

READERS' CORNER

Book Review: *The Market of the Gods: How Religious Innovations Emerge. From Judaism to Christianity* by Dominique Desjeux. 2024. Bruxelles: Peter Lang

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The Market of the Gods by Dominique Desjeux is a unique and provocative contribution for business anthropology as well as the larger field of anthropology. In this work, Desjeux examines the origination of Christianity and its subsequent spread through the Greco-Roman world. Desjeux examines the rise of Christianity as an extremely successful innovation, one that can be mined as an illustrative example of innovation processes more generally as well as strategically compared to contemporary business and consumer innovations. As he states in his first chapter:

In the mid-first century, the group of Christian Jews following Jesus, who could be compared to a start-up, numbered no more than a few thousand out of an imperial population of 70 million. Two hundred and fifty years later, there were nearly 9 million Christians of Jewish origin. This shift from invisible invention to

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collective innovation is the central mystery to be solved (p. 22-23).

In the space of nine relatively short chapters, bookended by an introduction and a conclusion, we are taken through the competitions among Jewish monotheism, the movements that spawned the future Christian monotheism and Greco-Roman polytheisms. We learn that polytheism and monotheism co-existed for a considerable amount of time. Desjeux notes that even if Jewish monotheism was born around the time of the beginning of the Kingdom of Israel in the 11th century BC, polytheism continued until at least 70 AD. We also learn of the Hellenization and the Romanization that spread to the Jerusalem area, which in turn also made the way for Greek speaking Jewish Christians and their diaspora, which was a vital factor for the Christian innovation. This use of Greek was a soft power influence of language, but, as Desjeux points out, there were also conquests; for instance, from the Roman world that also helped usher in monotheism over polytheism, illustrating how innovations are often spread not only peacefully, but also by harder and less peaceful means.

Desjeux also points to the way that the Christian notions of resurrection and eternal life were helpful ways of solving or, at least, coping with suffering in life and, thus, readily adopted. Crucially, however, Desjeux is clear that it was not only the spread of ideas, but the spread of activities and practices that surrounded those ideas which was crucial in the successful uptake of Christianity. Getting rid of circumcision and the eating restrictions of kashrut were key in the spread of Christianity. The ritual of baptism, a kind of one-and-done purification ritual, was also relatively easy in comparison to earlier practices such as animal sacrifice. Making these practical changes in religious rituals made life easier. Returning to cognitive issues per Desjeux, these changes in practice reduced the “mental load.”

Significantly, Desjeux does not view the developments that led to the uptake of Christianity as occurring in a linear fashion nor that these occurred without considerable bumps in the road as well as intense human energy to keep the processes moving forward. Moreover, he does not see the process as inevitable or predetermined in any way. Rather, he focuses on the importance of chance occurrences, invoking the metaphor of the black swan, as he points out that even if the first nine swans one encounters are white, it does not mean that the tenth swan will not be black. In the case of Christianity, the destruction of the Temple in 70AD was the black swan event; that is, the chance occurrence that considerably aided the Christian innovation.

Sprinkled throughout the chapters, Desjeux has included pointers to what he has termed “invariants” of the innovation process. He has derived these invariants from the innovation literature as well as his

many decades of experience working with innovation in organizations, agriculture, and consumer goods not only in Europe, but also Asia, Africa, and North and South America. For instance, he points to the importance of proselytism as one of the constants, or “invariant mechanisms,” for the spread of innovations, noting the work of Paul the Apostle as a key mobilizing figure for the spread of Christianity and advertising as a proselytizing form of persuasion for contemporary products and services. I found myself thinking that these invariants of innovation were very provocative and could be helpful heuristics for other studies. For instance, included are the following:

- “Innovation is always comprised of continuity and discontinuity. This is its central paradox” (p. 20).
- “There is no innovation without a social network” (p. 29).
- “Proselytism is itself the product of mobility, another constant of innovation processes” (p. 38).
- “An idea does not spread just by virtue of being good, or ‘logical,’ or rational, or ‘coherent,’ but also because social groups spend a lot of energy making sure it is successful” (p. 52).
- “Innovation does not only disrupt technology or services, it also disrupts social relations among human groups. This disruption is often the sign that an innovation is progressing” (p. 99).

I found myself wishing that these insights, invariants, and heuristics of innovation should be collected, and I do hope that Desjeux’s next work will do just that.

In the meantime, this work is a model not only for understanding innovation and entrepreneurship, but as an inspirational muse for using the method, mindset, and analytic frameworks we have mastered as business anthropologists to examine social and historical questions that may seem beyond the business purview. Desjeux frames his model as one of “strategic anthropology.” I look forward to other researchers building on this model, looking at other social revolutions, both past and present, from a business anthropological perspective. We stand at a moment when looking at contemporary political innovations through this lens might be just the place to start.

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