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Editor of series: Gligorije Zaječaranović
Address: Univerzitetski trg 2, 18000 Niš, YU
Tel: +381 18 547-095, Fax: +381 18 547-950

NEW BOOKS REVIEW

BUCHBESPRECHUNGEN

CATHEDRAL OF LEARNING*

Djuro Susnjić's *Religija (Religion)* is a major work, both in its scope, volume and theoretical, didactic ambitions. Most certainly, it may take years of careful reading, interpretation and discussion before this book is about to be duly acknowledged in our scholarly, cultural and educational community. Great effort which was invested in creating this work will, therefore, be adequately rewarded only after an equal amount of energy is committed to its reading and critical scrutiny. Indeed, Susnjić's *Religija* is, thus far, the most important, comprehensive and ambitious theoretical work on religion written in Serbian language.

Although the sociological approach to religious phenomena is predominant in this book, it could not, and should not, be reduced to only one academic discipline. More precisely, it pertains to the type of scholarly literature that Germans labeled as *Allgemeine Religionswissenschaft*. According to the American scholar Joseph Kitagawa, there are, in fact, two kinds of sociology of religion: one is derived from sociology, and the other is based on the general "science of religions". Notwithstanding the formal characteristics of Susnjić's book, I would contend that it is more of a work in "religiology" than sociology, resembling perhaps Van der Leeuw's *Religion in Essence and Manifestation* or Wach's *Sociology of Religion*. Susnjić's two-volume treatise will, furthermore, be a precious resource at the universities, but again, one should not reduce his *Religion* to its didactic function only.

Speaking of the book's structure, it is apparent that its two volumes are thematically rather different. The first part is divided into three separate segments - Concept, Structure, Functions, while the second volume is composed of the following chapters: Meanings, Theories, Intertwinings, Encounters and, not accidentally, Selected Bibliography which is quite impressive. Each of these chapters consists of several carefully selected topics, and this is clearly indicated by their very titles.

In the first part of the book, Djuro Susnjić addresses some predominantly methodological and sociological subjects. The first chapter (*Concept*) deals with the definition of religion - what is (or is not) religion, whereby the author proposes and explains his own, original definition: "the belief in an absolute and mystical power...". This chapter will be a true delight for methodologists, because it contains the most comprehensive definition of religion available in this sort of literature. One may perhaps compare this definition only to Geertz's analysis developed in his essay *Religion as a Cultural System*. This section is followed by the discussion of the typology of religions,

* Djuro Susnjić, *Religija*, vols. I-II, Cigoja stampa, Beograd, 1998

classification of the science of religion and polarization between theism and atheism. In *Structure*, Susnjić has discussed the topics such as myth, ritual, experience, symbols, values, norms, holy figures, holy communities, sacred time and sacred space. Finally, in the last chapter of the first volume, he deals with the cognitive, integrative, regulative, prophetic and ideological functions of religion, as well as with its role in providing communication, identity, identification, orientation, adaptation, compensation and legitimization.

In the second volume, Susnjić analyzes the relationships between religion, on the one hand, and social structure, family, politics, nation, education and economy, on the other (*Meanings*). In *Intertwinings* he, again, compares religion with the rationalist philosophy, science, art, ethics and ecology. Between these two chapters, he devotes more attention to various theories of religion within his meta-theoretical discussion of the scholarly conceptions regarding the origin, structure, development, truth and value. In the fourth chapter (*Encounters*), the author of *Religion* deals, in some more detail, with the contemporary socio-political topics, such as religious dialogue and tolerance, schism within Christianity, ecumenism, war, violence and our own tragedy.

As a special supplement at the end of the book, we find the selected bibliography of domestic and foreign works on religion, comprising even 30 pages. Each volume is, moreover, appended by an index of names. Susnjić suggests a very thorough selection of literature containing numerous works from special disciplines: philosophy of religion, anthropology and sociology of religion, psychology, theology, as well as encyclopedia, dictionaries, collections of essays and bibliographies. This concluding part of the book is, of course, a special value for researchers, students and all those who are interested in religious issues.

Addressing the unique discourse of Djuro Susnjić, we should bear in mind his very personal, subjective attitude towards various theoretical problems. In almost every sentence, we feel the strong presence of the author, we, as it were, hear his inner voice. This, I condent, is a Nietzschean inner drama of philosophical inquiry, which involves the specific dose of pathos. Hence, for example, one finds many exclamation marks on these pages, which is not characteristic of other scholarly works. While expressing his most profound theoretical and philosophical assumptions, Susnjić, in fact, takes poetic care of his own words. It seems that we are dealing here with a unique sociological and philosophical type of hermeneutics. On the other hand, we may hardly find any passage in this book where there are no aphorisms, pithy remarks or sayings which essentially express the nature of the discussed problem. Susnjić's hermeneutics is primarily the Hermean art of mediating between the ideal and real worlds with the help of a specific mode of discourse. Such a discourse is, indeed, necessary to this author in order to express his subtle approach to religious phenomena.

Mircea Eliade was probably closest to this kind of discourse when he spoke about the "creative hermeneutics" as a unique method of studying religion. He defined hermeneutics as an inquiry, a quest for the meanings that some religious idea or phenomenon have had over the course of time. Eliade believed that this hermeneutics was creative because it influenced a scholar's own existence. Faced by the less known meanings and modes of living, the interpreter alters his own way of life, his existential condition. That person, as it were, goes through the process of hermeneutic "initiation". Moreover, such a hermeneutics is creative because it reveals some values that were not obvious on the level

of direct experience. In this sense, it pretends to be the "complete" method of the humanities, opposing the mere specializations within the particular scholarly disciplines.

In methodological terms, Susnjić opts (if not for the described form of hermeneutics) for the more general, integral, holistic approach to religion. Formally speaking, this method is ostensibly eclectic, but in its essence, it is actually holistic. In accordance with his spiritual orientation, Susnjić assesses the positive concept of science and the positivistic approach to religion. Science and religion are two independent systems of ideas, beliefs and practices that have their own, special criteria and truths. Instead of the specialized scientific worldview, he supports a more general, integral *Weltanschauung*. This holistic approach may actually be well illustrated by religious doctrines themselves. In any case, this is the quest for the new humanism which is necessary in this age of "all possible divisions" - i.e., specialization and indifference permeating the science, scholars and intellectuals.

However, even in the religious world, not just in the scholarly one, things are far from being ideal and perfect. The scientists are also prone to deceptions and blind ideologies. Susnjić, therefore, makes clear the distinction between an institutional, public and official religiosity (i.e. religion as a church or ideology) and private, subjective, "underground" religiosity, putting the former under his critical scrutiny. In other words, he distinguishes the "official" from "unofficial" forms of belief, and church from faith, while his affinity is directed towards religious individualism, an unofficial religious culture, or even mysticism. However, what is specially interesting here is that this aspect of religiosity - which is mostly related to people's interior life - evades the scholarly investigation, including psychology of religion. At any rate, religious life is very complex and may not, as Susnjić rightfully remarks, be understood or comprehended by only one science or discipline.

I believe that it would not be inappropriate to say that Susnjić, like his European and American predecessors (Max Mueller, Eliade, Van der Leeuw et al.), lays, in his modestly called "textbook", the solid foundation for the general science of religion. He is probably closest to the hermeneutical and existentialist-phenomenological orientation, even though he ascribes the greatest significance to sociological approach. Susnjić, furthermore, assesses the concept, structure, functions and meaning of religion *in general*, and not some specific religious tradition. One of his main theses is that all religions of the world, like all languages, have the same basic structure and functions, notwithstanding other differences. His theoretical construction has the form of a "cathedral": it is, indeed, the cathedral of concepts and learning, which makes understandable why he regards Christianity as the model for all other religious traditions.

Djuro Susnjić's *Religion* is the book of great theoretical value, with an immense methodological and methodical significance. Great effort, knowledge and experience of the subtle scholar and researcher were invested in its creation. His every thought, sentence is not only scolded to its stylistic perfection, but personally experienced in hours, days and years of reading, researching, writing and working with students. Our scholars and professors will, accordingly, have an opportunity to read Susnjić's *opus magnum* in its depth, to analyze it and recommend to their colleagues, students and other experts - including all curious seekers for the absolute and mystical powers.

Milan Vukomanović