

## KARL MEULI'S "GRIECHISCHE OPFERBRÄUCHE" - TOWARDS AN ETHOLOGY OF RELIGION

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**Abstract:** On a first view, the academical disciplines "history of religions" and "ethology" have little in common. As recently as 1945 the philologist and historian of religions Karl Meuli (1891-1968) has been able to prove that religions as distinct from one another as the religions of ancient Greece, imperial Rome, recent arctic hunter-gatherers, and probably even prehistoric hunters, shared similar ritual customs. In spite of the prevailing paradigm Meuli concluded that these similar manifestations of sacrificial practices must originate in an innate behavior pattern acquired during human evolution.

**Key words:** Anthropology, Ethology of Religion.

### INTRODUCTION

During the last few years the alleged new discipline of cultural studies determined the discourse within the humanities as much as the demand for interdisciplinarity. This postulation was associated with the strong conviction of the personal progressiveness of the scholars under question. This self-assessment, however, is not in accordance with the facts. Even the specialization of the natural sciences and the humanities into disciplines and subdisciplines is a phenomenon mainly of the last fifty years and, therefore, quite new. Already during the beginning of this development, clear-sighted scholars tried to bridge the gap between the sciences and the humanities. Not astonishingly, many of those scholars came from the discipline of anthropology that has to deal with both scientific and scholarly approaches. One of the most renowned proponents of this approach was the skilled anthropologist Victor Witter Turner, who wrote as early as in the seventies: "One remedy would be to seek means to overcome the overspecialization of departments and the atomism of funding. My paper indicates that a new breakthrough in anthropology depends upon a serious sustained effort by the proponents of severely segregated subdisciplines... to relate the best findings of their segregated years." (TURNER, 1977). Even if Turners' postulation may have sounded uncommon to many of his con-

temporaries, he stood nevertheless in a strong tradition of outstanding researchers, who had never abandoned the approaches and results of more or less related disciplines who continued to consider anything qualified for broadening the scientific horizon.

Usually, in this connection a scientific transfer from the sciences into the humanities is brought into consideration, as the history of natural science easily proves. Famous philosophers and anthropologists such as Antoine de Condorcet (1743-1794), Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) or Edward Burnett Tylor (1832-1917) stressed the results of contemporary biology (having then discussed theories of the French biologist Jean-Baptiste de Lamarck), to develop their ideas of human evolution and the related development of society. In contrast, it is mostly forgotten that even the humanities have had a strong impact on biological science: No one less than Charles Darwin (1809-1882) and Alfred Russel Wallace (1823-1913) have developed their theory of natural selection (1858) in dependence on the work of the famous economist Robert Malthus (1766-1834) and his observation of the coherence of population-growth and available resources (Malthus; *Essay on the Principle of Population*, 1798).

A broader discussion of this interesting topic, however, would go too far within a symposium dedicated to the cave-bear and, to a lesser account, to phenomena related

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to its temporal and geographical environment. Therefore, I decided to introduce the work of a scholar, who stressed the same arguments and saw new approaches not only in the field of anthropology and philology, but in biology as well. Additionally, his research focused on Greece in historic and prehistoric times, and, therefore, is in the geographical and chronological range of our symposium. Karl Meuli's "Griechische Opferbräuche" (Greek Sacrifices), therefore, is meant as a homage to our hosts and a plea for the entity of science.

## THE ROOTS OF ETHOLOGY

On a first view, cultural anthropology including religious studies and ethology has little in common. Whilst historians of religion use hermeneutical methods, ethology has a strong foothold in biology including scientific methodology.

The historical roots of ethology can be traced to Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. In his book *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (1872) he recognized that the role of instinct is just as important for the survival of the species as the adaptation of morphological structures in the course of their phylogenetic histories. During the following decades, however, the Darwinian approach continued to be disregarded. On the contrary, a scientific school with roots in psychology dominated the study of animal and human behavior. This so-called behaviorism was based on the premise that psychology should be regarded as the science of behavior, rather than the science of mental life. Proceeding from the assumption that behavior is a product of learning, American behaviorists focused on the study of observable behavior and the ascertainable or contrived circumstances of its occurrence. As a result, behaviorists were successful in all kinds of research with regard to general laws of learning, but failed to take evolutionary approaches into account. Until the 1970s, most behaviorists and sociologists were convinced that the behavior of humans and animals was mainly a product of their environment and education (HINDE, 1982).

Within the scientific climate at that time, anthropology and the study of religions developed approaches of cultural relativism that considered human culture as phenomena upon which the biological heritage had no influence. This opinion first came into question when the experienced philologist Karl Meuli (1891-1968) was able to prove that religions as distinct from one another as the religions of ancient Greece, imperial Rome, recent arctic hunter-gatherers, and probably even prehistoric hunters, shared similar ritual customs. This observation

was unintelligible from an environmental point of view. In spite of the prevailing paradigm Meuli concluded that these similar manifestations of sacrificial practices must originate in an innate behavior pattern acquired during human evolution.

## Karl Meuli

Karl Meuli, the classical philologist at the university of Basel, did not merely make his name as an exponent of philological research, but followed the tradition of such famous predecessors as Hermann Usener (1834-1905) from Bern or Johann Jacob Bachofen (1815-1887) from Basel. Even if these scholars had been outstanding exponents of philological research in the nineteenth century, they owe their lasting fame in the realm of the humanities to specific approaches that crossed the borders of their particular discipline. While Bachofen had stressed the historical approach to shed light on the development of Greek and Roman religion in general and the role of mother-goddesses in particular, Hermann Usener went so far as to conjecture about the origin of religious ideas in general. He thereby stressed the results of contemporary psychology and, as a result, saw that religion is mainly found in the natural fright of threatening apparitions such as lightning or thunderstorms. These were typically unexplainable until a first term was found that named the phenomenon, making it acceptable to the human mind and, as a result, less frightening. Only later did these items become personalized, growing into the gods and goddesses of ancient times - so far Usener. In this context it may be interesting to mention that the skilled art-historian Aby Warburg used that approach later to develop his own ideas, that partly founded in Darwin's *The Expression of the Emotions ...* Warburg's essay *A Serpent Ritual* and his *Mnemosyne Atlas*, actually undergo a renaissance, even if their importance was hardly valued during the time of their first publication (FORSTER, 1999, WUNN, 2005).

Something similar to this happened to the non-philological work of Karl Meuli. Considerable internal and external obstacles have stood in the way of any thorough understanding of Meuli's non-philological writings. Almost his entire scholarly output was published in German, and, therefore, was seldom cited, even when closely relevant. Even if one cannot say that Meuli's initiatives attracted no attention - for the discipline of the history of religions the contrary is true (BÖHME, 2001) - but the pioneering ideas of his approach were not discerned until today.

Any contemporary interest in Meuli, therefore, should

not arise mainly in connexion with his philological research, but from issues connected with the decipherment of general patterns of human behavior as adapted during human evolution.

### GREEK SACRIFICES - GRIECHISCHE OPFERBRÄUCHE

Not only recent generations, but also the Greek people of ancient times feared their own myths and hardly understood meaning and reason of their sacrifices. Not only did the narratives speak about cruelties such as the emasculating and laceration of a god or the ravage of a town, but were improper to give meaning to a pious life. In addition to that people consistently came across antilogies and discrepancies in myths as well as in rituals (MOST, 1991, MEULI, 1946). This mostly concerned the sacrifice on behalf of the Olympic gods. A common offering was divided into a nearly valueless part for the gods containing mainly the bones and the gall, whilst the humans received the precious meat.

Whereas Greek mythology tried to explain this unreasonable way of sharing with the help of the legend of a former deceit of Prometheus, philological research was confronted with a mystery that absorbed the effort of countless researchers past and contemporary. For Meuli, the answer seemed to come into reach by not only bringing the results of the new discipline of archaeology into account, but also by using a genuine scientific approach. His search for human universals included both generalization and reductionism that are usual procedures in the sciences, but abandoned in the humanities.

Concretely, Meuli first stressed a comparison of different types of sacrifices at ancient Greece, before making an excursus deep into Greek history and prehistory, when the predecessors of the Greeks still had made their living as hunter-gatherers in the steppe of Eurasia.

Analogies among different types of sacrifice proved that the various sacrifices common in ancient Greece such as in hero worship or ancestor worship were meant as aliment and support. Therefore, the receivers of the offering had not to be content with bones, but should receive proper meals from their worshipers. Only later, when the whole community had taken on the duty of worship, even the gods and goddesses knew the promise of meals in which outstanding members of the community took part.

Shortly after this, the whole demos became participant in the sacrifice and the following meal. The derivation of sacrifice with respect to elder customs such as the worship of the dead may explain its origin as well as the

joint meal, but fails to explain the unjust distribution of goods. ("Eine Speisegabe kann das olympische Opfer ursprünglich nicht gewesen sein." MEULI, 1946: 214.) This phenomenon is explicable only, if hunting customs of contemporary and ancient hunter-gatherers of the arctic zone are brought into account (MEULI, 1946: 223). If an animal is hunted and killed by hunter-gatherers, the carcass is transported into the village and treated with care. The dead animal is often showered with gifts and always treated with honour. After certain ceremonies and the meal, the left-overs, especially the skeleton of the animal is treated in a specific way. Sometimes the bones are collected, sometimes one tries to reconstruct the appearance of the former animal. These ceremonies serve the purpose that a certain god-like being such as a master of animals or a pothnia theron may use the remnants to recreate the animal and, therefore, will continue to provide the community with meat (WUNN, 2005).

Meuli was convinced that similar customs were widely common even among prehistoric hunter-gatherer communities. Contemporary proceedings of prehistoric research reinterpreted assemblies of bones in certain caves as the remnants of hunting rituals among prehistoric tribes and Meuli had no reason to distrust those results provided by Emil BÄCHLER and Konrad HÖRMANN (PACHER, 1997; WUNN, 2005). According to Meuli, the specific form of the olympic sacrifice should to be seen as a so-called survival from prehistoric times, that was adapted to the needs of later generations without losing its characteristics. Especially those relicts from ancient times make the sacrifices look strange even in the classical period.

As a result, Meuli explained that even social behavior as a process of adaptation during evolution obeys biological rules. According to Meuli, adaptive strategies have to result not only in physiology and morphology, but also in adaptive behavior, and, finally, in culture.

### RECENT APPROACHES

Before discussing Karl Meuli's impact on modern anthropological research, a short overview about the recent knowledge concerning the origin of Greek sacrifices should be given. Even if it is obvious that Greek offering rituals in their classical form must have had a long history, their rooting in Neanderthal hunting customs is not very likely. Later investigations of supposed remains of a cave bear worship in the Paleolithic (PACHER, 1997; WUNN, 2005) or related rituals for example at Monte Circeo did not bring any evidence for such an assumption. On the contrary, is it most unlikely that religious

practice and feelings developed earlier than during the Upper Palaeolithic period. On any other aspect of the question Meuli seems to be correct: His assumption that Greek offering customs may be originated in inherited hunter-gatherer-customs is most probably correct. Even if the sacrifice of bones is not as widely spread as he assumed, it was probably common within a region from where the indoeuropean Greek people originated, so that a historical relation to hunter-gatherer-customs seems most likely. On the other hand it is commonplace among psychologists that the killing of a being, be it human or non-human, is strongly related to feelings of guilt that have to be appeased in specific rituals. Besides that, many researchers even of the later decades referred to Meuli's approach of the display of pretended innocence that serves the purpose to be released from guilt. From a psychological point of view, this part of the sacrifice is supposed to have a cathartic effect insofar, as the ritualized killing is suitable for preventing uncontrolled outbursts of violence (GIRARD, 1992).

### MEULI'S SUCCESSORS

According to Darwin, any behavior pattern is adaptive in the sense that it contributes to the reproductive success or to the survival of the individual, the group, or finally the species. In that sense, well adapted religious activities also promote the success of a culture. MEULI was the first who referred explicitly to the results of human ethology (a discipline that hardly existed during his time) when tracing rituals and other activities within the scope of religious behavior to their supposed biological origins. Several basic elements of religious practice and thought, and, in particular, sacrifice, have to be seen as being inherited from predecessors, where they may contribute to the survival of the individual or the group in dangerous situations. While Meuli placed emphasis on the origin of religion in strategies of survival, recent anthropologists such as Marvin Harris (1927-2001) see religious behavior as the result of the adaptation of a culture to its specific ecological niche. In this context, the occurrence of rites of passage, especially seen in male initiation, can be traced to biological roots. Especially in societies with a low-protein diet prolonged nursing is a necessity. This, however, results in a postpartum sex taboo that leads to polygyny. The resulting mother-child households, together with prolonged nursing, lead to an intensive bonding between mother and child and, finally, to cross-sex identification. Severe male initiation ceremonies that include circumcision or other forms of ritual torture and mind control are then required to break the prepubescent identity in

order to allow for later identification with fathers and other males.

A similar approach escaped the work of Roy Rappaport (1926-1997). His famous book *Pigs for the Ancestors* is a classic case study of human ecology in a tribal society, focusing on the role of ritual in local and regional resource management. Rappaport describes the role of a religious ceremony among the Tsembaga, a community of horticulturalists in New Guinea. After warfare, the Tsembaga used to perform a ritual in which a large number of pigs were slaughtered in order to offer the pork to their ancestors. As Rappaport found out, the ritual was articulated with the ecological relationship among people, pigs, local food supplies, and warfare. Warfare and the succeeding ritual occurred, when the pig population had grown to a certain extent. This means, that the ritual kept the number of pigs within the capacity of the natural environment and prevented land degradation. Even warfare had its certain place within the ecological relationship among people, pigs, local food supplies, and social relationships, because it caused the necessity of finding allies among the neighboring villagers, that had to be impressed by hospitality and wealth, displayed by the amount of meat served to them during the ritual.

Even if Harris, Rappaport and other proponents of the so-called cultural materialism sometimes overstrain their approach and ('sometimes' may be replaced with 'possibly') loose sight of historical relations, they succeeded in directing the attention of a too often over-specialized discipline of cultural anthropology to regularities occurring among all human societies and cultures.

### UNITY OF THE SCIENCES

By adopting and establishing a new approach in the humanities, Meuli still proves to be the underestimated proponent of a genuine biological conception of human cultural behavior including the various religions and related customs. During a time formed by behaviorism and therefore by a scientific paradigm reducing culture to learned behavioral patterns, he emphasized on the strong roots of human behavior to its biological heritage, its adaptive value and its evolution during history. For this reason Meuli became the proponent of a discipline that was not appreciated until twenty years later, when Konrad Lorenz and Niko Tinbergen or Huxley and Robert Hinde made ethology popular.

Meuli should have set standards in anthropology. Solely because his revolutionary approach was hardly understood in the humanities, Meuli is a nearly forgotten figure in cultural anthropology. Most certainly, Meuli

is well regarded as long as research on Greek religion is in demand, and equally, his research on ritual is hardly questioned. Especially the German historian of religions, Walter Burkert, has recently stressed Meuli's approaches to develop his own concept of the origins of religion.

On the other hand, it remained overlooked that Meuli could develop a biological and evolutionary approach on religions. Similarly, his understanding of religion as a behavior pattern rooted in human biology was not understood by his contemporaries. His conviction that religious activity has to be seen as an adaptive reaction to requirements of the environment was to peregrine to be accepted. Only his (few and often criticized) successors succeeded in developing his approach and making it aware. Nevertheless, heavy criticism did not fail to appear.

In the meantime ethological approaches to the study of religions have helped to gain insight into the ways multiple cultural systems are related to the biology of the human species. It may not be disregarded, however, that the stress on universals runs the risk of deflecting attention from the characteristics of a given society and its religion that make it a solitary system of conceptions and deeds acquired throughout the course of history. At this point the evolutionary approach comes into the focus of attention, if the specific history of a society and its religion shapes the spiritual universe of a people and modifies certain psychological attitudes, which have retroactive effects on religious behavior and thought.

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