Chapter 18:
The Name of God

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In order to emphasize the sacredness of the words of language, beginning with the first, I have adopted the custom of speaking of the originary sign, the key innovation of the hypothetical originary scene, as the name-of-God. The sign is a gesture of representation, but calling it the name-of-God reminds us that the deferral of appropriation may just as easily be seen as an act of worship, a sign of respect to the “numinous” quality of the central desire-object that is in our anthropological analysis the product of the desires of the group.

The first sign is ostensive; its point is to defer the object’s presence to the appetites of the signers. Yet once the sign becomes associated with the object in the originary event, the sign becomes undecidably a vocative-imperative call as well as a designation; the sort of pointing movement we can imagine the originary sign to be “communicates” indifferently to the others and to the object itself, all of which are potential sources of danger, the situation of deferred desire in which the participants find themselves.

And following the schema of The Origin of Language (Gans 1981), this imperative “call” will evoke in reply a declarative sentence as soon as the idea of a direct response by the designee is removed from the realm of possibility, so that the word/name/noun designating the object can only function in a predication that tells us something about it in a “fictive” world constructed in language.

How are these linguistic relationships to the central object related to religion? Very schematically—or, to put it more flatteringly, parsimoniously—we can make the following rapprochements:

1. Name-of-God as an imperative-vocative, like a real name = “paganism”
2. Name-of-God as a declarative (“I am/will be that/what I am/will be”) = Judaism
3. Name-of-God as the name of a (divine/human) person, Jesus = Christianity
I define “paganism” here as the worship of a “named” God, one who as God may be called on by name for help in a crisis. The association of paganism with polytheism can be retained if we include in it “henotheism,” or the worship of one god but in the “pagan” mode, as in effect the local divinity of a powerful nation. Akhenaton could enforce henotheism in Egypt, but a tribe like the Hebrews could not insist that our god is the one real god in a world of more powerful entities unless it renounced the specificity of the naming-relation, that is, unless it adopted true monotheism.

The refusal of a vocative name as well as of the sacrificial animal/feast that we see in the Exodus 3 “burning bush” scene is a passage to a higher level of universality. The point is not to claim that “our” Hebrew god is the only god, but that our understanding of God as expressed in our rites and litanies is that God is unique and universal. It is the uniqueness of the Hebrew idea of god that gives rise to the sense of chosenness.

As the configuration of the Exodus scene suggests, the signifier-name is no longer understood as a source of power for the believer. Rather than Moses evoking God, it is God’s voice that calls to Moses from the sacred locus. The permanence of this represented locus guarantees the permanent meaning of the sign, but God’s name as given is not a source of evocative power but a reminder of God’s permanent presence in the underlying configuration, which is in essence communal.

If paganism is a religion of the signifier, relying on the coercive collective power behind the sign-name as evidenced in the originary event, monotheism/Judaism gives the center itself an existence that is not merely chronologically but ontologically prior to the sign—and consequently independent of its evocations. The “objective” nature of the declarative reflects the sacred signified’s independence from the signifier. Before the sign there was the sacred object of desire, and, once there is the sign, what it signifies is no longer a specific object but the unique subsistent source of the sacred. This One God is a subject of language more unambiguously than the “pagan” god designated by the sign/name, one who speaks first and refuses to give a name in the normal sense. Moses’ desire to lead the Hebrews out of Egypt requires that he conceive the source of the community’s unity (and ultimately of its language and rituals by which its communal values are communicated) as a subject. But if it is a subject, it is the unique subject, since the configuration of center and periphery is that of all human communities. This is the great intuition, or revelation, of monotheism.

The Jewish model maintains the desire for a name and its deferral/disappointment, which is surely the psychological atmosphere of the conversation in Exodus 3. For there is an unresolved tension between the abstract configuration...