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TWO CONCEPTS AND ONE MEMORY.
AN ATTEMPT TO RECONSIDER RELIGION
AND CULTURE IN THE LIGHT OF MEMORY

ABSTRACT

Already in 1964 Wilfred Cantwell Smith wrote that: “the term ‘religion’ is confusing, unnecessary, and distorting”. Since then many new definitions for ‘religion’ were elaborated. In 2012 Jared Diamond not only reminded sixteen of them, but also proposed two new definitions. The multiplicity of definitions for ‘culture’ is well known. In the recent anthropological reflection the basic concepts of Western civilization underwent a dramatically transformation. This is true also for religion and culture and found a specific culmination in the theory elaborated by Clifford Geertz, who saw religion as a cultural system. The aim of this paper is to reconsider these two concepts in the light of the notion of memory. The contribution by Maurice Halbwachs who indicated a close link between religion and memory has to be included and also more recent analysis by Jan and Aleida Assmann, particularly their emphasis on cultural memory.

KEYWORDS

religion, culture, memory, Christianity, sociotheology, religious fundamentalism

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Introduction

The study of religion in the last period faced deep transformations, mainly connected with the growing awareness of the importance of religion not only for theology but also for other humanistic discipline as sociology, psychology, anthropology and gender studies. The analysts speak about ‘sociotheological turn’ as a new way to face the challenge of religious studies. In fact “For the social sciences, this ‘socio-theological turn’ means incorporating into social analysis the insider-oriented attempt to understand the reality of a particular worldview.”¹

One of the first theologians who realized that theology has also social implications (sociologists, of course, were aware of this earlier thanks to the contributions of Emil Durkheim and Max Weber) was Wilfred Cantwell Smith who suggested that, in order to understand better the religious phenomenon, it is necessary to abandon the concept of religion which was abused for ideological purposes. When Smith suggested this, his proposal was not only criticized but also misunderstood, or simply ignored. It seems to me, that Smith’s proposal should be accepted as an intellectual provocation, which could give a more precise description of the religious dimension of human existence. Smith’s proposal can give religious persons more clarity about their religious identity. Today it is more evident that each religion has an historical and evolutionary character, also religious pluralism seems self evident and is more and more accepted as a matter of fact also by believers (in previous epoch religious pluralism was rejected). In this new context the necessity to elaborate a new definition of religion seems obvious, and the basic question is: “What are the implications of the historicity and religious pluralism that characterize our religious situation?”² The consequences of the acceptance of the historical dimension of religion, for the understanding of every religion, are radical, also for Christianity:

The spontaneous bias of intellectual culture is that pluralism is a ‘natural’ state of religious affairs in our world, and that it will always be so insofar as religion is a function of particular cultures and societies. Any claim about a permanent or universal truth must be proposed apologetically within the context

¹ *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and Violence*, eds. M. Juergensmeyer, M. Kitts, and M. Jerryson, New York 2013, p. 624.

² R. Haight, *Jesus Symbol of God*, New York 2002, p. 188.

of a supposition of some measure of historical relativism. The very claim for the existence of universal truth has become associated with a narrow, sectarian outlook.³

It seems to me that the criticism of the way in which the concept of religion (and probably also the concept of God) was used and abused in Western theology is not only justified but also found a confirmation in books dealing with religion without God.⁴ In addition, the recent analysis of the secularization process has drawn attention to the phenomenon of essentialisation of Christianity which, in effect, provoked using the category of Ivan Illich, ‘corruption’ of Christianity.⁵

It seems also that the discussion around the concept of religion is connected with the broader research of the new European identity: “What went on in the course of reshuffling the old categories – seemingly a purely conceptual exercise – was in fact part of a much broader, fundamental transformation of European identity.”⁶

Some of new anthropological perspectives demonstrate the impact of theological conceptions elaborated in relation with the concept of religion on the destructive development of human history. It is particularly evident in the relation between religion and violence. Hent de Vries stated in his book dedicated to the relationship between religion and violence:

The way in which this ‘transcendental historicity’, as Husserl and Derrida would say, is overdetermined by ‘religion’, in all of its manifestations, forms the central concern of this book; the insight that this inflection betrays a certain ‘violence’ (to be defined) is its main thesis.⁷

But perhaps the most important result of rejecting the concept of religion by Smith is a new methodology of religious studies and, particularly, the elaboration of comparative theology as a way to overcome the traditional divisions and conflicts between adherents of dif-

³ Ibidem.

⁴ R. Billington, *Religion Without God*, London 2002; R. Dworkin, *Religion Without God*, Cambridge 2013.

⁵ Ch. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Cambridge 2007, p. 737.

⁶ T. Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions. Or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Pluralism*, Chicago 2005, p. XII.

⁷ H. De Vries, *Religion and Violence. Philosophical Perspectives from Kant to Derrida*, Baltimore 2002, p. XII.

ferent religions.⁸ In this context it is important to see again the contribution of Wilfred Cantwell Smith to overcome this negative heritage of the concept of religion. It seems to me that the notion of memory could be very useful in correcting the traditional use of the concept “religion” because memory indicates that this concept has its history. Similar solution I have found in the book by Martin Buber *Eclipse of God* in which the abuse of the word God is a strong motivation to redefine its meaning: “The races of man with their religious factions have torn the word to pieces; they have killed for it and died for it, and it bears their finger-marks and their blood. Where might I find a word like it to describe the highest!”⁹ Accepting the skepticism of W. C. Smith concerning the use of the concept “religion” I suggest not to abandon it but to treat it as a metaphor for faith traditions. In other words I propose a kind of working definition which is not specific or content based, but is useful in understanding those organizations which are based on beliefs and values that respond to ultimate questions.¹⁰ In this sense, presenting the main idea formulated by W. C. Smith in the sixties of the twentieth century, I would like to ask if we still need the concept “religion”, and if yes, under which conditions we can and should use it in our debate concerning the place of the religious dimension in our life. It will be very interesting to compare W. C. Smith thought with the theology of Paul Tillich and with the contribution to religious studies by Mircea Eliade, since each of them played an important role in the debate on religion in the USA in the past century. It is worth to mention an article by Jonathan Z. Smith “Tillich [‘s] Remains...” in which the author draws our attention to the place of Smith in the American debate.¹¹

⁸ F. X. Clooney, *Comparative Theology. Deep Learning Across Religious Borders*, Oxford 2010.

⁹ M. Buber, *Eclipse of God. Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy*, New York 1957, p. 8.

¹⁰ In this point I would like to express my gratitude to Roger Height who in a personal email to me on March 14 2014 after reading the draft of this paper, offered many constructive suggestions which helped me to clarify my main idea. Roger draw also my attention to J. Z. Smith’s article which I found very inspiring also for my thinking about W. C. Smith thought.

¹¹ J. Z. Smith, *Tillich [‘s] Remains...*, “Journal of the American Academy of Religion” 2010, Vol. 78, No. 4, p. 1142.

The community of humankind

Who was the theologian who dared to reject the basis of his professional activity? Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1916–2000) saw his theological reflection as a direct outcome of his life. It is impossible to understand his theology without consideration of his activity and religious identity which was in constant evolution. He defined himself in the following way:

I am a Presbyterian; yet the community in which I participate is not the Presbyterian, but, at this level, the Christian. I participate as a deliberate though modified Calvinist in the Christian community, and the Christian process. In much the same way, I choose to participate as a Christian in the world process of religious convergence. For, ultimately, the only community there is, the one to which I know that I truly belong, is the community, world-wide and history-long, of humankind.¹²

Smith started his academic activity in McGill University in Montreal where he established the Institute for Islamic Studies, and taught there from 1949 to 1963. A year later he moved to Harvard University where he was involved in planning the Center for the Study of World Religions and took up its directorship. Similar institution he founded in 1973 in Halifax, Nova Scotia, where he established the Department of Comparative Religion at Dalhousie University. In 1978 Smith returned to Harvard where he worked till his retirement in 1984. In all those institutions and in dozens of books and numerous articles, W. C. Smith presented his idea that religion should be understood more as a living, vital faith rooted in personal experience, than as an abstract set of ideas and doctrines.

Moreover, we can say that his theology was also rooted in the American theological tradition of William James and John Dewey, because these fathers of American pragmatism stress as the most important dimension of religion its connection with human experience. He was also deeply aware not only of the variety of religions in the world but he was convinced that all religions have common roots in the faith in God, and perhaps more importantly, he saw the changing character of each religion in the history and life of each person. And exactly this

¹² W. C. Smith, *Towards A World Theology. Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*, New York 1981, p. 44.

conviction brought him to the idea that the concept of religion should be dropped:

Those who believe in the unity of humankind, and those who believe in the unity of God, should be prepared therefore to discover a unity of humankind's religious history. [...] The historian notes that not even one religion is the same, century after century, or from one country to another, or from village to city. So much is this so, that I have found myself pushed to dropping the word 'religion' as a concrete noun altogether.¹³

This idea was developed by Smith the sixties in his most important book *The Meaning and End of Religion*, which will be discussed in this paper later on. Here I recall his other book *Towards A World Theology. Faith and the Comparative History of Religion*, published twenty years later, in which he not only repeated that we need to abandon the concept of religion, but also developed the theological consequences of this decision. According to Smith's successor at Harvard University, Francis X. Clooney, who is now the director of the Center for the Study of World Religions, "Even imperfect and partially realized comparative theological reflection helps us in reshaping both theology and wider cultural expectations about religion and spirituality."¹⁴ I am very grateful to Francis X. Clooney who not only read the first version of my paper, but also made very pertinent comments on Smith's theology. In an email to me he wrote: "As for Smith, one might say that he is correcting modernity's reductive reading of 'religion', a construct that came to exist for certain purposes. 'Religion' as a reified entity is not, I think, a very old concept, and has always stood in a problematic relation to theology."¹⁵ Exactly this problematic character of the concept of religion became clear to us thanks to Smith's insistence on its diverse use in theological reflection. And I cannot express better what Francis X. Clooney wrote in the same email to me:

On the whole, I think Smith offers an important critique of a reified notion of 'religion', and I think most of us agree with him today, on the importance of seeing the interconnection among traditions. But what I find in many academic circles today is an increasingly comprehensive deconstruction of religion, of tradition, of community, and of each and every claim one might make as a be-

¹³ Ibidem.

¹⁴ F. X. Clooney, op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁵ Francis X. Clooney, personal e-mail to me on Dec. 8, 2013.

liever. But even after we admit the importance of history and of personal encounter, and the human role in the construction of meaning, at least Catholic tradition (and Hindu, to be sure) still wants also to leave room for tradition, truth claims, etc., and meaningful language about religious communities.¹⁶

And exactly this is the point. The rejection of the concept or, more precisely, the rejection of its wrong use in the history of theological reflection does not mean that we reject religious tradition. The opposite is true, we look for a better and more genuine understanding of it. In defense of Smith's theory with some critical notes: Talal Asad, one of the most influential cultural anthropologist dealing with religion in the modern context, considered Smith's book *The Meaning and End of Religion* published in 1964, as "perhaps his most famous work, one that is most widely cited by historians of comparative religion". Asad stated in the same article that "it represents some of the strengths and weaknesses of religious studies as seen from one perspective". The strength of this book is that its author "was the first to argue against essentialist definition of religion."¹⁷ It seems that Asad did not share the method of the deconstruction of the traditional approach towards religion, and his article is aimed to show, first of all, the weaknesses of Smith's conception. It is interesting to see Asad's arguments because they show how revolutionary, in fact, Smith's perspective was at that time. I do not agree with Asad's critique, but I see that he shows the need for some corrections in Smith's decision to abandon completely the concept of religion.

But let me present, first, the main argument of Smith who claimed that the concept of religion should be dropped because "the rise of the concept 'religion' is in some ways correlated with a decline in the practice of religion itself."¹⁸ In other words, in order to be able to understand the religious phenomenon it will be better not to use the well-known and too familiar concept, which is, according to him, inadequate and even false. After many years of research, Smith came to the conclusion:

¹⁶ Ibidem.

¹⁷ T. Asad, *Reading a modern classic: W.C. Smith's "The Meaning and End of Religion"*, "History of Religions" 2001, No. 40 (3), p. 205.

¹⁸ W. C. Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion*, New York 1964, p. 22.

[...] that the vitality of personal faith, on the one hand, and, on the other hand (quite separately), progress in understanding – even at the academic level – of the traditions of the other people throughout history and throughout the world, are both seriously blocked by our attempt to conceptualize what is involved in each case in terms of [a] religion.¹⁹

Of course this skepticism in dealing with religious experience is well known in the history of religions as *via negativa*, which means that human language is unable to grasp the essence of this experience.

Also in the fifties Abraham Joshua Heschel formulated in his philosophy of Judaism very similar thesis, that the use of religion could lead to rejection of the religious dimension of human existence. Nevertheless, according to Heschel “it will be more honest to blame religion for its own defeats” than secular science and anti-religious philosophy.”²⁰ But it does not mean, that Heschel thought that the concept of religion has to be rejected. In fact, he wrote many books in defense of Judaism as a living and important religion.

Before Smith, nobody rejected the concept of ‘religion’ as such. In fact, there were doubts concerning the use of the concept of ‘religion’, and the way in which this concept was understood, but a total rejection of the concept is Smith’s initiative. The main reason why this is so according to Smith is the concept of religion is a theoretical construction which does not correspond to the fullness and richness of religious experience. Actually, theology, as an intellectual reflection on religious reality, is part of this construction and has to be abandoned as well: “Theology is part of the traditions, is part of this world. Faith lies beyond theology, in the hearts of men. Truth lies beyond faith, in the heart of God.”²¹

The final conclusion to which Smith arrived is his appeal to reformulate also the traditional names of world religions: “On the verbal plane, I seriously suggest that terms such as Christianity, Buddhism, and the like must be dropped, as clearly untenable once challenged.”²² The last fifty years of intense interreligious, or as Raimon Panikkar prefer, intrareligious, dialogue confirmed, on the one hand, how right

¹⁹ Ibidem, pp. 48–49.

²⁰ A. J. Heschel, *God in Search of man. A Philosophy of Judaism*, New York 1955, p. 3.

²¹ W. C. Smith, *The Meaning...*, op. cit., p. 167.

²² Ibidem, p. 175.

W. C. Smith was but, on the other hand, we see that all the participants in this dialogue much more clearly define their religious identity. In fact, only in this way is dialogue possible – you have to say who you are and from which perspective you are entering in such dialogue. A good example of this kind of dialogue is the statement mentioned above by Francis X. Clooney in his book dedicated to comparative theology, in which he clearly defined his identity and at the same time declares his openness towards others:

I am an Irish-American Roman Catholic, born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1950. I am male, a Catholic priest, and for over 40 years have been a member of Society of Jesus. I am of a generation of American Catholics that matured in the decade after Vatican Council II. This was a time of turmoil, but it was also an era infused with optimism about more positive relations among religions. [...] The hesitations and worries of recent decades have the work of learning interreligiously appear less welcome in the Catholic Church. But *Nostra Aetate* nonetheless represents our best instincts. It also helped create the more open context in which I did my studies, and allowed me to set out on the course I still follow.²³

I have to say that exactly these “hesitations and worries of recent decades” made me, as a Catholic, very skeptical about the possibility of participating in interreligious dialogue not in an unbiased way. This is the reason why I define myself as a cultural Catholic without belonging to the institutional and hierarchical structure. In other words, I am a cultural anthropologist with a Catholic background for whom all religious traditions can be understood and describe as a “cultural system”. To this point I will come later on when I will deal with different definition of religion. In this point, I would like to quote Peter Phan, who being himself a Catholic priest, constructed an interesting theory of “being religious interreligiously,”²⁴ and of “multiply religious belonging”. According to him, in the context of Christian religion: “There is a reciprocal relationship between Christianity and the other religions. Not only are the non-Christian religions complemented by Christianity, but also Christianity is complemented by other religions. In other words, the process of complementation, enrichment

²³ F. X. Clooney, op. cit., p. 16.

²⁴ P. C. Phan, *Being Religious Interreligiously. Asian Perspectives on Interfaith Dialogue*, New York 2004.

and even correction is two-way or reciprocal.”²⁵ It is exactly what Smith was claiming – it is impossible to see religions as isolated and abstract entities, but as we see in Phan’s explanation, it is not necessary to drop the concept completely. Instead we should look for a corrected definition and the right use of it in the description of religious experience and religious tradition. It seems that Asad’s criticism goes in this direction.

I would like to return to Talal Asad’s objection. His main argument was that it is impossible to separate faith from concrete expression of it:

Faith is inseparable from the particularities of the temporal world and the traditions that inhabit it. If one is to understand one’s own faith – as opposed to having it – or to understand the faith of another, one needs to deploy the relevant concept whose criteria of application must be public – in a language that inhabits this world.²⁶

For this reason Asad cannot accept Smith’s position because “his residual essentialism leads him to ignore the materialities that form religious subjects.”²⁷ Behind this criticism there is a different concept of religion. For Smith it is a conceptual construction which has to be dropped in order to regain a new and better access to religious experience. However, for Asad, religion is a concrete expression of an historical fact and to be a religious person means for him to belong to a concrete community, in his case to the Muslim community. In other words, if we reject the concept of religion we, in fact, reject the material expression of belonging. It seems to me that we can find an answer for this dilemma in the anthropological reflection in which religion is seen as a part of cultural heritage of humanity. In order to do this we have to change the language which we use to describe religious reality, and Winfred Cantwell Smith was one of the first who rejected the traditional way of approaching religion, but he seems to be less eloquent in proposing a new, more appropriate way to speak about religion. Probably this was the reason for Asad’s criticism.

²⁵ Idem, *Multiply Religious Belonging: Opportunities and Challenges for Theology and Church*, “Theological Studies” 2003, No. 64, p. 502.

²⁶ T. Asad, op. cit., p. 214.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 217.

Religion as a cultural system

Ten years after the publication of the path breaking book by Smith, Clifford Geertz, also a cultural anthropologist as Talal Asad, proposed a new way to interpret the religious phenomenon. For Geertz religion could be seen as a cultural system. I will return later to this theory which became very influential in recent religious studies.²⁸ The best summary of the debate that took place after Geertz could be found in Jared Diamond's book *The World Until Yesterday* which contain also a chapter on religion.²⁹ As a scientist, Diamond used consequences from a variety of fields, including anthropology, ecology, geography, and evolutionary biology and in his book quotes sixteen the most characteristic definitions of religion including definitions by William James, Clifford Geertz and Karl Marks.³⁰

Diamond considered all of them insufficient, and proposed two new definitions. The first is simple and the second is more complicated. It seems to me that both definitions confirm the epistemological skepticism of W. C. Smith concerning the use of the term 'religion'. Let me quote both. For students Diamond elaborated a simple description: "Religion is the belief in a postulated supernatural agent for whose existence our senses can't give us evidence, but which is invoked to explain things of which our senses do give us evidence."³¹ I think that for students it is an understandable illustration of religion as a sociological phenomenon and does not preordain the authenticity of religion. The second is more multifaceted, and takes into account the historical complexity of religious phenomena:

Religion is a set of traits distinguishing a human social group sharing those traits from other groups not sharing those traits in identical form. Included among those shared traits is always one or more, often all three, out of three traits: supernatural explanation, defusing anxiety about uncontrollable dangers through ritual, and offering comfort for life's pains and the prospect of death. Religions other than early ones became co-opted to promote standardized or-

²⁸ C. Geertz, *Interpretations of Culture*, New York 1973, pp. 87–125.

²⁹ J. Diamond, *The Word Until Yesterday. What Can We Learn From Traditional Societies?*, London 2012, pp. 232–368.

³⁰ *Ibidem*, pp. 327–328.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 329.

ganization, political obedience, tolerance of strangers belonging to one's own religion, and justification of wars against groups holding other religions.³²

Diamond claims that his definition corresponds to reality. In my opinion this definition is not very original. Its importance consist not in new and original approach of religious experience but a summary of different and, in fact, complementary definitions. Actually, it is similar to the description presented already in 1966 by Peter L. Berger and Thomas Luckman in their classical book *The Social Construction of Reality* in which the confrontation with the other (in case of Christianity it is the case of heresy) is the most decisive factor in construction of religious identity. It is a classical example of social constructivism:

Historically, the problem of heresy has often been the first impetus for the systematic theoretical conceptualization of symbolic universe. The development of Christian theological thought as a result of a series of heretical challenges to the 'official' tradition provides excellent historical illustration for this process.³³

This process is, of course, valid also for other religions as well, and particularly intense in moments of confrontations, and also in elaboration of modern secular ideologies, as for example communism or fascism. We can also distinguish similar traits in the construction of ethnic or national identities, but it is not the topic of my paper.

In my opinion, the definition proposed by Clifford Geertz is closer to the phenomenological aspect of religion and to its cultural dimension. According to him: "Religion is a system of symbols which acts to establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and clothing those conceptions with such an aura of factuality that the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic."³⁴ In this definition Geertz identifies religion with culture, in other words, He sees it as a cultural phenomenon. Also, what is important for me is that this definition indicates how important a role it plays in memory in the process of shaping religious identity. I will come to this problem in my last section. For now, I would like to mention a theological pro-

³² Ibidem, p. 368.

³³ P. L. Berger, T. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality The Social Construction of Reality*, New York 1966, p. 107.

³⁴ C. Geertz, op. cit., p. 90.

posal elaborated by a Catholic, who aimed to include anthropological data in his reflection on religious traditions.

New language in theology is a sign of a new attitude toward the possibility of formulating religious conviction in words. I think that we can say that the Catholic Church changed the paradigm of its view of other religions – it moved from religious exclusivism towards inclusivism or even pluralism.³⁵ One of the most important Catholic thinkers to articulate this new way of thinking was the American Jesuit Walter Ong.³⁶ As far as I can see, he was the first Catholic theologian in the 20th century, who was looking for inspiration outside of Christian theology and took seriously the possibility that religious conviction might be changed as an outcome of a dialogue with other cultures and religions: “The dialogic approach means you don’t know where you are coming out. You stand to be modified by the other man; he stands to be modified by you.”³⁷ According to Ong, the center of the Christian message should be the human being as such, an individual person, and not the Holy Scripture, or dogmatic formulations:

The [...] person of every human being, for believers and non believers, lies in a way beyond statement. The ‘I’ that any one of us speaks lies beyond statement in the sense that although every statement originates, ultimately, from an ‘I’, no mere statement can ever make clear what constitutes this ‘I’ as against any other ‘I’ spoken by any other human being.³⁸

It seems to me that the proposal to concentrate theological reflection on the uniqueness of human being is a common feature of Ong and Smith and again confirms that the concept of religion is superfluous.

The theological consequences of this way of thinking are enormous. Namely, it means that it is not doctrinal formulations at the center of theological reflection but rather human beings. In other words, before we can start a dialogue between religions, we have to realize that we

³⁵ J. Dupuis, *Christianity and the Religions. From Confrontation to Dialogue*, New York 2001.

³⁶ T. J. Farrell, *Walter Ong’s Contributions to Cultural Studies. The Phenomenology of the Word and I-Thou Communication*, New Jersey 2000.

³⁷ *An Ong Reader. Challenges for Further Inquiry*, eds. T. J. Farrell, P. A. Soukup, New Jersey 2002, p. 91.

³⁸ W. Ong, *Hermeneutic Forever: Voice, Text, Digitization, and ‘I’*, “Oral Tradition” 1995, No. 10, p. 20.

meet as human beings. Ong says that each and every text should not be treated as the final truth that cannot be interpreted further.³⁹ This conviction also applies to the Church's doctrinal formulations. How far this new approach will lead us, it is impossible to predict, but we can say that culture and religion could be treated as synonyms.

“Do this in memory of me”

In the third and last part of my paper I would like to draw attention to the function of memory in the construction of cultural and religious groups. It will help us to see the possibility to overcome tensions and conflicts between different groups. I will use the work of Maurice Halbwachs (1877–1945) on collective memory which, as his translator into English, Lewis A. Coser, wrote in the introduction, “is path breaking and will have a continued impact.”⁴⁰ It seems to me that this impact will be particularly strong on religious studies. The main contribution of Halbwachs is to show how peculiar is religious memory, and how deeply it is shaped by the cultural and political structures of religious institutions. His analysis found confirmation in recent studies by Jan Assmann on cultural memory.

Although Halbwachs elaborated his ideas concerning collective memory in the thirties and the forties, they became really influential in the second part of the 20th century. His analysis of religious memory has some common traits with the anthropological theories constructed by Geertz and Diamond. But Halbwachs is more precise in underlining the exclusive character of this memory. First of all:

What is peculiar to the memory of religious groups is that, while the memories of other groups permeate each other mutually and tend to correspond, the

³⁹ “In a culture so addicted to literacy as that of the United States, to believe that truth, of various sorts or even all sorts, can be neatly enclosed in a proposition or a limited set of propositions that are totally explicit and self-contained, not needing or indeed even not tolerating any interpretation. [...] In the case of Christian fundamentalists, for example, what they commonly may not advert to is the biblical statement of Jesus's: «I am the way and the truth and the life» (John 14, 6). Jesus leaves his followers not list of given number of propositional statements that total up all that he comes to utter as the Word of God” (ibidem, p. 19).

⁴⁰ M. Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed., transl., and introduction L. A. Coser, Chicago 1992, p. 21.

memory of religions claims to be fixed once and for all. It either obliges others to adopt themselves to its dominant representations, or it systematically ignores them; contrasting its own permanence with the instability of others, it relegates them to an inferior rank.⁴¹

It seems that the role of memory is decisive in the development of different religious tradition which are antagonistic towards one another. Probably this antagonism explains also the variety of Christian denominations and their close relation to ethnic and national tradition. And it means that only when religious institutions, for example the Catholic Church, have the possibility to control the whole society, they can reach its religious goal:

As long as the Church was able to impose its tradition on the world, the entire life and history of the world had to conform to the tradition of the Church. All the remembrances that corresponded to that life and history had to be so many confirmations of the teaching of the Church, which could enrich its memory with all these testimonies without deviating from the line of the past.⁴²

In modern and postmodern time when secularization became decisive factor in shaping social landscape of different communities, it is obvious that religious institutions lost their ability to control the process of communication, so also the traditional transmission of religious tradition has to be modified. Also for this reason it becomes evident that these strategies are similar to transmission of other traditions:

Although religious memory attempts to isolate itself from temporal society, it obeys the same laws as every collective memory: it does not preserve the past but reconstructs it with the aid of the material traces, rites, texts, and traditions left behind by the past, and with the aid moreover of recent psychological and social data, that is to say, with the present.⁴³

Many studies by the German Egyptologist Jan Assmann deal with the monotheistic heritage of Western civilization. In a book dedicated to the memory of Egypt in Western monotheism Assmann postulated the return to Egyptian cosmotheism as a way to overcome the dark side of this form of religion:

⁴¹ *Ibidem*, pp. 91–92.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 113.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 119.

Cultural memory is rich in crypts and dark spaces. Discoveries and reemergences are always possible and prevent intellectual history from proceeding on a simple path of unilinear evolution. The return of Egypt and its cosmotheism as the suppressed counter-religion of Biblical monotheism may perhaps be considered one of the supreme examples of this phenomenon – at least in the West – to judge by its past and potential consequences for the development of thought, society, and moral institution.⁴⁴

In this context, it is possible not only to discuss concrete religious traditions, but also to negotiate their quality. As an example of this negotiation, I see an interesting proposal elaborated by the German sociologist Ulrich Beck in his book *A God of One's Own* which is directed to secular and to religious people as well, including Christians. According to Beck's vision:

If today the truth and legitimacy of faith has been placed in the hearts, conscience and hands of the sanctified individual in the shape of a God of one's own choosing, the contrast to the orthodoxy of the Christian churches could scarcely be greater. [...] Christianity may have undergone a conversion from an intolerance prosecuted with fire and sword to the limited form of tolerance.⁴⁵

It seems to me that exactly this “limited form of tolerance” is at stake when we discuss the concept of religion and its impact on human history. The awareness of mutual correlation between religion and culture on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the dependence of both on memory, could be a good departure point for the process of “conversion” of all the participants in the public debate. I believe that stronger awareness of the importance of memory, as an essential element in what heretofore has been known as “religion”, would be helpful in accurate understanding of that concept, which has to be seen as living traditions, in which people nurture their ultimate concerns. In a way, thanks to this relation between religion and memory it is possible to negotiate its content on the basis of individual experience which is unique, but its verbal expression is different each time.

⁴⁴ J. Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian. The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, Cambridge 1997, p. 218.

⁴⁵ U. Beck, *A God of One's Own: Religion's Capacity for Peace and Potential for Violence*, Cambridge 2010, p. 99.

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