The Modern Mission of Monotheism

Some Remarks on the Hidden Link between

Religion, Philosophy and Culture Today

Contribution to the International Workshop ‘Religion, Philosophy and Culture’

Saint Paul University, Ottawa, Canada, 23-24 September 2013

What binds ‘religion, philosophy and culture’ together?

A lot of things, but glitches, complications, irritations and problems at the first place. Religion has lost its grip on culture, including philosophy. Once, even deep into modernity, it played a dominant role in western civilization, but that civilization precisely became modern as that role progressively diminished. And now its part is played out or has become really minimal. Religion has at the most a secondary influence on society and its culture.

The same goes for philosophy. Although philosophy in some way or another is always about society and culture (it has no problem at all to argue its link to culture or, even, its cultural necessity), there is a lot of today’s philosophy that has no reference whatsoever to religion, not even to religion as considered as problematic. Religion, they say, is a matter of faith, and faith is something personal, stuff for the intimate of the soul; it has nothing to do with public culture, with science or with thinking in the margin of science which is philosophy.

All this is true, and yet, on a fundamental level, i.e. on that level where we meet the ‘grammar’ in which we speak as well as the basic suppositions we all accept without being aware of them, on the level of the common discourse that we have inherited from history and which we continue to unconsciously ‘breath’ (so to speak) – on that level, there is still a specific link between religion, philosophy and culture. There, religion is more dominant than we are inclined to admit. This is at least the thesis I want to defend here with a few short remarks.

But, first, what is religion? Or, rather, what kind of religion is involved here? For the religion secretly at work in the fundamental grammar our culture and philosophy operate with is a specific one. It is monotheism, and this is, contrary to the way we spontaneously speak, not simply a synonym of religion. It would take another – longer – lecture to fully explain this, but I can say at least that it is a ‘secondary’ religion, to use a term coined by the great German Egyptologist of our time, Jan Assmann. The origins of monotheism do not lay in the deep dark, pre-historical times out of which civilizations have emerged, they do not lay in the wide spread attitude of ancient man to talk about his life and the life around him by referring to his ancestors, to the dead from whom he has received life, and to death *as such* or to the realm beyond death where he situated the source of the gift his and other’s life is, has been given. Monotheism is not a ‘primary’, ‘natural’ religion, it is not a culture considering the ‘nature’ man lives by as inhabited by ghosts or gods reigning in the obscure field of the sacred which man should keep at distance if only in order to be able to accept the indispensable gifts coming from there.

Monotheism is ‘secondary’ in the sense that it emerges from a reserve or even a critical attitude with regard to all this. It does not belief in ghosts and gods. Why? Because it *beliefs*. Because it performs a commitment to something of which it claims that you can believe in it, trust it, something in which you can have faith in. And, what is more, you have that faith in it because it is supposed to be true. Faith or believe supposes truth. Monotheism links the divine and the sacred to truth, and in this, it differs radically from all other religions. It deals with the domain of ‘the beyond’ from an entirely different perspective than the archaic religions did, it approaches the divine with a specific distinction, with a criterion that distinguishes truth from false, that declares some gods idols and others real.

Contrary to monotheism, ancient religions dealt with the divine without making that distinction. Which is not to say that in their eyes all gods were the same. Precisely not, they were all different, but – and this is crucial – their difference was not considered from the perspective of *one* difference, a difference which operated as the principle, the ‘arche’ of an entire set of differences constituting the symbolic universe. The non-monotheistic universe is, even at the level of (what we would call) its ‘principles’, diffuse: it is a differential domain without ‘arche’, a culture lead by (so to speak) an anarchistic difference, obeying a ‘grammar’ that was not to be reduced to one single difference dominating all the others.

We cannot even imagine how, in such a universe, one could find reliable points of reference or even be capable of simply *thinking*. For thinking – just like monotheism – supposes a reference to truth, to the distinction made between true and false. And this is what both monotheism and thinking – or, more generally, today’s religion and philosophy – has in common: they refer to the truth or, more exactly, they are based in the unquestioned supposition that there is a difference between true and false, that the chaotically differential world is to be reduced to a single difference, the one separating true from false and telling that what is true exists and what is not true does not. Gods are false and do not exist, for there is only one God, and solely that divinity exists; the gods do not.

This is the core of monotheism. It makes it an inherently critical – and even ‘religion critical’ – religion. This is the essence of what, in the 14th century AD, the Egyptian pharaoh Akhenaton did when he established the first monotheism in history, the cult of the one and only Aton. This is where our Bible is full of as well. Again and again the Lord has to fulminate against his Chosen People’s ‘natural’ inclination to worship other gods, for, as he declares, He is the Only, the only true God, the only existing One.

Modernity has established itself during centuries of sharp criticism with regard to Christian religion. That religion – as well as religion in general – had been exposed as incompatible to critical thinking as developed in modern science, thus the philosophers of the Enlightenment, backed up by Kant who declared the scientific pretentions of Christian faith as “*schwärmerei*”, as mere fantasy.

Yet, on a strictly formal level, this critical attitude is not so anti- or non-monotheistic as it seems. For just like monotheism, enlightenment fought false gods. It fought the false idea of what erroneously was taken for true. And of course, Enlightenment had a radically different idea of who or what then the true God is, namely the truth that there is no God at all. But its intention to demolish the false gods was formally monotheistic, and when Enlightenment it was corrected by German Idealism, telling that the relation it had to its own thesis is not radically different from ‘faith’, from an attitude vis-à-vis the claimed truth which is not entirely to be founded in that truth (an attitude to be described a the kind of ‘jump’ Soren Kieregaard analyzed in its extreme consequences), it was invited to acknowledge its monotheistic inheritance. In a way, it was invited to recognize, in its very enemy, its brother in arms. Enlightenment was – and is – in the position to ‘love its enemy’. Just like today’s monotheistic religions are in the position to love their ‘enlightened’ enemies and to recognize in their critical attitude – even their religion-critical one – a similar mission as their own. For in a time of religious crisis – and, consequently, religious confusion, it is monotheism’s mission to assist modern man in the ‘fight with his gods’ – gods and idols who, precisely in an image culture like ours, are omnipresent.

Here, it is crucial to take into account the second fundamental criterion Jan Assmann ascribes to monotheism. For the monotheism that will dominate our history, the Jewish one, is not solely characterized by the truth criterion, as is the case with Akhenaton’s monotheism. Contrary the this one, Jewish (and, consequently, the later Christian and Islamic) monotheism changed the direction of the religious procedure. Similar to the non-monotheistic religion, Akhenaton’s monotheism was concentrated on the relation with his god. Religion was there to please the god – with sacrifices, prayers, processions, temples, and all kind of things we still call typically ‘religious’. Jewish monotheism has not done away with all that, but it has not emphasized it either. It has restricted it to one single place: only in the temple in Jerusalem, the strictly ‘religious’ aspect of monotheism could be celebrated.

This was possible because the restricted ‘religiously’ established relation to the deity went hand in hand with a then new way to establish the human relation to God. To serve God, to commit oneself to the only one and true god, one should particularly do justice to the ones who have no – or difficult – access to justice, to the rightless, to those whom the Bible often entitles as “the widows and the orphans” – thus the message the prophets of Israel again and again has repeated. The *Promised Land* God guarantees is not so much a political state with international prestige (as Israel’s kings claimed, for which they were criticized by the biblical prophets), as a community of high ethical standards, where it is good living because justice is done to everyone, even those in the margin being not in the possibility to claim justice. Here the ‘sense’ of (antique) religion changed: to serve God is now to serve man, not the man of power, but the weak and powerless, the “luckless, the abandoned and forsake”.

The Covenant that God signed with his Chosen People is about this. It is the core mission of the Torah, the Law the Lord dictated to Moses on the Mount Sinai Desert. The direct link between religion and social justice is what Assmann coined as the “Mosaic Criterion”, “*Die mosaische Unterscheidung*”, and this is what Jewish monotheism distinguishes from any other antique religions, even Akhenaton’s monotheism.

This monotheist idea of social justice has entered our culture through Christianity, and has been supported by the long Greek philosophical reflection on ‘*dikaiosunè*’ and the Roman juridical treatment of a similar social justice item. And since social justice is in the center of modernity’s political project (a project trying to give justice its foundation in the ‘social’, in the fact that we are all ‘*socii’*, ‘comrades’, ‘companions’), monotheism has a voice in this debate.

Both its social interest and its tradition of criticism – even criticism of religion – put monotheistic religions in the position in which they can genuinely participate in the basic project of modernity.

To conclude, I want to go into one aspect that makes monotheist ‘social criticism’ particularly interesting in the context of modernity. Monotheism, as explained, is a critical and even ‘religion critical religion. Yet, despite this, it has considered itself always as religion. That is less contradictory than one may think. It is at least similar to the condition modern ideology critique is in. This has to criticize and unmask ideology although it is aware of the fact that there is no radical alternative which definitively escapes ideology. As modern critical thought – with Adorno, Foucault, Lacan and Zizek (to name only a few) - has discovered, there is no ‘outside’ to ideology. To put it in reference to the old platonic myth: we are *in* the cave, and we have to criticize the shadows – the false images – on the wall, but now we know that this cave of images is all there is. Just as we know that precisely for that reason, criticism is more necessary than ever, for the world we live in consists to a larger extent out of images, and in that condition, we absolutely cannot do without a critical attitude, without a critical culture supported by our long tradition of criticism.

Monotheism belongs fully to that tradition. This is why the way it has dealt with its criticism – in the good as well as the bad way - has to be taken into account by our modern critical culture. This is why monotheism has to participate to that culture of criticism and to cultivate its own proper voice in this.