THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH AND POPOL *VUH* IN THE LIGHT OF CLAUDE LÉVI-STRAUSS AND IMAM GHAZALI'S METHODOLOGIES

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ABSTRACT

Many ancient mythological stories remain unfamiliar to the modern reader since they are not carried anymore by a living exegesis tradition. The study of myths needs, therefore, a prior discussion on interpretation. In this paper, I compare Claude Lévi-Strauss and Imam al-Ghazali's interpretations of myths and apply them to the mythological accounts of Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh. Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory of structuralism and Imam al-Ghazali's classification of beliefs share a common essential point: they both present myths as an explanation of the empirical world. According to these theories, myths reflect the relation a particular society has with human faculties ("mental" for Lévi-Strauss and "spiritual" for al-Ghazali) but also with its physical (Lévi-Strauss) and metaphysical (al-Ghazali) environment. I base my analysis on Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Myth and Meaning* (1978) and al-Ghazali's *Mishkat al-anwar* (*The Niche for Lights*, 11th century AD), especially the third chapter of his opus.

Key words: Myth, Interpretation, Structuralism, Classification of beliefs, Worldview

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I. INTRODUCTION: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND DEFINITION OF TERMS

A. "Theories Need Myths as Myths Need Theories"

In this paper, I introduce two ancient myths – i.e. the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh – in the light of two different approaches of myth, which are Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism and Imam al-Ghazali's classification of beliefs. Although they lived in very different contexts, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Imam al-Ghazali share a common essential point: they consider myths as an explanation of the empirical world. They think myths reflect the relation a particular society has with human faculties ("mental" for Lévi-Strauss and "spiritual" for al-Ghazali) but also with its physical (Lévi-Strauss) and metaphysical (al-Ghazali) environment.

I base my analysis on Claude Lévi-Strauss's *Myth and Meaning* (1978)[1] and al-Ghazali's *Mishat al-anwar* (*The Niche for Lights*), especially the third chapter of his opus.[2] Both books offer genuine approaches to animism, polytheism or what it is commonly called today myth. In order to illustrate my demonstration, I decided to apply both theories upon two famous mythical accounts, i.e. the Epic of Gilgamesh[3] and Popol Vuh[4]. The Epic of Gilgamesh refers to the old Mesopotamian legend of King of Uruk who is believed to have ruled the Mesopotamian region around 3000 – 3500 BC. The story has been recollected from a wide range of cuneiform tablets dated from 3000 BC to 100 BC and found in modern Iraq, Levant and Anatolia. Even if some features of the Epic seem to have been transmitted to later cultures and religions, the fall of both cuneiform writings and Babylonian cosmogony at the end of the first millennium led also to the extinction of the exegesis tradition linked to the Epic. As for the Popol Vuh "it contains the cosmogonical concepts and ancient traditions of [the Mesoamerican] people [i.e. Quiché Maya], the history of their origin, and the chronology of their kings down to the year 1550."[5] Although this account is much more recent than the Epic of Gilgamesh, no vivid exegesis tradition remained after the cultural extermination led by the Spaniards (between the 16th and 17th centuries).

Although this paper tells us more about the divergence in interpretation of myths than about the content of myths *per se*, I believe this comparative approach to myth is a prerequisite to any attempt of understanding myth. Indeed, mythological stories, as far as the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh are concerned, are unfamiliar to the modern reader and cannot be introduced without prior discussion on interpretation. In other terms, without a proper debate on how we should approach myths, these latter remain meaningless for us. Indeed, these myths are not carried anymore by a living exegesis tradition that would establish clearly their intended meanings and purposes.

Therefore, I show in this paper how Claude Lévi-Strauss and Imam al-Ghazali differently interpret the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh. First, I propose a comparative analysis between al-Ghazali and Lévi-Strauss's approaches to myths (A) by introducing their ontological (I), epistemological (II) and methodological (III) presuppositions. In addition, I discuss in a second part (B) to what extent these divergences impact our understanding of both the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh. Here, I use these two mythological accounts as illustrations of the divergences between Lévi-Strauss and al-Ghazali's theories. As Robert A. Segal claims in his *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, "to analyze a myth is to analyze it from the viewpoint of some theory. Theorizing is inescapable [...] Theories need myths as myths need theories".[6] Finally, I conclude by illustrating some implications of Claude Lévi-Strauss and Imam al-Ghazali's theories on civilization studies.

B. Myth or Belief?

Naming an object-of-study is already constructing a theory, or at least giving fragments of it. Here, the fact that Claude Lévi-Strauss and al-Ghazali are defining differently what I may prudently call "ancient story-tellings" reflects a divergence in the very understanding of the issue itself. While Claude Lévi-Strauss speaks about "myth", al-Ghazali speaks about "belief" and "faith". In brief, when Claude Lévi-Strauss considers "myth" as an archaic way of interpreting the world's complexity through mental classification (the same way sciences do in modern time), al-Ghazali considers the same phenomena as "false belief" (*bā il*), which is the result of souls that have not been unveiled to divine realities. This divergence in naming the issue includes many differences between both authors in the fields of ontology, epistemology and methodology. All these points are deeply debated in the following chapters.

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1   Caude Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning* (Toronto, Buffalo: University of Toronto Press, 1978).
2   Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, *Le Tabernacle des Lumières, (Michkât al-Anwâr)*, trans. Roger Deladrière (Paris: Seuil, 1981).
3   Andrew George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003).
4   Delia Goetz and Sylvanus G. Morley, *Popol Vuh: The Sacred Book of the Ancient Quiché Maya* (USA: Norman, University of Oklahoma Press, 1950).
5   Goetz and Morley, 5.
6   Robert A. Segal, *Myth: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

II. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS BETWEEN AL-GHAZALI AND CLAUSE LEVI-STRAUSS'S APPROACHES TO MYTHS

A. Ontology: Transcendental Realities versus Scientific Evidences

In his introduction to "ontology", Thomas Hofweber reminds readers how the definition of "existence" is transversal to the whole history of philosophy: "Many classical philosophical problems are problems in ontology: the question whether or not there is a god, or the problem of the existence of universals, etc. These are all problems in ontology in the sense that they deal with whether or not a certain thing, or more broadly entity, exists. […] We have at least two parts to the overall philosophical project of ontology, on our preliminary understanding of it: first, say what there is, what exists, what the stuff is reality is made out of, secondly, say what the most general features and relations of these things are."[7]

A worldview could be defined as the assimilation and the transfer in the subconscious of a particular definition of what entity exists: "In any religious tradition, practical attitudes are closely intertwined with beliefs, and both of these are inevitably expressed within the linguistic and cognitive frameworks that the reigning *worldview* allows. By "worldview", I mean the subconscious matrix of unacknowledged presuppositions that permeate an entire society or epoch at any given point in history."[8]

In this part, I will give the main features of al-Ghazali and Lévi-Strauss's worldviews. It is essential to take them into account in order to understand why and where both authors' theories are differing from each other. Speaking on the importance of the concept of "worldview" in comparative scientific traditions, Alparslan Açıkgenç claims that "if the worldviews of both scientific traditions exhibit many differences, this will be reflected on the scientific work itself; but if the two respective worldviews are not so much diversified, obviously the differences in their respective sciences will also be proportionately less."[9]

Al-Ghazali: worldview based on religious metanarrative / transcendental realities

According to Alparslan Açıkgenç[10], the Islamic worldview is constituted of three main principles, namely *tawḥīd* (the belief in the being of one and indivisible God, i.e. Allah), *nubuwwa* (the belief in the prophecy of Muhammad – saws – as Messenger of God through the revelation of Qur'an) and *hashr* (the belief in the resurrection and in the hereafter). Mokhtar Maghraoui refers to this worldview as *'ubudiyya* (adoration, worshipping).[11] *'Ubudiyya* reflects a world made of dialectical relations (*nisba*) between the Creator (*al-khāliq*) and creatures (*makhlūqāt*), God and human beings, transcendence and immanence, soul and body, spirituality and materiality, hereafter dimension and worldly dimension… Although the first element of each of these dyadic has an ontological superiority over the second one, both have a role to play in this whole *'ubudiyya* and should complete each other in a harmonious way.

As a result, al-Ghazali's worldview – assimilated and subconscious ontology – implies transcendental realities. Moreover, these transcendental realities are accessible through a religious narrative that establishes criterion between "true" and "false" beliefs.

Lévi Strauss: Kantian approach to metaphysics / scientific understanding of the world

Claude Lévi-Strauss's worldview refers to late 19th century European "positivistic" mind: people admitted the Kantian approach to metaphysics (i.e. impossibility to perceive metaphysical realities from the human mind) and became "instinctively" skeptic towards any religious narrative. In other words, the empirical world matters more than the metaphysical one. According to this worldview, spiritual existence (and first Divine Being) can be explained by history, sociology and psychology, the same way physical phenomena are explained by physics and biology. In his article on modern and Islamic approaches to environment, Afzaal refers modern worldview to "the uniqueness of the modern condition". He adds in his footnotes that "the phrase "modern condition" denotes in a general way the long-range impact of the Enlightenment on human societies, with particular reference to rationalization and disenchantment. I realize that the "modern condition" is neither a monolithic nor a static phenomenon".[12] This is the reason why Afzaal elaborates in detail on the Weberian understanding of "disenchantment of the world" and "historical process of rationalization".[13]

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7   Thomas Hofweber, "Logic and Ontology", in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2018 (https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-ontology/, last accessed July 13, 2019).

8   Ahmed Afzaal, "Disenchantment and the Environmental Crisis: Lynn White Jr., Max Weber, and Muhammad Iqbal", in *Worldviews*, Vol. 16, 241.

9   Alparslan Açıkgenç, *Islamic Scientific Tradition in History* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit IKIM, 2014), 49.

10   Ibid, 122-141.

11   As he mentioned it in his course on *uṣūl al-fiqh* at the Alliance of Civilizations Institute, Ibn Haldun University, Fall 2018.

12   Afzaal, 241.

13   Ibid, 250-252.

In sum, in Claude Lévi-Strauss's worldview spiritual realities at least do not matter and at most do not exist at all. Existent things are those who can be observed in this empirical world. The term "existence" itself relies on the prefix "ex-" that refers to "coming outside", "becoming apparent", "having a shape, a form".

B. Epistemology: Gnosis versus Scientific Knowledge

Al-Ghazali: kashf / ilhām / qalb / taṣfiya al-nafs

Many epistemologies coexist within the Islamic worldview. Some disciplines may insist on some human faculties (*quwwa*) and some other disciplines on other ones. In philosophy for instance scholars insist on rationality (*ʿaql*), sound senses (*al-ḥawās al-sālima*) and the combination of both that is experience (*tajruba, ʿadiya*). Scholastic scholars may add to these faculties the human relation to the sacred reports (*naql*) and linguistics (*sarf, nahw, balāgha, adab*). Exegetes of Qur'an and *ḥadīth* may even more insist on this last epistemological stand. Yet in his *Niche for Lights*, al-Ghazali is using another epistemology – that can be called the *taṣawwuf* epistemology – based on purification of the soul (*taṣfiya al-nafs*), spiritual inspiration (*ilhām*) and unveiling (*kashf*). This epistemology leads to a particular knowledge (*ʿilm*) that is gnosis (*ʿirfān*). In order to have a proper understanding of al-Ghazali's methodology and classification of beliefs (III), it is first required to dig more into the details of *taṣawwuf* epistemology.

In his commentary on al-Ghazali's *Kīmyāʾ al-Saʿāda* (*The Alchemy of Happiness*), Tayeb Chouiref explains how al-Ghazali connects the Islamic worldview with the *taṣawwuf* epistemology. Indeed, in the following quotation al-Ghazali first provides a Sufi ontology that conceives human being as an angelic, transcendental nature hidden and locked into a temporal, illusional ego. Secondly, he proposes, as a method for purifying the ego, the double movement of rejecting the world ("inner struggle") and of desiring God ("Lordly reality"). In short, according to him the more we are attached to this mundane world, lesser we are conscious of Divine Presence, and vice-versa:

> The identification of man with his ego represents the ultimate illusion and this is the source of misguidance. Hence this warning from al-Ghazali: 'It is the Spirit that is the reality of your substance; outside this what remains is foreign to you and is only a loan.' The egocentric illusion degrades man and makes him forget the fact that he is, in his essence, a "Lordly reality". In exposing what he calls "the alchemy of happiness," al-

Ghazali recalls that the purpose of the teaching of all the messengers of Heaven is to allow man to recover his first deformity: 'The purpose of the Alchemy of Happiness is to get rid of everything that humbles the man and puts on the attributes of perfection. Knowing the spiritual heart and its attributes is the key to knowing God, the Exalted. You will have to engage in the inner struggle to know the spiritual heart because it is of the same substance as the angels and its substrate has its origin in the divine Presence. From this place he comes and to this place he will return.' The peculiarity of human nature lies in the apparent duality between its animal aspect and its lordly aspect. In the words of al-Ghazali, "man belongs both to the world of Creation and to the world of the Order". The peculiarity of the spiritual path is to give man the means, in terms of both doctrine and method, to come out of confinement in the world of Creation to return to his true homeland in the world of the Order.[14]

In this paragraph, al-Ghazali describes the vertical relation that connects human being to God and calls readers to engage in a spiritual path, in a mystical "return", to Him. As a result, al-Ghazali's approach to beliefs is mainly based on this esoteric understanding to the world. From an upper station of gnosis, he can evaluate any belief and its relation to divine realities (i.e. to what extent this belief is veiled from the divine truth). In sum, as I will show it in the third sub-part on methodology, the purification of the heart is a prerequisite before using rationality (*ʿaql*) in a proper manner.

Lévi-Strauss: the relation between theory (reason) and experiment (observation) – that is constantly contested and revised – lead to scientific evidence.

The epistemological frame of Lévi-Strauss is positivistic, i.e. he considers human beings as able to classify both the empirical and social world through the discovery of their objective laws. Reason, together with observation and experience, is the tool that leads human beings to knowledge. In other terms, reason permits human beings to demonstrate judgements through objective evidences and thus to reach scientific knowledge. This is the reason why Laurence Coupe says Lévi-Strauss's theory of myth reflects "the ambition of modernity, to abstract and rationalize everything."[15]

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14 Abu Hamid al-Ghazali, L'Alchimie du Bonheur: Connaissance de soi et connaissance de Dieu (Kīmyāʾ al-saʿāda), trans. Tayeb Chouiref (Tasnim, 2016), 161.

15 Laurence Coupe, Myth (New York: Routledge, 2009, 2nd ed.), 139.

Despite its length, the following quotation is essential for understanding how Afzaal approaches Weber's description of modern epistemology, which is Lévi-Strauss's one:

> Overall, there has been a rapid progress in the systematic mastery of life processes and an increase in their coherent understanding by means of abstract concepts; at the same time, the ability of values to order the world has declines. For Weber, science is the most important form in which theoretical rationality has manifested in recent history. This type of rationality involves the ability of human beings to gain control over their environment, which is achieved by rendering the empirical reality increasingly comprehensible through *abstract concept*.[16] […] According to Weber, humankind's recent progress in theoretical rationality has caused the shrinking, and often disappearance, of those aspects or dimensions of empirical reality that were previously viewed as "mysterious" – i.e. unknowable in principle. This has led to a gradual loss of the very possibility of experiencing genuine wonder, which, in turn, implies a serious blow to the human capacity for constructing and attributing meaning to the world. Disenchantment then comes to represent the predicament of having to live in a world that lacks any intrinsic meaning or purpose[17], even as it becomes increasingly intelligible in scientific terms.[18]

This positivistic approach to knowledge leads also Lévi-Strauss towards the "objective" study of the mind and of the subconscious, namely psychoanalysis. As most of his contemporary scholars, Lévi-Strauss trusts the faculties of the mind to the extent that reason may disclose its own mysteries. Finally, Lévi-Strauss is an anthropologist and he does apply the positivistic epistemology in his ethnographical researches. In other words, reason and observation are the key faculties in order to understand social and cultural phenomena.

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16 Italics by Afzaal.

17 We can also make the parallel with the end of "metanarratives" – the traditional means by which we order the world – theorized by Jean François Lyotard. See, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, originally published in 1979). Lyotard, however, links the loss of metanarratives with postmodern societies.

18 Here the loss of metanarrative would lead to a kind of nihilism.

C. Methodology: classifying beliefs versus making sense of myths (structuralism)

Al-Ghazali: classifying beliefs according to their relationship with divine realities

After having exposed his ontological and epistemological framework it can now disclose with greater accuracy al-Ghazali's methodology and approach towards beliefs. In the third chapter of his *Niche for Lights*, al-Ghazali makes the esoteric exegesis of a famous Prophetic saying: "God has seventy veils of light and darkness Were He to remove [the veil, or the veils], the glories of His face would burn away everything that the eyesight of His creatures perceives."[19] It is in the light of this exegesis that al-Ghazali proposes a classification of beliefs in three general categories:

1. those who are veiled [to the divine realities] by darkness;
2. those who are veiled [to the divine realities] by a mix of light and darkness;
3. those who are veiled [to the divine realities] by pure light.

Al-Ghazali mentions that a countless number of groups are included in these three categories and thus constituting the great diversity of beliefs among human beings. I should remind here once again that al-Ghazali can make this distinction because of his own enlightenment (or unveiling) to the divine realities in a gnostic perspective. From an upper station of gnosis, he can evaluate any belief and its relation to divine realities (i.e. to what extent this belief is veiled from the divine truth).

The first category, those who are veiled [from the divine realities] by darkness, is constituted of atheists (*mulḥida*), "who do not believe in Allah and in the Hereafter" and "who preferred this life instead of the Hereafter"[20]. Al-Ghazali distinguishes two groups of them:

- those who consider the Nature (*tab'*) as the cause of the world. According to al-Ghazali they confound the cause of the world with one of its attributes. This belief is thus a tautology or circular thinking. For him the Nature has no consciousness, no knowledge, no perception but has only an unconscious mechanical agency.

- Those who never looked for the cause of the world and think to themselves only. According to al-Ghazali this kind of non-believers are obscured by their passions (*hawā*)

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19 English Translation from William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2007).

20 Al-Ghazali himself mentions these two Qur'anic verses, respectively (9:45) and (16:107).

and ego (*nafs*). Due to this addiction, they "worship" worldly pleasures such as eating, fashion mode, sexual intercourse, killing, material abundance, personal reputation etc. For him, all these beliefs constitute nuances of the same darkness: "they are all veiled by pure darkness that takes root in their own ego."

The second category, those who are veiled [from the divine realities] by a mix of light and darkness, is composed of three main groups:

- those who face darkness that originates from their own senses: they are pursuing the knowledge of God (dislike the first category) but cannot go beyond the sensible world/dimension and cannot conceive metaphysical realities. Al-Ghazali claims many kinds of beliefs fall into this group, to which the idolaters and the dualists constitute the two extremes. In sum, they restrict God to some of His attributes (domination, light, beauty etc.).

- those who face darkness that originates from their imagination: they can go beyond the sensible world/dimension and conceive metaphysical realities. Yet, al-Ghazali claims they cannot go beyond their imaginative faculty, i.e. they still believe in some physical features of the Divine (a God in the sky, sit on the Throne etc.). In sum, they do not manage to go beyond spatial and time dimensions.

- those who face darkness that originates from wrong intellectual analogies: Although they managed to go beyond spatial and time dimensions, they still approach divine attributes the same way they approach their own. In al-Ghazali's text, this group mostly refers to scholars who consider scholastic reflection as describing outside reality (*bi-khalij*) and not as a mere mental elucubration (*al-aḥkām al-zihnī*).

The third category, those who are veiled [from the divine realities] by pure light, is constituted of countless of groups. Al-Ghazali gives such four of them:

- those who define God by His relations with His creatures (such as the Transcendent, the Holy etc.). According to Ghazali such accounts are not false *per se*, but they do not define the very divine reality.[21]

- those who perceive that there are many skies and each of them has its own driving force, it is own angel. According to them, God is the driving force of all these sub-driving forces. The One who encompasses all these skies.

- those who perceive that this prior driving force is itself worshipping a greater being. This motor of the skies is considered as an angel. According to them, God is the obeyed (*muta'*) by this driving force. He is the One that makes all these skies moving by order (*bi-wasila*) and not by direct action.

- those who achieved the [spiritual path], i.e. *al-wāṣilūn*. They were revealed that this *muta'* is itself characterized by attributes that do not reflect the perfect Unicity. Thus, they went beyond this *muta'*. They focus on the One that created this *muta'*. They discovered a Being absolutely pure.

This is a brief summary of al-Ghazali's classification of beliefs. Notice that the third category is not of great importance for this paper because it does not concern the kind of beliefs present in the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh. I will show in the chapter B what this categorization of beliefs implies with regards to our understanding of the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh.

Levi-Strauss: myths reflect the universal structure of human mind (structuralism)

In his *Myths and Meaning*, Lévi-Strauss starts his researches on myths by this constitutive presupposition: despite their illogical appearance myths may not be deprived from meaning since human being's productions cannot be totally deprived from meaning. This way "to prove that [myth] is orderly would prove that is creator [i.e. ancient peoples or contemporary remoted tribes] is orderly, hence logical and intellectual, as well."[22] This pursuit for "order" and "structure" of the human mind comes from both his anthropological standpoint (he has empathy for his object-of-study and cannot consider their cultural productions as deprived from meaning) and his positivistic epistemology (it is actually possible to classify and order any object of study). The following quotation underlines this fact:

To speak of rules and to speak of meaning is to speak of the same thing; and if we look at all the intellectual undertakings of mankind, as far as they have been recorded all over

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21 Martin Lings mentions in his *Symbols and Archetypes* that *al-Khāliq* is already a low dimension of the Divine since this name is in relation to creatures (that are spiritually speaking low). See Martin Lings, *Symbol and*

Archetype (London: Fons Vitae, 2006).

22 Segal, 114.

the world, the common denominator is always to introduce some kind of order. If this represents a basic need for order in the human mind and since, after all, the human mind is only part of the universe, the need probably exists because there is some order in the universe and the order is not a chaos.[23]

From his anthropological observations about peoples that are still vividly reporting myths, Lévi-Strauss develops the idea of a universal "structure of mind" or "order of mind", commonly shared by any human being. For him, it is this single structure that shapes primitive story-telling such as myths or modern scientific researches. He called this methodology "structuralism".

According to his structuralist theory, the mind intrinsically looks for resolving the contradictions it is facing, either in the outside empirical world or in the inner one. "The purpose of myth is to provide a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction'. Myth resolves or, more precisely, tempers a contradiction 'dialectically', by providing either a mediating middle term or an analogous, but more easily resolved, contradiction."[24]

For Lévi-Strauss, myths and sciences are just two different ways to temper similar contradictions met in the outside and inner world. Another important point is that "all [the illogical contradictions found in myth] are apparently reducible to instances of the fundamental contradiction between 'nature' and 'culture', a contradiction which stems from the conflict that humans experience between themselves as animals, and so a part of nature, and themselves as human beings, and so a part of culture. That conflict is the projection onto the world of the oppositional character of human mind. Humans not only think 'oppositionally' but consequently experience the world 'oppositionally' as well […] At the same time, Lévi-Strauss maintains that the world is itself organized 'oppositionally', so that human projections, while remaining projections, match the nature of the world".[25]

Myths are therefore a way to "experience the world" among others, and to construct a coherent meaning of this contradictory world. As a result, Lévi-Strauss does not pay attention to the narrative dimension of myths but rather to their synchronic one. Since he is interested in the structure of mind reflected in myths and not in the content of myths *per se*, Lévi-Strauss deconstructs each myth and reconstitute them into oppositional "mythemes" such as death/

life, gods/men, sadness/happiness etc. The final and ultimate opposition that encompasses all these dyadic is of course the mytheme nature/culture. In other terms, every mytheme can be in fine included within this ontological dialectical relation between nature and culture. Therefore, "it is the task of myth to articulate such contradiction and to resolve them".[26]

III. APPLICATION OF AL-GHAZALI AND LEVI-STRAUSS'S THEORIES UPON THE EPIC OF GILGAMESH AND POPOL VUH

A. Similarities in form and content between the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh
A similar role in their respective civilization

Despite the great diversity of social fabrics, political systems and cultural features that characterize these two spatiotemporal contexts, both Ancient Mesopotamia (3000-500 BC) and Mesoamerica (1000 BC-1550 AD) show evidences of cultural unity, of intertwined relations between city-states, and of the transmission of a genuine knowledge tradition.[27] In this context, the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh give an account of worldviews and metanarratives of their own civilization. Indeed, the fact that both texts dig into themes such as cosmology (or cosmogony), the origin of human beings, the beginning of civilization, the relations between humans and gods etc. indicates that they are not mere literature pieces focused on aesthetics but rather representative fragments of genuine visions of the world. Surprisingly enough, both texts show apparent similarities in some major features:

- First of all, they both give an account of the creation of human beings that is link with gods worshipping and service.

In the Popol Vuh, Tepeu (God of the skies), Gucamatz (God of the seas) and other gods agreed to create the natural elements such as mountains, rivers, valleys. They also wanted to create species that could praise and serve them. They started by creating animals, but these could not praise the gods as they could not speak their names. They then attempted to create humans from clay and wood, but the firsts were infirm and the seconds transformed

23 See Lévi-Strauss, *Myth and Meaning*, 4.
24 Segal, 114.
25 Ibid, 115.

26 Ibid, 139.
27 Norman Yoffee, *Myths of the Archaic State: Evolution of the Earliest Cities, States, and Civilizations* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17; Richard Adams, "Introduction to a Survey of the Native Prehistoric Cultures of *Mesoamerica*", in *The Cambridge History of the Native Peoples of the Americas*, eds. Richard Adams and Murdo J. Macleod (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 1-45.

into monkeys. They finally succeed in creating Man from maize (corn): the first four men were Balam-Quitzé (Jaguar Quitze), Balam-Acab (Jaguar Night), Mahucutah (Naught) and Iqui-Balam (Wind Jaguar). In the Epic of Gilgamesh too, the main purpose of human life is worshipping gods and serving them. The main wisdom of the story is directed to Mesopotamian kings as they are taught to accept their fate and to serve gods temples scrupulously. Besides, the story tells that once gods wanted to exterminate human beings because they had forgotten worshipping them. Yet, while they were about to send the Flood (Deluge) in the earth and rid it of all human beings, they suddenly realized that human beings were needed to take care of their temples on earth. This is why they decided to make an exception and to save one man – Uta-Napishti – from the Flood in order for him to rebuild human civilization and serve gods temples. Although the form differs, the Deluge as a symbol of divine revenge against human forgetfulness is also present in the Popol Vuh. In this the third chapter of this latter,[28] gods send floods to earth at least twice: the first time to animals because they could not speak gods names and thus could not worship them; the second time to the first human beings made of wood due to their forgetfulness and ingratitude towards the gods. Because they stopped to nourish gods, a Flood was sent to them and the few who survived were transformed into monkeys.

- The second common point between both stories is role of god-like human heroes.

In the Epic of Gilgamesh, Gilgamesh the legendary king of Uruk challenges gods and mythic creatures in the company of his god-like fellow Enkidu – who has been directly sent by the gods to Gilgamesh in order to correct the king's behavior. Together they will steal forbidden trees in the cedar forest, defeat Humbaba the demon of the forest with the help of Shamash the sun god, kill the Bull of Heaven that has been sent by Anu (god of the sky) as then put an end to seven years of famine etc. The whole epic narrative follows the adventures of these two protagonists with a further insistence on Gilgamesh. In Popol Vuh too, the story focuses on hero twins' adventures. The chapter 2 tells the story of Hun-Hunahpú and his brother Vucub Hunahpú who fought the gods of Xilbalba – the Maya underworld – and got killed there. Yet, the death of Hun-Hunahpú is the beginning of the successful revenge of his sons, i.e. Hunahpú and Xbalanqué: "Hun Hunahpú's head, placed on a tree by his killers, spits into the hand of the maiden Xquic, who becomes pregnant with the hero twins, who are then

born on Earth."[29] In this adventure – that comes before the narrative on the creation of the world – the Hero Twins enter the underworld but manage to defeat the gods who killed their father and uncle due to clever [Promethean] tricks. Finally, "they slay two lords of Xibalba before ascending into the sky as the sun and the moon."[30]

- The third common feature is the horizontal and intertwined relation between gods, monsters and humans, between social world (cities, temples etc.), natural world (rivers, rain etc.) and mythical worlds (underworld, waters of death, etc.).

As it appears clearly in the examples mentioned above, both the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh describe the relations between human characters and divine forces in a horizontal and loose manner. In both texts, human heroes struggle and fight with gods, human beings are themselves gifted with god attributes, heroes go from human dimensions of the world (city, temples, ball games, temple prostitute…) to mythical dimensions (such as the underworld in which Hunahpú and Xbalanqué are defeating demoniac gods, or the Waters of Death that Gilgamesh has to cross in order to meet Uta-Napishti, the eternal man and father of civilization). This narrative setting may be confusing for modern readers. This difficulty is even more stressed in the Popol Vuh, since the story takes place in a cyclic vision of time and not a linear one. Without prior knowledge on Maya civilization, the modern reader may not understand the chronology of events as it is presented in the text (the first humans appear before the creation of the world, the story of human heroes is related to the story of noble family dynasties etc.).

B. Interpretation of the Epic of Gilgamesh and of Popol Vuh in the Light of al-Ghazali's Classification of Beliefs

As mentioned above, al-Ghazali approaches texts such as the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh not as myths but as beliefs. Therefore, the main importance here would be to analyze what these texts tell about man's origins, gods, and the creation of the world. In other terms, al-Ghazali focuses on the narrative dimension of those texts, especially on spiritual narratives. In order to apply his theory to these two narratives, firstly I may replace them into his classification of beliefs. To which category would the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh belong?

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28 Please notice that the chapter organization was first settled by European translators. The original version of the Popol Vuh did not include any chapters.

29 Christopher Minster. "The Popol Vuh: the Maya Bible.", July 3, 2019 (https://www.thoughtco.com/the-popol-vuh-the-maya-bible-2136319, last accessed July 13, 2019).

30 Ibid.

The question is not so easy to answer. On one hand, natural and divine features are intertwined and tend towards animism, i.e. worshipping physical elements as metaphysical ones. The word animism itself comes from Latin anima, meaning "wind, air, breath, the vital principle, life, soul". In fact, in both texts, natural elements seem to combine agency (genuine capacity of acting) and consciousness. On the other hand, both text present also some representations of transcendence, beyond the physical world (for instance the skies in where gods reside). This last feature may look like polytheism more than animism even if both remain probably intertwined and inseparable from each other.

As a result, both the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh may constitute a particular group in the second category of beliefs that gathers "those who are veiled [from the divine realities] by a mix of light and darkness". Both texts probably remain in the middle between "those who face darkness that originates from their own senses" – and who cannot conceive metaphysical realities – and those who face darkness that originates from their imagination – and who can conceive metaphysical realities but still find difficulties to disconnect definitely their worship from sensible dimension.

In his analysis of the Epic of Gilgamesh, Andrew George even underlines the similarity between the purpose of life in the Mesopotamian story and in the Qur'an, namely worshipping the Divine. Similarly, al-Ghazali includes in a same classification of all kinds of belief including pure monotheism, polytheism and even atheism. Yet, al-Ghazali stresses there are decisive differences between all of them. Hence his classification from totally veiled (metaphorically "down") and totally unveiled (metaphorically "up"). Therefore, while al-Ghazali may accept that both the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh get an unveiled dimension of belief when they underline "worship" as the purpose of life (a transcendental feature), he may notice that these texts also relate men nourishing many gods and taking care of their temples (a animistic/polytheistic feature). This last feature definitely constitutes a criterion that localizes both the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh in the second category of al-Ghazali's classification.

Yet some may argue that the philosophical debate between "destiny" and "free will" in Islam refers to the same contradiction but in a more sophisticated way. As an answer, I may say that firstly, this "sophistication" constitutes a decisive criterion since it makes the strict distinction between sensible and metaphysical approaches, between obvious polytheism and apparent monotheism. Secondly, this debate between "destiny" and "free will" is more related to the relation between the "finite" (feature common to creatures) and the "infinite" (feature restricted to the Divine). In al-Ghazali's classification of beliefs, this relation is actually debated in the third category – which introduces the different nuances within proper monotheistic belief – and not in the second category – in which polytheism and animism have still their place.

C. Interpretation of the Epic of Gilgamesh and of Popol Vuh in the Light of Claude Lévi-Strauss's Structuralist Theory

In order to apply Claude Lévi-Strauss's theory to the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh, one should first deconstruct both myths and reconstruct it according to the dialectical opposition between nature and culture. The same way I introduced these texts according to three thematic, Lévi-Strauss would reconstitute "mythemes" that are opposing each other. He would not follow the narrative plot. Fortunately, it seems that the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh represent ideal cases for Lévi-Strauss's theory since both texts present widely dialectical oppositions between natural phenomena (gods, floods, famine, fate etc.) and cultural involvement (human decisions that contradict divine will, human impact on the outside world etc.).

As an example, I can draw two categories of mythemes, one representing the natural force (N) and the other the cultural one (C):

- mytheme (N): I would put here any paragraph of the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh that stresses the supremacy of nature over cultural features such as gods' revenge against humans (gods of Xilbalba kill Hun Hunahpú and his brother, gods meet and decided to kill Enkidu through suffering illness), natural disasters (the different 'Deluge' episodes, seven years of famine sent by the god Anu), Gilgamesh's inexorable death, threatening natural worlds (underworlds, Waters of Death, the skies from where gods reside, cedar forest), men worshipping gods.

- mytheme (C): I would put here any paragraph of the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh that stresses the heroic resistance of men against natural forces, such as Hunahpú killing the gods of Xilbalba and taking revenge on his father's death, Gilgamesh and Enkidu defeating the terrifying demon Humbaba as well as the Heaven Bull, Hunahpú managing to overcome gods through clever tricks (looking like Promethean myth on the origin of man), men nourishing gods.

According to Lévi-Strauss's theory, these two mythemes disclose the *a priori* illogical stories of The Epic and Popol Vuh, where gods are both dominants and dominated at the same time. For Levi-Strauss, this dialectic and oppositional relation remains between men and gods, heroes and monsters, reflect the oppositional structure of the mind itself that attempts to temper with difficulty the contradiction between nature and culture. What firstly appears strange and non-sense for modern readers can now be interpret as rational and meaningful since the story reflects an objective rule of human mental process.

CONCLUSION:
IMPLICATIONS ON CIVILIZATION STUDIES

First of all, both Imam al-Ghazali and Claude Lévi-Strauss look at myth from a pretended upper stand (or station). When al-Ghazali classifies a wide range of veiled beliefs from his unveiled gnosis, Lévi-Strauss reinterprets primitive myths from his modern scientific knowledge. Ironically enough if we follow al-Ghazali's theory, Lévi-Strauss's strict belief in empirical science and reject of metaphysical faith may lead him to the first category (i.e. those who are veiled [to the divine realities] by darkness) that is a lower station than the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh, both parts of the second category (i.e. those who are veiled [to the divine realities] by a mix of light and darkness). On the contrary, Lévi-Strauss may approach Islamic spiritual narratives (in which al-Ghazali believes) the same way he analyses another myth. For him, Islamic narratives may also present unscientific and non-modern features.

Secondly, both Imam al-Ghazali and Claude Lévi-Strauss consider belief/myth as part of a same "civilizational" process. Al-Ghazali may describe the Epic of Gilgamesh and Popol Vuh as steps (or station) towards one and same goal, i.e. the knowledge of the Divine. As for Claude Lévi-Strauss, he considers myth reflects the same mind order than science, both attempting to temper intrinsic contradictions between nature and culture, both attempting to make sense of the outside world.

As a result, both Imam al-Ghazali and Claude Lévi-Strauss help us understand "human civilization" in singular, namely the adventure of sapiens on earth. Indeed, while Claude Lévi-Strauss presents a reflection on "metalanguage" common to all human beings (i.e. structuralism), and al-Ghazali proposes a meta-approach of faith that includes all kinds of beliefs shared among human beings (i.e. classification of beliefs).

This way to encompass all human activities within one single philosophical system is similar to John Searle's theories on institutional facts. In his *A Social Making of the World* (2010), Searle wants to demonstrate how "all of human socio-institutional reality has a common underlying structure".[31] The same way as Imam al-Ghazali and Claude Lévi-Strauss, he attempts to articulate the understanding of the empirical world (physics and biology) with the understanding of the social world (institutions, beliefs, thoughts) under one and single system, namely biological evolution up to human "Status Function Declarations".

Yet, although these meta-theories disclose many mechanisms involved in human activities, they do not provide any intellectual tools that would distinguish one civilization from another.

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31 Coupe, 200.