cf. van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985a, 1985b).

<sup>266</sup> Wrongly, as it appears – and that is little surprising since he only knew about the Australian Aboriginals from published early ethnographies, and lacked all personal field experience that would have allowed him to critically link the written ethnographic text to actual socio-cultural practice; his critics include Evans-Pritchard 1965b; Stanner 1967; Goldenweiser 1958; Schof-

religion: the distinction between sacred and profane, which may take all sorts of forms in concrete settings of time and place, but whose fundamental and allegedly universal (!) feature is that it is *absolute*. As such the distinction between sacred and profane is not only the basis for all rational thought, but particularly for a cosmological partitioning of the world in terms of that conceptual pair. Sacred aspects of the world (given aspects of the natural world such as animal species (religiously turned into totems), but also man-made aspects: events, human acts, concepts, myths) are not sacred by some aspect of their intrinsic nature, but their sacredness is superimposed by collective human representations. The selection of things sacred is entirely arbitrary and therefore can vary from society to society and from historical period to historical period – what is involved is merely the application, with endless variation, of the distinction between sacred and profane. The sacred is nothing in itself, but a mere symbol – but of what? The sacred is subject to a negative cult of avoidance, taboo, but also to a positive cult of veneration. It is essential that this cult is a collective thing, in which the group constitutes itself as a congregation, a church – Durkheim uses this word (*‘église’*) in the original etymological sense (*ἑκκλησία, ekklēsia*, i.e. ‘people’s assembly’) and without Christian implications: his own background was Jewish, and his argument is almost exclusively underpinned by ethnographic reference to the religion of Australian Aborigines, who at the time had undergone virtually no exposure to Christianity. Durkheim then makes his genial step of identifying the social, the group, as the referent which is ultimately venerated in religion. Here Durkheim is also indebted to Comte’s (1830–1842) idea of a *‘religion de l’humanité’* as a requirement for the utopian age when a ‘positivist’, rational science will have eclipsed all the religious and philosophical chimera of earlier phases in the development of human society. It is the *group* which, through its transformation into a religious symbol – a transformation of which the adherents themselves are largely or completely unaware –, inspires the believer and the practitioner of ritual with such absolute respect that their ritual becomes an ‘effervescence’, a heated melting together into social solidarity by which the group constitutes itself and perpetuates itself, and in which the individual (prone to profanity, anti-social egotism, sorcery) can transcend her / his own limitations, can give up her / his individuality, and becomes part of the group, for which the individual is even prepared to sacrifice not only ritual prestations, but also herself / himself. Without religion no society, but it is society itself which is the central object of religious veneration; and from this springs all human thought, all logical and rational distinctions, concepts of space and time, causation *etc.*

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feilers 1978 – also cf. van Binsbergen 1967 / 2007, 1968, 1971, and forthcoming; although with his focus on the sacred / profane distinction, Durkheim finds himself in excellent company: Eliade 1965; Hogarth *et al.* 1899; Kaberry 2004; Lynch 2007; Nougayrol 1947; Sherratt 1991; Uzoho 1974; Wasilewska 1991; and Isambert 1976.



This is not the place to trace the philosophical antecedents of Durkheim's thought, which include idealist and collectivists French philosophers as de Maistre (1884-1893 / 1815, 1891) and de Bonald (1845), a fair helping of Kant (especially *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 1983a / 1781 / 1787), and also influences from rabbinical mysticism.

Durkheim's achievement was to offer coherent, theoretically underpinned answers to some of the most pressing questions of religious studies, *e.g.*

- why do people create representations of a world beyond the one of everyday sensory experience?
- why do people not give up these representations even if their rational faculties are unimpaired, and even if they are confronted with alternative, rational, scientific modes of explanation?
- why is there the extreme variety of human beliefs, both within and across societies and historical periods?
- why can we often detect a striking parallelism, or isomorphism, between, on the one hand, specific aspects of a society's religion (*e.g.* notions concerning the causation of illness and healing, featuring ancestors dispensing punishment and reward; or the parcelling up of the society and of the landscape into hierarchically nested congregations and spirit provinces) and, on the other hand, other aspects of that society *e.g.* its kinship system (in which living senior kinsmen are in control of production and reproduction and constitute major role models; and the ramification of social and territorial organisation into nested localised social groups)?

Throughout the twentieth century CE, part of the sociology and most of the anthropology of religion have revolved on the specific empirical application, as well as the theoretical critique, of Durkheim's theory. From the original context of the *Année Sociologique* (the leading sociological journal at the turn of the twentieth century CE), the British anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown (1952) introduced the theory into social anthropology, greatly modifying and simplifying it in the process. Durkheim's general approach to the identity of the sacred and the social obtained a particularly original twist in the work of René Girard.<sup>267</sup> Malinowski

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<sup>267</sup> Girard 1977; Troisfontaines 1980. On Girard a voluminous literature has developed, for bibliographical details *cf.* Simons 1992; Hamerton-Kelly 1987; Janssen 1991; McKenna 1992; van Beek 1988. The global spate of violence in the last few decades, in everyday life as well as in regional, international and interreligious armed conflict, lends a depressing new topicality (and credibility!) to Girard's ideas, where *violence* appears not as an unfortunate by-product of religion and as a sign of imperfection in the structural-functional integration of society (Parsons 1949 / 1937), but as the source, and *conditio sine qua non*, of all human social life – relegating all symbolism and culture to the status of secondary epiphenomenon grown (often as conceal-

(1954 / 1948) initiated a dominant line of critique: given Man's selective interest in nature (some natural species are more edible than others, *etc.*) it can be argued that for some symbols their sacred nature is not entirely superimposed, but does spring from some intrinsic quality they have for human production and reproduction. This line of argument was carried on by the British Marxist anthropologist Worsley (1967, 1956). On the other hand, a direct link of student / teacher relations connects Durkheim, via his most famous student Mauss, to Claude Lévi-Strauss. The latter's rationalistic theory of what at his time of writing had already been an anthropological hobby-horse for over a century, *totemism* (Lévi-Strauss 1962a, 1962b) as constituting and expressing binary group oppositions, is not just a specific application of structuralist ideas with a Saussurian ancestry, but also a specific elaboration of Durkheim's ideas as rendered above. In Lévi-Strauss' work ritual, veneration, 'spirituality', emotion, effervescence, scarcely play a role, and neither does economic or dietary interest – with typical rationalistic myopia, only operations of the mind are considered.

A more promising elaboration of Durkheim from the point of view of religious studies is the work of Victor Turner,<sup>268</sup> who on the basis of detailed ethnography of both the social and the ritual process in the mid-19th century CE society of the Ndembu in North-Western Zambia, South Central Africa,<sup>269</sup> greatly refines Durkheim's theory of religious symbolism. He situates the construction and the experience of the sacred no longer in the static characteristics of a belief system which is supposed to be formulated once for all, but (in a way which we might characterise as *praxeological*) in the dynamic dramaturgy, the micro-historicity, of the unfolding ritual process in concrete settings of time and place. Another major innovation is that Turner identifies the idealist, even totalitarian streak in Durkheim's approach to the social: while the social may admittedly be the ultimate source of sacred meaning and of experienced reality, it also takes on the characteristics of Big Brother (*cf.* Orwell 1961) forcing the individual into sociable submission by extremely powerful symbolic devices. For Turner, by contrast, ritual does not necessarily produce, reproduce and replicate (through isomorphism) the social order – it may also *challenge* that order, create situations where that order is temporarily suspended, denied, or overthrown: *liminal* (*i.e.* threshold-like) situations, like pilgrimage, retreat, ecstasy, rituals of an rebellious or orgiastic nature. Then not structure but *anti-structure* is being produced. Therefore in Turner's hands Durkheim's 'effervescence' becomes 'communitas' – an intersubjective sense of transcendence of individuality into sociable collectivity. *Communitas* does not necessarily refer to some pre-existing community whose members are tied to one another by enduring institutionalised social relations, who participate

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ment, legitimisation or rationalisation) upon the primary datum of *violence*.

<sup>268</sup> Turner 1967b, 1968b, 1969, 1974, 1975, 1982; Turner & Turner 1978.

<sup>269</sup> In language, culture, political organisation, and history the Ndembu are closely related to the Nkoya people of Western Zambia, with whom I have done historical and ethnographic research since 1972. For relevant references, see the bibliography of the present volume.

in the ritual, whose structure is culturally reinforced and is perpetuated; the transformation of alterity into community may merely involve those actually participating in the specific ritual at hand, but then again it may transcend, consciously or by implication, the concrete setting and generate identification with a very wide class of humanity and even with the non-human world, with the world at large, the cosmos – holding up ideals and aspirations concerning an ideal world rather than reinforcing the status quo on the real world and its structures. While for Durkheim ritual reinforces the power structure of a society, for Turner it is likely to expose and potentially explode that power structure.

It would take us too far to consider the question as to why, throughout the twentieth century CE, Durkheim's approach has remained fairly dominant in the cultural anthropology of religion, whereas in the adjacent (originally indistinguishable) field of the sociology of religion, from the middle of the century Weber's approach increasingly eclipsed Durkheim's. For the German sociologist and historian Weber (1922, 1985 / 1919), who is thus echoing the hermeneutical tradition mediated by Dilthey, the intentionality of (individual) human action is the central point in sociological explanation (in terms of *Verstehen*). He therefore sees religion in terms not of arbitrary symbols imposed by 'society', but as a structure of collective signification, which implies a shift from (a) a static model of individual submissiveness to institutionalised religion (Durkheim's emphasis) to (b) the dynamic tension between individuals' acts and conceptions and their merging into a more or less enduring, more or less institutionalised religion.

Issues of power dominate also the main original alternative to the Durkheimian approach in twentieth-century CE anthropology and sociology of religion: the Marxist approach. At first glance there could not be a greater difference than between Durkheim's sociologist<sup>270</sup> idealism and Marx's historical materialism, but the extreme difference becomes more relative once we realise how much both traditions owe (via Hegel) to Kant; how much structural persistence over time is really an emphasis shared by both Marx and Durkheim; and how much Marx's theory of value, of fetishism, and of religion as false consciousness which is produced as a result of class contradictions, in fact amounts to a theory of religious symbolism which has unsuspected (and seldom explored) parallels with Durkheim's. Interestingly, not just Worsley but also Turner (and most of his colleagues of the Manchester School of anthropology) went allegedly<sup>271</sup> through a phase of

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<sup>270</sup> On the semantic implications of the suffix *-istic*, see Chapter 10, below, footnote 387.

<sup>271</sup> I have been severely attacked for divulging this claim, especially by Gluckman's son Mr Tim Gluckman, and I apologise for any inconvenience or grievance this claim (also in van Binsbergen 2007a) may have caused. I admit I have no documentary proof of the political affiliation stated here. My information is based on extensive interviews on the Manchester School I conducted with Gluckman's and Clyde Mitchell's former PhD student Jaap van Velsen (then Professor of Social Anthropology at Aberystwyth, Wales, UK), conducted at Manchester, United Kingdom, May 1976. Prior to these interviews, and as basis for reliable communication and trust, I worked very closely together with van Velsen in the years 1971-1974, when he was Director of the Institute

being a card-carrying member of the Communist Party. For a long time, the Marxist approach to the sociology of religion was obsessed with the distinction (not without parallels with Durkheim's sacred / profane distinction) between:

1. a *material basis* revolving on relations of production and the class contradictions these entail, and
2. a *superstructure*<sup>272</sup> – the cultural and symbolic arrangements allegedly superimposed, almost as an unessential embellishment, upon the more fundamental material 'base' of production forces and production relations; here religious beliefs and practices, myths, legal procedures, and other forms of symbolic expression would be situated, allegedly reflecting, and being determined by, the material basis; here again there is a parallel with the fundamental distinction between sacred and profane informing Durkheim's theory.

Major steps were taken in Marxist religious anthropology in the 1960-70s, when a more relative view was taken of the basis / superstructure distinction, without giving up the idea that any society, including its religious dimension, necessarily revolves on processes of production, the alienation of the product from the primary producers, the class contradictions this produces, and the devices by which these forms of exploitation, although counter to the interests of the primary producers, are yet accepted by them. Violence, slavery, raiding, forced labour, are among these devices, but far more common ones exist in the religious and ideo-

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for African Studies (the former, Manchester-dominated, Rhodes-Livingstone Institute), as part of the University of Zambia at Lusaka, and I was a Lecturer of Sociology at that university, and subsequently Research Affiliate of the Institute. In the years 1975-1978 van Velsen was even my academic supervisor, succeeding Köbben, and preceding Schoffeleers. I have immensely admired his small oeuvre, and have some reason to take his statements seriously. On the other hand, he had an axe to grind especially *vis-à-vis* Gluckman, whom he considered authoritarian and manipulative – essential traits, though, for the founder of a major scientific movement – and whose final intervention with his PhD thesis – wholesale deletion of the section on Lake Tonga labour migration – van Velsen continued to resent – his publications were few and far between. When the flower of Manchester anthropology came to Zambia, 1972, to a conference van Velsen was hosting in Lusaka, he proved unable to play the expected leadership role, and almost collapsed under the challenge. As was also clear from his life-long, in principle justified, resentment of the Dutch colonial war in Indonesia 1945-1949, for which he even gave up his Dutch citizenship, van Velsen (who like many descendants of Dutch colonial families was of partly Indonesian ancestry) was a political romanticist, to the detriment of his career, his personal life, and his style of communication – and this may well have warped his recollections and his judgment. However, my knowledge of the Manchester School was far from limited to van Velsen's confidentialities. During the 1970s and 1980s my contacts with the (remnants of) the Manchester School were extensive, frequent, close, and characterised by mutual respect, and I still consider it the best and politically most mature variety of social anthropology available. So whatever the merits of my claim, it is made in good faith, and meant as *praise*, from someone (I myself) who was for decades a prominent Marxist anthropologist in the Netherlands, and a Manchester adept.

<sup>272</sup> Critically used, the concept played a considerable role in neo-Marxist anthropological studies of religion of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. CE; cf. Badawy 1956; Fernandez 1967; Godelier 1978; Leblu 1979; Tornay 1979; van Binsbergen 1981b; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985a, 1985b.

logical sphere, were the true nature of the exploitation to which the primary producers are being subjected is either obscured from their consciousness, or rendered acceptable by rationalisations: *e.g.* their suffering on Earth wins them Heaven; the exploiters do not exploit for their own interests but on behalf of the gods; the exploiters occupy an incomparably higher place in the god-given cosmological order of things and therefore their acts of appropriation cannot possibly be resented; it is the gods, ancestors, spirits of the wilds, *etc.* that guard over the social relations of the living, and thus underpin with their incomparable authority the (exploitative) redistribution of the primary product that take place, *etc.* The important insight therefore arose that religious beliefs and practices are not 'superstructural' epiphenomena of whatever more fundamental material processes around which social life was supposed to revolve – no, religion was recognised as part and parcel of the relation of production themselves. This rendered the concept of 'false consciousness' extremely problematic: it seemed to suggest, ethnocentrically, that the forms of exploitation to be found in the North Atlantic region at the height of capitalism – forms which Marx's and Engels' writings (Marx & Engels, 1975b-1983b) had identified for us – would be found back, on closer analytical scrutiny, in all societies at all periods of human history. Instead, it was admitted that specific local cultural systems would entail their own local ways of justifying and obscuring exploitation, and that therefore we had to study 'modes of production' in all parts of the world and in all historical periods, seeking to identify the specific ways in which the obscuring of exploitation and appropriative violence was built into the very structure of these societies. This suggested an interesting research agenda for Marxist religious studies. However, despite promising attempts in this direction,<sup>273</sup> this line of enquiry was from the beginning severely handicapped by the persistent difficulty of formulating a non-reductionist Marxist theory of religious symbolism; the movement (of which I was an active member) was virtually terminated by further developments in North Atlantic intellectual life: the demise of international communism as a political reality and the end of the Cold War in the late 1980s, as well as the replacement of the Marxist paradigm by the post-modern and post-structuralist ones in the social sciences in the course of the 1980s.

Another major idea informing the social science of religion from the beginning of the twentieth century CE has been that of the *subconscious* (Freud 1953-1974 / 1968a-1977a; and followers) or the *unconscious* (Jung 1989; and followers). These approaches have in common the idea that the religious content which is the object of representations, beliefs and rites, is based in the contents of those domains of the psyche which the individuals involved cannot directly access by rational, self-critical reflection, and which therefore govern their lives to a considerable extent, either on the basis of repressed and transformed conflicts in

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<sup>273</sup> Bonte 1975; Feuchtwang 1975; Godelier 1975; Maduro 1975; van Binsbergen & Geschiere 1985a, 1985b; van Binsbergen 1981b.

their life's history (Freud – predominantly the father figure as an evocation of the superego; Freud 1953-1974), or on the basis of the accumulated collective images of their family, ethnic group, and mankind as a whole (Jung 1989).

## 7.2.2. Implications for the study of religion in multicultural pluralism

Against this summary background of some theoretical resources in the empirical sociology and anthropology of religion, our next step is to spell out what modes of analysis the anthropology and sociology of religion has in stock for the analysis of religious plurality – the coexistence of various religious forms within the same more or less complex society, and how this may inform our intercultural perspective on spirituality, particularly as encountered in the multicultural environment of a major North Atlantic city today.

An argued discursive treatment would take us much too far, and instead I refer the reader to Table 7.1, which sets out the essentials in greatly simplified and no doubt contentious form. Although the social scientists in question scarcely use the term, I have tried to fathom what meaning might be given in their work to the concept of 'spirituality' – since for better or worse this concept has been chosen as our point of departure. I have then tried to outline the implications of their theories along three complementary dimensions:

- the synthetic potential to be found in their (reconstructed, or attributed) notion of spirituality;
- its community-building potential; and
- its critical political potential.

In the last, right-hand column I have sought to outline what might be the specific perspective on the theory in question on urban spirituality in a context of multicultural pluralism, such as is to be found in Rotterdam today – the setting we have been led to single out as an empirical referent.

author (order follows the main text)	in that author's approach, spirituality would appear to be equivalent to:	synthetic potential attributed to spirituality	community-building potential attributed to spirituality	critical political potential	implications for urban spirituality in multicultural pluralism ('spiritual map of Rotterdam') project
Taylor	belief in anthropomorphic spiritual beings, and actions based on such a belief	minimal: entrenched in the model of dyadic transactions between humans	minimal: individual-centred	none	unspecified ('one-group approach'); by implication: social landscape reduced to the human measure, individuals may shop

					around for spirits as they do for human interaction partners
<b>Otto</b>	dealing with the numinous which is non-anthropomorphic	more than minimal: beyond the human	more than minimal: individual-centred but beyond the human	considerable: beyond the human measure	unspecified ('one-group approach'); by implication: diffuse sacralisation of the social landscape
<b>Durkheim</b>	dealing with the sacred (<-> profane) in positive and negative rites, especially in effervescence	radically transcends the individual so as to create the social; cosmology, myth, rationality, society all spring from spirituality	spirituality is the one constituent factor of community; but the only case considered is a one-group community	on the one hand totalitarian social implications (the collectively social is God); on the other hand rejection of extreme individual atomism	unspecified ('one-group approach'); by implication: sacralisation of each of the constituent groups ('églises', congregations); given the fundamental nexus between the social and the religious this might produce absolute divisiveness between these groups, both religiously and socially
<b>Lévi-Strauss</b>	spirituality appears to be the uninteresting epiphenomenon of an underlying rationality (be it 'wild' or otherwise) shared by all humans	to the extent to which spirituality is thinking about the natural world, it creates the socio-cultural world, in a pattern of transformations converging for all mankind	considerable: ~Durkheim with a rationalistic slant, but involving a plurality of groups, each group associated with a sacred symbol on the basis of aetiological myths linking symbols and therefore groups	none: everything goes as long as it is in the mind; protest amounts to cultural nostalgia, not to ethics, freedom etc.	between, and beyond, the constituent groups a larger community is conceived on the basis of myths attributing to each specific group (or sets of groups) a place on the basis of its specific emblems; but it is difficult to see how this may proceed from consciousness to practice
<b>Turner</b>	ritual interactive practice, subject to micro-historicity generating <i>communitas</i>	spirituality both sums up and, as anti-structure, escapes from the structure of everyday life	great, but the community is not necessarily an established, concrete one, but may be imaginary, thus not outlasting the ritual itself	considerable	great potential both for the expression of group-specific, ritually underpinned community, and for the transcendence of group-specificity into more diffuse and comprehensive <i>communitas</i>

<b>Weber</b>	structure of collective signification open to understanding; action component remains implicit	collective meaning constituting a coherent world-view	builds a community of shared meaning	limited: emphasis on meaning and life styles	emphasis on class, estate, life styles and consumption patterns rather than ethnic pluralism; difficult to see how plurality of meanings is negotiated and transcended
<b>Marx (1), neo-Marxism (2)</b>	(1) false consciousness; (2) reproducing immaterial conditions for specific modes of production and appropriation	spirituality as a prerequisite for production, which is the centre of social life	community is not an operative concept	great	focus on production, appropriation and alienation highlights the economic contexts of multiculturalism but has no appreciation of spirituality as such
<b>Freud</b>	spirituality as misguided libido	apparently negative; <i>Jenseits des Lustprinzips</i> (Freud 1968b-1977b) suggests a considerable promise for spirituality, after all	apparently negative: society mainly as an anti-libidinous conspiracy	considerable	limited: psychoanalysis tends to produce crude sociology; yet it would be worthwhile to look at the multicultural society and its spiritualities as a ramification of libidos and their repression
<b>Jung</b>	communication with the individual and the collective unconscious	beyond the self, layers of cosmic and pan-human inclusion but also of sub-universal exclusion and othering	somewhat limited: tendency to entrenchment in what one perceives as one's own group, which may be either historical or newly constructed	limited	limited: how to identify, in concrete settings, the more comprehensive layers of the unconscious; moreover a tendency to stress individual psychology at the expense of social and economic collectivities

Table 7.1. *Classic social-science approaches to religion provisionally scrutinised from the point of view of spirituality and urban multicultural pluralism.*

The benefit of this overview is that it makes us aware once more of the many and variegated ways in which aspects of religion have been singled out for theoretical reflection. At first, an approach in terms of spirituality would seem to take a healthy distance from the overemphasis on established, institutionalised religion which has been standard in social science research over the past hundred years. However, once we begin to scrutinise this corpus of theoretical resources from the point of view of a concept of spirituality, we realise that all these complementary classic approaches should not be cast overboard merely



because we do not like the term 'religion' any more. In my opinion, Table 7.1 offers a valuable link between our project and its central concept 'spirituality', and the accumulated resources of a wide field of religious studies in which the best minds in the social sciences have invested for well over a century. Even if some of the entries in this table must remain arbitrary or even preposterous, it outlines a number of dimensions and options which is going to enrich our future analysis of spirituality.

### 7.3. Introducing spirituality

Although we may expect hundred of thousands of hits when searching the Internet for 'spirituality', the term is rather a newcomer among the terms by which scholars refer to religious beliefs and practices. It does not feature prominently, if at all, in any of the contributions to Ann Loades & Loyal Rue's (1991) authoritative collection of *Contemporary Classics in Philosophy of Religion*, nor in the titles of the extensive and consensually compiled list of recommended further reading at the end of that book. The same applies to the even more authoritative 1994 update of Eric Sharpe's (1994) *Comparative religion: A history*. However, since this was written in 1999, the star of the concept of 'spirituality' has steeply risen, and that of 'religion' gone down, and an encyclopaedic work like Kees Waaijman's *Spirituality* (2002) shows the enormous conceptual, empirical, historiographic and bibliographic progress that has been made in this field.

Let us consider a few randomly chosen contexts in which the concept of 'spirituality' appears.

In some of the older of such contexts as have come to my attention in preparation of the present Chapter, 'spirituality' simply features as a noun derived from spiritual, in the sense of 'relating to spirits, i.e. spiritual beings'.<sup>274</sup>

An instructive use of elements from the lexical cluster 'spirit(u)...' is to be found in anthropological and comparative religion studies of African Independent Christian Churches in Africa, especially Southern Africa, and it is to these that we now turn.

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<sup>274</sup> E.g.: 'Über den Inder Kanakah (Katakah ?) ist nichts Zuverlässiges bekannt. Abu Maar nennt ihn in seinem *K[itāb ] al-Uluf [ Book on the Thousands ]* als einen hervorragenden indischen Astrologen. 3 (...) Hadjdj Halifa (V p. 158 nr. 10530) fügt noch das *K[itāb ] Manazil al-Qamar [ Book on the Lunar Mansions ]* hinzu, in dem Kanakah "hermetische" Lehren über die *S p i r i t u a l i t ä t* der Planeten übernommen haben will. Schließlich zitiert al-GHaznawi in sein (...) *Kifaya* (fol. 52b, -3; 56a 9.14) mehrfachen Inder Kanakah.' Ullman, 1972: 298 f [ spacing added - WvB ]

Probably Kanaka (कनका Sanskrit: 'yellow, gold, honey'), like Ṭumṭum al-Hindi who is also frequently mentioned in Islamic magical texts including those around geomancy, is merely a imaginary personification, but that is not the point. Reference is being made here to the belief that the central entities (also designated 'planets' in the West today) featuring in astronomical and astrological science (in Antiquity and classical Arabic magic largely merged fields) are 'spirits'.

These religious organisations often combine an emphatically modernist organisational and doctrinal idiom with transformative selections from regional historic religious forms pre-dating Christianity and the European conquest. In the literature they are often called 'spiritual churches', because 'the spirit' (in either a Christian sense, or a presumably historically African, or a combination of both) is held to be a central concept in these religious forms. Schoffeleers (1991) has demonstrated how these churches combine this emphasis on 'spirit' with a particular political stance, that of *acquiescence* vis-à-vis the extensive structural, symbolic and physical oppression characteristic of the South African state and economy under apartheid, and spilling over into the neighbouring countries. Whatever the limitations of Schoffeleers' approach,<sup>275</sup> he has certainly identified a wider context of power, symbolic oppression and hegemony in which we have to situate both the 'spirit' emphasis of these African organisations, and their designation in the anthropological and Africanist literature (whose hegemonic origin is unmistakable despite attempts, of the last 70 years, to steer away from that heritage). The same link with politics is clear from the following example, involving the Vapostori Church<sup>276</sup> from Zimbabwe and Botswana:

'In the course of time the second generation and the newcomers, mostly of Kalanga stock (the original Vapostori are Shona) began to regard many Vapostori practices as unnecessary and old-fashioned. In 1957 the elders started restricting the activities of the new converts and promotion to posts of authority was stopped. The latter then accused the ASCG [Apostolic Sabbath Church of God – WvB] leadership of nepotism and tribalism.<sup>277</sup> When a compromise could be reached the ultra-liberals and ultra-conservatives were expelled for the church in 1957/58. They established themselves as Vapostori elsewhere, for instance in Shashe and the non-tribal Lobatsi [B]loc and Gaborones Bloc.<sup>278</sup> In 1961/62 the liberal wing called for formal education for Vapostori children and employment in private and public sectors for adult members. The conservatives opposed and many liberals left the church. It should be noted that as years passed relations between the parent body

<sup>275</sup> I have argued that Schoffeleers' emphasis on specifically apartheid conditions as producing these churches' emphasis on 'spirit' has to be revised in the light of the proliferation of such churches in Botswana, which especially after its Independence (1966) has been the hallmark of civic liberties, political stability, effective state services to the citizens, and relative affluence: van Binsbergen 1993.

<sup>276</sup> In Zimbabwe, *Vapostori* is the Shona version of the word 'Apostles'. In the present scope I cannot enter into a typological discussion of the varieties of African Independent Churches in 20<sup>th</sup>-c. Southern Africa. See the references cited.

<sup>277</sup> Despite the rise of a more sophisticated paradigm in the study especially of post-Independence sub-Saharan Africa (Vail 1989; van Binsbergen 1997e, revised reprint 2008e) an inveterate standard approach to ethnicity in African power relations during the 20<sup>th</sup> c. CE has been the essentialising concept of *tribalism* – as if Africans are compelled by their culture and history, even their very nature, to parcel up their socio-political space in clearly demarcated, immutable and implacable 'tribes'. However, in actual socio-political practice Africans have tended to internalise the tribal divisions that have been invented for them and imposed upon them by colonial and post-colonial administrative, political and economic agents, so that the appearance of tribalism fits post-colonial African realities rather well.

<sup>278</sup> Enumerated are localities and administrative divisions in 20<sup>th</sup>-c. CE Botswana.

and breakaway factions often became more cordial, the uniting bond most probably being Masowe's<sup>279</sup> leadership. In 1965, in Francistown younger members believed that Vapostori should take an active part in the policies of their country, in order to be fully represented in governmental body. The Vapostori leadership refused, because the community's mission was to liberate Africa *spiritually*, not politically.' (Lagerwerf 1982: 43).

A powerful attempt to deal with these churches in a context of symbolic hegemony (although not yet explicitly using that Gramscian term; cf. Gramsci 1950 / 1985) was Jean Comaroff's first book, *Body of Power Spirit of Resistance*, dealing with a major African Independent Church in the Southern African region, the Zion Christian Church (ZCC):<sup>280</sup>

'I have suggested that the initial meeting of the Tshidi<sup>281</sup> with the agencies of European imperialism was mediated by a coherent symbolic order; and that this order was itself reformed in a more sustained confrontation with the iconography and practices of colonialism. The resulting bricolage represented a particular instance of a universal process of symbolic construction – the repositioning of signs in sequences of practice, "texts" which both press new associations and reproduce conventional meanings. Such practice varies in its intentionality and its formal elaboration, from the implicit meanings of reformed habit to the assertive syntax of transformative rites. Its substance, in any context, is a matter of circumstance; marked efforts to signal dissent or to induce innovation often occur in situations of radical structural cleavage – such as result from conquest, proletarianisation, or the sudden sharpening of contradictions within hierarchical orders. The purposive act of reconstruction, on the part of the non-elite, focuses meaningfully on the attempt to heal dislocations at the level of experience, dislocations which derive from the failure of the prevailing sign system to provide a model for their subjectivity, for their meaningful and material being. Their existence is increasingly dominated by generalized media of exchange – money, the written word, linear time, and the universal God – which fail to capture a recognizable self-image. These media circulate through communicative processes which themselves appear to marginalize people at the periphery; hence the major vehicles of value have come to elude their grasp. In these circumstances, efforts are made to restructure activity so as to regain a sense of control. Repositories of value, like the Zionists' money, are resituated within practices that promise to redirect their flow back to the impoverished, thus healing their affliction. Dissenting Christianity has often, in the Third World, offered the terms for such reformulation. Its logic seems to reverse the signs of Protestant orthodoxy and the global industrial culture; its reintegration of spirit and matter, for instance, or its insertion of the subject in a web of tightly ordered socio-moral relations, seeks to restrict the circulation of generalized media, offering to return lost value and meaning to the alienated.' (Comaroff 1985: 253).

The uncritical use of the concept of spirit in the scholarly literature dealing with the Southern African Independent Churches already points to the usage of the word

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<sup>279</sup> John Masowe, prophet-founder of the Vapostori in Southern Africa. Cf. Dillon-Malone 1978.

<sup>280</sup> From the 1990s on, Jean Comaroff with her husband the legal anthropologist John Comaroff, both originating from South Africa, have established themselves as leading members of the Chicago School of anthropology, USA, with major studies of the history of Christianity and consciousness in Southern Africa, globalisation, and of the epistemology of African Studies (Comaroff & Comaroff 1991-1997, 1992a, 1993).

<sup>281</sup> The Tswana sub-group studied by Jean Comaroff.

'spirituality' in its present-day sense. Let us explore this usage somewhat more systematically, even if at this stage this has to be done on rather too few sources.

#### 7.4. *Spirit and spirituality*

In the scope of this Chapter I cannot possibly do justice to the absolutely central place which the concept of 'spirit' (רוח *ruah*, πνεῦμα *pneuma*, *animus*, *Geist*, *esprit*) has occupied throughout the history of Western thought, philosophy and religion. From Anaxagoras, via Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus and St Augustine, reflection on 'the spirit' preoccupied philosophy in Antiquity, and after establishing itself as a cornerstone of Christian thought, was taken to decisive positions for Western thought and society in the works of Descartes and Hegel. This history is well documented.<sup>282</sup> From here we readily derive the adjective 'spiritual'. However, the cognate term 'spirituality' is somewhat less obvious and less frequently used; presumably, being a derivation from a derivation, the word 'spirituality' has built-in, morphological connotations of artificiality raised to the power 2.

At any rate it should be clear that with the choice of the term 'spirituality' we risk importing into our analysis the odds and ends of an internally contradictory heritage of two and a half millennia of philosophical and theological thought, and (given the alliance between theology and one of the major political factors through many centuries of European history, the Christian churches) of social power formation around the concept of spirituality. This aspect is very manifest in a French dictionary definition from the beginning of the twentieth century CE:

*spirituel* (...) (lat. *spiritualis*); de *spiritus*, *esprit*) Qui est esprit, incorporel: les anges sont des êtres spirituels. Qui a de l'esprit, qui sait donner aux choses une tournure vive et ingénieuse: homme spirituel. Où il y a de l'esprit: réponse spirituelle. Qui annonce de l'esprit: physionomie spirituelle. Qui est borné au domaine de l'esprit: parenté spirituelle. Qui regarde l'âme: le pouvoir spirituel s'oppose au temporel. Qui a rapport à la religion: exercices spirituels. Vie spirituelle: vie de l'âme pieuse, pratique des choses du salut. Lecture spirituelle, lecture sur un sujet mystique. Sens spirituel, sens figuré dans l'interprétation des écritures. Concert spirituel, qui se compose de morceaux de musique religieuse. N.[om ]m[asculin ] Pouvoir mystique: le spirituel et le temporel. Membre d'une section de l'ordre des franciscains, qui se sépara de l'ordre au XIIIe siècle. Ant.[inomies ] matériel, niais, sot, imbecile. (Larousse & Augé 1910, II, s.v. 'spirituel')

Hence for Larousse, 'spiritualité' was, at the beginning of the twentieth century CE:

'Qualité de ce qui est esprit: la spiritualité de l'âme. Théol. Tout ce qui a pour objet la vie spirituelle: livre de spiritualité. (Augé n.d., s.v. 'spiritualité')

The *Oxford Shorter Dictionary on Historical Principles* confirms the Christian connection although there it is considerably diversified:

<sup>282</sup> Derrida 1987; Editor 2001; Hülsmann 2001a, 2001b; Kaulback 2001; Riedlinger 2001; Ries 2001; Snell 1955.

**Spirituality** (...). late ME. [- (O)Fr. spiritualité or late L. spiritualitas, f. spiritualis SPIRITUAL; see -ITY. 1. The body of spiritual or ecclesiastical persons; the clergy. Now Hist. 1441. 2. That which has a spiritual character; ecclesiastical property or revenue held or received in return for spiritual services. Now arch. 1456. b. pl. Spiritual or ecclesiastical things; ecclesiastical possessions, rights, etc., of a purely spiritual character. Now Hist. late ME. 3. The quality or condition of being spiritual 1500. b. With a and pl. A spiritual thing or quality as distinct from a material or worldly one 1676. 4. The fact or condition of being spirit or of consisting of an incorporeal essence 1681. (...) 1. He blamed both S. and laity 1709. 2. b. They [ the Dean and Chapter ] are Guardians of the Spiritualities during the Vacancy of the Bishoprick 1726. 3. His Life (...) is full of excellent Lessons of S. 1763. 4. That He is invisible is accounted for by His s. 1884.] (Little *et al.* 1978 s.v. 'spirituality')

The intellectual origin of the term 'spirituality' is clearly Christian, more specifically Roman Catholic theology. This is still the context of a book like that of the Dutch sociologist of religion Gérard van Tillo, *Onthullingen: Spiritualiteit Sociologisch Beschouwd*,<sup>283</sup> a collection of short essays on the border between sociology and pastoral theology – apart from its title little useful for our present purpose since it does not contain an attempt to confront the definition of spirituality outside the *position prise* of Roman Catholicism today. Here again the paucity of analytical reflection on the term 'spirituality' becomes manifest: although van Tillo's extensive bibliography covers much of the sociology of religion and theology, *it only contains one item featuring 'spirituality'*: a dated systematic elaboration of the concept as an established term in Roman Catholic theology. (Villers *et al.* 1938 / 1932).

### **7.5. Spirituality: A surprisingly inspiring New Age approach**

Considerably more promising for our present purpose is a book by the controversial biologist Sheldrake and the (originally Roman Catholic) pastoral theologian Fox, *Natural Grace* (Sheldrake & Fox 1997 / 1996). With these two authors, the theological tradition of the spirituality concept is linked to a post-Christian exploration of modern predicaments in science, cosmology, and existential signification. Although the book's argument takes us close to the borders of the utopias of *New Age*, the authors' intellectual stature guarantees an inspiring reading experience. It appears that the insistence on the term spirituality in this book is largely Fox's contribution; those passages in this dialogical book which explicitly pose the question of spirituality are claimed by Fox rather than by Sheldrake. Situating himself in continuity with the Roman Catholic spirituality tradition (Sheldrake & Fox 1997: 106, on the spirituality of praying), Fox has for nearly two decades operated an Institute in Culture and Creation Spirituality

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<sup>283</sup> 'Disclosures: Spirituality from a Sociological Perspective' – van Tillo 1994; the reader expecting in this book a Husserlian perspective on spirituality will be disappointed.

(Sheldrake & Fox 1997: 180), in which he seeks to derive new religious inspiration and existential motivation (= 'spirituality') from modern science's up-to-date version of the creation story: *Big Bang, spiral nebulae, supernovas, the origin of the solar system, the origin and evolution of life on our planet* – the kind of context in which one expects that other Roman Catholic priest-scientist-mystic, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, to have been a major influence although he is not specifically mentioned. In his endeavour, Fox finds an enthusiastic interlocutor in the person of Sheldrake. As is well-known, the latter's theory of *morphic resonance* (Sheldrake 1981, 1988) revolved on the following idea: nature, the world, has a memory, is informed by morphogenetic fields which are produced, *inter alia*, by individual human volition and acts, so that *e.g.* the performance of an unchanged, time-honoured ritual brings us in contact with the original insight and the founders of that ritual; or the speaking of a language that has many speakers and / or that has existed for a long time is facilitated by our world environment which is supposed to have a memory of these earlier speech acts and thus to support our own; and old propitiatory or apotropaic rituals performed in an emphatically modern context may yet yield tangible material effects (Sheldrake & Fox 1997: 159; *cf.* my introduction to Chapter 3). Even science itself turns out to be largely ritual, not so much in the sense of being rigidified into fixed procedures, but in sharing to a large extent the spiritual dimension of religious rituals (Sheldrake & Fox 1997: 153, 168).

The revolutionary idea of morphic resonance, partially indebted to Sheldrake's extensive residential and theoretical experience in Asia (India, Indonesia), makes him a *New-Age* hero. Derrida, in his awareness that every given contains its opposite and denial within itself, and that everything in the world leaves indelible traces, turns out to critique today's logocentricity and cramped dualism – and critiques it with what is not just (a) post-modern thought but also (b) the time-honoured modes of thought that speak to us from the oldest linguistic reconstructions (van Binsbergen 2012d: Chapter 6, pp. 204 *f.*) – suggesting that the Aristotelian binary opposition and excluded third is a relatively recent (less than three millennia old) innovation rather than (as Lévi-Strauss would have it) the perennial hallmark of human thinking. Well, in much the same way Sheldrake, while apparently squandering his credibility as a modern Western scientist (yet seeking to salvage his integrity as a scientist in the face of fossilised and cramping paradigms), may yet hit on an ulterior truth which reveals fundamental traits of our life world for the identification of which Western science is at present still ill-equipped, even though these traits have been recognised, and utilised, in the historic knowledge systems of Asia (Capra 1978; Zukav 1979) and Africa. My book now (2015) in preparation, *Sangoma Science*, makes the same point. The suggestion thus emerges that what most recommends a paradigm shift from religion to spirituality, is that spirituality as a concept may free us from the sediment of millennia-old power complexes that, while obviously capable of accounting and controlling significant aspects of our reality, are utterly unable to situate our-

selves in that reality – let alone making us feel at home there.

## **7.6. A provisional analysis of the present-day concept of spirituality, and some of its theoretical implications**

The recent resilience of the concept of spirituality, in what could be broadly identified as a *New-Age* context, consists in the redefinition of the original Christian theological concept of structured personal devotion, into a concept which refers, in many cases, to:<sup>284</sup>

*religious forms from the periphery of the local or global social system, – forms which from the dominant centre would tend to be negatively judged because of their very peripherality (on the basis of which they would popularly acquire connotations of exoticism, savagery, paganism – also originally a peripheral terms, denoting the pagus or rural hamlet –, and superstition), but which the blanket, apparently neutral concept of spirituality allows us to retain under one broad general umbrella together with other, more dominant and central forms; spirituality in its present-day usage is largely a term of inclusion deferring (but far from precluding, and in fact implying) negative judgement and prejudice.*<sup>285</sup>

It is not difficult to glean from the literature titles which seem to confirm this provisional semantic analysis.<sup>286</sup> We could adduce numerous examples which convey the same all-embracing fascination (Sheldrake & Fox 1997: 58, 108).<sup>287</sup> What these authors are saying, in other words, is the following: looking for the greatest common denominator, in the light of which all locally-specific forms of religion, all such forms as associated with specific identities, ethnicities, organisational structures, are really all ramifications of the same continuous stream,

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<sup>284</sup> An early compilation, within the general massive industry of esoteric publications, and foreshadowing the explosion of *New Age* publications, seems to be: *Dictionnaire de spiritualité*, Paris, 1937, which however I have not seen.

<sup>285</sup> The notions of peripherality and centrality in the context of the study of cultic systems was elaborated by Lewis (1971).

<sup>286</sup> *E.g.*: Zahan 1979; Wicker 2000. The latter book is published with Crossroads Press; although bearing a name which would not be out of place in *New Age* contexts, Crossroads Press is in fact an imprint of the authoritative African Studies Association of the United States, and a serious academic publisher, *e.g.* of medical anthropology.

<sup>287</sup> In fact, my own research since the 1990s, looking for extensive temporal and spatial continuities in aspects of African symbolic and religious forms throughout the Old World and even into the New World, could be seen as contributing to this trend – but until this was written (1999) I scarcely ever used the term spirituality in that connection. For a brief introduction, *cf.* van Binsbergen 1999a / 2003b: ch. 15, and extensive references there.

are all legs in the same cosmic journey of all humankind, images in the same dream. The concept of spirituality seems to imply an invitation to give up all emphasis on specific doctrinal and ritual specificity – underneath all those superficial different forms, or so at least we are promised, lingers a unifying shared quality which merges for all mankind and for all historical periods... For Sheldrake & Fox, spirituality even has a more embracing, cosmic meaning than just the whole of humankind:

‘...to be able to situate things in a cosmic context, which therefore means spirituality and amazement.’ (Sheldrake & Fox 1997: 184; my re-translation into English).

But in this present-day semantics of spirituality we are not just dealing with unqualified inclusion on a global or a cosmic scale. Our brief discussion of the African Independent Churches has indicated that there may be important political issues at stake in the use that the term spirituality: *the term sets a a-political discursive framework within which to speak of power and hegemony is to be considered irrelevant, impolite, un-aesthetic, rude, indicative of a base materialism and the incapability of overcoming the clutches of matter and to take wing in the realm of the spirit.* The price of inclusion seems to be a-political submission, both to a code of aesthetics and civility (it implies e.g. an unqualified and uncritical respect for, interest in, and admiration for, the ‘exotic’ spirituality of ‘the other’; and for ‘Nature’). *One wonders what happens to the agency of individuals and of groups, from this perspective. And one is tempted to pinpoint and critique the kind of arena (that of the multicultural society and its politics of recognition (cf. Taylor 1992) which requires, and strategically produces, such an approach to religion.*

An additional aspect of the latter constellation is the emphasis on *unstructured humanity*, I mean on humanity conceived as consisting of a loose set of unattached individuals (as in the cosmology of the market ideology of the 1990s, of consumerism, of democracy as the disempowering mechanism of individualised, anonymous polling instead of local-level participation – or as the amorphous quasi-stratigraphic layer of thinking protoplasm which Teilhard de Chardin called *noösphere*), instead of enduring, self-affirming, sharing, internally and externally complex and contradictory, richly structured social ties and networks of relationships.<sup>288</sup> The atomised individual, not the internally structured group, not the historic collective identity, let alone the structured complexity of all of humankind under globalisation, would seem to be the implied unit of study in an approach centring on the modern spirituality concept. If the concept is applied to a human collectivity, it may tend to be at an abstract level of people sharing classificatory characteristics (a gender, a sexual preference, a profession, a life-style, possession of a specific consumption item) within global and local arenas of identity, rather than people con-

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<sup>288</sup> This is not to question the validity of the thesis of the fundamental unity of humankind, as considered in the Introduction to this book; but to deny that unity is equal to amorphous and unstructured sameness.



stituting a viable group or community on the basis of their consciously mediated and sustained, personal ties. With all its pretensions and aspiration of being forward-looking, the concept of spirituality yet seems to revive an utterly obsolete, pre-social science, 19<sup>th</sup>-c. CE model of Man.

Atomised human individuals, the avoidance of questions of power and hegemony, and the assumption of universal (at least global) distribution of traits and mutual access to traits – all this makes the concept of spirituality eminently usable within the context of globalisation not as a sociological datum but as an ideological project, and one of its most pressing North Atlantic manifestations: the installation of what is officially known as the *multicultural society*.

There is another form of submission which seems to be implied in the present-day usage of the term spirituality: submission to a particularly crude solution to the problem of body-mind duality. Does not this concept of spirituality imply that ‘the spiritual’ is a universal category of all humankind, throughout all distinct human cultural orientations of past, present and future? Hence authors such as Fox & Sheldrake (whatever their merits in the fields of spiritual counselling or as advocates of the seductive and resonating shimmerings of life’s manifestations) exhort us to recognise the concept as the soul as vital to any historical civilisation and therefore the need for the West to rediscover the soul (Sheldrake & Fox 1997: 180)? Does this not imply forcing the enormous and precious variety of human worldviews under the yoke of a Western, Judeo-Christian-Graeco-Roman conception of the human condition?

Behind all these images lurks the *dominance of appearance* (cf. Oosterling 1996) as the central concern of the post-modern world, of a reality which is primarily experienced (whatever the attempts at grounding it in environmental concerns) as disembodied and virtualised<sup>289</sup> – as electronic and furtive, man-machine and image-mediated contact rather than man-men contact.

As constitutes an established trope in *New-Age* discourse, Sheldrake & Fox do critique Cartesian dualism. But kicking that dead horse is no longer distinctive. One cannot help wondering if a position like theirs may not be based on ignoring the history of the philosophy of mind / body dualism, and on ignoring today’s growing consensus, from many different philosophical directions, that the Cartesian position has ushered European thought into a dead trap from which it is only liberating itself with great difficulty.<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>289</sup> van Binsbergen 1997d, also reprinted in the present volume as Chapter 1; van Binsbergen 1998.

<sup>290</sup> Hein 1983. Also Feyerabend & Maxwell 1966. For an overview of the history of alternatives to Cartesian dualism, cf. work by Poortman, pedestrian in execution (and translation) but of immense relevance: Poortman 1978 / 1954.

Reflecting the fashionable themes which have captured public opinion in the North Atlantic over the past few decades, not only an ideologically optimistic view of globalisation is implied in the present-day concept of spirituality, but also the *environment* as a growing cause of alarm, and hence increased awareness of natural, biological, chemical, physical conditions informing the world as it appears to our senses. Fox's *creation spirituality* (which recalls a thread running through much of *New-Age* thought) is a case in point. Another theme is that of intuition, imagination, creativity, – aspects of the realm of spirituality which allow us to think up alternative futures, and break out of such mechanical rigidity in our dealing with ourselves, fellow humans, and the surrounding world as may be characteristic of North Atlantic modern subjectivity:

'In the Preface we have said that we need to develop a new "sense of the sacred" in order to deal with the despair and the sense of powerlessness of so many of our contemporaries. Could these dialogues on nature and the spirituality of creation, on grace and praise, on the soul, praying, darkness, ritual, morphic resonance, and education, really assist us in retrieving a sense of the sacred? Did they help us? Yes. One of the things which they have brought to light, is how scientific insights have been kept separate from the realms of intuition and imagination. Much of what science has discovered about nature has remained sterile, isolated from the spiritual world. The riches of nature as brought to light by science, are offering new opportunities for thanksgiving, for praising and admiring the creativity which is at the root of it all.' (Sheldrake & Fox 1997: 190; my re-translation into English)

However, indicating these characteristics should not be taken as an attempt to dismiss them. In one of the other Chapters of the present volume, we will encounter similar, and similarly liberating, ideas as held by the French post-structuralist philosopher Guattari<sup>291</sup> – and although I am critiquing Guattari for making idle and historically insensitive claims about what he evidently does not know well, I do recognise the vital importance of such attempts at liberation.

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<sup>291</sup> Oosterling & Thissen 1998; for a longer study greatly augmenting to my short contribution to that book, see: van Binsbergen 2008, reprinted in the present volume as Chapter 10. Also cf. Sheldrake & Fox 1997: 190.