



M. Pesce, *Il cristianesimo, Gesù e la modernità:  
Una relazione complessa*

by  
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This book aims at a re-reading of both the Bible and the history of Christianity. It does so not from the apologetic perspective of theological approaches to these topics. It rather takes the sober distance that is characteristic of comparative religious studies and historical research. Its author, Mauro Pesce, is among the leading scholars in the field of early Christianity, its relation to Hebraism and the figure of Jesus. This book gives an update of earlier research<sup>1</sup> in the context of an encompassing view on the development of Christianity from its beginnings in antiquity to its present form which is a fruit of its interaction, for not to say conflict, with what Pesce calls “modernity” (*modernità*). In this context it is striking that he – as far as I can see – completely avoids the word “enlightenment” (*illuminismo*) to characterize the central factor of the fundamental changes that Christianity has been undergoing.

The overarching concept under which Pesce deals with Christianity is “symbolic system” (*sistema simbolico*). A symbolic system is defined as «the totality of spatial and temporal, textual, figurative, linguistic, conceptual, scientific and mythical representations, which organize and determine the life connected with it and the mental representations» (p. 19). A symbolic system should, thus, represent «the extreme complexity of the natural and historical reality and of human experience in a somewhat uniform mode» (p. 19). Three symbolic systems enter into consideration: the ancient Greek-Roman system, which in a long process was replaced by the ancient Christian system, which

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<sup>1</sup> At places, this is tangible, when e.g. “last century” (*secolo scorso*) does not mean the 20<sup>th</sup>, but rather the 19<sup>th</sup> century (cf. p. 191).

in turn – and this is one of the central theses of the book – has been replaced by the cultural system of modernity. Here one has to keep in mind that although philosophical and theological changes play a role in the replacement of cultural systems, it consists mainly in wider cultural modifications that determine the life of society. Pesce is convinced that «modernity has produced a cultural hiatus of enormous dimensions, a turn that marks a point of no return of the evolutionary history of human beings, comparable to the Neolithic revolution» (p. 20). Despite this fundamental turn, we observe still remains of the old symbolic system that are surviving.

The theological pillars of the ancient Christian system were first Christology and the theory of Trinity, and second the Christian Bible that consisted of the New Testament and of what then became the “Old Testament”, i.e. the Hebrew Bible read from a Christian perspective. Politically, God appears as the King of the Universe. The replacement of the Greek-Roman cultural system took several centuries and reached its theological climax in Western theology with St. Augustine (354-430). In the East, this was achieved by Byzantine theology. The pro-Christian legal corpora of the emperors Theodosius I (347-395) and Justinian I (ca. 482-565) together with a public iconography and the Christian organization of space and time completed the picture.

The formation of the modern symbolic system that replaced the ancient Christian is characterized by four factors: 1) epistemological universalism that transcends specific cultural boundaries; 2) the change of life associated with the creation of the modern state; 3) connected with this is the profound change of the conception of the sacred and its relation to politics; 4) the encounter with other cultures that among other things leads to comparative religious studies; 5) the Hebrew presence in the field of theology puts into question the Christianization of the Hebrew Bible and of Judaism. Pesce analyses these factors in a way that shows his immense erudition in the field. Of particular interest for him and of great utility to the readers is his analysis in Chapter 2 of the Christian transformation of the Hebrew Bible into the Christian “Old Testament”. Only in the late 60s of the last century, did theologians generally acknowledge this as a hermeneutical shortcoming. The third Chapter gives a fascinating history of the concept of heresy, a concept that was completely missing in the first 150 years of Christianity.

The fourth chapter is devoted to the influence of science on the change of the cultural system. The hero is Galilei and the sacred text, as it were, is Galileo’s letter to the Grand Duchess Cristina of Tuscany

(1615). Already in 2005, Pesce had written a book on the new way to biblical hermeneutics that supposedly began with Galileo and the present chapter is understood as an update to it. In his letter to Cristina, Galileo separates science and religion and shows the possibility of their co-existence. His central thesis is: «the truth of Scripture is not scientific, but only religious» (p. 86). As we know, Galilei did not convince the Holy Inquisition and it took the Catholic Church more than three centuries to accept that science is an enterprise completely different from and independent of religion. The letter to Cristina, published for the first time in 1635 or 1636, played – as Pesce convincingly shows – a central role in the discussions following Galileo’s being sentenced to indefinite imprisonment in 1633. Pesce, however, is wrong that the condemnation of several books that represented Copernicanism, by the Holy Congregation of the Index on March 5, 1616 was «never published» (*quella condanna, che del resto non era mai stata pubblicata*, p. 119). In reality, the decree of the Congregation was printed and distributed. It can even be downloaded on the internet. Not “published” was only what had happened a week earlier, on February 26, 1616. On that day, Galileo was summoned to the Holy Office by the Cardinal Inquisitor Robert Bellarmine and forced to abjure Copernicanism.

Given the central role that Pesce attributes to Galileo’s letter to Cristina for the development of a new Bible hermeneutics, one should not lose sight of the important role of Georg Joachim Rheticus (1514-1574), a protestant friend and private student (1539-1541) of Copernicus<sup>2</sup>. In 1540, Rheticus published a first sketch of Copernicus’ theory. He furthermore got the permission to take his Master’s *opus magnum* to the press. When he left Copernicus in 1541, the manuscript of *De revolutionibus* was in his baggage, and he succeeded by having it published in 1543. In Rheticus’ baggage, however, there already was a defense of Copernicanism against theological attacks. This text contains all aspects that Galileo will make more than 60 years later in his letter to Cristina. Unfortunately, Rheticus’ text was printed only anonymously in 1651<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> For Rheticus’ role cf. G. Wolters, *The Silence of the Wolves, or, Why it Took the Holy Inquisition Seventy-Three Years to Ban Copernicanism*, in W. Neuber-T. Rahn-C. Zittel (eds.), *The Making of Copernicus: Early Modern Transformations of the Scientist and His Science*, Brill, Leiden-Boston 2015, pp. 42-63.

<sup>3</sup> We owe its identification to the Dutch historian Reijer Hooykaas. See R. Hooykaas, *G. J Rheticus’ Treatise on Holy Scripture and the Motion of the Earth with Translation, Annotations, Commentary and Additional Chapters on Ramus-Rheticus and the Development of the Problem before 1650*, North-Holland Publishing Company, Amsterdam 1984.

The fifth chapter gives a fascinating survey about the development of the conception of tolerance in its various forms. Clearly, tolerance did not originate in Christianity, which owes its very existence to the lack of tolerance towards Hebrews. Even Locke, whose *Epistola de tolerantia* (1689) counts as an important document in the history of tolerance, excludes Catholics from tolerance, because they would endanger tolerance, if they had the power to do so. In addition, atheists have no chance with Locke, because they supposedly do not fear to be punished by God after their death and therefore not obey the laws, on which our living together is built. For Pesce tolerance has Roman roots. This is certainly true to some degree. It is in conflict, however, with the Roman persecution of Christians before the Edict of Milan (313) – not mentioned by Pesce – that legalized the Christian religion.

The sixth chapter deals with the profound changes various religions undergo with the advent of the idea of human rights, as they are pronounced in the Constitution of the United States (1787) and the French Republic (1791). Both constitutions lead to different conceptions of the relation of religion and state: limiting the power of the *state* in the American case and limiting the power of the *churches* in the French case (p. 177).

The book ends with a fulminant rehabilitation of heretics: «They were the expression of the attempt to measure and reformulate Christianity within modernity in all its multiple aspects: exegetic, historical, scientific-epistemological, political and interreligious» (p. 208).

Pesce's book is highly recommendable to everybody interested in the history of Christianity. Unfortunately, the publisher shows that editorial carelessness, which is typical of many Italian (and also German and French) productions: there is no bibliography at the end of this book, which is full of references to important and sometimes (at least to me) unknown publications. After all, there is an index of names, while a subject index is missing.

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