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On the Origins of Ioan Petru Couliano's *Morphodynamics*: A Benchmark for Couliano's Cognitive Layout

Abstract: The configuration of Ioan Petru Couliano's concept of "morphodynamics" began to stabilise during the final period of his career. Although Couliano did not outline the development of his methodology in a single volume, his inquiries into the evolution of cultures and religions became known as "morphodynamics". This paper analyses the origins of Couliano's theory and clarifies how the concept of "morphodynamics" embodies his methodology, at a time when his final volumes are being published. Couliano's theoretical framework of "morphodynamics" is an ongoing examination of his prospects regarding Gnosticism and the Renaissance. Starting with the methodological concept in Couliano's research on the evolution of cultures and religions, I demonstrate how his earlier studies on Gnosticism and the Renaissance establishes a benchmark for understanding the development of Couliano's cognitive layout.

Keywords: Morphodynamics; Ioan Petru Couliano; Cognition; Religion; Cultural Transmission; Renaissance; Gnosticism; Evolutionism; Permutation; Cognitive Science of Religion.

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The discipline of History of Religions aligns with cognitive psychology in the 1970s and 1980s. The ramifications of this intersection are reflected today in fields such as the Cognitive Science of Religion (CSR) and the Psychology of Religion¹. The Cognitive Science of Religion emerged as a field of study in the 1990s, exploring how cognitive processes influence religious practices, beliefs and behaviour. The Psychology of Religion involves applying psychological principles to various religious subjects and systems. Ioan Petru Couliano began his academic career at the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore in Italy, where he encountered Western concepts and methodologies that would later form the theoretical basis of his work. The concept of "morphodynamics" provides a structured framework that links the evolutionary dynamics of religious traditions to the cognitive theory of "cultural transmission", which are both key features of Couliano's work on the History of Religions.

The stages of Couliano's methodological approach are outlined in two sections, which I will discuss and analyse below. The first stage was developed under the

influence of Western methodology and psychology. Couliano formed a cognitive framework that he applied to his works on the Renaissance and Gnosticism. The second stage emerged during his time as a professor in Chicago. The development of his research and expertise is referred to as “morphodynamics”. Couliano also advances hypotheses and forms theories based on the paradigm of evolutionism and the evolution of cultures and religions. He will further study and develop this under the name “cultural transmission”, a subject he discusses in his final volumes, one of which is *Out of This World: Overworldly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein*, published by Shambhala in 1991. In fact, Couliano’s theoretical concept of “morphodynamics” is an ongoing development of his ideas concerning the Renaissance and Gnosticism.

In *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*², Ioan Petru Couliano elaborates his thesis that cultural and religious content is formed, based on mental processes. The historian analyses myths and scenarios such as: “Gnostic Myth 1: Fallen Wisdom”, “Gnostic Myth 2: The Ignorant Demiurge” and “The Abolition of the Law and of the Actual Father: Marcion of Sinope”. Couliano postulates *dualism* as the defining feature of Gnosticism, emphasising the importance of the social and behavioural aspects of its practices. The historian notes that *dualism* emerges over time due to its adaptive capacity, ensuring its continued existence in the cognitive framework of individuals: “Both adoptionism and dualism are systems. Possible communications between them cannot explain the historical occurrences of dualism as deriving

from adoptionism or vice versa. Dualism continues to cross history only because it continues to exist as a system in the minds of people who cultivate its principle and transform and multiply its outcomes.³ According to Couliano’s overview of the main “contenders of incarnationist theology”, one example is *adoptionism*, which holds that Christ was merely human. This doctrine evolved from the “Jewish-Christian Ebionism⁴”, and was rejected by the early church fathers. Regarding the *dualism*, in the first chapter of his volume, “Dualism: A Chronology”, Couliano highlights its key features, describing it as a “device serving theodicy⁵”, signifying an attempt to conciliate the existence of a benevolent God, with the imperfections of human existence and the world. When discussing the systems of *adoptionism* and *dualism*, the historian asserts that a key difference is that *dualism* spans time. The category of “Western Dualism” that he discusses in his volume, encompasses all the various forms that this doctrine has taken across space, time and cultures. Couliano traces the first assertions that the doctrine has the capacity to transcend time, back to the theories of Ugo Bianchi, who opened the way to understanding *dualism* as a “mental process with a sequence in time⁶”. The concept of *dualism* was understood by Bianchi to be a historiocultural phenomenon⁷.

The social context in which Gnostic believers interacted was influenced by the society in which Christianity was manifesting itself. The complexity of these social systems is evident in the various beliefs, sacraments and practices that developed and transformed under these influences. One example is Marcionism, which originated outside Europe with

Marcion. The later organised Marcionite Church required its members to practice asceticism and encratism⁸, elements that resembled the practices of the Christian Church. Although some people see Marcion as a Gnostic, experts consider him to be non-Gnostic, albeit one who shared the rules of Gnostic reasoning⁹. Regarding the Gnostic systems, Couliano states: "The system of Gnosticism is extremely complex, implying innumerable transformations (...). Among medieval movements, the situations vary largely. Paulicianism is a transformation of Marcionism, whereas Bogomilism is just a form of orthodox – be it out-Jandishly archaic – Christianity. Catharism consists of two doctrines: one is just classical Bogomilism, the other a transformation of 4th-century Origenism, doubtlessly synthesized among a circle of revivalist Eastern monks. Yet beyond their variegated appearances, all Western dualistic trends can be envisaged as different facets of a single larger system."¹⁰ The various Gnostic traditions underwent changes, in distinct stages. Each ramification developed its own unique characteristics and features, that shaped the social cohesion and the norms of each Gnostic community.

In his research on *The Tree of Gnosis*, Couliano also states that: "Some may object after reading this book that it does not actually go much beyond the methodology of structuralism, in so far as its greatest achievement can be said to consist in showing that the ideas of the different trends of dualistic Gnosis – from Gnosticism to the Cathars to Romantic poets and 20th-century philosophers and biologists – hold together by virtue of belonging to the same system, generated by similar premises. They cannot be explained

as being derived from each other or anyway not according to the dominating concept of derivation or "descent" commonly used in historical disciplines. As we will see, in some cases we are confronted with a process that can be defined as "cognitive transmission". But is this not what a structuralist means by saying that ideas are "synchronic"?¹¹ The cognitive approach to history cannot be researched or applied using traditional techniques, that imply causal links between historical processes. Cultural transmission and evolutionary diffusion of events require space and time variables, which would therefore integrate cultural and evolutionary dynamics as data. When it comes to Gnosticism and the Renaissance, Couliano's analytical model employs a range of variables depending on a specific framework. These variables are then translated into social and behavioural factors to ensure the quality of the data and the accuracy of the results.

Prior to the publication of his book in 1990, Couliano considered the concept of "cognitive transmission", providing an updated perspective on his theoretical views and on Gnosticism in this volume, which can be connected to his studies with Ugo Bianchi and his earlier book *Gnosticismo e Pensiero Moderno: Hans Jonas*, from 1985. He also states that his book should not be linked to structuralist methodology, although he recognises its value. Regarding structuralism, he argues that one of its achievements is the idea that the common system that generated the different forms of dualistic gnosis, "the Gnosticism to Cathars and the Romantic poets of 20th-century", was created under the same premises.

Adopting a different perspective to structuralism, Couliano introduces the

concept of “morphodynamics”. Unlike structuralists, the historian does not attribute these ramifications to a derivative process or descent, but to a process he calls “cognitive transmission”. Couliano advocates a cognitive approach, arguing for a study of events in a space-time axis instead of a purely morphological one, “that would involve diachrony as an obligatory dimension of the world, not one we can dispense with.”¹²

In *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*¹³, Couliano emphasises the importance of magic in the Renaissance as viewed through the framework of applied psychosociology and mass psychology. Couliano states that: “Of course, it would be difficult to maintain that the method of magic has something to do with the method of our natural sciences. The structure of matter is completely ignored, and physico-chemical phenomena are ascribed to occult cosmic forces. Yet magic has in common with modern technology that it claims to arrive, by other means, at the same ends: long-distance communication, rapid transport, interplanetary trips are some of the magician’s current exploits (...).¹⁴”

I will not focus here on the magical nature of the Renaissance, but I will argue that in his research on the Renaissance, Couliano still employs a preliminary form of the applied theory of cognitive transmission. I argue that Couliano applies his evolutionary theory of cognitive transmission to the history and philosophy of science, a field with deep historical foundations stretching back to the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. By doing so, Couliano highlights the epistemological dynamics that occurred during the Renaissance, as well as the beliefs of the masses. Couliano

notes that: “We find ourselves today at the crossroads of two kinds of epistemology: the one, which goes back to the age of Enlightenment, believes that scientific progress is cumulative and that, all things considered, mankind is supposed to discover Truth; the other, only extant for a quarter-century, believes that all worldviews are valid, that they are all far from Truth, and that there is no continuity between them. According to that epistemology, the Renaissance concept of the world and that of modern science, though chronologically related, are not so in any other way: they are simply *incommensurable* with one another. Our research tends to confirm this point of view. Science in the Renaissance – whose most general principles are the only ones under examination here – is a coherent system, based on the psychic (or rather, spiritual, *pneumatic*) dimension of things. This dimension, as will be easily understood, is a real one. But are the intersubjective processes, that magic says may exist, also real? Yes, in a way. We have proof of it nowadays when manipulation through picture and speech has reached an unprecedented level owing to mass communication.¹⁵” While Couliano acknowledges the scientific nature of the Renaissance, he also describes it as operating according to different theoretical principles. During the Renaissance, this led to the creation of a new, coherent system based on intersubjective processes and heavily influenced by the psyche. This system provides a pathway to theses about mass psychology.

In *Experiențe ale Extazului*¹⁶, Ioan Petru Couliano analyses various forms of ecstatic ascension from the Hellenistic period to the Middle Ages. First published in French in 1984 by Payot, the volume

Expériences de l'extase. Extase, Ascension et Recit Visionnaire de l'Hellenisme au Moyen Âge, represents a study of the ecstatic ascension, from the perspective of the History of Religions. Couliano also anchors these religious manifestations in the cultural context, comparing different Western and Eastern traditions. In this volume, Couliano's cultural evolutionism progresses alongside the themes and concepts of the History of Religions. In this study, the historian surveys types of ecstasy, from Greek shamans and Gnostic ecstasy to Plutarch, and then moves on to the revelations of Christianity in the Middle Ages. A complete theoretical study, the volume also demonstrates the historian's high level of expertise in the themes and religious manifestations he specialises in.

Couliano claims that there are two types of ecstatic ascension of the soul: a Greek one, which can be observed in Pico della Mirandola, Marsilio Ficino and Dante; and a Judaic one, which can be noted in many Christian and Judaic apocalypses, as well as in Muhammad's stories of *Mi'raj*. The historian researches different cultures and their practices relating to ecstatic trances, and religious beliefs, as well as the social significance of such events; he states: "One of the fundamental errors of gnostic exegetes was that they failed to recognize the direct relationship between the speculative contents of this kind and gnostic practice. Thus, the character of lived experience that gnosis must have had among its followers was reduced to a pure generality. We will see later that the gnostics had at their disposal manuals containing the tedious description of the places (*topoi*) where the celestial powers reside, along with their names and the passwords

necessary for passage.¹⁷" Ritualistic scenarios formed well-established social networks within Gnostic communities, and the laws that believers followed shaped their practices.

In the final chapter of the study, "From the Mysticism of the Throne to the Legends of *Mi'raj*", Couliano analyses the revelations in Judaism, focusing on passages from the Bible, such as *The Book of Enoch*, and the *Revelations of Moses*, as well as different variations of the stories about entering Paradise. Expanding on this, Couliano juxtaposes the Christian and Judaic traditions of ecstasy with the Arabic revelations of *Mi'raj*. The Islamic legends, centring on the image of the Prophet Muhammad, thus frame the event of the Apocalypse, when, according to tradition, everyone will be saved because God chose Muhammad as his prophet.

Couliano concludes his chapter by suggesting that the legends about *Mi'raj* have nothing to do with the Iranian region, but they originate from Judaic and Christian traditions. The Judeo-Christian apocalypses influenced the stories about *Mi'raj*; the historian highlights the cases in which the Ascension of Moses and the story of Muhammad resemble.

In *Expérience ale extazului*, Couliano's analytical model is thoroughly presented and described though the examination of cultural, behavioural and religious backgrounds within a social context. According to his research, cognitive transmission operates by a mechanism that decodes cultural traits and beliefs (such as the ascension of the soul), which are conditioned by factors such as social norms and environments that are specific to a cultural tradition, or social anomalies in other cases.

Ioan Petru Couliano's paper, "Magic and Cognition"¹⁸, was first published in *Incognita* in 1991. It is the only paper in which the historian specifically considers magic to be cognitively transmissible. This study is a significant assertion by Couliano which describes his thinking on magic from his time as a professor in Chicago, seven years after the initial publication of "Eros et Magie à la Renaissance: 1484", in French, by Flammarion, in 1984. The paper can also be found in the Romanian volume, *Jocurile Minții. Istoria Ideilor, Teoria Culturii, Epistemologie*¹⁹, ("Mind Games. History of Ideas, Cultural Theory, Epistemology"), organised as a collection of Couliano's studies and articles.

Couliano asks whether there is a cognitive definition of magic, or some standardised procedures that can define a domain as that of magic. The historian argues that, while claiming the cognitive character of "science", "religion" and "magic"²⁰, a cognitive point of view does not offer clear distinctions between the three concepts, but that a delimitation can be made between these domains and *technology*. In his study, Couliano again refers to structuralism and structuralists in an attempt to highlight the importance of their research on magic. He asserts that investigating testimonies and materials related to magic in different societies requires two main objectives: examining the social constructs relating to magic and determining the calculation processes utilised by these constructs.²¹

Couliano's ideas about the human imagination and the connections between the mechanisms that influence mass psychology, represent just outcomes, that he continues to research and develop, building on his ongoing theory of

"morphodynamics", which he began to formulate in 1984, with the publication of his book. I assert that Couliano's theory of "cognitive transmission" is an evolutionary theory of cultures and religions because the historian incorporates dynamics and elements of religious behaviour into his theoretical framework, which are data commonly analysed by evolutionary cognitivists. Consequently, Couliano's methodological framework is heavily influenced by evolutionary patterns and cognitive dynamics.

In *Out of This World: Overwordly Journeys from Gilgamesh to Albert Einstein*²², Ioan Petru Couliano presents an interpretation of the history of otherworldly journeys. In his research, the historian analyses scenarios concerning the voyage of the soul to another world. In the volume's chapters, Couliano examines journeys from ancient Egypt, "Puppets, Playhouses, and Gods: *Journeys through Other Worlds in Ancient Egypt*", China, "Crane Riding, Soul Raising and Ghost Brides in Taoist China", Buddhism, "Journeys through the Mind: *Buddhism and Otherworldly Journeys*", and the Greeks "Greek Medicine Men". He also discusses Marsilio Ficino in "Interplanetary Tours: *The Platonic Space Shuttle, from Plotinus to Marsilio Ficino*". This volume represents Couliano's final published research, constituting a comprehensive work in which his theoretical perspectives over history gain comprehensive applicability. Couliano's references to modern physics, biology and mathematics give rise to new debates about the emergence of thought and the origins of matter and the mind. His theory of cognitive transmission is thorough and is applied to the different processes by which cultural and religious traditions emerge, making his

work an essential reference for researching the evolutionary dynamics of cognitively transmitted religious scenarios.

Elements of Couliano's research, such as "permutation" and "prediction" represent recurring concepts in his theses. These concepts and themes are relevant to the mechanisms of his theory of "morphodynamics". In some of his work, Couliano states that religion is a mental game and that traditions are formed through permutations: elements that, when combined in different sequences, create the world's religious and cultural diversity. I argue that the historian will subsequently apply these theoretical calculations to the broader research field of the emergence and origin of religions and cultures, which will result in the formation of his thesis about cultural transmission. The factual transformation of the world cultures under the principle of "permutation", as observed at a cognitive level, is also evident in his research on Renaissance magic. There, Couliano links his hypotheses to a psychosociological framework, arguing that Renaissance philosophers devised a way to exploit magic to control the masses.

Couliano also analyses these elements in *The Tree of Gnosis: Gnostic Mythology from Early Christianity to Modern Nihilism*. In this book he states that: "A chess player's mind is trained to analyse hundreds of binary decisions within a complex situation. The fascination many of us have with chess and other games derives from their ability to challenge the mind's computational skills, which, we may add, is all the mind has when viewed at a certain level. Fascination with religion derives – although much more unexpectedly – from the same source, for religion, like philosophy, science, and even literature, is equally a computational

process²³". In this volume, Couliano applies the theory of "morphodynamics" to the dualist system of the Gnostics. The historian argues that all religions developed from the same premises: the existence of God, another world and a creation. The computational skills that the mind uses lead to the development of an adaptive strategy, forming the basis of a type of religion.

Couliano concludes by observing that the dualistic movements had an impact on the formation of new religions and philosophies: "Ancient dualistic trends were part of the explorative mind process, when most solutions to the riddle posed by the emergence of a new religion out of old religions and philosophies had to be formulated. The morphogenesis of dualism can be followed step by step and understood in the terms of the logical game that was being played for approximately three centuries, before Christianity became the state religion of the Roman Empire. With this, far-flung solutions were discarded, and the rules of the game became stricter. The gnostics had had their time; the board belonged entirely to mainstream Christians, whose persuasive skills had to do not with logic but with power.²⁴" The historian is optimistic about the survival of the dualist system, arguing that it is by no means extinct.

Couliano leaves the development of religions and the way in which the mind works open to discussion, inviting scientists to examine these theories. The overlapping processes observed when analysing the available data shed light on the ways in which different religions, cultures and ways of thinking intersect: "Among this book's conclusions are also others that should be explored further. One is that mind games have necessarily similar mechanisms

(because the way the mind works and its capacity have remained unchanged for at least sixty thousand years), and therefore systems that have been sufficiently run in time would tend to overlap not only in shape but in substance. With complex data at hand, we should be able to demonstrate that portions of the map of the Buddhist system would overlap with portions of the Christian system with portions of German idealism with portions of modern scientific thought, because all systems are infinite and tend to explore all possibilities given to them. Accordingly, when sufficiently extended, their maps of reality would certainly coincide.²⁵ Couliano's analytical model places great emphasis on the intersection between thought, the mind, culture and religion, thereby providing a framework for understanding the world's religious and cultural diversity. The argument about the consequences of mental processes continues, with the historian claiming that philosophy and science may have similar origins, based on the same principle. At this stage, Couliano's theory focuses on the prospects that modern science can generate, as a computational process of the mind.

Therefore, the concepts of "prediction" and "permutation" represent elements that describe the initial mechanisms of Couliano's theory, before it was examined prospectively and elaborated in *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* and *Expériences de*

l'extase. Extase, Ascension et Recit Visionnaire de l'Hellénisme au Moyen Âge. These notions are practically exemplified in the researcher's volumes, which investigate in this manner the ways in which magic, the ecstatic ascensions, or the dualistic movements, create perspectives on the future, or modify the existing beliefs and religious traits of different communities, into new social movements of a cultural and religious nature.

In conclusion, the historian of religions Ioan Petru Couliano establishes an expertise and develops a configuration in order to consolidate a new form of knowledge within the field of study of the History of Religions. His endeavour to form a methodology and its conceptual structure, "morphodynamics", provides a new perspective on the timeline of history. As a discipline, the History of Religions connects the cognitive psychology and the emerging evolutionary perspectives on history, to consolidate a framework adapted to current fields of study. Initially organised around his studies of Gnosticism and the Renaissance, Couliano's cognitive layout evolved into a cognitive theory of cultural transmission. This is evident in his final four published volumes, in which he developed the methodological approach of "morphodynamics", that unites the evolutionary dynamics of religious traditions with the cognitive theory of cultural transmission.

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NOTES

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6. *Ibidem*, p. 27.
7. *Ibidem*.

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