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The divine light of prisons

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By following inmates who were not initially religious but who later found God in prison, Thibault Ducloux rethinks our understanding of the social conditions that produce and preserve faith.

Reviewed: Thibault Ducloux, *Illuminations carcérales: comment la vie en prison produit du religieux* (Carceral illuminations: How Prison Life Produces Religiosity), 2023, Genève, Labor et Fides, "Enquêtes" series, 282 p., 22 €.

Why are people more religious in prison than elsewhere? Thibault Ducloux takes a new look at this enigma, which is constantly referenced by the media (as in the oft-repeated characterization of prison as a "hotbed of radicalization"). He approaches the topic with a particularly innovative methodology and a theoretical framework that differs somewhat from specialized prison studies, on the one hand, and religious studies, on the other. In solving the enigma, he puts forth a bold thesis: the prevalence of religion in prisons is symptomatic of a "return to childhood" that the highly destabilizing experience of prison triggers among inmates. It is not--or only rarely--the result of ex nihilo or interconfessional conversions. By stripping away secondary socializations, carceral deculturation reactivates religious dispositions sedimented during childhood -- dispositions that had been buried and forgotten. These dispositions resurface due to the general loss of reference points that comes with confinement. Religion, in short, does not appear out of nowhere, nor is it simply the result of forms of sociability that are vulnerable to proselytization. It goes much further back.

The argument is laid out through an embedded investigation. The book is actually published in the "Investigations" ("*Enquêtes*") collection of the Labor et Fides publishing house, which takes a strong editorial line against analyses that explain religion solely on its own terms, independent of the social contexts that produce and preserve it. Thus Ducloux, while conveying the words of his informants in all their richness, also puts them in perspective. Take the case of Louis. A former lawyer in his sixties who hails from a prominent family and who was briefly a monk, Louis became a millionaire thanks to a management consulting firm, only to be arrested for tax evasion. He speaks of his Catholic faith, which was reborn in prison, as a "gift of God": "it wasn't prison that gave me a smack. No … Oh no, not at all. But sure, it makes for fertile ground…" (p. 140). By taking us beyond Louis' denials, the book takes seriously the "smack" that prison inflicts and the religious "ground" that it prepares.

"Betting on one's topic"

Ducloux has undertaken an ambitious ethnography in a very particular type of prison: a detention center (or *maison d'arrêt*), which incarcerates criminals serving short sentences or who are being provisionally detained. It is characterized by heavy turnover and places little emphasis on rehabilitation. Ducloux spent 26 months between 2014 and 2016 in a large provincial institution. He does not reveal its name, but we learn that it is very overpopulated and has one of the highest suicide rates in France. What makes his study a tour de force is its methodology: unlike studies of religion in prisons that focus on inmates who are already religious, Ducloux examined over time a diverse group of 32 men (he was denied access to the women's prison), none of whom were religious when they were first jailed. He conducted repeated interviews--as many as twelve--with each of them. These interviews constitute the study's primary material, along with its many ethnographic observations. Ducloux's method involved a real risk, which is sufficiently rare in this age of short-term "project-based research" to be saluted. He took the bet (p. 32) that some of his informants would end up becoming religious and that he could thus witness *in real time* changes in their behavior and beliefs resulting from prison life. The book does not ignore the difficulties arising from its methodology. While an ethnographer's place in the prison environment is already fraught, it was made even more challenging due to the fact that, for many long months, religion was never mentioned in any of the inmates'

conversations (and Ducloux could not raise the issue without introducing bias into his research). "No one was religious. No one spoke about it. Will they one day?" (p. 36). This situation was exacerbated by the 2015 terrorist attacks, as a result of which any manifestation of religious intensity in prison became regarded as suspect. And yet, towards the end of the sixth month of fieldwork, a "miracle" did happen: fifteen informants began to experience unprecedented religious concerns. God, fate, genies, the devil, prophets, signs, and dreams began to appear in Ducloux's fieldnotes.

Readers expecting a book steeped in discussions about religion from page one will have to be patient: not until page 185 (out of 267) is religion addressed. Most of the book is devoted to describing the detention center--not just the physical setting, but the social environment that shapes the conditions for the emergence of an "illumination." Ducloux's analysis is well served by lively, imagistic, and direct writing that plunges readers into the "entrails" (p. 29) of the "battleship" (p. 20) that is the penitentiary complex, emphasizing its visual, auditory, sensory, and olfactive dimensions ("everything stinks!," Louis says, p. 97). In the thick description of this world, we also encounter groups characteristic of carceral sociability: the "gremlins" (confrontational young inmates), the "old timers," the "stand-up guys," the "zombies" (who are lost in the fog of anxiolytics and antidepressants), the "stitches," and the "pervs" (jailed for sex offenses and bullied by other inmates), and a few "bearded ones" (i.e., Muslims), though they are far from central. Interactions are harsh and violent, and relationships--as well as reputations--are contingent on the rhythm of transfers, releases, and suicides.

Negative socialization

To describe how each inmate "manages" prison life, Ducloux draws on detailed portraits of several informants who serve as illustrative "cases," particularly two key and completely different characters: Louis, the millionaire fraud and "big four-eyed bag of bones" (p. 55), and Sharif, a "fat funny guy" (p. 33) raised in public housing (his Algerian mother was a cleaning woman) who joined a gang of young drug dealers and was jailed for a murder related to a feud with a partner. We are also introduced to several secondary characters, such as Demba, a thirty-something father and accomplished boxer, who was jailed for his involvement in an antifascist demonstration (during which he was shot in the face by the police) and Yann, a kitchen

clerk arrested after a violent fight, also in his thirties and who finds himself in an extremely precarious situation: his girlfriend is pregnant and penniless.

Ducloux is interested in the destruction of socialization that occurs "*in situ captiva*" (sic). He carefully describes the "unrestrained uncertainty" (p. 175) that reigns in prison, where one must often wait weeks for an answer to the slightest request, if it is answered at all. "None of this makes any sense," the inmates say, as they face "a mountain of problems:" -- "it's not normal, there are too many" (p. 196). Confinement produces *negative socialization* that "cannibalizes" (p. 183) body and soul. Some inmates are reduced to mere "shadows." They are lost, "like in a foreign land," where they cannot speak the language (p. 123) and that only exists to "destroy people" (p. 161). Even the toughest inmates, who manage to make a place for themselves in prison sociability, cannot completely resist these circumstances. In prison, "everyone cries" (p. 125). It is a massive and brutal dis-adjustment, produced by the obstruction of most dispositions acquired in life. Before this "de-realizing reality" (p. 189), there are, according to the inmates, just "three choices": "either you take pills, pills, pills. Or you come up with your little routine … Or you put a rope around your neck" (p. 223).

Reawakening dormant religiosity

Among those who come up with a "little routine," Ducloux identifies several resources, which he sees as analogous from the standpoint of their social function ("one resource is as good as any other," p. 158) and as equivalent roads of salvation: work, school, sport, the prison's informal economy, and--finally--religion. They all make it possible to structure daily life, access emotional and material solidarity, and, as "syntaxes of intelligibility," give meaning to an appalling experience. Thus religion is just one resource among others--and one of the least valuable. It offers neither a salary nor a diploma, and in the case of Islam, it can trigger surveillance. But it is also one of the easiest resources, as it requires neither logistics nor administrative approval. Yet not everyone takes to religion--or, rather, not everyone is "taken by it" (p. 193). So who turns to it? And why some do even though nothing indicated, when they were first imprisoned, that they had religious tendencies?

Ducloux admits that he did not find the answer until long after he completed his investigation. His patient re-reading of his scattered conversations with inmates revealed that the religion that appeared in prison cells was in fact a recollection--

though not consciously recognized as such--of a past internalized during childhood. Thus Louis, who (like Job), lost everything, turned to the frugal religiosity bequeathed by the Catholics on his father's side of the family. Similarly, Sharif prayed chaotically to a loving God and sought protection from the devil, just like his mother, who practiced an undogmatic form of Islam, independent of a mosque. Demba--who is undoubtedly Ducloux's most moving example--never thought of himself as a Muslim. But in his cell, he was possessed by a *jinn*: his body began to shake, he vomited a substance "yellow like bile," and felt "a smile in the darkness" (p. 194-195). Demba grew up in a West African Muslim family steeped in a mystic form of Islam, which he had rejected as a teenager. As he himself said, "it brought up a lot of stuff" (p. 209). Ducloux thus proposes the concept of *regressive socialization* ("regressive" being a psychoanalytic term) to indicate this unconscious return to childhood resulting from the stripping away of secondary socializations in jail.

In this way, the book resonates with recent work on socialization, which seeks, to describe, for example, limit cases of non-socialization (such as Hervé Mazurel's book on Kaspar Hauser), the persistence of socialization despite biological threats (as seen in Muriel Darmon's study of stroke victims), and multiple and successive instances of resocialization in radically different contexts (as in Christophe Granger's study of Joseph Kabris). The socialization framework is what makes the book original: unlike prison studies that often draw on Erving Goffman and Michel Foucault, Ducloux's theoretical apparatus brings socialization sociology into conversation with psychoanalysis and uses Bernard Lahire and Sigmund Freud to grasp how inmates persist in their being. Ducloux also brings in Norbert Elias to understand how inmates detach themselves from or become involved in prison life, as well as Carlo Ginzburg, to determine what religious variations are the *clue* of.

Religiosity without religion

The sign of a good thesis is its ability to make us think. In seeking to break the disciplinary barriers surrounding religion, Ducloux has won his bet. In his book, religion is not studied for its own sake (we learn relatively little about its texture, repertories, and manifestations). It is simply an entry point (one of several, though a particularly effective one) for analyzing a deeper social process, the internalization of prison life. Its function is not to preserve a group nor build a community inside prison walls. It is primarily a symptom of a remnant of the social, a *sign* of what remains of

the socialized individual (dispositions acquired in childhood that had hitherto remained dormant) when habits forged through secondary socialization are obliterated. Ultimately, the resurgence of religiosity has "nothing to do" with religion (p. 16, p. 225).

These claims can all be debated. Is an inmate's commitment to education and religious behavior really part of the same process? If religiosity has no *irreducible* specificity, how can one still circumscribe the perimeter of its empirical distinctness in relation to other resources? One also wonders how primary socializations are reactivated for inmates who have never experienced religious socialization. Yann suggests some clues, but his case is too dramatic. He grew up in stark poverty, was confined to social services, and speaks of his parents as "weak" and "invisible" (p. 222). He ultimately succumbs to psychotic delirium. In this instance, the issue is more the absence of a biographical grid inherited from primary socialization than religiosity's place in this socialization process.

Furthermore, Ducloux does not really consider secondary religious socializations that took precedence over primary socializations. In Louis' case, for instance, one might have considered that it was primarily his *secondary* socialization as a monk that was reactivated in prison (at age forty, he joined the Order of Cistercians of the Strict Observance, who follow Saint Benedict's rule). Ascetic dispositions acquired in a monastery are probably better suited to prison life than a distant religion inherited from one's father. Finally, there are reasons to doubt the "non conscious" dimension of childhood remanences articulated in religious terms. After all, all that researchers know about their respondents is what the latter choose to tell. Is it really the case that parental religiosity is "not mastered" (p. 206) and "eludes the consciousness" of those who reappropriate it (p. 210)? On this point, Ducloux's reliance on psychoanalysis reaches its limit. Could one not consider religious reaffiliation as a *deliberate* desire to reconstruct one's moral life by re-anchoring oneself to a generational legacy--a desire that is realized in the very fact of affirming it during an interview?

Further reading:

- Béraud Céline, de Galembert Claire, and Rostaing Corinne, *De la religion en prison*, Presses universitaires de Rennes, Rennes, 2016.
- Darmon Muriel, *Réparer les cerveaux : sociologie des pertes et des récupérations post-AVC*, Paris, La Découverte, 2021.

- Ducloux Thibault. "Des socialisations régressives ? L'exemple de la production carcérale du religieux," *Genèses*, vol. 124, no. 3, 2021, pp. 77-96.
- Ducloux Thibault, "La religion en prison: contribution à la construction d'un objet décloisonné," *Revue européenne des sciences sociales*, 59-2, 2021, 177-201.
- Esmili Hamza, "L'alliance sacrée. Le réinvestissement de la tradition islamique parmi les immigrés et leurs enfants en cité," *Ethnologie française*, vol. 54, no. 1, 2024, pp. 55-69.
- Granger Christophe, *Joseph Kabris, ou les possibilités d'une vie (1780-1822),* Paris, Anamosa, 2020.
- Mazurel Hervé, *Kaspar l'obscur ou l'enfant de la nuit*, Paris, La Découverte, 2020.

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