

Cultural interactions in Ancient Christianities: Theoretical and Methodological Issues

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Introduction

The aim is to understand the role of cultural interactions in the history of ancient Christianities and their implications in the formation of Christian communities. Therefore, I seek to discover the characteristics of the particular kind of Christianity that resulted from the processes of cultural encounter in the regions of Alexandria and Egypt, this is the background from which I propose to make use and validate this theoretical and methodological framework. So my goal is to observe the types of communities that emerged from this process of cultural encounter in a region marked by polytheistic religious and varied philosophical culture. But for now I intend to present a methodological study which helps me in the above-mentioned search.

Before this can be carried out, a theory and methodology that can give an account of this problem must be established. One of the major problems when it comes to researching ancient history, not to mention the scarcity of documentary sources, is the tendency to question the importance of the topic, especially if historical research is related to the issue of religion in late antiquity, such modes of Christianity. It is common to hear questions like «What use is this knowledge today?», «Why do I have to understand the past?», «To be interested in the past is like living in a museum.» The important issue in this debate is to relocate the

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question of historical research about the past. The fact that the historian chooses a research topic related to a past more or less distant, does not make him a researcher of antiquity, but an academic who believes that our current time and space, and all accompanying issues, including the more troubling ones, can be better understood when connected to the historical path of humanity.

Historical research about the past in this specific geographic space and time, the North African coast between the first and second centuries of the common era is to me as a Brazilian and historian of Latin America, important for having a direct relationship with the historical processes of subordination of peoples and cultures as was the case of Spanish and Portuguese colonization in Latin America. It is also relevant to Atlantic slavery as well as the process of neo-colonization of Africa by European countries, an event that became known historically as «the partition of Africa». Rethinking this nascent Christianity as the result of plural experiences surrounding its origin, goes against that array of religious and political homogeneity and purity of a religion that was born as a sect within thoroughly Hellenized Judaism, later to take the status of the official religion of the Roman state with the Edict of the Emperor Constantine.

The use of the plural word «Christianities», contained in the title and body of the text, points clearly and unmistakably to the socio-religious plurality in the reception and in the experience of the ancient Jewish-Christian communities. This is the key point of all the research in this area, that one understands that all religious experiences, in any order or creed, are always plural (CHEVITARESE, 2011). Thus, any political and religious fundamentalism that seek to support and explain the origin of Christianity according to their place or position, need to recognize that Western Christianity is nothing but a «nail stuck in the sand». That is, the sources are diverse, plural, and in some cases, contradictory to each other (CHEVITARESE, 2011). The static, fundamentalist argument is so fallacious that it cannot be used as a corroboration of originality and hegemony, which are in fact, nonexistent.

The importance of research and methodological issues

How can a methodology applied to a particular object of study or research project be important in the production of an article that has this complex issue as its centerpiece?

I understand the method as a path, not a straitjacket without which it would be impossible to develop a research about the history of Christianities in particular and the history of religions in general. «The Birth of Christianity» by (CROSSAN, 2004) and «Christianities: Methodological Issues and Debates» by (CHEVITARESE, 2011), are two works that I use to score the arrangement of the theoretical and methodological thesis about the cultural interactions in Christianity in Alexandria and in Egypt from the first century of the Common Era. That said, it means that transdisciplinarity is a methodological framework that tends to broaden perspectives on a particular object of study.

Because they allow, or rather seek dialogue with other disciplines such as sociology, anthropology, archeology, philosophy, psychology etc... I think this is a

methodological approach that creates better opportunities for observation in the historical study of religions, as stated by (CARDOSO, 2005): «... More than in the past, analyses today are most often interdisciplinary or transdisciplinary in the History of Religion and Religiosity.»

We often talk of interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinary and transdisciplinarity as the same thing, although the prefixes inter, multi and trans contain meanings if not opposite, at least different. According to (ALONSO, 2000), the prefix «inter» means between, what is in the middle, between several. This implies that education is a bond that arises between the disciplines. These, however, remain intact in its programs and content. It should be noted here that there is a need to propose a coordination responsible and able to think about the content (or cross-cutting themes) that it would be possible to work in common, for example. The prefix «multi» expresses an idea of multiplicity, without however, establishing any necessary link between the terms listed or related disciplines. Thus, the ratio of disciplines is even less clear than the interdisciplinary since multidisciplinary work provides no common guideline, though it also does not prohibit it. The fact is that the absence of a proposal and methodology can be far more damaging for a work in which a set theory and methodology is attached. Finally, the prefix «trans», according to (LALANDE, 1996), implies something that passes from one side to the other through. A braiding of wires sets the tone of the issue with the intertwining of subject and object, causing other objects to emerge as one advances in research.

From this new methodological paradigm, researchers are becoming aware of issues and perspectives that hitherto were not clear, which means the according to (DE-TIENE, 2004) «comparable building». Based on this understanding, I think it is possible to define transdisciplinarity as the place where the subjects become subjects through interfering with each other, «adding knowledge and plural views» (THELM and BUSTAMANTE, 2004), forcing the researcher to cease being the owner of his object, but becoming a researcher with other researchers constructing comparisons where thought possible to do so, transforming the academy. The transdisciplinary work subverts the order of time and space in the school content, turning education into a relationship of knowledge in order to become an instrument of human liberation and social transformation.

By comparing literary texts (CHEVITARESE, 2011) the reader should see that the fundamentalist reading of biblical texts can distort what the text might be trying to say. Moreover, I think an even bigger mistake is to renounce the whole context within which a given work was produced and dialogue that it has established with other authors of the time and space of its production.

For Christianities, emphasizes also that from its earliest origins, even in early generations «Christians», achieved consensus in a few areas, while there was a polysemy said attached to what Jesus said and didn't say. This 'confusion' of meanings cannot be attributed solely to the character of an illiterate Jewish culture in particular and the Mediterranean, in general, since even the first generation of followers of Jesus were circulating written materials (letters of Paul, the gospel Q and, perhaps, that of Thomas). This book works on the assumption that the cultural background of a particular individual, or a particular social group, or an entire community is crucial to explain this polysemy around the ideas and proposals of the Nazarene.



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The historian of Christianity, (CROSSAN, 2004), from the work cited above, highlights the importance of comparing transdisciplinary observations of a given object. Crossan believes it essential to research the history of ancient Christianity, we can apply the knowledge from various fields of science to make some assertions and denials about the object studied. Here, as the author, I use the methodology of transdisciplinary comparison, where the History, Anthropology and Archaeology transcultural (FUNARI, 1999) components to observe my object of study, the plural religious experiences on the north coast of Africa, more precisely in Alexandria and Egypt in the first and second centuries of the Common Era.

(CROSSAN, 2004) puts the question about the data coming from different areas of knowledge and their interpretations as follows:

First, it is work with a general model for context because, without it, I can interpret the data almost any way I want. Second, the three levels of my model interact with each other and potentially correct each other. Third, within this interaction a certain hierarchy of stratification is assumed: anthropology, history and archeology. For me, the ruins of the textual history and the ruins of archeology materials are located within anthropological or macro-sociological matrices in general. (...) When I read the recently published results of Galilean archeology, I encounter a strange phenomenon. Scholars do not simply describe what they found, but also make social commentary interpreting those data. Often, this commentary criticizes somewhat circumstantially what someone like me can say about the historical Jesus. But where is their wider social matrix? Where have they succeeded?

Complementing what (CROSSAN, 2004) proposes the importance of cross historiographical information with the discoveries that come from other areas such as archeology, Brazilian archeologist (FUNARI, 2006) puts the importance of archeology for the historical Jesus research and the history of religions in antiquity aptly and clearly.

Another methodological aspect must be remembered. The written sources are always based on a view that reflects the interests of class, group and ideology, so that constructions are highly subjective and biased, because they are voluntary. The material remains are involuntary. The documents were often written by male scholars, somehow reflect the result of a formal institution. The archaeological remains reflect both the wealth and poverty and are often the only direct access we can have to the illiterate, women and slaves. This is particularly relevant to the study of the Jesus movement, coming from poor and illiterate communities of Palestine.

For the proposed methodology of this paper to remain well informed, the closer look of sociology and anthropology about the studies on antiquity was needed. (BOURDIEU, 2003) points to the care we should have when working with so-called classical texts, as if they were the truth about a certain period and theme which to refer to research which is part of this article.

The interpreter who wishes to act as an ethnographer makes thus himself viewed as an informer, a «naive» author who was already acting (almost) as an ethnographer whose mythological evocation, even the seemingly most archaic, such as Homer or Hesiod, are myths that have developed, involv-



ing omissions, distortions and reinterpretations (...) which are to be learned, in which one cannot distinguish what the authorities called on loan (...) and what has been reinvented from the structures of the unconscious and sanctioned, or ratified, by the deposit of knowledge acquired.

The literary documents Christian or Judeo-Christians are also objects of attention because they are made in different regions and strata of time that will take shape, undergoing insertions and deletions as the years go by such as the traumatic event of the death of a dear leader, until you reach the end which we face today. We then have two major actions to perform when we try to study the history of Christianities: *a*) to observe attentively the different motivations with which a given material was produced, and *b*) the time and space traversed by a given material to its final form with which we work today.

These two actions should be based on the fact that there are tensions within agencies (BHABHA, 2010) and power relations that contribute to the consolidation of a particular practice while silencing others. What should guide the researcher who carries out research of antiquity and early Christianity as a way to intervene in the current reality is that even with orthodoxy's oppression, persecution, attempts to silence or make the enquiry invisible, to remember that «the diverse experiences and dissonant normative structure occurred and some of them come to us» (CROSSAN, 2004), providing new perspectives on the life of the primitive Christian communities.

Every religious and cultural experience, where we observe meetings of cultures, is plural. Concerning this statement, (GEERTZ, 2004 and SALLINS, 1990), in a study of Islam, noted that the development of this religion in Morocco and Indonesia was quite different, although both experiments could be read as Islam. Within the process of building a system of religious beliefs is the fact of having to give an account of a totality of its contents and proposals given by God, sent by Him to a particular individual(s), but it also has to cope with the peculiarities of certain groups and individuals in the community where the «good news» is then announced, as noted by (GEERTZ, 2004 and SAID, 1995). «If Durkheim's famous statement that God is the symbol of society is incorrect, as I believe it is, it is still correct that particular types of faith (as well as particular kinds of questions) bloom in particular types of societies.»

This can be considered the paradox of the message and the institution of a particular religious belief. (GEERTZ, 2004 and SAID, 2007) applied his method to the experience of Islam in Morocco and Indonesia, but would not be forced to apply this study of Islam in its entirety, to the case of Christianities, the ones that developed in Palestine, Rome and Asia Minor, or the one that developed on the North African coast. Also this, from its beginning, was composed as a mosaic, where each stone could be taken as an expression of the Jesus movement itself. Thus, culture, and the place where the religious experience occur, involves changes and continuities that should be observed as changes only, not assigning a valuation of better or worse to it, which will always be arbitrary (SANTOS, 2003).

Another understanding of [culture], which coexists with the previous [culture as a depository of what the past has produced] recognizes the plurality of cultures, defining them as complex wholes that are mixed with the companies, allowing characterize the modes based on conditions of symbolic life material

Conclusion

These referenced insights make the importance of building transdisciplinary comparison of historical knowledge in order to reconstruct the socio-political environment of the time under research very clear. (BARROSO, 2009a,b). One might consider such an object of research from a different methodological framework. I would respond affirmatively, but if an extended viewpoint can't disallow other corroborating data and analysis, and present new perspectives, it seems that the methodology that this paper proposes for the study of the history of religions could be the most complete for the intended purpose of this study.

Given the small number of sources and documentation about the history of Christianities in the North African coast, we quietly put forward what the story produced for Judaism in the region of Alexandria, crossing these data with the methods of expansion of Christianity in the regions of Corinth, Asia Minor and Rome and to infer with the help of transcultural anthropology, sociology and archeology (CROSSAN and RED, 2001) and infer that the Christian, or Jewish-Christian communities in this region could not differ in terms of the methodology of expansion on the north African coast (GRIGGS, 1988) Namely: I understand that Christian communities descended from their Jewish roots forming a new socio-religious structure in a process of rupture and one is not able to distinguish where this process begins and ends. I use here the term socio-religious in order to mark the impossibility of separating the social, political and cultural facets of religious belief.

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