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Symbols of the Sacred, Louis Dupré, Eerdmans 2000 (0-8028-4748-X), pp. viii + 131, $ 20.00

Before I accepted the invitation to review this book, I had a look at Eerdmans’ website. There I read that ‘Symbols of the Sacred gathers four classic essays by Louis Dupré on the role of symbols in our understanding of the sacred and on their fundamental importance to religious consciousness.’ That induced me to accept the invitation. Collections of ‘classic essays’ are among the books I like to have on the shelves. To my disappointment, the book does not live up to the expectations raised by Eerdmans’ website (and by both the book’s cover and the back of its title page). Instead, it is a slightly revised edition of the core chapters of The Other Dimension (Doubleday 1972). The short treatment of religious art in the earlier edition has been replaced by a more extensive one, based on a chapter from Transcendent Selfhood (Seabury Press 1976), and a conclusion (which, according to the Press Information leaflet that came with the book, has been reprinted from the Christian Century) has been added. Though this is a slightly revised reprint rather than the new collection of classic essays that I was made to expect, it remains a splendid study of religious symbolism. It traces the development from a culture in which symbols are God-given – and therefore intrinsically meaningful – to one in which they are man-made. What is the effect of this development on our understanding of religious symbols? Can they still have meaning for us? Dupré argues that they can, but only when we assume ‘that the mind itself possesses a transcendent dimension which enables it to share in the transcendence from which it receives its revelation’ (p. 125). Where did I hear about such a divine spark in human beings before?

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