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THE WESTERN CONSTRUCTION OF RELIGION

A review of Daniel Dubuisson, *The Western Construction of Religion: Myths, Knowledge, and Ideology*. Tr. by William Sayers. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003. 244 pp. ISBN: 0-80187320-7.

DUBUISSON OPENS WITH A CAUTIONARY NOTE: the history of religions is itself a historical phenomenon (2). He warns us that this history appeared at a particular time (the second half of the nineteenth century) and a particular place (western Europe). Dubuisson asks us to be aware of the problems in any such history. Writing such a history means making choices: has the history of religion erased its roots and defined a body of concepts and methods that facilitate the inquiry? Or, has the history of religion itself been western? As Dubuisson puts it: "The history of religions, despite its scientific pretensions, initially appears in the intellectual history of the West as the heir to a Western vision of the world and of humanity that was itself determined by its Christian antecedents" (39).

Dubuisson begins with the central concept that religion is a western concept, and that it becomes the concept through which the West looks at and conceptualizes the world. Facts are not in themselves religious, they *become* religious when individuals isolate them by invoking certain criteria and then apply this designation. It is therefore necessary, Dubuisson argues, to say that the West is religious only in the sense that religion as a *notion* intended to isolate a set of phenomena (which thereafter will be considered homogeneous) is a Western creation. This meta-critical insight is concerned less with the nature of Western religion than with the notions of what religion means, notions that have helped categorize events/ideas as "religious" and write the history of religion. We need to assemble all those facts that we have termed "religious." Dubuisson is therefore more interested in the *process* of "relgioization."

Dubuisson argues that "relgio," as rethought by Christian thinkers, was defined from the very beginning by its claim to difference, by its opposition to other cults. Through its difference, "relgio" set itself up as the "true" religion against

paganism, atheism, heresy, etc. Dubuisson notes that the distinct domain of religion does not exist in all civilizations – that the oppositions such as false versus true religion are themselves Christian concepts. Finally, religion relies on *texts* to find the coherence and homogeneity of religion. A group of scattered texts are ordered into a corpus, which is then identified as the source of religious ideas.

The subject of inquiry in the history of religion, Dubuisson notes, has often been to discover a series of traits that is universally valid. But this means that the Western definition of what “religious” means will have to be applied to non-Western belief systems too. The second route of inquiry has been to replace the Western notion of religion with that of cosmographic formations. This enables us to look at the totality of human activities whose aim is the creation and preservation of all-encompassing symbolic universes. It is this second mode that Dubuisson favours.

After an exploration of the various definitions of religion, Dubuisson argues that we need to respect the structural uniqueness of each cultural continuum, so that comparison should not be at the price of what makes each unique. The reduction of religion to a simplified schema – as has been done in the (Western) history of religion – has meant that, in the search for universally valid “features,” the uniqueness of cultural formations have been destroyed. Thus, when we speak of Greek or Roman religion, we ignore the fact that Latin has no word to designate religion. Dubuisson asks: “in the name of which scientific criteria has it been decided that magic, divination, astrology, horoscopes, pharmacology, alchemy, sorcery, and secret initiatory teachings do not belong to the religious sphere” (73)? Western epistemology either includes them in its definition of religion, or excludes them (while ignoring its own heritage of magic and spiritualism).

Taxonomies of religion function either at the level of binaries (true versus false, revealed versus natural religions) or evolution (natural, artificial, animist religions). Such taxonomies, Dubuisson demonstrates, are almost always ethnocentrically prejudiced. All the academic work published in the field tends to obey the principle of classification. Contemporary epistemology falls into two categories: the fragment and the whole, great theories of religion on the one hand (exemplified by Eliade’s work), and the monograph on the other. Any scientific status of the study of religion is illusory, since it results from a “complex process that mixes together trivial observations, deductions founded on our own intellectual prejudices, and explicatory schemas borrowed from the most narrowly positivist epistemologies” (91).

Exploring “Christianity and the West,” Dubuisson traces the evolution of the

very notion of a “true” religion through the processes of interiorization and universalization. The first process individualized conscience. The second postulated a generic human being, a “disincarnate idealization of an impersonal being” (110). This postulate ignored “various cultural, ethnic, and social points of reference” (*Ibid*). Epistemology, Dubuisson shows, moved from Christian universalism to the universalism of science. The movement begun by Saint Paul to evangelize pagans and to address oneself to all human beings was echoed in the movement of Western science, in the attitude that universalized those categories and values which issued from Western culture alone.

Dubuisson notes that a “vast general topic” (117) has been built around the nucleus of religion. The ideas and general positions that thematized access to reality were themselves inventoried. The general topic contains schema that define the loci from which the interpreter or historian speaks; it provides a hermeneutical scheme. Dubuisson provides an inventory of the topic around which the field of the history of religions has been organized: true religion versus false religion, theism versus materialism and atheism, revealed religion versus natural religion.

Turning to the history of religions, Dubuisson reiterates his central argument: “the history of religions … reveals itself to be not only a Western discipline but a science born of the closing decades of the nineteenth century” (155). Even in the twentieth century, Dubuisson suggests, all explanations (as to why cultures/societies produce religion) that claim to be scientific finally “reduce the infinite variety of reality to a principle or to a unique, ontologically homogeneous cause.” They are nothing less than “real acts of metaphysical aggression” (167). The influential thesis of *Homo religious* is, Dubuisson argues, a derivation from a mythic imagination, but the elements are themselves the result of an ideological development.

Pleading for the substitution of the notion of religion with that of “cosmographic formation,” Dubuisson outlines his three main objectives:

To determine a general concept capable of encompassing the heterogeneous totality of those facts and notions that are currently excluded from the totality that we call “religion” on the basis of Christian theological criteria;

To stimulate contemporary anthropological thought to concern itself with the human condition;

To make obsolete the majority of the debates and categorizations that the history of religions conserves and defends (199-200).

Dubuisson leaves us with certain axioms that (can) function as new ways of reading religion, faith and cultural practices: every cosmographical formation is a world, its own world; all cultures are thereby similar and all are different; the worlds created by human beings are metaphysical worlds; each world is a totality, but contingent, unique and autonomous; belonging to a world itself assumes the form of a world; every world of this kind is a common world in which people live and age together; each world contains our texts, our lives, and our bodies (201).

Dubuisson's work is a Foucauldian exploration of the epistemes that have constructed classificatory grids to slot cultural systems. These grids, Dubuisson demonstrates, proceed from a mythic imagination but take on the character of scientific/objective inquiry. Dubuisson's attention to the rhetorical construction of religion enables him to critique the *discourse* of religiosity itself, a discourse that he conclusively demonstrates to be Western. Although it is a rigorous inquiry into the systems of thought and the history of ideas, *The Western Construction of Religion* may have benefited from a closer examination into the politics of the dissemination of religion and faith-systems. The debate around secularism or "state-religion" that figures prominently in several countries across the world has a lot to do with contemporary geopolitics and is informed by economics and the military rather than by shared cultural beliefs. Thus, an inquiry into the colonial, racial, capitalist and military contexts of the notions of religion – especially in the 20th century – would have added another dimension to what is already a thoughtful book.

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