

Towards a Natural History of Religion

GUSTAVO BENAVIDES

Taking as point of departure Walter Burkert's work, this article seeks to theorise the relationship between needing and getting, choreographed by ritual and mythology, and the formal excess that characterises religious practices. While the formal complexity that characterises ritual activity and doctrinal elaboration reminds us of the parallels between religions and the aesthetic realm, the fact that the satisfaction of the needs of organisms is sought against a background of scarcity reminds us of the role of power. It is, however, to work—that is, to what human organisms generally do in order to satisfy their needs—that one must turn, if one is to understand religion. Despite the formal parallels between the organisation of work and the organisation of rituals, and of the role played by rituals in the timing of agricultural and other kinds of labour, 'work' is largely absent from studies of religion. This absence, related to the turning away from concepts even vaguely connected with Marx, seems to go hand in hand with the repression of the working body in contemporary 'theory'. Rejecting such repression, this article focuses on human labour as a key for understanding the emergence of religion. © 2000 Academic Press

In the inaugural lecture he delivered at the Technical University of Berlin more than thirty years ago, [Walter Burkert \(1967\)](#) spoke about the *Urgeschichte* of technology as reflected in ancient religion.¹ Could one think nowadays, when, perhaps as the result of millennial expectations, 'post' reigns supreme, of a word more unfashionable than *Ur*?² Yet for more than three decades, oblivious to fashions, Burkert has been concerned with *Ursprünge*—with origins.³ Those who, undeterred by the title, keep on reading the text of Burkert's lecture will find references to *Urwaffe* (p. 284), *Urmensch* (pp. 284, 296), *ursprünglich* (p. 287), *Ur-Behältnis*, *Ur-Gestus* (p. 293), *Ur-Wagen* (p. 295), *urzeitliche Technik* (p. 297), *Ur-Behausungen* (p. 298) and *Ursprung* (p. 299). Nevertheless, Burkert, unlike romantic historians of religion,⁴ is interested not just in that which can be removed from the realm of the ordinary by virtue of its being attached to an *Ur*. The lecture is in fact about the interaction between religion and that which is subject to necessary, if sometimes slow, change, namely technology. How to understand, however, the intersection between the realm of origins and that of change? What is it that, appearing at the intersections of these domains, regulates their interaction? The answer is need. For Burkert—but not just for him—religion is the name to be given to the practices and beliefs that grow out of the needs of the organisms we happen to be (see 1981, p. 130). From the early article on technology to *Homo Necans* (1972/1997) to his contributions to *Le sacrifice dans l'antiquité* (1981) to *Violent Origins* (1987) and to *Creation of The Sacred* (1996), 'need' (*Bedürfnis* 1967, p. 281) is always present, explicitly or implicitly. The parade of Greek and Near Eastern rituals one encounters in his writings can be regarded as the luxuriant transformation of the thirty-one functions involving loss and retrieval identified by Propp (see Propp). Many of Burkert's writings in fact seem to be ruled by a rhythm that goes back and forth between amplification and concentration: from the ritual expansion of Propp's sequence to its reduction, first to twenty-one functions, then to the one essential command of 'get':⁵ the *basso continuo* of needing and getting being orchestrated—in fact, choreographed—by needy bodies. It is this aspect of Burkert's theorising, even more than his Frazer-like penchant for ransacking the world's mythologies, that is likely to disturb some of his readers, for the process of theoretical distillation that leads from a body of rituals to the most elementary

command imaginable may appear as reductionism.⁶ Such fear is unfounded: what appears as reduction is the richest aspect of Burkert's work, whereas what requires further theorisation is the transition from 'needing' and 'getting' to the baroque luxuriance of the practices that grow around Propp's sequence. What, after all, is the source of having to 'get' something? It is bodily needs, needs which, until the body becomes a corpse, demand continuous satisfaction. Neither in temporal terms, then, nor in terms of the range of the demands covered by the term need can one possibly speak of reduction. It is indeed a curious feature of the late twentieth-century intellectual demimonde that the repression of the concept of need, and its replacement by the gratuitousness of desire is presented as a gain—as a return to the body, when in fact it is the opposite.

Even though Burkert has remained concerned with the role that biological needs play in the generation of religion, he has not continued exploring the relations among religion, technology and labour, having concentrated rather on the related issues of ethology, violence and sacrifice. Such focus is necessary, especially these days, when most persons in industrial societies seem to regard religion as having to do mainly with disembodied psychological issues, rather than, as it had been approached at least until the industrial revolution, as a generally unfalsifiable set of techniques, believed to help in the pursuit of health, fertility, love, war and power. Burkert's work continues to remind us that, in a world ruled by scarcity, religion has always been involved with survival and with the frequently violent means required to secure it.⁸ But despite the ubiquity of violence in human history, the main way of securing the species' survival since the appearance of sedentary life has been agricultural work. It is to the working body, therefore, and not just to the violent, or to the violently treated, body that one must turn to do justice to the nature of religion. In any event, whether one studies sacrificial violence or the kind exercised by and against the working body, Burkert's insights can be used to continue developing a natural history of religion. Perhaps it would be worth engaging in a sociology of knowledge, and asking whether Burkert's research would not have continued focusing on tools and labour if, instead of accepting the *Ruf* from Zürich, he had continued working among engineers in Berlin.

Concern with violence and scarcity does not mean that one should disregard meaning and language. Quite the contrary. It is the freedom that can be exercised through language; it is, furthermore, the apparently gratuitous complexity of the verbal constructions which we humans take an inordinate pleasure in elaborating that can be explored to make sense of the also apparently gratuitous complexity of religious acts. It is precisely in dealing with language that Burkert has made what is perhaps the most speculative, but also potentially the richest, proposal found in *Creation of the Sacred*. Writing about the injunctive, an Indo-European category of verb inflection used for both the imperative and the tale (see Burkert 1996, p. 67), preserved in Vedic, with relics found in Greek, he imagines 'our ancestors sitting around the fire in the evening, rehearsing the sequences of imperatives that occurred in the important activities of the day' (see Burkert 1996, p. 66). It is likely that, confronted with a reference to primitive ancestors sitting around a fire, readers will be reminded of Evans-Pritchard's fulminations against the 'if I were a horse' sort of theory (see Evans-Pritchard, p. 108). Nevertheless by helping us to imagine a possible passage from the urgency of the command to the gratuitousness of the tale, linguistic facts such as the one about the injunctive can help us to reconstruct the passage from the urgency of the needs of organisms to the exuberant ritual and doctrinal wastefulness generated by those same organisms.

Religion, Form, Power

The transition from needs—from scarcity—to formal complexity—to a surplus of forms—should remind us of the parallels between religion and the aesthetic realm. It ought to remind us also that, in dealing with religions, one is dealing mainly with surface features.⁹ This means that religious surfaces can be understood as irreducible and therefore *sui generis*, but irreducible and *sui generis* in the same sense that any formally complex object, regardless of its function, can be reduced to its formal characteristics. What must be emphasised is that the irreducibility of religious objects is in principle not different from the irreducibility of aesthetic ones, this being the reason for the difficulties involved in trying to distinguish between the two.¹⁰ At this point, theologians will argue that there is a difference between the *sui generis* character of religious objects and that of merely aesthetic ones: they will argue, in effect,¹¹ that the *sui generis* character of religion is itself *sui generis*.

The study of the formal properties of religious practices and representations can be carried out by making use of the insights developed decades ago by the Russian formalists—Propp's, to be sure, but also Šklóvskij's 'device of making it strange' (*priëm ostranenija*) and Jakobson's definition of the poetic function as that which 'projects the principle of equivalence from the axis of selection into the axis of combination'.¹² It is not possible to discuss here the limitations of Russian formalism, or the correctives proposed by Mukařovský and other representatives of Czech structuralism.¹³ It should suffice to say that the early twentieth-century concern with the formal properties of aesthetic objects can be found once again in the exploration by cognitive scientists of the interaction of the intuitive and the counterintuitive features of representations defined as religious. The interaction of intuitive and counterintuitive features results in the cognitive salience, and thus in the attractiveness, of ideas, images, narratives and practices.¹⁴ Were it not for the cognitive salience—the 'naturalness'—of certain ideological formations, it would be extraordinarily difficult, for example, for ruling groups to impose structures of domination, as these would have to be based exclusively on brute force. If, alternatively, domination is legitimised—transfigured¹⁵—by the incantations of cognitively salient symbols, myths and rituals, the amount of brute force needed to maintain power structures in place will diminish considerably. It may be that '*primus in orbe deos fecit timor*', as Burkert asserts, taking advantage of Statius' criticism, but it is also true that this fear must be conveyed effectively to those who are expected to experience it and to act accordingly.¹⁶ The connection between the exercise of power and the complexity of religious forms is therefore intimate. It could be said in fact that religion is the name given to a variety of complex forms which derive their rhetorical power from their use of a peculiar mix of intuitive and counterintuitive features.¹⁷ It would be a mistake, however, to follow certain fashionable authors and to surrender to the power of *pouvoir*. The question is not whether religion and power are related; the question is whether the power with which religion is indeed symbiotically connected functions tautologically as the ground of itself, or whether it is exercised in a situation of scarcity in order to transfigure the means used to allocate resources to needy organisms, thus generating sacralised systems of stratification, and more generally, systems of classification.¹⁸ Regarding the intimate connection between access to goods and philosophical abstractions, it may be worth remembering that as august a term as νόμος is derived from νέμειν, a verb that originally had to do with the dividing and serving of a roast.¹⁹

There are several issues that would have to be clarified if this approach to religion is to withstand scrutiny, a task that cannot be undertaken here. One would have to ask, for

example, whether one can speak of religion in situations in which there is neither scarcity nor stratification; or whether one will have to regard as a form of ontological scarcity the uncertainty of self-conscious organisms regarding their own fragility, even in a situation of abundance.²⁰

Ritual and Work

It is to what human organisms generally do in order to satisfy their needs that one must turn, then, if one is to understand religion. The concept of 'work' is, however, largely absent from studies of religion.²¹ This is indeed a curious situation given, on the one hand, the formal parallels between the organisation of work and the organisation of rituals, and on the other, the role played by rituals in the timing of agricultural and other kinds of labour. It is not possible to explore here the reasons for this absence; suffice it to say that, besides the turning away from concepts even vaguely connected with Marx, the repression of work seems to go hand in hand with the repression of the working body in contemporary 'theory'.²² But even though Burkert has not explored the religious aspects of work since the days of the essay on the *Urgeschichte der Technik*, his approach to the elementary character of human needs, as well as the insights found in that early article, can help us in the exploration of this issue. Burkert's concern with the needs of organisms, as well as his encounter with Meuli's work,²³ led him to the study of the rituals that surround the practice of animal sacrifice—an aspect of his research that has received critical attention. Part of this scrutiny has had to do with Burkert's emphasis on the killing of the sacrificial victim rather than on *la cuisine du sacrifice*.²⁴ It is indeed the consumption of the sacrificial animal that functions as the point in which the satisfaction of the organism's need for scarce protein intersects with social hierarchies, thus placing the sacrifice at the centre of a system of unequal exchanges.²⁵ Although it is in principle not difficult to grasp this fact, it is almost impossible to understand the centrality of sacrifice unless one is aware that in the Greco-Roman world, all—or virtually all—meat eaten was sacrificial meat.²⁶ This intimate connection between food and religion has opened up several avenues of research. One of them involves the connection between sacrificial food and nutrition in general; the other has to do with effects that ritual slaughter had on animal population and therefore on the ecology of the classical world. Research along these lines (see Jameson) is contributing to narrowing the gap between the methods used in the study of classical antiquity and those employed in studying groups such as the Tsembaga of New Guinea, whose ritual system has been investigated from an ecological perspective by Roy Rappaport.

Even though hunting and ritual killing are varieties of work, and even though the instruments used in those tasks are working tools, there remains a great deal to be known about the work that animal sacrifice presupposes and the kind of work sacrifice is. Regarding the first issue, Jean-Louis Durand has emphasized how sacrifice cannot eliminate work, because sacrifice presupposes it (see Durand, p. 198). Along similar lines, Jonathan Z. Smith understands sacrifice as 'an exaggeration of domestication, a meditation on one cultural process by means of another' (Smith, p. 200); but since 'cultural processes', and certainly domestication, involve work, one can understand this exaggeration as in effect a meditation on labour. What may be even more productive is Burkert's comment about the fact that, after the neolithic revolution, sacrifice was not the affair of the herdsman but 'rather the affair of those who own the herds, of the kings and leaders of the armies and of the wealthy families' (Burkert 1987, p. 213). This can be understood as the display of ownership of all the work embodied not just in a

particular *victima* but in the long, sedimented process of domestication itself. In fact, if we understand the value of an object as the medieval canonists (and Marx) did—that is, as the social estimation of the sacrifice needed to produce it²⁷—we can regard the sacrificial animal as the embodiment of the sacrifices—that is, the labour—required to produce both the individual *victima* and the entire process of domestication. At the same time, the sacrificial display demonstrates that one has managed to place distance between oneself and this labour.

The tension between embeddedness and distance present in rituals becomes even more visible in rituals associated with work. For if it is true that rituals can be understood as embedded in the process of reproduction—as providing temporal parameters (see [Kramer](#)), as punctuating the rhythms²⁸ of production, whether this production involves hunting or agriculture or manufacture—it is also true that, as in the aesthetic realm in general, ritual must be seen also as an attempt to establish a distance between oneself and that from which one must escape.²⁹ The embedded aspect can be studied by examining the structural parallels between labour and ritual activity. This can be done by paying attention to the etymological connections between ‘ritual’ and ‘work’ in various languages. For example, if one examines, with [D. George Sherman’s](#) help, the connection between celebration and work among the Samosir Batak, one finds that ‘feasts’ are most often referred to as *ulaon*, ‘works’ or ‘labours’, the root of which, *ula*, with an infinitive prefix, *mangula*, means ‘to work’, particularly with reference to agricultural tasks involving soil-turning. *Mangula paremean* means ‘to be in the process of performing the necessary labor to prepare a field for planting rice’—i.e., ‘to work a rice field’. But *marulaon* is ‘to hold a feast’, ‘stage a celebration’.³⁰ At the same time, it is necessary to keep in mind that, besides functioning as the condensation of the labour to be performed, rituals connected with work frequently attempt to establish a distance between the celebrant and real labour. When, for instance, Chinese (and Vietnamese) rulers performed agricultural rituals, the amount of land ritually ploughed increased as the status of the ritual performer decreased. In other words, if the emperor ploughed three furrows up and three back, the three princes each ploughed five furrows up and back, the nine high officials turned nine furrows each, and so on, it being left to the peasants to do the actual work.³¹

In general, even ritual services—that is, ritual work—can appear as a kind of pollution. In India, for instance, Brahmans who serve as priests—that is, who work on somebody’s behalf—have a lower status than those who serve only themselves (see [Parry](#), p. 112). The other side of this attempt to put distance between oneself and polluting work is the prevalence of waste and excess in ritual activities, and in leisure in general—an issue that brings us back to our discussion of the gratuitous complexity of the religious and aesthetic realms.

On Tools

Since it has been mentioned that ritual and labour, including hunting, generally require tools, it is to tools that we must turn our attention. In the ritual use of tools—and not only from a *religionsgeschichtliche* angle—one finds, more so than in anything else, the pull of the past, the present and the future. While the pull of the present seems to be the clearest, in that the tools are there to be used now, and while the attraction of the future is there also, insofar as the users hope for an improved version of what they are now using, what is crucial in ritual circumstances is the fact that the tools used in the performance of the liturgies are consistently out of date technically. Consider the use Burkert makes of a

wooden stick hardened by fire. In the article on the *Urgeschichte* of technology, it appears, first, as the stick from an olive tree used by Odysseus to blind Polyphemus and thus to save his own life; second, as the elementary weapon used by peasants and barbarians, but also by regular soldiers in cases of extreme necessity; third, as the primitive weapon used one hundred thousand years ago by palaeolithic hunters; and finally, as the Roman *hasta praeusta*, a wooden spear hardened by fire which the *fetialis* threw towards the enemy territory as a declaration of war (see Burkert 1967, pp. 282ff.). What we have is, first, a mythological appearance of the weapon; second, its practical use during classical antiquity; third, a jump back into prehistory; and finally, a clear ritual action in Roman times. Despite what some will condemn as the unfashionable ‘privileging’ of classical antiquity and the even more ideologically suspect resorting to primitive times, Burkert’s juxtaposition of times and places can help us understand the intersection among needs, work and religion. Consider the practical, life-preserving use of the spear to kill one’s prey or to kill or blind one’s enemy. Consider, further, its sacralisation: the setting of boundaries around it, and the religious attitude—in the etymological sense—surrounding its use. Consider, finally, the apotheosis of return: the liturgical use of the long-outdated and now sacralised weapon to inaugurate, and thus legalise, a killing that will be carried out using more efficient means. What is true of spears and other weapons is also true of agricultural tools, means of transportation and utensils as simple as containers. In all these cases, one can see how once useful instruments become, as it were, frozen in time, their use taking place only in liturgical contexts, during which, at once useful and useless, their very inefficiency points towards their origin and simultaneously renders visible the centrality of that which could not be accomplished without their more efficient successors. Burkert shows how in ritual contexts, rather than the desirable silver or bronze containers, it was the primitive clay ones that were used to make offerings to the gods (see Burkert 1967, p. 292). Similarly, after war carriages had become obsolete, they remained the vehicles favoured by Greek gods, whereas the goddesses, even more conservative, preferred carriages pulled by oxen; still more archaic were the tastes of Egyptian and Mesopotamian gods, for they favoured boats and sleds, vehicles that predate the invention of the wheel (see Burkert 1967, pp. 294–6).

Homo faber, homo hierarchicus

But it is to the origins of agricultural work that one must turn in order to explore the nature of religion, as agriculture has been work *tout court* for most of humanity since the neolithic revolution. In the myth of Atrahasis, ‘the Extra-wise’,³² and before that, in several Sumerian myths,³³ we encounter elements that can help us continue exploring the relation between work and religion, not embodied in the action of ritual performers this time but rehearsed through narrative. We will be concerned less with the flood segment of the story—in which, like Noah, Atrahasis, aided by Enki/Ea, fools Ellil and ensures the survival of humankind—than with the events narrated in the first tablet. It is to the beginning of the myth that one must turn in order to observe, in its raw state, work as the essence of humankind and as the connection between the gods and humanity. One must go in fact to a stage prior to the appearance of humanity—to the time when, in Wolfram von Soden’s translation, ‘*die Götter (auch noch) Menschen waren*’,³⁴—to see work functioning as the source of inequality. For it is before the creation of human beings, ‘when the gods instead of man did the work, bore the loads’, that, having found that their ‘load was too great, the work too hard, the trouble too much’, ‘the great Anunnaki made the Igigi carry their workload sevenfold’. Work, then,

serves as both link and divider between the working gods, the Igigi/Igigu, and the Anunnaki/Anunnaku, the gods who enjoy the benefits of that labour.³⁵ It is only after the lower gods—tired of having to ‘dig out canals’, tired of having ‘to clear channels, the lifeline of the land’, tired of having to bear ‘the excess, hard work, day and night’ for 3,600 years—demand to be relieved from their hard work that human beings are created as the new workers. During this divine labour unrest *in illo tempore*, the Igigi set their tools on fire, reach the gate of ‘warrior Ellil’s dwelling’ and surround his house. It is only then that Enki/Ea, acknowledging that the Igigi’s work is too hard, proposes that Belet-ili/Mami, the womb-goddess, create ‘a mortal man, so that he may bear the yoke . . . the load of the gods’. In order to create the new being upon whom the gods could impose their load, the gods slaughter Geshtu-e³⁶ (or We³⁷), a god who had *tēmu*, and mix his flesh and blood with clay. These events, found in the first of the three tablets that contain the myth, show how the subordination of human beings, and the connection between subordination and the obligation to engage in undesirable activities—that is, the obligation to work—is already prefigured by the subordinate position of the Igigi/Igigu. At the same time, since the original workers were gods, albeit subordinate ones, one must regard work, the essence of human beings, as linking humans to the gods in a way that cannot be understood entirely in negative terms.³⁸ Moreover, the fact that in order to fashion these beings who had beforehand been condemned to work, it was necessary to slaughter a god endowed with *tēmu*—intelligence, planning, capacity—confronts us with the ambiguity of this peculiar human characteristic.³⁹ The connection between the mythical postulation of the capacity to act in a purposeful manner and the related notions of divine agency and anthropomorphism is an issue that requires exploration.⁴⁰

Negativity returns when the gods, having grown restless at the clamour of the now numerous human beings, decide to destroy them. These events, narrated in the second tablet, have caused a controversy over the reasons for the extermination of humanity, and over the nature of the noise generated by human beings. Kilmer (1972), followed by Frymer-Kenski (p. 149) and Dalley (p. 5), interprets the action as an attempt to reduce overpopulation. Pettinato (1968, pp. 198–200 and *passim*) understands the noise in the context of the imposition of work, as an attempt on the part of the gods to punish human beings for protesting against their condition as workers. W. von Soden (1973/1985, pp. 354/169 and *passim*) agrees, and interprets the noise in a Promethean sense as an indication that human beings, not content with what the gods had granted them, wanted to achieve more: ‘*Sie waren nicht bereit, sich zu bescheiden*’.⁴¹

The version of the story of Atrahasis that has come to us was copied by the junior scribe Nur-Aya around 1700 BC. One cannot simply assume, therefore, that, despite its being at least thirty-seven centuries old, this myth goes back to the earliest period of Mesopotamian culture or contains the memories of a period before the emergence of agriculture, stratification and urbanisation. At the same time, given that several Sumerian myths studied by Pettinato describe the time when the gods engaged in the back-breaking work of digging canals, it is necessary to pay attention to Wolfram von Soden’s suggestion that the myths reflect historical events concerned with the digging of the network of canals as well as with the interaction between Sumerian and Northwest Semitic populations.⁴² Even more speculatively, and considering the relative closeness of the time when this myth was produced to the beginnings of urbanisation and state formation, the necessity of engaging in a new form of work might have had an impact on the origin of the kind of religion found in the agricultural societies of the fertile crescent.

Utopias

Hurried as our discussion of the Atrahasis myth has been, it would be impossible to devote even this limited space to the examination of attitudes towards work in other mythologies. All we can do is point out that even though Nur-Aya's version of the Atrahasis myth is separated from Hesiod's *Works and Days* by a thousand years, we encounter in the work of the Boeotian poet an attitude towards labour that is not entirely different from that found in Mesopotamia a millennium earlier and which may stem in part from the agrarian crisis of the eighth century.⁴³ The gods, Hesiod says, 'keep men's food concealed: otherwise you would easily work in a day enough to provide you for the whole year without working'. Formerly, 'the tribes of men on earth lived remote from ills, without harsh toil and the grievous sicknesses that are deadly to men'. Men, it is true, have not been created to do the work once done by the gods; nevertheless, the relationship between men and gods is built around the fact that, in order to eat, men have to work, for Zeus concealed the food, 'angry because Prometheus' crooked cunning had tricked him'. The 'crooked cunning' that tricks Zeus echoes the Promethean theme in Atrahasis. Furthermore, the theme of concealment is found in a Sumerian myth that narrates how Enlil keeps grain away from people by hiding it in a mountain.⁴⁴

For Buddhists, work is also the result of a fall. Both in the Pali Canon (Aggañña Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya) and in 'popular' Buddhism, utopian wholeness is dreamed up in material terms: rice will recover its lost unity only when Maitreya, the future Buddha, appears. Before the fall, which was caused by greed, it was not necessary to cultivate or to cook rice.⁴⁵ Moving farther east, we find in the aphorisms of the *Tao Te Ching* the stubborn memory of a period when people reach old age and die without visiting the neighbouring states, even though they are in sight of one another, so much so that 'they hear the sounds of each others' dogs and roosters'; a time when, 'although there exist boats and carriages, they have no occasion to ride in them' (Lafargue, p. 166). Even more radical is the nostalgia embodied in the Taoists' abstinence from cereals, which Schipper has interpreted as the rejection of sedentary life as well as of the peasant condition itself. According to him, it was not just the harshness of the peasant's life that was being rejected but, more radically, the loss of what had been humanity's way of life for millennia.⁴⁶ Despite this longing for a time before the appearance of mass labour, some peasant ideologies are realistic enough to seek a return not to the pre-agrarian age but only to the time when people were not forced to work for others.⁴⁷ The extremists among the pre-Han School of the Tillers, for example, 'thought that there was no point in serving a sage king, wished to make the ruler plough side by side with his subjects, upset the degrees of superior and inferior'.⁴⁸ In the world of She-nung, the Divine Farmer, 'there were no stations and one man could not employ another'.⁴⁹

In early modern Europe we find the same dream expressed by Gerrard Winstanley, the only one of the seventeenth-century English radicals who, besides presenting his vision in religious, indeed mystical, terms, had specific political and economic plans. In *The New Law of Righteousness*, he writes: 'I heard these words, *Worke together. Eat bread together*; declare this all abroad. Likewise I heard these words. *Whosoever it is that labours in the earth, for any person or persons, that lift up themselves as Lords or Rulers over others. . . . The hand of the Lord shall be upon that labourer*'. (Winstanley, p. 190). Here we have the problem of stratification presented in terms not just of status or of wealth but concretely, in terms of the sources of wealth and status, namely, human labour.

After one considers the role played by work in some of the oldest myths of humanity, it is easy to see why, as much in the ancient world (see [Kenner](#)) as in the pre-industrial West, representations of Utopia had to do with the reversal of power relations, with overabundance of food and with leisure. Inevitably, most of these dreams had to do with work: with the power used, certainly not for its own sake but to make one work for the benefit of others; with the food that had to be produced with great effort, mostly to be consumed by others; finally, with leisure, the ultimate freedom.⁵⁰ In his essay on the Kronia festivals, Burkert has emphasised the *andurarū* aspect of the festivals of reversal of the ancient orient that is the release from forced labour and debt servitude (see [Burkert 1993](#), p. 21). Similar practices are found in Israel, although there, where the covenant between the people and their god set limits to social inequality, particularly regarding the selling of a fellow Jew as a slave, that very rule excluded non-Jews from benefiting from the command of Deuteronomy 15:12, according to which, those in debt servitude should be set free in the seventh year (see [Kippenberg](#), pp. 134, 172).

In the Babylonian, the Israelite and countless other cases, divinely instituted reversals remind us of an aspect of religion with which we have not dealt in this essay—that which involves dismantling hierarchies, erasing distinctions, leaving behind all forms. Should one be surprised to find that most of these utopian dreams have to do with leaving work behind? In order therefore to elaborate a theory of religion along the lines so productively pursued by Burkert, it will be necessary to take into account one of the main sources of the processes of differentiation as well as of their counterparts, mysticism and utopia: labour.

Notes

- 1 [Walter Burkert 1967](#): ‘Antritt Vorlesung an der Technischen Universität Berlin gehalten am 21. Juni 1967’.
- 2 Actually one can, because *Ur* is not even a word: unlike *Wesen*, *Ur* is a mere prefix.
- 3 But see also [Burkert 1987](#), p. 212. On the way in which the role once played by *Ur* is now played by fashionable prefixes such as ‘post’, see [Benavides 2000b](#).
- 4 For a critical examination of the ideological aspects of classical scholarship, see [Burkert 1980](#), esp. pp. 187–94.
- 5 See [Burkert 1979](#), pp. 15ff.; 1996, pp. 63ff.
- 6 On the problem of reductionism, Segal remains indispensable. See also [Idinopulos and Yonan](#), particularly the essay by [Ryba](#); see also [Benavides 1996](#).
- 7 The dematerialisation of religion is explored in [Benavides 1997b](#), 1998.
- 8 One must keep in mind that religion is also involved in restricting such access: see [Benavides 2000a](#).
- 9 See [Rappaport](#) as well as [Smith](#).
- 10 Assuming that there are two. Whether there is a specific religious domain that has emerged as the result of our biological peculiarities is an issue that cannot be discussed here; yet, just as it cannot be assumed that there is such a thing as a *sui generis* religion, so it cannot be assumed that religion is merely ‘imagined’ by scholars.
- 11 As they indeed must. It is a waste of time to try to convince theologians, or scholars of religion who use crypto-theological approaches, to mend their ways. Much more productive for the scholar of religion is to identify the rhetorical, cognitive and ideological devices that will be used in the defense of theological and crypto-theological claims.
- 12 See [T. Jakobson](#), p. 358 (italics in original); [Erlich](#), pp. 76, 177 and *passim*.
- 13 It is regrettable that, despite the current popularity of literary theory and ‘criticism’, the insights of authors such as [Mukařovský](#)—many of whose writings are available in translation—have been largely neglected by scholars in the humanities and the social sciences. On Czech structuralism, see [Galan](#).
- 14 Burkert writes about the ‘psychological mechanism that shields the individual from the superabundant influx of sensory data and singles out what is “memorable”’ (1987: 157–8). For a cognitive approach to religious ideas, see [Boyer](#).

- 15 In this respect, Marx's view of religion remains as valid now as when it was first formulated.
- 16 See Burkert 1981, p. 102; 1996, p. 31.
- 17 One of these features is anthropomorphism, which involves the interaction of cognitive and ideological forces. For some preliminary remarks on this issue, see Benavides 1995.
- 18 On the connections among religion, power, differences and stratification, see Benavides 1989, 2000a.
- 19 See Baudy, pp. 153–62 and passim; Gladigow.
- 20 Horton's definition of religion as comprising two components, 'explanation/prediction/control' and 'communion', goes in that direction: see Horton, pp. 5–6.
- 21 On the concept of work, see Tilgher. There are entries on 'Work' (Ready) and 'Arbeit' (Kehrer) in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* and in the *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe*.
- 22 Some of these issues are explored in Benavides 1997 and 1998.
- 23 For some information on his encounter with the work of Karl Meuli and Konrad Lorenz, see Burkert 1990, pp. 187–8; 1992.
- 24 Addressing Burkert at the 1980 conference on sacrifice in antiquity sponsored by the Fondation Hardt, Vernant said: 'Sans que nos raisons soient exactement les mêmes, nous plaçons l'un et l'autre une des formes les plus typiques du sacrifice grec dans la perspective de l'alimentation. Sacrifier, c'est fondamentalement tuer pour manger. Mais, dans cette formule, vous mettez l'accent plutôt sur *tuer*, moi, sur *manger*' (1981, p. 26). At the same conference, criticizing Girard, Burkert wrote: 'er übersieht nahezu völlig, was beim realen griechischen Opfer so sehr im Vordergrund steht, das Essen' (1981, p. 110); see also Burkert 1987, p. 72, as well as the 'Nachwort 1996' to the 1997 edition of *Homo Necans* (1972/1997, p. 342).
- 25 On inequality, see Schmitt Pantel 1985, pp. 155–8; 1990, p. 15; Detienne 1988, pp. 178–9; Grottanelli 1988, p. 32; Auffarth 1995, pp. 264–5.
- 26 See Detienne 1979, pp. 9–10; Vernant 1981, p. 26; Grottanelli 1988, 17; Jameson, p. 105; Lissarrague and Schmitt-Pantel, p. 212. Eating was also central in the cultic practice of Israelite religion: see Ottosson, pp. 135–6.
- 27 See Firth, p. 183; cf. p. 192.
- 28 See Heilfurth, p. 12, with a reference to Karl Bucher, *Arbeit und Rhythmus*, 6th edn, Leipzig 1924, which was not consulted.
- 29 On the 'as if' component of ritual, see Burkert 1987, p. 154; cf. 1979, p. 50.
- 30 See Sherman, p. 114. Having examined the vocabulary of ritual and work, Sherman comes to the conclusion that although 'there is no confusion as to what is agricultural work and what is feasting . . . the two activities have one stem in Batak because they both refer to life-giving endeavors' (p. 116). Distinctions of this kind should be kept in mind when trying to determine the boundaries, if any, of the religious realm.
- 31 See Williams, p. 39; cf. Lan, p. 405.
- 32 I quote from the translation found in Dalley, pp. 9–16. The name 'Atrahāsīs' has been translated as 'Exceedingly Wise' (Læssøe, p. 90), 'der überaus Verständige' (v. Soden 1979/1989, p. 13/241); 'le Supersage' (Bottéro 1987, p. 400; 1998, p. 199). Most Assyriologists use the form 'Atrahāsīs' Wolfram von Soden (1966, 1969, 1973, 1979, 1989) and Giovanni Pettinato (1968) use 'Atramhāsīs'. In 'Literarische Texte und funktionaler Mythos: zu Ištar und Atrahāsīs' (1982, pp. 69–74) and in *Creation of the Sacred* (1996, pp. 136, 141n, 219n) Burkert refers to the myth of Atrahāsīs but does not examine it from the point of view of work; he does refer to this myth from the angle of work in his essay on the Kronia festivals (1993, p. 21).
- 33 The myths are discussed in Pettinato 1971: see note 42.
- 34 On why 'Mensch' rather than the grammatically correct 'Menschen', see W. v. Soden 1969/1989, p. 417/149. On the controversy between Lambert/Millard and v. Soden see T. Jakobsen, pp. 113–4; Oden, p. 200; Moran 1987, p. 242.
- 35 On the Sumerian Anunna, see Falkenstein, esp. pp. 138–40; see also p. 132 on the gods as workers, and p. 133 on the creation of human beings as the new workers. On the Igiġū as cosmic Akkadian deities, and the Anunnakkū as chthonic Sumerian divinities, without, however, there being an opposition between them, see Kienast, esp. pp. 157–8. But he does not take into account the Atrahāsīs myth: see W. v. Soden 1966, 1989. Kienast's position is quoted approvingly by T. Jakobsen, p. 117.
- 36 W. v. Soden 1979/1989, p. 11/239 ('Verstandesbegabter'), 22/250, l. 223; Dalley, p. 15; see, however, Pettinato 1971, pp. 102, 103, l.4(223), 104 and n. 37.
- 37 See Lambert and Millard 1969/1999, pp. 9, 58/59, l. 223; Kilmer 1977, p. 129, l. 223.

- 38 Mesopotamian conceptions of work as humankind's fate are discussed above all in Pettinato 1971.
- 39 W. von Soden has translated *tēmu* as 'Verstand', (1969/1989, p. 424/156) and in later contributions as 'die Fähigkeit, (sachgemäß) zu Planen' (1973/1985, p. 352/168), 'planender Verstand', 'Planungsfähigkeit' (1979/1989, pp. 11/239, 22/250). See also Oden, p. 202; Bottéro 1982, p. 28. It is instructive to compare the meaning of *tēmu* with that of the Hindi 'kaam' (related to karma): 'on the one hand, activity which is purposeful and, on the other, activity that cannot be avoided' (Searle-Chatterjee, p. 269). On the Greek terms for the various forms of 'work', see Vernant 1955, 1956, 1957. On German 'Arbeit' as Mühsal, Plage, Bedrängnis, see Heilfurth, p. 2.
- 40 See Benavides 1995, esp. pp. 15–6, as well as the articles by Simpson and Underhill cited therein.
- 41 See also Moran 1971, pp. 53f.; 1987, pp. 251ff.; Picchioni, pp. 103–11; Oden, pp. 203–9. One can only imagine what Marx, who in the preface to his dissertation (1841/1962, p. 22) calls Prometheus 'the most eminent saint and martyr in the philosophic calendar' ('der vornehmste Heilige und Martyrer im philosophischen Kalender'), would have done with the Atrahasis story if it had been available during his lifetime.
- 42 W. v. Soden 1979/1989, p. 9/237; 1989, p. 342; Pettinato 1971, pp. 22–5, 69–100.
- 43 On 'la crise agraire', see Detienne 1963. I quote from West 1988; cf. West 1978.
- 44 See Pettinato 1971, p. 33. The possible connections between the myths of Prometheus and Atrahasis are mentioned in Burkert 1982, p. 70; however, he does not deal with the problem of work.
- 45 See sections 11ff. of the Aggañña Sutta of the Dīgha Nikāya (translated Walshe, pp. 410ff.; see also Przyluski, pp. 484–5). The 'fall' begins even before rice makes its appearance, as the need to eat comes into being 'when some being of a greedy nature . . . tasted the savoury earth on its finger'. On beliefs about agriculture in Southeast Asian Buddhism see, for Laos, Archaimbault, pp. 1277ff., and Zago, p. 258; for Cambodia, Porée-Maspero, pp. 21–6; for Thailand, Tambiah, pp. 351–66.
- 46 See Schipper, pp. 220–1. Compare the Taoist attitude towards cereals with the symbolism of figs in Greek culture to which Burkert refers in his essay on the Kronia festival: see Burkert 1993, p. 14.
- 47 On the difficulty of regressing from the agrarian to the hunting/gathering stage, see Gellner, p. 16 and passim.
- 48 Graham 1990, p. 68, quoting *Han shu*, Peking, 1962, ch. 30, 1743/8–10; see also Graham 1989, p. 66.
- 49 Graham 1990, p. 75, quoting *Kuan-tzu*, ch. 35, Basic Sinological Series [*Kuo-hsüe chi-pen ts'ung-shu*] 2/61/3.
- 50 On these issues, see Moser-Rath.

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GUSTAVO BENAVIDES is Associate Professor of Religious Studies at Villanova University. His most recent publications are 'Postmodern Disseminations and Cognitive Constraints', *Religion* 27 (1997); 'Magic Religion, Materiality', *Historical Reflections/Réflexions historiques* 23 (1997); 'Modernity', in Mark C. Taylor (ed.), *Critical Terms for Religious Studies* (University of Chicago Press, 1998); 'Mysticism', in Wade Clark Roof (ed.), *Contemporary American Religion* (Macmillan, 2000); 'Stratification', in Willi Braun

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Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Villanova University, Villanova, PA 19085, USA. E-mail: gustavo.benavides@villanova.edu