

Review

Henry Duméry, *Imagination et religion. Eléments de judaïsme, éléments de christianisme*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2006, 468pp.

We have here a substantial work. More than 400 pages, no footnotes, no over-scholarly vocabulary (apart from a few technical terms), an erudition that is understated rather than displayed and the promise of original thought instead of supporting texts copied out – all this makes the book the happy conclusion to a thoroughgoing work of research and an intense meditation.

The author specialized very early in a critical philosophy that takes as its object of study biblical religion and the origins of the Christian religion. For him that philosophy has to be purely rational, distinct from a theology that remains a belief even as it searches for reasons to justify what is believed or should be believed. More reserved than theologians, philosophers of religion owe no allegiance to modes of belief; they attempt to extract the human meaning from certain doctrines and rituals. Without denying the historical links that lead Judaism and Christianity to develop a theory of irreversible (and not cyclical) time, he classifies and records the imaginative element that feeds the narratives of edification or piety: hence the rehabilitation of the myths that frame the functioning of religious representations.

However, the attention given by the author to the most fundamental or creative imaginary, the fact that he confers on it the power to invent all the social roles, and especially all the signs and symbols, leads us to think that the imagination, in its deepest resources, forges human society, adds culture to nature and gives rise to the attitudes of devotion or renunciation which are a human prerogative when people are members of a community of believers.

Images may be passive and imposed. But the ability to conceive new, unprecedented images to serve organizations and behaviours highlights what there is about religions that goes beyond ordinary events. In this respect analysis of language provides the opportunity to distinguish between literary metaphors, which are suited to intensifying meanings, and metaphors of function, person or agent, which serve to valorize people, particularly in the religious field.

Applied to the Hebrew bible the theory of the instituting imaginary makes it possible to understand that we are dealing with successive rewritings, and that the enriching of episodes is not an extrinsic addition but the result of what was included at the outset. What is read in the present expresses the truth of what was. And the future will not be vain if it brings what had been expected since the beginning. The

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scribers' merit will have been to dismiss circular temporalities and replace them with a time that continually progresses and culminates each time it brings forward the means of salvation.

The revelation of Christian origins attempts to show how the conception of a suffering Messiah was extended to a Messiah of resurrection then to the son of God (which contributed to the idea that the divine Word became flesh, that 'he lived among us'). But the complexity of the Christian data is explained by the variety and dispersal of ideas when the new religion is introduced into regions separated from one another. However, it is also explained by the subsequent synthesis, when the churches came together to define common beliefs. The slowness and disparateness characteristic of Christianity's foundation demonstrate both that it proceeds from biblical inspiration and that it attached to that an original interpretation by borrowing certain concepts from Hellenistic culture.

One of the book's curiosities has been to explore in its own right the antinomian idea of the virgin mother and use it to prove that Christianity contains an anthropology that invites us to rethink the female condition, the complex of having been born, the desire to escape from the dependencies that are the lot of all children and which subject them to various tests. The pages on autogenesis are among the most brilliant and the most instructive.

The diversity of subjects tackled might dishearten the reader; but it proves the author has many interests. His thought is nevertheless unitary. Provided he is dealing with precisely defined anthropological structures, he wishes to give an account of the maximum representation of self or others. Assisting him in his investigations are the chief thinkers of Greek antiquity as well as historians, psychologists, sociologists, psychoanalysts, phenomenologists and more.

It will be noted that the author concentrates his efforts on two religions only. He refuses to discuss all religions (even the best-known ones). He gives the reason for this: all too often similarities between religions conceal crucial differences and lead us to think there are common meanings which in reality must be reconsidered in their diversity. As for claiming that a philosophy of religion is merely a disguised apologia, this kind of objection is not unheard of but it can be refuted. Where faith is involved, philosophers will refrain from taking sides. They know themselves; they wish to remain independent. And they have no right to set aside their judgement, so long as they hold to descriptions that are objective and disinterested.

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Translated from the French by Jean Burrell