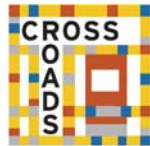


# Religious Awareness in Modern Man

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The text appeared in *Communio*, Volume XXV Number One, Spring 1998.

**Monsignor Luigi Giussani** (1922-2005) was the founder of the international Catholic lay movement Communion and Liberation. His works are available in fifteen languages and include the trilogy *The Religious Sense*, *At the Origin of the Christian Claim*, and *Why the Church*; *The Psalms*, *The Risk of Education*, and *The Journey to the Truth is an Experience*. For more information about Monsignor Giussani and Communion and Liberation, please visit [www.clonline.org](http://www.clonline.org).

## FOREWORD

Reinhold Niebuhr pointedly observed that "men rarely learn what they think they already know." I am convinced that everyone thinks he already knows about the religious fact in general, and about Christianity in particular. Yet it is not impossible, if we take another look, that we may learn something new.

In the following conversation<sup>1</sup> I shall first try to identify our cultural and social situation insofar as it is an impediment to an authentic religious awareness; secondly, I shall point out the attitude of Christianity in the face of this situation.

We notice, today, that people are far more open to that religious sense which coincides with the search for destiny—an openness that, years ago, I never encountered. There appears to be a rebirth of man's vocation to place himself in relationship with his meaning; yet it seems to me that the way this is talked about is generally not very helpful.

These brief notes are meant to contribute to the clarity and the positivity of the undertaking.

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<sup>1</sup> The following text is from a conference given by Msgr. Giussani to students at several European universities.

## PART ONE: "HAS MANKIND FAILED THE CHURCH?"

### Chapter 1. A Forgetfulness in Man's Religious Journey

#### *The Bridge between Man and Destiny*

To get at what I want to say, I shall begin with a page from the Anglo-American poet, Thomas Stearns Eliot, who, in the seventh of his "Choruses from 'The Rock'"<sup>2</sup> recalls in poetic form the religious history of mankind.

Eliot begins by describing the cosmos as "waste and void. And the darkness was over the face of the abyss." "Waste and void," and "darkness," stand for the absence of meaning. It is man, in fact, who peoples the waste and the void: in him, nature itself begins the relentless adventure of the quest for meaning. Man came on the scene, and immediately there began an ongoing attempt to imagine, to define, and to realize in theoretical, practical, and aesthetic terms the connection that runs between the lived moment, which is passing and ephemeral, and its timeless, ultimate meaning. What is the meaning of the contingent instant in relation to the totality of things? In every age, human beings have faced and lived this interpretive task, even when they have denied doing so. The quest for this connection between the moment and the whole, the eternal, is a phenomenon that human reason cannot avoid, because man has always lived out the urgency of asking himself, and not leaving unanswered, the question as to the ultimate purpose of his journey; and he has done so with greater insistence than in responding to any other human need. The spark of religiosity arises between the poles of the ephemeral and ultimate destiny and thus begins the work of building the "bridge," as Victor Hugo writes in one of his poems, a bridge that spans the human shore and the distant star by hundreds, nay thousands, of arches.<sup>3</sup>

Thus are born all religions. Religion is, in fact, nothing other than the attempt to construct the way in which man imagines his relationship with his destiny in theory, ethics, and ritual. This image entails a certain way of thinking, of seeing reality; it provokes a certain attitude toward that imagined destiny, and therefore leads to a particular morality. Finally, it strives to resonate aesthetically and poetically in certain rites, in certain gestures. All of these various ways of thinking, of acting, and of ritualizing, taken together, is religion.

Thus, Eliot recalls this religious tradition of mankind.

The great founders of religion advanced their proposals for the journey, saying, as it were, "Come with me; I will teach you the way"; or, "This is the road to perfection"; or, again, "To be useful to history, to the world, this is the path to follow."

#### *An Anomalous Fact*

But at a certain point, the poet continues, a phenomenon occurred that was absolutely anomalous. Not one that said, "Between the contingent moment you are living and its timeless meaning, between the obscure point where you find yourself and the nearest star in the sky, this is the path you must follow." Rather, a Voice cried out that claimed to identify itself with destiny—no longer man inquiring into the mystery, attempting to imagine his destiny for himself, but a man who dared to say, "I am that Mystery; I am your destiny." He did not proclaim, "I teach you the way," but "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life" (Jn 14:6).

Then came, at a predetermined moment, a moment in time and  
of time,

A moment not out of time, but in time, in what we call history:  
transecting, bisecting the world of time, a moment in time but  
not like a moment of time,

A moment in time but time was made through that moment: for  
without the meaning there is no time, and that moment of

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<sup>2</sup> T.S. Eliot, "Choruses from 'The Rock,'" in *The Complete Poems and Plays, 1909-1950* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1958), 96-114.

<sup>3</sup> Victor Hugo, "Le Pont," in *Les Contemplations, Oeuvres Complètes* (Editions Rencontre)

time gave the meaning.  
 Then it seemed as if men must proceed from light to light, in the  
 light of the Word,  
 Through the Passion and Sacrifice saved in spite of their negative  
 being;  
 Bestial as always before, carnal, self-seeking as always before,  
 selfish and purblind as ever before,  
 Yet always struggling, always reaffirming, always resuming their  
 march on the way that was lit by the light;  
 Often halting, loitering, straying, delaying, returning, yet following no other way.  
 (T.S. Eliot, "Choruses from "The Rock")

Such are Eliot's vivid images in which he depicts the two-thousand year history of Christianity.  
 Christ left us to be men, but he made us essentially restless creatures; he instilled in us a tension towards destiny—  
 “always struggling.” This is the most palpable anthropological characteristic endowed to mankind by the proclamation of  
 Christ. The world marked its years from that moment, one after the other, along that road. And it seemed that men should  
 have forever progressed "from light to light," always ready to take up the well-lit way once again, in spite of everything,  
 walking as they were able, but still walking on the trail of that incomparable Event.

*Something Happened*

But it seems that something has happened that has never happened  
 before: though we know not just when, or why, or  
 how, or where.  
 Men have left GOD not for other gods, they say, but for no god;  
 and this has never happened before  
 That men both deny gods and worship gods, professing first  
 Reason,  
 And then Money, and Power, and what they call Life, or Race, or  
 Dialectic.  
 The Church disowned, the tower overthrown, the bells up-turned,  
 what have we to do  
 But stand with empty hands and palms turned upwards  
 In an age which advances progressively backwards?  
 . . . . .  
 Waste and void. Waste and void. And darkness on the face of the  
 deep.  
 Has the Church failed mankind, or has mankind failed the  
 Church?  
 When the Church is no longer regarded, not even opposed, and  
 men have forgotten  
 All gods except Usury, Lust and Power.

(T.S. Eliot, "Choruses from "The Rock")

I believe that this poetic passage, written about fifty years ago,<sup>4</sup> is a prophetic description of the religious  
 situation of the majority of the human race in our time. I consider his description to be the best way to highlight  
 the religious situation of modern man, the situation in which man walks, lives, acts, and thus, the situation that  
 influences his way of thinking, his heart, his moral sensibility and his possibilities for hope.

The words of the poet clarify the context in which the religious sense finds itself today: overwhelmed by  
 a steady attempt to prevent it from acting as an existentially vital factor at work in the dynamics of education  
 and social relationships—as if to make it rigid, something obsolete.

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<sup>4</sup> "The Rock" was written by T.S. Eliot in 1934 as a historical scene in verse to be performed in a London theater. The choruses were later  
 published separately

But because the religious sense is the culmination of reason—the future Paul VI, in his first letter as Cardinal of Milan, defined it as "the synthesis of the spirit"—it cannot, as such, be uprooted; it cannot be ignored for long. Thus in an epoch such as ours, God's absence is filled by the presence of something else. Even an authentic religiosity must nowadays take into account the fact that a serious lie has been woven into the social fabric: God has been denied, but human religiosity, the quest for a relationship with God, attempts to realize itself all the same in a relationship with unconscious "gods," that are not, however, proclaimed as such.

Men can certainly eliminate the names of all the gods, but they will in any case find some "god" for themselves without even knowing it and bow down to it in unnatural slavery. Eliot identifies these as "Usury, Lust and Power," and they can be reduced to one thing: mutual instrumentalization, a compensating projection of ultimate subjection, deceptively conceived.

Eliot claims that no one knows where or how or when or why this situation came to pass. Yet it is exactly a response to this question that we, shunning the poet's caution, would like to explore.

## 2. How It Happened

To understand the process of that "progressively backwards" advance of which Eliot speaks, several historical points of reference can be discerned. Our human situation is the result of a legacy.

Simplifying things, we can say that until the end of the Middle Ages, those societies that had "recognized" the "anomalous fact" that had occurred in history identified something greater as the origin, the destiny, the path's ideal: God. The multiplicity of factors that constitute the human person and human society were drawn into a unity; they were gathered together and realized in a single whole. In this way, an unfragmented conception of the person—and so also of the cosmos and of history—was assured. It was characteristic of the Middle Ages to uphold the figure of the saint as the exemplary image of the human person; and the saint is a man who has realized the unity between himself and his destiny. The shattering of this unity, of this human figure, is the great change.

When he was nominated to the French Academy in 1955, the French writer Henri Daniel-Rops gave a speech in which he described in some detail a fatal illness, which, in his diagnosis, infected the heart of modern man. He traced the cultural matrix of this situation back to three roots. I shall briefly recall these and then comment upon them, after which I shall note how they are, in substance, interrelated.

### *Man as "Divo," the Self-Made Man*

One of these roots was systematized for the first time in that period of time following the Middle Ages, the period of Humanism. The tension toward the unity of the human person, represented in the figure of the saint and lived as a social ideal, fades into non-existence.

Sanctity, as a human ideal, projected man toward something greater than himself, and the unity of all the aspects of humanity were, of course, found in this tension toward perfection. If the link with what is greater than the human being is lost, perfection as the totality of factors cannot exist and, in fact, is no longer imaginable. True, there may be a particular "achievement" in one field or another; there could be some particular capacity in one type of human expression or another. But from this point in time onwards, the order of what would come to be the dominant culture in a sense is splintered into partial aspects. Humanism substituted the ideal of human success for the medieval ideal of sanctity: all things flow harmoniously together, no longer in God, but in the *divo*, the successful man who relies on his own forces. Man is to place his hope in his own strength; he is to bank on his own energy. Whether in this or that field, what matters is to make life a "success." At this point, the notion is already taken for granted that life as a whole is no longer as important as "winning" admiration in one particular area: the arts, military valor, politics, learning. The humanist Coluccio Salutati proclaimed that "Worthy of heaven is the man who does great things on the earth." And what if a man has not enjoyed favorable circumstances? Where will he find his worth? If the value of his life is no longer founded upon this objective relationship with God, but is instead consigned to the mercy of fortune, what then? And is a small and weak man worth nothing? The seeds of racism are waiting to germinate in such soil as this.

The rediscovery of ancient manuscripts, preserved in large part by medieval monks, has unearthed interesting linguistic convergences: the goddess of "fortune" and the goddess of "fame" are present in a remarkable way in the recovery of the ancient vocabulary so characteristic of Humanism. And their presence helps clarify just how much the meaning of life was, for the humanists, identified with success, even if achieved

only in one particular area of life. Thus the god that was not isolated and remote from our existence, but active and involved in human affairs, was the god of success.

Chesterton has observed that "Every error is a truth gone mad." Indeed, success in one's life is no doubt a value. Great estimation for this value arises in the Christian tradition through the concept of "merit." The term "merit" designates the measure human activity acquires with regard to the Eternal: man must merit happiness, that is, heaven. But clearly from the Christian perspective, one who is ill, for example, or falls on misfortune, or is handicapped can have a dignity and a stature greater than that of those whose names are paraded in the newspaper headlines. Such stature is not just the lucky convergence of external factors.

It is this partiality, this lack of unity, that characterizes the thread of modern culture—in its thinking and therefore in its praxis. Grounding all success in life, all faith, and all hope on human energies alone is also typical of the contemporary mindset. It is not by chance that the idea of the *divo* is widespread in our day and age; and the range of its influence is certainly not limited to Hollywood; it promotes a social ethic that is not confined to the world of film. Even today, God is replaced by the *divo*. God is perceived by us as something out of reach, whereas the *divo* is someone who palpably realizes himself, today as during the time of Humanism.

John Dewey, the founder of American educational theory (his renown was so great that his eightieth birthday was celebrated with two national holidays) posits "social efficiency" as the ultimate formula, the ultimate criterion of education. Of course, he adds the word "social" to "efficiency," but the meaning brings us very near to the humanistic sense of "*divo*."

However that may be, we must note that these shifts in mind-set did not necessarily come about in an irreligious way. Yet, if Christian principles happen to be maintained—even with a certain devotion—and not denied, nevertheless, the feeling of living them, for its part, wavers. God ends up like a cloud floating in the sky, increasingly remote, with increasingly less influence on a world that is seized upon and manipulated more and more extensively by man alone. God becomes an abstract something, unconnected to the world.

#### *Whence Come Man's Energies?*

The humanist still retained a sense of genuine humanity; and he could not forget that man is full of limitations. From his reading of the ancients, he happened upon that veil of sadness, that sense of ultimate limitation which, in Greek drama, brought every human effort to a tragic conclusion. Symptoms of this sense can be found in Petrarch's exclamation, when he writes, "Who will give me the wings of the dove, that I may arise and lift myself from the earth?"

The humanist asks himself whence comes the creative energy of human beings, which is the source of success and grandeur; and he realizes full well that man cannot bestow it upon himself. The individual is clearly not the source of his own strength: it must come from something else, something greater. Thus, in the face of a Christian God who has been, not denied, but eclipsed, off in the empyrean distance, the ultimate source of creativity is identified with nature, which becomes the concrete substitute for an abstract divinity.

What will thus characterize the Renaissance is a nature understood pantheistically.

But if nature is the source of our fortunes and energies, then all that springs from nature is good. After the humanistic affirmation of the *homo faber*, the Renaissance announces a new ethical concept: human activity is good by nature. And what springs from nature? The impulsive, the spontaneous, instinct. The "good" becomes what is instinctual. The "naturalism" that thereby defines the Renaissance ethic signals a change that occurred systematically in the entire body of ethics. When Rabelais wrote, "Do what you will, because man is, by nature, driven to act virtuously," he made this change explicit, and had already perfectly articulated a principle of the ethic of our day.

How true it is that error is a truth gone mad! To recognize error, it is necessary to think its logic through. Only then will it be made manifest that something has been forgotten or denied. In the present case, for example, the Christian tradition would be the first to reaffirm the statement of Rabelais. For a defense of the natural Law, which man bears written in his heart, is characteristic of Catholic culture; and this is to say that Catholicism recognizes that "man is, by nature, driven to act virtuously."

But at the same time, the Church recognizes that it is necessary to be realistic. We must not forget that while it is true that nature prompts man to virtuous activity, it is also true that the existential situation in which he lives makes it impossible for him to realize the ideal impetus of his heart. Every good impulse has a force that soon wanes. Every man knows the bitter taste, the humiliation, of this falling short of himself. Not to recognize it is to lose sight of one's own concrete humanity. Rabelais totally neglects the reality of this limitation, the origin of which the Christian tradition calls "original sin." In a famous phrase, the Latin poet Ovid also confesses this

reality: "I see and approve better things, but follow worse." Let it be said: while the soul, across the centuries, is by nature a web of ideal pointers, in the concrete it is suffocated by a great weakness. If man by nature possesses a strength of his own, existentially he is wounded, ambiguous, equivocal. It is as if man suffered vertigo, as if his heartbeat were racing. Suppose, for example, we were to draw a line on the ground, and were to challenge those present to walk along it, placing one foot in front of the other; no one would have any difficulty. But were we able to take the same line, and elevate it a hundred yards above the earth, the situation would change radically. The line, and the challenge, would be the very same as before, but the conditions would have been altered considerably, such that the identical task would have been made impossible for most of us. There are certain things man is structurally able to do, which historically and existentially he cannot do.

The climate that ensued from Renaissance naturalism is well expressed by a phrase from Machiavelli, who records with his customary cynicism the atmosphere and mind-set of the nobility in the sixteenth century: "We are men who are more impious and immoral than can possibly be imagined."

We must note that in the Renaissance, there begins a subtle but real hostility to the God of Christianity, to a God who says yes or no, who seeks to regulate, to prune human instincts. Such a God can even contradict the impetus of nature or what seems to be the impetus of nature and, so starts to become a potential or real enemy.

### *Man as Prometheus*

The Renaissance was followed by the great age of scientific discovery. The discovery of a systematic correspondence between the dynamics of nature and the dynamics of human intelligence seemed to allow man to touch the *ultima Thule*, the limit of his possibilities. His reason seemed able to bend nature entirely to his own purposes.

This discovery led man to conceive of his reason as that which truly rules the world. In this way, he believed he had found the true god, the lord: reason. If, by applying his reason, man could bend nature to suit his own ends, he had in his hands the secret of happiness and the instrument to assure it.

Daniel-Rops, in the speech we cited above, observed that when Watt made the first sparks fly from his steam engine, man believed that he had made the ancient myth of Prometheus real, that he had stolen fire from the gods. At this point, it seemed as if man had truly become his own master. Thus the *Dominus* who had the right to determine life and the cosmos is no longer God, but man himself, through the use of reason.

With this step, we have entered the age of rationalism. In the development beyond the first conquests, the possibility of a limitless and unchallenged dominion seemed to unfold; more and more, the good of man's journey would be determined by science and technology, which, by manipulating reality, promised man a world built according to his plans. Man is the master of his own destiny.

### 3. If God Does Exist, He Doesn't Matter

Our survey of the last few centuries was to indicate the legacy they have left to our age. That legacy is an ideal, a conception of life, and it has three main features: the conviction that success is what makes life worthwhile; that nature merits our complete trust (i.e., instinct is exalted); and, finally, that reason can bend nature with certainty in accordance with its every wish and command (and that human happiness can be attained in this way). This, the three-fold legacy, still defines the ethical and cultural content of our time.

God is not necessarily eliminated by this new conception of man, i.e., of man understood as totally autonomous, capable of self-realization and the realization of his own plans. What does occur, however, is something far subtler. Cornelio Fabro summed it up well: "If God does exist, he doesn't matter." God has nothing concrete to do with man. God is now extrinsic to human cares and human problems. Within this sphere, man is his own measure, his own master, the source both of the formulation of his plans and of the energy needed to bring them about, the origin even of the ethical intention implicit in all he does. Thus, even if God does exist, within the sphere of human problems it is as if he did not. In this way, a division between the sacred and the profane comes into being, as though there could exist something outside the "temple" of God that is the entire cosmos.

So it is that rationalism has embraced this division as its own, gradually at first, and, after the French Revolution, through political force. This division has in turn come to be the common ground of the learned; it has determined the cultural air we breathe; it has now become the dominant culture. And the novel substance of this culture has, after several centuries, and by means of public education, infected the hearts and minds of all



people, so as to become a social mind-set.

And the more that mind-set spreads, the more God disappears, is pushed off to the margins. He is not tolerated should He claim to intervene in the destinies of those who believe themselves to be their own masters.

### *Secularism*

The term for this conception of life, insofar as it has through political power and public education become a social mind-set, a dominant cultural influence, is "secularism." Secularism is "the assertion that man belongs to himself and to no one else" (Cornelio Fabro); it is the presupposition that man is totally autonomous.

Herein lies the cause of the terrible impasse confronting the religious awareness of human beings in our day. In fact, a God who is not relevant to our lives is at best a useless God. It follows that the more active, interested and engaged with life a man is, the more he will feel it a waste of time to pause to think about such a God. God is reduced to a more or less private option, a pathetic psychological consolation, or a museum piece. For a man who feels keenly the brevity of his life and the many tasks to be accomplished, such a God is not only useless, but even harmful: He is the "opiate of the people." A society informed by such a mind-set may not be formally atheistic, but it is so de facto.

In truth, such a God is not only useless, not only harmful; He is not even God. A God who does not pertain to man's activity, his constitution, his path towards destiny, is at best a waste of time; and in the end, a god of this sort should be dispensed with, eliminated. The formula, "If God does exist, he doesn't matter," bears within itself the logical conclusion, "God does not exist."

The real enemy of authentic religiosity, in my view, is not so much atheism as it is the secularism outlined above. If the sacred is irrelevant to the concrete domain of our daily efforts, then man's relationship with God is conceivable only as something totally subjective. Consequently, human reality is left to itself. Our problems and concerns are then at the mercy of sheerly human criteria, which, in practice, are readily subsumed by the powers that be.

### *Consequences of Secularism*

Of those basic values of the Christian cultural tradition that have been most distorted, and, as it were, pulverized by the passage to our modern, enlightened, and secular age, we may draw particular attention, for the purposes of our present study, to four.

a) In the first place, there is a restrictive conception of *reason*. If we understand it as the measure of reality, our conception of reason is confined, as if we were talking about a room. No matter how spacious we wish to make the room, insofar as it remains a room, it is delimited and destined to become a tomb in which man remains imprisoned. Reason as the "measure of all things" (and thus man as the measure of reality) is, in fact, a prison: beyond its walls, there can be nothing else.

Man-the-measure-of-all-things is a being who encloses himself inside a horizon, rendering all of life's novelty impossible. If that which my measure cannot measure does not exist, then all novelty is merely apparent, something formal, like the tinker toys that children play with: they can change the formal construction, but the pieces making it up will always be the same. When reason remains a "room," its power is destroyed, and all of life's adventure—its discovery and creativity—are put to death.

For the Christian tradition, by contrast, reason is an open gaze. Or, to remain with the analogy, it is not a "room" but a "window" that opens onto a reality into which reason will never finish entering; a reality that man possesses and experiences as his own to the extent that he adheres to and obeys it. Reason is the awareness of reality according to the totality of its factors. Thus understood, religiosity becomes the culmination of rationality insofar as it is the affirmation of a total meaning, towards which, in fact, the totality of factors points.

This elimination of novelty is also responsible for the abolition of another characteristic dimension of true reason, namely, the category of possibility. Einstein, in a conversation he had a few days before his death, said that a man who did not recognize "the impenetrable mystery could not even be a scientist"; such a man could not, in fact, establish the category of possibility,

which is fundamental for all research.

*b)* A second reduction occurs in our image of *freedom*. Freedom in the modern age comes to be understood as separation from something, as the absence of any connection, as the absence of all ties. We might put this conception in ordinary terms by saying that freedom is the abandonment of one's self to nothing but the force of one's reactions, instincts, fancies, and opinions.

For Christianity, on the other hand, freedom is the energy of adhering to what is real, of adhering to being. It is the adherence of self to the other, an adherence that fulfills, augments, constitutes, and brings to completion our person. Therefore, freedom is an affective force, and it leads to an ultimate "Thou." Freedom is the constructive energy of the "I" through an adherence to the "Other."

*c)* A third profound change occurs in our idea of *conscience*. In modern culture, conscience is the place in which we form the criteria and directives of action; it is the autonomous source of ethical norms.

In the Christian tradition, conscience is the place where the freedom of the I in its freedom attends to the Voice of an Other, the place in which there emerges the objectivity of an order issuing from beyond one's self, an order to be obeyed. What a vast difference there is in the expression, "I follow my conscience," when it is understood as the objective place of obedience, or the place of ultimate, subjective interpretation!

*d)* As a fourth example of the radically divergent sense of values, I point to the development of a certain understanding of *culture*.

If man is, in fact, conceived as the measure and the truth of the world, then culture is a human projection upon reality in order to possess it. Thus, for the age in which we are living, the word "culture" refers to something an individual "has." Culture, as a "having," makes use of science and technology only in order to possess reality more fully, rather than to treat them as partial features of a total organism in which man can "be" more. Thus science and technology—as well as those who make use of them—are condemned to serve an ideology, as the flaunting of the particular point of view which states that power acts for the sake of "having" more.

According to the Christian tradition, so tenaciously taken up by John Paul II, culture is a phenomenon of man's humanization, a path to man's realization. Therefore, it concerns man's "being."

#### 4. The Most Significant Characteristic of the Three-Fold Legacy

##### *Frustrated Optimism*

In the legacy of modernity as a whole, the accent falls on man, master over his world, his life, his earth. The most remarkable characteristic of this mentality is a sort of optimism affirmed with dogmatic certainty.

This has to do with a naive optimism introduced by Humanism, expanded by the Renaissance, and then definitively sanctioned—or so it seemed at the time—by rationalism. Such optimism, which we have already mentioned, was the only mark distinguishing Humanism from its greatest source of inspiration, namely, classical culture. Antiquity perceived in an impressive way the tragic limits of man's existence. No matter how, in his most heroic exploits, he achieved and measured his greatness, man could not defy underlying fate. Tragic catastrophe inevitably triumphed over every human plan. All this is assuaged by Humanism.

Optimism still remains the dominant feature of our cultural legacy. It may seem disingenuous to us today, but until the end of the last century and in the early years of this century, this optimism went so far, in philosophical and theological literature, as to declare that in a very short time science would finally bring mankind under the control of a comprehensive system, and so to complete perfection: there remained only a few steps to be taken in the field of psychology and sociology. For confirmation one need only consider the philosophical and

theological literature of the period, in the United States but also elsewhere.<sup>5</sup> In a text from 1907, the American theologian and historian of the Church, Walter Rauschenbush, wrote, "The speed of the evolution of our country documents the immense capacity for perfection which is latent in human nature ... Perhaps these nineteen centuries of Christian influence have been a long preliminary period of growth, and now the goal and the fruit are almost within hand's reach."

But optimism of the rationalist stripe, according to which reason, through science and technology, would be able to resolve every human problem without God's help, was frustrated by the tragedy of the First World War. I remember a testimony of this in the first books of the great American Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, who exercised considerable influence on American culture in the 30s and 40s, particularly in his *Moral Man and Immoral Society* of 1932.

After a First, there followed a Second World War, which completed the job. The great culture fell into a deep bewilderment, for on the one hand God had already vanished from the human horizon, while on the other, man, the new god, had been dethroned by his own hands.

### *An Episode and a Prophecy*

I would like to take note of two events before entering into an analysis of some salient connotations of that cultural bewilderment, which in the years following the Second World War spread throughout Europe and the world.

The first is a trip made by Winston Churchill. At the end of the conflict that had engulfed the world, he went to the U.S.A. to be honored on account of his contribution to a victory that some considered the salvation of civilization. He found himself the guest of M.I.T., one of the most famous scientific centers in the world. The dean of that institution addressed a speech to him, a speech filled even then with that trusting and ingenuous certainty in the magnificent fortunes that would fall to human beings now that the war was at an end. Having mentioned the great debt civilization owed to Churchill for his part in overcoming the Nazi threat, he went on to describe what the look of that civilization would be as he saw it in the post-war period. Civilization had, he supposed, taken possession of every aspect of human existence by means of science and technology. Only a small step separated mankind from the realization of total dominion over human thought, affection, and feeling. Soon human power would reach down to the very roots of our nature, such that no Hitler would ever again be able to arise, and the world would become capable of a perfect society, like some great laboratory set up according to a just plan. Hearing this, Churchill rose from his seat, and after thanking the dean for his hospitality and his words of praise, said in reference to the happy world the dean had just described, that he "sincerely hoped to be dead before it happens." I have always enjoyed recalling the humorous approach taken by the English statesman in the face of a final grotesque tremor of that optimism rooted in the culture of pre-war Europe.

The second episode, and one that offers even more dramatic evidence, concerns the speech Daniel-Rops gave on the occasion of his admission to the French Academy, to which we have already referred. It happened that the tenth anniversary of the explosion of the atomic bomb at Hiroshima occurred on that day, and the author asserted that that coincidence was for him, as a Christian, a warning not to be ignored. He then went on to cite Plato's *Timaeus*, wherein we are told of a golden land called Atlantis, an unreachable continent situated beyond the Pillars of Hercules, and inhabited by a happy race of intelligent and enterprising men. These men had made themselves truly self-sufficient, and so no longer worshiped the gods. Zeus then called together the Olympian gods and, considering the matter, asked what was to be done with men who lived without gods. The gods decided to exterminate the impious race, and with a lightning bolt Zeus sank the continent of Atlantis into the ocean. The *Timaeus* goes on to state that the water that had swallowed up Atlantis formed an enormous mushroom reaching to the heavens. Ten years previous to that very day, Daniel-Rops commented, this Platonic dialogue had come true.

## 5. The Cultural Bewilderment of Modern Man

An "anthropology of corruption" signals the ultimate outcome of a psychological bankruptcy brought on

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<sup>5</sup> Here I refer in particular, and by way of example, to the authors of that American Protestant movement of thought and action that goes by the name of "The Social Gospel," active in the closing decades of the last century up through the end of the First World War.

by the tragic impact of these events. I will try to analyze this anthropology by delineating its most salient features.

*Anguish in the Face of the Enigma of Meaning*

Reason-as-the-measure-of-all-things has led man to fear not only the loss of his life in death, but also to fear the loss of his very humanity. A boundless bewilderment takes hold of man as he faces the enigma of human and personal destiny.

I wish to recall a novel that is particularly representative of the present historical moment, a novel that symbolizes the crisis we face. I am speaking of *Barabbas* by Pär Fabian Lagerkvist.<sup>6</sup> Barabbas is the symbol of modern man. He expresses a culture in which man conceives of himself as totally autonomous. The book tells the story of the brigand pardoned in the place of Christ. A few days after his capture, and quite unexpectedly, Barabbas finds himself being freed in place of a stranger, Jesus of Nazareth, to whom his life is now linked—"his" life, so independent, so wild and free. The novel is constructed entirely on the premise that if Barabbas lives, if he continues to be powerful and capable of accomplishing the exploits that have made him famous, he owes it all to the fact that "another" has died in his stead. Giovanni Papini, writing in his "introduction" to the first Italian edition of the novel, pointedly comments,

Thus, Barabbas is Man, man par excellence, whose life was saved by the work of Christ, and yet he does not know why. He tries to know, he tries to find out, he tries to see ... And, in truth, he will never know exactly. Barabbas is curious and restless, but he will never be converted.<sup>7</sup>

Lagerkvist won the Nobel Prize in 1951 for this novel, which he had published the year before. The reason for his being so honored was that Barabbas was seen as the "paradigm of European man," namely, someone who recognizes Christianity as a source of values which have imposed a culture on the world, but who is no longer able to believe in Christ.

Lagerkvist, who is also a subtle poet, says in some verses addressed to the "unknown friend":

A man unknown is my friend  
someone I do not know, a stranger far, far away.  
For him my heart is full of longing  
because He is not near me.  
Perhaps because He does not even exist?  
Who are you who fill my heart with your absence,  
who fill the whole world with your absence?

He adds, in another of his poems:

... there is no one who hears the voice sounding in the shadows;  
but why does the voice exist?

Why does the voice exist? The man of our time, intelligent, cultured, lover of life and humanity, understands that he is unable to overcome the negation. But he also understands that the negation is not the measure of all things. His own reality is greater than the negation.

The man of our time, as we have already said, understands the values that originate with Christianity, but he is unable to believe, and this leaves him terribly incomplete. The sadness of being incomplete is precisely what occupies the great minds of our day. Incapable of belief, the man of today, in an extreme and desperate act of loyalty, cries out longingly for some final, positive affirmation; he cries out what Christ with complete awareness had cried out before he died: "Into your hands I commend my spirit."<sup>8</sup>

Now that rationalistic optimism has undergone the frustration of two world wars, the deep bewilderment of contemporary high culture seems to open itself up to a new longing. Man cannot survive long in such an enigmatic situation. "The whole law of human existence," said Dostoyevsky, "lies in this: that man be able to bow

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<sup>6</sup> Pär Fabian Lagerkvist, *Barabbas* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> This introduction appeared in the first Italian translation of the book in 1951 published by Gherardo Casini, and later reappeared in the 1978 edition by Città Armoniosa

<sup>8</sup> These are the last words of Barabbas in the novel of Pär Lagerkvist.

down before the infinitely great." This wound, whether acknowledged or left in obscurity, stirs within man. Again, the Russian author observes that "the bee knows the plan of its hive, the ant knows the plan of its anthill, but man does not know his plan." This plan, in fact, consists of a relationship with the infinite.

### *Ethical Despair*

Not only has man lost the purpose of his own existence, but he has also become aware of his incapacity to realize his own humanity. Man is powerless to be man. He has no ideal law, he has no directive he has a disposition to follow, he has no safe harbor. In addition, he feels as though he does not even have the energy to live this. It is an ethical despair over the possibility of his own dignity, his ultimate loyalty. "There is no ideal for which we can sacrifice ourselves," says Malraux," because all we know are lies, we who do not know what the truth is."

The most incisive image of this despair over one's own ethical impotence appears in the final scene of *Brand* by Ibsen, when the protagonist, who has sought out coherence his whole life long, in the face of a death announced in the thundering avalanche, cries out, "Answer me, God, in this hour when death sweeps me away: can the whole will of a man obtain even a single thread of salvation?" That is, a single perfect act, which means, in the end, an entirely human act.

How remote is the cry that Ibsen lends to his protagonist from the self-sufficiency that is the root of modern culture! Man, aware of his incapacity to fulfill himself, falls from an extreme optimism into a profound and total pessimism. Every act is steeped in evil, a Protestant salvaging of such an attempt at autonomy.

This terrible recognition of incapacity led Kafka to write, "I, too, like anyone else, have inside me from birth a center of gravity that not even the craziest education has been able to budge. I still have this center of gravity, but somehow there is no longer a relative mass." That "center of gravity" is what I would call an urgent need for an all-embracing meaning. But it is clear from Kafka's subtle analysis that a "center of gravity" without a "relative mass," feels heavy, like a "ball of lead," weighing down the body rather than giving life to the organism: the heart is like a stone.

A God who is irrelevant to life, the sort of God our culture has inherited, only makes man's ethical despair more acute; he is like lead in man's existence. And so Eliot's list of gods—usury, lust, and power—become the active dominators of man, the inevitable penalty of retaliation, the concrete destiny into which man cannot avoid falling when he abandons the organic link with what constitutes him, creates him.

### *Anthropological Consequences*

I would like to outline what I believe are the fundamental categories of the psychology of human beings today, the categories that form the dead weight of which we just spoke.

*a)* Since the law of human existence is to bow down before what is infinitely great, to bow down before that which surpasses the horizons of any formula, I draw the first and most universal among these categories from a comment by Teilhard de Chardin. He observes that "the greatest danger that confronts mankind is not a catastrophe which comes from the outside; it is neither famine nor plague, but rather that spiritual sickness—the most terrible, because the most directly human of all scourges—which is the loss of the taste for living."

This, I believe, is the basic description most applicable to the age in which we live.

*b)* Second, we may note a contradiction that lies at the root of many different attitudes. Consider again the poet Eliot, who says in the sixth of his Choruses:

They constantly try to escape  
From the darkness outside and within  
By dreaming of systems so perfect that no one will need to be  
good.

That is to say, the human being, incapable of being himself, seeks refuge in systems, in ideologies that do not involve what he is as man, as "I," as freedom.

A passage from a letter of Marx to his wife, dated 21 June 1856, strikes me as significant:

I feel like a man again, because I experience a great passion; and the multiplicity of things in which study and modern culture entangle us, and the skepticism by which we must be brought to criticize all impressions, subjective and objective, are deliberately made to leave us small and weak and mournful and indecisive. But love, not for the man of Feuerbach, not for the metabolism of Moleschott, not for the proletariat, but love for the beloved, for you, this is what makes a man to be a man once again.

Thus, there weighs on modern man not only the loss of the taste for life, but also a contradiction which is, as it were, latent (in the sense that it is difficult to see it as a contradiction) yet operative, and very much present. But how in fact can any anthropology be sustained, how can a way of conceiving history be imagined, if it does not arise from, if it does not have an impact on and explain what man does on an everyday basis?

c) Hence a third observation: the destruction of time's usefulness. Such a clue can be taken from the concept of the instant. In the instant, time is caught in the act of its genesis. But once it became customary to assert that we alone cause ourselves to be, that we are self-made, this folly has brought along with it the destruction of the word "destiny," a synonym for the word "God." Only if there is such a thing as destiny does the instant have any substance, any significance; only then can it be seen in function of something beyond it. Otherwise, as Oriana Fallaci says, "life becomes a series of lost opportunities, a regret for what was not and for what might have been, a sorrow over what was not done and over what might have been done. And thus the present moment is wasted, making it another lost opportunity to then be sorry about."

d) The three categories I have mentioned merge in what is becoming one of the most prominent features of modern society: loneliness. The consequence of four centuries of man's efforts to assert himself as the ultimate purpose of reality is a frantic solipsism.

Loneliness is expressed in varying degrees, has various origins, and is lived in various historical moments, but all of its forms have in common the experience of a human being cut off from any relationship with things, with others, and with himself. "Where there is no temple," Eliot comments, "there shall be no homes." And, it is only in a home that man finds nourishment, friendship, a place where everything exists for him, is useful and good for him in the depths of his nature. What loneliness there is in the following words of Pavese: "They all look for a writer, they all want to talk to him, they all want to be able to say, 'I know how you were made,' and to make use of that fact; but no one gives him the benefit of a day of complete sympathy, man to man." To give someone the benefit of complete sympathy requires a love for his destiny.

e) We can find even some insane aspects in this awareness of loneliness. Consider the words of Sartre, which cannot but make one shiver: "My hands, what are my hands? They are the immeasurable distance that divides me from the world of objects and that forever separate me from them." This is the tragic affirmation of the impossibility of a relationship. But it is the logical consequence of the assertion, carried to the extreme, of the self as the measure of all things. If man is the measure of all things, he is alone, like some friendless god. The hands may grasp things, they may caress the face of a loved one, they may shake other hands, but there is no real relationship. Man is then like a light that glides over the surface of the rocks and the water: though inseparable from them, he is foreign to them. Condemned to a certain conception of freedom, man comes to realize that freedom is estrangement. And thus, he is free for nothing. Every attempt to grasp a thing puts it at a further remove; things withdraw ever more from us, and become completely unattainable. If man is so free as to be the measure of reality, he is condemned to an abysmal loneliness. A truly solitary man is a stranger to everything that is; should he roam to the utmost bounds of the earth, everything he would ever encounter would be alien to him; the past would be alien to him; indeed he would be a stranger to himself. A truly solitary man would not know what to make of his freedom, nor would he know what to make of reality. Moravia defines reality as "insufficient," that is, "incapable of arguing for its effective existence."

Thus everything becomes nothing. Pavese makes the point once again in the following verses:

There is nothing more bitter  
than the sunrise of a day on which nothing will happen;  
There is nothing more bitter  
than uselessness...  
The dragging hours  
are merciless for the one who no longer waits for anything.

f) The only apparent remedy for such corruption would seem to be a wishful commitment.

What is there to oppose the spread of this dissolution of the human person? Once God is lost, once the point of reference for an integrated self is lost, everything comes undone, breaks apart, and dies. This is indeed just what death is: the experience of corruption, wherein all the elements of an organism separate one from the other.

Thus in the face of this utter breakdown of relations, the most generous human attempt to respond lies in a renewal of stoic voluntarism. Faced with the impossibility of realizing a human image, faced with a nature that, materialistically understood, sweeps all before it only to destroy it all, the rigid force of human willpower imposes a project on itself, and strives with all its might to bring it into being. By way of example, let me offer this passage from Bertrand Russell:

I have by chance felt something that religious people call conversion. I became suddenly and vividly aware of the loneliness in which most people live, and became passionately desirous of finding ways to diminish this tragic isolation. The life of man is a long journey through the night, surrounded by invisible enemies, tortured by weariness and pain; one by one, as they walk along, our fellow travelers disappear from sight, as in a book; the time when we can help them is extremely short. May our time shed sunlight on their path, to renew their shrinking courage, to instill faith in their hours of despair.

Courage: to what end? Faith: in what? Voluntarism here reveals its blindness and irrationality. Man attempts to extend his capacities in the direction of a horizon that his more reflective awareness knows it cannot reach—like the frog in the fable, who kept puffing himself up until at a certain point he could do nothing but burst.

g) The only real obstacle modern man knows how to oppose to his own corruption is the State; the State as the source of all things. It is the lordship of man realized, but how ironically! Our ultimate salvation would be preserved from alienation in an ideological image of society, in the veiled enslavement of an entire people to some *power*, i.e., to the few "fortunate ones" who retain control.

Is this not perhaps the gist of the bitter comment by the Nobel prize winner for poetry, Czeslaw Milosz? "They have succeeded in making man understand that if he lives, it is only thanks to the powerful. Thus you think of drinking a coffee or catching butterflies. The one who loves the *res publica* will have his hand cut off."

## 6. The Option

The entire situation described up to this point, with its every consequence, is not the fruit of a deeper reflection by man on his own nature; it is an option, the result of a choice. Althusser, the Neo-Marxist philosopher, used to say openly that the alternative between "the existence of God and Marxism is not a question of reason, but is rather a pure option." That is, it is a position that man takes up, it is a free choice.

Althusser was right. Imagine a man standing on the border between shadow and light. Should he turn his back on the light, then the border marks the beginning of nothingness, of darkness. If, on the contrary, he turns his back on the darkness, the border marks the beginning of the light. It is all a matter of seeing the stance he decides to take.

Nevertheless, one of the two positions is the realistic one. If there is a border between shadow and light, it means that the darkness of the human drama is real. But it also means that there is light. Thus, the true drama is precisely this choice of stance in the face of reality. Because reality presents itself as a hinterland between shadow and light, it certainly may be defined as complete darkness, but it may also be the discovery of the beginning of the light. On the other hand, when the will—that is, the tension and energy of freedom, the ability to adhere to what exists—becomes a simple force of negation, like a child in a temper tantrum, then nothing is to its advantage.

Man has the power to throw temper tantrums in the face of being, but this is in fact so tragic that God felt pity for him. He became one of us in order to rouse us, to call us back, to move us to lift up our heads. The tantrum man throws in the face of reality is an expression of self-hatred, and a hatred for his own destiny.

We read in Nietzsche an anticipation of this will to violence, implicit in modern man's claim of being the measure of all things: "One day the wanderer closed the door behind himself and wept. Then he said, 'This burning desire for truth, for what is real, for what is not only apparent, for what is certain—how I hate it!'" Here is the choice contemporary man has made. He has shut the door on hope, on that ideal blowing at his back, that lies hidden at the bottom of his heart, that was passed on to him by his mother and all those who preceded him in history. He has learned to ignore his evident desire for truth, for what is real, for what is sure. Modern man believes he is persecuted by a "gloomy and impassioned" tyrant; at the same time he admits that he is constituted by the desire for truth, and he rebels against the nature of his very heart, which is a prophecy of God. Only at this point is man's evil revealed.

Dante, moreover, had already pointed out this ultimate human problem through the figure of Capaneus. The Christian is familiar with this temptation: You, a God, do bind me here, and I cannot flee, but you cannot stop me from blaspheming you—and I do blaspheme you. So it is that in renouncing God, man renounces himself. That desire for truth, that tyrant, does not allow him to rest. How wrenching, how bitter it is to escape from the urgent needs of his heart! "But since man must move his tired and wounded feet further," Nietzsche continues, he thus casts behind him—on those things so beautiful and adequate to his longing, things unable to sustain him—a look of bitter hatred. In his wrathful determination to wrench himself from the questions that would bring him back to God, he is full of spite, because those urgent needs of his heart have not constrained him to rest. Thus he hates his own freedom; he hates it even as he engages it.

Montale, in a splendid poem, describes the moment of perceiving the contingency of things:

Perhaps one morning, walking in the clear, dry air,  
Looking back, I will see the miracle occur:  
The nothingness at my back, the emptiness behind me,  
with the terror of a drunkard.  
Then like a screen, they will suddenly take up the field,  
Trees, houses, hills, for the customary deception.  
But for me it will be too late; and I shall walk away,  
silent among men who do not look back,  
with my secret.

Man, as that level of nature wherein nature becomes conscious of itself, perceives that he does not make himself in the instant, and that therefore things do not make themselves. This perception can be the beginning of mystical experience, that is, the awareness of his own being as creature. How is it instead that it becomes nihilism, "nothingness at my back"? It is precisely a matter of choice, a choice, however, that evades certain questions reason would pose. Like every error, such a choice is compelled by its own logic to forget or deny something, namely, that things do exist. That they are contingent, that they are not self-subsisting: this is very true. But they do exist. And by this very fact, they are a sign of the expression of the great Presence.

Cicero once said, "Is it not shameful that philosophers doubt things that not even peasants doubt?" It happens, then—and this is a source of wonder for whoever considers it—that some people oppose the very things that make them live; they oppose what is called "good" sense. By contrast, it would be enough to use their reason, that openness to reality that is like a window wide open to a sea, a sea into which one dives again and again, without end, which at every moment makes itself present to us in a new way.

It is possible that one choose to place oneself in front of reality, not like the child in the Gospel to whom is promised the kingdom of heaven, whose eyes are wide open to life, but rather like the child who shields his face with his arm and does not look, does not see. This is the true mystery of man, since he either places himself in front of things and chooses not to look at them, in order to censor their inauspicious aspects, or he remains in



front of them with the natural openness that casts him into that comparative universal. Either he opens up to things or is angered by them, and, from the religious point of view, this is the crucial choice that is common to men of all times. Surely, in an age like ours, this choice can be handicapped, our having inherited four or five centuries of constructed atheism—a "constructed" atheism, because, as the Protestant theologian Tillich rightly said, "Atheism, in the etymological sense, is impossible."

Atheism is, in fact, existentially possible: there can be a god who no longer matters in one's life, a god to whom one pays lip service, one who is even perhaps honored with dogmas, but who is thought to have nothing anymore to do with existence. One prefers instead that various interests be the most relevant things in one's life; "Usury, Lust and Power," as Eliot said. Justified ethically first by naturalism and ultimately by rationalism, man gradually resigns himself to this final enslavement. He renounces every god, except, precisely, "Usury, Lust," or to sum them all up in a word, "Power." Thus we live in a dramatically beautiful moment, because more and more, everything depends upon the choice we make, and this choice must struggle against a common mentality established by four centuries, one in which there nevertheless appears, as we have seen, the longing for, and flashes of an awareness of human needs which was dimmer in other periods of history.

At the end of his philosophical journey, the German thinker Max Horkheimer said, "Without the revelation of a god, man can no longer understand himself."

## PART TWO: OR "HAS THE CHURCH FAILED MANKIND?"

### 1. Christianity Has Progressively Become Protestant

Faced with the situation we have described, a practical and existential atheism, but also faced with the urgent need of some connection with destiny—that is, of an authentic religiosity, which we have surveyed—it is absolutely necessary that the meaning of life should once again befriend life.

Christianity entered the world in order to challenge the destruction of man that is perpetrated wherever man loses his connection with God. Christianity is the proclamation of the God who became man, and so it should be the most determining opposition to the day-to-day estrangement in the relationship between the infinite and the events of life.

We recall Christ's prayer to the Father before dying, "I do not pray for the world" (In 17:9). By this he certainly did not mean creation, which offers us the stars, the sea, and the tenderness of love. Rather, He meant reality, which, sadly, can include even the stars, the sea, and the tenderness of love, when it is encountered in isolation from its ultimate relationship with the divine. This is the world for which Christ does not pray: reality when faced without from God. Reality faced in this way would tend to destroy man, whom Christ came to save.

But nowadays the Christian fact is proposed to the world in a profoundly reduced form. It is not what it should be; namely, the presence that battles against man's destruction. If it is that presence, it is only so potentially.

In speaking of this reduction, I want to make clear that I am not talking about an ethical inconsistency. Since the Lord came, in fact, the Church has always made man aware of the fundamental truth that he is a sinner, and that Christ came specifically for sinners. I am not talking about that terrible fragility depicted by Ibsen in the passage from *Brand* cited previously, whereby the human being is unable to stand on his own two feet, unable to be himself. I am not talking about that: for Christ came precisely so that, leaning on him, we would be able to walk; to walk slowly, to be sure, but to walk. No, I am talking about a reduction of Christianity that concerns a way of living out its very nature. It seems to me that the Christianity of our day has been afflicted, weakened, diluted by an influence we could define as "protestant." This is not the occasion to describe the religious depths from which Protestantism is born, or the depths it can reach. What I want to offer is surely not a critique directed at the Protestant world, but a critique of the Catholic reality—I would say, of Catholic intelligence—which today shows itself to have become almost protestant.

The chief observation motivating such a judgment lies in the reduction of Christianity to "Word" ("Word of God," "Gospel," or simply, "Word"). This reduction entails certain consequences that are decisive for a culture.

#### *Subjectivism*

From a methodological point of view, this reduction leads to an inevitable subjectivism, which, from a practical point of view, fosters a certain sentimentality and pietism. Thus, a person's conscience becomes the ultimate interpretative criterion of the Word of God; and this results in a dramatic relativization, which makes each person the source of moral dictates, the ultimate teacher and prophet to himself; and this means in turn that the person is at the mercy of his sensibilities, of his immediate experience, and the moment in which he lives. *Tot capita, tot sententiae*: there are as many opinions as there are heads. This Latin motto could even be the slogan of rationalist freedom.

If a remedy is desired for such aggravated subjectivism, it is sought from those who engage in a hermeneutics of the Word; we turn to the exegetes. But the intelligentsia are not sufficient for the objectivity needed. Nor, to salvage objectivity, is the opinion of the base community enough; nor is the opinion of the local Church. Christ bequeathed the ultimate and unequivocal objectivity of his guidance to none of these entities in themselves.

#### *Moralism*

If Christianity is God's word interpreted by conscience, a further serious question arises. If Christianity is rendered "word," as interpretable by conscience in the above mentioned sense, what solution would it propose when it comes up against man's personal problems or the urgency of social reality? How can extreme subjectivism

deal with the mass of vexations brought on by the ever increasing complexities of modern life?

Regrettably, there is but one response possible: our behavior will inevitably be informed and deemed as good by those ideals that have been anointed by the dominant culture. Morality, then, becomes something that derives from laws and from the coherence of an understanding of life validated by power, and thus recognized by the majority. If Christianity is reduced to word, it coincides with an emotion of conscience which has the right to interpret it; and this conscience in turn cannot detach itself from the influence of those values most prized in the historical moment in which it lives. We see, then, that the most correct and dignified behavior for a human being will be determined according to the ideas and convictions deemed most urgent by the reigning social mind-set.

Here is the second mutilation that the reality of Catholicism, according to a widespread interpretation, offers our time: a narrowed moral horizon, the boundaries of which are those stemming from the dominant conception of the life of the society in which it finds itself. And this amounts to a reduction of morality to moralism. Moralism always narrows the moral horizon, and it always points an accusatory finger at man; or rather, it both accuses him, and vindicates him. Some values are exalted, and others are censured; regarding some, total consistency is expected, while regarding others, their absence is at times accepted and even praised.

Thus, even if the Word of God, when subjectively interpreted, is able to open up spaces that are emotionally alive, or even the source of particular sacrifices, the morality for men who live in a society remains determined by those who are really in power. Thus it is impossible for a man's position in front of Christianity—even that of the believing man—not to give in to an identification with the moral values that society seems to express as obvious.

So it is that morality becomes an inflexible moralism: either one's behavior flows from the dynamism intrinsic to an event to which one belongs, or it is an arbitrary and pretentious selection of affirmations among which the choices most publicized by power will dominate, choices to which one will be scrupulously bound to conform.

#### *Weakening of the Organic Unity of the Christian Fact*

Another direct consequence of the reduction of Christianity to word is the vanishing of the connection between present and past; that is to say, the organic, structural unity proper to a fact like the Christian one is destroyed. The value of history, of tradition, and therefore, of the organic unity of the Christian event, which quickens the life of the Church, is weakened. It is as though an adult lived exclusively in the present, relying on instinctive or passing reactions, his past erased by some strange illness or negative reaction.

The enfeebling of the historical and vital density of the Christian fact leads to an attempt to empty, as far as possible, the content of the relationship with that factor which guarantees the organic unity we have just mentioned, namely, the Bishop of Rome. With respect to a certain slackening of following of the Pope, we may note another echo of Protestantism, which, using an expression drawn from Protestant history, we could call "congregationalism," or "episcopalianism": the local Church has sufficient capacity and autonomy to establish man's relationship with Christ, with the divine. The real primacy of the Bishop of Rome is attenuated, and along with it the only adequate grounding of man's relationship with God, which is the mystery of the Church in its fullness.

Paul VI, when he was still the Cardinal of Milan, already foresaw this danger, as he indicated in a letter sent to Cardinal Cicognani before the opening of the Council:

This Council should, from the start, express a unanimous and joyful act of homage, fidelity, love and obedience to the Vicar of Christ. After the definition of the primacy and of the infallibility of the Pope, there were a few defections, a few doubts, and then docile acceptance. Now the Church rejoices in recognizing, in Peter and in his successor, that fullness of powers which is the secret of her unity, of her strength, of her mysterious capacity to challenge time and to make out of men a Church. Why should the Council not say so? Why does the Council not express this acquired certainty? Why, before it has to discuss episcopal powers, does it not distance from itself every temptation and from others every doubt which could momentarily call back into question the sovereign greatness and solidity of that truth? For this point, too, a simple and short, but solemn and cordial act would suffice.<sup>9</sup>

One thing must be emphasized. A merely "local" church cannot endure in the face of a dominant culture; it can do nothing but submit to it. A culture becomes dominant only by means of values imposed with force or with a

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<sup>9</sup> Paul VI Institute, *Notitiae* n. 7, pp. 11-14.

claim of universality. The local Church, precisely because it is limited, cannot help but be caught up in the game: her universal values are those drawn from the "catholic," as John Paul II expressed in his address to the Italian Church together with the bishops and their representatives at Loreto in 1985.

Here, then, are the three "pitfalls" which tend to reduce the Christian fact, and particularly Catholicism, from within; each dismantles Christianity from inside, weakening its struggle against the mentality that says "God has nothing to do with life." The first, as we have seen, is a subjectivism in front of destiny, both in theory and in practice. The second is the stress on a moralism in the face of values exalted by the dominant culture. Finally, we have mentioned the weakening of the living unity of the people of God with its tradition, gathered around its chief guarantor, the Bishop of Rome.

The powerful organic unity of the Church, that unity which is the sign of the saving presence of Christ, thus appears today depleted of strength. Georges Chantraine, a Belgian theologian, wrote in a journal article, "The ontology of Christianity has been emptied and only the words were left behind."

## 2. Christianity as an Objective Fact

### *The Announcement in History*

If Christianity wishes to present itself to the contemporary world in undiminished form, it must offer the living God. Not the god of the dead, or of human intelligence, but the living God: the God who holds time and history, the intelligence and the heart of man in His hands, and who alone can answer the deep longing that is awakened to the point of being evident as a social fact.

Christianity is the announcement of a Fact, a Fact that is good for man, good news: Christ born, dead, risen. It is not an abstract definition, a notion subject to interpretation. The Word of God—the Word—is a fact that occurred in the womb of a woman, became a child, and grew to become a man who spoke in the public squares, who ate and drank at table with others, who was condemned to death and killed. The word of God is a human fact, a fully human fact.

In a passage from the "Four Quartets," Eliot writes:

Men's curiosity searches past and future  
And clings to that dimension. But to apprehend  
The point of intersection of the timeless  
With time, is an occupation for the saint—  
No occupation either, but something given  
And taken, in a lifetime's death in love,  
Ardour and selflessness and self-surrender.

When a child is born into a family, it is clear to the parents, to the grandparents, to the whole family and to friends that this is a fact. There is nothing to dispute: a new bed is needed, perhaps another bedroom; we have to give thought to how to take care of the new arrival; we are concerned about feeding, clothing and protecting him or her; we get up at night if he or she needs us. The shape of daily life is transformed by virtue of this fact. Christianity is a "fact" in the same way. It entered history just as a baby enters into the house of a husband and wife. Christianity is an irreducible event, an objective presence that desires to reach man; until the very end, it means to be a provocation to him, and to offer a judgment of him. Jesus said to the Apostles after his Resurrection, "Behold, I am with you always, even to the end of the world" (Mt 28:20).

Christianity will have a dramatic and decisive bearing on man's life only if it is understood in accordance with its originality and its factual density, which, two thousand years ago, had the form of a single man. Yet even when he was still living, he also had the face of people whom he had brought together, and then sent out two by two, to do what he had been doing, and what he had told them to do; they came back together and returned to him. Later, united as one, this people went out to the entire known world to present that Fact. The face of that single man today is the unity of believers, who are the sign of him in the world, or as Saint Paul says, who are his Body, his mysterious Body—also called "the people of God"—guided and guaranteed by a living person, the Bishop of Rome.

If the Christian fact is not recognized and grasped in its proper originality, it becomes nothing more than a ponderous occasion for all sorts of interpretations and opinions, or perhaps even for works; but then it lies alongside of or more often subordinate to all of life's other promptings.

Thus, in the face of the protestant influences we have described, Christianity, conceived anew in its structural originality affirms in the first place that the path to truth is something objective, in opposition to the subjectivism discussed above. Man's path toward the truth, and toward his destiny, is not at the mercy of his thoughts, or of the thoughts of others or of the society in which he lives. The path is objective: it is not a matter of imagining it or inventing it, but of following it.

Paul Claudel, in *Tidings Brought to Mary*, has Anne Vercors, standing before the corpse of her daughter Violaine, say, "Why do we so tire ourselves out, when it is such a simple thing to obey?" A living reality that invites us to follow it: this is the characteristic proper to the Christian fact. This is now the life of the Church. What constitutes this life is, to be sure, the reading of the Gospel, the Word of God; but it is the Gospel interpreted by the living awareness of a living body, guided in turn by another living reality, the Magisterium; and this body has its own rhythm in the flowing of time, namely, the liturgy.

The path to what is true, notwithstanding its fragility, inconsistency, and weakness, can be full of peace for us if it is the following of a person, as an affective decision towards destiny which makes us truly human.

To his contemporary, the historian Cardinal Baronius, Saint Philip Neri wisely used to repeat the formula: *oboedientia et pax*, "obedience and peace."

### *Morality as Grace*

We have seen that moralism is the forced adherence, voluntaristically stressed, to the ideals of humanity approved by the dominant culture. By contrast, the objectivity of the path to our destiny, in the face of moralism, proclaims Grace. Man becomes who he is, he walks toward his realization, by virtue of a Grace. How does this Grace act?

Nature provides an illuminating analogy. How does a child become a man? He acquires his physiognomy, he brings his structure into being, he grows into an unmistakable personality through a continual osmosis due to the fact of belonging to an event with a structure and a face all its own: the family. The more the family possesses its own physiognomy—the more it is aware and rich with humanity—the more the child comes to have a personality of his own. It is precisely the experience of continuity that allows the differentiation of persons, the formation of his distinctive traits. This is the wonderful paradox that expresses the root of that endless unity that generates each and every man; it is the deep principle of creation.

Analogously, man walks toward his destiny, he realizes himself, by living within that familiar "fact" of the brotherhood of men in Christ, of men who recognize one another and share a common path, because Christ is among them.

Thus, in opposition to moralism, which reduces the horizon of human values and requires a guilt-inducing conformism, Christianity, by making objective the fact that brings man to his destiny, offers us salvation as grace, something which is given if one remains and perseveres within a living reality. In this way, the adult man is "saved," that is, he grows, and finds with time that he has changed; he matures, and finds himself ever more immanent to him for whom he was made, and for whom his entire being cries out.

Abiding within the concrete and organic unity of the event that irrupted in history and that today is a guided people (a "*sui generis* ethnic reality," said Paul VI as we shall see momentarily), man is built, becomes a different creature. In fact, if one is not born from a people, that is to say, if one does not develop from a social reality naturally founded and organically identified, he will have great difficulty in achieving the fulfillment of all those aspects that form his make-up. What sort of man would he be who was born in a test-tube and raised by a state institution?

### 3. Two Fundamental Characteristics of the Christian Fact

#### *An All-Embracing Fact*

The first characteristic of Christianity understood as a happening, as a structured event, is that the Christian fact is all-embracing. That is to say, this fact suggests a certain sensibility in facing life's occurrences, it generates the very perception of things, the way of conceiving of and valorizing things, of planning things and of carrying them out. This was stressed by Paul VI in his encyclical *Evangelii nuntiandi*, especially in paragraphs 19 and 20.

If God is a fact among us, it is as though I had received a very important guest into my house: the house remains mine, but it is his, because everything rotates around him.

If we re-read the first chapter of the Gospel of John, we find the first mention of a relationship with that Presence that had such a radical impact on the persons of those who first followed Jesus: John himself, Andrew, Philip, and Nathanael. The encounter with Jesus was for each of them an event that overturned their lives, filled it with a total demand, eliminating every empty space within them, every plan independent of him. If a God who became one of us, who came to be among us as our life's companion, did not tend to determine our every thought, plan and sentiment, if he were not understood in this all-embracing way, he would simply cease to be God.

We should take care to note that this all-embracing characteristic of the Christian fact has nothing to do with the temptation to deduce everything, i.e., the temptation to derive from the Gospel a ready-made formula for every last detail of life. The characteristic we are considering has to do, rather, with the radical transformation of every last detail of life through the total engagement of a subject who dwells in the atmosphere of a perturbing fact. Faith impacts upon the subject, and in changing him it tends to every detail of his existence.

Romano Guardini offers us a striking phrase, which, in my opinion, states extremely well what is meant by an all-embracing fact: "In the experience of a great love, everything that happens becomes an event within its sphere." This is a sovereign intensity of the person: everything that reverberates in him assumes a different face. Could it be that such love is all-too-absent from the Christianity of today?

However that may be, an all-embracing faith is absent from the Christianity of today; Christianity is not taught as life. Thus weakened and drained of life, it ends up becoming a pretext for some concern or other that wins the consent of the mentality in power.

#### *Faith Becomes Culture*

If faith impacts upon every expression of human life, then faith becomes the source of culture, indeed of a new culture; otherwise, it is not incarnated, and would be as though the redemption of the historical present had not yet begun. In an address to the MEIC [Movimento Ecclesiale di Impegno Culturale], John Paul II said, "A faith that does not become culture would be a faith not fully received, not entirely thought out, and not faithfully lived."

Culture can be defined as a critical and systematic awareness of human experience in its unfolding. Now, experience is the impact of a subject with reality. Reality as a presence solicits him and puts a question to him. The human drama then lies in the subject's response to this question; this is the meaning of "responsibility." The response is something clearly generated in the subject.

The subject's power lies in the intensity of his self-awareness, that is, of his perception of the values that define his personality.

Now, these values penetrate into the self from the lived history to which the self belongs.

The radical genius of a subject lies in the power of his awareness of belonging. For this reason, the people of God becomes a new cultural horizon for every subject that belongs to it. I must not fail to add one further observation. Education in the faith is education in a cultural capacity. Should not the aim of a Christian school, then, be above all the development in the person being educated of an awareness of belonging?

#### 4. The Christian Fact as Presence

How is the Christian fact, or the Body of Christ, or the people of God, present such that belonging to it is something possible, achievable, able to be experienced? It is present in a way analogous to what is described in the first letter of John:

Something we have heard, something we have seen with our own eyes, something we have looked upon and our hands have touched—that is, the word of life—this life became visible; we have seen and bear witness to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life that was present to the Father and became visible to us. (1 Jn 1:1-2)

Here is the answer: the presence of the Christian Fact lies in the unity of believers. Here is the most telling phenomenon. This is the miracle, the sign. That which is humanly impossible—the abolition of estrangement and the birth of a new fraternal bond, which does not spring from the flesh but does involve the flesh—Jesus understood as the evidence of his divinity: "As you, Father, are in me, and I in you, I pray that they may be one in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (Jn 17:21, cf. Gal 3:26-29).

Thus we see the method, characteristic of that Fact, for "converting" the world: that this unity be made visible,

everywhere. In the absence of this unity, no Christian religiosity can stand.

Paul VI strongly affirmed this:

Where is that "People of God" of which so much has been said, and of which so much is said now—where is it? This *sui generis* ethnic reality which is distinguished and qualified by its religious and messianic (or priestly and prophetic, if you will) character, which entirely converges on Christ as its central focus, and which derives entirely from Christ—how is it structured? What characterizes it? How is it organized? How does it exercise its ideal and invigorating mission in the society in which it is immersed?

We know well that the people of God now has, historically, a name which is more familiar to everyone: the Church.

This is not an esoteric theology, inaccessible to the common mind-set of the faithful People; it is indeed the highest truth, but open to every believer and capable of inspiring that style of life, that "communion of spirit," that identity of sentiment, that feeling of mutual solidarity, which pours forth into a "multitude of believers a single heart and a single soul," as it was at the dawn of Christianity. That sense of community, of charity, of unity, that is, that sense of the one, catholic—or universal— Church, must grow in us. The awareness of being not only a population with certain common characteristics, but a People, a true People of God, must assert itself in us.<sup>10</sup>

Bringing out the unity of believers in the place where the believer finds himself: this is the revelation of "communion" that will have as its fruit a "liberation" that can be humanly experienced, that is, a humanization of the environment which is more adequate to man's destiny.

Thus, through the Christian fact, even history—in its concrete time and space, in its "circumstances" which form the vehicle of the mystery of unity—acquires a decisive value. In the Church, the historical concreteness through which Christ and his Spirit reach, provoke, and educate man, however it begins and with whatever form it takes, corresponds to this period in history with a phenomenon that has come to be called "movement." It is in this sense that John Paul II said, "The Church is movement."<sup>11</sup> It is also in this sense that John

Paul II frequently speaks of "movements" in his speeches. It is Christ, not historical factors, whom one obeys. But one does not obey Christ except in the historical factors "formed," or molded by His Fact. Christ is realized in us and among us through our companionship.

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<sup>10</sup> Paul VI, Wednesday general audience, July 24 1975.

<sup>11</sup> From the speech delivered by John Paul II on the occasion of the first international meeting entitled "I movimenti nella Chiesa" sponsored by the Polish "Light and Life" and the Italian "Communion and Liberation" movements, in *I movimenti nella Chiesa* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1982), 14.

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