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From the Native's Point of View – or Daddy-Knows-Best?

A call for papers to a session on Indigenous religions for the 1997 AAR conference seems to propose an “applied science of religion” similar to applied anthropology where the anthropologist makes use of her gained knowledge of a certain people to help this very people in its various intercultural affairs. An example is the assistance with defining and explaining Australian Aboriginal principles of land affiliation in court where claims for rights to land are negotiated (cf. Layton 1997).¹ As one of the issues proposed for discussion on the AAR conference, the session co-ordinator asks for papers investigating “misrepresentations of indigenous art and religio-cultural forms for commercialization purposes” and suggesting ways to help indigenous peoples challenge such misrepresentations and protect their integrity. The discord between the indigenous people's self-representation and the misrepresentations by the people of a dominant culture is thought to be overbridged by the academically schooled researcher, not only when it comes to cultural traits in general, but in the case of such deep personal commitments as religious notions as well. But defending other persons' or groups' ideas demands an understanding of these ideas, an issue which has been raised by students in the humanities for decades; the solution of the problem constantly oscillating between the impossibility of full understanding due to our culturally inherited ethnocentricity, and the possibility of this same understanding due to our biologically shared property of being human.

Throughout the 20th century in anthropology and in history of religions there has been a tension between on the one hand what Clifford Geertz in a paper first published in 1974 (reprinted in 1983) called “the native's point of view”, that is, the conviction that we may get our understanding only from the studied object itself, and on the

¹ For surveys of the history of Australian Aboriginal land rights' claims, see Charlesworth 1984; Engelhart 1995; Harris 1979.

other hand the stance declaring that only the scientific observer is able to discern those underlying motives and circumstances which in the end explain an action or a cognition, with the help of some illuminating theory, which may be more or less jokingly characterized as the Daddy-Knows-Best-approach. The problem of understanding "the Other" arises as soon as we meet this other, but where the other seemed too much unlike ourselves, the demand became imperative, either to reject the other totally, or to find ways to communicate, that is, some form of understanding.

The Other in history

The history of the Europeans' meeting with and view of the other has been investigated by McGrane (McGrane 1989; see also Tambiah 1990; Trouillot 1991) among others. In the Renaissance, the other, that is, man in extra-European societies, was described, met and explained from a Christian point of view, as the demon, a something, external to humanity. Questions that were put were such as "would it be possible at all to teach the Gospel to these creatures?" (McGrane 1989: 11). "In the cosmographical discourse of the sixteenth century the non-European Other cannot be related to nor understood apart from the Christian Devil", McGrane states (1989: 11). The best treatment seemed to be the gun, to clean the world from the devil's gang. The question of humanity was connected to the possibility of salvation. The non-Christian other was equated with a madman, another totally dissimilar creature, whose chances of salvation were non-existent (McGrane 1989: 18).

The Europeans of the Enlightenment viewed the other from an intellectual point of view: the others were certainly humans, but humans of a lower kind, without the ability of rationality which characterized the European. The Other became the Savage. Though admittedly a human being he represented Nature, against which civilized man had to fight, and which he was bound — with God's providence — to conquer in the end (McGrane 1989: 47). Until the end of the eighteenth century, there was still a break between the European and the other. The evaluation of the savage other as a lower form of human being held sway also when the assumed break had been replaced by the notion of an historical difference, when the Savage became the Primitive, representing the earliest part of a unilinear anthropological time (McGrane 1989: 51), a time line which was expressed in various evolutionistic schemes of spiritual and material progression. The evolutionism in the late 19th and early 20th century

implied strictly speaking a rejection of the other. He had nothing to tell the student, except from being an illustration of a dark and (for the European) happily overcome past.

But a few decades into the 20th century, the views changed to a more open appreciation of the other, that is, people in foreign cultures (it was eventually acknowledged that there were other cultures). One way to come to this evaluation was through anthropological fieldwork, another was what may be called the phenomenological attitude in the history of religions. The historicizing perspective, aiming at finding origins to explain recent opaque beliefs and manners, gave way to the synchronic perspective which tried to explain bewildering facts through the circumstances in which they occurred. Explanations moved closer to the facts themselves and although anthropology long kept a functionalistic tinge, seeking the utility behind strange actions, its attempts to meet the other on his own grounds was the result of an attitude similar to the attempt of phenomenology of religion which claimed to be listening to the phenomenon in its own language. The success of this enterprise will be discussed below.

The Other today

Still, the other was the object under the scholar's lens. And this is the case still, since it is the ground for our very existence as researchers. It is a part of our business, to study others, not ourselves, even if the study may give us information also in this respect. In anthropology the distinction between the self and the other has begun to get blurred through the growing research by indigenous anthropologists who investigate their own culture. By this activity, it has been possible to demonstrate the conventional nature of the distinction and the political effects it has brought about. Since the 1980's, anthropologists have questioned their work as reporters: "problems of description become problems of representation" (Marcus and Fischer 1986: 9)² when the precedence of interpretation was acknowledged to having been staying with the anthropologist, that is, that the colonial influence had not been done away with. It has even been declared that the very concept "culture" operates to enforce separations that

² Cf. Clifford and Marcus 1986; James, Hockey and Dawson 1997 as further examples of anthropology's calling itself in question. For representations of the "otherness" of the anthropologist, see for instance Fowler and Hardesty 1994.

inevitably carry a sense of hierarchy (Abu-Lughod 1991: 138). But it seems as if anthropology and history of religions have to walk in opposite directions: while anthropologists close in upon the "selfness" of the student and her object and have to investigate what happens "when the 'other' that the anthropologist is studying is simultaneously constructed as, at least partially, a self?" (Abu-Lughod 1991: 140), the student of religions face the problem of digression from the "selfness" of the own confession to the "otherness" of religious configurations far from one's own experience and religious experiences that may seem very strange to the educated Westerner (cf. Goodman 1991). For anthropologists, the value of a disengaged study of foreign cultures has never been questioned. Historians of religion have still often to fight for the justification of such a disinterested study.

Although the field-working anthropologists claimed a position close to the data, they at the same time worked from the basis of certain theories, trying to explain the facts through hypotheses on hidden motives and circumstances. The notion of the unconscious level of the human psyche can be seen as the starting motor for several kinds of hypotheses of latent functions and structures of societies, which had to be disclosed by the student to get at the explanations of what happened and was discernible on the surface. Structures were laid bare, showing connections between different aspects of culture, such as kinship rules and economical transactions, authority and religious rites, and the functionalistic view kept its grip for a long period. From the anthropologist's point of view, religion was more a symptom of a fact than the fact itself.

For the phenomenologists, and for many students of history of religions, this was a way to diminish their object of study, and it was repeatedly maintained that religion was something very special that had to be studied in its own right, a phenomenon *sui generis*.³ But both anthropologists and religionists faced in the end the same question: whose view is the "rightest": the believer's or the scholar's? Who comes closes to the truth, the one who is inside her own tradition and knows it emotionally, if not always fully cognitively or rationally, or the outside viewer who knows it intellectually with the help of all the means that comparison and various theories give? Who knows "best" what religion is? Who "understands" belief, organizations, habits and emotions that pertain to the elusive concept "religion"?

³ For a discussion on "non-reductionistic" approaches to religion, see Pals 1987. The *sui generis* approach has been criticized by several scholars, for example Penner 1989; Segal 1989.

Reducing the Other

In the anthropological research, a row of theories were presented as explanations of religion. As expressions of components in a structure, religious phenomena also worked as confirmations of this structure, a functionalistic view which was presented early in the century. Psychologists explained religious phenomena by reference to individual and inter-personal conflicts which had to be solved or at least expressed, as well as conflicts imbued in the social system itself, as a result of its very structure. Economically interested researchers found that religions kept economy within given ecological frames, putting restrictions on the use of certain species, always or at certain times, or for certain individuals or groups, and politically religions were seen as creating, demonstrating, confirming and/or transmitting authority positions.

All these theoretical attempts to explain religions were considered reductionistic by the phenomenologists who claimed that it was impossible to translate the very special phenomenon "religion" to anything else in the kaleidoscope of socio-cultural facts. Understanding could be gained only by comparing religious facts with each other (see Sælid Gilhus 1984: 31), not with facts from other socio-cultural areas. However, the comparisons had to be supplemented by the student's empathetic ability of understanding, as a kind of vicarious participating. This the outsider's understanding of course put the phenomenologist on the same track as the anthropologist, since they both tried to find the truth of the Other through their own theoretical lenses — the difference between them was only that while the anthropologist usually declared his theoretical foundations, the phenomenologist had to resort to a kind of "esthetic" translation of the data found, declaring that the essence of religion could be found intuitively (Pyle 1979:199). There was even a certain timidity of theories, as if such monsters brought about a diminution or distortion of the religious phenomena (Wiebe 1983). The esthetic translation is of course most clearly discernible in Eliade's writings, unfortunately (or maybe, fortunately? see below!) his literary skills are not always attained by other phenomenologists. But consider this statement which gives the reader a fair impression of the imaginative ability of the researcher, but leaves her unaided in her curiosity of the thinking of the people investigated: "The Mbuti must transform their own dangerous, almost uncontrollable, passions into a yearning for peace and harmony, if they expect the wilderness at the center of the universe to respond and to be subdued by divine love" (Zuesse 1979: 52). It is all very beautifully put — but is it "mbutic"? Should we really resort

to this kind of “esthetic reformulation” of Eliade and some of his disciples? The trouble is that unless we have the same talent for fiction as Eliade, our reformulations will fall short of the mark, being just so many plain words, without the convincing power that emerges from a gifted author of pure literature.

The pitfalls of “understanding”

However, this convincing power may be dangerous in a scientific area. It is crucial that the sources are correctly used. In *Sacred and Profane* Eliade built his reasoning on the sacred center on an Australian myth but forgot in the earlier editions to mention that it was a myth and rendered the story as if it were about some living Aboriginal people. This reading gave a very odd impression of a group of humans reduced to a living as hunters and gatherers. The trouble is that his picture was so vivid, so plastic and so convincing. The book is studied in the introductory courses in history of religions at Stockholm university and as the students do not have much information about the early Australian Aboriginal culture, they almost unexceptionally believe that the Aborigines of Central Australia carried a pole on their wanderings unable to decide where to walk unless the pole showed the direction by falling. And the most interesting problem with all this is that although the text is commented upon by showing the absurdity of a hunting and gathering people walking in a direction where there may be neither game, nor edible plants or even water, just because their inherited pole fell in that direction, this picture sticks in many students’ memories (which has often been demonstrated in the examinations) to the conviction that Australian Aborigines really lived in that way. But everyone also has a very clear apprehension of the importance of a sacred center for the religious man. Eliade’s description helps the students to what may be called an “esthetic” understanding, founded on emotional grounds in a way both stronger and more long-lived than what may be gained in a rational way. But although Eliade in his literary way shows the students how the phenomenological abstraction *homo religiosus* might experience the world, his carelessness with the sources supplies a false apprehension of concrete Aranda-speaking human beings. And also if his rendering had been correct⁴ we still know only something about the abstraction *homo religiosus* but stay doubting

⁴ Eliade corrected it in later editions, cf. Smith 1992: 3, but the English pocket edition (Eliade 1987) is still the unimproved one.

concerning the Central Australian Aborigines. Is our knowledge of the abstract universal also valid for the concrete particular? In what extent is it allowable to maintain that we — all human beings, as human — “are in constant flight from our own concrete existence” and that we “... long for primordial being, and ... thirst for ultimate states that will remove us from our own insufficiencies and mortality” (Zuesse 1979: 238)?

The impossible understanding

Since phenomenological theory concentrates on one facet of religion only, the experience of the sacred, leaving out social, structural, psychological, economical or political ones it is in fact as reductionistic as it claims the anthropological theories to be. And just like those theories, the explanations it offers are based on the viewer's understanding, not the actor's. In her study of theories of ritual, Catherine Bell points out how tightly integrated the thought-action dichotomy has become in the study of man so that even Clifford Geertz, who advocated a “thick description” (Geertz 1973), to get at the native's point of view (Geertz 1983), a few years earlier noticed that the outsider has only to reflect on what he sees while the insider integrates the action in a system of meanings (Geertz 1966: 29). Bell states: “Geertz is setting up a third structural pattern and a third permutation of the thought-action dichotomy. That is, ritual participants act, where those observing them think” (Bell 1992: 28). In ritual studies, the conflict between the actor's conviction and the student's is particularly clear. Jean La Fontaine separates two levels (or, “dimensions”) of ritual: the level of action itself, which is a sequence of actions to accomplish a purpose, and the meaning of that action which La Fontaine explains as “sets of overlapping metaphors” for the various desired states or changes (La Fontaine 1985: 13). As Victor Turner was among the first to show, both these levels are acknowledged by the actors themselves (Turner 1970) — but among the academic investigators, only the second one is accepted.

In a recent article, Brian K. Smith raises this rather thorny issue of the student's view of her data, compared with that of the believers. How is it possible, Smith asks, to accept the ritual actor's declaration that a rite has effect? This fact, that an insoluble conflict arises between the “insider's” claim that a rite works, and the “outsider's” conviction that it does not, may even have to be avoided altogether (Smith 1996: 306). In other words, it would be entirely and perpetu-

ally impossible to get to an understanding like the one of the believer herself and it would not even be any use to try.

Becoming a Sumerian

But if we insist that it is worth trying? After all, the one and only object of our enterprise as scholars is to understand a mode of being in the world — not only our own, but others' as well. But shall we explain in order to understand, that is, understand rationally — or should we experience in order to understand, that is, understand emotionally, or intuitively? Should the Western student “go native” — or should she even convert to the religion she is investigating? (cf. Wiebe 1983: 301 f.) She could, of course, try to endorse the assertions of belief, participate with conviction in the rites and regard herself as a true participant — but if it comes to indigenous religions, she will be an eternal outsider and if she tries to change her life entirely for the one of the studied people she would have changed her viewpoint from history of religions to theology. An interesting kind of theology seems to be emerging in our Western culture, where university students turn, not to Christianity or to any other world religion such as Islam or Buddhism, but join groups adhering to “nature religions” such as Wicca, neo-shamanism⁵ or Asa-tru, and study them from within. Could this be a way of getting a full understanding of a religion: start from the outsider's viewpoint to get the understanding given by comparison and explaining theories, and then by conversion change to the insider's position and gain her emotional understanding by full participation and identification? The difficulties of this process are self-evident. Firstly, it is dubitable whether the conversion after the first gain of a distanced, rational knowledge, based on comparative and/or external data, would bring about the same deep understanding as the one reached through being brought up in a tradition, secondly the problem of identity would be hard to solve, indeed, when the scholar gets interested in still another religion — not to mention if one wants to study the religions of antiquity — how does one become a Sumerian?

⁵ The prefix neo- is, of course, the academic outsider's term.

Being a Believer?

In other words, the alternative of converting to the religion studied would be impossible and in fact it has been suggested more to show how absurd a religious equivalence of the anthropologist's "going native" would be — at least as a general recommendation for a successful process of investigation. But what about having to be a believer — in any religion, to be able to grasp the cognition of another dimension of existence, as Hultkrantz has put it (Hultkrantz 1985: 88)? Wilfred Cantwell Smith's suggested progression from the study of other religions as impersonal presentations of an "it" to a talk between believers about "us" is well known (Smith 1959). This means that if I am not gifted with the special mental ability to believe in a supernatural dimension of cosmos, I am disqualified to start upon a scientific journey in the history of religions. Or maybe we are permitted to modify the demand to exclude the unbeliever from phenomenology of religion? Religious understanding has sometimes been compared to musical understanding. It has been declared that just as only the musically gifted individual has the ability to understand music, only a religious person has the ability to understand religion. But also an unmusical person is able to get at an understanding of a piece of music by analyzing the score, even if she is unable to play, sing or enjoy the sound of music and this kind of understanding may be as deep as the more emotional one reached by a devoted but musically ignorant listener. In the same way the areligious student will be able to get an understanding of a religion through comparisons of different religious statements and actions, through descriptions of religious configurations in their place in time and space, and by investigating how and why they change without the special form of understanding brought about by a religious belief of her own, provided that she recognize religious statements and actions at all — if such an animal exists, which is, after all, the crucial question. From a phenomenological point of view, it may well be maintained that only one's own approach ascribes an independent existence to religions. The so-called reductionists are said to deny this existence, declaring that religion does not exist in itself and that what has been mistaken for religion, is in fact something else, psychological, social, political or whatever. This may be true, but even the staunchest reductionist would have to admit that there are people in this world who believe that supernatural agents exist, and who regard some beings, things, places, words and actions as holy, respected, avoided, dear or not to be trifled with. The grounds for this attitude and these notions may be anything but supernatural, but this does not deny them an existence of their own.

On the other hand, their grounds have to be investigated through a religiously disengaged approach. Our view of religions should not be overshadowed by the apprehensions of the believers of whatever confession (cf. Pye 1994). This does not mean, however, that we are permitted to leave their ideas out of the account.

A multi-reductionistic approach

The complexity of the material is the heaviest argument against every kind of one-sided reduction, be it social, political, psychological, religious or symbolic. Even a thick description, which admittedly volunteers an all-sided attempt, will make up an account only of the generic side of a religious experience — what we simply have to do is to collect our data both from the society's and from the individual's point of view. To cover all aspects of, for example, a religious rite, it may be necessary to perform a series of reductionistic "translations". Just as it cannot be accepted that the believer or the actor in a rite should have the prerogative of the final explanation, it is impossible to claim that it remains with the sociologist, the psychologist, the economist, the anthropologist, the phenomenologist or the student of any other discipline who takes an interest in the material. It has to be contended that each of these interpreters have permission, even the duty, to find an explanation from her own academic point of view.

A theory may be defined as a set of possible questions to put to a domain of reality.⁶ If we choose 'religion' to be this domain and restrict it further to Australian Aboriginal religion, for instance, which is the area to which I have dedicated the most part of my studies, we will find that the totality of this research area offers several kinds of such sets of questions. We may start with questions of how the social system of the Aborigines is expressed through a religious idiom and find that the belief in mythic fore-fathers and fore-mothers having both human characteristics and those of some natural object mirrors the social system of categories, moieties and rules for marriage and reproduction. We will find that the anchoring of these rules in a supernatural dimension of existence renders them validity and permanence in a truly Durkheimian sense and that religious notions govern the individual's apprehension of his place in the world and his relations to other people. We will also find that as well as the supernatural affiliations define groups and behavior within groups, they govern inter-group relations and behavior determining times, places and

⁶ For a list of varieties of meanings for 'theory', see Wiebe 1983:295.

extension of larger assemblies, such as the rites of male initiation, and that they also govern meetings for members of specialized associations, such as the various totemistic groups.

We may put economic questions to the data and find that territorial boundaries are defined mythologically so that a person's or a group's movements in and economical utilization of a certain area are expressed as mystical affiliations to supernatural beings in that area. The hunting and gathering economy can be shown to be supported by these rules of territorial affiliation. From a strictly economical point of view, it may also be stated that it is likely for a hunting and gathering economy to form religious beliefs in supernatural agents who are responsible for all kinds of natural objects, which is the case in Aboriginal religion, since man in this type of economy is dependent on the total natural environment without physically controlling any special part of it, such as cultivating some kind of cereal or tubers, or breed some kind of domestic animals or fowl.

Psychological questions to put to the material may concentrate on this very lack of physical control of the natural environment. The Aboriginal rites of restoration, known among religionists by the Aranda term *intichiuma*, may be explained as a way of securing such a control, solving a problem of uncertainty and anguish. In the same way, the rites of male initiation may be psychologically explained, by referring to Oedipus complexes, post-partum taboos, society's need of controlling and pacifying outrageous youths, difficulties of confirming a wavering sexual identity, or some other unconscious motive.

Politically, religions offer a vast field of interest. Also the Australian Aboriginal religion is a suitable object for research along these lines. It is easy to discover religious notions as grounds for differences in power between the genders, for example; the anthropological reports abound in description of how women were excluded from parts of rites or whole ritual processes, as well as from certain paths or whole areas of land, all on religious grounds. Lately, it has been shown that the opposite was also the case and that certain authority positions were assigned exclusively to women, on the same mythological principles (Bell 1983). It has also been reported how a man's religious status effected both his position of authority in general, and his economical status as well as his marital prospects. It is also clear that the male initiation rite worked as an introduction to such a career in the power-gathering process, and that this process went on as a series of initiations into various cults. The close bond between authority and religious beliefs is easy to notice in the Aboriginal world.

This list is just a thin selection of all the various approaches to the Aboriginal religion in Australia, each making up a theory of how this religion could — or even should — be explained. Depending on the student's theoretical orientation, they all throw some light on the phenomenon, but each light is unable to illuminate the whole picture. "The study of religion ... cannot be but cross-cultural and poly-methodic", Pyle declares (Pyle 1979: 197). If we look at the theories as parts of a spectrum of different colors, we realize that all of them are needed to get the full, white light. So far, we have left out one approach that is of crucial importance when we are dealing with religions, and that is the individual aspect, which has to do with the experiential dimension of religion. Here is where the "native's point of view" comes in as an unavoidable part of our investigations. We have to gather information on how the believer/actor experiences his or her religion, otherwise our picture will not be complete. An "intuitive" translation by a religiously committed scholar in the phenomenological tradition can never be enough, even if it may transfer some kind of esthetic understanding to the reader of the same religious commitment, or at least from the same cultural affiliation. The important thing is that we view religious phenomena from all possible angles, to cover both their deep aspects, those so-called "latent functions" or deep structures that only the researcher from her culturally distanced position knows how to unmask, and the agent's, or the experienter's own declarations, the group's generalized statements as well as the psychological aspect of the individual's own experience, rational as well as emotional. Statements that show Aboriginal attitudes are such expressions as "to grow up the land" or "to take care of the land", and reports of bodily stance during rites or at walking on certain paths, silence and respectful behavior, or rules of avoidance or of admission.

Clearly the two modes of understanding have to supplement each other. What is called for is what might be called a multi-reductionistic approach. Daddy, who may be a cultural outsider, or an academically trained indigenous scholar, would contribute sociological, psychological, economic-ecological, historical, art-theoretical, literary or folkloristic, linguistic, symbolic or other theoretical explanations that may be useful in the studied area, as well as the perspective gained through comparison and an emotional and experiential distance to the material. The believer/actor, on the other hand, who in this context plays the role of the "native" would give the picture color and relief by filling it up with accounts of personal experience, the impact of values and emotions, the insider's evaluations of the outsider's distanced report and a direct relation of what Daddy

could never be able to understand in his indirect way of looking, even if he may come very close through his own experience.⁷ "Being there" must be a prerequisite where it is possible. But the actor's or believer's own voice should always be listened for, and assigned the same value as the scholar's, neither higher, nor lower, regardless whether it is heard through documents or through interviews. Daddy's knowledge should never be permitted to obscure it, but the two have to illuminate each other.

I do not expect to have exhausted all the possibilities of interpretation in this paper. Students with other theoretical view-points should be able to complete the list. But I hope to have demonstrated how a single approach or attempts to leave the specific socio-cultural setting out of the account can only distort our view of the extremely complex phenomenon 'religion'.

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⁷ I realize that this is a pessimistic view of our achievements, but one that has to be acknowledged.

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