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THE CREATION OF THE WORLD, MARTYRDOM [et.al.](#)

The author Catherine Nixey started shaking international readership interested in History with her 2017 work “The Darkening Age” which attempts to convince readers that the Christians are guilty of destroying the classical world. (1) Then followed in 2024 “Heresy” (2) which explores the topic of “the other sons of God”. Several critics acclaimed these works as “bold”, “extra-ordinary” “sardonic”, “engaging and erudite”, “compelling”, “vivid and important”, “enthraling”, “provocative and troubling”. Nixey herself, in her second book, reveals in tones of admirable sincerity that she is the child of an ex-monk and an ex-nun who although raised in a Christian environment, subsequently lost her faith. That may explain the vehemence of her attacks on Christian tradition but, admittedly, this is a space of a personal matter concerning her where readers or critics would better abstain from intruding.

For my part, although I belong to the opposite pole, retaining faith in my roots, I am offering here some few remarks not as a self-appointed spokesman of the altera pars, much less as a non-solicited representative of bigotry or as a self-proclaimed advocate of the Christian tradition under attack, but simply as a dedicated student of History which makes me feel entitled to question a few points of purely historical character. It goes without saying that I am not questioning Nixey's sources which are indeed impressive both in quantity and in quality and which, to a considerable extent, substantiate several of her other points.

Nixey draws extensively from **Celsus**, in both her works, in order to highlight her points. There is no issue with that choice which is her unquestionable prerogative. The problem is the use of this source: Celsus was one of the two participants in one of the most famous polemical debates of antiquity, facing as opponent the Church Father Origen of Alexandria. Nixey herself admits that posterity does not know the original writings of Celsus but only partially through what remains in Origen's responses. Nixey often reproduces in her pages the fierce polemical rhetoric of Celsus, which, naturally, gives extra weight to her own daring arguments. But the problem remains as far as an unbiased reader is concerned: It is well known that Origen refutes Celsus' arguments “point by point”. Why then this other voice is silenced by our author? She deals, as we mentioned, with one of the most dramatic polemical debates of the ancient world, why such lack of balance? Why no mention of the other voice? Is it only contempt for the Origenian positions or rather the well-known problem of historical writing with a pre-conceived agenda, where authors pick selectively sources useful to their theses? We know, of course, that not everyone admired Origen, then and in recent times. The German 19th c. scholar Franz Overbeck derided him while Heinrich Dorrie (1911-1983) disputed Origen's philosophical competence. But the majority, since ancient times, was very much in his favour. Eusebius admired “Contra Celsum” and even used it in his own “Contra Hieroclem”. Gibbon himself confirms that “Origen possessed “a very considerable share of the learning of [his] times” (3) and elsewhere he draws from “the irreproachable testimony of Origen” (4). Modern scholars view “Contra Celsum” in a positive light with Adam Gregerman and John Anthony McGuckin praising Origen's “intellectual honesty”, while Henri Crouzel calls this text “alongside Augustine's City of God, the most important apologetic writing of antiquity” and Joseph Wilson Trigg views it as “the greatest apology ever written in Greek” (5).

Origen's voice is ignored by our author but one should not forget that she has a steady target in front of her; to demolish and discredit the Christian tradition and Origen would distract her from her course.

There is another area which calls for further scrutiny: The topic of the numbers of early Christian **Martyrs**. Here Nixey tries to minimize numbers, to dispute the length and depth of persecutions, to criticize and question Christian disposition for martyrdom and glorification. At the same time, she is careful to admit that at such distance in time, it is difficult to ascertain precise numbers, a wise reservation which I fully share.

Nixey quotes Gibbon who himself opts for a “moderate computation”. Lowering the level of tone, she talks of “annual consumption” -as if it were about livestock, she highlights Gibbon's estimate of only about 1500 martyrs. She adopts the unfortunate expression of Gibbon -rare in a huge text distinguished both for its historical as well as literary qualities- about “annual consumption” of martyrs, as if it were about livestock. But Nixey fails to follow the next lines of the celebrated historian: “Allotting the same proportion to the provinces of Italy, Africa, and perhaps Spain, where, at the end of two or three years, the rigour of the penal laws was either suspended or abolished, the multitude of Christians in the Roman empire on whom a capital punishment was inflicted by a judicial sentence, will be reduced to somewhat less than two thousand persons.” (6). The difference is small but still it should have been included. As well as footnote 183 of Gibbon on the same page, -and we all know the importance of footnotes in Gibbon-, where Eusebius' passage is mentioned -even under a cloud of doubt by Gibbon- in which he [Eusebius] relates that in Thebais “from ten to one hundred persons had frequently suffered martyrdom **in the same day** [my emphasis]. So much for selective use of primary and other sources...

Apart from the above discrepancies, it is noteworthy that post-Gibbon scholarship has questioned his estimates. Some advance numbers as 3000-3500, or 23.500 and this only under Diocletian, not including Nero, Decius, Valerian, Galerius or Maximian. In another analysis, supposing there were 6 million Christians by the year 300 A.D., “if only 1 percent of 6 million Christians died under Diocletian, that is sixty thousand people.”(7). I also suppose that we have nowadays more advanced archaeological evidence e.g from the catacombs, from various objects, funerary or other, artifacts etc., which may contribute to more accurate estimates, although never final and always elusive, as mentioned earlier, given the distance in time.

Then we have to take into account persecutions by local officials of the empire, not always Emperors, like the urge massacre at Lyons. It seems impossible to arrive at precise numbers there, due to the multiplicity of actors. Then we should not forget persecutions by non-Romans, like Shapur II in Persia (around 341 A.D.) or by Ald-Rahman and Muhammad I in Cordoba. (We have vivid descriptions of the latter thanks to Euloge and Alvar of Cordoba. (8) We have also thousands of Japanese Christian martyrs in the 17th c., whose tragedies were so vividly portrayed by a most gifted contemporary Japanese Christian novelist, Endo Shusaku (9). Also the Chinese Christian victims of the Boxer rebellion are estimated to about 33000 -including a few foreigners.- (We limit ourselves to a few examples among a plethora of similar cases.) Nixey focuses on the Roman persecutions but still the topic has broader dimensions. Of course, to be fair, one has also to bear in mind the fact of so many rigidities against non-Christians in the Theodosian Code or the immense tragedies inflicted later by Christians against Christians (Albigensian Crusade etc.,) -and now I join both Nixey as well as Gibbon; but here we reach other chapters of History which can be compared to the Neronian, Diocletian and other such violent signs of human cruelty; but still, later atrocities cannot automatically extinguish earlier ones...

At the bottom line, no matter how much Nixey manages to downgrade the scale of martyrdom, the extreme cruelty of persecutions remains as an indelible stigma of those

NOTES

1. Catherine Nixey: *The Darkening Age*, 2017
2. Catherine Nixey: *Heresy*, 2024
3. Gibbon: *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, v.1, p.440
4. *Ibid.* p.439
5. Wikipedia, *Contra Celsum*
6. Nixey, *Darkening Age*, p.61 – Gibbon, v.1, p.503
7. Wikipedia, *Martyrs – Numbers*
8. *Les Martyres de Cordoue in Christianisme et Chretients*, (coll., 1997)
9. Endo Shusaku: “Silence”, “Samurai”.

In her second book “heresy”, author Catherine Nixey deals with the subject of **Creation**. Of course, we all know that this topic has created endless debates through the centuries but Nixey opts here for a rather extreme and uncompromising position. It is interesting to quote her verbatim, as she tries to dismiss the view of Creation by a single deity.

“However, that is not, in fact, what the biblical text says. Look again at the precise words of the Bible and many modern readers might feel a moment of surprise. For what the Bible actually says in Genesis 1.26 is “let us make man in our image, after our likeness.

Not “my own image” but “our”. Not “my likeness” but “our likeness”. The conclusion that there is in Genesis -as there is in every other version of this story- more than one god, here, seems inescapable.”

In a following note, Nixey forcefully dismisses two other theories of interpretation, “a grammatical category”, a plural of “majesty” as well as the solution by “later Christian apologists” referring to “the fact that God was a trinity, three in one.”

The author's final verdict is: “Scholars now recognize that the reason for the plural is, quite simply, that those who composed the version in Genesis believed there was more than one god in heaven”. (1) (No such scholar is named by her... And no explanation by her either, concerning the same authors of the Genesis who insist on ONE Creator, as per the following paragraphs as we shall soon see.)

Let me now try to explain why I cannot concur with such an interpretation of the first chapter of Creation in Genesis.

1. To begin with, what Nixey relegates to a modest footnote, -dismissing it- (the plural of Majesty and the Trinitarian view) deserve a much deeper consideration as they have constituted for centuries two wide streams of interpretation. The “grammatic category” of “royal plural” has been for centuries much more than a case in linguistics (in juxtaposition to “nosism”, referring to oneself), but deeply ingrained in cultural values: The term “Elohim” describes God in plural terms; the term of royal plural appears in the 4th century A.D., it was introduced to England in the 12th c. by William Longchamp, it was used by many Popes and Monarchs, it was known in the East Asian sphere; the famous promoter of Buddhism in early Japan, Prince-Regent in Shotoku, in an edict of his imbued by tolerance, uses the majestic “We” as follows:

“ WE hear that our Imperial Ancestors paid deep reverence to the Shinto deities of Heaven and Earth. Whenever they dedicated shrines to the mountains and rivers,

they held mysterious communion with a divine power of Nature...Let our ministers with their whole hearts do reverence to the deities of heaven and earth.” (v. Chicao Fujisawa: Concrete Universality of the Japanese Way of Thinking, Tokyo 1958).

In Hindustan, it was not unusual for elder speakers to refer to themselves in that way. The Oecumenical Patriarch still uses it in his homilies or writings.

In Islam also plural word forms referred to Allah, something replicated in modern times by rulers of Malaysia or Indonesia. Indeed, in the text of the Qur'an we frequently come across with sentences using the “royal we”: I have tried to extract particularly those with direct reference to Allah, as follows:

Surah 3, 55-58: “This is what We rehearse to you of the Signs and the Message of Wisdom”.

Surah 17, 105: We sent down the Qur'an in Truth and in Truth has it descended.”

Surah 20, 2: “We have not sent down the Qur'an to you to be (an occasion) for your distress”. 5

Surah 20, 21: (Referring to the rod of Moses). “Seize it and fear not: We shall return it at once to its former condition”.

Surah 23, 32: “And We sent to them a Messenger...”

Surah 25, 19: (Allah will say:) “...And whoever among you does wrong, him shall We cause to taste of a grievous penalty”.

Finally, a quotation most appropriate in our investigation of “royal plural” in Creation, some verses surprisingly close to Genesis I -26 :

Surah 78 5-16

Have We not made the earth as a wide expanse,

And the mountains as pegs?

And (have We not) created you in pairs,

And made you sleep for rest,

And made the night as a covering,

And made the day as a means of subsistence?

And (have We not) built over you the seven firmaments,

And placed (therein) a Light of Splendor?

And do we not send down from the clouds water in abundance

That We may produce therewith corn and vegetables,

And gardens of luxurious growth?

Isn't it amazing to find in the Holy Book of Islam, associated with Creation, the royal plural, even with capital “W” in “We”, as per the magnificent translation of the Qur'an by the Pakistani religious scholar Abdullah Yusuf Ali (1934)? (2) Who would look there for accompanying “deities”, in a text permeated by the most austere and extreme exclusivity of Allah? “Do not take for worship two gods; for He is just One God (Allah); they fear Me (and Me alone). (Surah 16, 51). Or: “Verily, I am Allah: There is no God but I” (Surah 20, 14). (2)

As to the Trinitary view, suffice it to say that it counted among its proponents someone of the spiritual stature of St Augustine.

Personally, I would not have any obstacle to adhere to the “royal plural” theory, particularly when we consider that the first chapter of Genesis, according to a top biblical scholar of our times, Oxford Professor John Barton, is characterized by a “priestly style” in the narrative (in juxtaposition to the

two other styles he detects, “the saga style” and the “deuteronomistic one”). Barton quotes in extenso Genesis 1-2 and attributes its tone to the “priestly style” where, in my humble view, a royal plural insertion could be easily absorbed”. (3) (4). An “all powerful figure” -as Barton qualifies God (5) could certainly have used in his utterances a “royal plural”.

2.A reader familiar with the Bible would know that references to Creation are not a monopoly of the beginnings of Genesis: In Job we may read the following:[God talking to Job]: “Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth?” Here there is no doubt whatsoever that one God laid the foundations of the Cosmos. No doubt is allowed to such an exclusivity. (6)

3.Similarly in Psalm 104 we read:

“God the creator of the earth

Bless the Lord...

Who laid the foundations of the earth that it should not be removed for ever.” (7)

Here too, unequivocally, the Creator is ONE. Therefore, the remark of Nixey that in Genesis -as there is in every other version of this story- more than one god here seems inescapable” is totally belied by the sacred words.

Further on, in Prophets, there are several references of similar types of Creation vocabulary and we may quote, indicatively, the following:

From Isaiah:

[The Holy One asks]: “Lift your eyes and look to the heavens: Who created all this?” (Is.40-26) The answer is obvious and we may find it a few verses below:

“The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth”. (Is. 40-28). And further: “For this is what the Lord says- he who creates the heavens, he is God.” (Is. 44-18)

From Jeremiah:

“Tell them this: *These Gods, who did not make the heavens and the earth*, will perish from the earth and from under the heavens.” (Jerem. 10-11) And further:

“But God made the earth by his power; he founded the world by his wisdom and stretched out the heavens by his understanding”. (Jerem. 10-12).

From Zechariah:

“The Lord who stretches out the heavens, who lays the foundation of the earth and who forms the spirit of man within him, declares...” (Zech. 12-1).

From Malachi: “Have not all one Father? Did not *One* God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?” 7 Mal. 2-10).

We have entered here a very exclusive domain, that of the Creation prophetic literature, usually studied and interpreted by high level biblical scholars. Our own purpose is not to comment on such ancient writings and on figures belonging to centuries before the Christian era, but simply to extract a few indicative references reconfirming the belief on ONE Creator. (We have used *italics* in points particularly refuting the idea of a plurality of Creators and affirming ONE God as creator. - For further analysis on this literature v. Prof. Martin G. Klingbeil: Creation in the Old Testament Prophetic Literature (Internet).

4. Going back carefully to the disputed biblical text, where Nixey sees a multitude of gods hiding under a plural formulation, I am tempted to refute this as a simple reader of the Bible who happens to be Greek -and therefore perhaps a little more attuned to the sensitivities of the Greek text. The famous cite, Gen I-26 (8) begins with one God who expresses himself in plural: “Let us make man in our image”. The expression, if not a plural of majesty, sounds much more like “a wish”, (ευχη), “an intention”, “a call” to create man by “us”, “plural”. But if we read more carefully, God continues with the “wish” to make man “in our image”, after “our likeness”, i.e. His own. If He were thinking of -or obliged to- other divinities, he would have said , after “our images” and “our likenesses”. Besides, if he really worked in tandem with other deities -parallel or subordinate-, how could we imagine the end product, man, reflecting simultaneously parts of so many and distinct components? Man at that stage would be only one; how could he reflect so many traits in his face and body? Which divinity would prefer to be reflected in his eyes instead of his mouth, in his hands instead of his chest and so on?

Further than the about syllogisms, an objective reader of the Bible would not stumble upon one single word. He should read the whole chapter to absorb its essence. Again, the very text leaves no space for biased readings. “So God created man in his own image” (9). “And God blessed them and God said unto them...(10) “And God said, Behold, I have given you every herb bearing seed...(11) “And to every beast...I have given every green herb to meat (12). “And God saw everything that he had made...(13) “And on the seventh day God ended his work... (13) “And God blessed he seventh day and sanctified it; Because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and made” (14). It is notable that in all these instances the reference is unquestionably to ONE God and the mention of the “plural” earlier on, all dimmed if not entirely forgotten. Besides, in the King James version of the Bible, extra emphasis is given in italics: “His *own* image”, “*I have given you*”.

Where then have all the other deities , supposedly “co-creators”, disappeared?...

At this point, the words of a Japanese scholar writing about a different topic, become strikingly relevant: One has to adopt “a synthetic approach, comparing the whole with the whole, and not parts with parts”. (Private correspondence between Professor Fujinawa Kenzo and this author related to the latter's book “Mythology of Greece and Japan, “ 1987). The utterance “let us make man in our image” should not be examined in isolation, but in conjunction with what follows.

We should also bear in mind that we are dealing here with very ancient texts, composed roughly from the 9th to the 2nd century B.C., written by several hands and often focusing on materials going further in time. The phenomenon is not exclusive to the Bible; the Iliad too contains materials of an epoch antedating its conception. In the case of the great epic Gilgamesh, texts and poems “were composed and recited long before they were written down” (N.K. Sandars: Introduction to the Epic of Gilgamesh, p.13). The early pillars of Japan's story, the **Kojiki** and the **Nihongi**, belonging to the borderline between Mythology and History, present similar analogies through additions, amendments or excisions by generations of *kataribe*, court reciters.

The sacred scribes of the Bible dedicated every effort to reflect God's disposition, thoughts and commands. If on one occasion some used “We”, “plural”, their collaborators or successors used the undisputable “I” in more than one occasion, as the text unfolded. Therefore, a reading in the sense of Professor Fujinawa, “whole with whole” and not “parts with parts”, becomes the golden rule for understanding deeply, interpreting correctly and avoiding the easy traps of single words...

5.

5. Leaving aside for a while the biblical landscape, it may be useful to recall that echoes of the belief in one and only Creator have permeated the ethos of Greek Orthodoxy since the remotest times: The

famous invocation “Domine Iesu Christe, Fili Dei, miserere mei, peccatoris”, the “heart Prayer”, can be traced back to the times of the “Niptic Teaching” of the early Fathers of the Church and it is further glorified in the “Filokalia” orthodox tradition from the 4th to the 15th c. A.D. In this inspiring short text of “the Prayer”, “the Wish”, constituting at the same time a doxology, theology, eucharist, prayer and confession, we can hear the voice of thousands of monks glorifying God, “the creator of the visible and invisible

world”. No doubt through the centuries about the one and only architect of Creation. Besides, those endless generations of thousands of monks, from the deserts of Egypt to the sublime Mount Athos in Northern Greece, had no particular agenda to defend, no intention to suppress any theological points, except to simply honour their calling in solitude and prayer.(This reference does not exclude, of course, other similar attitudes in the Medieval, Renaissance West, even in later times.)

6.

A last remark does not reflect any deep exegetical thought, but it may shed a little additional light to the debate from the perspective of the original Greek formulation which has distant echoes even in contemporary Greek parlance: When we pronounce in modern Greek “let us try”, or “let us think” or “let us have patience” or “let us do” or a multitude of similar “wishful expressions”, we may urge our listeners – if there are any- “to try”, “to think”, “to be patient” , “to do” etc., but all the same we may use this plural form in solitude, reflecting our own feelings, formulated in a simple -and not majestic-plural in order to avoid the more egotistical formulation of “nosism”. If we, simple mortals, have such an option, how much more in the case of the “all-powerful figure of God” to slide temporary from singular to plural!

NOTES

1. 1.Catherine Nixey: Heresy, p.223
2. 2.Gen.1-2
3. 3.John Barton: A History of the Bible, pp.42-45
4. 4.Ibid. p. 48 Jon: 38-4
5. 5.Psalm 104-5
6. 6.Gen.1-26
7. 7.Gen 1-27
8. 8.Gen 1-28
- 9.
10. 10.Gen 1-30
11. 11.Gen 1-31
12. 12.Gen 2-2
13. 13.Gen 2-3

George Sioris

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