GUY G. STROUMSA

The Crucible of Religion in Late Antiquity

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124

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The Crucible of Religion in Late Antiquity

Selected Essays

Mohr Siebeck

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For Aleida Assmann, Jan Assmann,
Hildegard Cancik-Lindemaier, Hubert Cancik

> »Die Sage versucht das Unerklärliche zu erklären. Da sie aus einem Wahrheitsgrund kommt, muß sie wieder im Unerklärlichen enden.«
>
> Franz Kafka, *Prometheus*

Preface

Like its twin volume, *Religion as Intellectual Challenge in the Long Twentieth Century: Selected Essays* (Tübingen, 2021), this volume includes a number of texts written over a number of decades. I am grateful to Dr. Henning Ziebritzki, Director of Mohr Siebeck, for his kind offer to publish these two volumes, as well as to Christoph Markschies, Martin Wallraff and Christian Wildberg for agreeing to publish this volume in *Studien und Texte zu Antike und Christentum*. I am deeply indebted to David L. Dusenbury, who has closely collaborated with me on the preparation of these two volumes, throughout the long and difficult period of various limitations and lockdowns in Jerusalem, during the coronavirus pandemic, and, at Mohr Siebeck, to Elena Müller, who skillfully accompanied the project.

There is no point in attempting here to summarize the twenty essays of this volume, written over a number of decades, mostly as contributions to workshops and conferences, and for the most part independently from one another. Most of them have been published in the past, and follow the style of various journals and publishers, in a number of countries. While most essays were written in English, a few were composed in French, my mother tongue. After some hesitation, I decided not to translate these into English, and to keep their original linguistic garb. I am pleased to retain in these two volumes of *Selected Essays* certain tangible marks of my intellectual biography. All essays have been lightly edited, also in order to follow the publisher's editorial policy, but it would have been futile to seek to update them.

I do not claim, of course, to deal with all, or even most of the key problems of late antique religious history. What I have sought to do, rather, is to adumbrate some of the major themes linking these problems together, as I perceived them at the time of writing. While these essays in no way amount to a search for a grand theory, I do hope they reflect my wish to search relentlessly for the new religious ethos emerging from the interface of religions in the long late antiquity.

Chapter 8 was written jointly with Ronnie Goldstein, and chapter 19 with Sarah Stroumsa. I wish to thank them both for having agreed to their new publication here. In the Conclusion, I briefly reflect on perceptions of time in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In this way, I hope to emphasize the sacred character of history at the very core of the Abrahamic religions and of their ideas of salvation.

It remains for the reader, and not me, to judge the extent to which these essays point to a solution of historical riddles, and to decide whether they help us appreciate the almost infinite complexity and riches of late antique religious history. As I look at the traces of my own idiosyncratic trajectory, at least, I can detect in my quest more serendipity than a clearly preconceived plan. In the words of the Sinologist Marcel Granet: »la méthode, c'est le chemin une fois qu'on l'a parcouru.« In any case, I feel a profound gratitude for the intellectual effort and pleasure throughout the years spent on this interminable journey, across centuries and continents. I have been lucky to acquire many friends, in many places, on this journey, which I have accomplished together with the most demanding and most rewarding of companions: Sarah Stroumsa.

This book is dedicated to four brilliant scholars, my first friends in Germany.

Jerusalem, May 2021 Guy G. Stroumsa

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Introduction: A New Religious Ethos

Late antiquity may be defined in a number of ways, some more restrictive and some broader, in terms of both space and time. According to all definitions, however, the focus is on the Christianizing Roman Empire, at a time when pagan cults were still present in mental as well as in physical landscapes. The religious dimension in the meeting of worlds, indeed, constitutes an essential character of late antiquity. For the historian of religion focusing on the interface between systems of belief and religious communities and its transformations, it makes sense to embrace the centuries from early Christianity to early Islam, and the Near East as well as the Mediterranean. It is only through both *la longue durée* and *les vastes espaces* that one may fully identify the new religious ethos blossoming in late antiquity, an ethos in which religious belief and religious praxis interact in new, previously unknown ways.[1]

Two main paradigms seem to compete for the understanding of the deep transformations of religion in the Mediterranean and the Near East through those centuries. The classical paradigm emphasizes the essentially revolutionary character of the new forms of religion during that period. This character is epitomized in the passage from paganism to Christianity (and later to Islam), or from polytheistic to monotheistic systems.

In the last generation, this paradigm has been seriously challenged, mainly by new approaches to late antique religious history. One often argues, in particular, for an essentially benign and gradual change, through the identification of a number of passages between the worldview of traditional religions and that of Christianity, as well as between the latter and the worldview of the early Islamic world.[2]

The contradistinction between the revolutionary paradigm and the evolutionary one informs much of contemporary research. This rather artificial dichotomy, however, unduly blurs our understanding of intertwined religious history. While there is no serious doubt about the momentous transformation of religion in late antiquity, identifying it with the Christianization of the Roman Empire may be misleading. The religious revolution of late antiquity seems, rather, to be reflected in a broader array of new forms of religious belief and practice, of which Christianity is only the most perceptible one.[3] One might then speak of revolution, but only as the final consequence of an incremental evolution – or re-elaboration – of ritual as well as theological transformations in a highly complex society.

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[1] On this trajectory, leading to the emergence of Islam, see G. G. Stroumsa, *The Making of the Abrahamic Religions in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2015). On the question of the transformation of an ethos, see in particular chapter 12, below.

[2] See A. Cameron, »What Exit from Antiquity?« in S. H. Nasser and N. al-Baghdadi, eds., *The Arab Muslim World in Universal History: Forms of Authority, Power and Transformation* (Leiden, forthcoming). Cameron singles out Peter Brown as a leading voice for this approach.

The theological dynamism of the period is represented by the passage from polytheistic systems to monotheistic and dualist ones, while the ritual dynamism may be followed in the move from rituals centered upon sacrifices in temples to rituals established upon scriptures, in churches, synagogues, or mosques. This double dynamism of beliefs and rituals sheds light on the transformations of religious ethos.[4] In a sense, the two parts of this book reflect this double argument. The essays in Part I mostly deal with mental aspects of religion in the Roman Empire, as expressed in early Christian texts and traditions. Those in Part II, on their side, deal with religious communication across cultures and communities in the Empire.

The classical paradigm, focusing on the passage from paganism to Christianity, is misleading in a number of ways. In implicitly ignoring other religious systems such as Manichaeism, or Zoroastrianism, as well as Gnostic trends, it misses the crucial importance of dualist theologies. Moreover, its implicit identification of monotheism with Christianity (not something self-evident) all but erases the monotheism professed by Jews, as well as that professed by some Hellenic philosophers, such as Plotinus. Finally, by subsuming all traditional religions under »paganism,« it distorts to the extreme a highly complex reality.[5] It may well be that the passage to monotheism should not be identified with the rise of Christianity.

The presence of a number of different dualistic and monotheistic religious systems in the late antique Eastern Mediterranean and Near East points to the core importance of dualism in the religious history of the period. In its various forms, religious dualism expresses a tension within both the heavenly and the earthly world, both of which are perceived, in some way or other, as battlefields. Zoroastrian dualism, in which the good and the evil gods confront one another throughout cosmic and human history, is essentially ethical.[6] In Second Temple Judaism, and then in early Christianity, Satan, who had been a rather pale figure in the Bible, grew in importance, becoming the main opponent to God within the divine world. Gnostic dualism represents a radicalization of this trend, sometimes mixed with Platonic dualism. Manichaeism, on its side, reflects the combination of Judeo-Christian and Zoroastrian dualisms. As the different dualist theologies clearly show, religious structures, even those seemingly as simple and clearly defined as monotheism, are far from stable. Their fluidity, their constant evolution, even their transformation through new arrangements of their elements, may evoke a kaleidoscope. In any case, the growth of dualist trends represents a major trait of late antique religion. One may argue that the confrontation between biblical monotheisms and dualist religions replaced, to a great extent, the previous clash between polytheism and monotheism. In both cases, the core of the conflict seems to lie less in the number of the divinities involved than in the religious status of history, as expressed in the Hebrew Bible, an idea which was accepted by the Fathers of the Church but replaced by mythological ways of thought in Gnosis and in Manichaeism.

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[3] I have sought to interpret the development of Christianity in the first centuries as a clear expression of this revolution in the *longue durée*; see G. G. Stroumsa, *Barbarian Philosophy: The Religious Revolution of Early Christianity* (Tübingen, 1999).

[4] On the question of the ethos and the conditions of its transformation, see chapter 12, below.

[5] Aspects of the transformation of Hellenic and Jewish traditions in early Christianity are studied in chapters 1 to 6, below.

[6] See S. Shaked, »The *Bundahišn* Account of Creation: Myth, Speculation, and Paradox,« Foreword to Domenico Agostini and Samuel Thrope, *The* Bundahišn*: The Zoroastrian Book of Creation, a New Translation* (Oxford, New York, 2020), XI–XXVI.

The scholar of Islamic philosophy Henri Corbin has discussed what he calls »the paradox of monotheism.«[7] For him, monotheistic systems are condemned to remain unstable structures, regularly morphing into systems close to polytheism. This happens, Corbin says, because the transcendence of the one God is not really sustainable for humans, who need intermediary figures in the divine world, the angels.[8] A similar remark, it seems to me, could be made about polytheistic systems in late antiquity. They show constant attempts to represent the divine world as hierarchies, on the top of which reigns a supreme god, who alone can rightly claim the name of god. One may therefore say that polytheistic systems, too, suffer from some structural instability, and this permits us to speak of the paradox of polytheism, which often tends to morph into some kind of monotheism. Rather than a passage from polytheism to monotheism, the virtual ubiquity of dualist structures of thought seems to represent a typical character of late antique thought patterns. In a sense, dualism represents an equilibrium between simplicity and complexity, retaining both closeness to monotheism and the recognition of complexity in the world of divine powers.

The prominence of esoteric trends in most religious (and philosophical) traditions in the ancient world is a reflection of the tensions inherent to dualistic perceptions of reality.[9] For the esotericists, what is visible to all does not represent the highest level of reality. The testimony of the senses is misleading. True reality remains invisible to human eyes. In that sense, it remains purely spiritual, and can be grasped only through the spiritual senses.

Under such conditions, truth is not available to all, but only to an elite within the community. Where most imagine visible forms of the divine, the elect know that God is invisible. As is clear already in Plato's *Second Letter*, the idea of esotericism is related to the ambivalent status of writing in the ancient world, a written text being always susceptible to fall into unworthy hands. The most important truths, which should not be made available to all, must be transmitted only orally. Higher reality is often revealed in visions. As we know from the prophetic movement, visions always remained the privilege of religious virtuosi. In scriptural religions, moreover, esoteric doctrines often took the form of hermeneutical traditions: different levels of interpretation of the revealed scripture fit different publics. Only the elect, those usually called mystics in scriptural religions, have access to the highest, spiritual level of textual interpretation.

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[7] See H. Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris, 1981).

[8] Although originally Jewish, and then Christian, there were also pagan angels, as shown by G. W. Bowersock, »Les anges païens de l'antiquité tardive,« *Cahiers du Centre G. Glotz* 24 (2013), 91–104.

[9] I have dealt with late antique esotericism in G. G. Stroumsa, *Hidden Wisdom: Esoteric Traditions and the Roots of Christian Mysticism* (Studies in the History of Religions 70; Leiden, 1996; Revised and augmented paperback edition, 2005). See chapters 4 and 5, below.

It is within the framework of such a fundamental skepticism toward the testimony of the senses that one must read the development, in the earliest stages of Christianity, of Docetism. According to this heresy, Jesus did not die on the cross, but only *seemed* to suffer. For the Docetists, then, the true Jesus had escaped, ascending to heaven, while someone else, taking his appearance, was crucified.

One of the most radical attitudes to be found among the early Christians, Docetism soon became a generic term for some of the most troubling heresies fought by the Church Fathers. Oddly enough, the puzzling phenomenon of Docetism does not seem to have elicited enough scholarly attention. Moreover, there is no general agreement upon a convincing definition of Docetism, and one is at a loss as to the focal point of the Docetistic world-view. The two main approaches seem to relate either to Christ's Incarnation or to his Passion. Either Christ was not really incarnated, as the Divine and matter could not have a common ground, and Christ would be totally spiritual in nature; or Christ was indeed incarnated, but did not really suffer on the cross. These two approaches are not identical. The first approach is broader, and is inclusive of the second. Many scholars seem to support the first approach, and to find the roots of Docetism in Platonic thought, or in what is sometimes called, rather nebulously, »Graeco-Oriental Dualism.«[10] For those scholars, Docetism argues that the human nature of Jesus is only a semblance. For those who support the second approach, which focuses on the crucifixion, it is Jesus's death, rather than his corporeal existence as such, which represented the scandal that the first Docetists sought to avoid.

It comes as no surprise that one of the major points of discord among the first Christians lay, precisely, in the question of the suffering, or the lack thereof, of Jesus Christ – a figure at the very intersection between humanity and divinity.

The central feature of the salutary mission of Jesus Christ, precisely, focuses on his passion, on his suffering. A man turned God, or a God turned man, in any case this passion was felt to be both powerful and shocking enough by both Jews and Greeks, as noted by Paul, who called him »a stumbling block to Jews, and foolishness to Gentiles« (I Cor. 1:23–24).

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[10] J. G. Davies, »The Origins of Docetism,« *Studia Patristica* VI (TU 81; Berlin, 1962), 13–35. Similar expression in N. Brox, »Doketismus: Eine Problemanzeige,« *ZKG* 95 (1984), 301–314.

In the words of Cyril of Alexandria (*floruit* in the early fifth century):

> Yet being God by nature, he is considered to be out of reach from suffering (*pathous*) … he accepted birth in the flesh, by a woman; he gave himself, I repeat, a body able to taste death, but also to be raised again, so that, while he remains impassible (*hina menōn autos apathēs*) one may say that he suffered in his own flesh.[11]

For Cyril, both Greeks and Jews are unable to recognize that Jesus's suffering on the cross is neither madness (the Greeks, in their ignorance, did not recognize his human nature) nor a cause for shame (the Jews, in their derangement, could not believe he was the Son of God). The truth is that he at once suffered (in his own flesh) and did not suffer (in the nature of Divinity). It is, indeed, only within the double Jewish and Greek matrix of Christianity that Docetism can be fully understood. [12]

Martyrdom, which reflects the agreement, or even the will to suffer in one's body in order to imitate Jesus, is thus established on the opposite presupposition: the Christian should suffer in his or her body, just as Jesus had suffered. The new religious ethos reflected in Christian martyrdom also represented a major transformation of emotions and their representation.[13]

The idea that the truest, highest reality, does not always appear to the senses, but must be deciphered through its traces, was of course fundamental in early Christian discourse. But it came from a long tradition, in Greek as well as Hebrew literature. Docetism, one of the earliest Christian heresies, eventually disappeared, but not without leaving in Christian thought, as a deep scar, a sense of fundamental hesitation about sensory reality.

The double perception of reality was replicated also at the anthropological level. Here, the double level of perception entails a fundamental distinction between body and soul, as well as one between two kinds of humans, those who are essentially spiritual, able to receive true knowledge of the divinity, and those who remain irremediably enchained by their body to the world of matter. Direct consequences of such anthropology include esoteric traditions, which are available only to the »spirituals,« while they are denied to simpler, lower believers.

Duality, then, represents a major principle of the new religious ethos emerging in our period. At the theological level, one finds it in dualist trends, such as Gnostic Christian groups, and especially in Manichaeism, the opposition between the ultimate Good God of the spiritual world (and of the elite among humans), versus the evil, or at least inept, Demiurge, creator of the material world. Gnosis, or true, secret knowledge, is usually acquired through ecstasy, an altered state of consciousness, so that the person itself is split between a lower, material body, and a spiritual double, which is heavenly.[14]

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[11] Cyril of Alexandria, *Deux traités christologiques*, ed. and trans. by G.-M. de Durand (SC 97; Paris, 1964), 498–499 (773d).

[12] Ibid., 775 a-e. On Docetism, see chapters 7 and 8, below.

[13] I deal with aspects of martyrdom in chapters 9 and 10, below.

[14] On the interface between Manichaeism and Christianity, see chapters 18 to 20.

The same dual principle regulates both vision of spiritual reality (whence mysticism) and the two-tiered organization of religious communities. This principle rules religious society, differentiating these two groups of practitioners, the *electi*, privy to esoteric knowledge, and the *auditores*, whose belief is not based on the deep understanding of the former (to use Augustine's terms for the two classes of Manichaeans). Just like in Buddhism, those »fellow travellers« support the core community, which the Buddhists call the *Sangha*, without really belonging to it. The God-fearers (*yirei-shamaym*, or *phoboumenoi* of Judaism), represent an important category of monotheists without a clear revelation of their own.[15]

In the world of late antiquity, religious communities, even when established on highly different principles, existed together, learning to live side-by-side, usually in awkward coexistence, more often than not pitted one against the other, in various styles of competition or conflict. Religious history, then, is the history of intertwined religious communities. It makes little sense, for instance, to depict the trajectory of, say, Christianity in its first centuries independently of the religious life of both Jews and pagans in the same period.[16] Heresies are a special case of the conflicting attitude between religious phenomena so characteristic of our period. Within the broad spectrum of the monotheistic (and dualistic) religious pattern, conflicting attitudes were expressed in different ways of hermeneutics, of reading the scriptures. Such a hermeneutical web of communities obviously highlights their polemical competitions. At the same time, it reflects the uneasy *convivencia* between them, as well as the religious common language, or *koine*, in which they all somehow partook.

The existence of a religious *koinē* of sorts underlines the global character of the world of late antiquity. It is within communities that religion is lived in our period. These communities, in their turn, function within webs of communication, where ideas, stories and practices circulate, ceaselessly undergoing transformations, some of which are radical enough to be considered real mutations. In a sense, such a world of communities is a globalized world, in which all religions have become diaspora religions.[17]

The constant movement of beliefs and rituals within the web of religious communities, however, resembles in no way to the free and untraceable movement of electrons. There is a clear vector in late antique religious history, towards structural simplification, i. e., a clear diminution of the margins of religious legitimacy, and a drive towards what has been called *la pensée unique*.[18] This vector leads to a simplified reality, in which one speaks of religious dissent rather than of hermeneutical richness. In the new world that is emerging in late antiquity, identity becomes essentially defined by religion rather than by ethnicity or culture.

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[15] On the existence of those »God-fearers« until the seventh century, see P. Crone, »Pagan Arabs as God-Fearers,« in C. Bakhos and M. Cook, eds., *Islam and Its Past: Jahiliyya, Late Antiquity, and the Qur'an* (Oxford Studies in the Abrahamic religions; Oxford, 2017), 140–164.

[16] See J. Rüpke, »Early Christianity out of, and in, Context,« *Journal of Roman Studies* 99 (2009), 182–193.

[17] On webs of communication of religions, see chapter 16, below.

[18] P. Athanassiadi, *Vers la pensée unique: La montée de l'intolérance dans l'Antiquité tardive* (Paris, 2010). See chapter 15, below.

At least for students of religion, then, late antiquity represents a new axial age of sorts. As is well known, the concept of Axial Age, launched (or rather, re-launched) by Karl Jaspers in the aftermath of the Second World War, describes a striking series of (allegedly) similar transformations in thought and religion which occurred in societies as different as those of Greece, Israel, Iran, India, and China, more or less around the middle of the first millennium B.C.E.[19]

To some extent, late antiquity represents, at least for Mediterranean and Near Eastern societies, a turning point for religion and culture no less significant than that of the *Achsenzeit*. In two monographs, I have sought to show how two main characteristics of religion in the long late antiquity reflect such a transformation. In *The End of Sacrifice*, focusing on ritual, I discussed the long-range consequences of the disappearance, or at least the weakening, of sacrificial cults, mainly thanks to the combined efforts of Jews and Christians.[20] In *The Scriptural Universe of Ancient Christianity*, I dealt with the status and roles of books in the world of early Christians, as well as with the idea of book religion and its implications, both cultural and religious.[21] I approached the question at hand as a historian of religions rather than as a church historian, setting it within the broader perspective of what can be called the scriptural movement of late antiquity. Like Max Müller, I believe that in order to be fully understood, religious phenomena should be studied within a broad historical, cultural and social context. Thus, I emphasized the double paradigm shift, cultural as well as religious, which can be detected in late antiquity. At the core of the religious paradigm shift lies what I have called »the end of sacrifice,« i. e., the broad abandonment of public blood-sacrifice as a core religious ritual, in many religious systems of the Mediterranean and Near East, starting with Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism. As my argument there is presented in chapter 11 in this collection, I do not need to discuss it here. I only wish to note, at least, that our period underwent some kind of what we call now »globalization,« in which the clash of the Sasanian and the Roman Empires did not prevent the spread of cultural patterns (in particular, Aramaic as a *lingua franca*) across political borders. The most striking consequence of such a globalization may be the spread of Manichaeism across Asia, as well as in various provinces of the Western Roman Empire. We should remind ourselves, here, that Manichaeism is the first religion established by its founder as universal, or world religion.

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[19] On the Axial Age, see R. Bellah and H. Joas, eds., *The Axial Age and its Consequences* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2012); as well as, for Jaspers' precursors, J. Assmann, *Achsenzeit: Eine Archäologie der Moderne* (Munich, 2018).

[20] G. G. Stroumsa, *La fin du sacrifice: Mutations religieuses de l'antiquité tardive* (Collège de France; Paris, 2005). English translation by S. Emanuel: *The End of Sacrifice: Religious Transformations in Late Antiquity* (Chicago, 2009). On contemporary research on sacrifice, see D. Ullucci, »Sacrifice in the Ancient Mediterranean: Recent and Current Research,« *Currents in Biblical Research* 13 (2015), 388–439, as well as C. Hutt, »A Threefold Heresy: Reassessing Jewish, Christian and Islamic Animal Sacrifice in Late Antiquity,« *History of Religions* 58 (2019), 251–276, where the author convincingly argues for continuing sacrificial practices throughout late antiquity.

[21] G. G. Stroumsa, *The Scriptural Universe of Ancient Christianity* (Cambridge, Mass., and London, 2017). On the formation of a Christian culture, see chapters 13 and 14, below. The following paragraphs owe much to G. G. Stroumsa, »The Scriptural Movement of Late Antiquity and Intertwined Religious Histories,« postface to E. Grypeou, ed., *The Scriptural Universe of Late Antiquity*, forthcoming.

I wish instead to reflect briefly on the core of the cultural paradigm shift, which may be identified with the passage from scroll to codex, as the common physical support of books. From the first to the fourth century, these parallel transformations of the status and function of books would be accomplished, highlighting the dialectical relationship between culture and religion. More precisely, on may speak of intertwined religious and cultural histories. Born within the monotheistic climate of Judaism, Christianity grew up in »a world full of gods,« to use Keith Hopkins' pregnant expression. This was a world, moreover, in which Greek, Latin, and Aramaic were vying for the transmission of cultural traditions. *Cultura christiana*, when it eventually appeared, represented the ultimate result of a complex process, and would provide the backbone of European culture throughout the Middle Ages, until the Renaissance at least. As a religion of the book, then, early Christianity reflects a particularly intricate mixture of religious and cultural transformation. It is the task of the historian to search for the rules of such transformations, for their grammar.[22]

A religion of the book, as should by now be clear, is not only a religion established upon a »sacred book,« which is held to be divinely revealed. The very idea of a revealed book entails a cascade of consequences. The community, or the network of communities, carrying this book and revering its origin, must endlessly protect, copy, translate, and interpret it. Those communities, then, live in nothing else than a scriptural universe, and its members, or at least its religiously active members, soon develop an intimacy of sorts with the holy text. In ancient societies, in which literacy was dramatically more limited than what has become common in the modern world, memory was much more developed than today, and oral traditions played a role that we find difficult to imagine. In many ways, we have now lost the »scriptural intimacy« that was common in pre-modern societies.

In a recent book, Karen Armstrong, one of the most persistent and powerful voices in the eminently respectable task of popularizing religious scholarship in the Anglophone world, deals at length with precisely this predicament of ours.[23] For the explanation of our predicament, Armstrong turns to the cognitive sciences. More precisely, she refers to the two hemispheres of the brain: the right hemisphere, essential to imagination, and hence to the creation of poetry, music, and religion; and the left hemisphere, identified with logical reasoning, responsible for science and technology. The predominance of science in the modern world, she says, has brought with it an imbalance between the two hemispheres, a hypertrophy of the left and an atrophy of the right. One of the most dramatic consequences of this new human condition is the loss of our former familiarity with the language of religion – in other words, our present religious illiteracy. We no longer know how to read religious texts. We have lost the hermeneutical key, says Armstrong, which is needed to open them. These texts do not simply carry knowledge, but sustain a way of life, and are a means of self-transformation. As such, they must be read according to traditional rules of interpretation. Hermeneutics, in such a scheme, reflects both epistemic contents and behavioral patterns.

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[22] On aspects of the formation of a Christian culture and cultural memory, see chapters 14 and 15, below.

[23] K. Armstrong, *The Lost Art of Scripture: Rescuing the Sacred Texts* (London, 2019). See my review in *The Times Literary Supplement*, »Do as you'd be done by: Religious literacy and practical ethics,« *TLS* 6104 (26 March 2020), 32.

Some scriptures, however, were composed as oral literature, and meant to be recited, or sung, in ritual. Such scriptures were redacted only later. For the Qur'an, this process seems to have lasted a few decades. The Zoroastrian Gathas, on the other hand, remained oral for more than a millennium. It is amazing that such texts could stay quite stable for so long, even when their language, Avestan, had long ceased to be understood, even by the priests. One should however remember that in religious history, texts do not only evolve from an oral to a written form. In the »scriptural universe« of a religion, there is also room for the reverse movement, for the oral interpretation of written texts. Actually, hermeneutics is infinitely complex: texts are sung, memorized, commented upon, translated, and enacted in ritual. In order to grasp the life of sacred texts in the historical development of a given religion, one has to postulate a meta-textuality of sorts. Armstrong argues that in a globalized world, we should consider ourselves as the heirs of all the various scriptures and religious traditions. Only such an approach, she says, can permit us to move from toleration of the other to a new symbiosis. It is hard to disagree with such a generous vision, although this is a cultural task rather than a religious challenge.

Developing a deep understanding of other people's religious scriptures and of their religious history necessitates, to use anthropological vocabulary, an etic approach, not an emic one. Hence, it represents primarily a broadening of one's cultural memory, rather than a transformation of one's religious tradition. Translating the religious traditions of others into the terms of one's own is a very old habit, well known in the ancient world. The most dramatic such attempt is probably that of Mani, who in the third century C.E. designed the first consciously universal religion. Manichaeism sought to integrate into a world system the gods and prophets of all nations – Zarathustra, Jesus, Buddha – all, that is to say, except the god and prophets of the Jews, whom Mani perceived as evil. This last trait of Manichaean religious *mythopoiesis* underlines the late antique failure to imagine a genuinely universal religion.

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