

Jan Assmann

Religion and Cultural Memory. Ten Studies.

Trans. R. Livingstone.

Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press 2006.

Pp. x + 222.

US\$ 60.00 (cloth: ISBN 0-8047-4522-6);

US\$ 21.95 (paper: ISBN 0-8047-4523-4).

In these excellent translations of ten carefully selected essays, Germany's most famous present-day Egyptologist, Jan Assmann, shows us an unexpected perspective on how ancient religious traditions shape our cultural identity and how they determine our way of thinking. Improving on Maurice Halbwachs' insight that memory is a social phenomenon, Assmann contends that 'cultural memory', which stores normative information in texts rather than in the brains of individuals, forms our cultural identity. For Assmann, knowledge of one's own tradition, like knowledge of ancient cultures, is shared by the whole people as a cultural unit. The aim of this book is not to investigate and reconstruct the historical facts connected with the genesis and reception of normative texts, but rather the reconstruction of the collective memory we share. Culturally significant texts are treated as a manifestation of our collective memory. Furthermore, Assmann is a constructivist to the extent that he investigates memory content as a factor that shapes human reality. His new volume focuses on religion because it is one of the dominant spheres of human activity that produce an evolving 'cultural memory'.

All ten essays analyze tendencies in the history of religion. The introductory contribution defines 'cultural memory' and presents it as a new tool to analyze historical developments. The second text is a historical study of the progressive unification of religion as a system of belief, particularly in ancient Egypt. The third and fourth essays deal with the development and dynamism inherent in monotheist religion. Essays Five to Eight are contributions to a general theory of religion. A further essay is concerned with Thomas Mann's literary reception of mythical thinking. The last contribution holds that contrary to the development of historical identity in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, contemporary Western 'cultural memory' goes back all the way to ancient Egypt. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe thought that our identification with the past reaches back three thousand years, but this, Assmann says, is no longer true today: 'The Western horizon of memory is gradually beginning to expand to include its Oriental roots and to extend beyond Goethe's three thousand years to around five thousand years' (189). Surely we must doubt that we live in an age that is inclined to strengthen cultural identity through a deepening of historical understanding, and yet I can only agree that, particularly with Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* and Thomas Mann's *Joseph* novels, the twentieth-century reception of ancient Egypt is no longer only an academic specialty.

Although there might be good reasons for talking about entities bigger than individuals, a critical assessment of *Religion and Cultural Memory* reminds us that talk about the dispositions of whole cultures can be suspect when it becomes the primary method of explanation. But Assmann puts this method of studying the dynamism of cultures in perspective. His analysis admirably manages to synthesize general observations with the historically significant detail. Furthermore, he is well aware of the repressive function that culturally remembered texts have for the free individual. He reminds us that Friedrich Nietzsche was the first to be aware that memory-making is a violent process by means of which independent individuals are bred into fellow human beings (88). It is true that this taming of the modern individual finds its ancient parallel in the Egyptian conception of *maat* (justice). Ancient grave inscriptions illustrate and confirm what Nietzsche observed. *Maat* promises survival beyond death, but only to the virtuous man. To be remembered after death involves an obligation to the community, i.e., adequate behaviour as a social agent while alive.

Although Assmann cannot accept Gerardus van der Leeuw's phenomenologist view that the essential meaning of a particular religious tradition can be translated into other traditions (nor that all religions share a universal meaning), he nevertheless investigates interesting connections between different religions: he links the heritage of ancient Egypt with Israelite history. In his earlier book, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (1997), our author elaborated in detail that Egypt is not only the negative counterexample to monotheist religion, but also serves Israel as a source of inspiration. For monotheist religion Egypt represents the paradigm of otherness. This perceived otherness makes Moses, who bridges the two cultures, distinguish between true and false religion, a differentiation that later became important for Jewish, Muslim, and Christian self-understanding. In contrast to this earlier work, the focus of *Religion and Cultural Memory* is on developing a *theory* of memory that is not based on Freud's *Kulturtheorie*. The latter obscures conscious awareness of remembered content in favour of an archaeology of the human subconsciousness: 'Perhaps Freud's mistake lay simply in his insistence on approaching the biblical text as if it were a heap of ruins, whereas in reality it was an inhabited city, and in tackling it with "picks, shovels, and spades," when we would have been better advised to take a careful look around in the crypts and book stacks' (62). It must be noted that although he certainly disagrees with Freudian method, Assmann finds many psychoanalytical concepts like that of repressed memory quite useful. Monotheism, he contends, was an Egyptian invention that was repressed for a long time.

Religion and Cultural Memory is not only an excellent book for scholars who want to develop a timely understanding of theoretical key concepts like memory, text, myth, and ritual, but is also a stimulating introduction for anyone interested in the genesis of our cultural self-understanding. Moreover, the book aims at an interdisciplinary treatment of 'cultural memory'

and stimulates discussion in a broad spectrum of disciplines like philosophy, theology, and history.

Aaron Fellbaum
University of Graz