

Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce. *Forme culturali del cristianesimo nascente. Scienze umane, Nuova serie 2. Brescia, Morcelliana: 2005. Pp. 202. ISBN: 88-372-2084-7. €18,00.*

1. This very interesting book presents an anthropological inquiry into the origins of Christianity. The authors examine the cultural patterns that Jesus and the earlier Christian groups adopted to realise their religious projects and to organise their life in the world (p. 9). Destro and Pesce focus in particular on social macrostructures, like the households, the voluntary associations and discipleship, as well as on specific elements, for example the terminology used by Paul to define the members of the *ekklesiai*. The sequence of the themes studied in the present essay is not chronological, but thematic. It is composed of six chapters and eighteen pages of bibliography.
2. The first chapter (“La pluralità delle forme aggregative e il discepolato iniziatico giovanista”) is centred on the model of discipleship in John’s Gospel. According to the scholars, this model implies a complex and dynamic relationship between the leader and his followers (p. 23); it consists of two opposite ideals (the adhesion to the teacher’s guide and the opposition to the world, p. 39), and it is characterised by the concept of improvement (p. 34). In fact Jesus first prepares and forms his disciples, by his acts and his teaching, and then he initiates them by means of the final rite of “breath of the Spirit” (John 20:19-23). It is, as the authors stress, a true process of initiation by which the disciples can live the religious experience of “rebirth”, precisely the “rebirth from above”, in order to be able to enter the Kingdom of God (p. 47).
3. In the second chapter, entitled “Le comunità paoline di santi e fratelli”, Destro and Pesce study Paul’s project about the communities he founded. They suggest that the way in which the Apostle refers to the members of the *ekklesiai*, “saints and brothers”, is particularly revealing (p. 49). The adjective “saint”, the scholars show, specifies the concept of “brother”, because it is the transformation of the individual, through the sacred divine power, that founds the brotherhood: only the “saints” can be “brothers” (p. 65-66).
4. In the third chapter (“Gesù di fronte all’*oikos*: conflitto e ospitalità”), the authors analyse discipleship in Luke’s Gospel, especially its relation with the household. It is, as Destro and Pesce affirm, a dialectical relation. In fact, the itinerant followers of Jesus leave their families, their occupations and their goods, but they have a structural relation with the *oikoi*, because they need the household for their sustenance (p. 90). Like the poor, Jesus’ disciples are unable to participate in various strategies of alliances, political protection and social integration (p. 96-97). In this section, the discussion about the anthropological concept of household is really noteworthy. The exposition of recent researches about Luke’s vocabulary to render the different types of houses where Jesus and his disciples found hospitality (p. 91) is also very useful.
5. Chapters 4 and 5 are dedicated to the theme of sacrifice. In the fourth chapter (“Colpe, riti, sacrifici”), the authors illustrate and discuss the major anthropological studies on sacrifice and its features (V. Valeri, C. Grottanelli), as well as the sacrificial rituals in the Jewish world; they point to the works of B. J. Malina with his conception of “life effect” and the model of the “patron-client” relationship, and to those of M. Douglas about the norms on sacrifices in *Leviticus*. In the fifth chapter (“Gesù e la remissione dei peccati”), we are faced with Jesus’ conception of sacrifice. Destro and Pesce emphasize that the central idea in Jesus’ message is the forgiveness of sins, conceived in the tradition of the cancellation of debts as articulated in the biblical ideal of the Jubilee. According to the scholars, what Jesus asks is a forgiveness of sins as

an alternative system to expiatory sacrifice (p. 132). In order to obtain the cancellation of sins by God, there is only one condition: that the debtor, in his turn, should initiate a process of annulment of debts (cf. the parable of the two slaves in Matt 18:23-35). It is a sort of “chain reaction mechanism oriented to the re-establishment or to the creation of an ideal order” (p. 139). This condition is necessary in the light of Jesus’ eschatological perspective: “the imminence of the last judgment requires the chain reaction of reciprocal collective pardon”; those who escape this mechanism will undergo God’s punishment (pp. 149-151).

6. The sixth and last chapter (“Conflitti e soluzioni dei conflitti nel primo cristianesimo”) focuses on anthropological interpretations of the conflicts. Correctly, the scholars underline the complexity of the nature of the conflicts, which are not reducible to mere contrasts. That, however, includes a system of symbols and norms (p. 155). Destro and Pesce limit their analysis to John’s Gospel and show that, from the beginning, this Gospel is characterized by the idea that Jesus is constantly in danger (p. 159). On one side, the sociological presupposition of these contrasts does not belong to the world of Jesus, but to that of the Johannine community, who lived in strong opposition to the Jews (p. 162). On the other side, the author of this Gospel aims to reveal the real adversary of Jesus, that is the “Prince of this world”, Satan (p. 168). The two scholars explain why we are dealing with this stratification of readings.

7. After their *Antropologia delle origini cristiane* (1995, 2005³) and *Come nasce una religione* (2000), Adriana Destro and Mauro Pesce, Italian pioneers of the anthropological approach in the field of the primitive Christianity, offer a new and significant contribution about the origins and the development of the Jesus movement. So we can welcome this book that is characterised by the harmonistic presence of two different approaches: the anthropological and the exegetical analyses of early Christian texts. This fusion of methods produces fruitful results, because it is not limited to the historical significance of the words and the concepts used in the texts, but it explores more profound levels and implicit connotations familiar to ancient authors and their readers.

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