

# THE RECOGNITION OF RELIGION

## Archeological Diagnosis and Implicit Theorizing

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### INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Students of religion have many good reasons to avoid the domain of prehistory. On the one hand, the very term “prehistoric religion” evokes a host of clichés associated with less successful typologies and evolutionary approaches to religion, all of which seem to imply that Paleolithic and Neolithic populations shared special *kinds* or *modes* of religion that could be characterized as “prehistoric.” Furthermore, prehistoric artifacts fail to produce the kind of verifiable semantic input that students of religion are trained to examine before trying to make any substantial claims about religion. Although the apparent innocence of the term “prehistory” would seem to lie in the stress on methods of access—a period in the past only accessible through mute archaeological data, not through linguistic primary or secondary sources that would allow a cross-checking of the data—it is easy to demonstrate how this lack of access has been transferred from the shortcomings of the academic subject to the object of study. The term “prehistoric” often implies much more than the absence of texts. It suggests cultural illiteracy, a lack of complex modes of mediation and signification, cultural invariance, and ecological constraint. Instead of calling attention to the fact that prehistoric societies did not leave behind documents that allow us to enter into cultural subtleties and diversities, some scholars prefer to present them as perfectly legible, as more or less analogous and transparent. These populations have thus been approached as if they were unaffected by the causality of past events. By these means, a universal, eternally present society takes shape, perfectly reflected and balanced by the French-Russian philosopher A. Kojève’s Hegelian vision of a post-historical world, inhabited by a reconciled, universal consciousness (Kojève 1967 [1947]). Beyond history, either before or after, everything is transparent and stays the same.

We need not spend much time browsing through recent academic publications to find examples of such etiologies. For instance, the Italian archaeologist Emmanuel Anati proposed in 1994 that “[t]he real tower of Babel came into being when the hunting and gathering era approached the end” (Anati 1994: 136) and that “a step towards future understanding of rock art is to recognize in it some fundamental elements of man’s cognitive dynamics” (Anati 1994: 132). This way of reasoning leads to the absurd conclusion that populations who leave behind a sparse and expedient archaeological record cannot simultaneously possess a complex ideational culture (Gargett 1999: 82). I take it that such assumptions are usually avoided by contemporary students of religion, but the fact that they still prevail elsewhere is noteworthy for quite different reasons. Examples of “bad archaeology” need not only serve as a methodological premonition, but could also inform the study of religion in positive terms.

Along with more skeptical dismissals, certain prejudices, stereotypes, and biases in the study of prehistoric culture converge to form a rhetorical theme or *topos*. According to this

topos, prehistoric remains are simultaneously held to 1) constitute a self-contained language and 2) to obscure the complexity of past societies.<sup>1</sup> This alteration between opacity and transparency also characterizes conceptions of divination as well as of quasi-verbal activities, such as glossolalia, which are either perceived as incomprehensible mumbo-jumbo or held to reproduce the perfect language of gods. We can even take into consideration the contemporary status of aphasia in synchronic linguistics as a potential source to the essence of human language. In all these instances, the degree of defectiveness (or the amount of noise) seems to facilitate the access to essences.

The affinity between archaeological diagnosis and other hermeneutical strategies is symptomatic of a cultural self-reflexivity that tries to comprehend human culture to the same extent as it lends itself to insight into typical traits of human culture. Besides constituting an interesting field of inquiry in its own right, such activities may inform new approaches to religion in prehistoric archaeology by presenting new cases of religionizing. In other words, the practice of the archaeologist becomes a clue to the way in which human societies, past as well as present, develop sustained narratives about their own past.

I shall try to illustrate these preliminary assumptions with a few examples, but first let me emphasize that I am neither trained to assess archaeological data, nor to approach religion on the basis of cognitive science. What I wish to do here is rather, at the risk of seeming pretentious, addressing some general issues related to the nature and scope of religious studies. That which interests me in this regard is not so much the cognitive preconditions for religion, but rather the recognition of religion as a pretext to such reflections. Even if a dialogue between religious studies and prehistoric archaeology does little to promote the decoding of actions and artifacts, a decoding of preconceived and implicit notions about religion in prehistoric archaeology may prove helpful in developing new heuristic tools in the academic study of religion.

## 1. THE CASE OF TWO AURIGNACIAN LION MEN

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<sup>1</sup> In an article intended as a survey of “Neolithic Religion,” published in the frequently consulted *Encyclopedia of Religion*, D. Srejovi assumes that the religious life in Neolithic cultures was varied and dynamic, but that wordless archeological remains do not allow us to give an accurate definition of this variability:

“Lack of evidence that might help us to define each of these religions does not justify generalization and neglect.” (p. 353)

In accordance with this view, the adjective “prehistoric” could be understood as a particular limitation of access rather than a particular *kind* of culture, but the term still evokes such associations. Archaeological remains are used in the study of extinct religions that have not left any traces in written sources just as field data are used to define religions only accessible through observation and participation. But there is no “religion of the field,” nor does one expect an “archeological” or “philological” religion to emerge from the study of religious artifacts or religious texts. The adjective “prehistoric,” on the other hand, invites a tendency to confuse the prehistory of a particular culture with the prehistory of cultural diversity on the whole, as if the development of writing was the underlying reason for this diversity. Given this terminological indistinctness, it is worth noting how Srejovic, elsewhere in the already quoted article, characterizes the Paleolithic, Mesolithic, and Neolithic periods:

“Since in the Paleolithic and Mesolithic periods, not only everyday activities but complex religious beliefs, cults, rituals, and probably myths were also associated with stone, this ‘Neolithic Revolution’ may be defined, from the point of view of the history of religions, as a gradual process of the desacralization of stone and the sacralization of earth.” (p. 353)

Amongst the earliest evidence of figurative representation is the so-called *Löwenmensch* from Hohlenstein-Stadel, an ivory therianthrope (showing both felid and human traits) found deep in a Swabian cave during excavations in the late 1930s. While yielding radiocarbon dates between 31,000 to 32,000 years, it can—along with other artifacts, such as the bone pipes from Isturitz and the paintings from the Chauvet cave—be placed in a period and region known to present the earliest, most concrete evidence for cultural modernity. In a letter to the journal *Nature* (December 2003), Nicholas J. Conard recently announced the discovery of a second *Löwenmensch* at another Swabian site, the Hohle Fels Cave. It was found in Aurignacian deposits representing substantial habitation sites dated to 31,000-33,000 years. Despite apparent differences in style and size, Conard still assigns these Swabian figurines to the same cultural group and/or local tradition. “The occupants of Hohle-Fels [...] and Hohlenstein-Stadel,” he points out, “must have been members of the same cultural group and shared beliefs and practices connected with therianthrope images of felids and humans.” I consider these observations perfectly accurate to the extent that such figurines may have something in common in terms of cultural continuity. What I find less convincing, on the other hand, is Conard’s assumption regarding “shared beliefs and practices.” I see no reason why beliefs and practices should remain unchanged and undifferentiated just because their material extensions or motivations have remained the same, and even less so since the figurines in question could be separated by at least two millennia. Members of the same society may very well share certain beliefs, but does this always imply that the same beliefs are contained in the use of shared forms?

The next step in Conard’s argumentation is even more troubling, as it implies that the Aurignacian populations in southwestern Germany not only shared the same beliefs but that these beliefs can be identified and categorized: “Lewis-Williams, Porr and others have stressed the importance of mixed representations of animals and humans as *evidence* (my emphasis) for shamanism [---] The discovery of a second *Löwenmensch* lends support to the hypothesis that Aurignacian people practiced a form of shamanism.” Other examples of mixed representations from the Upper Paleolithic, such as the so-called “sorcerer” from the cave of Les Trois-Frères in France, have been interpreted in a similar vein, either as supernatural beings or as shamans who communicate with them (Mithen 1996: 176).



The *Löwenmensch* from Hohlenstein-Stadel.  
C14 date 31-32 kyr. Excavated by Wetzel and Völzing in 1939



The “new” *Löwenmensch* from Hohle-Fels. C14 date 31-33 kyr.  
Excavated by Conard and Uerpman 2002.

These conjectures are characteristic of typical top-down approaches to prehistoric culture. The top-down approach consists of attaching a familiar, preferably ethnographic narrative to prehistoric remains. Ideally, such a narrative may form a matrix from which valuable propositions can be derived, which in their turn can lead to discoveries of new data (Bouissac 2004: 1). In the case of shamanism, however, the critical gain seems rather limited. Firstly, I fail to see how mixed representations of animals and humans can be taken as *evidence* of shamanism. Secondly, the notion of shamanism as a particular *kind* of religion has caused so much confusion and dissent in contemporary scholarship that it runs the risk of obstructing rather than promoting critical thought about religion. As implied by this mode of analysis, the therianthropes from Swabia do not dictate any reconsideration nor raise any interesting questions, nor do they throw doubt (or light) on assumptions, they just become enmeshed in a narrative that already exists in the minds of scholars.

What the therianthropes clearly do exemplify, on the other hand, is the ability to think and represent entities without referential value. Shamanism (whatever that term may designate) can certainly inform or be informed by such abilities, but this does not render the representations themselves more intrinsically “shamanistic” than representations of Mickey Mouse or the Minotaur. Instead of trying to guess what such hybrid creatures might represent in an imagined culture, we should rather start by considering the data at hand, emphasizing the fact that they reveal representational abilities underpinning our present notion of religion in all its diversity. Regardless of whether we assume that therianthropes were thought to exist or not, it is implausible to suggest that they were considered ontologically compatible with felids and humans. If they were not thought to exist, we must still acknowledge the fact that they were conceivable and fit for representation, capacities which at least define minimal criteria of religion. Accordingly, in order to recognize therianthropes as possible markers of religion, the lack of referentiality, in spite of all the possible beliefs that such logical operators may induce, is a sufficient criterion of recognition.

This approach to prehistoric culture is more closely akin to the bottom-up approach, which consists of “building up increasingly complex patterns from limited but precise information” (Bouissac 2004: 1). I have borrowed this model from the semiotician Paul Bouissac, who recently proposed a limited set of intrinsic and extrinsic criteria of symbolicity as a means of assigning plausible symbolic functions to prehistoric artifacts (relative quantity of information in terms of shape, structure, density, etc.). These criteria are partly achieved by approaching information, in accordance with its definition in information theory, as a measure of uncertainty or unexpectedness. Bouissac understands the archaeological implications of this approach as follows: “If there are obvious discrepancies between some features of the artifact and what would be expected, then the information value of this artifact may increase to the point that it becomes unclassifiable because it does not fit anywhere.” (4) Although Bouissac’s model covers a much broader field than that of religion, it seems reasonable to assume that some aspects of symbolicity (some symbolic rather than strictly practical aspects) are at work in most religious actions.

In contrast to the bottom-up approach proposed by Bouissac, the top-down approach to religion discussed above is in fact vaguely reminiscent of a religious approach to the past. It assigns beliefs and narratives to remains of the past, it evokes images of ideal states in the past (shamanism, the Heroic Age, the Dreaming) despite being coined by the present and thus in a state of constant change.

Although figurative representations may have existed earlier in other regions, it is still striking that they first appear extensively in the archaeological record alongside the earliest evidence for mixed representations of animals and humans. This means that there are no

examples of pictorial representations considerably predating representations that violate the referential properties of figurative art, no visible passage from figurative realism to representations of the surreal, but that these abilities seem to go hand in hand. Needless to say, the disposition of such abilities is not a sufficient criterion for the emergence of religious behavior. Partly because the motivation to externalize entities without referential value is not a necessary consequence of their disposition, partly because the modes in which such entities are externalized and mediated should be of no less importance for defining them as religious. The purported religiosity of such modes and motivations, I submit, depends just as much on their association with socially constrained behavior and acts of reiteration. This is precisely why the appearance of a second *Löwenmensch* should allow us to recognize religious behaviour.

The emphasis (or over-emphasis) on categories such as “belief” and “the supernatural” has led many students of religion to assign more value to a volatile interiority than to the observable effects of religious action. Let us recall what Roy Rappaport so convincingly stressed in his last book, namely that the efficacy of a rite apparently has less to do with the belief in supernatural agency than with its immediate effects and acceptance in social life (Rappaport 1999: 119-123). It seems consistent that this insight should involve the discussion of religion as a whole. I observe, parenthetically, that the first extant discussion of the term *religio* in Roman Antiquity was clearly marked by the refutation of widespread beliefs (*superstitio*) as opposed to a scrupulous attitude towards the cult of the gods.<sup>2</sup> Belief certainly qualifies as a salient trait of religious behavior, but it would be both exaggerated and misleading to claim that religious behavior is dependent upon it.

## 2. TOWARDS AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF EXHAUSTION AND REUSE

I have so far considered a few examples of prehistoric representations as well as different means of identifying these representations as markers of religion. But what about the recognition of religious action? If a necessary yet insufficient quality of religion is to mediate and safeguard representations of entities without referential value, then the higher category from which such processes could be derived can be tentatively defined as *the mutual reiteration and counteraction of expediency*. This assumption calls for some clarification.

Needless to say, religion involves much more than notions and mental dispositions. Religion incites verbal and kinetic actions, not only expressions of the notions that induced these actions or the notions that they engender. If we are to move from notions to intentional actions, we also need to address the conditions on which such actions are recognized as more or less religious to an outsider. A possible point of reference in this regard is the category of “expediency.” Expediency signifies the quality of being suited to a particular end or purpose. If this suitability is less obvious, if the quality implies redundancy or unwarranted obscurity, it will either be defined as inexpedient, as being insufficiently analyzed by the observer, or (especially if it seems tenacious) as being superseded by the motivation of expediency. Think, for instance, of the arbitrary relation between a ritual action and its anticipated result. It is obvious that rituals *do* have results (such as changing someone’s social status), but they are seldom kinetically or linguistically suited to that purpose in terms of expediency, i.e. in terms of economy, iconicity, clarity, brevity, etc.

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<sup>2</sup> Cicero, *De natura deorum*, II, 28.

Religious practice can neither be understood by mere observation, nor necessarily through an elementary knowledge of the linguistic and social reality in which it is enacted, because it typically explores and reiterates the self-explanatory properties of expediency as well as the arbitrary rules governing other fields of social action. Religious practice submits to a system of meta-rules, the circumstantial meaning of which can only be communicated to other fields of social action through exegesis.

The issue can be clarified by turning to another field of strictly regulated social behavior, that of military radio communication. In a series of general instructions offered to personnel serving on UN missions, we recognize instructions vaguely comparable to those offered to a ritual participant: “avoid excessive calling and unofficial voice procedures.” Yet the differences are just as striking: “make your message brief but precise,” “break the message into sensible passages with pauses between.” We do not expect the instructions offered to a ritual participant to contain remarks on the brevity and comprehensibility of the performance. The ritual participant cannot decide how things should be said or done, because these things are dictated by tradition. Even if a traditional system of codification is understood to preserve certain messages intact as they pass through time, communicative economy is often considered a potential threat to the durability of the message. In the case of radio communication, on the other hand, durability is not an issue at all. The message does not have to be repeated if the addressee has received and understood it (signaled by the procedure word WILCO). Accordingly, while military radio communication is so explicit and transparent that it makes everyday communication seem almost obscure, liturgical language is sometimes so implicit and obsolete (even to the inner circle of participants) that it does not seem to serve a communicative purpose at all.

In so far as prehistoric archaeology presents direct traces of such operations, they often fall into either of the two following categories: 1) the exhaustion of expedient things and 2) the reuse of inexpedient things. These categories respond fairly well to the processes by means of which the historian Krzysztof Pomian explains how certain artifacts, due to an exceptionally high exchange value and an exceptionally low utility value, finally become detached from economic circulation and turn into so called “semiophores” (Pomian 1988). Examples of the first category are the widespread treatments of expedient grave goods, cases of pottery deliberately broken and deposited in a highly structured manner, etc. An example of the second category is the reuse of Menhirs in Southern Brittany (Bradley 2002: 36ff), or the mortuary monuments from Neolithic Balloy, Northern France, which seem to copy attributes of domestic buildings belonging to an earlier and completely different cultural setting. Although these and similar examples of exhaustion and reuse in the archaeological record have already been discussed at length by Richard Bradley in his book *The Past in Prehistoric Societies*, I wish to lay more stress on the mutuality and specific religious significance of such actions, not least because they, once again, seem so closely akin to the work of the contemporary archaeologist.

By employing more or less explicit methods of discrimination, archaeologists seem to transcribe traces of religious practice as the *least expected* traces of human actions in the past, always opting for, in a decreasing order of expectation, the first members of the following dichotomies: non-patterned vs. patterned, natural vs. cultural, expedient vs. inexpedient. It follows that the most expected traces are non-patterned, while the least expected ones are patterned, cultural, and inexpedient. As implied by this method of discrimination, the archeological excavation in itself responds to this final order of human behavior, for how else could we categorize a systematic recollection of human remains, submitting itself to meta-rules no longer inscribed in the excavated material, violating and reiterating the self-



explanatory properties of the material by transferring it to a museum. Not only does the genealogy of the museum in the West lead all the way back to the temples and tombs of the Ancient World, but there are also early, even prehistoric examples of excavations and reinventions of artifacts that evoke religious notions in the scholarly mind, simply because they cannot be defined as “archaeological” in strictly academic terms (e.g. echoes of the Neolithic treatment of skulls in Ugaritic epic [Margalit 1983]). Accordingly, while contemporary archaeological sense-making strategies seem to perpetuate strategies shared by all human populations, they cannot be kept separate from the religiosity that archaeologists recognize in their records. Let us once more recall the Ciceronian understanding of *religio*, not only as an action withstanding excessive beliefs, but also as a scrupulous recollection of transmitted instructions. To reassemble artifacts from the past in an archaeological context could thus become a fitting metaphor for religion as a whole.

To sum up, although religion is often understood to be induced by beliefs, certain contexts and actions could easily be recognized as religious without the slightest access to direct expressions of such beliefs: affirmations of redundancy, parasitic appropriations and semiotizations of social rules, etc. Neither of these intuitive characteristics of religion implies a belief in the supernatural. Even if scholars as well as members of religious communities maintain that belief in the supernatural is essential, that it *defines* religion, this does not prevent people from behaving in religious ways for aesthetic reasons, out of respect for friends and family, out of loyalty to the state, or in order to gain some political advantage. If people chose to behave in these ways for so many different reasons, does it really make sense to identify religion by selecting a purported and contingent outcome of this behavior? When we define a field of social action, it seems counter-productive to look for characteristics that would leave similar actions undefined. Such as: “they seem to be dancing, but I can’t hear the music.” This being said, I would cautiously propose, as a minimal trait of recognition, that religion *constitutes a field of social action in which the self-explanatory properties of expediency and referentiality, as well as other fields of social action, are intentionally explored, reiterated, and counteracted.*

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