**International Symposium**

**Technique and Religion:**

**Technical Cultures, Beliefs, Circulations from Antiquity until Today**

**Paris, 14th-15th September 2020**

**Call for paper (30th November 2019)**

The purpose of this symposium is to offer the opportunity and the place to conduct a reflection on the relationship between technique and religion. Until recently, the history of social sciences has reserved a relatively marginal place to technique as a sphere of human activity, instead taking as objects of study areas where the coherence of a collective consciousness is manifest, notably religious practice. A separation was drawn between the primacy that then-emerging sociology granted to the religious fact as a basic social phenomenon (Emile Durkheim) on the one hand, and instrumental practices, which were therefore limited to the infra-social domain of individual organic subsistence, on the other hand. Technique and religion, two fundamental forms of discovery and of constitution of experience, have thus, in the social sciences, given rise to divergent “interests of knowledge” that historically account for the selection and formulation of objects of knowledge. Yet history of techniques and history of religion have never ceased to interact, often in a conflicting manner.

**Interferences between techniques and religions belong, on one side, to the history of thought, of dogmas and of their interpretations.** On the one hand, for instance stands Alfred Espinas’s model, i.e. the progressive secularization of techniques, which he believed marked the discontinuity between the archaic and classical periods. According to this scheme, the “physico-theological” period, which stretches from the 8th to the 5th century BC, was characterized by the influence of the religious feeling upon artisan action. Techniques were conceived as divine gifts and their transmission was exclusively based on imitation and tradition. The period of the *organon*, which extends from the 5th to the 4th century BC, is characterized by the increasing differentiation of professions and the secularization of practices. This model, which is based on a questionable use of sources, was endorsed by Jean-Pierre Vernant. Yet the time has come to problematize and discuss it. Another example is the movement of secularization of religions and desacralization of nature, associated with monotheisms, themselves perceived as levers of knowledge, of exploitation of nature and, possibly, of the pursuit of profit, since the Middle Ages or the Reformation, according to the authors. Technique is tightly interwoven into these rationales, but it has also been disconnected from them. As early as in the 19th century onwards, the cult of progress and industry --which has been studied thoroughly and has been renewed-- paved the way for a secularized eschatology that some thinkers at the turn of the 20th century could magnify for their hope in the advent of socialism and of a society emancipated by labour. Critical and distanced analyses elaborated in the 20th century, whether by Lynn White, David Noble or Pierre Musso, highlight the dogmatic value of the sacralization of progress and its blinding effect. These approaches are currently subject to several types of questioning. How does the philosophy of techniques analyse these shifting movements between religion and technique? Should we follow Gilbert Simondon and his definition of universalism, as a shared “primitive” reality, technique being “even more primitive than religion”, because of its original, consubstantial relationship with life? What about anthropologists? Another set of questions address the current uses of the theoretical analyses of the link between technology and religion. The “Needham question” made religion a key argument to explain China’s so-called decline from the Song dynasty onwards. This theme, as well as techniques more broadly, is absent from Kenneth Pomeranz’s demonstration but it has been raised afresh by historians concerned with broadening the scope of the analysis of the Great Divergence. Which has ignited debates. Should macro-historical perspectives and generalizations be adopted to analyse interferences between technology and religion? Should we compare religious systems, cosmogonies or even temporal constructions on a global scale? Finally, what is meant by religion and by technique? Should we not, instead, evoke cosmogonies, representations of the universe, of its construction and harmony, and should we not disconnect the techniques from an economic (economist) perspective that associates them with the search for competitive advantages and profit, notions quite alien to the expectations placed in “effective action” in many a civilization?

**This leads us to a second part of the reflection: the interferences between techniques and religion in the worlds of practice.** The material dimension of techniques in religions is at the heart of much recent research which, far from adopting a level of generality as it often used to, adopts an anthropological and ethnological point of view (rituals, magic, ceremonies, conventual craft, etc.). Whilst the religious universe is often considered in the light of spirituality alone -- that as the case for example for European scholars after the Reformation -- many studies highlight the spirituality of techniques on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the importance of objects, gestures, techniques and even their codification in religious practice. These relationships also entail the production of images and performances (see early modern Christianity). Technical artefacts can represent religious ideas and, conversely, religious imagery can represent techniques and instruments. They differ from the great narratives and theorizations for they tap into other sources. What are the archives, objects, images for this material history of religions and techniques? What conceptual tools and methods of analysis are employed to conduct this study at the crossroads of the history of techniques and of the social sciences? Can these approaches renew generalizations on a global scale, through a localized analysis as it appears to be the case for Buddhist temples in China? Can they also allow for a reframing of the question of cosmogonies in a more concrete way? In this sense, what place should be given to magic and according to which definitions, if any comparative perspective should be implemented? Finally, intercultural circulation of rituals and artefacts, dynamics of borrowing and interactions between religious and technical circulations should also be tackled. The theme is vast and also questions the relationship of religious communities to techniques, be they their traditional assignments (including the negation of the relationship to techniques), their questioning, the community claims made by means of techniques, or the role of brokers, such as Jesuits (and their converts), in Asia and South America, and many other less visible intermediaries, who are beginning to be identified.

To answer these research questions, there is no restriction to one specific religion, territory or period. On the contrary, religions and cultural areas will be mobilized in their diversity in order to promote an inclusive conceptualization of the relationships between techniques and religions. Special attention will be also paid to developments and circulations at work across time and space. It will be the contributors’ task to define the frameworks and limits of these relationships, while highlighting the specific characteristics of the religions, spirituality, or techniques investigated, in order to foster collective reflection on these interactions and not to impose an a priori conception of their nature or forms. Finally, even though the symposium is based on a historical approach, this call is open to papers from various disciplines (anthropology, ethnology, sociology, philosophy, geography, economics).

**Proposals should be submitted by the 30th of November 2019 to:** [**liliane.perez@wanadoo.fr**](mailto:liliane.perez@wanadoo.fr)

**It is required to join: the title of the paper, an abstract and a CV.**

**Languages: English and French.**

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