

ASYMPTOTE OF THE INEFFABLE: SOME REMARKS¹

Roberta Bivar C. Campos²

In *Asymptote of the Ineffable: Embodiment, Alterity, and the Theory of Religion*, article published just over a decade ago on *Current Anthropology* (Volume 45, Number 2, April 2004) and reviewed by anthropologists from different departments and different theoretical leanings, Thomas Csordas led us to revisit in depth an issue we thought we had already overcome or at least exhausted: what is religion? What is its origin? What is its specificity in relation to other phenomena, such as art, politics etc.? Is the concept still useful? Csordas warns us that the answers he seeks in this article must go beyond previous conceptual criticisms, such as those by Durkheim and Geertz. Thus, Csordas makes us recede to the first concepts in an enterprise that, despite being highly critical, does not demolish the concept of religion, which contemporary criticisms do. However, unlike these criticisms, he invited us to refine it once again, (re)defining it considering the specific elements of the religious phenomenon, so as to re-enable it as universal in the end. He does all this within the theoretical proposal of a phenomenological anthropology of perception that he developed, without limiting the assumption of universality of the religious experience in a substance, in an essence; but otherwise, he turns incompleteness, the inability to establish boundaries between inside and outside, and indeterminacy into the elements that constitute religion. With that, we realize that we are facing an analytical gain that allows us to overcome analyses that reassert the distance and the radicalism of the difference, which encloses us in a political and symbolic

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² Professor at the Universidade Federal de Pernambuco (PPGA/DAM/UFPE). Contact: robertabivar@gmail.com

economy that generates hatred and fear. Csordas allows us to understand that the outside and the inside are part of a relational dynamic that produces several modes of existence. These boundaries are mobile and are not explained by opposition, but by an economy of ambivalence, of partial differences, where what is intimate and not necessarily distant may be the strange. It is important for us to understand this dynamic in Csordas, given that we are living in extreme times, when we react to different ways of living, building real trenches of horror, intolerance, and hatred, where there only is room for that which is a mirror. Therefore, Csordas' proposal frees us from the shackles of the perversity of the radicalism of the difference.

The fundamental and starting question of Csordas' reflection that allows this analytical advance is the understanding of the "alterity"/"otherness" as the creative sphere of religion, that is, the existential dimension that shapes and defines it, the original alterity, as he himself names it. Thus, the concept of religion, for Csordas, is still relevant and necessary, supported by that which he invites us to seek: a kind of "prototype", a certain phenomenon or experience that is able to take us to the origin of religion or to make us reach its existential core (phenomenological kernel). It is important to note that this existential core is sensorial and embodied. The sensory experience of wonder, of surprise, stands out in it. Conversing with phenomenologists, sometimes disagreeing with them, Csordas rescues what was vehemently rejected by Durkheim as the key to understand religion: wonder. Through Freud and Bataille, he circumvents the criticism about the phenomenologists who would have wrongly imprisoned wonder in the radicalism of the difference, bringing it closer to intimacy. He confronts Otto, van der Leeuw, and James with Freud and Bataille by drawing attention to the originating link that the "frightening"/*unheimlich* shares with what is intimate. Thus, the mysterious, the uncanny, is no longer necessarily frightening and distant, opening up to the intimate, as he himself says: "[...] my emphasis is not on the uncanny as frightening, but on the uncanny as close to us, as intimately other". To argue the originating link that the dimension of the "frightening"/*unheimlich* has with the intimate/*heimlich*, he says that "[...] what is familiar becomes private,

what is private becomes hidden, and what is hidden becomes spooky”. This argument is essential, since it is through it that a bridge between the personal, subjective experience and the problems of our time can be theoretically built.

It is also in this dialogue between Freud and Bataille on one side and Otto, van der Leeuw, and James on the other side that Csordas claims to find, in this existential moment, the kernel of religion, the point of constitution of the human. In other words, the ability to produce religion is what makes us human; thus, in Csordas, religion becomes the great divider between humans and non-humans. That is to say, we become humans from an intimate, embodied experience: “[...] instead of the wholly other projected onto cosmic majesty, I want to turn our attention to the intimately other”. Csordas does not substantiate his ideas only with theoreticians, but illustrates his theses with ethnographic examples (ethnography among Charismatic Catholics and the Navajo). Another important point is the sense that Csordas gives to the use of the term “alterity”. Even though it is a ubiquitous relationship in society life, it is developed in and for itself in a religious context. This would be the difference of its manifestations in politics (oppression) or in aesthetics (beauty). What is at issue is that alterity is not the object of religion, the object of religion is the objectification of alterity. It is even possible to say that when the difference is developed in itself and for itself we are in religious ground. Here lies one more opposition to Durkheim, who defined sacred as an object of religion. For Csordas, sacred is not a specificity of religion, neither is it the alterity. It is, however, as said before, its objectification. He tells us:

[...] the phenomenologists’ error was to make a distinction between the object and the subject of religion when the actual object of religion is objectification itself, the rending apart of subject and object that makes us human and in the same movement bestows on us—or burdens us with—the inevitability of religion. The ‘object’ of religion is not the other; it is the existential aporia of alterity itself.

Csordas is poetically and deeply telling us that religion would be, therefore, the search for lost intimacy. If I understand it right, there is therefore

a tragic nature in the making of the human being. By becoming humans, we start living in the world of alterity, in the world in which continuity was broken or at least became strange for us.

The objectification of alterity, however, and most importantly for the theoretical and political implications, is a movement in which the individual is a participant and at the same time does not have a pre-set direction. There is no pre-defined arrival point, its nature is indeterminacy. Therefore, the image we have of the objectification of alterity is not of unity, but of multiplicity. As with the vertical asymptote, whose curve tends to infinity, we, human beings, would be the asymptote of the ineffable, which never reaches us, but which defines (deifies) the alterity that makes us human and that makes the ineffable inevitable. Csordas recognizes that the application of mathematical reasoning may be wrong: it is possible that the asymptote is the ineffable, and that we humans are the curve, which never reaches it. As he warns us early in the text: “[...] the problem of subjectivity is that we are never completely ourselves, and the problem of intersubjectivity is that we are never completely in accord with others”. What stands out is the impossibility of stabilizing the objectification of the alterity in an essence, which opens us for the multiplicity of images: images of fear, of intimacy, of oppression, of care, of horror, of love, of strength, of tenderness... of the feminine, of the masculine, of a child maybe... infinitely ineffable.

Undoubtedly, we are facing a difficult text; it is not a text for neophytes in social theory. Reading this text requires patience and attention, given its erudition and intellectual density. We need these skills to accept the invitation to seek the origins, an enterprise that is unsympathetic to the anthropological thinking per se, and also navigating through authors that follow different traditions. Without knowing for sure if I have exercised these abilities wisely, I bring up my remarks here:

1. Early in the text, Csordas says: “My point is about being-in-the-world, our human condition of existence not only as beings with experience but as beings in relation to others”. Considering that it is relational,

saying that it is fundamentally social would not be wrong. According to Durkheim the social is a homogeneous whole that is imposed to the individual from the outside to the inside. I ask: how would Csordas' conceptualization be free from the same criticisms directed at Durkheim, religion as the mystification of society? In addition, wouldn't Csordas just be swapping society for embodiment, and, after all, would it be possible to say that if for Durkheim religion is the society mystified, for Csordas religion would be the mystification of the body?

2. Establishing religion as universal, as constitutive of what is human, makes us understand religion as an attribute of human nature. Separating us, obviously, from other animals, dividing nature and culture once again. Wouldn't Csordas be restoring a dualism that he intends to dissolve? Besides, Csordas seems to encounter the same problem Simmel faced (see Pierucci, 2010)³. Simmel imagined religiosity as a constituent part of human nature, with religiosity as the ability to produce religion (the objectified dimension of religiosity, which would be the objectification of alterity for Csordas, in my point of view). However, neither Simmel nor Csordas, apparently, imagine or consider those individuals that are "deaf" to religion, as Weber defined himself, claiming not to have a musical ear for religion. Or even know and understand, using Weber once again, why would some have charisma and vocation and others would not, some more and some less. Wouldn't it be better to consider religion, the religious practice, as a developed skill, as for Ingold, learned and acquired in the tangles of environments, where between nature and culture the boundaries and dividers would not be very well perceived?

*Translated by Sarah Hoff
under the supervision and translation revision
of Professor Elizamari Becker (UFRGS).*

³ SIMMEL, Georg. *Religião: ensaios*. v. 1. São Paulo: Olho d'Água, 2010. 148 p. Review by: PIERUCCI, A. F. *Revista de Estudos da Religião*, p. 103-107, dez. 2010.