Was There Religion Before Modernity? A Dialogue with Brent Nongbri

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Abstract:

This article aims to analyze the legitimacy of a thesis that has been gaining traction in recent decades within Religious Studies - namely, that the term religion can only be applied accurately to Protestant Christianity, and that all previous phenomena must be described using different terminology. To this end, we will take Brent Nongbri as our main interlocutor. What Nongbri advocates is simple: the term "religion" stands for the private adherence to a given set of theses; pre-modern peoples did not have any concept with such or similar meaning, therefore, they did not have religion, but something different. We will postulate, on the one hand, that Nongbri's thesis is tremendously fragile, and, on the other, that we are perfectly justified in continuing to talk about religion when referring to pre-modern peoples and cultures.

Keywords: Religion; Ancient; Modernity; Nongbri; Christianity

In recent decades, within *Religious Studies* and adjacent fields, a certain school of social constructionism has emerged, which has as its program the rejection of the notion of religion as a universal category that could be used to describe the individual or collective experiences of pre-modern people. Following in the wake of Wilfred Cantwell Smith, who proposed the abolition of the term "religion" in his best-known work, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962), the best-known figures in this current trend are today Talal Assad, Daniel Boyarin and Brent Nongbri. It is precisely Nongbri who resurrects the controversy when he publishes *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (2015). His thesis is simple: "religion" is a concept that belongs exclusively to modernity, and no ancient language has a term that is equivalent to what modern populations understand when they say "religion". "Religion" is, for Nongbri, an irremediably modern concept, engendered by Europeans, which refers to the model of Protestant Christianity in which "religion" would be understood as private adherence to a set of theses of a soteriological nature, and, therefore, the domain of the religious would be clearly demarcated from the secular. This is, in fact, for the author, the crux of the question: "what is modern about the ideas of 'religions' and 'being religious' is the isolation and naming of some things as 'religious' and others as 'not religious'" (Nongbri 2015, 4).

For the Greeks, *eusébeia* meant both the attitude that a subject should desirably adopt before

the gods - and *asébeia* the wrong attitude, this being one of the accusations that fell on Socrates and ultimately lead to his condemnation - as well as referring to social imperatives of other types, such as filial duties and those relating to state institutions (therefore, the common translation as *piety*, carrying all the baggage of the Latin *pietas*, can be tremendously misleading). In turn, the word that is most commonly translated as "religion" (and translated into Latin as *religio*), *thrēskeía*, also has a myriad of meanings. For Herodotus, it refers to rites and rituals – such as ablution and others -, for Philo of Alexandria, the term refers to actions that occur inside temples, such as sacrifices, for the author of the letter to the Colossians it seems to stand for the cult and worship, and for Josephus the *thrēskeía* of the Jews is the activity they carry out in their temples, normally sacrifices. In this sense, for Josephus, *ioudaïsmós* is the activity of Judaizing, of doing what Jews do, such as "sacrificing, going to temples, obeying kings, paying taxes, eating certain foods (not just kashruth), wearing certain hats, speaking Judean, everything one does as a Judean, with no distinctions made between what we in our culture would call 'religion', 'law', 'manners', 'customs', or 'politics'" (Boyarin 2019, 63). In fact, *ioudaïsmós*, as it appears in the Fourth Book of Maccabees (4:26), is related to *hellênismos* (belonging to the Hellenic community; referring to a subject who acts like a Hellene), and designates, more than a collective entity, an activity, a way of life. But *nómos* also refers to something similar: if it is true that *nómos* can have the meaning of "law", it is, nevertheless, a law that expresses the way of life of a people, and not, like a mere *thesmós*, a legal norm enacted by a legislator (Ostwald 1969, 55). In this sense, *nómos* is an expression of *politeuma*, which not only consists of "laws", but involves a set of notions of justice, *communitas*, *pietas*, harmony. Greek thought is holistic. For this reason, Josephus still equates the Jew's way of being (*ioudaïsmós*) as a *nómos* (making it equivalent to the Hebrew *Torah* and the Aramaic *'orayta*) (Boyarin 2016, 158).

In the same way, the Latin *religio*, instead of referring to institutions or to the adherence to a given set of theses, seems rather to describe a set of emotions, such as anxiety, fear, embarrassment, inhibition, and above all scrupulosity, in such a way that that we could say that *homo religiosus* was synonymous with *homo scrupulosus*. Thus, Livy reports, in his *Ab Urbe condita*: "Quod quamquam Varro aegre est passus, Flamini tamen recens casus Claudique consulis primo Punico bello memorata navalis clades religionem animo incussit" (22.42.8-9). The sight of past defeats instills Varro's *animus* with *religio* – with anxiety, hesitation. Or even Seneca, when he says, in his *Epistulae*: "Si quis specus saxis penitus exesis montem suspensionit, non manu factus, sed naturalibus causis in tantam laxitatem excavatus, animum tuum quadam religionis suspicione percutiet" (41.3), which Richard M. Gummere translates as follows, "Or if a cave, made by the deep crumbling of the rocks, holds up a mountain on its arch, a place not built with hands but hollowed out into such spaciousness by natural causes, your soul will be deeply moved by a certain intimation of the existence of God" (Seneca 1917). In truth, the intimation does not refer necessarily to the existence of God; Seneca intends only to evoke the sense of fear that accompanies the new and the abnormal, and that requires one to be cautious – from this fact many authors have derived the idea that the primordial cause of this fear is the feeling generated by the *tremendum* aspect of divinity, in the sense that Rudolf Otto offers to the numinous (Sabbatucci 1951).

In this sense, *superstitio* also does not constitute the opposite of *religio*, but refers to the idea of religion taken to the extreme, an exaggeration of *religio*. As Cicero uses the term: "(...) non enim philosophi solum verum etiam grandes nostri superstitionem a religione separaverunt nam qui totos dies precabantur et immolabant, ut sibi sui liberi superstites essent, superstitiosi sunt appellati, quod nomen patuit postea latius" (*De Natura Deorum*, 2.71-72). Those who spent their days praying for the health of their children, neglecting their other duties, were called *superstitiosi*. Thus, the anxiety of religion derived from a calamity, from an approaching war, or from a fatal illness, could, if the person had no healthy psychological mechanisms to deal with it, slip into *superstitio*[1]. This distinction remained until the medieval period. Then, in ecclesiastical circles, the adjective *religiosus* began to be used to describe clerics belonging to monastic orders (and *saecularis* to refer to elements of the Church that were not affiliated with them). In fact, it was only in the 19th century, more precisely in 1851, that a fundamentalist atheist, George Holyoake, used the word "secular" as a synonym for freethinker, unbeliever, nonbeliever (Keddie 2003, 15).

Likewise, the Arabic term that is normally translated as religion – *dīn* – has a great semantic range. This is what Muhamamd Sarwar does, for example, in his translation of the third verse of the fifth Quranic surah: "On this day I have perfected your religion [*dinakum*], completed My favors to you, and have chosen Islam as your religion [*dinaa*]". Maria Dakake (who participated in the first collective translation of the Quran, organized by Hossein Nasr), Abdul Haleem, Muhammad Pickthall, and virtually all modern translations, opt for the same translation (*religion*). First, it would also be worth pointing out the fact that it is not at all clear that the word Islam itself, as it appears in the Quran, even designates a collective entity, a current, or a homogeneous movement – a thesis defended by Fred Donner (Donner 2012). Patrice C. Brodeur believes that "religion" and "dīn" became equivalent during the 20th century through the facilitation of the encounter between English and Arabic cultures and the need to find a common term for translating the Quranic text (Brodeur 2001, 395). Brent Nongbri, relying on the first English translation of the Qur'an, which appeared around 1649 and was made by Alexander Ross, who did not translate from the Arabic, but from a French translation by André de Ryer – a strange foundation for a philological argument! – suggests translating "dīn" by "law", strangely stating that such translations (loy and law) "capture something that more recent translations miss" (Nongbri 2015, 40-41). What seems to escape Nongbri is the fact that "law" is a much more problematic translation of "dīn". In fact, there are several words in Arabic that could be translated into English as "law" – and *dīn* is not one of them. If *dīn* is to be understood as "law", what about *qānūn*, *fiqh*, and *sharīʿah*? Wael Hallaq demonstrates, in a more serious and less biased way, the problems that arise from wanting to universalize European concepts – such as that of legal penalties – for universes where such a thing simply does not exist, nor has it ever existed (Hallaq 2009).

The cases are not, however, comparable. The juridical system stands for a coherent set of state legal norms, which are ordered through a hierarchy, and which are imposed coactively. The political principles that govern a State are codified. In short, a legal system has a more or less well-defined

material reality, unlike religion, which has a greater semantic range. In fact, the thesis that Nongbri advocates in his book is one of total arbitrariness, which, in addition, as Robert Segal– who delivers a set of very harsh criticisms directed at Nongbri – as observed, reveals a general lack of knowledge of the bulk of studies on religion that have been carried out over the last few centuries (Segal 2016, 425). Nongbri claims to follow the famous Wittgensteinian precept that the meaning of a word is its use in a given language (Wittgenstein 1968, 43), and, thus, that "religion" always means something like Protestant Christianity, which would have as its fulcrum, as we have already said, the private act of adherence to a set of theses of a soteriological nature, clearly demarcating a secular – public – domain, where religion has no place. Now, on the one hand, as James Broucek was careful to point out, Nongbri's conception of Protestantism is caricatural:

> The material suggestive of a different view, in which belief plays no especially central role in Protestant communities, is massive. We can point to Presbyterian and Congregationalist concerns with the proper order of church government in seventeenth-century Britain, the emphasis on glossolalia as "proof" of the work of the Holy Spirit in one's life, or the ways Scots imposed discipline with respect to the taking of communion. Institutions, practices, and disciplines matter for Protestant communities as much as they matter for other religious communities—despite some Protestant rhetoric to the contrary (Broucek 2015, 104).

On the other hand, the alleged anachronism of the privacy of the religious domain is demonstrably false – of which the omnipresent initiatory schools in classical antiquity are direct testimony. The Pythagorean community, through the acousmatics, very clearly had a religious praxis, worshiping Apollo and believing in the doctrine of the transmigration of souls, and was primarily known as such (Kahn 1909). *Mutatis mutandis*, Roman Mithraism, which coexisted with the widespread cult of the emperor, was a secret school of initiation into religious mysteries, whose adherents, according to Plutarch, practiced ritual sacrifices (*Vita Pompei*, 24.5). Also in the East, within the Shiite tradition, mainly of Ismaili orientation, we find the practice of *taqiyyah* (literally *prudence*, *caution*), which consists of the possibility for the believer to hide his faith if the historical-geographical situation in which he finds himself does not allow him to practice his religion publicly and peacefully. In short, as Ann Williams Duncan, who wrote a specific bibliography on the subject, points out, "private or secret religious activities have existed in all types of religious traditions" (Duncan 2006, 469).

Furthermore, the idea that religion, since modernity, has been understood as belonging to the domain of private experience does not work – Nongbri seems to be unaware of, or deliberately ignores, the multiple authors and different schools of thought that, in recent centuries, have seen religion as an irremovable part of a social logic. Rousseau, for example, conceived of a religion of the citizen (*religion du cytoyen*), which he identified with divine civil law and which had as objective the fostering of social cohesion, whose fulcrum is similar to Marciano's legal precept recorded in the Digest: "sacrae autem res sunt hae, quae publice consecratae sunt, non private: si quis ergo privatim sibi constituerit sacrum "sacrum constituerit", sacrum non est, sed profanum. Semel autem aede

sacra facta etiam diuto aedificio locus sacer manet" (1.8.6 – 3). In 1893, Durkheim – the father of sociology of religion – argued that religion, at its core, is social: "tout ce qui est social est religieux; les deux mots sont synonymes" (Durkheim 1893, 183). Later, in 1912, in his famous study on *Les Formes Élémentaires de la Vie Religieuse*, he categorically reaffirms that: "la religion est une chose éminemment sociale. Les représentations religieuses sont des représentations collectives qui expriment des réalités collectives; les rites sont des manières d'actir qui ne prennent naissance qu'au sein des groupes assemblés et qui sont destinés à arousing, à entretenir ou à refaire certain états mentaux de ces groupes" (Durkheim 2013, 13). Therefore, Durkheim considers that there is no religion without the Church – understood as the union of members of a community who share certain representations of the sacred, which translate into identical practices. This is what, for the French sociologist, allows religion to be distinguished from magic: the former's purpose is to unite men among themselves, to foster bonds, it is eminently social, while the magician, to practice his magic, does not need unite with their counterparts; even when associations of magicians are formed – which is already something exceptional and unusual – these are not indispensable to the practice of magic, which is a fundamentally private practice. Following Durkheim's steps, Henri Bergson's concept of static religion stands exactly for a kind of social religiosity, in which one cannot dissociate the individual from the collective practice and experience (Bergson 1937). In the same way, Carl Jung, another name never mentioned by Nongbri, affirms the superiority of Catholicism over Protestantism precisely because the Protestant conception of religion is based on individual experience, and not on collective activity (Jung 1992, 31-6). In more contemporary times, Bruce Lincoln offers a definition of religion that in no way refers to the intimacy of private consciousness: "religion, I submit, is that discourse whose defining characteristic is its desire to speak of things eternal and transcendent with an authority equally transcendent and eternal" (Lincoln 2013, 165).

However, beyond all this, the distinction between the sacred and the profane, which Nongbri believes emerged with Protestantism and modernity, is, as Mircea Eliade demonstrated, abundantly present since the beginning of humanity, and is what more specifically characterizes the *homo religiosus*. The religious person's space is not a homogeneous and aseptic space, composed of mutually exchangeable specific units, but it is a living space, a space of ruptures (Eliade 1987). When God orders Moses to take off his sandals because he is on sacred land (Exodus 3: 5), he immediately outlines an ontological-existential distinction between a profane space and a sacred space, endowed with supreme reality. When it is not the divine that bursts into a certain place, it is the person himself who performs the consecration, whether by erecting a cosmic column that functions as an *axis mundi* (as in the case of the Kwakwa̱ka̱'wakw), a sanctuary (like the temple in Jerusalem), a sacred hut (like the Sioux people), etc.

Let us also add that this alleged separation between secular and sacred, between the domain of religion and that of politics, science, etc., which Nongbri sees as a characteristic of modernity, often does not occur. The politics of the most influential country in the world, the USA – whose population, it should be noted, is mostly Protestant, as are the overwhelming majority of its

presidents throughout its history – is explicitly Christian. From the outset, the constitutions of American states such as North Carolina, following the Declaration of Independence ratified in 1776, affirm the existence of God and, therefore, a set of God-given rights. When, in 2001, George W. Bush declared a "war on terror", he referred to the need for the offensive against Iraq and Afghanistan as a crusade. Later, in 2004, he reaffirms – in opposition to the Other par excellence, the Islamic East – the Christian nature of freedom and democracy, and his proselytizing mission: "Freedom is the Almighty's gift to every man and woman in this world. And as the greatest power on the face of the earth we have an obligation to help the spread of freedom". The narrative of the existence of a secular liberal democracy, of a neutral State that is no longer susceptible to religious influences, and that is the only path to world peace and cohesion, not only fails to account for these and other aspects, but is also a complete fiction.

On the other hand, we also find several examples of confusion between religion and science, that is, of circumstances in which people or religious communities believe that their religion – for example, through their scriptures – has a set of scientific truths and that the Science is not divorced from religion. Let us invoke, again, a paradigmatic case of Protestantism - creationism. Understood as the position that "supports a literal interpretation of the Judeo-Christian Bible, an earth that is no more than 10,000 years old and created ex nihilo in six days by a monotheistic God, with no new kinds arising since the period of creation, and with a single flood of staggering force shaping layers of rocks and trapping the fossilized organisms within them" (Antoling and Herbers 2001, 2379), it is a thesis that comes into clear conflict with the scientific theory of evolution, insofar as it postulates that there is something like an biological evolution understood as "change in the properties of groups of organisms over the course of generations" (Futuyma 2009, 2). In early 2000, the People for the American Way estimated that a third of Americans wanted creationism as part of the school curriculum (half of them wanting it along the theory of evolution, and the other half wanting to disregard completely the theory of evolution). The countless ideological clashes in American public schools, even today are well documented (Branck and Scott 2009). Contrary to what Nongbri postulates, we moderns often do not clearly demarcate religion from politics, economics, or science. Nothing radically different here compared to the pre-modern mind.

However, the core of Nongbri's criticism is based on the thesis that the absence of a word implies the absence of a phenomenon. "The question could be put like this: does the absence of a word or a phrase equivalent to "religion" in a given language mean that the speakers of the language also lack the concept of religion" (Nongbri 2015, 22)? Invoking Wittgenstein, Nongbri defends the omnipotence of language to describe reality: "the presumption of the existence of concepts somewhere "out there" that somehow escape language is distant to me, not so much on philosophical grounds as on practical grounds. Such an assumption is, it seems to me, a conversation ender" (*idem*). The premise that surreptitiously hovers over his postulate is, first and foremost, that the apprehension of reality occurs only through concepts – or, even, that reality itself is made up of concepts. This is what seems to be implicit when Nongbri rejects that an Ancient Greek has no religion just because he has

no concept of religion (understood, as always, and in an absurdly unjustified way, as equivalent to the Protestant Christian model). The truth of this thesis is not at all clear – on the contrary, arguments could easily be made to show its falsity. The suggestion that the subject himself does not have a certain concept because he does not have a given word is not unreasonable, but we fail to see the relevance of this point to the subject. Robert Segal asks: "Did Adam have to confer with the animals before naming them? Should Malinowski have asked the Trobrianders about their Oedipus complex before concluding that the central complex in their lives was not Oedipal? Should Jung have been banned from identifying the archetypes in the dreams, myths, and behavior of others because others did not speak Jungian? Is the diagnosis by a doctor irrelevant because the patient is unfamiliar with the aid? Must atoms approve the naming of themselves in order for the term to be appropriate?" (Segal 2016, 427). In fact, the word "solidarity" does not arise from classical or medieval Latin, nor within Christianity, but appears for the first time in the philosophical lexicon by the hand of the socialist Pierre Leroux. Being an originally legal term, it meant the relationship in which each debtor is responsible for the entirety (*in solidum*) of a certain amount, considering the co-debtors equally responsible. Will anyone have the audacity to subscribe to the statement that, prior to the 19th century, there were no acts of solidarity or solidary persons? Did Alzheimer's disease only emerge when it was named after the psychiatrist Alois Alzheimer? This is, ultimately, the absurd nature of Nongbri's thesis.

If, to use the language of Anthropology, Nongbri's proposal consists of arguing that, from the perspective of an "emic" approach (that is, an approach that intends to describe events from the point of view of those who live and experience them), the use of the term "religion" is illegitimate, we will have to ask him to demonstrate the veracity of the thesis that says that the comprehension of a given phenomenon as such requires the existence of a linguistic concept – which he fails to do. Everything indicates that pre-modern people had a very clear conception of religion, generally understood as the effective presence of the invisible, experienced as sacred, and that, not infrequently, there was a well-defined demarcation between a sacred domain and a profane one. Like Nongbri, we believe it extremely important to try to understand religious events in all their breadth, which necessarily involves discerning the specificities of each culture and adopting a multidisciplinary stance when approaching the study of the role of religion in history. However, as we have argued here, we do not think that the simple elimination of the term "religion" is a fruitful measure, much less necessary, when wanting to study this complex phenomenon that has permeated all peoples throughout history.

Endnotes:

1. On the other hand, Cicero seems to believe in a link between the fears associated with *religio* and the observation of obligations before divinities, specially when he states that "religio est quae superioris cuiusdam naturae, quam divinam vocant, curam caerimoniamque affert", that is, that *religio* is what leads men to the veneration of divinity (*De Inventione*, 2.53.161). However, he also uses *religio* to refer to the *cultu deorum* itself (*De Natura Deorum*, 2.3). Cicero played an important role in adopting new meanings associated with religion. A philological study of this event falls outside our purpose.

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