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# For a systemic approach to the religious phenomenon

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**Abstract :** Is it possible to have a scientific approach of the religious phenomenon? That is to say, to study it in a way that is both critical and benevolent, distanced and close, that is not distorted either by the a priori of a belief or by those of unbelief?

This is the challenge of this article which intends to show that the systemic, taken under its double dimension of a knowledge and a method, gives the concepts and the tools for such an approach. It provides a vision that is both deep and global, commensurate with the high complexity of the studied phenomenon. Through its ability to articulate the different scientific disciplines and to make them interact, it avoids the pitfall of sterile reductionism into which analysts of religion usually fall. Finally, through the use of modeling, even if it is most often descriptive and qualitative models comparable to a simple map, it opens up an understanding of the religious phenomenon, an understanding that can then be used to act on it.

Throughout this course, some basic tools of the systemic will be presented and how to use them to try to understand the teeming universe of religions.

**Key words :** kerygma, historical socio-anthropology, modeling, religious system, symbolic system, systemic approach, systemic triangulation.

The fact that religions can be arranged in the vast array of symbolic systems, at the very least, calls for an explanation. But let's think about it: what are religious systems made of? Obviously with symbolic materials of various types, such as symbols, myths, rites, sacrifices, prohibitions, obligations... and even the most learned theological constructions. All these materials are part of this "*third world*" that Karl Popper defines as the "*objective contents of thought*" and that anthropologists classically refer to as **culture**. This "*third world*" has a strong, almost imperative influence on human behavior, has its own "consistency" and seems to stand above the actors, in a kind of transcendence like the Platonic sky of ideas.

Integral parts of this universe of culture, religions organize their basic materials according to their own architecture, constituting them into a particular **symbolic system**, endowed with coherence but each time contingent and original. Beyond the extraordinary diversity of these religious systems, is it possible to discern a few invariants, to bring out some great laws of structure and evolution? According to Mircea Eliade - undoubtedly the best observer of the religious phenomenon in the 20th century - every religion has a founding core (or kerygma in theological language). He writes on this subject [1]: "*Every religion has a "center", a central conception that inspires and animates the whole corpus of myths, rituals and beliefs... But the "center" of a religion is not always obvious. Some researchers sometimes do not even suspect its existence*". How then can such a center be identified, described, analyzed, and then shown how it organizes the entire religious system according to its own architecture?

## Requirements for a scientific study of religions

In one of his books, Edgar Morin stated a prerequisite for any authentically scientific study of religion. He wrote [2]: "*The philosophers of the 18th century, in the name of reason, had a rather irrational view of what myths were and what religion was. They believed that religions and gods had been invented by priests to deceive people. They did not realize the depth and reality of religious and mythological power in human beings. By the same token, they had slipped into rationalization, i.e., a simplistic explanation of what their reason could not understand. It took new developments of reason to come to understand the myth. For this, critical reason had to become self-critical. We must constantly fight against the deification of Reason, which is our only reliable instrument of knowledge, provided that we are not only critical, but self-critical*".

The requirements stated by Edgar Morin can be qualified as the **prerequisite of modest reason**, as opposed to the reasoning and triumphant reason of positivism. This prerequisite is a marvelous illustration of the new scientific spirit carried by systems thinking. One can infer from it the two principles required henceforth for any observation of the religious phenomenon which is intended to be scientifically based:

- **Principle of methodological agnosticism:** The observer must approach the religious fact by "purging" himself of any a priori conviction, whether it is favorable to a particular faith or belief, or whether it translates an asserted atheism. He does not have to defend or illustrate a thesis, as was the case with the philosophers of the 18th and 19th centuries, as well as with certain positivist scholars. Its only object must be to seek to understand a complex reality by trying, as far as possible, to construct models that try to account for it. And he must never forget that a model is always an approximate and provisional construction!
- **Principle of participatory observation:** Resulting from ethnological practice, this principle asks to look with benevolence at those we observe, to enter in empathy with them, to make oneself indigenous with the natives. It is only then, after having taken charge of a rich harvest of facts, that one will be able to regain the ethnologist's critical distance. This second attitude requires once again to set aside one's preconceived ideas and preconceived notions in religious matters. And it may be that believing scientists are better placed than atheist scientists to implement such a principle. Even if they belong to a religious universe very distant from the one being studied, believers have in fact with the latter a kind of intimate pre-comprehension, a certain connivance which, by hypothesis, the atheist lacks. Thus of the jesuit Eric de Rosny, who was enthroned as a *Nganga* healer among the Doualas of Cameroon and who drew a remarkable anthropological testimony [3].

## How, with the systemic, can we study a religious system ?

As I showed in a book published in 2002 and co-authored with Michel Karsky [4], the systemic approach is the most efficient method to enter the study of a complex object. It is declined according to a process in three successive stages during which one acquires more and more numerous and extended knowledge on the complex object under study. This process is moreover iterative, i.e. based on multiple back and forth trips between each stage. These iterations make it possible to acquire a more and more refined vision of the studied object which then becomes an **observable** one.

## 1. Systemic investigation

It consists in defining the limits of the system to be studied; to situate it in its environment and to understand the nature and reason for the exchanges it maintains with the latter; to have an idea of its internal architecture, the main components and the nature of the relations between these components; to know enough about the history of the system to be able to understand its evolution. The tool to be used first and foremost to initiate such an investigation is *systemic triangulation*, which will be presented in the next section.

## 2. Qualitative modeling

It is essentially based on graphic diagrams such as figures, drawings, maps, and possibly computer flow charts. From the data collected during the previous phase, we will build a relatively accurate and above all usable "map" of the complex object. This map is based on diagrams and loops where the interactions between the main components of the system and its environment are visualized. The aim is to show the different flows and the control actions underlying the regulation of the system.

The models thus obtained are essentially descriptive (which is why one could just as well call this model **descriptive** or **topological**); they have only a weak predictive value. On the other hand, they have real pedagogical qualities; they allow the potential user to behave intelligently and efficiently when in the presence of such a complex object.

## 3. Dynamic modeling

The preceding qualitative model is endowed with quantitative relationships or "laws" that attempt to translate into the formalism of mathematics the various links or interactions between components. The methodology used in this last stage of modeling borrows a lot from **system dynamics**, and the model then becomes operable on a computer. Whenever possible, it is of course desirable to push the modeling process to this ultimate stage.

Unfortunately, when it comes to the humanities and especially to religions, this goal is rarely achievable. The hyper-complexity and often blurred nature of interactions in such systems make quantification illusory. It is then necessary to limit the approach to the stage of qualitative modeling, or even simple systemic investigation. But even if incomplete, the approach is always fruitful and rich in lessons learned. This is why we will limit the rest of this study to the first two stages of the systemic approach. Firstly, we will investigate, which will allow us to establish a relatively exhaustive inventory of the different scientific approaches that can be used in religious matters. Next, qualitative modeling, by constructing a systemic model of the religious phenomenon that is relatively simple but open to complexity and from which we will try to draw all the potentialities.

# The systemic investigation of the religious phenomenon

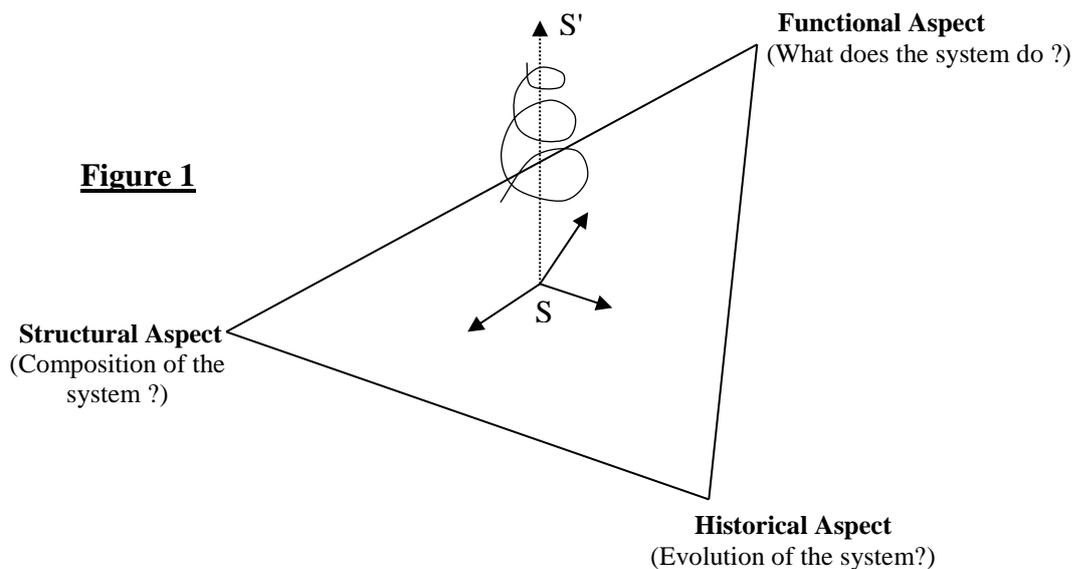
As has just been said, this investigation is essentially based on the implementation of systemic triangulation, whose characteristics and implementation principles we will first recall before giving an illustration of it concerning the analysis of the whole religious phenomenon.

## 1. The method of systemic triangulation

Remarkably adapted to the investigation phase of a complex system, triangulation consists of observing it from three different but complementary aspects as shown in Figure 1.

- **The functional aspect** is especially sensitive to the purpose or goals of the system. One spontaneously seeks to answer the following questions: what does the system do in its environment? what is its purpose? what is its *raison d'être*?

- **The structural aspect** aims to describe the structure of the system, the arrangement between them of its various components. Here we find the analytical approach of classical science, but with a difference in weight: the emphasis is placed much more on the relationships between components than on the components themselves, on the structure than on the element.
- **The historical** (or genetic or dynamic) **aspect** is linked to the evolutionary nature of the system, always endowed with a memory and a project, capable of self-organization. Only the history of the system will very often make it possible to account for some of the aspects of its functioning. In the case of social systems, it is even the history of the system that is the starting point for observation.



Naturally, systemic triangulation develops by combining these three pathways. More precisely, we move from one aspect to another in a helical process that allows, with each passage, to gain in depth and understanding, but without ever believing that we have exhausted this understanding.

## 2. Application of triangulation to religion

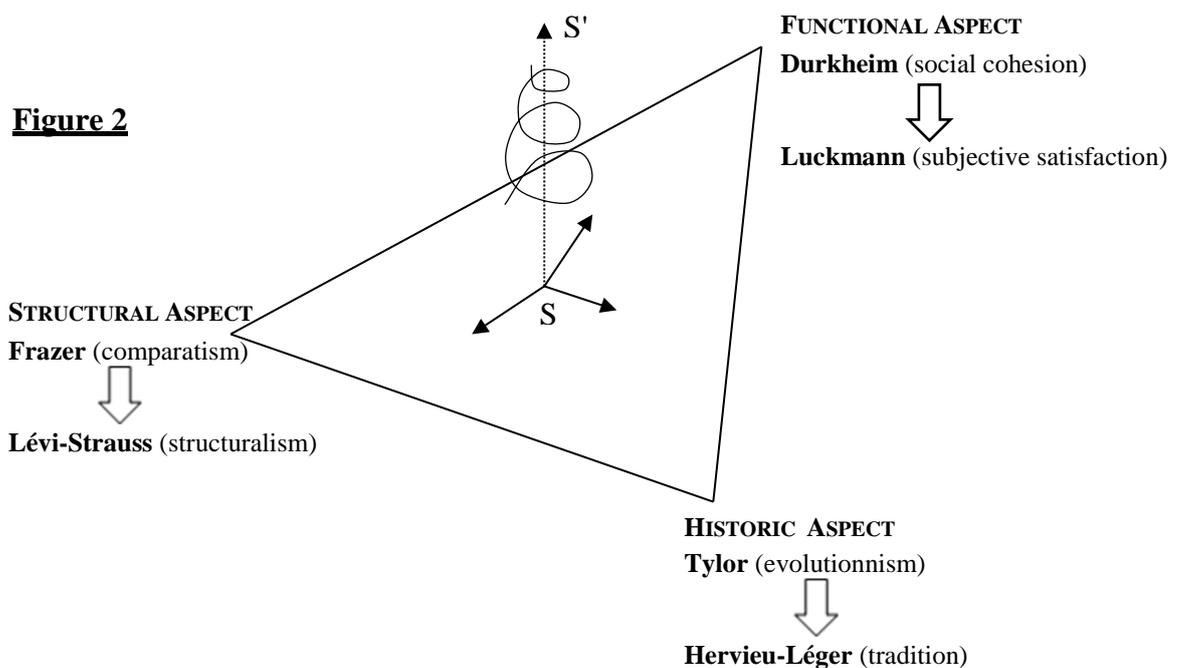
This application, as has just been said, applies generally to the whole religious phenomenon and also applies to a particular religion and even to a myth or rite of a given religion.

The various approaches to the religious phenomenon are then distributed around the three functional, structural and historical poles, as shown in Figure 2. Unlike Figure 3, which is intended to be exhaustive, this one is given only as a pedagogical illustration and has taken up only a few of the best known possible approaches

The following comment can be made about Figure 2:

- **The functional aspect** is especially sensitive to the purpose or goals of religion. It spontaneously seeks to answer the question: what is it used for humans? This is the path that has been explored since Emile Durkheim [5] by many sociologists who have sought above all to highlight the social function of religion, which creates social bonds and group cohesion. On the other hand, we can investigate the usefulness of religion in producing meaning and gratification for the benefit of personal subjectivities. This was already Feuerbach's thesis, which the contemporary American psychologist Thomas Luckman [6] takes up in a non-polemical manner and with much greater scientific rigor.

- **The structural aspect** seeks to describe the internal structure of the object, the relationships between its various components. In matters of religion, ethnologists and philologists have often been the bearers of this point of view. They apprehend the religious from its founding myths, its rites, its prohibitions; they seek between these various "mythico-ritual complexes" correspondences, analogies, laws of structure. This was the approach initiated by Georges Frazer [7], then taken up in a more satisfactory form by many contemporary researchers. The structuralism of Claude Lévi-Strauss [8] is part of this approach.
- **The historical (or genetic) aspect** is linked to the temporal and especially evolutionary nature of religion. Only the history of a religion - from its origin to its development and maturity - often makes it possible to understand it and to account for some of its singularities. Strongly influenced by Darwin's evolutionism, the first proponents of the historical approach (Auguste Comte, Edward Tylor [9] ) emphasized the evolution of religious forms from so-called primitive religions to contemporary monotheisms, even deisms or atheisms. But in this relation to time, we can also ask ourselves not about what is changing, but about what makes it possible for a religious system to survive beyond the succession of generations. Such is the question posed by sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger [10] whose explanatory model is centered on the role of memory and tradition.

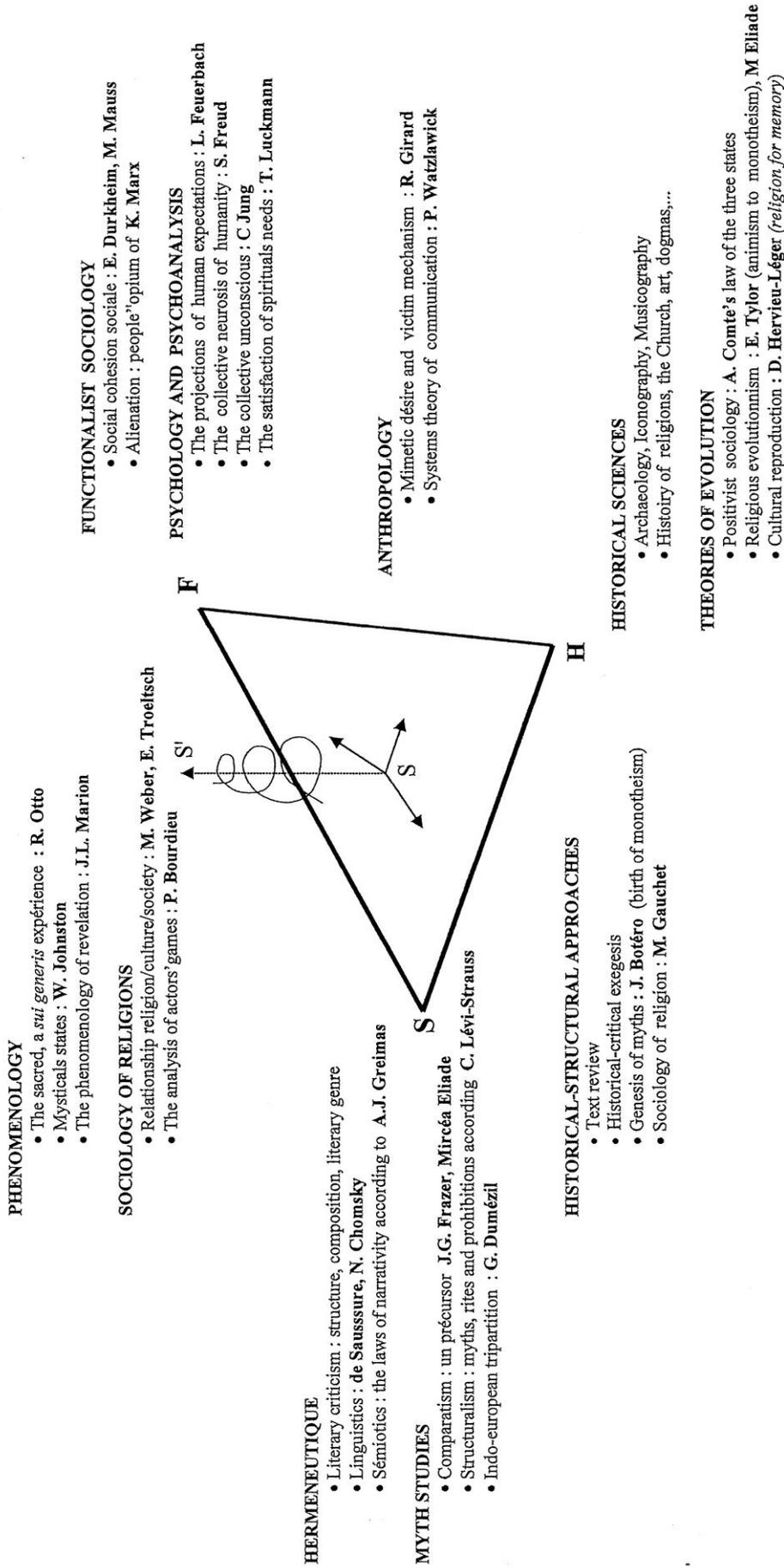


Naturally, as mentioned above, the triangulation method combines the three aspects by enriching them with each other in a helix process that can lead to several turns of the propeller. One thus moves asymptotically towards a more and more refined knowledge of the religious system observed, but without ever claiming to have exhausted its understanding.

### 3. Religious Sciences Classification Test

The illustration that has just been given about systemic triangulation can be generalized to all sciences concerned with the study of religious phenomena. We then obtain Figure 3 below on which we have tried to situate all the religious sciences, each positioned according to its greater or lesser proximity to the three poles of function, structure and history. We note that if some of these sciences are clearly located near one of the three poles, others

**Figure 3 – Map of the religious sciences**



An integral Attempt : Mircea Eliade's Treatise on the History of Religions

on the contrary straddle two or even all three. This is the case, for example, of the historico-structural approaches (between S and H), the phenomenological approaches (between S and F), and certain anthropological approaches such as that of René Girard (between F and H) [11]. The most recent theories also aim - in order to escape the reproach of reductionism - to combine as many different points of view as possible, and to do so to combine the three aspects of F, S and H. This has already been done in the case of the Mircea Eliade's project in her monumental "*Traité d'histoire des religions*", now taken up by Marcel Gauchet with his **historical socio-anthropology**.

Although we are convinced that the three aspects - functional, structural and historical - must be permanently combined in any study of religion, it seems tedious and useless to do so in each of the religious sciences taken in isolation. On the one hand, these sciences are very numerous, as Figure 3 has shown, and the inventory would end up being redundant and tiring. On the other hand, such a choice would overly validate the usual classification of these sciences, which is more a matter of academic habit than of true interdisciplinarity.

It therefore seems preferable, in the course we propose to follow, to combine systemic triangulation with the typology of the epistemologist Karl Popper to which reference has already been made. The latter considers that science - and this is particularly true of the religious sciences - is interested in three types of objects:

- **the world of natural objects**, in which the objects studied by physics and chemistry, but also by biology, must naturally be placed. Sociology, in its material and "objective" dimension (relations of production and exchange, systems of domination and power, public institutions, etc.) can be placed in this first world.
- **the world of states of consciousness** or mental states that neurosciences can explore at the margin but whose shifting and fleeting nature makes it difficult to reduce to simple determinisms. This world is traditionally studied by psychology and psychoanalysis.
- **the world of objective contents of thought**: "objects" here are beings of reason whose existence is immaterial, such as belief systems, philosophical doctrines, scientific theories, works of art, etc. One will also find there all that relates to the sciences of language, the study of texts, the analysis of myths, rites and prohibitions.

It is clear that the study of the religious phenomenon has to do with these three worlds. Thus, one will find illustrations of it at the level of sociology (reciprocal influences between religion and society for example), psychology (for example study of mystical states), hermeneutics (interpretation of the sacred writings of the various religions, etc.). But it is also as an archetype of all the symbolic systems imagined later by Humanity that we should be interested in religion, in application of the famous exclamation of Mircea Eliade "*All humanity comes out of the religious!* "

## **Qualitative modeling of the religious phenomenon**

Of course, there is no single model of religion, or even of a particular religion, but a plurality of models, each depending on the contingent choices of the observer/modeler. Like the map, the model is not the territory, but a partial, and sometimes biased, representation of it. But like the map, the model is intended to be operational and practical; it aims to give a certain understanding of the territory in order to allow one to orient oneself in it and act on it.

Moreover, when the modeler is interested in systemics, he will be more attentive to the interactions between components of the system than to the components themselves, to the multiple feedback loops governing them, to the architecture of the regulation networks. All this will ultimately allow him to discover the existence and nature of this *center of a religion* that Mircea Eliade talks about.

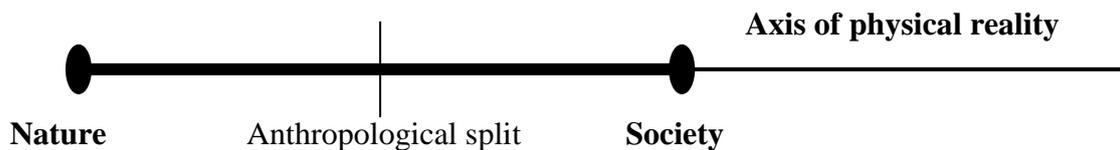
It is this whole ensemble that makes the model we are going to present now so interesting, and which was constructed on the basis of Marcel Gauchet's **historical socio-anthropology** [12].

## 1. Marcel Gauchet's model

Naturally, the graphic representation proposed here does not appear as such in Marcel Gauchet's book. It is a systemic reconstruction composed after the fact by the author of this article [13] from his reading of Marcel Gauchet and allowing to stage the great "actors" or components of a religious system: the world or Nature, the Society of men and its productions, the Human Person or thinking and conscious subject, the Gods or transcendence and the beyond. Moreover, these "actors" are grasped primarily from their dynamic interactions rather than in their singularity.

### a) The axis of physical reality (or axis of the simple beings)

On a horizontal straight line, we position all the natural objects (inanimate, animate, living, conscious) of the world. However, these objects are not located arbitrarily. On the left, we find everything in the cosmos that is only natural (physical objects, energy, plants, animals...); on the right, everything that belongs to the human order, i.e. to people living in a society shaped by culture.



By his biological characteristics, his animal origin, man belongs to nature; by the invention of language, the construction of increasingly elaborate social, political, ideological systems, man belongs to culture. Between nature and society there is therefore a split, the anthropological split that is constituted at the moment when man - through language and symbolic thought - extracts himself from nature to become a being of culture.

In the formation of this break, religion seems to have played an essential role.

### b) The axis of symbolic (or ontological axis)

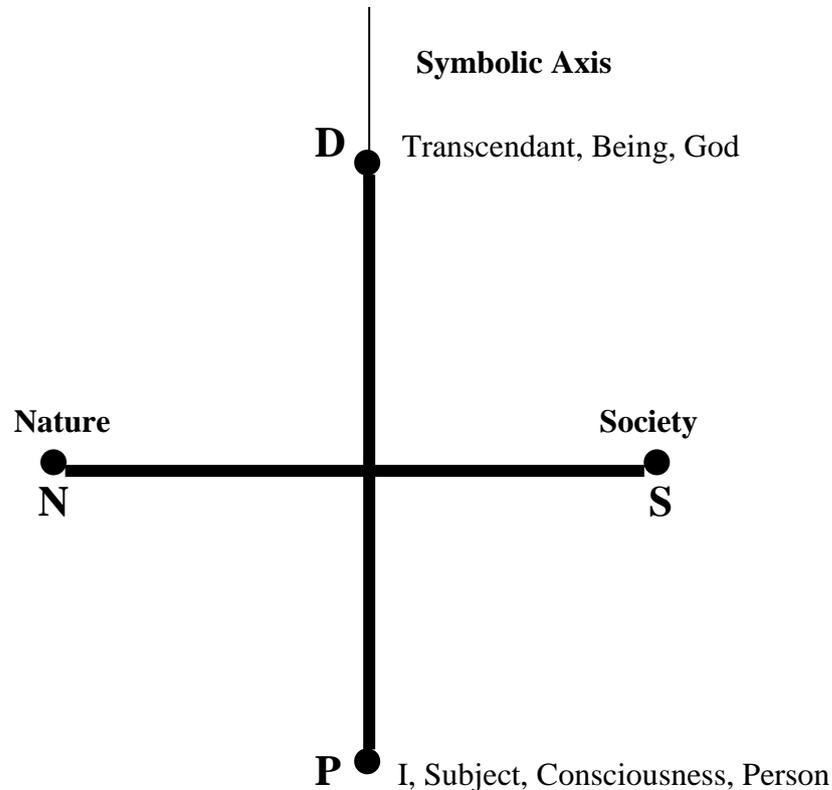
Raised perpendicularly to the anthropological cut, this axis is the place where the religious dimension of man is deployed, but also his interiority as a conscious subject. This axis refers to a purely spiritual world of symbols, the domain of the ineffable, the sacred, the mysterious, the inner existence. We thus obtain the canonical form of the model (Figure 4) whose configurations we will follow in the course of the various historical evolutions of Humanity.

At the highest point, there is what the philosopher or theologian calls the transcendent, the All Other, the Being as says Martin Heidegger or simply God as in religions. At the low point and symmetrically to the axis of the real, not being part of it as a simple being of the world, stands the consciousness, the subject that says I, the Person (in the philosophical sense).

Between these four components a complex interplay of interactions will be established, evolving over time and that we can characterize each one :

- **by its direction** (represented by an arrow). From D to S for example or from S to D, or even by a double arrow ellipse when it is a reciprocal interaction in the form of a feedback loop.

- **by its intensity.** Four degrees can be identified: the primordial link, represented by a thick line which reveals the existence of a very deep and structuring conditioning; the normal link, marked by a simple line which indicates the existence of a significant influence; the secondary link, represented by a dotted line; finally the pure and simple absence of link.



**Figure 4**

The variety of structures that can be designed in this way is very great and there are a large number of configurations, several million [14], most of which are hardly viable. It is then possible to find the configurations that correspond each time best to a given historical figure. This is what we are going to do following Marcel Gauchet to describe the evolution of the religious phenomenon in human societies, starting with its emergence among the first *homo-sapiens* 200,000 years ago, through the appearance of the phenomenon of burials. By the disposition of the deceased and the objects that accompany him, these burials denote the belief in an afterlife and the existence of another world, richer and more joyful than this world of here below.

In a first phase, Marcel Gauchet analyzes the historical period from the appearance of *Homo sapiens* to the beginning of the Christian era. Over this long period, four periods can be distinguished, which can be found, with the exception of a few nuances, in the evolution towards the great ancient civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, but also China and India. In a second phase, the analysis is focused on the last two millennia of world history, a period for which, after studying Buddhism and Islam, I will attempt to show, following Marcel Gauchet, the originality of the Christian response.

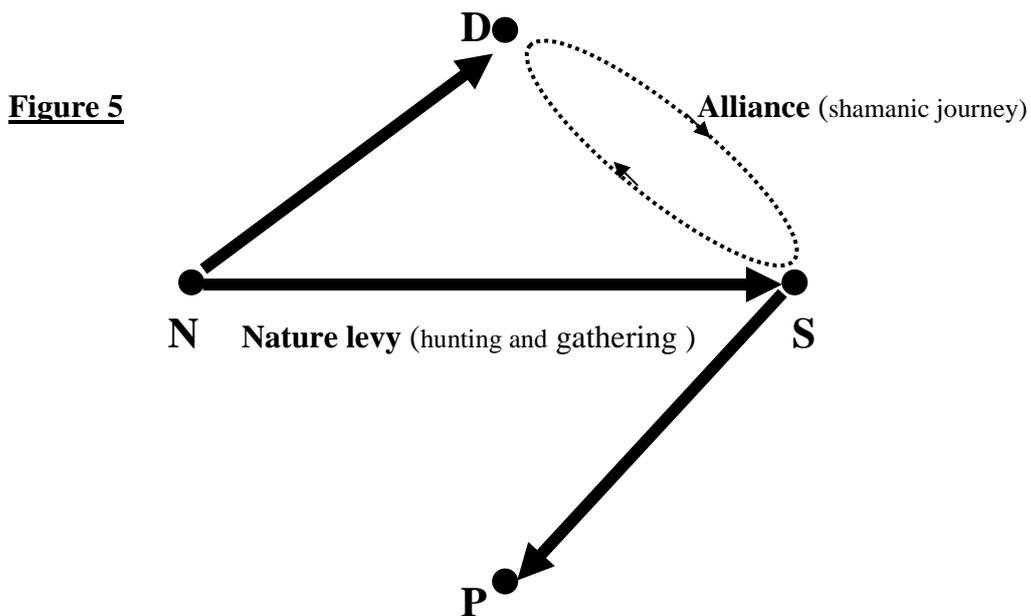
## 2. Shamanism or the religion of hunters/gatherers

For Gauchet, who agrees with what prehistorians and anthropologists say about the religious practices of human hunter-gatherer societies in the Paleolithic, the first religion of humanity presents itself as "the *intellectual translation of the native impotence of naked man, completely destitute, without any hold on an overwhelming nature, ... at the same time as a means of overcoming, through thought, by admitting it, a situation of extreme destitution.*

The world is perceived as enchanted, a mysterious partner populated with spirits, genies, deities that it is advisable to make oneself favourable by learned rituals of alliance which the *shaman is in* charge of. In a certain way, the transcendent is immersed in nature, determined by it. At the same time, in this hostile nature where survival can only be collective, the individual - can we speak of subject? - becomes one with the group; absorbed by it, he exists only through it. The "I" is engulfed in the "We".

In the symbolic order, the shaman acting on behalf of the group, negotiates then with the spirit donor of game the "supernatural" counterparts to the taking that the hunt operates on nature. For that, he must take animal appearance in order to send his soul to the beyond to meet the spirits and negotiate with them; it is the "shamanic journey".

On the structural diagram, all this is represented as follows:



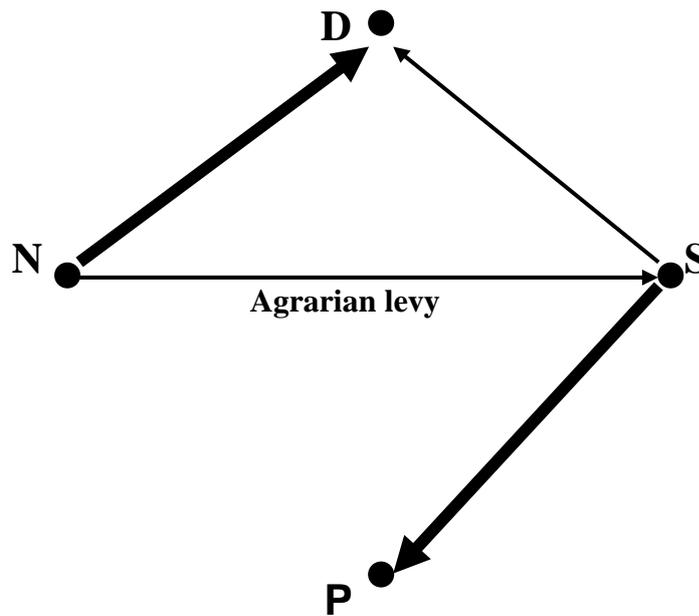
### 3. Agrarian religions

From 7000 years B.C., the Neolithic mutation (i.e. the invention of agriculture and breeding) will spread and flourish in the great alluvial valleys of the Nile and Mesopotamia, India and China. In these areas, where man settled permanently, the first agrarian societies appeared, stateless and unwritten societies, of which late examples (in Africa, Asia, America, Oceania) will be maintained until the contemporary era.

Religious representations also evolve, but less than might have been assumed. The emphasis is still on nature, perceived in the sacral mode of the ultimate encompassing. To the spirit of the forest and the genius of the river have come the gods or goddesses of fertility, whose benefits are expected to benefit the fertility of fields, herds and women. The vision of time is broadening and transcendence is increasingly conceived in a vertical modality. The ancestors of the group, some of them divinized, add their human form to the spirits and geniuses of nature. In a joyful exuberance are thus mixed zoomorphic and anthropomorphic deities. It is undoubtedly from this period that many myths, rites and prohibitions date back. Offerings and sacrifices (especially human sacrifices) were started to be addressed to the deities. A religious tradition is constituted, transmitted orally within a group of initiates.

The structural scheme takes the above form, very similar to the previous one, but where the social group begins to free itself from its direct dependence on nature. As for the transcendent, it is presented as the combination of the projections of the powers of nature and the power of the group (Durkheim's *mana*).

**Figure 6**



This agrarian religion, prior to the advent of the State and great civilizations, is for Marcel Gauchet the **primordial religion** by excellence. He writes [16]: "*The world before the State is intellectually the world of religion proper. This is what allows us to say that humanity began in a certain way with religion*".

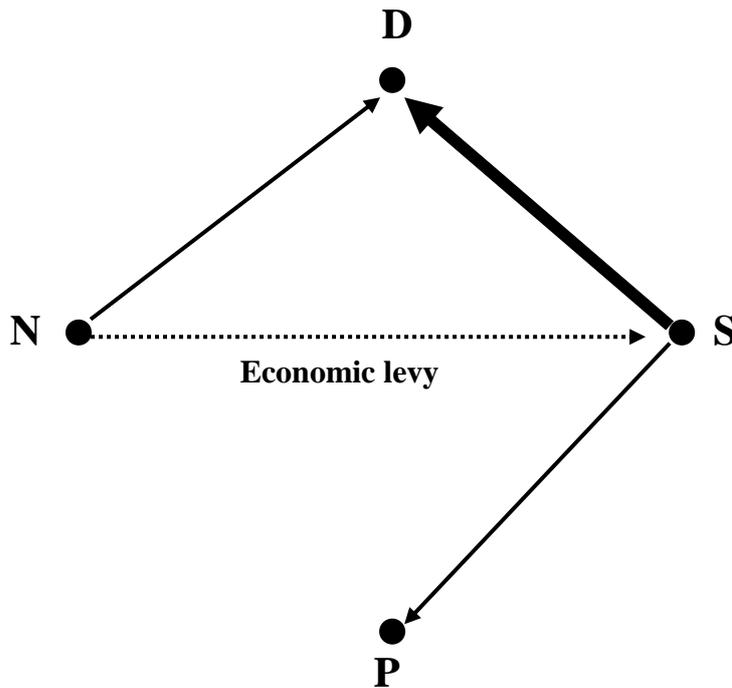
#### **4. The State, sacral transformer**

Marcel Gauchet observes [17]: "*And then, somewhere around minus 3000 B.C., both religious and political changes took place. The novelty is that we find individuals who are separated from others by the fact that they have a privileged link with the divine, a divine that is no longer the ancestral of previous societies, but the divine of gods acting in the present. These personal deities, who preside over the march of the world here and now, have correspondents among men. Thus the temple, the cult and the clergy appear, without forgetting this other considerable change that is writing*". All this begins first in Sumer and then in Egypt. A few centuries later, there will be efflorescences in India, in the Ganges and Indus valleys, and in China, in the valleys of the Yellow and Blue rivers. The long sedentarization of man in these fertile areas produced considerable cumulative effects. Population and wealth have multiplied, tools have been perfected, handicrafts have appeared, protection against nature and security have been ensured.

All this will make possible the emergence of city-states and ancient civilizations based on writing. The division of labor, the specialization of functions and roles, the differentiation of classes and social status (farmers, artisans, merchants, warriors, priests and scholars, political elites) on which reigns a monarch invested most often the fullness of political and religious powers (Pharaoh of Egypt and Emperor of China for example).

With the advent of these civilizations, the transformation of religion is accelerating. It is the birth of polytheism with its learned hierarchy of anthropomorphic gods (notion of *divine pantheon*) copied from human hierarchies. The "king of the gods" (Zeus, Jupiter, the Lord from above in China) is the celestial equivalent of the earthly emperor. This new historical configuration does much to draw transcendence from the social side.

The structural scheme deforms to take the following form:



**Figure 7**

A society S that remains always holistic, but where the subject P becomes less dependent on the group, projects on the transcendent D its own image. This transcendent, partially liberated from nature, nevertheless continues to assume nature in its most conspicuous manifestations (the storm, the tempest, etc.). For Gauchet, the figure of the sacred monarch will do much for the emergence of monotheism.

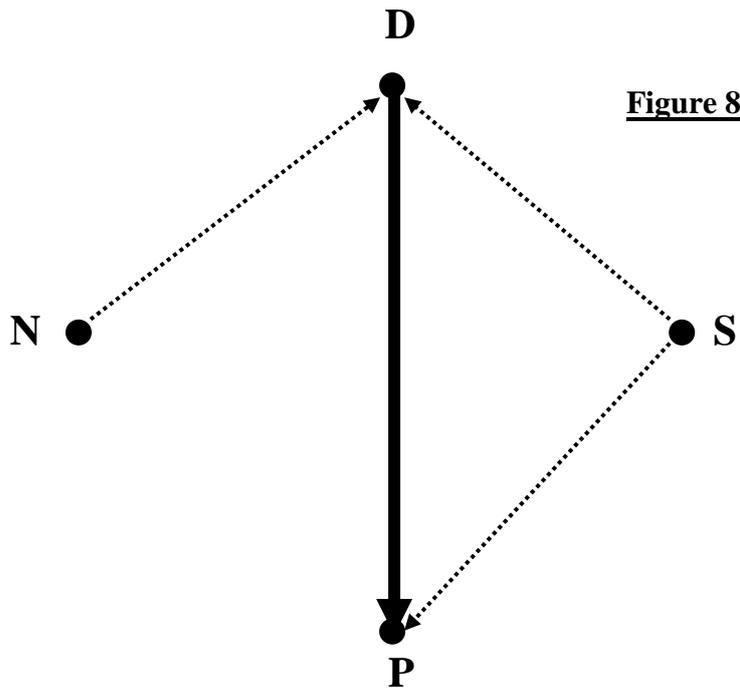
## **5. The Axial Period and the Universal Religions of Salvation**

At the crossroads of a still sacred nature and a society which, through the cult of ancestors and the sacral monarchy, projects itself into the world of the gods, the transcendent can finally emerge as a specific and autonomous reality on the axis of the symbolic. And at the same time, its double emerges, the consciousness of a subject understood as the place where the experience of the transcendent takes place.

According to Marcel Gauchet, this fantastic transmutation occurred in the most advanced societies of the planet over a short period of time that can be situated from the 7th century B.C. to the 1st century. This period, called by historians the **axial period**, saw the existence of Confucius, Laozi, Buddha, Zoroaster, Socrates, the great Jewish prophets (especially the second Isaiah) and Christ.

On the structural diagram (Figure 8), the vertical axis then becomes predominant. Less dependent on society, the person will paradoxically conquer his freedom by becoming dependent on the transcendent. According to Marcel Gauchet, the empowerment of the transcendent liberates men. He writes [18 ]: "*The greater the gods are, the freer men are*".

But this configuration makes little sense and is only valid for a few superior minds. It will have great difficulty in imposing itself in a society still largely shaped by beliefs in the divine character of natural forces and the sacral nature of political power. Also, during the last 2000 years of history, hybrid forms of the model will follow one another, more or less in agreement with the sacred monarchy, the religion of nature and the primacy of the collective over the individual. The great universal religions of salvation that will impose themselves little by little from the first millennium are the expression of these compromises.



While displaying the importance of the vertical axis and the primacy given to transcendence, these compromises are far from being equivalent. They articulate the four components of Gauchet's model differently. Thus, the choices made by Buddhism, Christianity and Islam are different and will lead to contrasting results in the history of the societies that have chosen these religions.

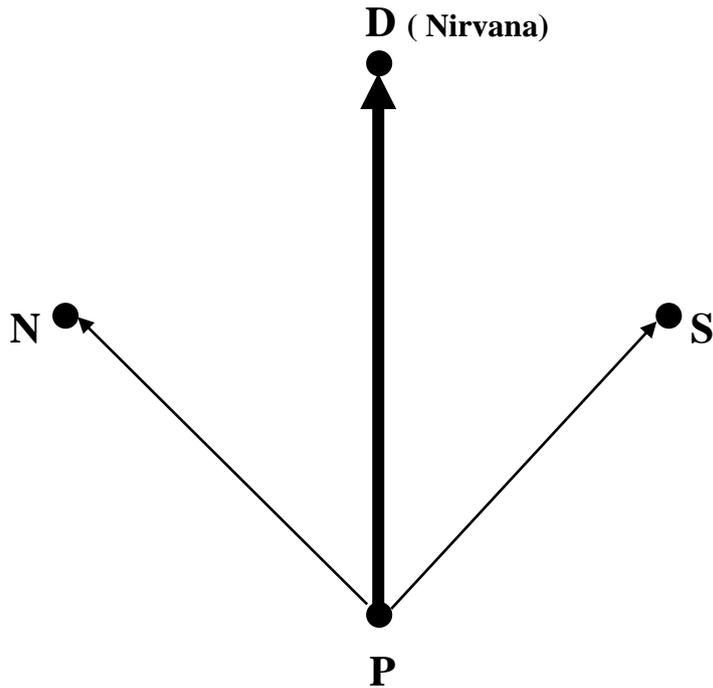
In the rest of his analysis, Marcel Gauchet focused exclusively on Christianity and its role in Western development. However, his model makes it possible, as we show in the next two sections, to represent the configurations specific to the Confucian-Buddhist universe of the Far East and to the Arab-Muslim world. A preliminary examination of these two religious traditions will only bring out more clearly, in the last section, the originality of Christianity and Marcel Gauchet's highlighting of its singularity.

## 6. Buddhism: a salvation out of the world

For the disciple of the Buddha, the objective is to escape from the illusory and ephemeral world of *samsara*, a world of suffering and impermanence, where man is condemned to perpetual rebirth in mortal and unhappy existences. For this, one must follow the *noble eightfold path* preached by the Buddha, a path based on asceticism, detachment, compassion for all beings, mental discipline and contemplation. In this way one can hope to extinguish one's *karma*, that is to say the trace in itself of all the bad voluntary acts one has committed, *karma* which is the cause of successive rebirths. Then one will obtain the awakening that leads to *nirvana*; one will never be reborn again in this world of suffering.

Everything is thus at stake for Buddhism around the subject's capacity to escape *samsara* by himself and thus to reach *nirvana*, a true substitute for the transcendent. In the model (Figure 9), this is represented by the importance of the vertical ascending line, as opposed to the lines going from P to N and S, which do not aim to translate the interest in nature and society (which are part of *samsara*), but the effort that the disciple must make to detach himself from this world.

Figure 9



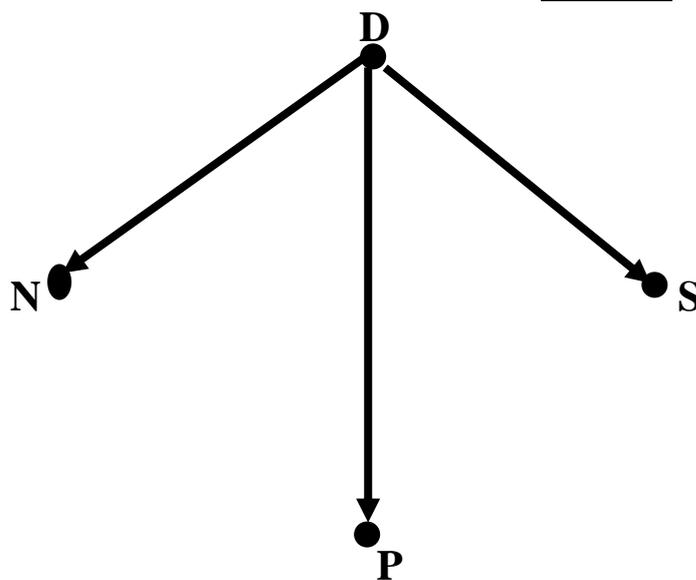
With regard to the preceding graphic representation, Buddhism can then be qualified of escapist anthropocentrism:

- **anthropocentrism**, because it is indeed man and not God or the gods who is first in the process of salvation,
- **escapist** (*escape: to escape, to save oneself*) because it is a question of escaping from the world of *samsara* and the perpetual cycle of rebirths.

## 7. Islam: a radical theocentrism

The landscape here changes completely. We have with Islam a totally inverted schema of transcendence compared to that of Buddhism, which is very well visualized by Gauchet's model (Figure 10).

Figure 10



Radical theocentrism founded on the absolute oneness of God, marked more than any other religion by divine transcendence, Islam organizes its theological structure from pole D: a God "*master of All*" who expects perfect submission from his creature (which is etymologically one of the meanings of the word *Islam*). This omnipotence of God manifests itself at the same time in the direction of nature, the thinking subject and society.

In the words of the Franco-Algerian historian Rochdy Alili [19], nature is presented as an "*enchanted creation*". Nothing takes place there without it being the result of God's will, acting through his angels and according to his good pleasure.

For the conscious man, the only reasonable attitude consists in surrendering himself into divine hands. To do so, he must adhere with all his will to the truths that God has revealed in the Qur'an, obey His commandments, and worship Him through the practice of the five pillars of Islam.

With regard to society, Islam multiplies the prescriptions concerning the organization of collective life, sometimes in the form of prohibitions, sometimes in the form of obligations. The initial Koranic obligation to "*command good and forbid evil*" (Koran 3:106) was clarified and enriched by the *hadiths* (words attributed to the Prophet) to give birth to Islamic law (*sharia*) recorded in tradition (*sunna*) and then translated into Muslim law (*fiqh*). For the islamologist Louis Gardet [20], if Islam is a religion, it is also "*a community whose religious bond fixes, for each member and for all the members together, the conditions and rules of life*". And Rochdy Alili, projecting his historian's viewpoint on fourteen centuries of Muslim civilization, writes similarly: "*Thus, for almost all of its history and over most of the Muslim territories, Islamic society was able to appear as a theocracy... with a temporal leader who could appoint a judicial personnel who could legislate and judge with reference to a divine law*."

## 8. Christianity: the Man-God at the Center

Because Christianity identifies transcendence with a single God who is at the same time a communion of persons (this is its Trinitarian monotheism), the relationship between God and man cannot be conceived of in the form of submission (as in Islam), fusion (as in Hinduism), or escape (as in Buddhism), but of a personal encounter with the divine under the sign of love.

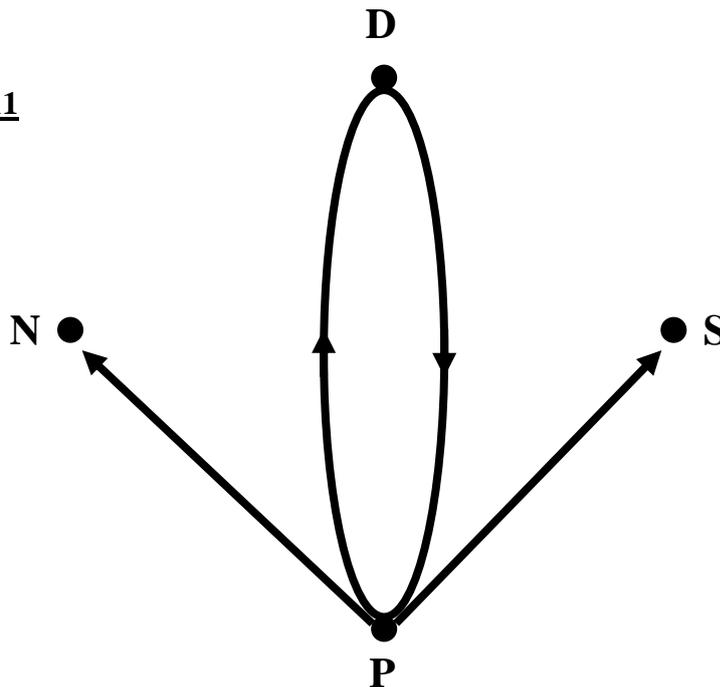
At the center of the Christian faith, as preached by the Apostles and the first Christians, is the **doctrine of the Incarnation**: a God who becomes man in order to call man to participate in the very life of God [21], a salvation that is not of this world but is built in the world. God, as the mystically accessible All Other, will then base the primacy of the subject (the person), and consequently of human freedom, on every social or natural belonging. This is what St. Paul affirms when he writes in the Epistle to the Galatians: "*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus*". This originality, present from the very beginning of Christian preaching, will have the greatest difficulty in imposing itself in history.

This founding choice then allows the Christian option to develop according to a double separation, which the structural diagram visualizes (Figure 11) :

- **separation God/Nature.** Created by God, but then left to its own laws (this is the meaning, in the biblical account, of God's rest on the seventh day), nature becomes for man a place of intelligibility and transforming action. This results in the sacred/profane distinction, and this "profanity" of nature will later found the legitimacy and autonomy of scientific knowledge and technical action.
- **God/Society separation.** Like nature, society becomes for man an autonomous place of action, an action that he must carry out in fidelity to the demand for fraternity arising from his spiritual experience, but whose modalities can never be a direct expression of the will

of the divine. This God/Cesar distinction, spiritual/temporal, authorizes political and social relativism and allows for the autonomy of the State and more broadly of the social and political order.

**Figure 11**



Marcel Gauchet affirms very clearly the social, political, cultural, technical consequences... of the very particular way in which Christianity conceives transcendence [22]: "*Subjectivation of the social, impersonality of power, openness to history: the fundamental innovations that have shaken the familiar figure of the collective being have in common this same temporal source, the direct result of the Christian process of unfolding transcendence.* His analysis finally culminates in his now famous formula according to which Christianity is in human history "*the religion of the exit from religion*". Marcel Gauchet does not mean by this the announcement of the disappearance of religion, which will undoubtedly keep its value as a spiritual force at the level of individuals, but the loss of its structuring and organizing role in social and political life.

In order to achieve such a "tour de force", Christianity would have had to go up a notch in complexity, which is clearly visualized by the succession of models we have just presented, especially since the axial period. In an attempt to account for this complexity, Christian theology has had recourse to surprising and paradoxical formulas - *oxymores* [23] - which subvert ordinary logic and play on the polysemy of language and images : God at once One and Three, near and far, omnipotent and weak; Jesus Christ, true God and true man, historically situated but at the same time co-extensive with all of history; a salvation already given but yet to come, which is a pure gift of God but which men have to build; a Church that is holy and without stain but at the same time sinful and constantly in need of reform; Mary both virgin and mother, etc. Contrary to the conception of the philosophers, God is not to be sought on the side of the simple, the immutable, the impassive. **He is the infinitely complex**, perpetual movement, eternal outpouring of newness, the bubbling of creation, the fire of love. Christian thought, especially through the voice of its mystics, has been able to say these things.

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2. Edgar Morin, *Introduction to Complex Thinking*, ESF, 1991, pp. 95-96.
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14. Ibid. *Les religions au risque des sciences humaines*. Footnote: pp. 234-235  
We know that in systems thinking, the relationship is more important than the component in understanding how a system works. It is then interesting to show that with a relational system, apparently as simple as the one just presented (4 components, 6 conceivable relations considering the 4 sides and the 2 diagonals of the diamond), we nevertheless lead to an immense number of possible configurations. By combining the direction and intensity of the relationship, as well as the possibility of double arrows, we already open up 16 possible types of relationship between two components. Taking into account the 6 conceivable relations between the 4 components, the number of theoretically possible configurations is then <sup>166</sup>, precisely: 16,777,216, i.e. nearly 17 million configurations.
15. Ibid. *The disenchantment of the world*. p. VI
16. Marcel GAUCHET et Autres, *Chrétiens tournez la page*, Bayard, 2002, p.66
17. Ibid. *Christians Turn the Page*, p.68
18. Ibid. *The disenchantment of the world*. p. 53
19. Rochdy ALILI, *What is Islam?* The Discovery, 2000
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21. One will recall the famous formula of Irenaeus of Lyon (one of the first fathers of the church) at the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century: "*The Word of God became what we are so that we become what he is*".
22. Ibid. *The disenchantment of the world*. p.202
23. **Oxymore**: a literary figure hated by logicians and adored by poets according to Edgar Morin, in which the same expression designates both a thing and its opposite.