

Philippe Borgeaud (2004), *Aux origines de l'histoire des religions*, Paris, Seuil (La Librairie du XXI siècle)

Unlike the question of the origin of religions (or rather 'religion' in the singular), a cul-de-sac or precipice down which the 'science of religion' (*Religionswissenschaft*) blindly plunged for decades, Philippe Borgeaud's title postulates the existence of a history of religions, and also of its object, as time-bound and datable. It links the birth of the subject area to the emergence of its object, and the existence of this object to the observer who imagines and defines it: religion exists as such, isolatable in cultural space, only because there was once subject matter for a history of religions. The concept of religion is not universal, it does not refer to anything innate in human beings. It emerged in the context of the 'theological triangle' which witnessed the encounter and conflict between gods in human shape, gods with animal heads and a god with no image: the anthropomorphism of the Greek gods, the theriomorphism of the Egyptian gods and the aniconism of the god of the Jews.

Philippe Borgeaud holds the chair in the history of religion in Geneva, where he succeeded his teacher Jean Rudhardt, who died in 2003. His book takes the form of an essay in five unnumbered chapters preceded by a brief preface and an introduction. Two pages of chronology for the ancient data analysed in the book, 52 pages of notes, an extensive bibliography of nearly 25 pages, a short index (where the typographical style distinguishes between old words, proper names and authors' names) make it a work that is both scholarly and very easy to handle, accessible to educated and especially informed minds. Its aspiration and its limits are delineated simultaneously: alongside extremely carefully explicated themes in the area of antiquity, in which the author is an eminent specialist, others are treated with the more general touch which is evidence of long practice in the history of the discipline and seminars in comparative approaches to religions (for we are reminded that true comparison is nowadays a collaborative task). The project of explaining and promoting a cross-disciplinary subject area, the history of religions, in the current European context where the quest is in progress for the correct way to teach religions in school, makes reading it urgent and stimulating.

The overall plan follows the chronology and leads us from the Greek dawn to present-day methods and research in comparative religion. While the first philosophers (Heraclitus, Xenophanes) were already criticizing, from within Greek culture, the naïve features of myth and anthropomorphic representation of the gods, one culture observing another gave rise first of all, between Greece and Egypt, to the translation of one into the other's language, and at the same time a comparative assessment of one in relation to the other. However, the jealous exclusivity of the god of the Jews, with whom it was necessary to make peace from the time of Alexander's conquests, did not permit a similar kind of translation by Greek or Egyptian neighbours. This irreducibility, which Jan Assmann (1997) calls the 'Mosaic distinction', made the observing eye sharper. It encouraged some to denigrate and even reject others, and accuse each other of superstition or atheism; and this rejection led, *ipso facto*, to the choice (*hairésis* in Greek, which gave 'heresy') of one religion to the detriment of both the others. Why did the god of the Jews come out on top? Philippe Borgeaud does not answer that question, but prefers to export the 'theological

triangle' to other eras and places, for example the period when the Christian *conquistadores* encountered pre-Colombian polytheism, and up to the moment when Father Lafitau (1724) recognized in the native people of America the revealed light of a natural religion: what came into being in that triangle that facilitated a meeting with the other, and the distance for observation, was not one religion in particular rather than another but the singular fact itself that a religion exists only by defining itself relative to another one; the consequence of that was the possibility of choice, and equally the possibility of rejecting that choice in order to maintain comparative distance. That distance was itself based on transverse concepts (the religion of Adam according to Lafitau, civil religion according to Rousseau [1762], the sacred according to Rudolf Otto [1917]), which were doomed to be transcended and revoked. From this viewpoint the emergence of two monotheisms at the beginning of the Christian era, Christianity and Judaism, structured in relation to one another, seems almost like an accident of history that is limited in its extension and could have been replaced by other developments. And the question of the religion of Israel becomes the question of the whole eastern Mediterranean. What is left today of that theological triangle, the present-day legacy that is handed down to us, seems rather to be, the author thinks, the imperative of a choice to be made between a fixed position in the triangle or the polygon (if belonging or converting to a single religion entails an ideological *a priori* that is blind to history), or a subjective intellectual position that is mobile and always able to maintain the historian's distanced viewpoint. The author looks forward to the time when religious adherence will be able to preserve openness and tolerance without betraying itself: in the meantime we have to choose between wars of religion or the history of religion. Of course Philippe Borgeaud prefers the comparative history of religion.

However, the Introduction gives way to another possible perspective and a more modest but wider choice, which is likely to make less dramatic the constraints of that alternative: according to a comparison that sociologists of religion have been keen on in recent years, the choice between religions nowadays looks like a worldwide supermarket where we all help ourselves as we wish and put together a symbolic customized decorative scheme; so we should see this store rather as a bazaar of universal spare parts, which can be found in varying numbers and combinations in every latitude and all 'religious' artefacts, whose coherence they defy by stubbornly recurring. Perhaps we can dare to introduce here a few examples that the author does not cite: relics, treatment of the dead body, addressing those who are absent or invisible, the role of fire in cooking food, practices of coming together and speaking in a public meeting, practices and sites of remembrance. These are humble concrete problems and attitudes we can expect to encounter more or less everywhere, realized in the widest variety of forms, but adding or combining them does not necessarily make religions, properly speaking, though they are their basic building blocks. So we should be humble and not overestimate the 'sacred', as the author invites us to with the following example: Amasis became a pharaoh, a living god, only through a change of social status comparable to the change that, by reworking the material, turned a gold bowl used for foot-washing into the image of a god before which all bowed down (pp. 29–30).

The author lays before us a fabulous material, in both its richness and its interest.

In so doing he illuminates historically concepts as fundamental as 'sacred', 'superstition', 'religion'.

The material comprises in particular many texts and documents, from the best known to the most arcane, which demonstrate, in the original 'theological triangle' drawn by the author from ancient Greece to ancient Egypt and Judea, the emergence of the religious concept through cultures observing one another.

A first chapter 'Some very old questions: classical milestones', supported by quotations from the ancients, reminds us of the ambivalence of the anthropomorphic divine image when imitation of human features becomes over-realistic: is the statue in human form then a simple object, or an effective sign, or the real presence of the divinity in its temple? Cult practices (feeding and clothing the statue, dressing its hair, talking to it . . .) may thus look like credulity and superstition to the critical minds of most Greek philosophers. Doubt creeps in as to the effectiveness of traditional cults, and people dream of an original religion where people addressed the gods directly, without these stone and wood intermediaries and the stories associated with them.

The author goes further ('Moïse' . . .) into the question of the anthropomorphic divine image, which might indeed have been the absolutely decisive point of friction in the rise of religious disputes in the Roman empire and later (see also Byzantine iconoclasm and more recently the destruction of the Bamiyan buddhas): aniconism, which was found together with exclusivity and rejection of 'idols' and also absence of mythology, resulted both in archaic Roman religion, with its serial gods (on this see Georges Dumézil) and in the Judeo-Christian and Muslim monotheisms.

A second chapter, 'Between Greece and Egypt', deals with the prehistory of intercultural comparison by examining the first attempts to translate religious ideas from one language into another: from the language of the gods into human language; from the gods' names in Egyptian to the gods' names in Greek; from the true names of the gods (those they are thought to give themselves) to their imitation by inspired sages in the form of etymological montages, according to Plato's *Cratylus*; from the recognition of the conventional nature of divine names to the idea of a degraded universal truth in very many local traditions, which are nevertheless to be warmly recommended; and finally from an 'energy' presumed to be peculiar to gods' names to the use of that energy in the Jamblique theurgy. It appears that in Homer the brief glossary of a 'language of the gods' is mere Greek, and first means that it is possible to juggle with synonyms. For a long while the concept of alloglossia was approached from the speaker's viewpoint (all other people speak 'foreign'), but it is strange to see how in this area the Greeks were able to adopt the Egyptians' perspective: Herodotus (II, 52) could calmly assert that the Greeks had received the names of gods from the Egyptians, whereas those names were different from one language to the other! Philippe Borgeaud shows convincingly that this assertion can be taken literally and probably relates to etymological plays on words.

Under the title 'Genesis of comparative studies', the author next describes the differing reception of foreign cults in that 'melting-pot' that was the Greco-Roman Mediterranean: while Jewish aniconism met with approval and was compared with

the same feature of the original Roman religion or that of the Persian magi, while varying evidence proves the vogue for the Sabbath under the empire, Judaism's food taboos sometimes seemed an abomination. But as opinion held that Jews knew the reasons for their abstinence, people were willing to see this as close to an original revelation (Seneca): it was to a kind of primitive familiarity with the gods that the ancients attributed the 'barbaric wisdoms' (on this see the Italian historian Momigliano). But encountering the other constantly modified the perception a culture had of itself and forced it continually to rethink its system of interpretation. In this way vegetarianism stopped being rejected and instead became, throughout the ancient world, the supreme sign of a holy and pure life, which was easily seen as a feature of any cultural alterity (Orpheus, Pythagoras, Jewish ascetics, Egyptian priests, etc.). On the other hand mutual accusation of human sacrifice time and time again indicated rejection of the foreigner: it served again as an ideological weapon for Antiochos IV Epiphanes when he seized the temple at Jerusalem and wished to humiliate its cult. At this point the author introduces two curious texts, known by the happy few, one from Theophrastus and the other from Clearchus quoted by Flavius Josephus, which describe the Jews as philosophers who have withdrawn to Syria in the same way as the Brahmin in India. So their practice of sacrifice by burning (holocaust<sup>1</sup>) is now only retained out of obedience to an obscure divine will: nevertheless they are credited with a truly 'philosophical' vegetarianism!

A book within a book, 'Moïse. Histoire de la Grèce et de Rome' is by far the longest and fullest chapter, enriched by faultless scholarship, so much so that the three preceding chapters and the following one, indispensable though they are, are simply peripheral satellites. We find ourselves face to face with documentary material that dispels retrospective illusions and illuminates the confused way in which was forged the identity of the other – and of half of present-day humanity, if we add in Islam. At the time when the Jews started to make themselves known through their migration to Alexandria, the Greek Hecataeus of Abdera made Moses a hero who founded a colony on the Greek model; as a response to this story a mysterious man called Artapan (an Egyptian Jew with a Persian name!) wrote a historical apologia for the Judeans: for instance the episode of the love between a certain Joseph and an Egyptian woman whom her lover accepted in marriage only after she had been converted by a vision and by eating a miraculous honey; or the detail of the garments of linen, the material of the dead that Pharaoh required Judeans to wear but that also made them a pure people, marked out as separate; Artapan's civilizing Moses becomes the initiator of the Greeks, honoured by the Egyptians under the title of Hermes-Thot . . . but very close as well to the biblical Moses in the story of his people's exodus preceded by the disasters that afflicted Egypt. The Egyptian historian Manethon had more of a future: he saw in Moses a certain Osarseph, a violent, impure and sacrilegious Egyptian (Jews and Christians were easily accused of atheism and impiety by the pagan environment around them), who had come to the assistance of the Hyksos invaders leading a band of lepers exiled to the Nile delta. His story, through which 19th-century historians had an influence on Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, still casts a spell over our contemporaries: after recent books by Jan Assmann (which he incorporates in his

analysis as the final stage in the construction of a myth), and Jacques Le Rider (2002), Philippe Borgeaud in his turn revisits in detail the historiography of the Freudian montage, which makes the Amarnian episode of solar henotheism and iconoclasm<sup>2</sup> the initial trauma that triggers subsequent monotheism.

Documented analyses demonstrate how illusory it is to try to project our current conception of monotheism into the pre-Christian past. The oldest evidence we have of pre-exile Judean cults is a temple at Elephantine in Egypt, erected at the level of the first Nile cataract by a Jewish garrison in the pay of the Persian invaders: there mention of several divinities can be found. In the Macchabeans' time a certain Onias, fleeing Antiochus Epiphanes, obtained the command of Ptolemy's armies and had a temple built at Leontopolis in imitation of the one in Jerusalem. The Greek historian Strabo made Moses a Hellenic figure *par excellence* of the inspired sage combined with an interpreter of dreams in the Egyptian style, whose teachings were later degraded by popular superstition: the prophet of a unique cosmic god with no image. The ancients took a long while to decide between the vague outlines of a non-anthropomorphic god, able to assume all names and all divine powers in turn, and the immanence of a cosmic god, or a world seen as the temple of divinity, or even the transcendence of a single god as asserted by Philo of Alexandria. And the revelation of the divine oneness could be placed under the authority of Orpheus, who was presented by the Jew Aristobulus as a disciple of Moses (in Orpheus's Testament, from the Hellenistic period) or the oracle of Apollo at Claros (by Cornelius Labeo in the 2nd or 3rd century AD), while a god Iao, whose name must be a transposition of Yahwe, is invoked in magic or theurgic texts. The immanent god who first stands out as the sole and supreme god appears to have been the Egyptian healer god Sarapis, at the very start of the Hellenistic period, from the late 4th century BC.

Finally Philippe Borgeaud analyses the various theories recorded by the Latin historian Tacitus in book V of his *Histories* as to the origin of the Jewish people: Cretan (the Judeans could have been Ideans), Egyptian (exiles driven out by the rapid population growth in Egypt), Ethiopian (the name Iope – Jaffa – can be recognized in the name Aithiope), Assyrian, 'Homeric' (the Hierosolymites could be Solymes), and he examines the accusation of impurity levelled at them: a leprosy that Moses is supposed to have turned into a claim to an identity with a separate life, while a hardy tradition – known by the name of the oracle of the lamb or the potter – promises the Egyptians horrific disasters from which they will finally emerge through revenge on the Medes and domination over Syria.

What determined the astounding success in the ancient world, via Christianity in particular, of the tiny group of Jewish people? Absence of an image of god – in other words aniconism – seems to have been far more decisive than monotheism in its representation of the divine. And the 'distinction' that characterizes it is the ambivalence of pure and impure that seems especially to mark it out. So should we not turn again to the Greeks to account for the influence of that distinction? We think we can read between the lines that the aniconism of the Judeans' god gave the credit of a tradition and prophetic revelation to the cosmic divinity or the supreme god the philosophers had postulated in their criticism of the cults of Greece or Egypt. If this really was the case we have to draw as a conclusion the paradox

that philosophy only produced reasoned science by producing religion at the same time.

Renée Koch Piettre  
*École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris*  
Translated from the French by Jean Burrell

### Notes

1. It is well known that this term refers to a class of ancient sacrifice whereby the offering is completely consumed by the fire.
2. This refers to the well-known reign of Amenophis IV (Akhenaton), who treated himself to a new capital, Heliopolis ('Sun City'), and introduced the cult of a single god, the Sun. Freud considered this to be the first case of monotheism in history and associated the figure of Moses with this Egyptian 'monotheism'.

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