

The Religious Imaginary: Concept, Characteristics, and Functions

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Abstract

This article addresses a significant subject within human sciences: the religious imaginary. It is a topic that has attracted the attention of historians, sociologists, psychologists, and anthropologists—particularly within the sub-field of symbolic anthropology. The objective of this study is to fill a research gap that has long remained unaddressed: no precise theoretical definition of the religious imaginary has been found in the existing literature. Nor has any researcher dedicated a study specifically to delineating its characteristics and functions. Accordingly, this article identifies the fundamental characteristics of the religious imaginary: (1) it expresses a discourse of truth, reality, and history; (2) it is collective by necessity; (3) it is subject to transformation and change in both content and scope; (4) it articulates universal human constants or archetypes; and (5) it transcends empirical verification. The article further demonstrates that the religious imaginary has performed pivotal functions in the life of the Homo Religiosus and in the conceptualization of eschatological destiny—functions that include explanation and interpretation, foundation, argumentation, consolidation of belief, euphemism, and social integration. Finally, the study seeks to identify the primary generative sources of the religious imaginary, which are three complementary and interrelated axes: laziness, avarice, and hope.

Keywords: Religious imaginary; the sacred; rituals; collective representations; archetype; the Quran; the Gospel of Buddha; the Bible.

Introduction

An observer of the books and studies published within contemporary Arab and Islamic culture over the past two decades will notice the prominent presence of inquiry into the imaginary in general. It is certain that the authors of these studies followed in the footsteps of a well-established tradition laid down by a group of Western scholars since the 1940s, beginning with the works of the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (d. 1980) in his two well-known books *The Imagination* (1936) and *The Imaginary* (1940). This tradition continued with a series of books by Gaston Bachelard (d. 1962), such as *Water and Dreams* (1942) and *The Poetics of Space* (1957) and reached its theoretical zenith from a structuralist perspective with the publication of Gilbert Durand's dissertation, *The Anthropological Structures of the Imaginary*, in 1969.

Western thought has taken significant strides toward delineating the contours of the imaginary, making it possible to speak of distinct types: the literary imaginary (Chelebourg 2000), the geographical imaginary (Staszak 2003), and the political imaginary (Delmas-Marty 2006). We believe that these and other specializations within the domain of the imaginary could not have emerged without a minimum degree of conceptual stability in Western scholarship and the crystallization of meaning attached to the term—to such an extent that some scholars have devoted entire works to tracing the history of the imaginary (Boia 1998). Although a variety of definitions of the imaginary exist today (Durand 1984), a review of the available scholarship reveals the absence of a precise definition of the religious imaginary specifically—even where the expression is employed in certain writings (Castoriadis 1975). This absence may partly explain why Arab and Muslim scholars have used the term without sufficient understanding of its meaning. Such a situation

can only be explained by one of two possibilities: either complete unfamiliarity with the term's significance—in which case silence on its meaning conceals an epistemic difficulty the researcher cannot confront with adequate scientific and critical rigor—or the assumption that the term is well-known and requires no explanation. This second hypothesis is, in our estimation, incorrect. Contemporary Arab and Islamic culture urgently needs to shed the illusions of self-evidence—and there are many.

For these reasons, this article studies the religious imaginary from the perspectives of definition, characteristics, and functions, while also addressing the generative sources of the religious imaginary. It combines theoretical reflection on these themes with a procedural approach drawing on samples from religious production both within and beyond the Islamic tradition.

1. The Concept of the Religious Imaginary

The definition we propose for the religious imaginary may be summarized as follows: the religious imaginary is the totality of semiotic products—linguistic and non-linguistic—that the Homo Religiosus constructs in relation to the transcendent, the absolute, or the immanent, in order to respond to questions of origins, worldly existence, and eschatological destiny, either in part or in whole.

This definition, we believe, allows for the inclusion of diverse religious traditions, whether prophetic religions, revivalist religions, or contemplative religious philosophies. It is equally clear that semiotic products in both forms take many shapes, including religious texts (sacred or otherwise), religious rituals and rites, and the periodic or occasional celebrations associated with them.

The transcendent and the absolute refer to God or gods (visible or invisible) and to every abstract concept such as infinite will or omniscient knowledge. The immanent (Immanent), by contrast, refers to deified human beings elevated to the status of objects of worship.

There is no doubt that religions have existed to confer meaning on the existence of the Homo Religiosus (Berger 2003), by dispelling existential anxiety through the organization of worldly affairs and the provision of answers to questions of origins and destiny—answers formulated in systems of religious representations, beliefs, and symbols.

2. Characteristics of the Religious Imaginary

Our definition of the religious imaginary facilitates the identification of its most important characteristics, which may be reduced to the following five points:

2.1 The Discourse of Truth, Reality, and History

The religious imaginary expresses a serious discourse—one of truth, reality, and history—in the estimation of its producers, disseminators, and adherents alike. As such, this imaginary cannot be subject to debate, revision, or critique. When the Book of Genesis states that the Lord created the universe in six days (Old Testament, Genesis 1:31), Jews embrace this ontological truth and accept it unreservedly. The same holds for Muslims, when numerous Quranic verses (Quran, Hud 11:7; Fussilat 41:10) inform them that God created the earth and the heavens in six days as well. No room is then left for interpreting the stated duration as a form of rhetorical representation or metaphor that reflects a mode of establishing the beginnings of creation, the triumph of order, the building of civilization, and the dawn of humanity's era on earth.

Although modern and contemporary scientific research has demonstrated that the duration of creation extends over billions of years, people of faith have remained attached to what they perceived as the expression of absolute and immutable truths in the sacred texts. Al-Tabarsi, for example, citing Mujahid ibn Jabr, affirms that God created the heavens and the earth 'in six days of the days of this world, and there is no doubt that He, Glorified be He, is capable of creating their like in an instant, but He created them in this span of time as a matter of wisdom, and ordered them according to the days of the week...' (Al-Tabarsi 1997).

2.2 The Collective Nature of the Religious Imaginary

The religious imaginary is necessarily collective, even when some of its components are produced by specific individuals. These individuals, upon examination, are embedded within a cultural tradition that profoundly influences their religious representations and social perceptions. Evidence of this across various religions is virtually inexhaustible—from the representations held by the faithful concerning resurrection (the raising of the dead, the gathering, and the reckoning) and retribution (reward or punishment; paradise or hellfire), to systems of ethics (good or evil). For instance, followers of the Zoroastrian religion all believe that Ahura Mazda is the ruler and creator of the universe, and that he is engaged in a relentless struggle against Ahriman, the evil deity, over whom he will ultimately prevail, thereby establishing the reign of goodness and eternity and the triumph of 'monotheistic doctrine' (Ghanim 2009).

Buddhists and Hindus alike believe in the doctrine of karma, upon which reward, punishment, and the transmigration of souls depend. In the words of the Buddha himself, karma means that 'a person reaps in the present what he has sown in the past, and the future is the fruit of the present' (Gospel of Buddha 9:15). Dream interpretation also illuminates another important dimension of the collective religious imaginary. Works on the interpretation of dreams reflect the collective unconscious (Jung 1993) within a given culturally based religious framework. To understand the components of the Greek collective unconscious and its modes of operation, one need only consult the *Oneirocritica* of Artemidorus of Ephesus (second century CE), transmitted to us in the Arabic translation of Hunayn ibn Ishaq al-Abbadi (d. 260 AH / 873 CE). The book

offers interpretations of dreams involving themes such as 'descending to the afterlife and ascending from it,' 'resurrection,' and 'being among the angels.' Comparable material is found in works of dream interpretation within Islamic thought, such as the book attributed to Muhammad ibn Sirin (d. 110 AH / 728 CE) and the work of 'Abd al-Ghani al-Nabulsi (d. 1143 AH / 1730 CE).

2.3 Transformation and Change

A prominent feature of the religious imaginary is its susceptibility to transformation and change in both content and scope. Two principal causes explain this characteristic. The first is that most religious imaginary draw upon cultural sources that combine oral narratives—which are by nature variable in content—and written accounts, which are typically transmitted through multiple chains of transmission ('Ajina 1998). The second cause stems from the interaction, intersection, competition, and dominance of popular culture and learned culture vis-à-vis one another (Le Goff 1977), to the extent that the boundaries between them may blur as numerous elements from popular culture seep into learned culture.

The religious imaginary is, moreover, typically structured in narrative and story form, shaped by the cultural worldview, prevailing knowledge, and the mental horizons of the audience—which in turn reflect both the implicit and explicit expectations and concerns of that audience.

The history of religions testifies to this characteristic of the religious imaginary. Christian doctrines, for example, underwent successive phases spanning centuries. The components established at the Council of Nicaea (325 CE)—including the Christian Easter and the Consubstantiality of the three hypostases—were supplemented by additional doctrines at subsequent ecumenical councils, culminating in the First Vatican Council (1869–1870), which ratified the doctrine of Papal Infallibility—a doctrine previously nonexistent.

In the Islamic context, the corpus of the religious imaginary pertaining to the prophetic biography expanded considerably over time. It suffices to compare the few signs of prophethood attributed to the Prophet in the Sira of Ibn Ishaq (d. 151 AH / 768 CE) with the numerous proofs of prophethood to which Ibn Kathir (d. 774 AH / 1372 CE) devoted an entire volume of his historical compendium *Al-Bidaya wa-l-Nihaya*. Indeed, the scope of the religious imaginary surrounding the prophetic biography grew even further—in both volume and content—with the composition of the *Sirah al-Halabiyya* in the eleventh century AH / seventeenth century CE.

2.4 Universal Constants and Archetypes

The religious imaginary possesses a universal character, insofar as it contains constant elements that represent a common denominator across diverse products of this imaginary, regardless of the multiplicity and differences among religions. These warrants speaking of 'human universals' that cut across these products—such as the presence of the Divine in most religions; that is, the acknowledgment of transcendent powers with whom humanity maintains vertical relationships, which it employs in organizing worldly existence and representing the eschatological destiny.

What further reinforces this universal character is that the religious imaginary establishes archetypes (Jung 1971) that take various forms across religions. The archetype of the ascensional scheme is the sky in diverse religious productions, symbolized by the tree (in Shamanic religions) (Eliade 1980), the winged angel (in Judaism and Christianity) (Faure 1997), or the Buraq (in the Muhammadan Ascension) (Ibn Sa'd 1957). Furthermore, time in the religious imaginary encompasses all three temporal dimensions—origins, worldly existence, and eschatological destiny—and these are present, in whole or in part, in the texts of the religious imaginary. Rituals and rites typically serve as a procedural means for the reactualization of the time of origins and beginnings (Eliade 1969).

2.5 Transcendence of Empirical Verification

Among the characteristics of the religious imaginary is its transcendence of empiricism. The manifestations of this imaginary are believed to be authentic and real based on religious faith and conviction, not through their submission to the laws and conventions of history. The applied models of the religious imaginary typically contain elements that appear to afford verification in the lived reality of believers, yet something invariably obstructs the realization of this possibility—what we have proposed calling the 'technique of prevention' (*taqniyyat al-man'*). In the texts of the prophetic biography, for instance, some Companions are said to have seen angels at the Battle of Badr (2 AH / 624 CE); yet proof of this claim was foreclosed by the words of Abu Usayd Malik ibn Rabi'a (d. 60 AH / 679 CE): 'Were I today at Badr with my eyesight intact, I would show you the mountain pass from which the angels emerged—of this I have no doubt and no hesitation' (Ibn Hisham 1995).

It has been confirmed, from what has been presented, that the religious imaginary possesses characteristics that distinguish it from other forms of imaginary. These characteristics must be extrapolated from within the discourse of the religious imaginary itself, conceived as a linguistic achievement amenable to analysis, interpretation, and critical engagement. Delineating these characteristics, we believe, opens the door to identifying the functions that the religious imaginary performs in relation to the *homo religiosus* in particular.

3. Functions of Religious Imaginary

It is self-evident that the religious imaginary performs numerous functions in the lives of believers across diverse religions—considered both as components of society and its associated social dynamics, and as

individuals embedded within a specific culture, professing a set of religious representations, symbols, and beliefs. In our view, these functions may be identified as follows:

3.1 The Explanatory-Interpretive Function

The narratives and texts of the religious imaginary in religions and contemplative religious philosophies offer religious explanations for the history of the cosmos and humanity, as well as for existential phenomena that positively or negatively affect the life of the homo religiosus (Fromm 1996). Hence, the sacred scriptures and their commentaries and interpretations demonstrate a clear concern with explaining how the cosmos or the world came to be. The Old Testament, for example, devotes an entire book to the subject of genesis (Old Testament, Genesis 1–5), presenting an ontological vision of cosmic creation according to the prevailing conceptions at the time of the Torah's composition—specifically following the Babylonian exile, which lasted from 597 BCE to 539 BCE (Bottéro 1999). It is beyond doubt that the adoption of water as the primordial substance of creation—which put an end to chaos and darkness and founded order, and with-it human civilization and the beginning of humanity's era on earth—was directly influenced by the myths of Mesopotamia (Ali 1996).

The Islamic imaginary adopted this Mesopotamian/biblical conception of cosmic creation in its broad outlines, if not in its details. This is evidenced in the texts surrounding the Quranic text, most importantly the works of prophetic narratives (qisas al-anbiya') and exegetical literature. The element of creation from water thus appears prominently in this framework, as illustrated by the words of al-Tha'labi al-Naysaburi (d. 427 AH / 1035 CE): 'When God Most High willed to create the heavens and the earth, He created a green jewel many times the size of the layers of the heavens and the earth. Then He cast a gaze of majesty upon it, and it became water. Then He gazed upon the water, and it boiled and from it rose foam and smoke, and it trembled in fear of God (...) and from that smoke God created the heaven (...) and from that foam He created the earth...' (Al-Tha'labi 1979). In this regard, Wahid al-Saafi writes: 'If the sky is water that has evaporated and the earth is water that has solidified, then the imaginary has transformed this shared origin into an enduring and firm relationship, through which it has manifested the longing of one for the other and the superiority of one over the other, depicting it materially by positing a tangible thread that joins them all together: it is water, that shared element, which flows from the sky and is bestowed as a gift upon the earth' (Al-Saafi 2001).

The Bhagavad Gita, the sacred Indian text, also addresses the creation of the cosmos as both a proof of the creator's greatness and a testament to His transcendence. The Lord speaks thus: 'Behold my divine forms, which are to be counted in the hundreds and thousands, varied in kind, varied in shape and color (...) Behold my body today, concentrate—here is the whole cosmos, with its motion and its stillness, and all that you wish to see' (Bhagavad Gita 11:5, 7).

As for the creation of the human being, certain contemporary studies have shown that most of the conceptions embraced by the religious imaginary on this subject reduce to two pivotal explanatory models: emanation—the emergence of the crafted human from the crafting God, from the same substance—and transformation, meaning the conversion of clay into a creature, as in the case of Adam (Al-Saafi 2001).

The religious imaginary also serves as a means of explaining the origin of evil in the cosmos and in human life specifically. To this end, it invented malevolent beings to which it attributed the cause of evil, giving them various names—shared by some religions and differing in others—such as Satan (in Judaism and Islam), Ahriman (in Zoroastrianism), Vitra (in Hinduism), and Iblis (in Christianity and Islam) (New Testament, Gospel of John 8:44). In Buddhism, for example, the devil is considered 'the lord of the five wicked desires and the maker of death and the enemy of truth' (Gospel of Buddha 11:4).

Modern and contemporary research in psychology (Meslin 2009), however, has shown that the religious imaginary's explanation of evil in human life does not reduce to the existence of external forces or an external agent; rather, the Homo Religiosus himself invented that evil/satanic being in order to justify the evils he may commit (Freud 1982). Studies in the history of religions have tended to argue that the Homo Religiosus originally attributed both good and evil qualities to God or the gods (Freud 1982), but that at a later stage in the history of religions he purged his deity of those evil qualities and transferred them to that satanic being. If this being has any real existence, it amounts to no more than a 'collective psychological reality' (Jung 1986) in the minds of those who believe in it—a reality that explains what Mircea Eliade termed a 'supernatural reality' among those who invest mundane things or beings with sacred meaning—such as belief in a sacred stone or a sacred tree (Eliade 1965).

3.2 The Foundational Function

A significant sector of the products of the religious imaginary has been employed to establish cultural phenomena in the anthropological sense of the term. Every phenomenon of human existence requires an origin that founds it and grants it legitimacy to persist in human life as a social being. Evidence for this is plentiful. Among the examples is the story of Cain's killing of Abel in the Jewish (Old Testament, Genesis 4:1–24) and Islamic (Quran, Al-Ma'ida 5:27–35) narratives, which establishes the beginning of human civilization through the victory of the farmer (Cain) over the shepherd (Abel)—for in the era of agricultural dominance,

the human being's settlement in a place becomes possible, enabling the construction of cities and, therefore, civilization.

The victory of the farmer over the shepherd is an event commemorated in several Babylonian myths that circulated in Mesopotamia from approximately the third millennium BCE. The god Enlil, for example, created two brothers: Emesh the shepherd and Enten the farmer. They competed to produce greater quantities of crops or livestock. Their competition evolved into a dispute, and they brought their case before the god, who judged in favor of the farmer over the shepherd. Similarly, the goddess Inanna expressed her desire to marry, and she was approached by Dumuzi the shepherd and Enkidu the farmer, and she preferred the latter over the former (Al-Sawwah 1993).

It is also evident that the story of Cain and Abel, in its Islamic formulation, was appropriated to establish the rites of burial (Quran, Al-Ma'ida 5:31): 'Cain was the first mortal among humanity, and thus Abel did not know how to shroud him or bury him, until God sent two ravens, one living and one dead' (Al-Tabrisi 1997). The same story was likewise employed to establish the prohibition of incest (L'inceste) (Freud 1983), since one cause of the conflict between the fraternal enemies was Cain's desire to marry his own twin sister rather than the twin sister of his brother—though some Islamic accounts reject both claims (Al-Tha'labi 1979).

It is also clear that the notion of sacrifice in various religions and beliefs provided the foundation for sacred violence. The Homo Religiosus directs his violence toward a sacrificial victim (Girard 1980) as a means of drawing near to God or the gods and seeking their approval.

It is further evident that the Islamic narrative of the Night Journey (Isra') and the Ascension (Mi'raj) was employed in the Islamic imaginary to establish one of Islam's devotional rites—prayer—and to provide a basis for its legislation (Ibn Kathir 2004), even as the narrative and its content, comprising both a horizontal and a vertical journey, are replete with varied symbolic meanings and are susceptible to multiple modes of interpretation (Ben Ramadhan 2012).

3.3 The Polemical Function

The religious imaginary has been used as an instrument of disputation among various religious communities and among adherents of the same religious community, owing to the multiplicity of their theological positions and their different approaches to interpretation.

Among the manifestations of inter-religious polemic in the domain of the religious imaginary are the narratives produced by Muslim scholars concerning the miraculous and extraordinary nature of the Prophet's birth—narratives deployed to counter the miraculous events associated with the birth of Christ (Ibn al-Jawzi 1984). Biographers of the Prophet were unwilling to accept the Quran's silence on the birth of the Prophet in contrast to its explicit reference to the birth of Christ and the wondrous circumstances surrounding it (Al-Mas'udi 2007).

The miraculous birth of prophets appears to be a near-constant theme across various religions and contemplative religious philosophies. When the Buddha was born, 'all the worlds were flooded with light; the blind recovered their sight, so ardent was their desire to behold the arrival of the Master's glory; the deaf-mutes conversed about the joyous tidings, announcing the advent of the Buddha; the hunchbacked stood upright, the lame walked, all the imprisoned beheld their chains broken, the fires of all the hells were extinguished; not a cloud appeared in the sky, and the impure waters became pure...' (Gospel of Buddha 4:8–9).

The adherents of each religious community typically employ this theme in disputing with members of opposing communities, using it as a basis for asserting the superiority of their prophet or the founder of their religion.

3.4 The Function of Belief Consolidation

It is self-evident that the religious imaginary should be tasked with turning the hearts of believers toward the religion they profess and the beliefs they hold. Throughout its history, accordingly, the religious imaginary has contributed to the consolidation of beliefs to ensure their continuity and to protect them from defeat or extinction.

To accomplish this function, the religious imaginary has employed numerous techniques, the most important of which are persuasion through promise and deterrence through threat. In the Islamic context, for example, the sciences of Quranic exegesis, prophetic hadith and its commentaries, and the literature of resurrection were employed to achieve this purpose. Among the relevant works is "Kitab Hadi al-Arwah ila Bilad al-Afrah" by Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyya (d. 751 AH / 1350 CE), which contains narratives from the religious imaginary designed to encourage the faithful to enter paradise and enjoy its eternal blessings. Conversely, Ibn Rajab al-Hanbali's (d. 795 AH / 1392 CE) "Al-Takhwif min al-Nar" represents an excellent example of deterring believers through vivid depictions of the terrors of hell.

Another technique employed by the religious imaginary to consolidate prevailing religious beliefs is reliance on extraordinary and wondrous stories associated with the lives of prophets (miracles) or their close followers and saints (karamat). It has been customary that prophets stand little chance of being believed in their prophethood by their people without signs and proofs. Moses, according to the Torah account, cast down his staff and it became a serpent (Old Testament, Exodus 4:2–3), and he inserted his hand into his garment,

whereupon it emerged 'white as snow with leprosy' (Old Testament, Exodus 4:6). Christ healed the sick (New Testament, John 4:43–54), calmed storms (New Testament, Matthew 8:23–27), and multiplied food (New Testament, Luke 9:10–17).

The Buddha, for his part, strengthened the faith of his followers through moral teachings expressed in parables and stories. One such account relates: 'Among the disciples of the Buddha was a monk who was suffering greatly in his attempt to master his senses and his evil passions and the wicked inclinations of his heart, to such a degree that he resolved to abandon the monastic order. He came to the Blessed One and asked to be released from his vows. The Blessed One then said to the monk: Take heed, my son, lest you become prey to the passions and blind inclinations of your heart, for I have seen that in your previous existences you suffered greatly from the deadly consequences of debauchery. And if you do not learn to subdue your bodily desires in this life, you will be lost on account of your madness. Listen to the story of one of your previous existences, which you lived as a fish...' (Gospel of Buddha 68:1–3).

3.5 The Euphemistic Function

Among the tasks of the religious imaginary is to mitigate for the mass of believers the impact of terrifying realities in their lives. Accordingly, it works continually to dispel the existential anxiety that besets them on the one hand, while contributing to granting them the necessary degree of psychological equilibrium on the other.

Nothing weighs more heavily on the Homo Religiosus—and on humanity in general—than two profoundly affecting truths: the sense of temporality and the certainty of death. For this reason, Gilbert Durand held that the symbolic imagination possesses the capacity to provide 'vital equilibrium' for the human being in the face of the reality of death, and to ensure the psychological and social balance necessary for human flourishing (Durand 1984).

In ancient Egypt, for example, a technique of euphemism was applied in speaking of death. It was referred to by a synonym in the Pharaonic language called *Miny*, meaning 'to cling to' or 'to grasp onto,' because when the soul departs the body it clings to a mountain or a tree to ascend to the sky by means of a material intermediary (Eliade 1980).

We hold that among the activities in which the Homo Religiosus engages to alleviate his anxiety is the regular organization of communal religious celebrations—periodic, seasonal, and occasional—during which rites and hymns are performed. Death has thus been regarded as a rite of passage (Grami 2007) through which one moves smoothly from one ontological state to another. In this context, the religious imaginary, in its diverse semiotic expressive forms, undertakes to facilitate this passage.

In Judaism, for example, this passage is accomplished through an intensification of ritual observance during the mourning of a deceased person, the purpose of which is to help the bereaved family overcome their sense of despair. The mourning period extends from one week (known as the *Shivah* phase) to thirty days (known as the *Sheloshim* phase) and sometimes lasts an entire year. Those observing mourning are required to sit on the floor, to refrain from shaving, bathing, working, wearing leather shoes, engaging in marital relations, and exchanging greetings. Some Jewish communities go so far as to cover the mirrors in the home of the deceased (Wigoder 1993). It is therefore no surprise that the Homo Religiosus is characterized as a ritual being—a conception grounded in the understanding that this human being engages in symbolic activities alongside material ones.

Thus, the religious imaginary invents ritual and celebratory acts that give the Homo Religiosus the impression of mastery over time and triumph over the sovereignty of death. Religious celebrations allow him to participate in time's cyclical character (Eliade 1969), enabling him to reactualize it, especially considering his distinction between two temporal modes: the profane (*Profane*) and the sacred (*Sacré*) (Eliade 1965). The transition from the former to the latter is affected through myths and religions (Eliade 1963).

In Buddhism, emphasis is placed on the believer's participation in the cyclical character of time. Time is therefore represented as a wheel divided into twelve segments. The yoga rite (*Yoga*) in this religion is nothing other than an attempt to annul states of consciousness: through it, the Buddhist exercises mastery over time and dominates it, in the belief that time ceases now of performing the said rite (Eliade 1980).

There is yet another mode through which the religious imaginary accomplishes the euphemistic function: it does not regard death as the end of the believer's existence; rather, death is a path to an eternal life in which all that the believer desires—whether sensory or spiritual—is realized. The religious imaginary is therefore assigned the task of nourishing the eschatological horizon of the Homo Religiosus.

3.6 The Function of Social Integration

This function is in truth closely bound to the preceding one. Religious celebrations and the performance of their associated rites and hymns contribute in one way or another to the integration of the individual into the religious community to which they belong (Cailliois 1950). This integration is particularly important and necessary in ancient segmentary societies organized along tribal or clan-based patterns, in which solidarity among individuals is mechanical—in accordance with Durkheim's well-known thesis (Durkheim 1960).

In Vedic India, social integration was expressed through the invention of the deity Varuna—depicted as a being holding a rope—whose function was to forge bonds between members of the same religious group,

even among distant ones, by binding evildoers with his ropes. On such occasions, celebrations were held and hymns recited (Eliade 1980).

Thus, the religious imaginary strives to formulate shared representations and conceptions and employs religious symbols as an effective means of facilitating communication and mutual understanding among individuals—a concern manifested in its effort to unify the paths of worship, the modes of performing rites and ceremonies, and the continual demarcation of areas of difference. This may explain why several religions rely on the doctrines of 'tradition,' 'emulation of the forebears,' and 'the model' to achieve social integration. The Buddha thus commands his followers: 'Emulate the Buddha and imitate him and follow his examples when you convey the truth...' (Gospel of Buddha 48:20).

It has been demonstrated from the foregoing that the religious imaginary can perform diverse functions across three dimensions: the individual, the religious community, and human universals. This explains why several religions share the performance of the same function, despite differences in their history of origin, theological positions, beliefs, domain of influence, scope, and number of adherents. For this reason, numerous religious concepts have permeated advanced and sophisticated religions, such as Monotheism, Transcendence, Prophethood, and others (Charfi 2008).

Furthermore, it has been confirmed that the social is the container of the religious, and not the reverse (Bastide 1997). Consequently, the scope of the efficacy of religious imaginary products and the degree of their influence on religious and social communities varies in accordance with numerous considerations, such as 'social mobility' and the 'social frameworks of knowledge'—for religious life is accomplished within history and not outside it (Eliade 1965).

4. The Generative Sources of the Religious Imaginary

Our study of the religious imaginary from the perspectives of conceptual definition, characteristics, and functions has prompted us to reflect on the fundamental generative sources of this type of imaginary. We have identified three pivotal sources: 'laziness,' 'avarice,' and 'hope.'

4.1 Laziness

Some may perceive a paradox in claiming that the Homo Religiosus can produce a vast quantity of imaginary while simultaneously describing him as lazy. This paradox, however, does not in fact exist. The reason, in our estimation, is that the laziness of the Homo Religiosus is precisely what continually drives him to invent forms of the imaginary that conceal his laziness.

Many virtues have been attributed to the Quran—suras and verses—and these have been used, mostly implicitly, to justify the believer's laziness and his eagerness to obtain reward through few words rather than righteous deeds. The Prophet is thus reported to have said: 'Whoever recites Surat al-Dukhan on a night will awaken with seventy thousand angels seeking forgiveness for him' (Al-Ghazali 2004). Indeed, one who dies on a night on which he has recited Surat al-Hashr will attain martyrdom, regardless of his worldly conduct and the sins and transgressions he may have committed (Al-Suyuti 1997).

It is no wonder, then, that the Buddha objected to the Brahmins' pursuit of union with God through hymns alone, while turning away from good deeds—as his words make clear: 'It is therefore impossible for the Brahmins who are engrossed in the study of the three Vedas to be capable of showing the path that leads to the bliss of union with the God Brahma (...) And in truth they cannot, through their prayers, invocations, hymns, and praises, achieve union with the God Brahma after their death' (Gospel of Buddha 50:17, 20).

4.2 Avarice

We would not be overstating matters if we said that among the qualities of the Homo Religiosus is avarice. The existence of avarice requires two conditions in those who possess it: the first is withholding (Al-Ghazali 2004)—for a person does not relinquish anything freely and gratuitously, even when his corpse lies inert. He begrudges it even to the worms (Castoriadis 1975). Witness, for example, what Muslim voices intone in the prayer following the recitation of the entire Quran: 'Rouse us, before the approach of death, from the slumber of heedlessness and laziness, and grant us security from the punishment of the grave, from the questioning of Munkar and Nakir, and from being devoured by worms.'

The second condition is investment: the Homo Religiosus habitually engages in acts through which the growth of his capital in terms of desired reward and recompense is realized—whether in this world or in the hereafter, for religions that affirm resurrection, the Day of Judgment, and eschatological retribution. All the offerings that the believer presents to God or the gods are meaningless unless they provide him with security in all its forms: material security, psychological security, and the like. The god Soma, for example, is thus addressed by his followers: 'You bring to your purifiers who chant your praises cattle more abundant than their dreams. You fill our aspirations the moment we think of you and respond to our requests. O Soma, grant us wealth' (Rig Veda, Soma Cycle 20:2–3). When the Devil poses the rhetorical question to the Lord: 'Does Job fear God for nothing?' (Old Testament, Job 1:9), the real questioner is undoubtedly the Homo Religiosus himself.

We cannot expect this human being to say a good word or perform an upright deed unless the incentives driving him toward it are sufficiently enticing. Hence, it is established in the Islamic imaginary, for example, that a good deed is repaid tenfold, or seven-hundredfold, or more (Al-Bukhari 1981), and that 'whoever

recites Ya Sin, God records for him by virtue of his recitation the equivalent of reciting the Quran ten times' (Al-Suyuti 1997). The same logic applies to all religious rites performed by the believer in general.

4.3 Hope

The Homo Religiosus believes that death is an incidental event in his life that leads to another stage of his earthly or eschatological existence. The first is affirmed by Hinduism based on the doctrine of metempsychosis (Al-Sayyid 2010), while the second is embraced by religions that affirm resurrection and the Last Day—which explains the composition of numerous texts in the religious imaginary concerning the literature of resurrection and retribution.

Hope in another life drives the believer to fill his being and consciousness with religious images and representations concerning his destiny on the Last Day. For this reason, he has devoted himself, across various religions, to founding worlds of the extraordinary, the wondrous, and the astonishing, into whose imagined spaces he perceives himself as deserving entry (Delumeau 1992). In the Christian imaginary, for example, there is discourse on 'the first death,' which is the natural death in this world, and 'the second death,' which is the casting of sinners into the lake of fire on the Last Day (New Testament, Revelation 20:8). In Jainism, one of the religions of India, hope for the immortality of the soul is realized through the believer's undertaking of death by starvation—thereby liberating the body from the curse of metempsychosis ('Abd al-'Al 2007).

The Bhagavad Gita recalls that hope for entry into the heavenly gardens is available to people of faith once they have met its conditions, as the text states: 'Those who study the three Vedas, drink the soma juice, and are purified of sin, worship me and pray to me, shall attain the abode of Indra, where the food of the gods awaits them. They revel in that vast world of the heavens...' (Bhagavad Gita 9:20–21).

We conclude that these three generative sources of the religious imaginary are present across various religions—particularly the more developed ones—and that their scope and role differ from one religion to another depending on prevailing belief systems. It is noteworthy that these sources apply most especially to religions grounded in a doctrine of salvation or deliverance. We hold that the dominant relationship among this triad is one of harmony and complementarity. There is no tension between laziness, avarice, and hope: the lazy person is by nature miserly, and at the same time is possessed of grand hopes for living another, eternal life in which all his conscious and unconscious desires are fulfilled—even if only on the level of the imaginary—thereby transcending his inescapable fate and refusing to surrender to his existential tragedy or his given condition.

We further hold that the various techniques of producing the religious imaginary—in terms of definition, characteristics, functions, and generative sources—emerged from the womb of this triadic source, including the techniques of the vision, the miracle, addition (by amplification or generation), and transformation (by inversion or metamorphosis)—a subject we consider worthy of study and critical, interpretive engagement.

Conclusion

The primary objective of this study has been to produce a predominantly theoretical treatment of the subject under investigation, without neglecting, of course, the relevant examples drawn from various religions and contemplative religious philosophies. The point of departure was an attempt to answer the question: What is the religious imaginary? The answer may appear straightforward, but when the researcher strives for precision, he finds the matter to be quite the contrary—since no precise definition of the religious imaginary could be found that distinguishes it from other types of the imaginary, such as the political, literary, geographical, or social imaginary. This study has accordingly proposed a definition of the religious imaginary that endeavors to encompass all religions and contemplative religious philosophies.

There is no doubt that the delineation of the concept of the religious imaginary in the manner set forth in this work has aided in identifying its most important characteristics—five fundamental characteristics presented in this article. These distinguishing characteristics of the religious imaginary have enabled it to perform functions among the believing communities that embrace it, conceived as a producer of a discourse of reality or historical truth in the sense understood and circulated by those communities.

The article has demonstrated that it would not have been possible to identify the functions performed by religions were it not for a set of facilitating factors, such as the sharing of certain religious concepts or central theological doctrines among some religions—such as monotheism, transcendence, or prophethood. It has also been confirmed, as noted earlier, that the social is the container of the religious—contrary to what 'the managers of the sacred' promote to preserve their symbolic and reputational standing among the religious communities they govern and for whom they prescribe the paths of sound faith.

Furthermore, it was considered useful to address the most important generative sources of the religious imaginary, an examination that led to the identification of the following triad: laziness, avarice, and hope. These three sources evidently apply most fully to advanced and sophisticated religions, especially those grounded in doctrines of salvation or deliverance. We hold that the mechanisms or techniques employed in producing the religious imaginary—from the perspectives of definition, characteristics, functions, and generative sources—are, upon reflection, the offspring of this triadic source.

This study's methodology was based on a cross-religious approach, identifying what religions hold in common—which explains the variety of examples and evidence adduced for each proposition, drawn from multiple religions. Reflecting on the common ground between religions and contemplative religious philosophies is in fact considerably more difficult than identifying the features of distinction and difference—which are, in reality, surface-level differences concerned with the multiplicity of the modes through which religious beliefs are enacted in human society, and with the varying forms of devotional ritual that meet the ever-changing needs and demands of religious communities from one era to another, and from one cultural or epistemic context to another.

This study has led to the confirmation of the following conclusions:

1. This study has proposed, for the first time, a precise terminological definition of the religious imaginary that applies to all religions and contemplative religious philosophies.
2. This study has identified the most important characteristics and functions of the religious imaginary, and their validity has been tested across numerous religions and religious cultures.
3. The presence of the religious imaginary in most religions and contemplative philosophies is evidence that the Homo Religiosus is the producer of religious representations.
4. The religious imaginary is a fundamental component of the collective memory of believers in general. It is, accordingly, carefully tended and cultivated, and believers work to transmit it from generation to generation.
5. The religious imaginary should not be regarded as mere mythology and superstition. Rather, the 'New History' school, led by the French historian Jacques Le Goff, has affirmed that the imaginary in general is a part of history, not external to it or opposed to it. For the religious imaginary, from the perspective of the Homo Religiosus, is historical truth itself.
6. This study is, we believe, suited to opening for future researcher's broad horizons for studying the techniques of producing the religious imaginary within a specific religion—such as transformation, focalization, inversion, amplification, composition, reversal, metaphor, and others.

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