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The comparative liturgy of Anton Baumstark

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I was also bothered at times by some sloppy inter-gospel harmonizations.

If you appreciate, but do not currently have access to, the kind of cross-fertilization that a thoughtful pericope study group provides, then this book will serve as a decent substitute. In it you will find yourself in dialogue with two guys who will help you to begin your wrestling with some of Jesus' hardest sayings.

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The Comparative Liturgy of Anton Baumstark

Fritz West

Cambridge, UK: Grove Books Limited, 1995

46 pages, £ 3.50 paperback monograph

Why a monograph on this obscure, Roman Catholic lay theologian, who spent most of his career teaching secondary school, never held down an academic appointment, was an active member of the Nazi party, and only authored one major book in his entire life? Simply because Anton Baumstark (1872-1948) invented the discipline of comparative liturgy. This, in fact, is the title of his only book, published in French in 1934, but not translated into English until 1953. Unless you have access to a specialized library, you are unlikely to see a copy of Baumstark's *Comparative Liturgy*, long out of print. This monograph by Fritz West is likely the closest you will come to Baumstark.

Baumstark lived and worked in the narrow Roman Catholic world of the turn of the century, in the shadow of Vatican I, when "LITURGY" meant "THE ROMAN LITURGY". He was the first to identify the historical as well as the theological dimension of liturgical study. He spoke and wrote against the prevailing euro-centric and Roman-centric view of liturgy and church history. He was the first modern scholar to espouse a comparative view of liturgy and liturgies.

Baumstark based his theories and research on parallel comparative studies in the fields of language, biology, zoology, paleontology, and other new sciences. These fields were developing an *organic* model of development, in which both social and genetic factors of evolution were considered. In this process, the researcher assumed an original *archetype*, from which subsequent *types* evolved and grew.

In the field of liturgy, Baumstark is best known for his “laws” of liturgical evolution. These remain useful tools in the field even up to the present (28).

1. The new and vigorous in liturgy always overcomes and displaces the old;
2. The old and primitive, however, always asserts itself at special times and solemn festivals.

In addition to these two fundamental principles, four corollaries are asserted:

1. The older a text is, the less it is influenced by the Bible;
2. The more recent a text is, the more symmetrical it is;
3. The later it is, the more liturgical prose becomes charged with doctrinal elements;
4. Actions merely utilitarian in nature may receive a symbolic meaning.

These fundamental principles were used by Baumstark and his students to analyze, dissect, and reconstruct liturgical history from the fragments of texts, gestures, and rubrics preserved in liturgical documents of the early church, east and west. His success was in liberating the historical study of liturgy from its Roman and Euro-centric perspective. However, this unreflective perspective was replaced by a developmental “moralism” which glorified the *old* and the *ur-text* over anything newer or more recently developed. In most respects, this comparative method turned out to be only a dream and an illusion.

Fritz West, a minister in the United Church of Christ, and an independent liturgical scholar, offers a lively and concise summary of Baumstark’s life and work. As we look back today, we can see his work and ideas as seminal and important: he brought a comparative perspective to liturgy, and introduced a sense of relativity and pluralism to liturgical studies. However, his work is flawed by his idealist, utopian theories, and his students have been careful to distance themselves from their master. Today one would question Baumstark’s use of the concept of laws in nature as applicable to cultural “artifacts” such as liturgy. And his categorization of disparate but similar liturgical “events” to draw the conclusion of organic relatedness is fundamentally flawed.

Nevertheless, Baumstark needs to be remembered. For he shows us how much our thought today is focussed along comparative lines in every discipline, liturgical studies included. For if Baumstark’s comparative theories are totally discounted, then what are we left with? Chaos, random episodes and events, bland and value-free pluralism? Does it matter?

In spite of the fact that this small volume is marred by consistently

inaccurate numbering of footnotes, Fritz West is to be thanked for this testimony to the life and work of Anton Baumstark. Grove Books are available through the Anglican Book Centre, 600 Jarvis Street, Toronto M4Y 2J6.

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Worship and Evangelism in Pre-Christendom

Alan Kreider

Cambridge, UK: Grove Books Limited, 1995

45 pages, £ 3.95 paperback monograph

What a timely topic for a book! And what a wonderful little monograph! Anyone who is currently interested in the decline of the church, and who is familiar with the demise of “Christendom”, will find this book useful. In this post-Christendom era, this is a topic of intense interest: the phenomenal growth of the church before the Peace of Constantine.

“About one thing at least, there is no dispute: the pre-Christendom church was growing” (5). But why? Alan Kreider, Research Fellow in History at Regent Park College, Oxford, gives us his theory. It was not because of evangelism, or prayer, or public preaching, nor because of trendy, attractive, “seeker-sensitive” worship — for pagans were simply not admitted to “public” worship after the time of the Neronian persecutions. It was worship — but worship which followed a catechumenate, and which expected life-changing behaviour from those who participated. “I believe that worship, to which pagans were denied admission, was all-important to the spread of the church. It was important, not because it was attractive, but because its rites and practices — whether by design or intuition — made a difference in the lives and communities of the worshippers” (10). Christians at that time were out of joint with their culture, and so was their worship. Yet, the church worshipped and grew!

What made the faith of these “resident aliens” (*paroikoi*) so appealing? Kreider names eight factors of the Christian faith which appealed to the pagans of the day:

1. The fidelity of the martyrs;
2. The ethical living of the faithful;
3. Their care for the troubled and the ill in society;