

**«Ex auctoritate consecratum». The “sacred” as a Political Project between *nomos* and  
Margin.**

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In his 1994 history of magic in ancient world, F. Graf recalls that “magic” was defined as a “semantic trap”<sup>1</sup>. I think that the “sacred”, too, can be defined, *mutatis mutandis*, as a “semantic trap”. Let’s see some definitions.

Introducing his *Le Sacré et le Profane*, written in 1956, M. Eliade states: «[...] la première définition que l’on puisse donner du sacré, c’est *qu’il s’oppose au profane*. [...] L’homme prend connaissance du sacré parce que celui-ci se *manifeste*, se montre comme quelque chose de tout à fait différent du profane»<sup>2</sup>.

Previously, and consistently, in the very first pages of his important essay on history of religions, *Traité d’Histoire des Religions* (1948), he had remarked that all the definitions of the “religious phenomenon” have a common feature: the *contrast* between the “sacred” and the religious life, and the “profane” and the secular life: «Toutes les définitions données jusqu’à present du phénomène religieux présentent un trait commun : chaque définition oppose, à sa manière, le *sacré* et la vie religieuse au *profane* et à la vie séculaire». An affirmation through negation: he says what the “sacred” is not<sup>3</sup>.

Elsewhere he spoke about the “sacred” as an element in the structure of consciousness<sup>4</sup>. Obviously, I’m aware that Eliade’s speculation on key-words such as “sacred”, “religion” or the well-known concept of “hierophany” is worthy of a deepened treatment. I limit myself to remember how his theories on “sacer/sacrum” pay a strong tribute to Rudolf Otto’s striking formulation of the “sacred” as a *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*<sup>5</sup>.

More accurate indications come from the anthropologists of *L’Année Sociologique*. For instance, in E. Durkheim’s works we find the use of “sacred” in connection with “what is protected and isolated by prohibitions”. The “sacred things” are «celles que les interdits protègent et isolent», and the “profane” ones are «celles auxquelles ces interdits s’appliquent et qui doivent rester à l’écart des premières»<sup>6</sup>. Again, the works of H. Hubert and M. Mauss on sacrifice, too, are well-known to

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<sup>1</sup> Graf 1994: 26, quoting “Magic. A problem in Semantics” by Dorothy Hammond in *American Anthropologist* LXXII, 1970, 1349-56.

<sup>2</sup> Eliade 1965: 14-15.

<sup>3</sup> Eliade 1953: 15.

<sup>4</sup> Eliade 1975.

<sup>5</sup> Otto 1936.

<sup>6</sup> Durkheim 1912.

scholars in this field of research to need to be mentioned<sup>7</sup>. I just highline the fact that, when we use the categories “sacred/profane” in an anthropological perspective, they seem to become actually operational<sup>8</sup>.

Of course, we should discern the specific lexicon for each language: the Greek *hagios, hosios*, the Latin *sacer, sacrum* and correlated terms, and so on. Anyway, regardless of the history of the term “sacred”, what follows is a modest attempt to demonstrate that “sacred” is not – not necessarily, in any case – an *a priori* category or, using a widespread and common terminology, a *phainomenon*, a transcendent revelation, an *epiphany* conceived as a personal, not historical experience. An “out-of-time” event which reveals itself to us in history<sup>9</sup>.

The “sociological” dimension of the “sacred” is more evident when we consider the typical political institution, the *law* or, to be more exact, the *laws*. In ancient Mediterranean we find several “sacred laws”. We note that laws about the “sacred” appear in Mediterranean environment since VII century B.C., but they’re not explicitly defined as “sacred laws” (*hieroi nomoi*) before IV century B.C.<sup>10</sup>

But what do we mean when we say “sacred”? As we know, the Greek cities, the *poleis*, the new space which has to be divided between peers, “equal” people, appeal not to gods but to a *nomothetes*, a legislator, a human lawmaker, who prescribes the *nomoi*, the laws for the *polis*<sup>11</sup>.

Nevertheless, the god’s opinion is not disregarded at all. The *polis* acknowledges and looks for an extra-human suggestion, also through the efficient tool of divination. As we know, the most important oracle is the pan-Hellenic site of Delphi, where the god Apollon speaks through the voice (and the body) of his *prophetis*, the Pythia. Now, the oracle usually advises, guides, suggests, but never (or almost) commands and orders. Who is consulting the oracle, receiving the god’s word, his *logos*, must then be skilled in semiology<sup>12</sup>.

There is a particular case which is worthy of attention. The *nomothetes* (legislator) of Sparta is Lycourgos. He’s not a “common” man. According to Plutarch, about him and his life (and death as well), nothing can be said which is not disputed (*ouden estin eipein anamphisbeteton*)<sup>13</sup>. In Herodotus’ *Histories*, too, he is a charismatic figure, and the Pythia herself doesn’t know how to

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<sup>7</sup> Hubert – Mauss 1899.

<sup>8</sup> See Bonte - Izard 1991, s.v. “Sacré”.

<sup>9</sup> For a recent reflection on the topic, see Chirassi Colombo 2012, quoting Raffaele Pettazzoni, founder of History of Religions as a strictly historic and laic discipline. Since the beginning of her paper, Chirassi Colombo recalls Pettazzoni’s statement “[...] per il pensiero storico ogni *phainomenon* è un *genomenon*” (for the historic thought, every *phainomenon* is a *genomenon*). In: Pettazzoni 1953: p. 11.

<sup>10</sup> Chirassi Colombo 2008: 280ff. Also Chirassi Colombo 2012: 197. Data in: Lardinois – Blok - van der Poel 2011.

<sup>11</sup> Chirassi Colombo 2008: 281ff.

<sup>12</sup> Chirassi Colombo 2008: 281. See also Manetti 1987.

<sup>13</sup> Plutarch *Lyc. (Life of Lycourgos)* 1.1.

address to him, as to a man or to a god – but preferably a god, she adds<sup>14</sup>. We also know the Pythia’s “revelation”, a complex, treble text where she promises to give him an *eunomia*, a good constitution, “as no one *polis* on the earth has”<sup>15</sup>. In the third and final oracle Apollon himself directly addresses to the *polis*, ordering not to change the traditional Spartan institutions: this is the most effective constitution (*poly kratiste ton allon estai politeion*)<sup>16</sup>. It means, the god doesn’t reveals – it’s not a matter of revelation. He just validates. He doesn’t prescribe, he approves<sup>17</sup>.

Lycourgos, on the other hand, claims that not obeying to the *pythocrestoi nomoi*, the laws of the pythian oracle, would be not only *anomon*, against the law, but also – it has to be underlined – *anosion*, i.e. not *hosios*, we could say not “religious”. The *hosiotetes* is a term related to the environment of the so-called “holy”, “saint”, “sacred”: not simply the “respect for the gods”, the *eusebeia*, *pietas*, as we usually find in Greek dictionaries<sup>18</sup>. The *hosiotetes* is a matter of politics – in the etymological meaning: what is pertinent to the *polis* – and the *nomos*, the law, cannot ignore it. How to say, the right behavior towards the gods (the “religion”, just to simplify) doesn’t rely on a divine statement, but on the citizens’ management. It’s a human matter<sup>19</sup>.

Here we have a completely different case, if compared to the manner used by the monotheistic systems in order to organize their “religious symbolic”, which has to cope with a revealed, inevitable law – *nomos*, *lex*, *torah* – directly dictated by the Only God, who orders and commands. Unfortunately, this is not the context for further considerations<sup>20</sup>.

A very brief survey of Greek and Latin lexicon on the use of “sacred” would be helpful. I’ll just add a couple of examples from the Latin world. Some definitions by the II century A.D. jurist Gaius are illuminating, helping us to understand how the “sacred” is not an absolute concept, but it should be read again at the light of its “human” dimension<sup>21</sup>. For instance, *sacrum* is *quod ex auctoritate populi Romani consecratum est*, what has been ratified by the *auctoritas* of the entire community of

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<sup>14</sup> Erodotos *Historiae*, 1.65.3.

<sup>15</sup> Diodorus Siculus *Bibliotheca historica* 7.12.1-2. See Chirassi Colombo 2008: 282ff.

<sup>16</sup> Plu. *Lyc.* 5.4.

<sup>17</sup> Chirassi Colombo 2008: 283.

<sup>18</sup> As always, a precise methodological approach in Chirassi Colombo 2012: 195ff. The *hosiotetes* is a correct “manner of communication” between humans and the “alterity/otherness”, the reaching of an “equilibrium situation” involving the “trade/exchange” between human and the divine.

<sup>19</sup> I just summarized Chirassi Colombo 2008: 281ff., where the topic is discussed in a well-structured and wider form.

<sup>20</sup> For further consideration on the “sacred”, see also Chirassi Colombo 1992 (in particular, its relationship with the politic place *par excellence*, the *polis*), and Chirassi Colombo 2006 (for its relationship with the laws, or the “Law”). For an accurate discussion, the last work getting the problem into focus is Chirassi Colombo 2012, touching on the “history” of the debate on “sacred” in History of Religions.

<sup>21</sup> Gaius was born under Trajan, he died around 178 A.D. He’s the author of *Institutiones (Ist.)*, the only work from classic jurisprudence directly survived to us through a codex from V century, preserved in Verona, and discovered in 1816. It’s a teaching handbook on the basics of jurisprudence, divided in *personae* (Book I), *res* (II e III) and *actiones* (IV).

the Roman people (*Inst.* 2.5). *Religiosum*, on the other hand, is what *nostra voluntate facimus*, what we did by our own will (*Inst.* 2.6). Surprisingly, it's a human, "laic" will<sup>22</sup>. Again, *sacer* and *sanctus* belong to the range of the public life, the community, and to the jurisprudence lexicon. *Sacer* is the patron who betrays the trust of his customer. *Sacrosanctitas* is the word which signals the inviolability of the plebs tribune. More generally, *sacer*, as an adjective, indicates what has to be separated<sup>23</sup>.

It could be interesting to quote Festus' definition of "sacer": *At homo sacer is est, quem populus iudicavit ob maleficium; neque fas est eum immolari, sed, qui occidit, parricidi non damnatur* [...]. Who is guilty of *maleficium* is "out of normality", in an un-protected – i.e., dangerous – situation. The "sacer" man is no more under juridical protection: he can be killed, without the killer has punished<sup>24</sup>.

Therefore, also the concept of "profane" obtains new meanings. In the Latin lexicon, the "sacred place", the site dedicated to the cult of the gods, the temple, is not defined through *sacer*, i.e. the *sacrarium*. An ancient form for temple is *fanum*, and *pro-fanum* could mean what is in behalf of (or pertains to) the *fanum*<sup>25</sup>. As well as *aedes*, the temple is *templum*, a particular place, located by means of the divinatory techniques in order to find out and fix the best point in heaven, ground or underground, as in a Varro's peculiar sentence<sup>26</sup>.

In Macrobius, *Sacrum est, ut Trebatius libro primo de religionibus refert, quicquid est quod deorum habetur* [...], whereas the *profanum* is *quod ex religioso vel sacro in hominum usum proprietatemque conversum est*<sup>27</sup>. Again, in the same author, *sanctum est, ut idem Trebatius libro*

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<sup>22</sup> Again, further remarks in Chirassi Colombo 2012 and previous works.

<sup>23</sup> For the reader's convenience, more Gaius' definitions are here reported. *Inst.* 2.3: *Divini iuris sunt veluti res sacrae et religiosae*. 2.4: *Sacrae sunt, quae diis superis consecratae sunt; religiosae, quae diis Manibus relictas sunt*. 2.5: *Sed sacrum quidem hoc solum existimatur, quod ex auctoritate populi Romani consecratum est, veluti lege de ea re lata aut senatus consulto facto*. 2.6: *Religiosum vero nostra voluntate facimus mortuum inferentes in locum nostrum, si modo eius mortui funus ad nos pertineat*. 2.7: *Sed in provinciali solo placet plerisque solum religiosum non fieri, quia in eo solo dominium populi Romani est vel Caesaris, nos autem possessionem tantum et usumfructum habere videmur; utique tamen, etiamsi non sit religiosum, pro religioso habetur: item quod in provinciis non ex auctoritate populi Romani consecratum est, proprie sacrum non est, tamen pro sacro habetur*. 2.8: *Sanctae quoque res, velut muri et portae, quodam modo divini iuris sunt*. Reference edition: Seckel E. - B. Kuebler 1935.

<sup>24</sup> For a strictly "historic" interpretation of "sacer", see Sabbatucci 1951-1952. For instance, p. 98: «[...] tuttavia resterà sempre una grande differenza tra ciò che va a far parte del divino in seguito a deliberazione umana e quello che è già degli dei indipendentemente dalla volontà dell'uomo: nel primo caso si dirà 'sacer' e nel secondo 'religiosus'».

<sup>25</sup> Chirassi Colombo 2012: 194. See Sabbatucci 1975.

<sup>26</sup> Varro *LL (de Lingua Latina)* 7.2.2-8 (*Templum tribus modis dicitur: ab natura, ab auspicando, a similitudine; ab natura in caelo, ab auspiciis in terra, a similitudine sub terra. [...] In terris dictum templum locus augurii aut auspicii causa quibusdam conceptis verbis finitus*). See Chirassi Colombo 2012: 95.

<sup>27</sup> Macrobius *Saturnalia* 3.3.2-5. See Chirassi Colombo 2012: 194.

*decimo Religionum refert, interdum idem quod sacrum idemque quod religiosum, interdum aliud, hoc est nec sacrum nec religiosum, est*<sup>28</sup>.

It's a complex topic, of course. I just would like to suggest how many terms and concepts related to the range of "sacred things", as well as what we uncritically call "religion", can be used in a different way – I mean, they can be criticized.

Moving to the same direction, I propose a brief survey of three famous "divine men" who successfully tried to manage different forms of "sacred", even when they used the traditional, official rites and temples, apparently respecting them.

As the first one, we choose Apollonius of Tyana (from Cappadocia, Anatolian Peninsula). He's one of the most important and ambivalent figure of "powerful man". In his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*<sup>29</sup>, Philostratus (around 170-250 A.D.) states – and stresses the point – that he's not a *magos*, a magician, but a (pythagorean) philosopher, a wise man, even a "divine man", a *theios aner*<sup>30</sup>. Since he met the *magoi* in Babylon<sup>31</sup>, the Brahmins of India<sup>32</sup> and the *Gymnosophistai* in Egypt<sup>33</sup> – Philostratus explains – some consider him a magician (*magon*) and accuse him to be a false wise man (*biaios sophon*), but they do it because of ignorance (*kakon gignoskontes*)<sup>34</sup>. He then mentions some philosophers (Pythagoras, Empedocles, Democritus, Platon) who, although they met Persian *magoi* and Egyptian priests, have not been accused of "practicing magic" (*mageuein*)<sup>35</sup>. Philostratus' aim is precisely to demonstrate Apollonius' true identity, historically defined<sup>36</sup>, despite what some ignorant people say: he actually was a wise man seeking for – and teaching as well – the true wisdom, a higher knowledge, and that's the reason why many people considered him a supernatural, divine being.

We're informed about Apollonius' opposition to Power, in particular, against the Emperors Nero<sup>37</sup> and Domitianus<sup>38</sup>. It's reaffirmed in the passage where Philostratus reports his amazing disappearance from the courthouse<sup>39</sup>. The message is clear: no power, no authority can stop the great wise man, whose greatness puts him above not only the "tyrants" but everything and

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<sup>28</sup> Macr. *Sat.* 3.3.5.

<sup>29</sup> The reference edition is Conybeare 1948.

<sup>30</sup> For the topic, Dzielska 1998; Sfameni Gasparro 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Philostr. *VA (Vita Apollonii)* 1.26.

<sup>32</sup> Philostr. *VA* 3.10-50.

<sup>33</sup> Philostr. *VA* 6.6-22.

<sup>34</sup> Philostr. *VA* 1.2.

<sup>35</sup> Philostr. *VA* 1.2.

<sup>36</sup> Sfameni Gasparro 2007: 272.

<sup>37</sup> Philostr. *VA* 4.35-47.

<sup>38</sup> Philostr. *VA* 7.16, 8.8.

<sup>39</sup> Philostr. *VA* 8.8-10. See Sfameni Gasparro 2007: 272.

everyone. Nevertheless, his sudden disappearance seems to be an additional proof of his magical powers – the most impressive proof being the resurrection he performs on a young dead girl<sup>40</sup>.

According a long tradition, Apollonius was conceived as a “rival”, an antagonist to Jesus<sup>41</sup>, as we find it in Porphyrius (Tirus, 233/234 – Rome, 305), in some fragments of his work *Contra Christianos* (*Against Christians*), and in Sossianus Hierokles, in his *Philalethes* (*Friend of Truth*)<sup>42</sup>. Hierokles blames the Christians for having considered Jesus as a god because of his miracles and prodigies, while – he says – we consider him [i.e. Apollonius] not as a god, but as a man favorite by gods<sup>43</sup>. A meaningful symptom of the complex, problematic matter of the construction of “holiness”, or rather, of a “divine” identity.

The problem of the parallel between Apollonius, Jesus and, generally, every *theios aner* is still open. An important scholar as J.Z. Smith speaks about Apollonius as «a portrait of a powerful figure who muddles all models»<sup>44</sup> and claims to use the title “gospel” «for the *Vitae* attributed to Mark and John as well as for those by Philostratus and Iamblichus» (referring to Iamblichus’ *Vita Pythagorae*), still suggesting «to reserve the term “gospel” for those works in which the adequacy of a magical or divine man interpretation of a son of god, in which the portrait of a life which can be imitated and the demonstration of divinity through miracles is relativized by the motif of misunderstanding and through the depiction of the protagonist as *sui generis*, as enigmatic and estranged»<sup>45</sup>.

The first mention of Apollonius is in Lucian of Samosata’s *Alexandros ou Pseudomantis* (*Alexander the false prophet*)<sup>46</sup>, written around 180 A.D. against Alexandros and his followers. Alexandros of Abounoteichos (a town in Paphlagonia, close to the Black Sea, called Ionopolis at Alexandros’ request to the Emperor Marcus Aurelius, who agreed<sup>47</sup>) is another intriguing character living and operating in II century B.C. Mediterranean, well known and appreciated as a powerful magician and prophet. Lucian ironically informs us that his teacher (*didaskalos*) – who was his

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<sup>40</sup> Philostr. *VA* 4.45.

<sup>41</sup> See Celsus *Contra Christianos* [apud Orig.] 1.6: Jesus performed miracles thanks to magic powers (*goeteia*); 1.28: he went to Egypt, where he learned magic (*kakei dunameon*); 1.71: he was an evil magician (*mochtherou goetos*). Documented discussion in Smith 1978, Chapter 6.

<sup>42</sup> Sfameni Gasparro 2007: 284.

<sup>43</sup> Eusebius *Contra Hieroclem* 2. See Sfameni Gasparro 2007: 288.

<sup>44</sup> Smith 1993: 196. Again, p. 197: «Apollonius, as he functions in his *Vita*, remains opaque. He is a cipher. He has no teachings of his own. His philosophy, as represented by Philostratus, consists of neo-Pythagorean and Stoic commonplaces that may be found in any doxographical handbook. [...] His opacity is equalled by his transparency. Neither providing a model nor a saving message, he does not overshadow a situation but rather dissolves from view. Every encounter is similar to that with the Emperor—he simply vanishes». See also Sfameni Gasparro 2007: 285.

<sup>45</sup> Smith 1993: 204. For more information, a “classic” essay on Apollonius is Dzielska 1986.

<sup>46</sup> Reference edition is Harmon 1961.

<sup>47</sup> The significant event is discussed in Sfameni Gasparro 1996: 568.

lover, too – was one of Apollonius’ closer disciple, coming from Apollonius’ same town, Tyana. Publicly, he performed medicine (*iatros*), since he actually knew substances and preparations for good as well as for evil purposes (*pharmaka polla men esthla [...] polla kai lugra*, quoting Homer *Odyseia* 4.230) and he also knew – Lucian adds – all Apollonius’ “theatrical tricks” (*kai ten pasan autou tragodian eidoton*)<sup>48</sup>.

Alexandros is a very peculiar figure of “magician” – we can also say conjurer or maybe illusionist, in a modern and “rationalistic” perspective – who claimed himself not only Pythagorean, but even equal to Pythagoras himself<sup>49</sup>. He also claimed himself prophet of the medicine-god Asklepios, and founded the oracular cult of Glykon, the bizarre snake-god with a human face. It was a python, whose head was covered with a wig, and which Alexandros wore around his neck<sup>50</sup>. Lucian’s book is filled with many funny anecdotes about tricks, stratagems and abilities of a man (and his followers) who actually was respected and revered with religious devotion not only by the crowds, but also by rich and powerful people and even imperial functionaries, who sent messengers to him in order to consult his oracle<sup>51</sup>.

Some scholars underlined his role of “intercessor”, “mediator” between the humans and the gods – or the same god Glykon, who explicitly says: «You will have all when I will it and my prophet Alexander asks it of me and prays on your behalf»<sup>52</sup>. We actually have many dedications from different regions of the Roman Empire, maybe referring to him, like this one from Illyria: *Iovi et Iunon[i et] Dracon[i] et Draccenae et Alexandro (Epitynchanus C. Furi Octaviani c.v. posuit)*<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>48</sup> Lucian *Alexandros ou Pseudomantis* 5. See also, in the same place, Lucian’s introduction of Alexandros’ teacher as an expert in incantations, love potions, spirit evocations, treasure findings and... inheritances. Although interesting and well-documented, Sfameni Gasparro’s paper seems not to appreciate Lucian’s irony and sarcasm or, generally, his polemic statements against Alexandros and the several “false prophets”. She rather insists in stressing the importance and “intelligence” (i.e., ability) of his “religious activity” (with an uncritical use of the term “religion/religious”). See, for instance, p. 582: «Risulta confermato come Alessandro, nella sua ricerca di autenticazione mitica della propria persona e quindi della propria attività religiosa non sia un isolato stravagante impostore ma una figura pienamente calata nei moduli culturali del proprio tempo, la punta emergente di un iceberg che si può intuire assai compatto e pervasivo del contemporaneo panorama religioso»; p. 583: «[...] egli si conferma sempre di più sensibile interprete [del clima culturale e religioso], capace di utilizzarne ed esplicitarne tutte le potenzialità simboliche e le valenze mitico-sacrali».

<sup>49</sup> Luc. *Alex.* 4.

<sup>50</sup> On the “tricks” performed by Alexandros to simulate Glykon’s human appearance and behavior, see Luc. *Alex.* 12-18. A famous representation of Glykon is the statue at the National Museum of History and Archeology in Constanța, the ancient Tomis (Romania), of whom it’s a symbol and website *logo*.

<sup>51</sup> It’s the case of P. Rutilianus, consul in 150-155 A.D. and then proconsul, who not only was the very first, in Rome, to become a devoted follower, but also married (at the age of sixty) Alexandros’ daughter, born by the goddess Selene (the Moon) who fell in love with Alexandros. Thus Rutilianus considered himself one of the “heavenly company”: Luc. *Alex.* 30-35.

<sup>52</sup> Luc. *Alex.* 22. See Nock 1928: 161.

<sup>53</sup> CIL III 8283 = Dessau 4080. See Nock 1928, p. 160, and Sfameni Gasparro 1996: 569-570. In Nock’s interpretation (p. 161) «Alexander is therefore an intercessor, like the Christian saints, as we find them

Alexandros' name is thus invoked together with gods (*Iovi et Lunoni*) and the *Draccon* (Serpent), maybe referred to the oracular snake-god Glykon, and his female counterpart, a still mysterious *Draccena*<sup>54</sup>.

Finally, we can summarize with Nock's word, «Alexander remains an example of peculiar interest, because we can see him operating with Greek or Hellenized material, presenting his sacred story in a visible way in his mysteries, and leaving a lasting result; he did so because he built on local belief and because he created an institution which could take firm root»<sup>55</sup>.

It may be helpful to recall that, in the first centuries of the Christian era, a typical feature of the dispute between Jews, Christians and “pagans” (or, people usually defined “pagans”: the term is not correct, of course, it's used here just for simplicity) was the mutual accusations of “magic”<sup>56</sup>.

Speaking about accusations of “magic”, it's impossible not to recall the famous trial of Apuleius from Madaura, the II century A.D. rhetorician, lawyer, writer, (platonian) philosopher and alleged “magician” (*magus*). It's a well-known fact, that his (self)defense, the *Apologia* (or *Pro se de magia liber*)<sup>57</sup>, pronounced during the trial – or, more likely, written later – which took place in Sabratha in 158 A.D., is the only judiciary oration from the imperial age<sup>58</sup>.

There's no need to report the famous story<sup>59</sup>. It's interesting to note that, although he is risking a grave penalty – possibly his own life<sup>60</sup> – Apuleius doesn't explicitly reject the accusation of “magic” but, very proficiently (and cleverly, indeed), he exclaims to be a (platonian) philosopher, not a magician. Nonetheless he specifies that “magician” is the Persian word for “priest” (*Persarum lingua magus est qui nostra sacerdos*), explaining that this kind of “priesthood” consists in having knowledge, science, and skill in all ceremonial law, in sacrificial duties, and the rules of religion

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invoked in third-century *graffiti*; *Paule et Petre, petite pro nobis*, and like the saints and prophets of Islam».

<sup>54</sup> Again, Nock 1928: 162: «[...] as both introducing and representing the new cult, he [Alexandros] stands between humanity and Glykon».

<sup>55</sup> Nock 1928: 162.

<sup>56</sup> Sfameni Gasparro 2007: 278-279: the aim, in such accusations, is to delegitimize the adversary's cultural and religious identity. Although agreeing with many of the author's statements about the charge of “magic”, it doesn't seem convincing that it operates in “every religious tradition” (see note 48).

<sup>57</sup> Reference editions are Helm 1907; Abt 1908; Butler – Owen 1914.

<sup>58</sup> See Smith 1993: 193: «From Iamblichus' *De mysteriis Aegyptiorum* and Apuleius' *Apologia* to the Gospel of Mark [...] the characteristic of every such religious biography (and associated autobiographical and dogmatic materials) of Late Antiquity is this double defense against the charge of magic—against the calumny of outsiders and the sincere misunderstanding of admirers».

<sup>59</sup> On Apuleius' trial, an extended bibliography is available. An acute discussion and interpretation also in Graf 1994, Chapter 3.

<sup>60</sup> The *veneficium* or “crime of magic” was ruled by the *Lex Cornelia de sicariis et veneficiis*, established in 81 B.C. by L. Cornelius Sulla. On this topic, see the still useful work of Garosi 1976.



(*rite nosse atque scire atque callere leges ceremoniarum, fas sacrorum, ius religionum*)<sup>61</sup>. Again, he maintains that “magic” – interpreted in such a way – is an art acceptable to the gods (*artem esse dis immortalibus acceptam*), full of all knowledge of worship and of prayer, full of piety and wisdom in divine things (*piam scilicet et diuini scientem*)<sup>62</sup>. “This” magic is just the worship of the gods (*theon therapeia*), he finally states<sup>63</sup>.

His position is ambiguous. He knows there’s a linguistic, conceptual misunderstanding by his accusers – and Apuleius, who is a very educated man, takes advantage of this. He goes on, explaining the error of the ignorant people (*errore imperitorum*), who consider “irreligious” (*irreligiosos*) some philosophers such as Anaxagoras, Leucippus, Democritus, Epicurus, thinking they don’t respect the gods, and call “magicians” (*magos*) other ones, like Epimenides, Orpheus, Pythagoras, Ostanos and the same Empedocles, because of their research into foreknowledge of the world<sup>64</sup>. In his conclusion, the charge of “magic” becomes a merit, and he can ironically congratulate himself, for being in “such a good company”<sup>65</sup>.

To conclude, all these personalities of “magicians/philosophers” belong to a variegated, long list of characters – in which we have to include names like Pythagoras and Empedokles, whose extraordinary biographies locate them as forerunners in the “*theios aner*-type” – who propose a “different” model of management of the “holy things”, an alternative form (with alternative cults and oracles) of the “sacred”, where powers and knowledge are proposed by a powerful man in a syncretistic cultural platform, and where the line between “religion” and the dangerous land of “magic” is always very thin.

It’s possible, but probably not demonstrable, that such a management of different types of “sacred” presents similarities with other (previous) forms of wisdom. As we said, Apollonius’s travels to India, Egypt and Babylon were an important feature in the construction of his “divine” identity, and one of the very first aspect reported by his “biographer” Philostratus. India was particularly formative. There the “wise man” from Tyana learnt a higher truth, or the highest one. It’s impossible not to think to the ancient Vedic wisdom and knowledge: to the Brahmins or – what seems to be more intriguing – to particular “priesthoods” like the Vrātyas, peculiar groups involved in ascetic and ecstatic practices, sometimes defined as “itinerant magicians”. Their behavior and customs, viewed as socially – ritually, even sexually – transgressive, don’t seem sufficient to

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<sup>61</sup> Apuleius *Apologia (Pro se de magia liber)* 25.

<sup>62</sup> Apul. *Apol.* 26.

<sup>63</sup> Apul. *Apol.* 25. See Graf 1994, Chapter 3, for a distinction between a “popular” and local conception of “magic”, and Apuleius’ philosophical and “educated” one.

<sup>64</sup> Apul. *Apol.* 27.

<sup>65</sup> Apul. *Apol.* 27.

compare them to the Mediterranean prophets or “magicians”. However, they represent another case of (self)marginalized religious system whose symbolic reversal of laws – or common behaviors, in a pre-normative society – confirm the importance of what is conceived as the “center”.

Therefore, the reputation of the (alleged) “wise man” sometimes seems to be the only way to discern between the “true” Prophet, the Sage, the “divine man” and the “magician”, the impostor, the deceiver bringing a false message. Similarly, the various terms related with the “sacred” (which we often uncritically translate “sacred”) may be used in order to distinguish the Truth, the Licit, the Pure, coming from the gods (or God, in a Judaic-Christian perspective) from all the other possible but unacceptable truths (from time to time, the not-Judaic or “pagan” or “barbaric” believes and rules, and so on), which corresponds with everything illicit, impure, even “evil”. The laws (or the Law) thus become the main tool to cut-off everything standing – geographically, socially, culturally – out of the margin, in the “twilight zone” of the not-religious.

The question is unresolved, but not unsolvable. It requires a careful use of concepts we acquired from the past, but still operating in everyday life.

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