

A PHENOMENOLOGICAL APPROACH TO INCARNATION*
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Abstract: The Incarnation of the Divine is not accepted by all the religions, more than that for some of them it is scandalous to admit it, in fact between the human and the divine there is a dissimilarity so great that it is impossible to consider any similarity. To afford such a question in the essay I start from the phenomenological anthropology in order to explain the sense of the religious experience and at the same time I consider the history of the religions from the archaic ones as far as the last interpretations of Christianity. Visiting once again the contribution of Gerardus van der Leeuw I join the results of his historical research with the anthropological analyses of Edmund Husserl and Edith Stein. The two ways, the anthropological one and the historical one, are linked up in one subject, so that is possible to propose a new perspective in the field of the “phenomenology of religion”. I examine the contrast between “God near us”, that is the faith in His Incarnation in Christianity and “God far from us”, that is the refusal of His Incarnation, particularly in Judaism, trying to prove the accomplishment and the value of Incarnation.

Keywords: *Religious experience, Phenomenology of Religion, Incarnation, Christianity, Judaism.*

The power that confers sacredness on things, our surroundings, and the world, which includes human beings, and on the upper world, this very power can withdraw to the highest floor. But it can also move increasingly towards the first floor. In this case, it is united with the world. What is acknowledged with astonishment as completely different is no less a part of what is happening in the world. And the better it fits into other phenomena, the more it risks losing its original sanctity, its becoming *world*¹.

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¹ Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion* (Tübingen: J.C.B. Mohr (Paul Sebeck), 1956), I, 19, 4; English translation: *Religion in Essence and Manifestation*, trans. John Evan Turner and Ninian Smart (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 172. All the quotations here are translated by Antonio Calcagno.

Gerardus van der Leeuw thus describes, through the image of the first and top floors of a building, what I call the “distant God” and the “God who is near”, the totally other God of transcendence and the God who does not lose its transcendence, even if it risks losing its transcendence, according to the author, by entering the world. In truth, I believe that God cannot lose it, because this completely different being, as he suggestively defines it, is the divine that cannot be confused with the world.

To understand van der Leeuw's argument let us turn to the epilogue of his work *Phenomenology of Religion*, in particular, to paragraph 110, which he dedicates to the meaning or sense of “religion”. After highlighting the salient features of all religions, the historian/phenomenologist wonders why they are all “religions” in the first place. In tracing the essence of religion, he notes that human beings seek and have always sought “Power”. He uses this term as it is present in the traditional religion of the islands of Oceania, as reported by the testimony of the missionary Robert Henry Codrington. The term *mana*, which can be understood as a noun, adjective, or verb, always refers to something powerful that is present or that is sought and that the missionary defines as “the supernatural in a certain sense”. Although the natural-supernatural binary is absent in archaic religions, this does not prevent one from “feeling” the presence of something that goes beyond one, that transcends. All of van der Leeuw’s research is linked to investigating the many forms of “Power” within the history of religions, from archaic to more recent ones. The search for Power, to be in contact with Power, remains the common thread that unites all “religions”.

In religious experience, the human being who seeks power knows s/he is being led to a foreign place, that “something is coming towards her or him on the path”. It is the stranger who is encountered, for this being is different from her- or himself and has no name, it can be *heilig, quades, sanctus, taboo*; it is separated from and it comes towards her or him, that is, as an alien Power, completely different, which enters her or his life. In front of this being, the attitude of the human being is, first, one of amazement, as Rudolf Otto says and, ultimately, one of faith².

1. The Phenomenology of Religious Experience

These interesting observations, which have a certain poetic resonance, and which demonstrate that van der Leeuw is, in fact, analyzing an inner journey, invite us to deepen our understanding of what happens in human beings. For

² *Ivi*, § 110.

this reason, and by continuing to investigate religious experience in the footsteps of the Dutch phenomenologist, I follow the perspective of a philosophical-phenomenological anthropology in order to grasp the sense of openness to the foreign, to the completely different, without neglecting the modality that this openness assumes in the course of human history. We know religious phenomena because they manifest themselves in human history. Historical evidence is an effective testimony that indicates the presence of such an openness; therefore, it is appropriate to carry out a two-fold excavation: in ourselves and in human creations through time.

I maintain that attending to the relationship between the history of religions and phenomenological analysis it is possible to propose a new approach in the field of the “phenomenology of religion”. One can ask, then, which part of the human being’s structure allows us to understand what is deeply felt and expressed through the external configurations of Power, as van der Leeuw invites us to do.

2.The Sacred/Divine in the Human

Let us first examine what happens in humans when they move “beyond themselves”. Certainly, the Other that is experienced in religious experience transcends all that is human, for it is a being that goes beyond, it is a Power. And its presence, which, due to its indefinability that can be understood as absence, has been experienced by human beings from their childhood, is an experience that everyone must admit, if they are honest with themselves. Atheism, argues van der Leeuw – and this is also affirmed by Edith Stein – does not demonstrate that some do not have religious experience, but that, despite having it, they “flee” from it and do not want to admit that they feel it: this is a great proof of the freedom that the divine grants to humans, as humans are so free that they are able to deny the presence of God inside them!

The phenomenological description of the human is a necessary presupposition for the justification of the recognition of the “beyond”, of the foreign. Van der Leeuw, an excellent historian of religions, cannot be expected to delve into the anthropological question of the philosophical point of view, however, he shows philosophical sensitivity in that he insists on the fact that it is necessary to examine the phenomenon of “religion”, indicating where he must begin to understand it, namely, not from above, from the divine, but from below, from the human being.

Let us turn, then, to the analyses of various philosophers to obtain further useful insights. I am addressing here the phenomenologists who have reached extraordinary depths in their excavation of interiority and who have clarified

what had been discovered in the past but not sufficiently investigated. I compare here Augustine of Hippo, Edmund Husserl, and Edith Stein.

In interiore homine habitat veritas [Truth lives in the human interior]: what comes along the way is accepted, because it responds to the need for an expectation that is fulfilled. I recognize the stranger/foreigner because I already have an awareness of Him inside me, a trace of his presence. I could never speak of God, if I did not already know, albeit in an imperfect, indefinite way, what God is: I seek the Beyond, because I am structurally open to the Beyond. Augustine is right, for God, or truth, is within, however, if I suppose to understand Him wholly, I would not have God: *Si comprehendis non est Deus*. Is it possible to clarify more fully how the indwelling of truth in our interiority is seized?

As I mentioned above, Husserl and Edith Stein, following in his footsteps, can help us here. The human being is composed of body and soul, as stated in many religions and in many philosophies, but where does this duality come from? What are the foundational experiences that have made it possible to identify these territories? By carefully analyzing our lived experiences, Husserl calls them *Erlebnisse*, that is, the very living through of our experiences as expressed by the Spanish and Portuguese neologism “*vivencia*”, it becomes possible to identify the affinities and the differences they manifest. Through perceptive *Erlebnisse* we distinguish our corporeity from things that are not us, that transcend us; through the reactions of attraction and repulsion, we enter the territory of psychic states, instincts, impulses, and reactions, that is, the great territory of affectivity, of *Gemüt*. If we examine our valuing and decision-making abilities, we are led into another sphere, an exquisitely human one, namely, the sphere of *Geist* or spirit. Unity and complexity coexist in the human being. The Pauline and Augustinian tripartition of body, soul, and spirit is, in this way, confirmed by means of a precise description of what we live in experience. We live currents or flows of *Erlebnisse*, which, in their succession, constitute inner temporality – another Augustinian motif – and which enable us to understand how we are essentially made. We open onto a double transcendence, that of the things that form the surrounding world and the transcendence of all transcendences, God. Husserl writes:

The ordering principle of the absolute must be found in the absolute itself, considered purely as absolute. In other words, since a worldly God is evidently impossible and since, on the other hand, the immanence of God in absolute consciousness cannot be taken as immanence in the sense of being as a mental

process (which would be no less countersense), there must be, therefore, within the absolute stream of consciousness and its infinities, modes in which transcendencies are made known other than the constituting of physical realities as unities of harmonious appearances; and ultimately there would also have to be intuitional manifestations to which a theoretical thinking might conform, so that, by following them rationally, it might make intelligible the unitary rule of the supposed theological principle. It is likewise evident, then, that this rule must not be taken to be “causal” in the sense determined by the concept of causality as obtaining in Nature, a concept attuned to realities and the functional interdependencies proper to their particular essence.³

This text deserves commentary because the word God explicitly appears here and is linked, following the philosophical tradition, with the term “absolute”. Indeed, this adjective appears twice, once in connection with God and once in connection with conscience. We are conscious (*Bewusstsein*) of our lived experiences, Husserl affirms, otherwise we could not talk about consciousness; it appears, then, that even consciousness is an “absolute”, from which we begin to orient ourselves. I believe that the difficulty can be resolved by recalling that Husserl in section 58 of *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure phenomenology I* underscores the difference between the two absolutes: one could say that consciousness is an absolute *quoad nos* [that relates to us], which allows us to grasp the absolute in itself, which is “the theological principle”. This is possible because we realize that there are currents of experiences of which we are aware, which lead us to God, and these experiences are proper to religious awareness. They are very useful for theoretical thought and, in fact, the examination of the currents of such lived experiences leads us to reflect legitimately on that Beyond to which he had earlier referred.

And Husserl reflects theoretically on this question in his “paths” of transcendental reduction, a reduction which highlights the presence of experiences in us. In this way, following the Cartesian path, but also the Leibnizian one of the monads and, finally, the one that leads beyond particular ontologies to the ontology of the lifeworld, we arrive not only at transcendental subjectivity but also at transcendental intersubjectivity.

³ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy*, vol. I, tr. Fred Kersten (Den Haag: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983), 116–117.

Moreover, he admits that, due to the necessity of argumentation, one must also affirm the existence of the theological principle⁴.

This is the philosophical path; however, here religious consciousness is not forgotten. If from the observation of the existence of the monads we arrive at the Supreme or Highest Monad, we also discover that a deep link between the true, authentic monads, that is, of an ethical-religious type, is Christian love or *caritas*, which pushes us to love even the enemy. And the primacy of the ethical-religious moment, considered by Husserl as authentically metaphysical as an “ultimate and highest” problem, becomes increasingly evident as his research progresses, culminating in the exaltation of faith. Husserl describes the faith of the authentic believer in this manner: «It demands an absolute final validity, which does not come from seeing and intellectual discernment (*Einsehen*), and which cannot in each case obtain from this its source of justification and its measure. Believing and not seeing (even not intellectually discerning) belong together. “Faith” is certainly also judgment, but not simple judgment (simple *doxa*). The denial of believing is not simply false, but also and above all sin and, after all, in this case it is false, because not believing is a sin»⁵.

Faith approaches God as transcendent, but God is also immanent in the human being. Husserl even compares this presence to an “instinct” *sui generis*: «...like the original one of God's being present in our interiority, like a premonition without an intuitive vision, which is at the base of every effective religion»⁶. He believes that a confirmation of this presence is found in prayer, «really fervent, authentic prayer»⁷, because, even if it might seem paradoxical, prayer addresses our interiority; in fact, the real and current relationship with God is internal, given His trace in us.

To obtain deeper knowledge about interiority, further excavation work is carried out by Edith Stein. Following Saint Teresa of Avila, she seeks the “place” where the divine is found. Deepening her investigation of the human being, Stein is not content to speak of it as something “neutral”, as demonstrated by her observation about the universality of the human being's structure as *Mensch*. She notes, in fact, that this human structure is always determined as a single human being, and as a man or woman. She investigates

⁴ I describe these particular Husserlian analyses in *Edmund Husserl: La preghiera e il divino – Scritti etico-religiosi*, [Edmund Husserl: The Prayer and the Divine – *Ethical-Religious Writings*], ed. and tr. Angela Ales Bello (Rome: Studium, 2022).

⁵ *Ivi*, 187.

⁶ *Ivi*, 160.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

this aspect in a nuanced way, attracted by the value of its uniqueness. This uniqueness manifests itself in the individual's characteristics, in the particular declinations that do not exclude the universality that unites humans and that find a unitary point of reference in the single ego. The human being can say "I" because s/he possesses an identity or personal core (*Kern*): «The only being we can image for the core is one that is actualized in spiritual living and hence, insofar as actual living is actualization of potencies, one that shapes character and reshapes it over time»⁸.

The person changes, but the core remains stable. What is inscribed in the core is not always actualized in the person. Here, the question of the realization of life for good or of its failure arises and, therefore, the distinction between those who will or will not be saved: «The end of earthly life and the entry into eternal life would mean that "darkness" fades away and the entire personal core becomes actual and transparent. However, it is clear at the same time that the core has already been in eternity, throughout the entire duration of its earthly life. Time is in eternity and never ceases therein. And what is in time is for this very reason in eternity, but it is in eternity in a way other than that it is in time»⁹. The task of the human being consists in following the directives of the core, therefore, preserving it as it has been given to us: «...all of us must enter the kingdom of heaven as "children"»¹⁰. Edith Stein calls the core the "soul of the soul", since it is the deepest point of the psychic and spiritual soul, and it is its presence that makes us similar to the divine being, albeit with an utmost dissimilarity. Hence, it is the place in which one finds the call for her or his type of life that s/he must carry out in the best possible way. For this reason, the core must be kept as it was given to us.

The role of the core is further clarified when Stein comments on the mystical experience of two Carmelite saints: Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross. And it is here that she grasps the presence of God in the core, in particular, when Saint Teresa affirms that in the seventh abode of the inner Castle God enters the soul, therefore, in the core, and with this movement Saint Teresa affirms that He "returns home". As mentioned earlier, the trace of the divine is found in the core.

⁸ Edith Stein, *Potency and Act*, tr. Walter Redmond (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2003), 183.

⁹ *Ivi*, 202.

¹⁰ *Ivi*, 212.

3.The God Who is Near: The Incarnation

Thus far, our considerations have allowed us to understand the double nature of natural religion and “confessional” religion, as Husserl expresses it when he refers to Christianity. The presence of God in our interiority, in our core, applies to all human beings, as philosophy teaches us and as all religions demonstrate, while the question of faith in Jesus Christ is connected to a particular religion that claims to have received a revelation from God.

Revelation occurs not only through the words of exceptional human beings, the prophets or founders of new religious doctrines but also through the presence of the divine in things: this is theophany or hierophany. I propose to examine from the viewpoint of the phenomenology of religion, understood in the way that I have indicated above, the sense of the human need for a God who is near while also observing that in the archaic period, in that phase which we define as animistic and often fetishistic, this need strongly manifests itself. Usually, this phase is considered negatively in relation to its subsequent stages, even though one finds *semina verbi* (its seeds) in this early phase, as affirmed by the Father of the Church Justin Martyr and as John Paul II reiterates, according to Him one finds this need even in traditional African religions, which maintain numerous contacts with the sacred archaic¹¹. Given this enduring reality, it is appropriate we take the need to be close to God into consideration.

One may wonder why the isolated tree in the savannah, or the high mountain often covered with clouds are considered sacred places, places of manifestation of the divine. Does this happen because we have not yet understood what the divine is? This is true and it is not true. Certainly, we know that “Something comes to meet us on the road”; in fact, we have seen that for traditional Melanesian religion Something is powerful; Power, therefore, can be “encountered” along the road of one’s life. Let us examine the quality of this encounter, and to do so we return to the phenomenological description of the human that we have only partially presented, since an important aspect is missing that needs to be examined.

4.The Sacred and the Hyletic

I have referred to the sacred and the divine. I use the two terms conventionally to indicate two periods in the history of religions. I reserve the definition of “sacred” for the archaic period, which we know indirectly

¹¹ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, trans. Jenny McPhee and Martha McPhee (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994).

through the cultural remains of an archaeological type or the sedimentations found in traditional religions, whereas with the word “divine” I refer to historical religions, namely, those that have elaborated refined theological doctrines. Gerardus van der Leeuw in his work *Primitive Man and Religion*¹² emphasizes that dualisms do not exist in the archaic mentality and, in examining the primitive mentality, he puts forward a very interesting interpretation concerning the primacy in those cultures of a participatory logic as opposed to logic of distinction, which is particularly present in classical Greek culture. The conception of the divine in the West, therefore, is affected by the theorization of dualisms and distinctions, whereby every aspect of reality has its own precise and separate collocation.

Is it possible in this case, then, to dig further and wonder why this happens? Husserl, here, indirectly helps us, not only because he, also being familiar with Levy-Bruhl’s writings, speaks of the “logic of primitives”. From a gnoseological point of view, he highlights a basic dimension present in human beings that he defines as hyletic, a passive dimension of which one is not immediately aware, but which can subsequently be brought to consciousness and, therefore, be analyzed and understood.

The first level of knowledge of external reality is certainly perceptual for Husserl, because the experience of perception is accompanied by consciousness. But one can ask oneself, and Husserl already did so in his 1913 work *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy*, if there are any experiences that precede perception. He shows the presence of the localization of sensory sensations, for example, colour, acoustic, tactile and similar data, which occur as sensation contents that are accompanied by sensory sensations of pleasure or pain and by sensory moments stemming from the sphere of our “impulses”¹³. This primary layer of a physical-psychic nature precedes the perceptive moment of which one is aware, as well as the psychic states of which one is aware, and is considered “material”. Therefore, he deploys the Greek term *hyle*, matter, but in this context, it is understood as a *quid* offered at the intentional moment defined by Husserl as “noetic”. The hyletic-noetic duality accompanies the knowledge of all human beings and shows the presence of *Leib*, our physical,

¹² Gerardus van der Leeuw, “*La structure de la mentalité primitive*” in, *Revue d’Histoire e de Philosophie religieuse*, 8-1, 1928, 1-31. This essay along with others were translated together into Italian and published in the book *L’uomo primitivo e la religione* [*The primitive Man and the Religion*] (Turin: Boringhieri, 1961).

¹³ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and a Phenomenological Philosophy*, vol. I, 213.

living body, which is intimately connected to the psychic dimension of all human beings. These two dimensions form the base of spirit, which is the seat of our intellectual and decision-making activities.

The description of the various passive stratifications of the human being serves, in my opinion, for the understanding of religious experience. If the divine is present as a trace in the human, it manifests itself through the whole complex human structure, that is, corporeity, psyche, and spirit. Indeed, its configuration passes through such moments, in which acceptance or rejection can take place. Acceptance or rejection manifest themselves on a psychic level and are then elaborated on an intellectual and moral level, but corporality is also involved, for example, think of the importance of the bodily ritual moment.

It has been said that in archaic cultures some parts of nature are believed to be sacred. What strongly affects the senses and produces extraordinary psychic reactions is considered exceptional and powerful, and it is not only the place where Power lives but also identifies itself with that place: the thing or part of nature becomes sacred. The primacy of the hyletic sphere does not mean that the noetic is eliminated or cancelled out; rather, but the latter follows the indications or direction of the hyletic. The sacred is embodied in the thing, we affirm this claim with our dual logic, whereas with a traditional participatory logic we must say that there is no distinction between the tree and the sacred.

Sacredness, then, pervades all things: sacredness is embodied in things. "God is near". This type of incarnation also remains in historical religions. In polytheistic religions, for example, there are traces of this particular form of incarnation. In the poems of Homer, the statues nod or the priest or priestess is identified with the divinity; the divinity lives in the *pronaos* of the temple, and no one can see her, except the officiant. In Ovi's time, it was believed that the foreigner could be the God, think of the story of the metamorphosis of Baucis and Philemon, visited by Zeus and Hermes in the guise of pilgrims. Furthermore, it can be noted that, in examining traditional religions, the possibility of henotheism arises in the archaic phase associated with animism. Here, one finds the belief in a supreme divinity.

In Hinduism, the incarnation of deities is still accepted. In the 1990s, I witnessed the manifestation of the Goddess, the so-called "living goddess" in Kathmandu, Nepal: she is a little girl living in a chosen in a village, and she possesses the particular traits of being unemotional, that is, she must not cry and not show that she suffers from being away from her family. She was housed in a sumptuous palace, and she appears for a few moments at the

window on the occasion of the feast of the Goddess to be “adored” by the faithful.

5. The Distant God: Incarnation in Judaism

According to van der Leeuw, the Jewish religion was also built on the basis of dynastic animism. Power, in the form of a terrifying will, was understood to be of a demonic type: proof of this is found in Exodus 4: 24, where God appears to Moses in the burning bush, the Lord who met him and tried to kill him¹⁴. The historian/phenomenologist van der Leeuw links the animism of the Jews to the demonic, but it can also be observed that the very presence of the Lord in the burning bush, or rather His identification with it – it is the bush that speaks – refers us precisely to the participatory logic proper to archaic religions. The transition from henotheism, which clearly characterizes the archaic Jewish religion linked to an angry, jealous, vengeful God, to monotheism is interesting; van der Leeuw observes that the people of Israel were so faithful to this God that it was impossible for Him to admit, wherever He was, any other power alongside Yahweh¹⁵.

Thus, a faith in a single God was born. This God will no longer be only angry; He will also be merciful, because “He does not always keep his anger”, as Psalm 103 recounts. Particularly interesting here is the fact that God cannot be configured, because He cannot be seen. The religion of figuration *par excellence* is Greek polytheism, which describes and sculpts the beautiful figures of the gods. On the contrary, Moses receives the order not to see God, on pain of death: “But you cannot see my face, for no one can see me and live”, (Exodus 33: 20). God cannot be seen, He cannot be named, He is too high and far away, He is unique and transcendent. Slowly, one understands that He cannot incarnate. On the contrary, the conviction is increasingly affirmed that the “personal” aspect of the divine is only due to the fact that Yahweh wishes to be in touch with the human, yet remains “totally other”, elusive, unmentionable, omnipotent.

6. The God Who is Near: The Incarnation in Christianity

Certainly, the most significant example of incarnation is that of Jesus, who is present in a religion that is neither animistic nor polytheistic, but monotheistic. He is the “son of man”, and this term refers us to the prophet Daniel, who, in his vision, foretells the coming of Jesus. The prophet first

¹⁴ Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, § 99.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

describes an old man with a white robe and head, seated on a throne surrounded by flames of fire and then continues: «In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, [a] coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed. I, Daniel, was troubled in spirit, and the visions that passed through my mind disturbed me. I approached one of those standing there and asked him the meaning of all this. So he told me and gave me the interpretation of these things: The four great beasts are four kings that will rise from the earth. But the holy people of the Most High will receive the kingdom and will possess it forever – yes, for ever and ever» (Daniel 7, 13-18).

The expression that Jesus often repeats, calling himself “son of man”, indicates, in fact, not only his sonship from God, but also his resemblance to a human being, to whom all peoples will pay homage, therefore, he will be known by them, will enter human history. It has already been noted above that the story of Daniel, like those of other prophets (see Isaiah 2: 1-5), describes the expectation of the Messiah by the Jewish people, but, when this prophecy is fulfilled, it is not recognized and accepted. Judaism, despite the tension over the incarnation, does not know how to make it its own: at first it moves it to an indeterminate future and then it seems to ignore it. In this way, the “scandal” of the incarnation was born.

Can the Messiah, the anointed of the Lord, be an ordinary man, a craftsman, the son of a carpenter? For those who knew the Scriptures, the Messiah, who had been described as the one who «...will judge among the nations and will be arbiter among many peoples» (Isaiah 2: 4), cannot have such humble origins and, above all, cannot preach a radical change regarding the vision of the world, showing Him not submitting to the logic of this world.

And it is precisely the logic of the world that is called into question, because human beings want to touch God. On the one hand, it is the *sacer*, the *sanctus*, the separate, the stranger, the other, it is the God we guard in our interiority, and for this reason we want God to be close to us. The triune God, already foreshadowed in the Old Testament, manifests Himself in a child who is born into a humble family of craftsmen. The God who is near is one of us; He shares human events to make people understand the profound meaning of these events and to teach how to manage them in view of a future life. And this man calls God “Father”: the bond is that of fatherhood and sonship. This unity of the divine and the human does not require the logic of distinction, but

that of participation, the logic that had used archaic thought to understand the sacred, what is close but also distant. And in the tension of the two moments, in their coexistence, the profound relationship between the human and the divine plays out.

In the Gospel of Luke 23: 35-43, the people feel more directly and spontaneously that something great, remarkable, perhaps shocking, has happened: the son of man has been crucified; and he stands still to “see”, bewildered, and he does not judge. It is the leaders who judge and challenge Jesus: if you are the Christ of God, the chosen one, save yourself! God can save Himself. So, if he cannot evade death, then this man is not God. It is the same temptation that Jesus had in the desert. These events are scandalous for the very reason that a powerful person does not save himself. They did not understand that God came to go through all human stages, even death: Jesus had said that whoever does not lose his life will not be saved and what better occasion to show coherence with his preaching than the Incarnation?

Jesus can only be consistent with his own teaching for an even more profound purpose: to show that life truly does not end with death. He wills to go through death in order to rise again. And his future life is already announced to the evildoer who stands by his side, not to the one who conforms to the mentality of the leaders and challenges him to save himself, but, in a very human way, them too. Jesus does not perform this miracle, because he wants to show that, if one repents from sins as does the second criminal who accepts his fate and wants to follow Jesus, then one obtains something more precious than this life, namely, Paradise, that original condition that Adam and Eve had abandoned because they wanted to be like God. Redemption has taken place: if one wishes, with the help of divine grace, one can return to the Paradise from which one had been expelled.

The God who is near is the God who restores life for eternity. The Risen One is again “incarnate” in a new body, which, however, shows that it possesses a hyletic dimension. It is true that it passes through closed doors, but it also eats with the Apostles and says to Thomas, rightly incredulous from the human point of view, that he can touch Jesus, who, therefore, has a texture, as noted by Hedwig Conrad-Martius. Being aware of the early investigations of quantum physics, she proposes that there are other levels of matter different from what we usually experience and know, thereby anticipating the results of contemporary research on the physics of matter in the mid 20th century¹⁶.

¹⁶ I develop this argument, already proposed by Hedwig Conrad-Martius, in Angela Ales Bello and Anna Maria Sciacca, *Ti racconto l'aldilà: Fenomenologia della vita ante mortem*

The incarnation of Jesus Christ is a very important fact for human beings, because God, made man, shows us that it is possible to act in a coherent way with His teachings, that we can forgive sins and even be intermediaries for miracles – “Go and do this in my name”. Furthermore, with his resurrection, Jesus testifies that death is truly for us the beginning of a new life, as almost all religions and many philosophies do, for example, Platonism inspired by Orphism. The incarnation of Jesus is the fulfillment of every human expectation that had manifested itself in other religions: religions are similar, precisely, in the expectations they propose. Christianity fulfills these expectations and basically shows their validity as *semina verbi*.

Another important consequence of incarnation concerns the ritual aspect, which is deeply linked to the hyletic sphere and participatory logic. This is the sacramental dimension, which uses physical elements, foundational for the life of human beings: water for baptism; bread and wine for the Eucharist; oil for anointing the sick. In communal feeling, these are substances that relate to our corporeity, but which take on a spiritual resonance. On the other hand, this is nothing new, for the water of the Ganges for the Hindus, the water of the Jordan for John the Baptist, had the efficacy of purifying the whole human being: human beings need the washing ritual, which is a sign not only of physical purification but also of purification from sins. We need rites in many aspects of our lives, but Heraclitus shrewdly warns us that «the rites of the mysteries in use among men have nothing sacred» (14 DK) in the sense that we must distinguish which rites are truly “sacred”.

If the baptism of Jesus was part of a great collective rite, which attracted the crowds, the Baptist himself admits his insufficiency, pointing to Jesus as the one who will truly purify those who are willing to follow Jesus. As far as the Eucharist is concerned, food has always had a ritual function. Think of the banquets of the gods with nectar and ambrosia, which avoided two types of death – and for this reason there were two – natural death and violent death; think of the meal of sacrificed animals, which had a support- and strengthening-function, even in the rituals of cannibalism.

Jesus fulfills this requirement by identifying his body and blood with the products of the earth worked by human beings: the bread – “Take and eat, this is my body” – and the wine – “Take and drink, this is my blood”. The sacrifice of Jesus is part of the line of ritual sacrifices: Jesus the new lamb. The physical thing is identified with the divine, the objectified divine spirit manifests itself

e post mortem [I will Tell You about the Beyond: A Phenomenology of Life before and after Death] (Rome: Castelvechi, 2023).

in the thing, as Edith Stein¹⁷ teaches us in an extraordinary continuity with archaic thought, but with the novelty of the moral and spiritual message revealed by Christ. The sacrament is incomprehensible with the logic of distinction (either it is God or it is bread), but it becomes evident with the participatory logic, for it is the only one that can justify the incarnation, even in the case of the sacraments in which the incarnation is prolonged. And participation is at the heart of Jesus' message, because it is a question of the love that binds the Father to the Son generating the Spirit, who is precisely the bond between the two that is also the bond with created human beings. According to van der Leeuw, Christianity is the religion of love.

The great miracle is that in our day the participatory logic and the logic of love continue to function in a context in which distinction and personal interest predominate. The estrangement of many from religious practice and the very denial of religious experience is also due to the rationalization process that has taken hold in Western culture, which largely has not been able to find the balance between hyletics and noetics, ultimately absolutizing the latter. And the West has not been able to value the theme of love beyond its reduction to a pure instinctive affectivity.

7. The Distant God: Islam

The greatest affirmation of the inconsistency of the incarnation is found in a historical religion, which van der Leeuw rightly defines as the "religion of majesty and humility". If humility is a virtue, taken to its extreme consequences and united with the unknowable God, it could become the debasement of humanity. The diffusion of Mohammed's message demonstrates the opposite, because Muslims immediately showed a great expansive force due to their great faith, not in themselves, but in their God. Two aspects characterize this religion according to van der Leeuw: the absolute power of God and the unquestioned faith in such power. The human being is surrounded on all sides by the power of God: humans exist because there is God, and they live in God. This means that they cannot adopt a critical attitude towards God. This means submission, and submission is a duty.

Van der Leeuw writes: «The faithful of the prophet in fact believe in the imposing power of God without suspicion. They let God's power expand in life. Here faith is strong, but humanity is weak. One could say, paradoxically,

¹⁷ Stein affirms that all things have sense because the Spirit of God, who created them, leaves His trace in them. She takes up this claim in *Potency and Act*. See Edith Stein, *Potency and Act*, tr. Walter Redmond (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 2009), chapter 5, 8b.

that Islam is the religion of what is properly called God»¹⁸. I think van der Leeuw means that authentic faith is a total trust, without doubts or second thoughts. Although the God of Islam has taken some traits of the God of Israel, Islam does not have a Job, for one cannot argue with God because one is *in* God. And God is, without any determination, and is alone, He cannot bear that anyone is near or close to Him. While knowing the message of Jesus, Islam certainly cannot accept his divinity: this is the highest point of the “scandal” of the incarnation. Yet, Islam has accepted the expansive, missionary force of Christianity and has transformed love of neighbor into social almsgiving, thereby obtaining many converts from those who were conquered during the wars against the infidels. Originally Islam’s expansive force was linked to the very strong faith of a people who, living in the desert, behaved like “a terrifying fighter”, as van der Leeuw defines it. But, despite its expansion onto other continents, and therefore, in different cultural contexts, it continues to be so.

Conclusion

The incarnation of the divine, as we have seen, divides religions. Some consider it “scandalous”, because God is so powerful that He cannot have anything to do with humans, on the contrary, others, precisely by virtue of the fact that all things depend on God, accept, indeed desire, the presence of God among us. I believe that there are good philosophical reasons for maintaining that God is near, the most forceful being that we must have the experience of the divine to speak of it, otherwise it would never occur to us to name it. Consequently, not only is there in us the trace of the divine presence, but this presence itself is with us. This fact, far from being scandalous, is highly comforting.

¹⁸ Gerardus van der Leeuw, *Phänomenologie der Religion*, § 100.