

About “The Using Value” of Religion in the Academic Studies

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Abstract The text was elaborated after some debate about the usefulness of academic study of religions in the Religions and Ideologies Research Seminar which took place in Iași and also by participating in la **Summer Contact Session «Paradigms of Cohabitation, Tolerance and Interreligious Dialogue»**. The present study aims to analyse three scenarios for the academic study of religion in the modern context. Basically, we want to show that regardless of the manner of approaching the religious element (the foundation of all natural sciences according to O. Spengler, a variation in a mental computerized construction, based on the theories of IP Culiănu, a complete science encompassing fundamental changes that can operate thanks to “creative hermeneutics”, according to M. Eliade) there are sufficient reasons to believe that the academic study of religion has an “use value”. Although no spectacular mutations would be obtained at cognitive and behavioural level, the simple religious familiarity and knowledge of the religious field allows a more profound approach of reality. Moreover, the academic study of religion could offer young people the chance to discover, know and respect the other person’s values.

Keywords The crisis of modernity • Faustian spirit • Proximity principle • The principle of magic • The principle of remoteness • Symbolic deficit • Religiousness • Morphological revolution • Mind game • “Use value”

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1 Culture Crisis and the Study Religion

To concern oneself with the importance or the lack of importance of studying religion nowadays in the academic environment—or outside it—might seem outmoded to some. They might ask themselves, naturally: *what is the point in wasting our time with such questions when present-day science and technology succeed in providing the answer to many of the human being's mysteries?* This could be the view taken by those educated under the sign of modern science and technology. In our turn, we ask: *could solving scientific and technological enigmas be the only reason of being for some academic fields?* And in these circumstances, what is the status and the rationale of those fields dealing with the study of religion?

Certainly, things are much more complex in practice and they cannot be solved by using simplistic patterns, just with questions and answers. Philosophers,¹ historians, anthropologists, sociologists point, each in their own way, to a certain crisis of the (post)modern world. Gianni Vattimo, for example, calls such a society in crisis a *transparent society*. Its roots would be in “the present-day crisis of the unitary conception of history” (Karl Popper, for example, said that a scientific theory should not claim to state a definitive truth. Instead, it should be subject to criticism and permanent adjustment. The conclusion is that any scientific knowledge proposes and deals with relative truths. This tendency, opposing universalist discourses and omniscient claims, is also present in the case of philosophers such as Michel Foucault or Jacques Derrida (Vattimo 1995, p. 8). One of the symptoms of this transparent society would be the installation of a relative chaos, where important roles are played by information and communication.²

Amongst others, the models promoted by training and education institutions are also responsible for this situation. It is enough, for instance, to take a look at the curricula of a few Romanian middle-education institutions and we'll notice a decrease of the number of hours allotted for the study of subjects such as philosophy, logic, psychology. Some subjects are missing almost completely. Ethnology, anthropology, the history of religions seem to be rather exotic, being completely unfamiliar subjects for aspiring students of the humanity courses at University.

In higher education, the situation is more nuanced: although there exists an offer from the humanity faculties, that is study modules are proposed for undergraduate

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²In the context of modernity, some authors point to a crisis of reason. Thus, Jürgen Habermas, in his *Theory of Communicative Action* proposes a real dialogue between individuals, based on common argumentation principles. The American philosopher Richard Rorty, in an essay suggestively titled *Hoffnung statt Erkenntnis (Hope in Place of Knowledge)* proves to be a supporter of *critical* discussion. This, he author claims, is much more important to knowledge than researching the ultimate, absolute truth.

and graduate studies—BA and MA (interpretation theory and practices, Christian philosophy, anthropology and ethnology, multicultural studies etc.), the number of prospective students showing interest in them is, with few exceptions, very low. This is due both to the poor level of training and information achieved in middle education, as well as to the low use the labour market has for specialists from these fields. As an example, the only specialities in the wide domain of social and humanistic studies that are being sought-after and have become fashionable in the academic environment of Iași are those that also have and (additional) practical component. That is to say psychology and social work, political studies, international relations, social communication, public relations and, to a lesser extent, sociology. By far the studies most sought-after in the academic environment in Iași and in the country are Law and Economics.

In a market oversaturated with accountants and lawyers, the Romanian student continues to attend the courses of Economics and Law. Why? Probably due to a certain (self)nurtured pragmatic spirit and not necessarily due to a calling. This clearly shows that, hidden behind choices that have nothing to do with the demands of the labour market, with the law of supply and demand, lies the profile of an entire institutional mechanism whose primary aim is to provide immediate practical skills and not cultural and moral training for the youth.

In any case, culture and the classic education model are seen as an outmoded ideal. How did we get into this situation? What is happening with religion and with its study in the present-day context? These are questions that have received all manner of answers. We shall dwell in the following lines on some explanatory scenarios.

2 Faustian Spirit, the Decadence of Science and the Rebirth of Religiousness

In an admirable work, with the enticing title *The Decline of the West*, published at the beginning of the 20th century, Oswald Spengler tried to identify the specific data for man’s historical and cultural evolution. The *organicist model* provided the author with an important support for advocating his ideas concerning the evolution of modern science and knowledge, as well as for outlining the corresponding tendencies.

The assumptions are as unexpected as possible: “*there is no Natural science without a precedent Religion*” (Spengler 1996, p. 522)—the author writes—because, in a way similar to “every myth and every religious belief, every critical science is based on an inner reality; its notions have different structures and sonority, without being different in principle. All the objections brought to religion from natural sciences also concern the latter. (...) The phrase «Man created God in his own image» is valid for every historical religion and is not less valid for every physical theory, however firm its reputed basis of fact” (Spengler 1996, p. 523).

In essence, Spengler's theory attempts to show that every religion and every science is dominated by the spirit and the principles of the age in which it appeared and developed. Thus, Antiquity would correspond to the *principle of proximity*, that would translate into researching the visible being. On an artistic level, this principle found its manifestation in the aesthetic symbol embodied in the *nude statue*. It is not by accident that in Ancient Greece the Gods had anthropomorphic faces and representations, sharing human destinies and living close to humans. For the Ancient Greek it was impossible to represent an abstract God, with no visible form. It is precisely these religious representations that were the starting point for what we could call "knowledge of nature" in Antiquity.

The model is repeated across space and eras. The Arab culture would have the *magic principle*. This would have made possible the birth of alchemy "with its ideas of mysterious substances like the «philosophical mercury» which is neither a material nor a property but by magic can transmute one metal into another" (Spengler 1996, p. 524). In architecture, this principle took the shape of the mosque and of the arabesque.

Whereas the Ancient Greek wished to know the visible and the proximity, and the Arab dealt with the research of the magical things in this world, modern man is more sensitive to what is remote and invisible. Why? Because the very evolution of religious ideas, beliefs and representations went from the *concrete* (it is not by accident that we talk about hierophanies and divine apparitions in certain times) towards the *abstract*. Christianity, it seems, had an important role in this.

Gradually, we, modern humans, have emptied divinity from any shape, placing it in the transcendent realm of abstractions and pure contents. This shift in perception and paradigm is captured in famous phrases such as *deus otiosus* or *God is dead!* Religion itself took on a special character: *it gradually went from the sphere of feeling to that of philosophy and knowledge*. Today, for instance, we offer subject matters such as the history of religions, the sociology of religions, the philosophy of religions in order to gain knowledge at *scientific, abstract level* about aspects that in the past used to belong especially to the spiritual practice.

Being built around the *principle of remoteness and the infinite*, modern Western man's thought and representations aspire to penetrate the unknown, the invisible. We mention here the research in molecular genetics, quantum physics, superior mathematics, the abstractizations in art etc. All proclaim one way or another that "our will for domination is above nature. *This is Faustian*. However, from this point of view miracles appear to us as exceptional from the laws of «nature»" (Spengler 1996, p. 539).

If all scientific and thought models expressed, essentially, the principles of religious models specific to their time, we wouldn't have reasons to worry about the presence or the absence of religion in our lives, even under the shape of academic subject. However, according to Spengler's theory, religiousness in science is, in fact, a form of decadence of world knowledge and understanding, despite the progress made by scientific knowledge nowadays. The fate of science will be sealed by its own exhaustion of *inner possibilities* of providing answers to our doubts and uncertainties. "Exact science must presently fall upon its own keen sword because

of excessive methodological refinement and problem posing. First, in the 18th Century, its methods were tried out, then, in the 19th, its powers, and now its historical role is critically reviewed. But from Skepsis there is a path to “second religiousness,” which is the sequel and not the preface of the Culture. Men dispense with proof, desire only to believe and not to dissect. Critical knowledge ceases to be an ideal of the spirit” (Spengler 1996, p. 585).

The Faustian spirit, specific to the modernity of our time, discovers that its ambitions to be all-encompassing and all-knowing remain practically insoluble problems. Theories, paradigms, models of analysis and thought are challenged. Gianni Vattimo places all these under the sign of *weak thought* (*pensiero debole*)³ replacing the *strong thought* (*pensiero forte*), universal and atemporal. The inter-disciplinary approaches and methods themselves or the birth of new sciences are a sign that Faustian knowledge discovers its limits. The scenario thus outlined is far from optimistic.

In this context, expressed through Oswald Spengler’s scepticism, the usefulness and the necessity of the academic study of religion appear, at least from a theoretical perspective, as a manner of tuning the other sciences to origins and first principles, represented by religious ideas and beliefs. Certainly, in Spengler’s opinion, the accent is placed on critical, rational knowledge, and this is not the most fortunate of positions religion could be in. We refer here to religion as an experienced fact and not as an act of knowledge.

However, such an alternative of knowledge in the academic landscape could offer the modern youth, somewhat saturated with scientific abstractizations that attempt in vain to encompass truth beyond the visible limits, new signs and significations for their knowledge. They could discover a symbolic universe that could throw more light on the web of scientific theories and concepts. While this will not help them make astounding technical and scientific discoveries, it will definitely allow them to assume their limits and to overcome the crises generated by the eternal search for knowledge and absolute truth.

3 The Destiny of an “Apterous Fly”

A scenario the same as interesting and thought-provoking is launched by Ioan Petru Culianu in 1984, in his volume, *Éros et magie à la Renaissance. 1484* (Culianu 1984). The author notes that modern sciences presuppose the existence of a specific mentality, very different from the one in the Renaissance, for example. The Renaissance man lived in a Universe saturated with magic, and his mentality crystallised around this fantastic universe.

³*Weak thought* can be connected to Heidegger’s notions of *Andenken* (commemorative thinking, recollection), *Verwindung* (distortion), *Überwindung* (overcoming, convalescence, resignation). In other words, “weak thought” suggests a methodological weakness, which leads to the acceptance of other views.

As a consequence, the sciences of the time proposed specific models for knowing and understanding the world. Astrology, alchemy, magic were respectable and valued disciplines. No-one doubted their *usefulness value*. “Let us not forget that under the label «natural magic» there circulated very diverse technical knowledge—from manufacturing animal and vegetal dyes to pyrotechnics and optical procedures—as well as theurgic and medical procedures, cryptography, stenography and telecommunication techniques, without leaving out the techniques for manipulating the individual and the masses, which did not find their full application until the present day. As far as the art of memory is concerned, it worked so well, that it is surprising it fell into obsolescence during the 17th century” (Culianu 1994, pp. 250–251). Thus, no sign of crisis of the Renaissance culture or of its decadence. If during the Renaissance the spiritual sciences dovetailed into the social mental, how can we explain their disappearance from the scientific landscape and, as a consequence, the mutation occurring at the level of the social mental?

The model on which Ioan Petru Culianu builds his answer comes, quite surprisingly, from the sphere of exact sciences. More precisely, it is a mathematical model. *The theory of fractals* can redefine, amongst others, progress and the scientific and cultural shifts marking the history of mankind. According to such a theory, history can be seen as a fractal, and all the objects and the facts composing it are nothing less but fragments, fractions, fractal objects.

Thanks to this approach, science and philosophy come closer to each other and meet again. Although “a philosophical science is a contradiction in terms. There is, however, a way to reconcile the irreconcilable.” (Boutôt 1997, p 249) This “morphological revolution” Alain Boutôt speaks about is based on a few principles:

- (a) “The parts have the same structure or structure as the whole, but at a different scale, allowing for slight deformation” (Mandelbrot 1998, p. 184)
- (b) “Its shape is either extremely irregular, or extremely broken and fragmented, irrespective of the scale of the examination” (Mandelbrot 1998, p. 184)
- (c) “They contain «distinctive elements», whose scales are very diverse and cover a very broad range” (Mandelbrot 1998, p. 184).

From this perspective, history is no longer thought about in the terms of the classical physics and philosophy, as a uniform, linear and irreversible flow. Moreover, we cannot speak about a future, but instead about several possible futures (Gavriluță 2003).⁴ At the time of the Renaissance, modern science was practically a mere scenario for a possible future, which, in that particular context, had no chance to materialise! It was like a mutant, an *apterous fly*. What contributed crucially to the formidable adaptation and survival of this mutant were the ideological and socio-historical circumstances of the time (especially the Protestant Reform), favourable to a certain type of choices.

⁴The fractal analysis model can also be applied successfully to sociological analyses concerning social time. A binary-fractal model of research is proposed by Nicu Gavriluță in *Fractalii și timpul social (Fractals and social time)*, Cluj-Napoca, Dacia Publishing, 2003.

Practically, the entire process of the establishment of modern science is similar to a *mind game*.⁵ “Our scientific spirit was born like an apterous fly, which, in the great whirlwinds of the 16th century was fortunate enough to pass unnoticed and not to be eliminated by the unforgiving natural selection. This hit the Renaissance sciences so hard, that it robbed them of any chance for recovery” (Culianu 1998, p. 253). In Culianu’s vision, the process is not definitive and nor is it irreversible. Depending on the conditions of the eras following the moment of Renaissance, we can think out various scenarios for explaining and knowing the world.

Thus, we can postulate a humanistic model of knowledge, a scientific model (dominant nowadays), an inter-disciplinary model, a religious model, a magical model etc. Each of these appears as one of the *potential futures*. Some scenarios have had the chance to be embodied in history, others will probably never have a life or else they will have an obscure and peripheral existence. Everything depends on the choices made by the games of the human mind. The destiny of the “apterous fly” appears thus as an uncertain one, constantly under trial from the challenges of the world and the combinatorial games of the human mind.

Theoretically, at any moment a mutant could appear, one that could serve perfectly the demands of the moment, putting in parenthesis the scientific knowledge of today. The very “fascination exerted by religion also derives—albeit in an unexpected way—from the same source, for religion, the same as philosophy, science and even literature, is also a computational process” (Culianu 1998, p. 344).

The presence of the study of religion at university level nowadays could be the result, from this perspective, of a choice dictated by the principles of interdisciplinarity in understanding the world or by ideological or political grounds.⁶ On the other hand, the results of scientific studies (we mention here the studies in the domain of quantum physics, that prove theoretically the possibility of the rebirth of bodies at the end of times) could bring back onto centre-stage the need for an academic study of religion. Thus, it is not compulsory that the true reason for the presence of the study of religion in the academic environment to be grounded solely in the mere fascination exerted by religion or in the mere curiosities of a modern man not having to worry about tomorrow. The future is open to any possibility: religion may gain more ground in academic study, just as well as it may disappear from university curricula. Everything depends on the choices we operate at some point in time.

⁵Ioan Petru Culianu, in *Arborele gnozei. Mitologia gnostică de la creștinismul timpuriu la nihilismul modern (The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism—translated from English by Corina Popescu, Nemira Publishing, Bucharest, Romania, 1998)* shows that mind games, through the choices they operate, can determine the route of our existence. “But life is, almost by definition, a type of operation we call analogous: it gives the impression of a continuous flow because the decisions it requires from us are too swift to be perceived as «digital», that is as sequences of binary commutations” (p. 343).

⁶We believe that the events on the international political stage (the Gulf War, the terrorist attacks of 9/11, other social movements) are also grounded in the idea of religious views. This could be a strong argument in favour of considering the study of religion as a form of education towards knowing and accepting the Other, different from a religious point of view.

4 A “Creative Hermeneutic” of Religions in Universities?

A more certain and optimistic perspective is that offered by Mircea Eliade. For the religion historian, a very important moment in the study of religion was the year 1912. This is a reference year, because the studies published then marked definitively the study of religion from a sociological, ethnological, psychological and historical point of view.

The important writings published that year were: Emile Durkheim, *Formes élémentaires de la vie religieuse*; Wilhelm Schmidt, *Der Ursprung der Gottesidee*; Raffaele Petazzoni, *La religione primitiva in Sardegna*; C.G. Jung, *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido*; Sigmund Freud, *Totem und Tabu*. These works were both starting points and challenges for all subsequent research made in the field of religion. Furthermore, they prefigured the possibility of studying religious phenomena from different perspectives. Besides, Mircea Eliade makes a pertinent radiography of the development of religious studies on the four levels mentioned above, in a chapter titled *A retrospective overview of the history of religions: 1912 to present* (Eliade 1994, pp. 29–66).

In the author’s opinion, the history of religions, as well as the science of religions in general, appear as integrant formulas for knowledge, without which knowledge of other fields would be incomplete, insufficient. The psychological, sociological, ethnological approaches are facets of the research of the religious phenomenon and represent, for the religion historian, important reference points in his hermeneutic endeavour. “We do not intend to develop here a methodology for the science of religions. The issue is far too complex to be dealt with in a few pages. But we believe it is useful to repeat the idea that *homo religiosus* is actually “the total man”; therefore, the science of religions should become a total discipline in the sense in which it should use, integrate and articulate the results obtained by the various approaches to the religious phenomenon” (Eliade 1994, pp. 23–24).

This integrating, inter-disciplinary approach is a logical part of the Eliadian vision on man and religion. According to it, we cannot research man while separating him from his religious existence. Irrespective of the manner in which the religious manifests itself in various socio-cultural contexts, the author proves that the sacred is consubstantial to the human being. Therefore, to know and research nature and human existence means to research what the religion historian calls being *homo religiosus*. “Indeed, it is difficult to imagine how the human spirit would function without the conviction that something irreducibly *real* exists in the world, the same way it is impossible to imagine how consciousness could have appeared without giving meaning to man’s tendencies and experiences. (...) The dialectic of the sacred has preceded and served as model for all the dialectic movements later discovered by the human spirit. By revealing being, meaning and truth in an unfamiliar, chaotic and threatening world, the experience of the sacred paved the way for systematic thinking” (Eliade 1994, pp. 5–7).

Although “a second Renaissance”,⁷ one resulting from the encounter between Western culture and the Indian and Sanskrit philosophy, never materialised, *cultural renewal* through the study of religion is possible at any time, claims Mircea Eliade. The approach best serving this renewal would be a *creative hermeneutic*. Thanks to this approach, “significances not perceived before are unveiled and highlighted with such vigour that, after the assimilation of the new interpretation, consciousness does not remain the same. The creative hermeneutic eventually transforms man; it goes beyond simple training, it is at the same time a spiritual technique likely to change the quality of existence itself. This is especially true for historico-religious hermeneutics” (Eliade 1994, p. 102).

The religion historian’s ideas outline a scenario in which the study of religions is ever-present at academic level. However, Eliade does not opt for just any type of knowledge of religious life and phenomena. In order to have a renewing affect at individual and social level, these studies presuppose, first and foremost, a *total hermeneutic of the religious*. The discoveries made in the field of religion could thus serve those who work in the field of arts, creation, literature etc. Such an optimistic approach, we believe, would have chances to succeed only in the context of a paradigm shift at the level of scientific knowledge and only as a result of a radical change in education policies. Otherwise, it can only have affects at particular level. The researcher and the scientist can discover on their own, thanks to a *creative hermeneutic*, new meanings and significances of the things researched. Furthermore, these discoveries can operate profound changes at the level of knowledge, understanding and feeling of the one concerned with unlocking the mysteries of this world.

5 Some Reasons Why the Academic Study of Religions has “Usefulness Value”

At a first level, the academic study of religion may constitute a form of erudition and knowledge. And it is no small thing, when we bear in mind that the mere knowledge of religious ideas, belief and systems and of the way they have worked in time can considerably broaden the horizons of the one studying them.

Even if the result is not a spectacular mutation at cognitive and behavioural levels, the mere familiarisation with and knowledge of the religious realm allows a more thorough approach of other professional fields of interest, offering at the same time a broader vision on the latter. Let us not forget that “at its origins, any cultural creation—instruments, institutions, arts, ideologies etc.—was either a religious

⁷It is the idea postulated by Max Müller at the middle of the 19th century, the “second Renaissance”, following the Italian Renaissance, capable of bringing about an unprecedented cultural and spiritual renewal. Unfortunately, the encounter with the Eastern culture and spirituality only manifested itself in the specialists’ spheres and did not bring about the expected acculturation phenomenon.

expression or had a religious justification or source. This is not always obvious to the non-specialist, especially to the one trained to conceive «religion» according to the forms proper to the Western societies or to the great Asian religions” (Eliade 1994, p. 111). The rediscovery of this fact could result in new understandings of the various fields of modern research.

For instance, for those interested in the study of physics, knowledge of religious ideas could give their work more substance. For some, the abstract approaches of the modern science could gain meaning and significance. The same could happen in the domains of art and creation. Moreover, we can hope that some religious ideas can be useful for the new scientific challenges.

A fashionable topic nowadays is *the crisis of modern man*. He has sociologists, historians, anthropologists, philosophers and religious historians equally concerned. To a great extent, they all agree it is a crisis of the spiritual values. It would be the result either of a *déficit symbolique* (Augé 1997), or to a *great mobility of social and symbolic reference points*, as Georges Balandier asserts. Irrespective of the causes generating the crises of modern man, the remedies may also come from the part of the academic study of religions. The great mobility of reference points—proposing an accounting-type experiencing of life—would be opposed by the profound meaning of existence. Mircea Eliade calls this *the rediscovery of the sacred*. This can happen not only through religious experience and practice, but also through study and research. This could give another meaning to the existence of modern man, plagued by fears, anxieties and uncertainties when facing both life and death.

We do not know whether this re-discovery of the sacred is necessarily equivalent to the *second religiousness* Oswald Spengler speaks about, but it would definitely bring back to the foreground *symbolic thinking* and all that it entails. Before rigid thought, marked by positivism and practical reasoning, symbolic thought could re-awaken long-forgotten values, feelings and sensitivities. It is not necessary to wait for modern science to exhaust itself in order to turn back towards eternal values. Science and religion are not mutually exclusive, but instead they can live together in the most natural of ways, even in modern times. This explains, for example, the interest for religious facts of researchers coming from the fields of psychology, sociology, anthropology, philosophy or exact sciences.

Nor do we know whether Eliade’s dream to make the history of religions and integrating science that would give depth to human knowledge will come to life any time soon. We also believe that it would be completely unproductive to endlessly wait for the moment of a major paradigm shift (see also Culianu) in order for the study of religion to gain a superior status. We can hope, though, that the academic study of religion will not educate just minds, but also souls. More precisely, if taught appropriately, religion can sow inside us the idea of tolerance and respect for the other. Recent experiences show that the main challenges of modernity are related to the encounter with the Other. They translate into identity issues, form an ethnical and religious point of view.

We do not know whether those attending university courses on religion will become religious and how much, but they will definitely have the chance to discover, to know and to respect the values of the Other. And that in itself is not unimportant!

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