Towards a transformative hermeneutics of disengagement

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The question

One area of the scientific study of religion where hermeneutics has played a major role is certainly the interpretation of myths. Whether we are dealing with a psychological approach allowing us to have a peek into the mind of the believers or relying on a sociological method to describe the inner workings of a community, myths have been one of the primary sources of information for an entire field of study. The modern attempts at identifying the basic structure underlying religious phenomena or at reducing the behavior of the *homo religiosus* to a single principle has produced interesting results the moment myths became objects of inquiry. I insist on the term "object" as this notion presupposes an important change of perspective and attitude towards elements that are constitutive of any human culture. To some extent, myths have always been subjected to a form of hermeneutics by their believers. However, because myths are an integral part of their psychological, social and spiritual lives, believers are, so to speak, looking at the world *through* them. This is not the case for the scholar of religion who is looking *at* the myths he tries to make sense of.

The distinction between looking *at* something and looking *through* it is important to decide whether we are dealing with a hermeneutics of engagement or one that is bringing about a so-called objective knowledge. A hermeneutics of engagement is usually at work when we entertain an intimate connection, for example, with the rules of a language *while using that language*. A hermeneutics of disengagement dominates when it brings about a cognitive distance between a subject and such rules. The first type of hermeneutics has a short range because it is active only during the moment one is engaged in an action like communicating. In such a context, we are tacitly aware of the rules that regulate the

ways we encode an idea or an intention into a message understandable by our interlocutors. That kind of awareness is deactivated the moment we attend to other actions that have their own sets of rules, rules that will again be grasped in a more or less conscious manner.

The second type of hermeneutics has a much longer range as it could be used to probe the deeper structure of a language in order to generate what may be a basis for comparison among different languages. To use Michael Polanyi's explanation of our ways of knowing, a hermeneutics of disengagement is based on a focal awareness that isolates an object from the action it is meant to regulate (Polanyi, 1975: 33). It is a way of looking at things that allows us to have an understanding of how the parts of an instrument interact among each other. In other words, a focal awareness reveals the complexity of an object whereas a tacit awareness only informs us of how such an object behaves at its limits. For instance, the English word "computer," when taken as a single unit, invites us to explore its etymology, its semantic evolution, its connection with other languages, etc. whereas when it is used in a sentence like "My computer is broken," we only worry about whether its use is grammatically correct, that is, as a nominative singular noun requiring a verb conjugated in the third person singular. This is what is meant by the limits of an object as opposed to its inner structure which always reveals more than what the users of such object need to know.

It is precisely because of its potential to make sense of a wide variety of phenomena that the hermeneutics of disengagement has been privileged in the modern study of religions. More specifically, with regard to myths, it has opened a field of inquiry unknown even to those who believe and live by those myths. And if the latter had somehow formulated an objective understanding of the elements of the tradition they are engaged in, very often they have been disproved by the scholars practicing a hermeneutics of disengagement. What could be said about the origin of the Sanskrit language is a case in point. Many Hindus believe that it is a sacred language that eternally exists

whereas modern linguists are able to trace its human origin as well as its connections with other profane languages. But even those linguists who say that the sacred nature of Sanskrit is just a myth, they would nevertheless have to recognize that the belief in its divine origin adds a special resonance and even has an empowering effect when used in Hindu rituals or prayers. That affirmation finally brings me to the main question of the present paper.

The knowledge and depth of inquiry that is gained through a hermeneutics of disengagement inevitably bring about a loss in the transformative power of the object of inquiry. Simply put, paying too much attention to the ways we actualize a purpose makes us lose sight of that purpose. For example, a focal awareness on the rules of grammar while speaking causes the process of speaking itself to come to a standstill. Consequently, because a hermeneutics of disengagement brings about a state of inhibition of action, it is very often rejected by the believers for whom symbols are means to perform actions. The same is true for a hermeneutics of engagement whose conclusions can be used to censor the process of free inquiry as it was the case in the dispute between Galileo Galilei and the Catholic Church over the structure of the solar system. For the latter, the geocentric explanation of the universe was not so much to objectively understand that universe, but to reveal the order of things as intended by a higher authority. The question I would thus like to explore is whether it is possible to have the best of both worlds, namely, the possibility of having a deeper insight into the structure of our beliefs and myths without sacrificing their power of transformation. In other words, can a hermeneutics of disengagement be reconciled with a hermeneutics of engagement in order to have a transformative hermeneutics of disengagement?

Failed Attempts at Reconciliation

The first group of attempts at a reconciliation between the scientific discourses of the religious scholars and that of the believers with regard to the hermeneutics of myths can hardly be

characterized as failed since their purpose was explicitly to delegitimize the meaning religious people attributed to the symbols of their own tradition. This category of attempts culminated with Sigmund Freud's belief that religious symbols like the monotheistic god of the Jews are just illusions. These illusions were probably necessary to contain man's violent instincts before the arising of civilizations. But now that human beings have found ways, mainly through laws and civilized customs, to control those instincts, the final step towards social harmony should be done by rejecting all forms of religion in favor of science. According to Freud, that rejection should come through a reinterpretation of myths and dreams that would reveal the real sources of men's pulsions and distorted emotions. An example of such reinterpretation is the Greek myth of Oedipus to show the structure of the unhealthy relationships a child may entertain towards his mother and father, namely, a sexual desire for the former and jealousy towards the latter. This redefinition of traditional myths became the basis of the Freudian therapy better known as psychoanalysis. At this point, only the name of the myth is retained and its original meaning is fully occulted.

The Freudian reinterpretation of myths is thus a good example of a hermeneutics of disengagement inhibiting the potential of a religious discourse to generate meaning. This type of hermeneutics seems to have taken place exclusively in the Western world and started around the time of the European Renaissance. This is a period marked by interreligious violence, the rediscovery of Greek and Roman classical literature as well as the discovery of the new worlds. It followed an era in which Judaeo-Christian myths ruled over the lives of the majority of the people of Europe. It was felt that the narrative constituted by those myths had reached its life cycle. More specifically, what was underlying the development of this hermeneutics of disengagement was the desire to find a new basis for a social consensus, something that would replace the old consensus that evolved from the Judaeo-Christian worldview. The corner stone of that new consensus was the faculty of reason. Reason thus became the new generator of meanings

which were to reveal themselves through the various discourses of what came to be known as science. From this point, reason and science took over the task of eliminating any form of mythological thinking or ways of apprehending reality.

Modern scholarship did not always consider myths as archaic forms of thinking or as examples of pre-scientific discourses. Carl Jung, a Swiss psychiatrist and an early disciple of Sigmund Freud who broke rank with him on the question of the importance of our sexual impulses in the creation of myths, rather advocated the existence of a collective unconscious and the notion of archetypes. An archetype is a pattern of human behavior that has been inherited from our ancestors and which is stored as unconscious memories shared by the whole of humanity. Examples of archetype or archetypal figures are the mother, the father, the trickster and the hero. To be more precise, it is not the archetype itself that is passed on from one generation to the other, but rather their actualization into specific psychological and social environments. The complexity and the wide variety of human behavior are therefore reduced to a series of universal structures in a way similar to how the infinite variations of human speech could be presented as examples of a limited set of grammar rules.

The notion of archetypes as universal structures has found echo in many modern sciences ranging from anthropology to biology including linguistics and pedagogy. Irrespective of its success as a tool to explain the basics of human behavior or the inner workings of social phenomena, it nonetheless remains an example of a hermeneutics of disengagement. It is precisely because this notion has given rise to autonomous scientific discourses, whose primary function is to disconnect us from the raw data experiences, namely the myths and the rituals performed on the basis of those myths, that we are dealing with a failed attempt at reconciliation. Another important consequence of that failed attempt could be seen in the fact that any discourse that is interpreted by such a hermeneutics is perceived as merely symbolic and the true meaning of its constituents can only be seized and manipulated through another discourse. The language

of the gods not only is explained away, but it also has to be translated into a different language so that it may be of some use. It goes without saying that, as soon as one has mastered the latter, the former usually becomes obsolete.

Moreover, if one is not engaged in any form of psychological therapy or social engineering, the very experience of understanding the inner structure of a religious phenomenon, an experience that often brings joy and satisfaction, is sometimes sought for its own sake. To some extent, the experience of aloofness and detachment brought about the application of a hermeneutics of disengagement is the result a quasi-mystical endeavor that would explain why its advocates are so much engaged in the defense and promotion of their models of explanation. In short, a hermeneutics of disengagement finds its foundations in some form of commitment, be it the establishment of social harmony, the promotion of reason over faith, or simply the experience of understanding for its own sake as the French mathematician Henri Poincaré wrote in his book *Science and Methode* when discussing the purpose of scientific enquiry: "The scientist does not study nature because it is useful to do so. He studies it because he takes pleasure in it, and he takes pleasure in it because it is beautiful. […] Intellectual beauty, on the contrary, is self-sufficing, and it is for it, more perhaps than for the future good of humanity, that the scientist condemns himself to long and painful labours" (Poincaré, 1914: 22).

To consider any hermeneutics of disengagement as a type of commitment to the realization of a purpose implies that the distinction between such hermeneutics and that of engagement is only relative. With regard to myths, the task is therefore no longer to get rid of them, but rather to find which ones are appropriate for today's challenges and aspirations. This affirmation dovetails with the thoughts of the sociologist Émile Durkheim who said, after having defined scientific thinking as a refined form of religious thinking: "It thus appears natural that the latter will gradually recede in front of the former to the extent that it becomes more apt to fulfill its task" (Durkheim, 1985: 613). This statement may be

true if we reduce ancient myths exclusively to primitive or archaic attempts at understanding the natural world or archaic ways at regulating social structures. In this regard, Durkheim was of the opinion that the Declaration of Human Rights could be a substitute to religions in their role of regulating and transforming societies, an idea that is confirming itself more and more in the recent developments of the political discourse in the West. But are we to consider myths exclusively as pre-scientific knowledge or as regulators of primitive societies? If our answer to that question is negative, then the next questions are: Have we understood the real purpose of those ancient myths? Have we really taped into their transformative power? Is there a way to bring back to life humanity's ancient myths that were, so to speak, forced to lay dormant in the modern scientific theories and models of explanation? The belief that this is possible outside the circle of the traditional communities of believers leads me to introduce the next group of attempts at a reconciliation between a hermeneutics of disengagement and that of engagement.

Almost Successful Attempts at Reconciliation

While discussing Jung's notion of archetypes, we might have the impression that we have come close to a full acceptance of the meaning of religious myths as understood by their believers. This is partly due to the fact that Jung's hermeneutics gives a positive account of those myths as opposed to what a Freudian explanation would lead us to believe. However, we are still dealing with a failed attempt at a reconciliation on account of the fact that such a hermeneutics is producing a discourse that dominates that of the believers. That dominance or prioritization inevitably brings about, as alluded to above, an occultation of the myths as realities to be directly seized for what they are—some would say, to be seized by them—as opposed to something indirectly understood via a hermeneutic key.

To have a better insight into this phenomenon of occultation, one might consider the work of Joseph Campbell who coined the concept of monomyth, that is, the idea that says that all

mythical narratives of the world are variations of a single great story. To some extent, Campbell pushes to its limits the reductionist tendencies of any hermeneutics of disengagement. However, what this approach loses in terms of explanatory power on account of having the details of individual myths smudged into one picture, it gains in terms of motivation. Indeed, by saying that all the world mythologies are manifestations of men's destiny, Campbell is somehow inviting us through his hermeneutics to embark on a journey of self-fulfillment, something that he summarized in the following motto: "Follow your bliss."

Campbell's philosophy of life resonated deeply with the generation born after WWII and had a great influence in popular culture, for example, in the conception of the *Star Wars* saga featuring the journey of its hero Luke Skywalker. However, despite the success of this philosophy in exciting our interest in ancient myths, the true significance of the latter is never really explored because, not only are they being occulted by Campbell's hermeneutics, but also the hermeneutics itself is discarded once it has served its purpose which is to justify the "Follow your bliss" philosophy. What is therefore missing in this way of apprehending myths, and what makes it a failed attempt at reconciliation between the two types of hermeneutics, is a permanent connection with the myths no matter the nature of one's endeavor and aspirations. This is what the next group of attempts will try to remediate.

Let's introduce this group by quoting a passage from the book *Problèmes de vie spirituelle* (*Problems regarding the spiritual life*) written by Yves de Montcheuil, a Jesuit theologian who has been assassinated by the Nazi in 1944 on account of his faith. This passage summarizes a strategy of integrating ideas from other traditions whether religious, spiritual or philosophical, into the Christian way of life and aspirations. It runs as follows: "What my reflection will reveal to be conformed to the Christian ideal, this only will I consider as having an authentic value; I will accept what comes from outside only that which appears to me to be an explanation of what has perhaps remained hitherto implicit in the Christian ideal" (de Montcheuil, 1963: 221). From this passage, we

can see that the two types of hermeneutics are present, namely, the hermeneutics of disengagement in the process reflection and the hermeneutics of engagement in the fulfillment of the Christian ideal. We can also envisage the nature of the relation between the two: a hermeneutics of disengagement has to be regulated by the hermeneutics of engagement. Joseph Ratzinger, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI hinted at the same strategy, while recognizing the valuable contribution of the historical-philological approach for biblical exegesis, when he exhorted Catholic theologians to return to the practice of theology instead of constantly formulating theologically insignificant hypotheses (Ratzinger, 2011: 8). In short, a hermeneutics of disengagement is good in so far as it fuels a hermeneutics of engagement.

This relation between the two types of hermeneutics requires a constant shift of attention between the objects of the hermeneutics of disengagement and the purpose of the hermeneutics of engagement. It also means that the former is subsidiary to the latter. Although such a relation may be viewed as an improvement from the previous group of attempts where we become alienated from the sources our aspirations, it nevertheless remains that, on account of the fact that the products of any hermeneutics of disengagement have acquired a subsidiary status, it limits their potential of transformation. In certain situations, it may even impose a reinterpretation of their significance as those products are no longer seen for what they are, but rather for what they contribute to the fulfillment of a foreign purpose. This would be a partial occultation as something is retained in the objects under consideration while something else is discarded. In other words, some details of, let's say, a myth or a symbol is considered significant, while others are simply overlooked.

We have a similar situation with Mircea Eliade's phenomenology whose purpose is the promotion of a "new humanism" or a "new Renaissance" (Allen, 1982: 33). For Eliade, that new purpose and the hermeneutics of disengagement, that is, the various instruments developed by the modern study of religion, should enable us to rediscover the aspirations of the believers

whose myths and symbols are the objects of his phenomenology. Needless to say, Eliade was highly criticized for it by his colleagues as it also limited the range and potential of those instruments so that when Eliade is using, for example, the Freudian psychoanalytical model, he cannot claim that he is using it as a Freudian psychoanalyst would. Paraphrasing Robert D. Baird, one of the critics of Eliade, I would say that from the contributions of other specialized disciplines, he only retains those that conform to what his phenomenology requires, and by integrating them into his own approach, he ignores the relative character, the specific hypotheses, the internal limitations specific to other approaches, whether they are ethnological, functionalist, psychological, sociological, etc. (Allen, 1982: 83). But such criticism did not bother Eliade as he was convinced that the exclusive use of the scientific approaches of his colleagues only betrays the aspirations of the believers whose traditions are being studied and that his phenomenology is the path the science of religion should follow if we want to be liberated from the alienating materialist and pragmatic culture in which we live.

What de Montcheuil and Eliade suggested as ways of integrating foreign elements into a specific ideal is nothing new in the history of religions. Both approaches are examples of the process of inculturation, that is, when the symbols of other traditions are redefined in order to support the tradition one is committed to. There is nothing wrong about it, but this is not the answer to our original question since we are still falling short of having an approach that fully acknowledges the specificity of the symbols we are trying to interpret. It is possible to know how far we have failed in our task by the degree of abstraction a symbol has been subjected to, as opposed to having it reveal itself in all its concreteness. In fact, what is missing is simply the inability to pinpoint the source or the intuition that generated a symbol or a myth in the first place. Once we are able to do so, we can then tap into its transformative power and understand, among other things, why its narrative defies common sense logic, so-called scientific

facts, the constraints related to space and time, etc. An approach which allows to do just that is what I would like to suggest next.

A Full Reconciliation Between Understanding and Commitment

To recapitulate the previous discussion, what we are looking for is not an explanation of a myth that forces it to fade away from our field of consciousness, nor an integration that reduces it to a subsidiary status to support a foreign aspiration, but rather an approach that would make sure that we remain fully aware of its existence, that we are constantly confronted and challenged by the ways it presents itself to us. In a somewhat metaphorical way, I would say that we have to adopt a state of mind that should allow myths to speak to us, to let them lead us to the source that brought them into existence and, consequently, to give them the opportunity to transform us.

I would suggest that the state of mind that would unlock the transformative potential of a myth is based on what I describe as a double awareness. It consists in the ability to be fully aware of two levels of reality at the same time, that is, the meaning of something like a myth as well as the concrete manifestation of that myth. This ability is not unheard of as it is cultivated in such practices as the Zen meditation on a *kōan* or any of the Hindu yogas based on the constant awareness of the existence of an ultimate reality, be it abstract like the *nirguṇa* Brahman or concrete as revealed in all its *saguṇa* manifestations. We can also think of the contemplative exercise based on the "I-Thought," as advocated by the Hindu saint Sri Ramana Maharshi or the simple instruction: "When you walk, know that you walk, when you eat, know that you eat, etc."

What these practices all have in common is the fact that we are forcing a reality that is usually perceived in a tacit manner to become an object of awareness. Since we still have to maintain an awareness of what normally allows us to interact with the world we live in, we end up having to keep at the same level of awareness two realities that have a tendency to organize themselves into a cognitive hierarchy as described by Polanyi's model alluded to earlier. If these practices have shown results in

their respective spiritual contexts, there is no reason why they should not be fruitful when it comes to our encounter with religious myths. I would like to finish the present article by presenting a few examples of how the practice of double awareness may lead to a reconciliation between a hermeneutics of engagement and that of disengagement.

The first myth or narrative I would like to consider is the story of Arjuna's encounter with Lord Kṛṣṇa that gave rise to the Bhagavad-Gītā. In this relatively short episode of the Mahābhārata, the son of Pāṇḍu and his charioteer are engaged in a conversation where the latter acts as the spiritual teacher of the former. While all our attention is on the profound teachings of Lord Kṛṣṇa, a crucial detail of the story may be overlooked, a detail that could have a tremendous effect on how that story can transform us. That detail occurs at the very beginning of the encounter, namely, just after Arjuna asked Lord Kṛṣṇa to bring his chariot in the middle of the two armies about to engage each other. The passage goes as follows:

When Arjuna thus saw his kinsmen face to face in both lines of battle, he was overcome by grief and despair and thus he spoke with a sinking heart. "When I see all my kinsmen, Kṛṣṇa, who have come here on this battlefield, life goes from my limbs and the sink, and my mouth is sear and dry; a trembling overcomes my body, and my hair shudders in horror; my great bow Gandiva falls from my hands, and the skin of my flesh is burning; I am no longer able to stand, because my mind is whirling and wandering" (1: 28–30).

What Arjuna is experiencing at that very moment is a state of inhibition of the action caused by an informational deficit. In short, he no longer knows what to do and, as it is in the nature of man to act, his mental state and even his body are adversely affected by it. This reaction of anguish accompanied by physiological symptoms is known for being the cause of many stress-related diseases like stomach ulcers, especially when the state of inhibition of action is not resolved. No matter how unpleasant this state may be, it nevertheless remains that it is a

necessary passage for any experience of transformation, an experience that is one of liberation and revelation. In the case of Arjuna, it is when he finally realizes the true nature of Kṛṣṇa, more specifically, when he sees face to face his divine form so hard to see, something that even the gods in heaven wish to experience.

As such, Arjuna's experience reveals a very important feature of human nature and of the process of transformation. In more general terms, it is also the structure of any experience of creativity. We can affirm this principle on account of a hermeneutics of disengagement since it may be considered as one of those universal laws to which many human experiences may be reduced. In fact, its range of explanation transcends the limits of individual experiences to include the dynamic of social transformation as well. When the Hebrews fled Egypt under the leadership of Moses, they also found themselves in a state of inhibition of action.

Indeed, soon after they left the land of the Pharaoh, they wandered about aimlessly in the desert until they reached the shore of the Red Sea. When Pharaoh decided to send his armies to pursue them, the Hebrews ended up being stuck between the advancing soldiers and the sea with nowhere to go. In great fright they cried out to Yahweh, the God of the Hebrews and complained to Moses: "Were there no burial places in Egypt that you had to bring us out here to die in the desert? Why did you do this to us? Why did you bring us out of Egypt? Did we not tell you this in Egypt, when we said, 'Leave us alone. Let us serve the Egyptians?' Far better for us to be the slaves of the Egyptians than to die in the desert" (Exodus, 14: 11–12). To the Hebrews who are here assuming the role of Arjuna, Moses, being comparable to Kṛṣṇa, answers: "Fear not! Stand your ground, and you will see the victory the LORD will win for you today. These Egyptians whom you see today you will never see again. The LORD himself will fight for you; you only have to keep still" (Exodus, 14: 13–14).

The rest of the story is well-known. Yahweh told the Hebrews to stop crying and ordered them to move forward. Moses was also ordered to lift up his staff and outstretch his arm over the

sea. The sea then split in two allowing the Hebrews to cross it on dry land. It remained open long enough for all the Hebrews to safely reach the other shore. At this point, Yahweh ordered Moses to stretch out again his arm and the sea flowed back to its normal depth to cover "the chariots and the charioteers of Pharaoh's whole army which had followed the Israelites into the sea. Not a single one of them escaped" (Exodus, 14: 28). The Hebrews were finally freed, they were, so to speak, reborn as a nation as this story relates one of their founding events and is retold every year during the feast of the Passover as a way to remember where they come from and to where they, as an entire nation, are heading or what they are aspiring to.

Considering the two stories or myths, we may be tempted in retaining only their common element which is here the principle of inhibition of action as a precursor to the experience of creativity while discarding the narratives that embody that principle. This is what we would do if we were to rely only on a hermeneutics of disengagement. However, the two myths are meant to produce different results. In the case of the story of Arjuna, it is related to an individual experience of transformation while, in the case of the Hebrews, we are dealing with the founding event of a nation. In order for the knowledge extracted from a hermeneutics of disengagement to reveal the fruits for which an interpreted myth was conceived of in the first place, it needs to be coupled with a hermeneutics of engagement which consists essentially in accepting the reality of that myth at its face value and not as a symbolic manifestation of an abstract principle. The latter is, however, not forgotten and it is precisely its juxtaposition with the realities of the myth that activates the process of transformation. One sign that this process is active is when believers seek to know more about the details of a myth, when commentaries about those details are being generated, etc. Such an interest in the realities of a myth is what is meant by a transformative hermeneutics of disengagement.

The next step in our exploration of a transformative hermeneutics of disengagement could be to see how the

reconciliation between the two hermeneutics taken individually plays itself out in specific cases, whether individual or social. For example, does an awareness of a universal principle, as revealed by a hermeneutics of disengagement, make sure that a myth always remains fruitful or that the believers are never using a myth for a purpose for which it was not created? Like a fire that burns when we are too close and get cold, when too far, how does the dynamic of reconciliation between a hermeneutics of engagement and that of disengagement maintain us at the right distance?

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