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`Religione, spiritualità e cura di sé`

ANTOINE VERGOTE AL CONGRESSO DI BARI

MESSAGGIO DI INDIRIZZO ALLA SIPR

Il prof. Vergote ha risposto all'invito a partecipare al simposium in suo onore durante il congresso di Bari con un messaggio che delinea chiaramente l'impostazione da lui data alla psicologia della religione, di cui è un padre fondatore. Di seguito riportiamo anche il discorso tenuto da Jacob A. Belzen durante la celebrazione.

Monsieur le Président et Cher Ami Aletti,
Messieurs et Mesdames de la Société de la Psychologie de la Religion.

Vous me faites un grand honneur en accordant un moment votre attention particulière à mes travaux dans le registre de la psychologie de la religion: Je vous en remercie chaleureusement. Reprendre contact avec votre société, Chers Amis, m'est aussi très agréable, car je suis un vieil ami de votre président-fondateur Mario Aletti. Ensemble nous avons tous deux fait un grand effort intellectuel pour donner à la psychologie de la religion son véridique statut scientifique. Cela n'a pas été simple à l'origine, même si, en Allemagne en particulier où cette psychologie s'est vraiment formé, cette psychologie devait se libérer de deux tendances opposées. Ou bien on cherchait à lui donner un sta-

Signor Presidente e caro Amico Aletti
Signore e signori della Società Italiana di Psicologia della Religione

E per me un grande onore che voi accordiate una particolare attenzione al mio lavoro nell'ambito della psicologia della religione; a voi il mio cordiale ringraziamento. Rinnovare il contatto con la vostra società, cari amici, mi è tanto più gradito perché io sono un vecchio amico del vostro presidente-fondateur Mario Aletti. Entrambi abbiamo dispiegato un grande impegno intellettuale per dare alla psicologia della religione un suo proprio status scientifico. Questo non è stato facile agli inizi, anche perché, in Germania in particolare, dove questa disciplina si è inizialmente costituita, questo ramo della psicologia ha dovuto liberarsi da due tendenze opposte: da una parte si cercava di attri-

tut proprement théologique, ou bien on tendait à en faire une sorte d'anthropologie scientifique qui expliquerait la religion comme le produit quelque peu imaginaire de tendances psychologiques. Dans cette situation culturelle et psychologique, j'ai rencontré en Mario Aletti le collègue universitaire avec qui je pouvais librement collaborer pour faire le travail de l'*observation*, de la *description* et de l'*interprétation* de ce qui est proprement psychologique dans les religions. D'accord avec lui je souligne: dans *les* religions. Car les données psychologiques sont différentes dans les différentes religions; elles sont même un peu différentes dans les différentes grandes époques d'une même grande religion comme l'est le christianisme. Songeons aux grandes catégories psychologiques que sont: l'expérience, le désir, l'angoisse, la conscience morale et la culpabilité. Ces grandes catégories anthropologiques et psychologiques comportent aussi leur part d'éventuels glissements dans la psychopathologie, cela dans la religion comme dans tout ce qui est proprement humain. Songeons aux désirs et ses illusions parfois proprement pathologiques, à la conscience morale et au sentiment morbide de la faute, à la croyance et à l'incapacité même pathologique de s'ouvrir au désir et à la croyance.

Bien penser les catégories psychologiques fondamentales et les situer dans le contexte des humains culturellement différents, cela est une entreprise difficile. L'histoire de la psychologie de la religion le montre. Construire ensuite les instruments qui permettent d'observer avec précision comment différentes personnes vivent pratiquement les complexes dimensions de leur religion, cela a été et cela est toujours la deuxième difficulté d'une psychologie religieuse scientifique. En cela je me suis toujours trouvé très heureux de pouvoir amicalement collaborer avec mon collègue Mario Aletti.

Antoine Vergote - Université de Leuven-Louvain

buirle uno statuto propriamente teologico, e da un'altra si tendeva a farne una sorta d'antropologia scientifica che spiegherebbe la religione come prodotto un po' immaginario di innate tendenze psicologiche. In questa temperie culturale e psicologica io ho trovato in Mario Aletti un collega universitario con il quale apertamente dedicarmi all'*osservazione*, alla *descrizione*, e all'*interpretazione* di ciò che è specificamente psicologico nelle religioni. Come Aletti, anch'io sottolineo il plurale: *nelle* religioni; perché i dati psicologici risultano differenti nelle differenti religioni ed, anzi, sono pure differenti nei diversi periodi di una stessa religione, come per esempio accade per il cristianesimo. Pensiamo alle grandi categorie psicologiche, quali sono l'esperienza, il desiderio, l'angoscia, la coscienza morale e la colpa. Queste grandi categorie antropologiche e psicologiche comportano anche la possibilità di derive verso la psicopatologia: questo vale per la religione come per tutto ciò che è propriamente umano; pensiamo ai desideri e alle loro illusioni, spesso decisamente patologiche, alla coscienza morale e al sentimento morbido della colpa, alla credenza e all'incapacità patologica di aprirsi al desiderio e alla credenza.

Pensare correttamente le categorie psicologiche fondamentali e situarle in contesti umani culturalmente differenti è un compito difficile, come è evidenziato dalla storia della psicologia della religione. Predisporre poi gli strumenti che permettono di osservare con precisione come persone differenti vivano concretamente le complesse dimensioni della loro religione costituisce da sempre la seconda difficoltà di una psicologia religiosa scientifica. In questo percorso ho sempre considerato una felice opportunità quella di poter collaborare con il mio amico e collega Mario Aletti.

*Antoine Vergote,
Università di Leuven-Louvain*

A real psychology of a real religion: Antoine Vergote turning 90 years of age

The task for us, and for me, today, is not quite so easy: how to say something meaningful in only a very few minutes about the work and perhaps the person of a man who can be regarded as a key figure in more than one intellectual movement that swept over Europe during the 20th century, that expanded into the USA and that continue to be of substantial influence in a great number of very different scholarly disciplines? (As many of you know, Vergote's position in the phenomenological and psychoanalytic movements is important and has been very influential: he was personally acquainted with and a partner in dialogue to persons like Ricoeur, Lacan and quite

a number of other celebrities.) How to do justice to the relevance, substance and importance of an author who published more books and articles than most people ever read? How to be fair in less than five minutes when dealing with an oeuvre that is being characterized by its resistance to the tendency to reductionism and sweeping statements that pervades so much of psychology and almost all of the general opinion, an oeuvre that is characterized by its broadening up perspectives and making things far more complicated than they appeared at first, more complicated even than most colleagues realize? And how to do that in the presence of the man himself?

Confronted with this task, I see only two ways out, a wise one and a rather inappropriate one. The wise one would have been to reject the invitation to participate in this panel, to remain silent and thereby to avoid committing a folly. Unfortunately, I was not smart enough to do so when approached about this panel... So, probably I am setting out for a folly now! The second way to deal with the task set, totally inappropriate for a presentation during a scholarly conference, is to abandon any scholarly style and pretention, so not to try to conduct a careful analysis, not to present a balanced view, but to say just something. Therefore, I shall not embark on an effort to talk about Vergote's importance in the diverse scientific fields that he has been active in: philosophy, psychoanalysis and other types of psychology, in clinical practice, theology, and what have you. As is obvious, I have to restrict myself, but even if I restrict myself to psychology of religion only, I still shall not try to come up with a quasi objective assessment of Vergote's work within the Dutch speaking, European and larger international context, although this could and should be done. I shall restrict myself in another way, and speak only personally.

But even this restriction I shall have to restrict immediately further. For what use, besides the enjoyment of listening to anecdotes, would it have for the present audience to hear about my personal memories of this intellectual giant? Before I had read a single line by Vergote, I already knew he was such a giant: at the Dutch university where I trained initially, colleagues even superior in age to Vergote, spoke about him with great respect (and with quite a bit of jealousy too...). When I think back about his performances at scholarly meetings and conferences, I must say that I rarely, perhaps never, witnessed such a combination of personal charisma, superior scholarship and great character. Later, my many discussions (and dinners!) with him have proved of considerable importance to my own development.

But what kind of use would it have to tell such stories in detail? Also, don't think that I am so excited about being on this panel that I have lost my mind or my critical sense, or that because of Vergote's presence here today, I would only dare to praise and flatter him. No one is perfect, not even Vergote, but what use would it have to tell anecdotes about the occasions on which he proved wrong, or to digress about the subjects I did, or doo, not share his opinion on? On the contrary, let me gratefully acknowledge that he was one of my most important teachers and that over the decades, until a few days ago, there has hardly been a conversation with him that has not been instructive to me.

Let me then say right away what I found so impressive about the man and his oeuvre and where I see some of his lasting contributions to the psy-

chology of religion, and again restrict myself to some brief remarks about three issues only:

1. Vergote's work in the psychology of religion is characterized by being both fundamental and applied, both empirical and at the same time theoretical. He never grew tired of pointing out the problematic status of the science of psychology, because he continued to be aware of the diffuse status of the object of such a science: the "psyche", whatever that may be. Even after the establishment of a so called modern and empirical psychology, about 130 years ago, the status of the psyche is as contested as it has always been. Vergote never grew tired of reminding that the psyche is that realm of reality that results from the encounter between a human pulsional body on the one hand and a culture on the other hand. Therefore, the psyche is a dynamic historical reality, it is not the same always and everywhere, it is not an object like the object of sciences, it is not a stone or anything other natural, nor is it an object like those studied in the humanities, it is not just a text or another product of human activity, but it is that what makes human action in the natural world to what it is. The psychic realm is the realm of what moves humans directly and ultimately in their hopes, fantasies, shames, desires, it is that realm that motivates human behavior, attitudes, cognition, emotion, etc. and that imbues these with affectivity. Therefore, Vergote resists conceptions of psychology as cognitive only, he refuses to reduce psychology to, e.g., neurology, he defies ideas about the human being as primarily a meaning giving entity, he contradicts opinions about human beings as being first and foremost rational, he rejects metaphors of man shaped after the model of an information processing computer, and so on. Certainly inspired by psychoanalytic theory, Vergote never joins even psychoanalysis naively, but balances, enlightens and synthesizes this kind of reasoning with his knowledge, both profound and extensive, of anthropology in a general sense, primarily western-philosophical, but also cultural and historical, even when he is writing about clinical work.
2. Vergote's is a highly complex stand in what is classically called the issue of the relationship between faith and reason. Although he is a religious man himself, his aim is not to defend any form of religion. He has been striving for neutrality and what he calls objectivity. He diverges here significantly from many other important psychologists of religion, past and present: according to Vergote any apologetic employment of psychology is impossible, and wherever you find it practiced, it is a misconception. Psychology does not lead to faith in god or to any other form of religious practice,

neither does it lead to apostasy (and whenever such seems to happen, Vergote would inquire into the psychic dimension of what has been happening, not to affirm or contradict, but in order to analyze and to understand). With Vergote you find described how psychoanalytic treatment can correlate with fading away of religious practices or convictions, without any evaluation from a religious position. In his work, you even find elaborations of his being aware that religious affiliation and engagement can have specific risks to what is usually being seen as mental health. In line with the first issue I mentioned, Vergote resists simple notions of mental health: according to him, mental health is not an adaptation to any statistical norm within any given subculture. Psychology needs to elaborate its own criteria, depending on the actual nature of the psyche, not of those of society. (So, psychology is not sociology, nor the other way round.) In his marvelous and classic *Dette et desire*, one finds an in-depth treatise of several catholic mystics, among others of Teresa of Avila, which has been erroneously interpreted by theologians and other religious readers as if he were saying Teresa would have been a hysteric patient. I admit that oftentimes Vergote is not easy to follow, but this is precisely the opposite of what he is saying!

3. Finally, and a bit related to this, is the issue with which he raised substantial attention in the last century: his controversial critique of the idea that the human being would be naturally religious, the idea that everyone is religious in some way, or that being religious would be better than not being religious, as such would be in accordance with the human nature. This idea is cherished in the Western tradition, you find it throughout: in theology, in philosophy, in all kinds of psychology and in all kind of popularized talk about religion, even in all kinds of so called current empirical research on spirituality as distinguished from religion. Vergote's comment on this idea, this apriori, is remarkably short and dry: "it is just an idea".... He defends rather a position that, by nature, human beings are neither religious nor irreligious, that becoming religious or irreligious is both an option, and that realizing either option is always approximately only. To take an example from the tradition that dominated the West for so long: *if* people come into contact with a tradition in which faith is important – like in Christianity, in other religious traditions things are radically different – human beings oscillate between believing and unbelieving, and any position an individual takes on this continuum at a certain point in her of his life will always be a dynamic constellation, characterized by affective struggles, by the need to overcome

resistances of various kinds, by both progression and retrogression.

Believe me: if you made your way through the depth of analysis you can find with Vergote, much of other psychology of religion resembles mainly bloodless talk.

Jacob A. Belzen,
Univ. of Amsterdam