FONDAZIONE BRUNO KESSLER
MAGAZINE

The virtuous excesses of religion

November 14, 2022

Robert Orsi in Trento for the 2022 Davide Zordan Lecture

A few minutes after taking the floor, **Robert Orsi,** the prestigious speaker of the **2022 Zordan Lecture**, interrupted his talk and, looking up from the lectern for a moment, addressed the audience gathered in FBK's Aula Grande Hall to honor the memory and celebrate the legacy of a theologian of unforgettable human and intellectual qualities, by formulating a non-rhetorical question: **"Does it make sense to question the study and teaching of "religion" at a time when the future of the planet and all the species that inhabit it is at risk?** Aren't we making a categorical error when we equate two incommensurable things like, on the one hand, the familiar matters of teaching and scholarship and, on the other hand, global catastrophe, planetary extinction?

At that point, the speaker's goal became clear for all to see: to **demonstrate to skeptics that there are** meaningful **links between the excess that religious experience carries within itself** as a hallmark of its way of being **and the borderline situation represented by the obligation to come to terms with the immediate and long-term consequences of the global warming of the planet** caused by the abuse of fossil fuels.

Climate change means many familiar things: increasingly scorching summers, long periods of drought, melting ice and glaciers, extreme weather phenomena, rising sea levels, devastating fires, chain extinctions, uncontrolled migrations, geopolitical instability. Thus, it also means being at one's wits' ends: i.e., feeling powerless in the face of a mammoth change, too slow to instinctively mobilize the masses and too rapid to allow hesitations. Anthropocene, as many have noted, is the perfect trap, the checkmate of a species that seems to have dared too much.

Orsi, however, did not come to Trento to play the part of the prophet of doom who merely denounces the unthinkability of an inevitable catastrophe. **The motto of his Lecture, on the contrary, communicated a sense of responsibility and personal commitment: "Here I am!"**

But how can religious studies translate that "here I am!" into a non unrealistic gesture?

According to Orsi, those who study religion scientifically have a twofold contribution to make today. The first is to remember in what **the original sin of the anthropocene** consists, namely the **exclusion and disavowal of the other-than-human** in the only seemingly noble intent of building a world tailor-made for humankind. From this point of view, the expertise of those who deal professionally with things "sacred" may prove indispensable precisely because, to quote his own words, "religion is one of the domains, perhaps the primary one, in which humans reach — in practice, theory, and imagination — for the other-than-human, and, more importantly, in which the other-than-human — all the others with whom they have been in relationship with, gods and ancestors, angels and demons, and also rivers and rocks, trees and animals, insects and birds — reaches for the human."

Religion, nonetheless, is not only this. "**There is a more to religion**," noted Orsi in a crucial passage of his talk, "that is not reducible to any given paradigm." The "post-anthropocene" and "post-religion" religion he invoked in the conclusion of the Lecture is precisely this surplus reality, which removes the bars from the doors and windows of the comfortable home in which humanity has enclosed itself, which rejects anthropocentrism without becoming post-human, which opens wide the temporal horizon by liberating people and incentivizing them to think and imagine outside existing frames.

The virtuous excess of religion in the age of the unthinkable excess of climate catastrophe is thus summed up in that elementary exclamation – "Here I am!" – which certifies the ultimate transition from the age of choice to the age of unconditional commitment and responsibility.

PERMALINK

https://magazine.fbk.eu/en/news/the-virtuous-excesses-of-religion/

TAGS

- #Davide Zordan Lecture
- #global warming
- #religion
- #religiousstudies

AUTHORS

- Paolo Costa