Alexis V. Halapsis, *Sc.D., Ph.D., Professor*
National Metallurgical Academy of Ukraine

ON THE NATURE OF THE GODS, OR EPISTEMOLOGICAL POLYTHEISM AS HISTORY COMPREHENSION METHOD

Abstract. This article is devoted to the issue of history comprehension of the ancient societies in the context of their religious identity. Religion is one of the fundamental elements of civilization idea ("ontological project"); it constructs "universe" that is distinguished by the "laws of nature", specific only for it. To make "communication" with ancient people maximally authentic, the researcher should not only recognize their right to look at the "world" in its own way, but also accept its "laws", that means – religion as well. Since the latter is almost impossible, the scientist is deprived of the possibility to comprehend another cultural and historical reality as vivid establishment of human spirit; he/she will see only scheme or fable in it. The proposed in this paper method of "epistemological polytheism", based on thought experiment, gives the possibility to bypass difficulties of perception and to approximate the understanding of meanings that define the ancient people worldview.
Keywords: historical method, epistemological polytheism, history, understanding, culture, civilization, philosophy of history.

Introduction

Objectivity of the world of history has little to do with the objectivity of the physical world, the actual existence of which happens to be an external attribute in relation to individual. Historical reality is an anthropic by definition which implies that human attitudes, representations, beliefs and even fantasy — all those things which may be described with the word "ideas" — become not only subjective rueful feelings, but under certain circumstances may become constructive factor of historical being. And if somebody takes a chance to list the most fundamental ideas that have reigned over the minds of people who featured all known societies within the entire history we know, then he/she will be get assured that the greater part of them had particular religious component. The latter sets specific requirements to history comprehension, since it is easier for researcher to understand scientific, political, philosophical concepts, alien to his/her time and culture, than alien religious forms.

For critically thinking individual any religion extrinsically represents the aggregate of absurd superstition and fables; however, if we are interested in reconstruction of the ancient people's Weltanschauung, then their religious views shall not be considered with tolerant smile, as schemes and models, built on their basis, were actual reality, vivid and true. Mircea Eliade noted that "every ritual, every myth, every belief and every image of the deity reflects the experience of the sacred and therefore bears the concept *of existence, of meaning, of truth*"[1]. Moreover, irrespective of how seriously we perceive the content of ancient religious concepts, it is extremely important not only for the reconstruction of life of this particular society, but also for the broader theoretical generalization. The objective of this paper is to develop the method of philosophical and historical interpretation of ancient societies religious life that will be able to provide the researcher with means of *understanding* of correspondent worldview patterns.

I

There is a belief that religious conceptualization emerged among the Neanderthals in the Middle Paleolithic. I do not know what the theological concepts of our extinct relatives were, but known human history is written with religious inks — even if not completely, then to the greater extent. The prophets and priests, theologians and philosophers, poets and mystics have long descanted about the divine, but almost everything said and written by them was too dependent on a large number of unverifiable hypotheses,

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[1] Элиаде, М. (2001) *История веры и религиозных идей.* Т. 1. Москва: Критерион, 5.

assumed within the measures of one paradigm, but without any sense within the measures of another one. The persuasiveness is realized only through the church frame, so the arguments of a Catholic priest hardly produce impression on a Hindu Brahmin. The detached from this frame pure reason has no reliable guide along the Holy Land; it has to be silent or create theoretical constructions that are eligible only for probability. The most astute thinker always knew it. Plato confessed: "we should accept the likely tale on these matters. It behooves us not to look for anything beyond this"[1]. The treatise of Cicero *De natura deorum* is even more representative in this sense. Reader who has attentively followed the controversy of Cicero characters may become disappointed at the end, since the issue of this "nature" remains unsolved. However, this particular "elusive" treatise is one of the best works of religious mind, demonstrating both brilliance of clear mind and its inadequacy. So, we are back again to Protagoras: "As to the gods, I have no means of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist. For many are the obstacles that impede knowledge, both the obscurity of the question and the shortness of human life"[2].

No matter what thoughtful judgment the modern philosophical discourse is featured with, we are ignorant of the nature of the divine just like our ancestors were thousands of years ago. This does not prevent us, however, to dissect someone else's faith and bring in a verdict to it as if we know the final answer to the most fundamental theological questions. Our *knowledge* of the sacred has not improved since the time of Protagoras, although there is no lack of "proofs" of God existence, nor of the religion "disproofs". Nevertheless, as the "proofs" have proved nothing, similarly the "disproofs" have disproved nothing. The only doubtless fact is that historical conditions make an impact on people's perception of another world, and if earlier paradise has been depicted in the form of a rural idyll, today it is difficult to imagine an angel without a smartphone.

The issue of God's existence is directly connected with issue of God's participation in the world historical process. Inasmuch as we are not able to say anything distinct about God (gods), there is supposedly nothing to say about the issue of His (their) participation in historical process. Therefore, the easiest way to factor out the idea of God and to try to comprehend the history from the point of view of real world only, since even if God intervenes in human affairs, He does it so skillfully that there is almost no possibility to record such participation.

Even though it is difficult to *recognize* God in historical process, sacral elements may be found easily, and then, the issue will become not only meaningful, but also resolvable. However, one shall change the issue wording. Within the measures of philosophy, the issue may not refer to *real* participation of deity in historical process (let us leave this for theologians), but only to the extent of religious beliefs impact on human development. Ideas drive the world, and if (and to the extent that) it is religious ideas, then, in certain sense, the world is driven by the gods; the development of separate societies can be interpreted as the history of collisions and interactions of "gods", controlled by them.

Something similar was said by F. Dostoevsky, claiming that each nation believes in its God as sense of their historical activity[3]. Although in descants of the Russian writer the word "God" is used in a metaphorical, rather than in religious, sense, meaning utmost idea of cultural-historical community, that (nature — at Greeks, people — at Romans) is not required to have theological content, however, Dostoevsky knowingly uses the word "God", as well as writes about "deification" of things that hardly worth worshiping in the opinion of our contemporaries. The top ideas of the great civilizations (I call these ideas "ontological projects"[4]) are of religious nature, refracted in a specific way through the prism of philosophical, political etc. concepts, as well as practical activities. Each civilization has its original project of world order, but their formal identification will give us a little if we do not find the way to adequate understanding.

However, we will be able to understand the ancient people only in case we take their spiritual world seriously — not only without a smile, but without hypocritical pretense of a psychiatrist, diligently recording fantasies of his patient. Nevertheless, in such a case we shall accept, even for a while, the worldview of ancient people as our own, and this will mean (as the most important worldview component is religion) — acceptance of their religious beliefs. It is unlikely that somebody dare to do this; moreover, the historian is not required to participate neither in mysteries of Eleusis, nor in bacchanalia. In order to be able "to talk" with ancient people in their language, it is required to find common communication space, a kind of

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[1] Plato. *Timaeus*. 29c–d
[2] Diogenes Laertius. IX. 51.
[3] Достоевский, Ф. М. (1990) *Бесы*. Москва: Художественная литература, 244–245.
[4] Халапсис, А. В. (2008) *Постнеклассическая метафизика истории.* Днепропетровск: Инновация.

coordinate system, where such a dialogue would be possible technically. We should not only *put up* with the fact that different from us people have professed another religion, but find the sense of it.

II

The coordinate system that assigns a specific meaning to alien (that means — "wrong") religions, cannot be based on any particular religion; it should be neutral with respect to religious myths (so as not to become dependent on them), but it should be somehow connected with them (to act as a "middle term"). I believe that to understand the essence of religious myths, certain quasi-religious meta-myth is required that will able to remove the acute problem as to religion reality and establish space of understanding. And this cannot be ecumenism — too insignificant to explain something, as within the ecumenism the most characteristic things, the most important and fundamental things are emasculated in the name of common phrases that all religions, allegedly, teach us some abstract "good", "peace", etc. — a conclusion that is obviously "far-fetched", coming into conflict with the entire history of religion. Meta-myth appeals to explain the world, but it should not substitute religion, as otherwise it will be a new religion that, just due to this fact, will be not able to fulfill the role of the medium in relation to the existing ones. In other words, meta-myth should have the features of both myth and religion, religious myth in its essence, but at the same time it should not claim to be a new religion or replace one myths with another in sake of adequate knowledge.

I will take a popular idea of Multiverse as a basis now. I will not rest on its physical interpretation and those discussions that surround it[1]. The model of "parallel universes" is actively exploited even by science fiction authors; there are logical interpretations of this idea as well. In my study, the term "Multiverse" is used only as the *efficient metaphor*.

Let us imagine that "going into past" by virtual "time machine"[2], we arrive to certain parallel universe, the fundamental parameters of which more or less differ from ours. For instance, the lightning in clear sky is a rare atmospheric phenomenon in our world, and it may be the sign of deity will in another one. At first sight everything is reduced to the knowledge. Ancient people had no sufficient data as to natural processes, thus, allegedly, attributed all unexplainable things to supreme forces; since at present even a schoolchild does not see anything mysterious in it, our interpretation of world is "correct", and interpretation of ancient people — "wrong".

Certainly, we know about the nature much more than our ancestors did, but the social reality is always mythological with just indirect relation to natural phenomena. To study ancient culture, it is important to understand not how much natural scientific perceptions of its bearer differed from the "standard" (ours), but how myths, put by it into service, worked. If lightning cancels consular election results or changes the course of military campaign, it is not just an atmospheric phenomenon, but an element of social reality; but since it causes quite tangible consequences, that would be absent in another interpretation, the causal chains of this universe differ from ours, at least, they are not identical to it. The picture of the world is itself a part of the world, so it is absurd to say that that world is "wrong" because, allegedly, people have perceived natural phenomena not in the way we perceive them.

Other cultural "universes" are similar in general (physical) terms to our world; not elves and orcs live there, but people who experience emotions, similar to ours, etc. However, to some extent the inhabitants of that universe act quite "wrongly" according to the standards of our world, but essential and logical according to the standards of their world. And if we come to another world we have no right to impose them our "laws", as they have no force there, or have the force, but in different way. We just have to accept during our "journey" the "laws" of another world in the course of familiarization with it (its understanding) and reconstruction.

Let me give the following example to illustrate it. The reader of fantasy novel accepts its game rules, he/she acknowledges, for example, the fact that he/she is unable to move without magic in "that world".

[1] Barrau, A. (2007) Physics in the multiverse. *CERN Courier, December,* 13-16.; Deutsch, D (1985). Quantum theory, the Church-Turing principle and the universal quantum computer. *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London A 400*, № 45841, 97-117.; Ellis, G.F.R., Kirchner U., Stoeger W.R. (2004) Multiverses and physical cosmology. *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society,* vol. 347, № 3, 921-936.; Carr, B. (Ed.). (2007). *Universe or Multiverse?* New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.; Greene, B. (2003). *The Elegant Universe: Superstrings, Hidden Dimensions, and the Quest for the Ultimate Theory* (2 ed.). New York, NY; London: W. W. Norton & Company.

[2] Халапсис, А. В. (2006). Путешествие по волнам истории, или «Машина времени» для метафизика. *Вісник Дніпропетровського університету (Соціологія. Філософія. Політологія), 14*, 188–193.

Impossibility of certain events according to the measures of our world does not prevent him/her from perception of narration "acknowledging" author's interpretation of "nature laws". Such acknowledgement does not mean in any case that the reader will reject his/her scientific beliefs and will bring these "rules" to his/her "own" world. It is absurd to interpret the works of Tolkien in terms of modern physics, checking how they fit into the scientific model of the universe. We either accept the "rules" or put this book aside. The same thing is with the past: we either accept the "world of ancient people" as "another world", or say goodbye to the hope to understand it.

The given example should not be interpreted as an appeal "to go into fantasy" as to reconstruction of ancient cultures. Fantasy novel author creates *predeterminedly* fictional world, he/she does not claim that there is something that corresponds to such a world, and the reader is involved into game, knowing in advance that this is just a game. However, in case of historical narrative the things are different. No matter how many fabulous items there may be, the reader is sure that at least main content of such narrative is not a fiction.

Dealing with comprehension of history theorist cannot do without giving certain particular ontological sense to his/her statements. Since the past cannot be represented in its past status[1], he/she talks about it as if it still lasts, i.e. he/she creates a model of the past that, being a virtual world, is designed and established as unfabled, reconstructed world of real past. Speaking about the past as if it is present, the theorist moves himself/herself with the help of imagination into the past that is quasi-present for him/her. His/her virtual world is projected to the world of actual existence that distinguish history comprehension from fantasy or science fiction. Universes, created by the fantasy novel author, have no place to project to. However, there are attempts to assign to literary characters certain "existential nature", for example, in the mystics of Daniil Andreev or in some works of Victor Pelevin, but I will not rest on such exotic concepts and evaluate them.

As for me, Multiverse is recognition of fundamental possibility of existence of various aspects of existence, not reducible to a single system of ontological assumptions. In terms of philosophy and history, it means irreducibility of different cultural "worlds" to each other. However, although these worlds are irreducible, they are not impervious for "travelers". In fact, the contacts between the different "worlds" representatives take place in real time, for example, when the bearers of different cultures, ideologies and religions meet; people can establish communication with each other that would be impossible if the principles of these "worlds" were absolutely unique and closed from the outside observer. Each local civilization has its own worldview principles, however, there is no impassable chasm between them, although the French may believe it is odd to be Persian (the topic, brought up by Voltaire as to *Persian Letters* of Montesquieu). We cannot understand our ancestors all the time, and we do not always understand modern Persians, but if at least, to some extent, we do understand (or hope to understand) both of them, then there are theoretical obstacles for understanding the past of other nations.

But how to do this? There is no necessity to believe in everything written by ancient authors, to create at the place of our temples the pagan cellae or to restore the cult of disappeared gods; it is not obligatory to become a pagan to understand paganism. However, if you come to an ancient society and wish to find "common language" with its inhabitants, you should accept the hypothesis that the laws of "their" world may considerably differ from ours. And in this "another world", the impossible in "our world" becomes quite possible. To explain this let us conduct a thought experiment.

III

We should assume that surrounding physical world is in fact not physical, that it represents universe, created by technical (computer) means of another world (in addition to such films as *The Matrix* or *The Thirteenth Floor*, some science fiction and fantasy novels, such an idea is also considered at the theoretical level, for example, in the article of Oxford Professor Nick Bostrom[2]. Based on this hypothesis, one may easily built respective model within which creators of the game or the players (or both of them, let's say in the status of supreme and inferior deities) will be the gods for us, and our freedom and reality will become illusion (alternatively it will correspond to initially set in the game engine parameters). Although the "apex of creation" will hardly like a prospect of downgrade to "unit", but we can choose another word, and the

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[1] Халапсис, А. В. (2006). Прошлое как укорененность-в-присутствии: метафизические размышления. *Грані, 3* (47), 56—61.

[2] Bostrom, N. (2003). Are We Living in a Computer Simulation? *The Philosophical Quarterly, 53*(211), 243–255.

relationship between our world and the divine one may be considered *similar* to the abovementioned model. No matter how unusual it may seem, there will be people for whom "divine gamer" will be more preferable than "grandfather on a cloud". Within the measures of this experiment, polytheism acquires new meaning.

The concept of "polytheism" is not identical to the concept of "paganism", but due to the fact that these words are often used interchangeably, there is nothing surprising, since polytheism almost always assumes "paganism" as the belief in national gods. This belief not only accepts the possibility of another belief, but it suggests it; that is why polytheists are mostly quite tolerant to the beliefs of other nations and do not see any contradictions in it. It will be strange for them and even insulting in case the altars of their "native" gods are common with the "alien" nations. By the way, this is connected with the fact that the cult of the city (in ancient Greece, Rome and other societies) was closed for foreigners. If the latter manage to find the approach to "our" gods, they may take their side and support them, not us. Jealousy in respect of gods not only abandoned missionary, but also treated it extremely negatively. Foreigners' worship to other gods was seen as something quite natural, as they could have their own gods, quite real and powerful. Plato wrote about it: "At one time, the gods received their due portions over the entire earth region by region"[1].

If the gods divided the Earth, it would be logical to assume that not only people may compete for their favor, but the gods themselves may compete with themselves that is reflected through competition between the nations. There is no need for a polytheist to try to build dizzying theodicy, trying at the same time to declare participation of Almighty God in history, and release him from responsibility for all indecent, taking place in it. If there is a struggle for flock and territory between the gods, then participation in such war on the side of one of them becomes practical, especially in case he promises his soldier a reward (for example, eternal life in paradise). In other words, the gods may compete with each other for influence in the world, using the fanaticism of the faithful for this purpose. Polytheism explains rather clearly the presence of different nations, different traditions and laws, competition and enmity between nations. At the same time, it does not divide people on the basis of religion that appear to be not a personal choice, but *function of the citizenship* (here I use the word "citizenship" in a broad sense, i.e. it is possible to be a "citizen of the tribe"). If the gods have divided the Earth, and my country is ruled by these gods, it is logical and natural that it will be I who will set up altars and hope for their support. Moreover, I may have quite a serious attitude to the faith of foreign person who builds altars to his/her gods and seeks their support.

Let us further assume that the gods play and "leave the table" in case of loss (or do this by any other reason), that gives the possibility to connect more or less the presence of different religions, emergency and disappearance of new cults, etc. For example, "team of Olympians" lost out to the "team of Christ", so that the latter received its resources and expanded its presence on the world map. It is possible to assume the presence of certain god-troll who suggests atheism to the people in order to anger his competitors. And so on, in the same manner.

There are a lot of other private issues that any prophet with imagination will easily stitch to his/her taste and intentions. However, the proposed by me meta-myth is just the thought experiment, it does not claim to have any religious sense, as it does not hold any transcendent foundation (Revelation). This meta-myth cannot be considered as an ontological statement, being ad hoc hypothesis, allowing to reconcile different traditions in a consistent pattern, which in itself is only a temporary structure, "scaffolding" of knowledge. If it is "polytheism", then not theological or ontological, but exclusively epistemological. Its acceptance does not provide philosophical conclusions, it is just a tool that is useful within the measures of its cognitive sphere. Accordingly, the results of its application will be purely informative, and they will determine the effectiveness of the method. The committed to the One God person may use the "epistemological polytheism" without prejudice to his/her faith, the same refers to an atheist — without prejudice to his/her disbelief. The historian may "go" to the world of the ancient Greeks, to admire the beauty of Aphrodite, Athena wisdom and power of Zeus, and then "come back" home, and to go together with his wife and children to the church for Sunday service. How to use this method?

We learn from the texts of ancient authors, for example, that a certain outstanding person ascended into Heaven and became a god, or that sexual relationship of certain god with a mortal woman led to the birth of the immortal hero. Of course, we reject these stories immediately as obvious fairy tales, fables, literary image, the element of political ideology, etc. The researcher will consider its mission accomplished in case he/she traces the origins of such beliefs and their analogues in other cultures. However, since this story was perceived by the ancient person as not fable, but as a genuine reality that defined not only his

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[1] Plato. *Critias*. 109b.

Weltanschauung, but also *practical actions*, then our reconstruction "miss the target", we lose possibility to understand the people who have lived in *such* reality. Their "world" will seem to us as a fabulous invention; in addition, it is evident that the researcher will consider his/her own sense rather "adult" and objective. However, scientific worldview is also mythological[1]; it just operates one myths instead of others. We can ignore the mythology of the ancients, but we haughty believe that we have the right to consider beliefs of other eras as a delusion. Dispelling certain myths we create others, and between the "world" of our contemporaries and the "world" of the studied culture a chasm emerges and it is based on misunderstanding due to claims to "understanding beyond one's mind", as if someone gave us the right to view the world *sub specie aeternitatis*.

If we read about some fabulous, from our point of view, events, they should not be rejected on the basis of creed. When in Rome, live as the Romans do. There may be another "laws of nature" in the studied by us world and things that seem impossible to us may have been there. This does not mean that we have to accept at their face-value all the myths, since ancient people also perceived many things critically. The researcher should accept the "laws" of that "world", where he/she tries to dive, and on the basis of them (and not personal beliefs) to the degree of "possible".

For example, can the American senators of the deceased President of the US proclaim him as the god? You do not need to study legislation of the United Stated to give negative answer to this question. And the issue is not about legal studies, but about the fact that fundamental patterns of American culture ("the laws of world") do not permit this. Legal acts may be adopted, modified and cancelled, but the "laws of nature" cannot be changed easily. The parameters of the world, where American society exists, do not permit the individual, even if he/she is a prominent and honored person, to become a god.

However, in the myths of many nations, particularly Greeks and Romans, there are stories about the possibility of mortal heroes to become immortal gods under certain circumstances. Each of such occurrences was extraordinary, but still — fundamentally possible. However, is it possible? Skeptics have always been, and not all unconditionally believed in the truth of myths. Thinking of this, Cicero wrote: "As for the cases you allege of men who have risen to the status of divinity, you shall explain, and I shall be glad to learn, how this apotheosis it was possible, or why it has ceased to take place now"[2]. Cicero expresses doubts as to the possibility of a person to become a god, providing among others argument that nobody has become god in his time. However, his idea may be turned upside down. Indeed, why were people in ancient times able to become gods, and in the days of Cicero — not? Did the heroes become extinct?

The treatise *De natura deorum* was written in 45 BC, and the next year was marked by the assassination of Julius Caesar, whom the crowd, probably not without prompt from his successor — proclaimed a god; large comet, in which they saw the soul of the deceased ruler, once again assured the Romans of their opinion correctness[3]. Two years after (42 BC) senate approved formal deed and Octavian, adopted under testament by Caesar, became *son of god* (*"divi filius"* — this title may be found at his numerous coins)[4].

Apotheosis of Augustus was not accompanied by the comet, but there was a witness (Numerius Atticus), who saw as the soul of the deceased ruler ascended to Heaven (it is said that for his testimony he received from Libya — the widow of the god — one million sesterces). The foundation was laid and *the new gods* (and subsequently Claudius, Vespasian, Titus and others joined them) began to supplement the list of celestials.

Whereas while reading these stories, we see only political games, gullibility of crowd and amusing curiosities, it means that we are very far from understanding the ancient people (in this case — the Romans). Our skepticism does not say anything about "that" world, it just proves that we are left "home", where worldly and otherworldly are separated by impassable abyss; we are angry and secretly envy those who have managed to build the bridge over it.

In our world an individual that has communicated with God, has all chances to continue communication with psychiatrist, in other "universe" people not only communicate with the gods, but also become gods themselves; though such things were not ordinary, but quite natural. Indeed, if the son of Venus, Aeneas, and son of Mars (and relative of Aeneas) Romulus have become gods, it is quite probable

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[1] Лосев, А. Ф. (1994) *Миф – Число – Сущность*. Москва: Мысль.

[2] Cicero. *De natura deorum*. III. XVI. 41.

[3] Suetonius. *Diuus Iulius*. 88.

[4] Curiously, that his treatise Cicero dedicated to Marcus Junius Brutus – future member of the conspiracy against Caesar, therefore – to future deicide.

that they were followed by the descendant of Venus, Caesar, and his son, Octavian Augustus. And why should the Romans reject the testimony of Numerius Atticus, if their ancestors have believed Julius Proculus?

It is clear, that senators did not make a god from an individual in the literal sense, but assigned *state cult* on the basis of assumption that he/she had *already* become the god. Moreover, the senate was not the parliament in modern sense, it was the Council of Elders — the most honored and respected members of the society. Moral authority of such "fathers" (patres) just reinforced the will of crowd to consider the deceased ruler as the god that was not only the symbolic gesture of respect for merits, but also sacral performance. Temples for new gods were built, there were bestowed honors; for example, Tiberius, supervised by board-worship of the divine Augustus personally. That is the way of myths creation — perhaps they are strange from our enlightened point of view, but quite logical and consistent within their assumptions.

We may snipe the ancient faith, we may try to imitate them, but we should accept the fact that their "universes" differed from our and there were another "laws" in force. And, of course, no modern philosopher cannot hope to repeat the career of Marcus Aurelius — may be not the most original thinker, but our only colleague, who became a god *officially*; such was the will of the senate and people of Rome.

Conclusion

Philosophical comprehension of history is a self-understanding in two senses. Firstly, we learn, exploring the history, "How did we get here», and secondly, we begin to realize more distinctively the specifics of own cultural background (and the restrictions imposed by it) in comparison with other cultural "worlds". In both cases we are talking about, so to say, "the mirror of history", through a specific space-time metric of which we recognize the features of own face. The proposed by me method of "epistemological polytheism" gives the possibility, from my point of view, to make our "communication" with the past closer and more effective as soon as the researcher will manage to move form haughty *judgement* (and judgement of *condemnation*) closer to *understanding*. The latter is possible only in case we recognize the right of the studied culture to perceive the world in its own way, and with all solemnity, without condescending hypocrisy and claims to absolute truth, take its "rules of game" and "laws" of its reality.

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