

In memoriam

ANTOINE VERGOTE

Professor Antoine Vergote departed, aware and at peace, on Thursday the 10th, 2013, aged 91. A master, colleague and friend to many of us, he's been Honorary Member of the Society for the Psychology of Religion since 1998, always taking part in the life of the association with his guidance, his teachings and quite often with his personal presence as well. The last formal meeting has been the symposium held in Bari in August 2011 to celebrate his ninetieth birthday during the Congress of IAPR-International Association for the Psychology of Religion. As usual, his contribution was masterly and throbbled with deep love for the psychology of religion.

Vergote is undisputedly renowned as one of the founders and pioneers of the contemporary Psychology of Religion, which he's been teaching for thirty years, since 1959, at the Psychology Institute of the University of Louvain, where he founded the *Centre de Psychologie de la Religion* in 1962, a benchmark for generations of students and scholars, psychologists and pastors. In the early 80s he and some colleagues of his started the group of European Psychologists of Religion, collecting scholars and professionals, promoting capital congresses and publications and, from 2003, flowing together in the new foundation of IAPR.

Born on December 8th in Courtrai (Belgium), ordained in 1947 in Bruges Diocese, Ph.D. in Theology (1950) and in Philosophy (1954), he taught in both Catholic Universities of Leuven and of Louvain-la-Neuve, besides Psychology of Religion, Philosophical Anthropology and Philosophy of Religion. Professor emeritus since 1987, he was conferred the *laurea honoris causa* by the Universities of Nimega, of Lima, of Arequipa and of Salamanca and received many other prestigious awards by first rate Psychology, Philosophy and Theology institutions. His thinking and research have been conveyed in quite a few papers and 16 books of Psychology of Religion and Psychoanalysis, as well as Philosophy and Theology, translated into the main languages.

As a **psychologist of religion**, he has always been adamant in outlining the specific object of the discipline and exposing any epistemological and methodological mistake. A fine example can be found in his paper "What the psychology of religion is and what it is not" (*The International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, 3/1993, 73-86).

"My view on the psychology of religion may be summarized in a few statements. It is neither the task nor the competence of psychology to form a theory concerning the essentials or origins of religion. Psychology starts by observing the fact that subjects refer to some religion(s) and that religion is always too complex to be interpreted under the head of a meaning system or as a strategy of adaptation to the world. Merely intellectualistic or functionalistic working hypotheses in psychology of religion never got to the point. Psychology examines the underlying and largely preconscious desires, feelings, and representations that are at play in encounters with significant religious tokens and that conditionally determine the way one constructs one's own response. The religious significant – symbols, metaphors, the words God or creator, and so on – are themselves multidimensional, and the inner desires, feelings, and representations of the subject are overdetermined. They are not in inner harmony and therefore change relative to life experiences and, for religious person, relative to different religious gratifications or displeasure. To study changes that are conflictual experiences and their momentary solution is the best way to grasp the underlying representations, feelings, and structures that are (co)responsible for the observe states of both religion and nonreligion".

As a **psychoanalyst**, he's been trained in the 50s within the *Société Française de Psychanalyse* with Lacan, Henri Ey, Françoise Dolto, and he's been one of founders in 1960 and a President of the *École Belge de Psychanalyse*. The critical investigation of the writings of Freud and of Lacan gave way to important theoretical re-thinking, such as the review of the construct of sublimation and the stress of the specificity of the primary psychic unconscious reality ("psychic body"), which can't be reduced to the body nor to the conscious soul. "l'expérience psychanalytique n'éclaire pas la secrète unité du corps neuronal et du psychique; mais elle oblige de reconnaître que des idées directrices, comme celles de jonction ou d'interaction, ne fragmentent valablement les points de vue sur le corps affectif qu'à condition de maintenir la perspective sur l'unité originellement donnée de celui-ci" (*La psychanalyse à l'épreuve de la sublimation*, Ed. Du Cerf, Paris 1997, p. 101). The physical body, therefore, becomes a body a person lives and lived

through. Psychoanalysis investigates “Comment ce corps, lieu de pulsions, est devenu le corps-mien, de moi qui suis par et en lui” (*La constitution de l’Ego dans le corps pulsionnel*, 1994). His thorough experience as a clinician and his courage to innovate are expressed in his last book too, published in 2011 and concerning the psychoanalytic psychotherapy of schizophrenia.

His **contribution to theology** mainly pertain to the ongoing seeking understanding of faith, in the light of the psychoanalytic experience and of the cross-fertilization of human sciences and contemporary culture. The mature summary of his thinking in such a prospect can be found in his *Humanité de l’homme, divinité de Dieu* (Ed. Du Cerf, Paris, 2006), a blossoming with questions and deeply involving research about the mystery of "man" and about his relationship with the mystery "God". Antoine Vergote dedicated to this double goal much of his human and intellectual efforts. He never indulged to rationalistic shortcuts or fideistic leaps: he kept the slow pace of a critic strictness that does not accept compromises about the need for understanding and therefore becomes an uncertain pace of patience and hope.

Vergote was aware that such a path of research is an ongoing task, both in the history of humankind and in the life of a man. Hence the generosity he showed in accompanying and encouraging others on the path he had outlined. Hence, also, the ethical meaning of the intellectual efforts he asked of his readers, of his students, of his team and, above all, of himself: always humble yet confident in investigating man and about man until, as it was written in the announcement of his death, “after a beautiful life, he was born to the eternal one”.

Mario Aletti