

Religion and Power in Ioan Petru Culianu's View

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“The power which in pseudo-specific societies the individual had to lose and regain ritually has returned today to the pure state of aggressiveness.”

IOAN PETRU Culianu was born in Romania in 1950. After he finished his studies at the University of Bucharest, he immigrated to Italy where he completed his religious studies. In 1976 he moved to the Netherlands, at the University of Groningen. Supervised by Michel Meslin, he received the State Doctorate (Doctorat d'État) at the Sorbonne, France, in 1987. Finally, following his mentor Mircea Eliade, he moved to Chicago to become a professor at the Chicago Divinity School. Unfortunately Chicago was also the place where he was shot in 1991.

Culianu was a scholar of religious studies, with great interests and contributions in other fields of study such as the history of ideas, literary theory or the philosophy of culture. Culianu is known mainly as a specialist in Gnosticism and Renaissance Magic. His first scholarly approach to the study of religion was historical, but in his last books Culianu's point of view moved

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toward a cognitive approach to religion. The latter assumes this hypothesis: if people from different places are thinking of the same thing, for example the soul, and have the same premises—which can be: the soul is separated from the body, the body is mortal and the soul immortal, and so on—, these people will come with similar (not identical) solutions for the problem of the soul. Culianu affirms that there is no need to search for origins, as they reside in the human mind, or for transmission from one culture to another, as it is from mind to mind. It is enough for one person to hear or to find out some opinions and ideas about the soul in one place, and to remember only few fragments of them (for example, from a speech one hears): he or she will meditate on that topic and come with his or her own opinion and ideas. The fewer the premises, the more limited the solutions. A simple case exemplifies this possibility with the concision of a math exercise. If we take two pairs of opposites, for instance: A & non A ($|A$), and B & non B ($|B$), there are only four logical combinations:

1. A-B
2. A- $|B$
3. $|A$ -B
4. $|A$ - $|B$

If we use the dichotomy soul/body instead of symbols and the premises are:

1. The soul preexists the body (A)
2. The soul does not preexist the body ($|A$)
3. The soul is created (B)
4. The soul is not created ($|B$)

Then the results are:

1. The soul is created and preexistent (A-B)—this is a conception that can be found for example in Hinduism, Platonism, with some Gnostics and Origen.

2. The soul is created and does not preexist their bodies (A- $|B$)—it can be found with Orthodox Christians and it started with St. Augustine.

3. The soul does not preexist the body, but they are created ($|A$ -B)—this doctrine is called Traducianism, and was advocated by Quintus Septimius Florens Tertullianus (or Tertullian; c. 160–c. 225). It claims that, in the same way as an individual's body is the resultant from the bodies of the individual's parents, the soul is derived from the souls of the parents.

4. The soul does not preexist the body, and they are not individually created ($|A$ - $|B$)—a conviction of many North American populations: they believe there is a reservoir of soul substance, and the souls go back to it after dying. The same belief is shared by Averroes (1126–1198), also known as Ibn Rushd, the master of Aristotelian and Islamic philosophy.

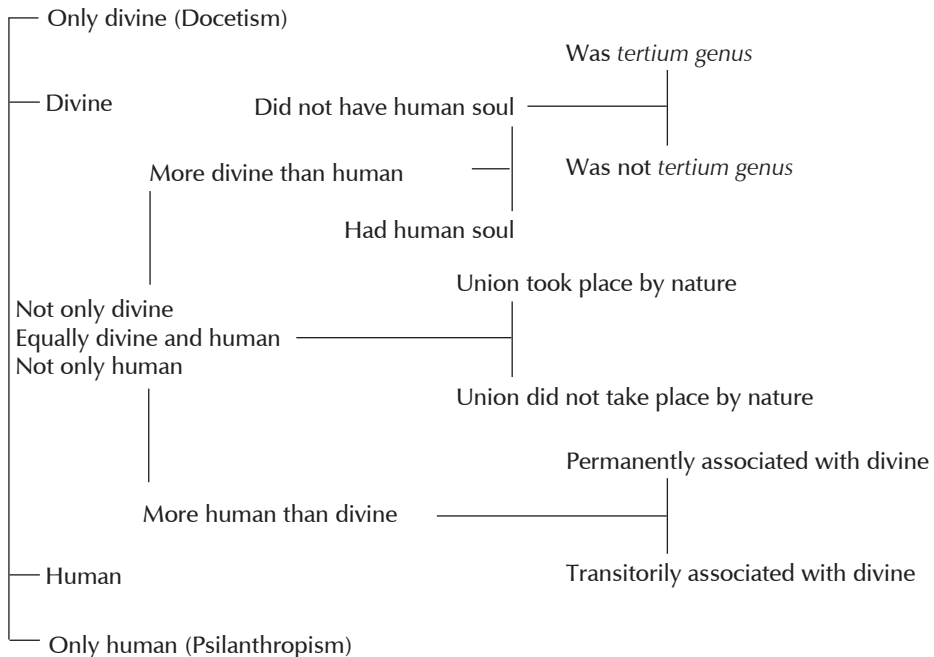
Subsequently, as the number of premises increase, the results chart becomes more complex. At any rate, says Culianu, complexity is not an impediment: important is the fact that any religion can be split up in different parts that follow

the same cognitive pattern. He illustrates this in a more complicated example, of the human versus divine nature of Christ:

- divine (1) versus human (2);
- only divine (Docetism) (1.1) versus not only divine (1.2);
- not only human (2.1) versus only human (Psilanthropism) (2.2);
- more divine than human (1.2.1) versus equally divine and human (1/2) versus more human than divine (2.1.1);
 - did not have human soul (Athanasius) (1.2.1.1) versus had human soul (Origen)(1.2.1.2 or 1/2.1);
 - was *tertium genus* (Monophysism) (1.2.1.2.1) versus was not *tertium genus* (Orthodoxy) (1.2.1.2.2 or 1/2.1.1);
 - was permanently associated with the divine (Antiochene School) (2.1.1.1) versus was not permanently associated with the divine (Adoptionism) (2.1.1.2 but also 2.2.1);
 - the union between God and man took place by nature (Cyril of Alexandria) (1/2.1.1) versus the union did not take place by nature (1/2.1.2 but according to some 2.1.1.1.2).

All these significant dichotomies that make the system work could be distinguished easier in Fig. 1.

FIG. 1. THE NATURE OF CHRIST—DIVINE VERSUS HUMAN



SOURCE: Culianu 1992, 14–15.

Culianu affirms (Eliade and Culianu 1993, 17–18) that the same method, as demonstrated in the case of Gnosticism (Culianu 1992), or in the case of out-of-body experiences or ecstasies (Culianu 1991), applies to any religion: although some are more complex than others, and consequently harder to identify, all religions are built on this sort of mental constructs. Some of these are ‘winners’ and one way or another they become paradigms and laws for which people are willing to die and kill. This is quite an unfortunate situation; what is more, during our history, it really happened but it should not have, as Culianu proves in one of his last books (Culianu 1992). This time Culianu bluntly affirms that “the main theological debates that led to the establishment of Christian doctrine were mind games people played with one another for centuries, mind games not different from chess (only perhaps less complex), which should not have had any consequences for the parties involved and could not be properly won by anyone, for, unlike chess, they did not include a rule for checkmate. Yet they nevertheless accomplished the moral and physical destruction of many and were won by an exercise of power” (Culianu 1992, 267).

As Aurel Codoban affirms in his study, there are major differences between Culianu and Mircea Eliade, both in their themes of research and in their methodological approach to religion. For Eliade, who is well-known as a generalist and phenomenologist of religion, the most important category is the Sacred, and its manifestation into the world, named hierophany. For Culianu, more important was the kratophany, which is the manifestation of power. “If we concentrate the difference between Eliade and Ioan Petru Culianu in a short formula, we can say it is about a different perception of the sacred: as form or as force, ‘power,’ namely about the difference between hierophany and kratophany in the manifestation of the sacred” (Codoban 2002, 93–94). Actually this is valid not only regarding the sacred. Culianu had really been preoccupied by power and its manifestation since his youth, as his oeuvre proves.

IN HIS first publications, which were several prose pieces he wrote when he was a student, he concentrated more on the political power. Culianu was born and spent his youth in some of the most awful years of the communist regime. In his stories written as a Romanian student he dared to say more than the regime permitted. His first volume of prose, which was supposed to be published in 1971, was printed only in 2002 with a lot of effort put into recovering his stories. One of them, “Să nu pierzi acest act” (Do not lose this document) is illustrative for the senseless and dreadful dictatorial system that was Romanian communism. The document in question is so important that people cannot live without it: they will be sent to prison and left to die there if they are caught without the document. The narrator gets his paper but the minute he leaves the

clerk's office he loses it (somebody robs him). So he forces his way back and asks for a new document. The official explains to him how the system works. The document is stolen from everybody. Some take the risk and live all their life in fear of being discovered. Others come back and stay in front of his door for years, waiting in vain for another one. But what the narrator did had never happened before, even though that is the way everybody should act, "if they were not so frightened" (Culianu 2002, 95). The truth is that nobody has the document. The structure is founded on nothing except fear. The whole system is an immense machinery working in the void, founded on anxiety and suspicion, "a huge apparatus controlling the world" (*ibid.*, 98).

In 1981, Culianu turned his attention from authority (which is the power of institutions) to power in general, power *per se*. In a less known essay published in Italian at the age of thirty-one (Culianu 1996), Ioan Petru Culianu expounds what power is and how it has manifested itself in individuals and societies throughout human history. The main question now is whether Culianu's essay is out of date or not, since it is an essay published at a time when Europe (and some other regions of the world) was divided in two: the communist bloc and the "free world" (i.e. Western Europe)? In fact, it remains quite topical nowadays.

Culianu defines power as "*a modification of the internal state* suffered by an individual or a collectivity, through an *investment* variable in its nature" (Culianu 1996, 164). Culianu classifies power in two ways: "power in a subjective way, which is experienced by a subject" and power in an "*objective* or *cultural* way, because the cultural norms invest from outside the whole realization of the abilities of an individual" (*ibid.*). The subjective power is in a permanent conflict with the objective power. Except for the "specialists in power" (or, in Eliade's terms, in the sacred: Shamans, Masters of Yoga or Zen, Christian Ascetics, or Islam's Sufis are only a few examples of this sort of specialists in the sacred who transcend the norms), individuals obey the norms. There are rituals that allowed individuals to periodically escape from the norms in a controlled process of abolition of rules. In traditional societies (in Culianu's terms: pseudo-specific societies: tribes, clans, and so on) the proper function of the rituals that helped people relieve themselves from the strain of the power of norms was assumed by religion. It had the role to create and maintain the proper frame for different rituals to compensate between normal boundaries all the assimilated repressions; that is why they are called rituals of compensation.

If an individual or even a society has in rituals an instrument of compensation, for culture there is only one instrument to counteract the norms: nihilism. Culianu also included Gnosticism in this category, in a study published for the first time in Romanian: "The gnosis is nothing else but a species belonging to

the nihilist genre” (Culianu 2003, 144). Contrary to what is usually said, utopia, far from opposing nihilism, is actually its continuator. Culianu underlined that, in extremis, when the utopian antinomian attitude against capitalism was applied in history, it led to three negative political consequences: communism, Nazism, and terrorism (Culianu 1996, 215–216). There is no profound difference between the three.

In time, the role of religion as a creator and maintainer of rituals of compensation was gradually assumed by the state, as it happened in what is called ‘secularity.’ But the state proved to be incapable to provide the proper environment, so the next result was a real issue because “the power which in pseudo-specific societies the individual had to lose and regain ritually *has returned today to the pure state of aggressiveness*” (Culianu 1996, 219). In conclusion, when the state tried to replace religion, the results could and did degenerate into “pure aggressiveness.” But the corollary is also accurate, and the present days prove it: when religion tried to replace the role of the state, in some cases the result could lead to something as destructive as a new kind of terrorism.

Culianu resumes his thoughts on religion and state in his subsequent books, this time with a better circulation among specialists. One of them is *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*.¹ Here Culianu makes an ingenious distinction between different kinds of states: one is called Magician-State and the other Police-State. When they deteriorate—the first because of too much subtleness and suppleness, and the second because of the complete absence of subtleness and suppleness—they become Wizard-State and Prison-State (Culianu 1994, 146–147). One can easily recognize the two political structures: on the one hand capitalism and on the other hand communism and other totalitarian systems. Of course, adds Culianu, although far from being perfect, the Magician-State is preferable to any other state, and the future seems to belong to it. In the wake of the Eastern European revolutions and the fall of the communist bloc, it seems that Culianu was right. But is he also right after all that happened between the events occurred in the USA on 9/11 and in France on 1/11?

The answer to the main question this article asked—“What is religion?”—can be inferred from Culianu’s last books and articles: religion is a process started by the human mind and transmitted throughout time (i.e. our history) from one mind to another in a complex way, following a particular set of rules, perfectly logical, and no more than that. If Culianu was once again right and this definition is also true, then killing in the name of religion is nothing else but a derisory excuse for an actual act of killing in the name of subjective power.

□

Note

1. First published in French (Flammarion, 1984). Italian edition: *Eros e magia nel Rinascimento: La congiunzione astrologica del 1484*, trans. Gabriella Ernesti (Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, 1987); English edition: *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, trans. Margaret Cook (Chicago–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1987).

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Abstract

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Ioan Petru Culianu is known mainly as a specialist in Gnosticism and Renaissance Magic. His first scholarly approach to the study of religion was historical, but in his last books Culianu’s point of view moved towards a cognitive approach to religion. This article analyses Culianu’s main viewpoints on religion, state and power. It examines some writings of Culianu which have not yet been translated into English, for example some prose pieces from his Romanian period, an essay published in Italian, and a text written in French but published for the first time in Romanian in 2003. In the end it will infer from Culianu’s last books a definition of religion, a definition that contradicts any act of terrorism made in the name of religion.

Keywords

Ioan Petru Culianu, Mircea Eliade, religion, state, power, terrorism