

## INTRODUCTION

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The following is the text of the opening address given at the Conference on *Religion and Society in the Prehistoric Mediterranean* held in Malta on 19-22 December 1988. The papers published in this issue are only a selection of the ones delivered in that conference. It is regretted that, owing to editorial constraints, not all the papers could be included.

While it is my duty as convener of this conference to introduce the theme of this meeting and to express my views on the desired orientation of its discussion, I confess that I harbour no illusions as to the treacherous paths and numerous pitfalls that bedevil this field of human science. So it is with great trepidation that I am about to embark on a task that would require an expert of prehistoric religions a whole lifetime to fulfill. But fools rush in where angels fear to tread and I shall be presumptuous enough to present you with a few reflections on what I think are some of the major problems at issue.

We normally associate the first manifestations of religious belief with *Homo Sapiens*, more precisely with the first subspecies of that group, Neanderthal man. Before him neither *Homo Habilis* nor *Homo Erectus* seem to have pushed their conceptual thinking far enough as to occupy their minds with preoccupations beyond those concerned with their material needs, either the very immediate ones or the foreseeable ones.

The first clear evidence of belief in the beyond is the adoption by man of deliberate burial such as those of Monte Circeo in Italy, ex-Skhul on Mount Carmel in Palestine, Le Moustier and La Chappelle-aux-Saints in France, and Teshik-Tash in Uzbekistan. Whether *Homo Sapiens* was an offshoot of Neanderthal man or belonged to a different branch in the evolutionary tree, he seems to have inherited this religious trait, or he had similar stimuli, similar exigencies. Burial became even ceremonial, such as that of a young man and an older woman buried together at Grimaldi and accompanied by red ochre and shell necklaces and bracelets, and the other of Arene Candide of a young man covered with ochre and wearing a cap of perforated shells and pairs of discs carved from elk antler.

Deliberate burial is already indicative of the initial stages of development of the human mind since other animals do not dispose of their dead in this way. Motivations of hygiene are to be excluded. We cannot help asking ourselves: why burial with ochre, why burial with personal ornaments, why burying at all? To these questions we can provide only guesses. Nevertheless, we cannot but presuppose the existence of a special regard to the relative whose remains need to be disposed of—a social relationship that is unknown in the animal world, that transcends the here

and now, that transcends the relationship between the living. This special reverence may well have been combined with some praeternatural, perhaps even supernatural ideas connected with the dead: some sort of survival after death, in another, far away space, or here, close to the living and influencing their lives. The connection between religious sentiment (or thought) and social relationships appears to be evident at the very outset of man's intellectual development.

At this stage in his evolutionary process the only social organisation we can conceive of is that of the family, at most that of the extended family incorporating possibly up to, but not more than, three generations and with some rudiments of division of labour based on sex and age. What did ceremonial burial mean to such an embryonic society? Did it satisfy some basic though still nascent human need? I would say, yes. Caring for the dead from now on meant that the sentimental bond between members of the family did not stop at death but continued afterwards. This feeling or belief must have been an important contributing factor to family, *ergo* to social, cohesion.

With the gradual extension of the social unit to clan, village and tribe this preoccupation with the dead became increasingly more complex, more elaborate, developing into a fully-fledged cult, the cult of the ancestors.

The next significant stage in man's cultural evolution which sheds considerable light on the history of religious ideas is the appearance of art, a phenomenon which characterises many, but not all Upper Palaeolithic cultures. Here also there is much scope for analysing the interactive forces between religious ideas and societal needs. I use the word 'societal' on purpose at this stage because together with the ordinary, day-to-day needs I mean to include those needs which, consciously or unconsciously, were held to be conducive to human relationship in a community.

Some cave art is very revealing on the hunting methods of *Homo Sapiens Sapiens* not only in relation to the type of quarry—the large-sized ones required different hunting techniques from those needed for small quarries—and the type of weapon used, but also on whether it was the effort of the single individual or a co-operative one involving co-ordination of action by several members of the community. In fact, several cave paintings show the participation of several individuals, possibly with slightly differing tasks. It is generally accepted that this type of cave art was initially connected with 'religious' or 'magic' beliefs, and that the purpose of such art and connected ceremonies or rituals was to bring the hunters in intimate relation with the prospective quarry. Some motifs could be interpreted as being intended to promote the animals' fecundity, to secure more game as a source of food for survival. Others may have been intended to propitiate animal spirits. But here we start moving away more and more from the empirical to the conjectural, to the non-testable, the non-falsifiable. Whichever the purpose, or purposes, of these paintings, it is not difficult to see the close interrelationship between religion and society. There is no doubt that the repertoire of religious ideas that transpire from Palaeolithic art is not that of a religion of the individual but of the group. So far as I can see, it is a religion at the service of society. I do not see dependence in the opposite direction, that is, of religion on society.

This can possibly be seen emerging with the first professional specialisation of human society, the individual (later to become a group) who assumes the role of intermediary between the community and the supernatural: the shaman, the sorcerer, the witchdoctor—the idea of the priest in embryo. Surely enough, the same individual could well have participated in the hunt together with the other members

of the community; he could have shared all the other daily experiences and chores with them. But whereas many members were involved in hunting and food gathering, in flint knapping and in other activities, only one individual—or a very selected few—had the transcendental knowledge, the esoteric powers, which provided him also with the charisma of a leader. Now, for the first time, the natural leader of the extended family unit, who probably owed his dominating role to physical—perhaps sexual—powers, or to his ability in the co-ordination of the hunt, had to contend with an emerging competitor for authority. A source of social tensions emerges which will develop in a full-scale struggle for power in the protoliterate civilisation of Egypt between the leaders of the two most fundamental and separated areas of society, the spiritual and the material. And as we know from experience the line of demarcation between the two areas in the exercise of authority is not, and was never, easy to draw. So much so that very often both authorities were combined and exercised by one and the same leader, or a caste of leaders.

In this respect it would be most interesting to try to identify the role of the artist in this socio-religious context. Evidently the artist is an individual with remarkable and extraordinary abilities. There is no question of trained artists here. These abilities are innate in the individual and not acquired, though naturally some concession has to be made to initiation, to handing over from one generation to another of the technical devices, the colour preparations, the painting instruments, the selection of the most propitious surfaces for painting over. The most legitimate question in this respect is: who was the artist? Was he the shaman, the sorcerer, the witchdoctor himself, or was he a simple instrument in the wielding of power at the hands of the spiritual (or magical) leader? I do not think anyone is as yet in a position to give a satisfactory answer but it is certainly a field of enquiry which could lead to interesting results.

In dealing with interaction between religious ideas and society in the Upper Palaeolithic one cannot pass over without considering one of the most debated questions of prehistoric studies in general: the existence or otherwise of a widespread, if not universal, belief in a Great Mother Goddess among Palaeolithic cultures, and, almost as a natural consequence of it, the matriarchal organisation of the same societies. At the risk of being platitudinous, I firmly believe that the only possible, rational solution to such a debate is through an objective, empirical approach: a critical analysis of the available data and the testing of hypotheses and proposed models. Tackling the problem in reverse, that is, considering first the possibility of matriarchal Palaeolithic cultures, the first thing to establish, if it is at all possible, is the sex of the religious leader, because the material leader, by analogy with the animal world closest to man, was almost certainly male. It is only when we have established that the spiritual, or even 'moral', leader of the community was female, can we be justified to affirm that we are likely to be dealing with matriarchal societies. Analogies with recent or historical, primitive societies are not, to my mind, always reliable from the methodological point of view and could often be very misleading.

In relation to this the supporters of the latter theory would bring forth the numerous representations in Palaeolithic art of female figures with prosperous volumes and prominent sexual attributes. Without going into the question of whether these could be simply objects of sexual or erotic art, I would say that the first thing that has to be firmly established is whether these figures are intended to represent the divinity itself, the essence of humanity, or individuals, perhaps the

leaders, defunct or alive, spiritual or material. It is then that we can make any real progress in resolving this question. For the present I cannot agree with G.R. Levy in seeing the dark recesses of the caves where such art occurs as symbolising the womb of Mother Earth whence man and animals came and whither they returned. This view is arbitrary and purely conjectural and, at most, it could possibly be applicable only to later times, more precisely to the Neolithic, after the invention of agriculture, when man started to depend entirely and manifestly on the generosity of earth for his survival. The absence of burials in such deep recesses at this stage is a further negation of this view.

This takes us to the next major stage of human cultural development when, as a result of a series of chain reactions following man's revolutionary decision to embrace the agricultural way of life, we are faced with a very different socio-religious scenario—people are now settled in villages of different sizes ranging from small hamlets of ten households or less, to towns several hectares large with hundreds of houses abutting each other and, in one case, even a fortified wall around it. Man now depends more directly on the earth which he sees producing the food for his sustenance, a process in which he himself is directly involved, in sowing and in the selection of the more suitable seeds.

We cannot, obviously, postulate a model of social structure applicable to all Neolithic societies. Here I do not have in mind distinctions between prepottery Neolithic, or pre-agricultural Neolithic, and full Neolithic, but distinctions between the larger and necessarily more complex societies and the smaller ones with a simpler organisation. There has been a tendency in the past to equate Neolithic agricultural communities with egalitarian societies with little or no social ranking. Although the archaeological record is not always explicit, nor easily interpretable, it has by now been established that there must have existed various degrees of social ranking among different Neolithic communities. These can be embraced within a bracket ranging from the extended family set-up we saw typical of Palaeolithic societies on one end to the complex hierarchical societies of the proto-urban civilisations on the other end.

Just to cite one example, a chiefdom society with territorial separations based on arable land and siting of temple complexes has been postulated, to my mind with a fair degree of success, to explain the extraordinary development of the Maltese Temple Culture. A number of interesting studies have been published in the recent past on various models of social structure and on various aspects thereof, and I feel that only time, more applications, and a critical analysis of them will prove their validity.

Now what do we consider would have been the role of religion in the social mechanism of Neolithic societies? How would the two have interacted? The answer is obviously far from simple. We can either try to synthesise, that is generalise by devising a model applicable in various degrees to various Neolithic situations. Or else, we can study how the two forces interact in specific situations, in specific cultures. I have no qualms in confessing that the first task is beyond my abilities and expertise. I am happy to note that a good number of papers to be presented during this meeting set themselves the second task. I shall limit myself to saying a few words on the subject in relation to the Maltese Temple culture. In view of the venue of this meeting I trust you bear with me for my focussing on this extraordinary prehistoric culture.

I have already expressed elsewhere my view that the chiefdom model proposed

by Renfrew for Malta's Temple culture could be extended from the purely material (or secular) area to incorporate also the spiritual (or religious) one. Besides being a leader in purely economic and social affairs, the chief would have also been the spiritual leader, the chief-priest, possibly aided by a group of priests in the role of sub-chiefs. As for the Temples themselves, they would have served not only a religious purpose, but also an economic one, that of collection and redistribution of surplus brought in as 'gifts' by the specialised sectors of economic production, according to the theory of Polanyi.

In such a model the initial moving force could be either the religious or the social one, but the end result would be one of the most effective amalgamations of forces for a common end. There are factors, however, in the cultural development of the temple builders that would indicate that the initial moving force was the social one rather than the religious one. According to the archaeological record, a group of farmers originating from nearby Sicily and carrying a culture close to that of San Cono-Piano Notaro in that island, settled in Malta around the end of the fifth millennium and after having done that, they underwent a cultural development quite independently from their Sicilian counterparts, even though contacts of a purely commercial, to some extent even cultural, nature was maintained.

Well, the cultural baggage, the corpus of religious ideas these people brought with them and its manifestations in the first two phases of its development contain nothing that heralds the extraordinary rise of the temple culture, no embryonic idea of it. Therefore, all indicators point to a purely autochthonous evolution without any stimuli from outside. What was, then, the source of the local stimuli? I am sure there might be other explanations but a possible one is a gradual but steady increase in population resulting from a thriving agricultural economy and requiring a more effective social organisation to provide better cohesion. This social need must have found response from a group who, in my view, were already in charge of the religious practices of the community such as the ceremonial disposal of the dead which is already documented in the earliest phases of the Temple period. This group took the initiative and gradually established themselves on the higher social rungs and eventually embarked on a religious building scheme of unprecedented proportions: all this in the name of a powerful religious ideology. Although the identity of the divinity or divinities behind this religious belief might be still beyond our grasp, we are faced with the concrete reality of the splendid monuments erected at its service. Therefore, although *prima facie* it might appear that society in this case is subservient to religion, in reality according to this view the original cause would be a social need which provoked a religious reaction and in combination with it produced the cultural phenomenon with which we are familiar.

This is the scenario I propose to explain the Maltese Temple phenomenon. I propose it, evidently, as a working hypothesis and, as any other hypothesis, it is to be put to the test, here in this forum, or elsewhere. Here, as for Palaeolithic art, I believe it would be of interest to investigate the role of the artist—in this case even of the architect, the temple designer—in this highly religious society.

A closing word about the final age of Mediterranean prehistory: the Bronze Age. And here the first differentiation that has to be made is between the eastern and western Mediterranean, for while the East entered into its proto-historical phase with the introduction of writing and a calendar before the end of the fourth millennium—a millennium later in Crete and even later in Greece—the West lagged behind in prehistory until well into the subsequent Iron Age, that is, until the first

colonisation movement by the Phoenicians and the Greeks. Before we could apply the same arguments to previous ages, it is for the Bronze Age that the great question arises as to whether, and to what degree, we are justified to infer ideas on prehistoric religion and society from situations described by historical writings. In particular, how justified we are to extrapolate information on prehistoric religion and society in the Aegean, and beyond, from what we can glean in Greek historical literature dated from the eighth century onwards.

There is no doubt that the Homeric poems refer to a society, a civilisation of the late Bronze Age for which, by the way, we have other contemporary written sources. We know, however, that there are in the same Homeric poems cultural references which could only be interpreted as Iron Age interpolations. Such interpolations should put us on our guard in our attempt at sifting the original (that is, the prehistoric) religious ideas from ones that came into being later, or ones that owe their origins from different geographical sources as a result of movements of peoples.

I have touched on this argument for two reasons. Firstly, because at least one paper in this conference is intended to be an essay towards the reconstruction of prehistoric religious thought from later Greek literature. Secondly, because the use of information on contemporary religious ideas given by many Greek and Near Eastern literatures have in the past been used extensively, and sometimes indiscriminately, to reconstruct the religious thought of prehistoric man. This method, I believe, should also be a subject of discussion on its own.

Needless to say, the above are intended to be exactly what they are: seminal ideas presented for eventual discussion. Though not all the papers set their contribution in this framework I very much wish that it will be kept in mind during the discussion session of each paper.

To put it in a nutshell, the fundamental issue here is one of methodology.

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