CHAPTER ONE

MYTHICAL SPEAKING “ABOUT” GOD

One who wishes to make an inventory of the various standpoints with respect to the “affirmation” of God must also consider the different ways of looking at the meaning of symbolic and mythical speaking “about” God. There are several ways of doing this. Symbols and myths are studied by many sciences, such as psychology, sociology, psychoanalysis, literary science, cultural anthropology and linguistics. From their own specific standpoints these sciences address different questions to symbols and myths. The questioning attitude of a particular science determines at once the kind of answer that will be received. This rule applies also to the phenomenology of comparative religion when it discusses religious symbols and myths: it, too, speaks in a specific way and endeavors to arrive at a specific way of understanding.

Philosophy, however, doesn’t approach symbols and myths in the same way as the phenomenology of comparative religion. The latter remains within the order of the symbolic when it tries to understand symbols and myths. It looks for connections, analogies and systematizations in the world of symbols. Its “understanding” is, as Paul Ricoeur expresses it, extensive and panoramic, it is interested but not involved.¹ The understanding of the internal connections and the systematization of the world of symbols, the understanding of symbols through symbols could be called the “truth” of the phenomenology of comparative religion.²

¹ “Ce niveau ne peut être qu’une étape, celle d’une intelligence en extension, d’une intelligence en extension panoramique, curieuse, mais non concernée”. P. Ricoeur, Finitude et Culpabilité, II, La symbolique du mal, Paris, 1960, p. 329.
² “En effet la question de la vérité y est sans cesse éludée; s’il arrive au phénoméno- logue d’appeler vérité la cohérence propre, la systématicité du monde des symboles, il s’agit d’une vérité sans croyance, d’une vérité à distance, réduite, d’où a été expulsée la question : est-ce que je crois cela, moi”? P. Ricoeur, o.c., p. 329.
The phenomenologist of religion himself, however, is not involved. In the phenomenology of comparative religion there is no room for the question, Do I myself believe this? To use again Ricoeur's language, in the phenomenology of religion one passes from one symbol to another without being oneself "somewhere" there. This non-committal attitude of the phenomenologist of comparative religion is not that of the philosopher. He does ask the question, Do I myself believe this? Not of course in the sense that he asks the philosophical question about the truth with respect to each and every symbol and myth, but in the sense that he endeavors to understand the essence of man's symbolizing and mythical consciousness. He investigates in what sense symbolic and mythical consciousness stands in truth-as-unconcealedness.

Within the search for the philosophical truth of religious symbols and myths one can discern different standpoints. There are thinkers who reject mythical speaking in order to give a foundation to their "denial" of God. Others do the same to purify their "affirmation" of God, but they reject only an interpretation of myths which, in their view, is untenable. Finally, there are thinkers who view mythical speaking as the only possible way of speaking "about" God. What they mean by this depends of course on their interpretation of mythical consciousness.

1. The Rejection of Myths and the "Denial" of God

The people who reject myths in order to give a foundation to their "denial" of God usually claim that the mythical consciousness is inferior to the consciousness of the positive sciences. They are unable to accept that man's authentic consciousness also implies a mythical dimension, that it is essentially also mythical. In their view, authenticity is exclusively guaranteed by rationality, i.e., the power to let meaning appear as objective meaning, by placing oneself critically at a distance. Mythical consciousness, they say, is unable to distance itself critically and thus is doomed to obfuscate objectivity by all kinds of "fictions", "fables", "fabrications" and "illusions".

It stands to reason that the prestige of the positive sciences induced these people to define the rationality which they oppose to mythical con-

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3 P. Ricoeur, o.c., p. 329.