

THE CHRISTIAN ORIGIN OF THE WEST

On Maurice Sachot, *Quand le christianisme a changé le monde*, Paris: Odile Jacob, 2007

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The Enlightenment made the separation between State and Church one of modernity's central political paradigms. Yet, that separation is much older. In fact, it was already the project of the very religion the Enlightenment was fighting against. As a consequence of Christianity's hegemonic position at the end of 4th century, a principal split was introduced within the age-old non-distinction of politics (*civitas*) and religion (*religio*). That split redefined each of the terms as well as their mutual relation and formed a new paradigm dominating western civilization till now. In sum, it created the West as such. Thus the central thesis in Maurice Sachot's book, entitled (in translation): *When Christianity has changed the world*.¹

To argue his provocative thesis, Sachot retakes the history of Christianity's origin and describes it as a mixture of three components – Diaspora Judaism, Hellenism and what he called 'Romanity' [romanité]' (78) – following one another in time, each later one redefining the earlier one.² But only the last and most dominant one, the Roman component, reshaped the Judaic and Hellenistic forms of Christianity into a genuine (i.e. Roman) '*religio*'. And only then, the West's paradigm mentioned above has been created.

Concerning the first component, the Judaic one, Maurice Sachot stresses that the decisive reception of Jesus' message is to be situated, not in the milieu of a homogeneous 'Hebrew' Judaism as dominant within the boundaries of Israel's territory, but of a Hellenistic one as dominant in the Diaspora (chapter 9). Very soon, by the agency of Paul and other Diaspora Christians, the 'Jesus movement' emancipated from strict Judaism (i.e. from Torah obedience, Temple cult, circumcision, et cetera) in order to make the movement accessible for anyone, for both 'Jews and Greeks' (Gal 3: 28). If its institutional structure was modeled on the synagogue, it was in the sense it had in the Diaspora where it was the *unique* centre of the

¹ Maurice Sachot, *Quand le christianisme a changé le monde*, Paris : Odile Jacob, 2007. All page numbers in the text refer to this edition. The English translation of the quotes is mine (MdK).

² In fact, to a larger extent, Maurice Sachot method is the one introduced by Régis Debray and entitled 'mediology' (29-40; 85; 140; 225). It claims the perception of a term to prevail over its content. So, it describes history by analyzing the way in which the main terms of a period or culture are commonly understood, and how the evolution of this reception have changed the meaning of the term and, subsequently, of the reality these terms stand for. See : Régis Debray (1991), *Cours de médiologie générale*, Paris: Gallimard; see particularly chapter 4 ('Le mystère de l'incarnation') and chapter 5 ('L'expérimentation chrétienne').

community, contrary to the situation in Israel that had the Temple as a second – or, more exactly, first – center. From the Diaspora communities, the Christian ones copied also the political structure including the *senat* (*gerousia*), the *presbuteroi* and the *ethnarkès* (bishop) (144).

Diaspora Judaism, limited to reading and commenting holy texts, felt the need to explain itself with regard to that other big tradition of ‘reading and interpreting texts’ flourishing all over the empire, namely philosophy as it was ‘institutionalized’ in a variety of schools. This confrontation had given a proper Diaspora textual tradition, the Sapiential one³, performing itself as a Jewish philosophy competing with the other philosophies of its time. Being the milieu in which it was prominently received, the Jesus movement soon took itself the shape of a ‘philosophical school’ (111). It is significant that Paul, for lack of success in the synagogue in Ephese, went teaching with Tyrannos who run a philosophical school in that town (169; see: Ac 19:9-10). Even the terminology of early Christianity reveals its ‘philosophical’ nature: Jesus was a ‘master/teacher’ (*didaskalos*) teaching to ‘disciples’ (*mathetai*: those who learn); to become Christian one had to follow didactic lessons, the ‘*didaskalia*’, of which the content was summarized in the *Didachè*, one of the earliest Christian writings after the New Testament (239). It not a surprise, then, that all apologists of the 2nd century were ‘philosophers’. They claimed *christianismos* to be the ‘true philosophy’: not one embracing the debate with all other ‘searchers for truth and wisdom’, but one pretending to have the ultimate answer to *all* philosophy (applying the Jewish idea of fulfillment – fulfillment of the Scriptures, fulfillment of the Messianic expectations [260] – to the variety of the philosophical research of that time).⁴

When this truth ceased to perform itself in reference to philosophy, when Christianity pretended to be not simply the true philosophy but the true *religion*, things fundamentally changed. This occurred in the Christian communities of ‘Africa’ (Tunisia), one of the most Romanized parts of the Empire, where the intellectual language was Latin instead of Greek and the intellectuals lawyers and jurists instead of philosophers. Only there, Christianity obtained its more formal, ritual and institutionalized shape. In that milieu, around 200 AD, Tertullian wrote his apologetic works, defining for the first time Christianity as a religion. (Philosophical) *christianismos* became *religio christiana*: the ‘*vera religio veri dei*’.⁵

³ To the Sapiential tradition belong the so called deuterocanonical books such as Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Ecclesiasticus (Sirach), Wisdom, and Song of Songs.

⁴ Sachot refers to Tatian (end of the 2nd century) who, in that ground, rejected *all* philosophy, philosophy *as such* (264).

⁵ Tertullian, *Apologeticum* 24: 2.

To Tertullian contemporaries, ‘*vera religio*’ (*true religion*) must have sound as nonsensical (108-109). For, in the eyes of the Romans, *religio* – a Latin word without any equivalent in any other language⁶ – had nothing to do with truth, but anything with age-old rituals to be performed as scrupulously as possible.⁷ That cult, indispensable for the maintenance of the Roman *res publica*, was meant to honor the gods, who were considered as co-citizens, be it of immortal nature. Nothing in Rome’s *religio* forced it to be against the gods of others. On the contrary, it supposed itself capable of including the gods of all conquered people. Promoting the own *religio* as true and declaring the other ones as false made simply no sense to the Romans.

Tertullian was the first to promote the contrary. Translating *christianismos* into *religio*, Christianity ceased to be simply a philosophy, a way of life or *weltanschauung*. It took the identity of a political institute of universal scope and applied for the position of delivering divine ground to the empire. The success of Tertullian’s oeuvre procured a new self-definition of Christianity.

So, when at the beginning of the 4th century, Constantine embraced Christianity, he did it in its quality of *religio* and considered it the new founding ideology for Rome’s empire. But things turned out not exactly in the way he and later Christian emperors had foreseen. The idea of ‘fulfillment’ made Christianity suppose to be *itself* the ‘*civitas perfecta*’ realizing the ‘*societas perfecta*’, i.e. the ‘true society’ – the Church – lead by the pope and leaving the existing, untrue society beheaded (110). Although *de facto*, the emperor remained the ruler of the world, *de iure*, the religion he supported was *not necessarily* supporting him and his *civitas*. An actual split was installed between religion and existing society. In the eastern part of the crumbling Roman empire, that split was less visible and effective, contrary to the western, Latin speaking part. It is that split that dominated – and, as Sachot states, defined – the West for more than a millennium.

Sachot’s book helps, referring to ‘Christianity’, to distinguish the different levels that resonate in this term. The Judaic Jesus movement is not the philosophical *christianismos*, and neither is the latter to be confused with Roman *religio christiana*. But the books shows as well how such confusion has become inherent with regard to both Christianity’s identity and the use it

⁶ Of the Latin word ‘*religio*’ no equivalent can be found in Greek, Hebrew, Aramaic or any other language. So, for what we still call ‘religion’, having borrowed the term from the Romans, these languages simply have no term.

⁷ ‘Scrupulous attitude’ is the proper meaning of *religio*, a Latin word which does not derive from ‘*religare*’ (to renew connection, ‘*liga*’), as a late antique, Christian etymology (by Lactantius) claims, but from ‘*religere*’: to consider, to read, to perform (*legere*) over and over again (*re-*) (95-96; 303).

made of it during its history. Both aspects make Sachot's insight unavoidable for any reflection on Christianity and its position in Western civilization.