

# THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL SENSE OF BELIEF\*

by

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**Abstract:** Faith is a paradoxical belief in the likelihood of unlikely events. The mystery of faith is the paradoxical and utopian character of this belief.

**Keywords:** Faith; belief; miracle.

**Resumo:** A fé é uma crença na plausibilidade de acontecimentos improváveis. O mistério da fé é o paradoxal e utópico carácter desta crença.

**Palavras-chave:** Fé, crença; milagre.

At first glance, this title may appear not to make much sense, because what is mainly noticed by those of us who are aware of the successive disappointments of the principle ideological narratives – liberalism, socialism and nationalism – <sup>1</sup> is the relative success with which the political manifestations of religious struggles occupy the public space of globalized, and at the same time culturally fragmented, societies.

A title such as the one I have given to this text would appear, on the contrary, to place the emphasis on the intimate “experience” of acceptance of God<sup>2</sup> which is the faith of believers in religious communities. But it only appears to be so. Indeed, in accordance with Max Weber, there seems to me to be a clear interrelation between religious convictions and social, religious and political practices.

So then, what is faith? It is the paradoxical belief in the possibility of unlikely events. The illogical and utopian nature of this belief makes it a mystery – the mystery of faith. The metaphor of lives about to be lost so absurdly in a shipwreck on a rough sea, serves as a context

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<sup>1</sup> Geertz, Clifford, ob. cit., p. 158.

<sup>2</sup> Gil, Fernando, ob. cit., p. 149.

for the desperate cry: “We are lost!” from those who, moments later, give thanks to God for the sudden recovery of the feeling of bounty. This freely offered saving grace (*karis*, in Greek; *gratia* in Latin) is received by believers as a gift, a gift which offers them reconciliation with themselves and with others – because in some ways it is also a reconciliation with God.

In its highest form, faith – the superior belief in miracles – is not only not positive knowledge but it is in fact excluded by it, insofar as the latter is disjunctive because it is either knowledge or it is not knowledge. However, paradoxical knowledge is affective as it lies in the mystery of faith, it is conjunctive insofar as it is not cognitive but, at the same time, it is. This apparent non-knowledge, this positive not-knowing is after all a knowledge centred on the personal and historical experience of the miracle. It is an epistemic field open to mystery and epistemologically open to potential future miraculous happenings, since it is certified by the memory of miracles, past and present. To paraphrase Camões, in a different context, we could describe it as “a knowledge based on experience”.

For Fernando Gil, faith is an intimate “experience” of “acceptance of God”<sup>3</sup> and he includes it in the group he calls “superior beliefs, apparently without any cognitive or functional meaning (...) which he characterises as beliefs “in” unobservable bodies” and not “that” something happens in the world”<sup>4</sup>. In his opinion, faith thus has no epistemological value, only epistemic. But faith is more than this: it is also the mysterious knowledge of this experience – which is undoubtedly different from positive knowledge but which also has its own rationality and objectivity.

This is made evident by theological discourse, which is the manifestation of the existence of a paradoxical rationality, insofar as it is a human construction concerning divinity, but it does not see itself as such but rather as the mystery of the discourse of God on mankind and the world.

And at this point, would be interesting to return to a question eighty years after it was first asked – the question with which Freud concludes the 5<sup>th</sup> chapter of *The Future of an Illusion (The Psychoanalysis of Religions)*<sup>5</sup> “One may wonder what the inner strength of these beliefs consists of and to what circumstances they owe their effectiveness, regardless of their being recognised by reason (or not). The author, who had just recounted a minor event experienced by one of his own children “who at an early age revealed himself to be particularly positive. As they were telling a fairytale to the children – which they listened to attentively – the child interrupted the account asking: “Is this story true?” As the reply was negative, the child withdrew, his face showing his feelings, he then conclude: It is probable that one day men will have the same reactions concerning religious stories.”

Thus Freud’s positivist belief appears to revolve around the decisive concept of happening/event<sup>6</sup> as a problematic fact which testifies to the epistemological value of the knowledge of the miracle. And it is in this way that the miracle appears as a happening which causes amazement to all, just as positive knowledge could not foretell that such a thing would happen or that it could ever happen now or in the future.

<sup>3</sup> Idem.

<sup>4</sup> Gil, Fernando, ob. cit., p.56

<sup>5</sup> Freud, Sigmund, ob. cit., pp. 75-76

<sup>6</sup> “Dans toutes les sociétés humaines, l’événement (...), fait problème” (Augé, Marc, ob. cit., p. 12).



So where does the paradoxical rationality of faith come from? Like Franco Ferrarotti<sup>7</sup>, we could reply to this question by saying that faith is the result of the assimilation by believers of social structures which having been de-structured and restructured time and time again give rise to this rational and affective structure – the paradoxical exercise which is the mystery of faith.

And what then are structures? They are forms in time, in other words, they are temporalities. The existence of forms – be they scientific, artistic, religious, juridical, political or others – implies the existence of poietic and eidetic powers (from gr. poiesis, creation and *eidos*, shape) from which they arose.

We may at this point wonder about these powers that are the basis of such a paradoxically rational and mysterious as faith. As Victor Turner stressed<sup>8</sup> “the dual nature of social” the community and the structure presents two powers: that of the gift which is exercised horizontally, based on strength, on wealth, on authority and tradition and which is constructed around the metaphor of (re) birth, consequently reinforcing the faith of believers and the recreation of community; but this implies the articulation of this power with a second one, liberation (salvation) which is exercised vertically based on God, spirits and forefathers, forgives sin committed according to the metaphor of death and destroys an unjust order of relations of violent reciprocity, purifying in this way hierarchical structures and at the same time reinforcing relations of loving reciprocity<sup>9</sup>.

How is it possible for gift and liberation (salvation) to conjugate their powers? By centring themselves on the symbols which identify the human race: birth, suffering, love and death<sup>10</sup>, bringing new vigour both to the faith of believers and, at the same time, a significance of religious institutions. This is a possible reply to the above-mentioned question by Freud.

And to my mind this is the essence of the theme of this round-table debate: *Beliefs, Religions, Powers. Individuals and Regimes of Sociability*.

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<sup>7</sup> Ferrarotti, Franco, ob. cit., p. 50

<sup>8</sup> Turner, Victor, ob. cit., p. 111

<sup>9</sup> On the distinction between violent reciprocity and loving reciprocity vide, Gomes de Araújo, Henrique, ob. cit., p. 51

<sup>10</sup> Gomes de Araújo, Henrique, ob. cit.