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The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion, by Marcel Gauchet

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THE DISENCHANTMENT OF THE WORLD: A POLITICAL HISTORY OF RELIGION. By Marcel Gauchet. Translated from the French by Oscar Burge. New French Thought. Princeton: Princeton University, 1997. Pp. xv + 228. \$24.95.

First published in France in 1985, this generally reliable English translation introduces an important voice into the North American sociological/philosophical debate concerning the role of religion in the shaping of Western societies. In this densely written book, the patient reader is rewarded with a rare tour de force, an original and thoughtprovoking general theory of secularization. Standing on the shoulders of Durkheim and Weber (from whom he derives his title and his inspiration), G. argues that religion itself is the source of the secularization of human civilization. In the French Unilinearist tradition, he posits a pre-neolithic "primeval religion" (33) wherein primitive humanity swam in a pantheistic sea of divine presence. In this world inundated by mystery, all phenomena were animated by the gods. Humans related easily to this reality through magic, rite, incantation, dance, etc. Yet this nascent religious mentality contained the seeds of its own destruction, for human attempts to experience the divine lead to an inexorable process of investigation, analysis, and understanding. The desire to lift the veil and see the divine allowed humans to see instead "a series of phenomena rigidly determined by sufficient reason," i.e. the laws of nature (62). To preserve the sacred while continuing the investigative process, humans began to posit the transcendence of God and the autonomy of nature.

This insight gave rise to two fundamental modes of reflection. The first was an investigative human curiosity which took the natural world as a field of exploration--the birth of scientific method. The second was the religious construct of a parallel world from which the divine intervened periodically in the natural world. The transcendentalization of the divine, and the concentration of all that is pure, good, and holy in a single God mark the human exit from paradise and the entrance into history, where monotheism would support the view that the natural world is a place of human effort to effect a historical journey through and, ultimately, beyond visible reality to that "other world" of God. In this alienation of the sacred G. sees the source of all dualistic religious and philosophical constructs, from Plato's theory of forms to the distinction between the mortal body and the immortal soul.

In G.'s treatment of the Judeo-Christian tradition, some readers will find points of disagreement with particular analyses, yet G. does intrigue. Judaism advanced the process of distancing God from the world of matter, change, and confusion. Christianity would paradoxically complete this movement by affirming the utter transcendence of God from the world in the doctrine of the Incarnation. God became a human being precisely in order to bridge the yawning chasm between heaven and earth, yet the Messiah was rejected and left to die a lonely and miserable death. It was only as the invisible Spirit within the private bounds of individual conscience that God would continue to be present to persons and to offer them eternal life in a paradise separate from an increasingly secular world.

For this reason, G. calls Christianity the "religion for departing from religion" (101). G. proposes that Christianity ultimately frees people from all mediating structures of organized religion even as it encourages human curiosity to subdue and possess a disenchanted world. He describes this latter process as the rise of politics. Prehistorical religious ritual gave birth to social organization in the form of cultic priesthood tied to tribal leadership; with the distancing of God, this office evolved over time into the political state. Just as science is the outgrowth of disenchanted reverence, so politics is the secularized modern variant of cultic life.

There is a Gallic nostalgie in G.'s account of this stow. Rather than proclaim God's death, G. relates an even sadder report: humanity has driven God into exile. At the outset, G. announces his atheism, yet by the end, amidst evident reverence for the Incarnation of the God-man Jesus Christ, one suspects that G. is actually a French intellectual agnostic. He bemoans the sacral emptiness of modernity, and he seems to hope for the eschatological victory of God. Between these two poles he would have us stand, unwilling to go back, unable to go forward, humans after all, promised wholeness by an unrecognized divinity, hanging on a tree, suspended between a distant heaven and a disenchanted earth.

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