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**Taking up Weber and Foucault:  
Religious roots of modernity, and beyond  
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**What does ‘taking up Weber and Foucault’ mean?**

Methodologically, the long-term research project of which this paper attempts to resume some of the relevant results, apart from being historical in its design, and in particular following the Nietzsche-Weber-Foucauldian genealogy, is also concerned with the proper way to take up the work of ‘serious authors’. The expression ‘serious authors’, in lack of a better term, designates those authors who, even taking heed of the critique to authorship voiced by Barthes and Foucault, are worthwhile taking seriously *as* authors. The ‘What is an author?’ debate does not, and cannot, mean that the personal component of research is irrelevant, and that it is not possible that singular figures might come up fundamentally new and strikingly relevant ideas. It rather diagnosed a peculiar, ‘romantic-titanic’ aspect of modern social scientific theorising: the pretence to claim that any idea, article or book written by a concrete person can be attributed to him as her as ‘own’, beyond the legal problem of plagiarism. In contrast to this position, Foucault showed that authors belonging to a particular time and space spoke from inside a given discursive formation, whose rules they simply took for granted.

‘Serious authors’, however, are those figures who for one reason or another could no longer speak from inside the discourse which they learnt from their teachers, taken for granted by practically all scholars working in a given field, and therefore were forced to develop a new and genuinely personal long-term research project. Nietzsche, Weber and Foucault, among others, belong to this category; and so the understanding of their work poses considerable problems. The novelty of their ideas is immediately evident to anybody reading them; yet, it is simply ‘in the nature of things’, and especially of ‘human nature’, that very few people are able to handle such novelty directly, and instead they try to reposition their work in the context of received wisdom, reducing their distinct novelty into the intellectual horizon they tried to escape – not because of a dogged search for novelty at any price, but as truly a matter of fate.

However, even once their singularity is recognised, and the novelty and exact character of the work understood, the best use to make of their ideas remains a problem. The reception of such ‘master works’ seems to oscillate around and in between two poles. One is concerned with commentary, aiming at a proper understanding of the work, rendering justice to its full complexity. While such efforts are eminently important and useful, they have the drawback of focusing attention on ideas already pronounced, research completed, thus producing a certain closure. The other pole concerns, on the contrary, some of the central ideas of such master thinkers, identified and taken out of context, given a definition, and used as tools to produce a new research. Foucault’s ‘bio-politics’ or ‘governmentality’, or Weber’s ‘charisma’ or ‘instrumental rationality’ are prominent examples. The problem of a closure, however, applies even here: any single ‘concept’, even when it is more or less properly understood, could lead into directions quite different from the spirit of the original work, and the danger is that in this way the concept will be reinserted into the same old taken for granted ‘mainstream’ way of thinking, which is however unsatisfactory, as *this* was the original reason why such master-thinkers started to develop not simply a few new term, but an entire research *path*. And so, instead of writing *on* Weber and Foucault, or ‘using’ some of their concepts, the

way to use their work to full potential is to enter and take further the very research path the were experimenting with.

Far from solving the problem, however, this is only the starting point of the real methodological difficulties. This is because, most evidently, it is simply impossible to 'take up' the project of Weber or Foucault, or for any other thinker, and for a number of reasons. We live, after all, in a different time and place; we face, in spite of continuities, different problems, have different life experiences behind us, and can make use of a vastly different and in some ways much improved background literature. And, most importantly, the idea of as if entering the 'mind' of another thinker, trying practically to assume his interests and concerns, thus almost his identity, is an undertaking full of difficulties, even of a simply psychological kind.

The way out lies in a certain combination of the comparative and hermeneutical methods. This means that, instead of selecting just one thinker whose research one intends to take up, it is necessary to select a few, preferably with already some links between them; but instead of taking up some of their ideas, especially restricting them to the ones most discussed, to enter the depth of their thinking, in the manner that is usually reserved for a hermeneutical study of a single thinker only. In this manner the dangers associated with an obsessive 'miming' or even 'stalking' the work of a single figure, characteristic in particular to Marxism and Freudianism, but also of the schools formed around the various real or presumed 'master thinkers' of the past century is avoided, and the result will neither be a mere eclecticism. The central idea, rather, is to penetrate the thought of some of the most important thinkers of the past century in such a profound manner that one can identify, whether through certain blind spots within their works, or in terms of a common direction to which they point to, certain research tracks that would offer the best chances to continue, fruitfully, the work they pioneered.

This is particular helpful concerning the theme of this presentation, the ideas of Weber and Foucault about the contribution of religious factors to the genesis of modernity. On a first look, the relevance of this question for the work of the two master thinkers (or 'serious authors') seems most different. For Weber, the 'Protestant ethic' thesis about the 'spirit' of capitalism is certainly one of the best known and indeed central part of his work. In the case of Foucault, however, religious aspects played a minuscule role in his genealogy of modernity, until – at a certain particular juncture of his work – the question assumed vital significance. A joint study of Weber and Foucault in this respect is not only helpful for mutually illuminating the work of the others, but also to identify, jointly, two specific research paths that seem particularly important to take up: one representing a singular and striking omission in their works, while the other a research path, beyond the temporal horizon of their works, which was rendered possible by recent advances in concrete research, especially in archaeology.

Before entering the work of Weber and Foucault concerning the religious roots of modernity, a few words should be said on the pioneering novelty of the approach they followed, due – as always – to the inspiration of Nietzsche.

### **The puzzling positive link between religion and modernity**

It is one of the basic, indeed defining features of modern thought to consider the disappearance of religion as necessary outcome of social evolution. The idea is deeply rooted in the Enlightenment, especially its 'radical' version (Israel 2000), central in the form of the 'death of god' thesis for classical German philosophy (de Lubac 1949), so much so that Marx already could assert, in the Introduction to his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, that the criticism of religion having been accomplished, the task of 'critical thought' must shift elsewhere. This approach not only proclaimed the future

irrelevance of religion, but also denied that religion played any positive role in history. The 'critique of religion' perspective even became a dominant feature of 19th century (German Protestant) theology, in the form of Biblical Criticism, which exerted a strong impact on philosophy, historiography, and even sociology.

It is against this general orientation that Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals* represents a radical alteration of course. Nietzsche not only reasserted the vital significance of religion in human history, but did so by presenting a complex socio-psychological argument, way beyond the standard Enlightenment treatment considering religion at best a myth, but mostly a deceit and priestly lie; and, going even further, argued that secular modernity, with its central values, only represents a secularised version of Christian morality, and is therefore deeply nihilistic, questioning the very legitimacy of modernity.

Max Weber not only followed closely, in the 'spirit' of his historically oriented research Nietzsche's genealogy as method, but also came to assign a particularly important role to religious factors in the rise of modern capitalism, presenting an argument that from the perspective of Enlightenment reasoning seemed utterly paradoxical. As a result, through the 'Protestant ethic' thesis, the recognition of the positive impact of religion on the rise of the modern world has become a standard, though by no means uncontroversial and often much misunderstood factor in the rise of modernity.

However, the Nietzsche-Weber axis was not the only way through which the recognition of the importance of religious factors for social life re-entered, paradoxically and against the spirit of the Enlightenment, classical sociology. Quite astonishingly, the other main classic founding figure of sociology and contemporary of Weber, Emile Durkheim also eventually came to assign, against the word and spirit of his earlier work, a central importance to religion in social life, and devoted much of the last part of his work to writing the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. This fact, that the two figures who, since a century, by practically every social scientists are recognised as the 'founding fathers' of sociology devoted the most mature part of their work to the study of religion was so strikingly against Enlightenment-based modern prejudices that they were simply *not* followed, no matter how this inserted a glaring paradox at the heart of sociology and in particular social theory.

This fact is even more striking as a simple analysis can show that this shift of interest in each of the three cases was by no means an idiosyncrasy, but concerned the heart of the identity of each of these figures – and jointly at the personal, social and professional level. Nietzsche did not study religion by professional training; rather, he started to write the *Genealogy* after a particular kind of self-reflexive meditation or 'spiritual exercise' (Hadot 1993), the writing of a new Preface to the second editions of most of his previous works.<sup>i</sup> Weber similarly started work on the *Protestant Ethic* after a long period of psychosomatic illness which was induced by an identity crisis, and his entire 'sociology of religions' project, deeply concerned with the identity of the West, was explicitly spun by a deeply personal line on investigation, as reflected in the first words of the extremely important 'Author's Introduction' to the planned 5-volume series.<sup>ii</sup> Finally, Durkheim's interest in the sociology of religion was sparked by his reading of Robertson Smith's *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites*.

It is here the relevance of Foucault's interest in the role played by religious factors in the origins of modernity can be properly situated. Until the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* series, there were very little references to matters of religion in Foucault's works; and these were limited mostly to the spatial location or architecture of buildings of originally religious use. It is thus only in the second part of the 1970s that Foucault started explicitly to reflect on the role of religious factors, in the context of a theme, the study of sexuality, which was very close to the heart of his own identity, and

the problems Foucault felt to have with it – a moment associated with Foucault’s ‘crisis’; and also a moment in which he started to become explicitly interested in the work of Weber.<sup>iii</sup>

Thus, while the study of religious factors by no means played such an important role in the life-work of Foucault than in Weber’s, even here the modality of similarities is evident; it can also be reinforced by a shared, striking omission. This concerns the Renaissance, especially the connections between the collapse of the Renaissance and the emergence of the Reformation; a connection which they failed to investigate and, instead, engaged upon a long-term comparative genealogical project.

In order to establish and investigate this point, it is necessary to present in some details how the claim concerning this presumed omission can be supported.

### **Max Weber and the Protestant Ethic thesis**

Until Max Weber’s work, and the almost contemporaneous work of Johan Huizinga, it was generally asserted, following claims made by the Enlightenment, that the modern world, and in particular modern capitalism, grew out of the Renaissance, and that a central connection between the Renaissance and modernity was secularisation. The works of Weber and Huizinga, in spite of all their differences, jointly helped to radically alter this orientation, by reassigning the Renaissance to the medieval period, and instead focusing on the Reformation as the source of modernity. As a result, sociologists and historically oriented social scientists in general lost almost all interest in the Renaissance as a period.

The problem is that, even fully recognising the significance of Weber’s work, the exact nature of the link between the medieval world, the Renaissance as a transition period at the end of the Middle Ages and the Reformation as a step towards modernity still must be solved. In particular, the paradoxical nature of the Weber thesis cannot be ignored. Weber recognised the connection between business success and Protestant sectarianism, but this connection was *still* a paradox; and the condition of possibility of such a positive connection was established in this peculiar period, the High Renaissance (from about the mid-Quattrocento); a period often simply identified with the Renaissance. Weber’s ignoring of this period could well be attributed to the deep suspicion that German Protestants, not without its own reasons, had towards it. Yet, this is not a sufficient justification; the collapse of the Renaissance should have been amply studied by historical sociologists, who were wrong to follow Weber here. And a study of this collapse would have shifted interest to another basic omission of comparative historical sociology, and a quite stunning one: the almost complete ignoring of the Byzantine Empire.

Thus, Weber’s focus concerning the religious roots of modernity must be complemented by a study of the collapse of the Renaissance, including the secular aspects that emerged there *only* at its collapse, in the context of a sociology of the connections between Eastern Christianity and the Byzantine Empire.

Interestingly enough, solely by following the internal logic of Foucault’s relevant work, especially the various segments about ‘pastoral power’, also lead to the same juncture, a study of the collapse of the Renaissance, which Foucault similarly *failed* to pursue, and instead jumped straight into a study of Antiquity.

## Foucault: problematising pastoral power

Foucault's substantial interest in religion was sparked by his planned study on the history of sexuality and its focus, as evident in the first volume published in 1976, on the practice of confession. The original plan was to write in quick succession five further volumes, based on the conceptual tools developed for the study of power in his two books published in the middle of the 1970s; but a planned cursory turn to the problem of Christian confession, based on the lectures of 1975, produced the opposite result, radically altering the entire direction of Foucault's work.

The manner in which this happened can be dramatically reconstructed on the basis of the 1978 Collège de France lectures. After the Sabbatical year, which was supposed to be devoted to the finishing of the five volumes, Foucault started his lectures by emphasising the continuity with his previous work, the question of bio-power. However, the fourth lecture of the course, the famous 'governmentality' lecture, announcing a genuine break in Foucault's work, followed up, in the next lecture, by introducing an even further novelty, the theme of 'pastoral power'. Having devoted three surprise lectures to this new central concept, at the end of the 22 February 1978 lecture, as if apologising to his audience for such a long excursion, Foucault promised to finish with pastorate and move back to the new central theme of governmentality (Foucault 2004: 188). And *yet*, this promise is not maintained, and the next, 1 March 1978 lecture is again devoted to pastoral power, though from a very particular angle: the crisis of pastorate, identified with the 15-16th centuries; and the medieval background to the struggles around pastoral power, discussed under five points, of which the last concerns the various eschatological and millenarian movements. This crisis thus evidently became so important for Foucault that he suddenly reorganised the already interrupted schedule of the course. And yet, to raise perplexity to a further level, he would never return to study this crisis; it would be mentioned, and even prominently, around that time,<sup>iv</sup> but then, instead of devoting further research to this topic, Foucault jumped over the period and the entire Middle Ages in order to study the early Christian centuries. His argument for leaving out the medieval period that pastoral power not being very important then, which is not very convincing; but the overlooking of the period of crisis is not even justified. In particular, the one page devoted to this theme in the famous 'Omnes et Singulatim' lecture even fails to distinguish between the problematisation of the pastorate by the medieval millenarian movements and in the 'crisis' of the 15-16th centuries (Foucault 1978: 73-4).

## At the limit of the thoughts of Weber and Foucault

Thus, we arrived at identical limits in the thinking of Weber and Foucault; and even in two senses. In their genealogies of modernity both Weber and Foucault attributed a particular significance to the break inaugurated in Europe by the 16-17th centuries, focusing on what was new and also on the particular, chaotic and uncertain conditions out of which this new was born, but placing less emphasis on the exact reasons why the previous order of thing collapsed; or on the rise *and* collapse of the Renaissance. Maybe they considered this phenomenon as less important, taking for granted that the old medieval world (order) *had* to break down anyway; maybe they were simply accepting, as they practically had to, the intellectual atmosphere characteristic of the times after the Enlightenment which was markedly hostile to Christianity, and thus considered the collapse of the (Christian) medieval world order as not only a necessity but as good in itself. At any rate, *even* Weber and Foucault came to consider that the only thing interesting in the complex series of events through which the Renaissance emerged out

of the 'late' medieval world, was flourishing, and then collapsed, was the *fact* that it collapsed and the *modality* of the particular kind of uncertain, unsettled conditions that replaced the medieval order and which were the 'conditions of emergence' of the modern search for a new kind of order. This poses the imperative to study, sociologically, the rise and collapse of the Renaissance.

Even further, the moment in which their work, driven by its inner logic, was supposed to incorporate the conditions of this collapse, whether in the form of the process of 'secularisation', supposedly characterising the Renaissance and leading to the Reformation, or the problematisation of pastoral power, the works of both Weber and Foucault took a big leap, over the Renaissance and the Middle Ages, back to Antiquity, with the promise of returning to the present – a promise that, due to their untimely death, could not be fulfilled. But it is exactly this leap backwards, into deep/ancient history, that offers a second modality for taking up the 'spirit' of the work of Weber and Foucault: a search for the more distant origins of modern culture and civilisation, the very origins of the city, and of technology, and the potential role that could have been played by religious factors there.

### **Elements for a sociology of the Renaissance<sup>v</sup>**

While the work of Weber and Huizinga was fundamental in problematising the Enlightenment (mis)reading of the Renaissance as heralding the coming of modernity, from the perspective of Nietzsche's concern with 'backward inference' it is possible to identify a profound shortcoming in both: viewing the Renaissance from its late, decadent phase. A genealogy of the Renaissance, however, should be concerned with the main features of the Renaissance as a project of renewal, and not being fixated with its end.

A sociology of the Renaissance is a particularly difficult undertaking not simply because Weber deviated the attention of historically oriented social theorists, but because the identification of the Renaissance poses particularly difficult problems. While the Renaissance is usually identified with the 15-16th centuries – a periodisation with its own problems – scholars time and again come up with extending the term to earlier centuries, talking about the 'Renaissance of the 12th century' (Haskins 1957), tracing it back to Carolingian times, or even the Northumberland of the 7-8th centuries. This is because one of the most central features of the Renaissance concerns the rectification of the damage done by the 'Barbarian invasions' at the collapse of the Roman Empire, by sparking a new flourishing after the terrible centuries of devastation. Thus, the definition of the Renaissance to a large extent depends on the particular perspective and guiding thread chosen: painting, education, legal thinking, or something else.

The entire issue, however, is more important than the 'right' chronology. The central aim motivating the return to history had a coherent concern behind it, beyond glorifying the past for its own sake; a concern that went way beyond a return to early Christianity or the Roman times, and that can be formulated as a concern with the unity of *grace*. The Renaissance had its motivating spirit by efforts to reconstitute a culture, a society, a way of life concerned with pursuing the unity of grace.

The term 'grace', especially as it was understood in the Renaissance, had three different, though quite interconnected facets. 'Grace' was first of all a theological category – though we need to find the exact meaning of the theology of grace at that time in history, purified of later layers of meaning.

Grace in the theological sense means 'divine grace', but this did not mean that human beings were merely passive recipients. The most important medieval theology of grace was formulated by St Thomas Aquinas, and can be resumed in the famous

expression '*gratia gratis data gratia gratum faciens*' ('a freely given grace makes one graceful/grateful'). This expression captures the heart of Aquinas's theology concern, the relationship between the divine and the human, which is up till today the heart of Catholicism as a way of life. According to this the grace of god, rooted in divine love, is indeed freely given, does not depend on our will; but this does not mean that the human side has no role to play. Any gift of grace received must be carefully maintained and nurtured. It must become part of parcel of our daily life, our habit or *habitus* – introducing a term that, following Weber and Elias, Bourdieu placed, perhaps unknowingly, at the heart of his sociology. Such a way of life not simply gave an access to Paradise, instrumentalising human existence in the sense of 'buying' eternal life; rather, it was *itself* a mode of living. The existential basis of medieval Christianity was not connected only to the future, a life after death, or the resurrection, the Last Judgment and the Second Coming, but also to the past, carrying the promise of valorising this, concrete life, in so far as it contained the grace of paradisiac living.

Second, and closely connected to this idea of divine grace, the Renaissance also manifested a particular care about an aspect of gracefulness that – with a terminology only developed in the 18th century – can be called the 'aesthetics' of grace, or a concern with beauty in work of art, which themselves merely reproduce and render even more evident, in a terminology strongly influenced by the thinking of Plato, especially the *Timaeus*, the only Platonic dialogue available fully translated in the Middle Ages, the beauty of the world.

Finally, the comprehensive vision of grace in the early Renaissance, animating not only the vision of the world but penetrating the manner in which this world was lived, concerned a social-anthropological aspect of living life as a gift, and therefore basing social existence on the offering, accepting and returning of gift; a mode of living closely connected to the Christian interpretation of love as charity.

The collapse of the Renaissance as a project, connected to the effective realisation of the unity of gracefulness at the level of daily existence can be best identified through the manner in which the best genealogists of modernity, Weber, Elias and Foucault each picked up one fragment of this project, and proclaimed this fragment as lying at the heart of the modern world. Weber focused attention on the Protestant (Calvinist) idea of predestination, which at first restricted Christian religion to a concern with individual salvation, then proclaimed that this salvation is purely a matter of the inscrutable will of God, destroying the delicate balance between divine Grace and human effort, as manifested in the *habitus*, and radically instrumentalising human life, arguing that life in the world has no value on its own, and can only be considered as way to manifest one's own status of as an elect. This also implied a full-scale downgrading of the other two components of grace: the beauty of the world lost all its meaning and relevance, the world becoming reduced, in a manner similar to human life, to the role of an instrument helping the revelation of one's own status, thus an appendix to the methodical transformation of human activities into enterprises who could success or fail, according to the predetermined or predestined status of the 'entrepreneur'; while the rejection of any church decoration, brought to its conclusion in Zwingli's church in Zürich, did away with any need for beauty in art. Similarly, the reduction of salvation to a purely individual level undermined the community principle that was at the heart of the medieval church, parishes being replaced by sects that were not communities, only gatherings of the elect, and where – ignoring the most basic anthropological features of any community life – people who suddenly faced difficulties were not helped by the community but rather were thrown out of it, their failure being considered as proof that they did not belong to the elect.

The aesthetic fragment of Renaissance grace was picked up by Norbert Elias, in his analysis of the court society and its obsession with minutely ritualised and formalised behaviour, regulated by books about the right, ‘graceful’ way of conducting oneself in court, and of which one of the prototypes – strangely not given any emphasis by Elias – was *The Book of the Courtier* by Baldassare Castiglione, a lifelong friend of Raphael, the painter of gracefulness, and who modelled the ideal court on the court of Urbino, native city of Raphael. In this court, eventually ruled by the ‘absolute’ prince, ‘by the grace of God’, however, any religious or philosophical substance concerning the life of grace was subordinated to mere formalities and etiquettes, resulting in the contemporary understanding of all rituals and ceremonies as being empty, formal occasions to ‘show off’, for long even misleading anthropological investigations of non-Western people.

Finally, the socio-anthropological ‘charity’ component was picked up by Michel Foucault, who recognised that the disciplinary network of the modern state was based, very often in a direct architectural sense, on the medieval network of charities, monasteries and fraternities, except that such voluntary institutions were increasingly replaced by the police force of absolutism, and then the governmentalisation of the state.

Thus, the modern world, according to these powerful accounts, especially if we put them together, was not an autonomous and legitimate development, outcome of a natural process of evolution or result of socio-economic or political progress, rather the direct outcome of the collapse of the Renaissance. The question to be posed concerns the reasons why the Renaissance collapsed; or the identification of the main factor(s) behind this collapse.

### **The Collapse of the Renaissance and the Byzantine Spirit<sup>vi</sup>**

One of the most singular blind spots in the works of Weber and Foucault was identified as the lack of attention devoted to the Renaissance, and especially the reasons for its collapse. A similar omission concerns the failure to discuss, practically at all, the Byzantine world, in spite of the fact that any study of Christianity is one-sided if it does not incorporate a study of the Orthodox East; any comparative study of civilisations or Empires is incomplete without attention being placed on the Byzantium; and the study of the medieval world or the Renaissance is incomplete without involving an eternal reference point, in comparison with which it had a perennial inferiority complex, the surviving Eastern Roman Empire.

This omission is by no means restricted to the life-works of Weber and Foucault, but incorporates the entire fields of genealogy, historical sociology or comparative civilisational analysis. This striking failure of the entire field was pointed out in a recent article by Johann Arnason, one of the most important figures of comparative historical sociology, who stated that while ‘the Byzantine experience ought to appear as an eminently promising field for comparative study [...] it has, to put it mildly, not been given its due’; a chapter in S.N. Eisenstadt’s 1963 study of Empires being the only predecessor Arnason could enlist, apart from an earlier article of his (Arnason 2010: 493; see also Arnason 2000).

The recognition of the link between the collapse of the Renaissance and the collapse of the Byzantine Empire was rendered difficult by the indirect character of the connection. In particular, there was a widespread belief, strong in particular during the Enlightenment, and no doubt diffused by Byzantine figures, which outright attributed the *rise* of the Renaissance to the arrival of Byzantine ‘sages’, and their supposedly beneficial impact on Western civilisation; a position that by today has been completely repudiated, but which proved to be quite tenacious, and – based on the principle that the

best defence is to attack – prevented any identification of the Byzantium as lying behind the *collapse* of the Renaissance.

A further problem is caused by the question how the collapse of the Byzantine world could possibly have sparked the collapse of the Renaissance. The answer to this can be given by strict Weberian terms: it was a certain kind of Byzantine ‘spirit’ that became transplanted and diffused in the West, which led to the collapse. The question now concerns the identification of this spirit, and its careers.

Such an undertaking is rendered difficult, however, not only by the lack of previous sociological studies, but by the particularly tricky nature of this Byzantine spirit. This was because the central character of the Byzantine world in the medieval times was the exact opposite of the West – a phenomenon Weber intuited, but did not analyse in detail.

According to Weber, while the medieval West can be characterised by the singular separation of temporal and spiritual power, or the various kingdoms and the formally surviving Empire on the one hand, and the Papacy on the other, the two were united by a shared religious world-view, thus animated by the same spirit, the Byzantium was a ‘theocracy’, in the sense that worldly and religious power was united in the person of the emperor, explaining the extreme centralism and bureaucratisation of the Byzantine East. The problem is not only that the term ‘theocracy’ is not very useful, as it fails to capture the complicated relationship between the emperor and the patriarch, but that Weber failed to identify the single most important feature of the Byzantium, a paradoxical counterpart to its excessive centralism: that it had, since the beginnings, a radically schismatic ‘animating spirit’; and that the schismatic feature of the Byzantium became more and more pronounced with every successive crisis of its history, which resulted in a non-linear but evidently inexorable shrinking from the rise of Islam up to its final collapse.

The schismatic nature of the Byzantine world can be understood through the Hippodrome, this astonishing ‘place’, which has no equivalent whatsoever in the medieval West.

The Hippodrome was an immense building at the heart of Constantinople, 405m long and 120m wide, such size being particularly impressive given the rather small promontory that constituted the heart of the city. In its original function, as shown by its long elliptic shape, it was a stadium for chariot racing, modelled on the Circus Maximus of Rome; but – also similarly to it – it was also a place for gladiator fights, wild animals, and various theatrical and mime shows. In contrast to Rome, however, where – as a result of the barbarian invasions – the Circus Maximus was abandoned and even today only its outlines can be seen, due to the continuity in the Byzantium the Hippodrome survived, and – as it is the case with any mass popular entertainment in a big city – proved to be indestructible. The Church only managed to eliminate its more violent aspects, like the gladiator fights, but the rest remained, more or less undisturbed, and for long centuries.

Thus, instead of the disappearance of the kind of mass spectacles that were standard features of the Roman Empire, especially in its decadent stage, but incompatible in any manner with the spirit of Christianity, especially in its particularly solemn and austere version that was the declared value of the Eastern Orthodox Church, the very nature of the Hippodrome became partly altered, and from a place of mere entertainment it also became the place where the Emperor exerted its *public* power, and *both* in its secular and ecclesiastic capacity. It is in the confusion thus produced between the secular and the religious, the solemn and the carnevalesque, the manifestation of the

splendour of divine light and the staging of the most base kind of mass entertainment, all at the same place, that the schismatic nature of the Byzantine spirit can be located; a feature that became particularly dominant at the centre of the Byzantium, the imperial court. The Byzantine Empire was not simply a ‘court society’, using the terminology of Norbert Elias, but of a very particular kind, in which the above confusion and conflation, combined with a series of other factors, in particular the entrusting of the education of the officials of the imperial bureaucracy to the sophist schools that became reorganised in the 2nd century AD, during the ‘Second Sophistic’, and transmitted to the Byzantine world, so much so that even the most important Church Fathers received, apart from a theological education, a training by the most famous sophist schools of their times, resulted in an increasingly pervasive cynicism of the court ‘intelligentsia’, comparable to Soviet Russia, a parallel that the works of Alexander Kazhdan, one of the most important scholars of the Byzantium made it evident, and which was only deepened by the long-standing collaboration between the Sophists and the mimes, which can be traced again back to the Roman Empire.

The schismatic dualism of the Byzantine spirit, a dogmatic and ritualistic solemnity combined with the outrageous ridiculing of the official ideology by the court society intellectuals and the street mimes at the very centre of imperial power reached its apotheosis in the final stage in the decline of the Byzantine Empire, inaugurated by the loss of Gallipoli after the earthquake of 2 March 1354 and the resignation of emperor John VI Kantakouzenos, who entered a monastery. In this period, lasting for a full century, the eventual collapse was evident, the surviving Empire being limited to an area not bigger than contemporary Albania, generating a suffocating, claustrophobic atmosphere. It was *this* spirit that was transmitted to the West, through Italy and especially Venice, in a series of waves starting in the last decade of the 14th century and culminating with the refugees fleeing the capital city after its sack in May 1453.

The carriers of this Byzantine spirit were mimes, who much contributed to the re-birth of theatre in the West; charlatans, who took over the organisation of the fairs and laid the foundations of modern economic society, that instead of market economy or capitalism should be thus termed ‘fairground capitalism’; and the court society sophists, the Byzantine *dotti* who were (mis-)recognised as philosophers and hailed as the saviours of Renaissance humanist culture, due to their competence in the Greek language that was all but lost in the West.

The central locations of the activity of such Byzantine figures, that the places from which the ‘Byzantine spirit’ was diffused in the West, were the fairs, scenes of all kind of entertainments, and the courts and palaces, centres of power, with a particular importance being played by the Burgundy court, with historical links to the Byzantium, since the Crusades, and the Papal Court, where the administrative competence of the Byzantine ‘sages’ was most welcome, and for whom conversion to Western Christianity presented no problem at all, after which they could sell themselves as *the* official representatives of the *curia*, the very centre of the Western Church, and so – at that time – also of the entire civilisation; and the universities and the suddenly burgeoning learned academies, from which a new, suddenly secularised learning was spread, and which both contributed to and reinforced the corruption of the papal court.

The one expression by which all these various kind of actors – bureaucrats, educators, actors, entrepreneurs and writers – could be all collected together is that they were all *mediators*. They did not belong to the still unquestioned leaders of the medieval world, the kings or aristocrats on the one hand, and the Church and monastic hierarchy on the other, *except* for the papal court; but they took over the vital roles and functions where power, ideas, goods and services were mediated and exchanged. Which had two main

consequences: first, that the diffusion of this Byzantine spirit was both extremely quick and unperceived – quick, as it used the mediating centres, and unperceived, as once the original impulse was given, the ideas, methods and perceptions kept being transmitted by indigenous figures; and second, especially in those areas where the sudden shock of the Byzantine influence was less immediately felt, and the guilt about leaving the Byzantium on its fate, especially strong in Venice, but also Italy in general, due to the events of the Fourth Crusade, was less influential, led to a widespread problematisation of the role of mediators in social life, in particular in so far as matters of religion were concerned – the area where the corrosive influence was most particularly felt, and with the greatest resistance.

The problematisation of the role of mediators in religious life is equivalent to the problematisation of pastoral power, emphasised by Foucault; and the rise of the Reformation with its emphasis on the direct relationship to a personal god, emphasised by Weber. Thus, from here onward, we can rely on the approaches pioneered by Weber and Foucault.

### **Moving further beyond: The vital significance of pre-history**

The horizon of comparative historical sociology or civilisational analysis, even in matters concerning the religious roots of the modern world, or of Western civilisation in general, rarely if ever goes beyond the rise of Ancient Judaism in the later Mesopotamian period, the experiences associated with Abraham (Voegelin 1956), in the context of Hammurabi. The themes covered and considered as ultimate reference points for historically informed social theory, reinforced by the anthropological perspective propagated by the Durkheimian school include monotheism, prophetic religions, the concern with salvation (or the problematic of ‘salvation religions’), and the presumably fundamental role played by rituals of sacrifice (meaning the bloody killing and ritualistic eating of the sacrificial animal, or even human sacrifice), a theme recently returned into the centre of attention by the innovative and intriguing but in other respects highly problematic work of René Girard.

This perspective, which in sociology goes back to Max Weber, and through Weber to 19th century Protestant Biblical criticism, a tradition to which Robertson Smith was also initiated, explaining the affinity of the Durkheimian anthropological sociology, has a serious shortcoming in that it has never really overcome the linear, evolutionary perspective of history, modern evolutionism being really only a secularised version of the Augustinian philosophy of history, itself relying on the linear Old Testament narrative, tracing everything back to the foundational figure of Abraham.

The fundamental break with the time horizon imposed by a particular reading of the Old Testament, dating the creation of the world to about 5000 BC, was not due to Darwin, rather to geology, in particular the work of Lyell, a most important inspiration for Darwin – and at the source of Nietzsche’s genealogy as well. Geology also had a decisive impact on another discipline, archaeology, rendering possible the study of those distant historical periods about which we don’t have written evidence. Archaeology, indeed, is one of the most important and most dynamic social science, which over the past few decades, due to improved technical methods and a series of breakthrough excavations came up with a radically new vision about the origins of human civilisation. The problem is that, entrapped by evolutionism and an increasingly narrowing vision of history, helped by the current experience of globalisation and its unfounded but seductive claims about an unprecedented new age of prosperity the social sciences, and sociology in particular, simply ignores these results, as they would upset the linear vision of progress enshrined at the heart of the world view projected by the Enlightenment.

In this second part of the paper, inspired by the spirit of Nietzsche genealogy and the need for 'backward inference', three central instances concerning the 'prehistory' of civilisation will be presented shortly, with the help of some of the most striking recent archaeological findings.

*Early Mesopotamia, 6.000-3.000 BC*

Our vision of Mesopotamia, dominated by the violent wars, sacrificial rituals and obsessive centralisation of the Babylonian and Assyrian periods radically changes if we shift our focus from the period around 2000 BC to the earliest stages, starting from 6000 BC. Some recent studies, based on new excavations, especially in Arslantepe and a more precise reinterpretation of the available evidence, focus in particular on two factors concerning the origins of Mesopotamia. The first is the emphasis placed on the primacy of religious factors in this line of civilisational development – a change of position that was much sparked by recent findings concerning the conditions of emergence of the Neolithic in Turkey, in particular Göbekli Tepe, to be discussed in the next section. Thus, for e.g. the building of huge stone temples can be traced back to the 5th millennium BC, much preceding the emergence of cities, and even coming before the most important developments in agricultural technology (Liverani 1998: 31-3). The second factor concerns the stunning artistic quality of simple objects of daily use, dated to the 6th millennia and associated with the Halaf, Samarra and Hassuna cultures. The striking beauty of hand-painted ware, including bowls, plates, jars and vases (Frangipane 1996: 73-6; Matthews 2003: 20), used in the everyday life of a society that ignored institutionalized social differentiation (Frangipane 2007), not only testifies to the existence of high aesthetic standards, but also that a particularly harmonious relationship must have existed at that period between human beings and the surrounding world. The geometric decoration patterns have been compared to the weaving patterns found in Native American basketry (Wengrow 2001: 179-80), and were also considered as having cosmological meaning: 'the decoration of vessels made manifest the operation of a cosmology in the world of tangible things, where ideas could be envisaged, meditated upon and transmitted across the boundaries of individual life-cycles' (ibid.: 176).

As a further, radical contrast with the later periods, in the entire period there is no evidence for wars or large-scale violence. The relationship between the divine and the humans were radically different from the scenes of massacres and the lining up of the unending rows of prisoners of wars in the honour of the deities that would mark the Assyrian period. This can be seen through a particularly perceptive analysis of the earliest available images by Henrietta Groenewegen-Frankfort. According to her the oldest images from the sacred area of Eanna, demonstrate a particular intimacy and confidence with the deity (Groenewegen-Frankfort 1951). In contrast to this, a radical break is represented in the Akkadic period, characterised by widespread warfare, where the emphasis shifted on representing individual achievement. In the period of Gudea's restoration (c2150-2125 BC), expression of confidence returned; while the distance between the divine and the human became marked again under Hammurabi. Groenewegen-Frankfort's judgment was confirmed by Marcella Frangipane, who also interpreted the findings of the earlier periods of civilisation in the broader region, going back as far as the VI millennium BC, as indicating openness and confidence (Frangipane 1996: 81-6).

The most important related evidence, however, concerns the singular absence of the religious practice that would be considered, on the basis of later evidence, as the very foundation of any religion, and even of culture and society: bloody rituals of sacrifice. The point is not simply that no evidence was – as yet – found of such rituals, but that

key experts drew the conclusion on the basis of ample available evidence that such a practice was inconceivable in early Mesopotamian religion and society.

Given its importance, this point requires more detailed substantiation. For this I will use two relatively recent papers concerning religion and rituals in Mesopotamia, by Tzvi Abusch, an Israeli scholar, student of Thorkild Jacobsen – one of the great classic figures of Mesopotamian archaeology and associate of Henri Frankfort; and by Jean-Claude Margueron, the most distinguished contemporary French scholar of Mesopotamia, director of the excavations at Mari from 1979 to 2004.

Tzvi Abusch starts by a clear, programmatic statement: our usual image of sacrifice as the violent slaughter of animals and their ritual consumption, shared with the deity, simply had no place in ancient Mesopotamian religion, which was rather concerned with the presentation of offerings. In order to approach this phenomenon it is necessary 'to understand the Mesopotamian and, in particular, the Sumerian view of human life, the gods, and the city' (Abusch 2002: 38).

In Mesopotamia gods were closely linked to a particular settlement. In early periods such vital forces were not yet anthropomorphized, also reflected in the fact that the temples at the same time were storehouses. They were later represented in a human form as 'a lord in his home' (Ibid.: 40), codified theologically by the start of the third millennium, with the temple no longer being 'a dwelling place to which a god repaired occasionally, but rather a permanent home in which the god and his family lived continually' (Ibid.: 41).

The second part of the article discusses, in an exploratory manner, a completely different type of ritual offering, characteristic of the Western (Levantine) cultures. As a starting point, Abusch quotes the classic work by Leo Oppenheim, according to which the basic difference between the two systems of religious devotion is ' "the 'blood consciousness' of the West, its awareness of the magical power of blood" ', which is ' "represented best by the Old Testament" ', and ' "which is not paralleled in Mesopotamia" ' (Ibid.: 44). Blood only plays a role in Mesopotamia in a very particular type of texts, those which tell the story of the creation of man; texts which furthermore 'provide a clue to the significance of the emphasis on blood in the Semitic West and its apparent absence in Mesopotamia' (Ibid.). The original model in Mesopotamian creation stories was the potter who created men out of clay; the new component was the addition of the 'flesh and blood' component, which was furthermore obtained from a 'killed god', a motive which was 'an intrusion into the Mesopotamian system of thought' (Ibid.: 45), and was 'probably due to Western Semitic influences' (Ibid.: 46). The killing of the god was depicted in seals dating to the old Akkadian period, and might have been a consequence of the settling of tribal Amorites. According to this new tradition the 'flesh' was the source of the human ghost, while the 'blood' of human intelligence.

Such a strong emphasis on blood might have been due to the need to cement alliances among nomadic people. Abusch here refers to the theories of Nancy Jay, who further developed some of the insights of Robertson Smith by arguing that blood sacrifice was used by patrilineal societies, in order to establish a line of descent in contrast to the natural lineages produced by women's childbirth (Ibid.: 46-7, fn.14), and which help to make sense of the contrast between tribal and nomadic Semites and urban Mesopotamians concerning offerings which emphasise blood and which do not. The settlement of tribal Amorites thus led to a profound transformation of the host country; as 'while they absorbed the culture of the urban Mesopotamians of the South, they did not fully give up their identities; rather, they transformed the culture that they had assimilated, introducing new images into it that were consonant with their own background and social situation', link the obsession with blood (Ibid.: 47). Abusch ends

his article by a contrast between the continuous tradition of the Sumerians, which went back to Neolithic times, being indigenous to the land which they cultivated, and which explain why ‘the central forms of the Mesopotamian temple had little use for blood’, in contrast to the ‘blood-consciousness in the Israelite cult’, corresponding to a kin-based community structure (Ibid.: 47-8) – a contrast that has striking affinities with Foucault’s discussion opposing territorial polis with pastoral power.

Margueron’s essay is based not only on his own experience as excavator, but also on a study of the physical shape of the over 150 temple structures so far excavated in Mesopotamia and the Levant, suggesting for the first time a comparative study of such structures (Margueron 2005). The aim is to recover the type of ritual practices that were performed in these temples, and their meaning. Margueron starts by arguing that the temples of Mesopotamia should be first of all understood literally as ‘houses of god’; this is how they were actually called in the earliest written evidence, and it was confirmed by the results of archaeological research. In this sense, there is evident continuity with the Neolithic, and such a localization of the deity in a particular place might even be used – and here go I beyond the words of Margueron – to explain the phenomenon of human settlement, a precondition and not consequence of the rise of agriculture.

The next question concerns the exact nature of the ritual that was performed in Mesopotamia in a building considered as the house or even the ‘home’ of the deity. Margueron starts by reconstructing the physical dynamics of the rituals that took place in the temples, arguing that this implied a linear progression towards the deity, who was seated on his throne in the centre of the temple. This procession implied a passage through a series of limits or boundary markers (gates, doors, thresholds), accompanied by ritual actions (Margueron 2005: 8); and then the presentation of offerings or gifts to the deity. These offerings were left or poured out at the table that was placed before the throne and that separated the god (or its representative) seated on the throne and the procession. This table was not an altar, as it was not a place of sacrifice.

The centre of the ritual was not the table, rather the throne. The entire linear procession advanced towards this goal, and it physically ended there: right behind the throne there was a wall, which again marked a limit: the radical separation between two worlds, the divine and the human, the boundary beyond which humans must not proceed. The throne, on the other hand, marked the spot where the god presented itself – the place of an original epiphany and its ceremonial repetition (Ibid.: 12).

These conclusions are further supported by a structural analysis of temple design, which identified a three-fold division of the buildings (Ibid.: 15). This consists of the vestibule, a kind of ‘buffer zone’ through which the procession leaves the realm of the profane and enters the sacred; the holy place, where the procession ends and offerings are given; and finally the ‘holy of the holies’, the throne, the seat of the god or its representative.

The last part of the paper is devoted to another structural analysis of the mode in which these basic elements are arranged in the various temples of the two regions, Mesopotamia and the Levant (Syria and Palestine) (Ibid.: 19ff). Margueron identifies four patterns: three oblong and rectangular, where the very shape of the building and the location of the doors indicates the direction of the procession; and a fourth, square building which alludes to a quite different arrangement, and which is termed the ‘temple-tower’. The first three both originate and are spread in Mesopotamia; the fourth, however, could only be found in the Levant. The ‘temple-towers’ were singular buildings, as they did not have an axis, indicating that meeting the divinity somehow became more difficult (Ibid.: 22). In these buildings there was no frontal encounter between the humans and the deity, just as there was no question of the anthropomorphic

representation of the deity. The main ritual action probably took place on the terrace, above the building, to which one could get access through stairs; under the open sky, faced with the ‘celestial immensity’ (Ibid.: 24). The temporal and spatial limitations of this type are remarkable: while the Mesopotamian buildings show a continuity with Neolithic culture, the ‘temple-towers’ only go back to the third millennia BC, and they are limited to the Western part of the region, to Syria and Palestine. The Eastern-most city where such a shape was found was the city of Mari (Ibid.: 24-5).

Margueron concludes his argument by restating that the main ritual action in Mesopotamia was the presentation of offerings, and not the performance of a sacrifice.<sup>vii</sup> In Mesopotamian temples it was structurally impossible to perform an act of ritual sacrifice in the sense of the slaughter of a living being; in particular, this applies to all the temples of Mari (Ibid.: 29). The only exceptions, again, are the ‘temple-towers’, where sacrifices could possibly take place on the terrace.

Intriguingly, just as the temples of Mari take up a peculiar position ‘in between’ the Mesopotamian and Levantine models, the city is in fact located at a liminal juncture, in the past as in the present: in between the two broad regions, on the Euphrates, where the river takes a turn, and – even more intriguingly – where the current borderline between Syria and Iraq crosses the river. It might not be accidental that it was the excavator of Mari, this liminal town, who completed a comparative study of the temple structures of the two regions, and with so resounding results.

In Mesopotamia from 6000 to about 4000 BC a process of genuine social flourishing took place. The question now concerns the factors that ended such conditions. The answer, on the basis of the available evidence, is strikingly relevant for contemporary times: it was sudden technological progress, due to the discovery of metallurgy, first experimented with on mass scale and in a quasi scientific manner in Arslantepe. This produced the first industrial revolution based on mass-production around the middle of the 4th millennia BC, resulting in the first period of globalisation, during the Ubaid period, followed by the sudden magnitudinal growth of Uruk, the first ‘megalopolis’. Around 3200 BC, within a relatively short period population density in Uruk increased tenfold (Matthews 2003: 110). As a result, by around 2900 BC the city simply exploded, growing to the staggering size of 5.5 km<sup>2</sup> (Nissen 1990: 80-1). The singularity of the phenomenon can be recognised by noticing that at its peak Athens extended to about 2.5 km<sup>2</sup>, while Jerusalem to only 1 km<sup>2</sup>, and even Rome at the height of the Empire, around 100 AD, was only about twice the size of Uruk (Ibid.).

The collapse of this entity, by some called the first ‘world system’, can be marked by two events; both connected to Arslantepe. In around 3000 BC the city was sacked and destroyed, representing the first such event, advancing the ‘Trojan War’ by about two millennia. It was not rebuilt until about 2900, and never regained its former splendour; but soon after this reconstruction the first princely sacrificial ritual appeared there; model of the kind of rituals that Sir Leonard Woolley uncovered in Sumerian cities, and dated to the middle of the 3rd millennium BC.

#### *Göbekli Tepe, 10.000-8.000 BC*

This archaeological site, of fundamental importance for re-thinking the dynamics of recent human history, was discovered in 1994, and is dated to the earliest Neolithic period (Pre-Pottery Neolithic A), with its use dated between 9500 and 8000 BC. Its location is of particular historical significance, given both its classical, religious and mythological associations, and aspects that were only rendered evident in the modern age. As it is about 20 kms from the historical city of Urfa (called Edessa in the Hellenistic period), and is about 60 km-s from the Biblical city of Harran, it is a candidate for being

the place of origin of Abraham. But it is also only about 20 miles from the Karacadag Mountain, on the slopes of which both einkorn and emmer, the two wild plants from which wheat is derived, were domesticated (Heun *et al*, 1997), and just a 60 miles away from Çayönü, where the wild pig was first domesticated.

Practically everything we know about the site radically alters our understanding of prehistory, even though still only about 5% of the area is excavated, and a proper completion of work might take another half a century or so (Schmidt 2000a, 2000b; Peters and Schmidt 2004). The site contains huge stone temples, of which four has so far been excavated. Such enormous megalithic constructs, which stone statues and building blocks occasionally weighting 5 tons, previously were thought impossible to have been built at that early stage, before the rise of agriculture and sedentary life. Apart from sheer size, the quality and character of the artwork is also stunning: the stones, in particular the enormous T-shaped pillars – which average 3.5 to 5 meters, but some are as high as 7 meters – are carved with beautiful and graceful animals, with no picture showing signs of violence, whether in the sense of sacrifice or hunting, though occasionally with threatening gestures. Human representation is practically absent. Another striking aspect is that the artistic quality was steadily decreasing over time.<sup>viii</sup>

The site simply has no parallels – the earliest occupation of Jericho is from the same period, but does not contain anything of significant artistic merit; nearby sites, like Nevalı Çori and Çayönü are later and less significant; while Çatalhöyük is over 2000 years younger. In spite of its huge significance, knowledge about the site is still limited, and even highly rated experts fail to recognize its significance and the need to change their own frame of reference. This highlighted by a Harvard professor of archaeology who suspects slave work behind the monuments – as if slavery in Egypt (as it has been reconstructed from late and probably corrupt evidence) were the necessary measuring rod for any megalithic construction, and as if slavery as a practice made sense for a not yet settled hunter gatherer population. The excavator, Klaus Schmidt resumes the significance of the site in a paradigmatic statement, concerned with the temporal ordering between Temple and city, or between ritual and utilitarian activities. In both counts, we must radically revise our entire perspective: the temple came before the city; and rituals have chronological and logical priority over technological advance (Schmidt 2000a).

Even concerning the reasons why and how such a revolutionary change took place at that place and time, Schmidt makes a series of most interesting suggestions, arguing that the rise of agriculture was due to a much higher degree of interchange and mobility than it was previously thought. The Temple was not simply a site of worship for people living nearby, but a site of pilgrimage. This helped to bring people together, demonstrating – as evidenced from the site – a much higher degree of social organization. Thus, the rise of the ‘Neolithic package’, which includes, beyond agriculture as a technology, elements of social, political and cultural organization, immediately took place at a large as opposed to a small, village scale; or, using contemporary terminology, it was immediately a kind of ‘global’ development.

Another major question concerns the end of the Temple complex. The facts are again stunning: after having been in use for about one and a half millennia, the site was suddenly abandoned and covered with about 400-500 cubic meters of land. Some of the carved stones show traces of smashing, but otherwise there was no sign of violence. Those who used the site for a very long time were closing it down purposefully, burying it forever, with an enormous expenditure of energy; and we can again only speculate at the reasons. The suggestion is that by that time the erosion generated by extensive agriculture and the resulting over-population was visible: the idyllic countryside, so well visible from the slightly elevated site of Göbekli Tepe, was increasingly eroded and

gradually replaced by the arid landscape that still today dominates the area – the agricultural equivalent of the desolate industrial decay created in places like Manchester and Liverpool, or Chicago and Detroit. Göbekli Tepe therefore not only instructs us about the origins of civilization – of *our* civilization – but also about the crisis any civilization faces if it fails to respect certain limits.

*The Upper Palaeolithic, 35.000-9.500 BC*

The last period to be mentioned is by far the most important, concerning both its sheer time span and theoretical significance. However, due to the lack of space and time only four basic points will be made here.

The first concerns the staunch hostility of evolutionary theorising to Palaeolithic cave art that at first seems perplexing, but that on a more thorough look becomes clinically intelligible. Given that the time horizon opened up by geology and archaeology radically dismantled the – dogmatic, Puritanical – reading of the Old Testament timeline, one would expect evolutionary materialism to welcome the ten-thousand-years' age assigned to cave paintings. Yet, this was not so, as it became particularly evident in the debate that broke out about Altamira, discovered in 1879, but recognised as genuinely prehistoric only in 1902. The first notices of the discoverer, Marcelino Sanz de Sautuola, 'prudent as they were', were not only disregarded and derided by contemporary academics, 'from the pinnacle of "official science"', but argued that the paintings were outright fraud, providing us a lesson concerning the need for humbleness when facing reality (Beltrán 1998: 8-9, 23-4, 26-7). Most strikingly, some critics argued that they were 'the work of conservative Spanish clerics hoping to defend belief in divine creation'; while others asserted that 'the cave had been deliberately created by antievolutionist Spanish Jesuits trying to make a laughingstock of the emerging sciences of palaeontology and prehistory'.<sup>ix</sup>

Strange as such resistance to new findings by the pioneers of progress and science may sound, this becomes intelligible through the upsetting of the evolutionary canon by the sheer quality of cave paintings. The champions of progress denigrated the Biblical reading of history only in order to be able to proclaim themselves, heirs of the Enlightenment, as heralds of the new, unprecedented period of human emancipation and development. From that perspective the distant past had to be devalued and denigrated; the obscure times of dark ages when human beings were only struggling for survival; a perspective incompatible with the stunning qualities of cave paintings. As Picasso expressed after his visit to Altamira, 'none of us could paint like that' (as in Lewis-Williams 2002:31).

Even more important was the character and quality of daily living exuded from these paintings, and many objects of daily usage recovered: a sense of dynamism and power 'derived from delight, the strength of freedom, from being in harmony with oneself, in a well-adjusted world' (Horvath 2013: 24); a mode of living that, according to the testimony of the so-called Palaeolithic 'Venus figurines', but in particular the 'Brassempuoy Lady', was attributed by female deities.

Still, experts bred on the principles of materialist evolutionism and structuralism were desperately trying to compress the findings into conventional Enlightenment thinking. André Leroi-Gourhan, a major expert of Palaeolithic art spent his life reducing prehistoric cave art into categories of linear stylistic development. However, the possibility of such evolutionary speculations was ended by the discovery of the Chauvet cave in 1994. The quality of these paintings was extraordinary, comparable only to Altamira and Lascaux, and in certain ways even anticipating innovations by Leonardo da Vinci; and they were dated as the oldest cave paintings so far discovered, painted in

between 35.000 to 28.000 years ago. There can be no mistake about such dating, as Chauvet is the most precisely dated cave in the world.

### Revisiting the Golden Age

Beauty is transient, which alone you seem  
 To hold in honour; what beside remains  
 No longer charms—what does not charm is dead.  
 If among men there were who knew the prize  
 The heart of woman, who could recognize  
 What treasures of fidelity and love  
 Are garnered safely in a woman's breast;  
 If the remembrance of bright single hours  
 Could vividly abide within your souls;  
 If your so searching glance could pierce the veil  
 Which age and wasting sickness over us fling;  
 If the possession which should satisfy  
 Wakened no restless cravings in your hearts;  
 Then were our happy days indeed arrived,  
 We then should celebrate our Golden Age.  
 Goethe, *Tasso*, Act II, Scene 1

Given the revealed hostility of the linear vision of history characteristic of materialist evolutionism to cave paintings and the long-standing ignoring of these findings by the dominant visions of historical change up to our days, perhaps it is worthwhile to interpret such results and the other major archaeological findings included or not in this paper in light of our basic historical traditions, the Bible and the thinking of Plato. Plato's vision of the Atlantis is widely considered as the most questionable character of his thinking, a pure myth; and yet Plato made a careful distinction between the various philosophical myths applied in his dialogues and the 'myth' of Atlantis that – he claimed – corresponded to real events. Strikingly enough, both the space and time horizons of Plato's story are confirmed by the culture of cave paintings, as it indeed belonged to the area of the Atlantic ocean, and collapsed around 9500 BC, or 9000 years before the time of Plato, the moment to which the philosopher traced the fall of Atlantis. As if to support such foreboding, a recent book by a geologist, who became interested in the Palaeolithic only through his involvement with the study of the Cosquer cave, argues that a strong case can be made for the seven islands destroyed around Gibraltar due to the coincidence of the rising sea levels and a local tsunami that erupted in 9500 BC being the historical location of the sunk Atlantis.

This perspective can be corroborated from the Old Testament if we shift, as we should, our central focus from the late and highly problematic Abraham episode to the central event of the entire narrative, the expulsion from the Garden of Eden. While in our 'enlightened' age even the mention of the term only produces scorn, some major figures of European culture did recognise the centrality of such a concern. These were not the famous utopian figures, who – like Saint-Simon – were rather obsessed with liberal emancipation and technological progress, rather Goethe, as cited in the motto, or Franz Kafka, a major admirer of Goethe, who wrote his high-school project on Goethe's *Tasso*, and whose Zürau aphorisms, recently recognised as being the philosophico-theological core of his oeuvre (Calasso 2004, 2005; Citati 2007), were devoted to this problem of the Golden Age, and whatever has been preserved from this at the heart of human beings. And this allows us to return at the very heart of Christian culture, the core

of medieval theology, as formulated by Aquinas, and its dismantling under the impact of the Byzantine spirit, the idea of a state of grace that is carried as a *habitus* by those human beings who manage to maintain it, with the help of a recognised divine support. This state of grace is identical to Kafka's 'indestructible', or the 'decidedly divine' in us; the heredity that we preserved from the 'Golden Age', or that was rekindled in us – and where Kafka, in his usual manner, failed to come up with a decisive formulation and rather escaped into dilemmas and paradoxes, concerning whether this indestructible was destroyed or not with the expulsion.

Thus, Goethe, the most Greek, even the most pagan, polytheist – though certainly not atheist – of modern European poets, and Kafka, this assimilated Western atheist Jew who then became thoroughly preoccupied with his Judaic heritage thus returned to the core of orthodox-medieval Christian theology, so much so that few contemporary, 'modernised' theologian would even there to follow them; but where a proper reading of the archaeological evidence, read through the right prism of historical sociology and cultural anthropology, offers elements of a striking corroboration.

It is at this point that this paper must stop, as such elements cannot be pursued – as of yet – any further. But they certainly should be, and this offers some hope in the otherwise grim reality of the global neo-liberal consumerist anti-utopia of 'fairground capitalism'.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> For details, see Szokolczai (1998).

<sup>ii</sup> It is most revealing that Parsons translated Weber's self-referential term *Sohn* 'son' by 'product'.

<sup>iii</sup> Foucault bought his copy of the French edition of the *Protestant Ethic* on 12 March 1976; it is extensively marked.

<sup>iv</sup> See the course resume (Foucault 2004: 374), and the important though unpublished 27 May 1978 lecture of 'criticism' (Foucault 1990: 37-8).

<sup>v</sup> This section is based on my 2007 book about the sociology of the Renaissance (Szokolczai 2007).

<sup>vi</sup> This section is based on Szokolczai (2007, Chapters 4-5).

<sup>vii</sup> This point is reinforced by the analysis of the Sumerian signs used for offerings, which are most commonly either a jar full of grain, or a table with two legs (Furlani 1932: 323). The meaning of the signs extend to blessing, prayer, sacrifice, and offering (Ibid.: 325).

<sup>viii</sup> This is discussed in the article that was the cover story of the June 2011 issue of *National Geographic*.

<sup>ix</sup> The former argument was made by Émile Cartailhac, who later changed his mind and with a 1902 paper played a major role in authenticating the findings; while the latter by Gabriel de Mortillet (Beltran 1998: 9).