

# SPIRITUALITY IN A POST-CHRISTIAN EUROPE

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WE FIND OURSELVES in complex times, an epoch of change subject to multiple pressures. It has been said that we live not so much in an epoch of change as in a change of epoch. The effects are to be seen in different contexts and dimensions, and without doubt one of them is the religious.

Today one has to speak of a post-Christian Europe, where 'Christian' can be understood either as *Christianity*, the pervasive explicit or implicit infiltration of Christian values and beliefs into so many levels of society, or, more precisely, as the strictly *religious*, that constellation of beliefs, rites and values that are all in crisis. It is possible to pinpoint four areas: the putting in doubt of a creed as that which gives direction and meaning; the growing ignorance of the biblical texts, both Old and New Testaments; the falling away from observance of rites and sacraments; and the loss of belief in any moral authority held by the *magisterium* and the Church hierarchy.

Both dimensions—the internal crisis of the Christian institution and its lessening social and cultural impact on European society—have become increasingly relevant since the Enlightenment and have dominated throughout the twentieth century. They are exemplified in the two great ideologies and dictatorships, the Nazi and the Soviet Marxist. Throughout the whole the century the desperate cry of Nietzsche's hero could be heard, 'God is dead!'<sup>1</sup> However, what has died is not God, but one particular way of thinking about God.

Nevertheless, with the end of the twentieth century and into the first two decades of the twenty-first, we are witnessing another phenomenon, which not even the best cultural analysts of the previous century had foreseen. Instead of the death of God proclaimed by the great philosophers

<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*, translated by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), nn. 18, 125, 343. There are similar texts in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

of the twentieth century, there has been a purification and an alteration of certain ideas about the divine. Rainer Maria Rilke had already hinted: 'Even if we don't will it, / God matures'.<sup>2</sup> But it is not God who becomes mature: rather it is the image we have of God that does so as we ourselves grow in maturity.

### ***From Atheism to Politheism and Pluritheism***

The crossroads of convergences at which we now find ourselves is the result of the overlaying, juxtaposition and conjunction of both personal and social processes, which are simultaneously internal and external. Whereas to some extent atheism is still present, it has given way to politheism and pluritheism. By politheism I mean that exaltation of desire and want which leads to an idolatry of the relative, a making absolute of what is ephemeral, and a making sacred of what is banal. On the other hand, pluritheism refers to the multiplicity of religions which has come about owing to migrations and globalisation. The result is that, rather than God being absent in our society, God enjoys a disconcerting, if fragmentary, presence, even when God's name is not mentioned or when God is given many names.

But another two phenomena are worthy of attention: on the one hand, the return of religiosity in the form of the institutional or communal entities that existed earlier with their particular conservatism or—more radically—fundamentalism, either defensive or offensive; and on the other hand, a rebirth of spiritual seeking on the margins of the millenary religions. The name given to the latter phenomenon is 'spirituality without religion'.

### ***Interreligiosity, Transreligiosity and Postreligiosity***

To guide one through this complex panorama three technical terms have been invented: interreligiosity, transreligiosity and postreligiosity. The first refers to the meeting and dialogue between religions that start out acknowledging the specific character of each. Thus interreligious movements seek respect and recognition within their differences, creating a common space where each religion can exist and contribute its values.

Transreligiosity, on the other hand, while not negating the previous attitude, tends to emphasize what religious traditions have in common: the legacy of wisdom which they contribute to humanity quite apart from their original individualities. Here interreligious encounter is understood

<sup>2</sup> Rainer Maria Rilke, *Selected Works: Poetry*, translated by J. B. Leishman (London: Hogarth, 1976), 34.



The Departure of Abraham, after Jacopo Bassano, 1570–1590

as the starting point for something that still has to be explored. The dominant image here is that of Abraham, called to leave the land of his fathers to enter an area that is unknown (Genesis 12). He set off trusting in a God who was greater than the one he had known up to then. Today the same call is being made to the faithful of all religions with the hope that, if all of them contribute what is most beautiful and noble in their wisdom, they will be able to offer humanity the resources we need to stand up to the challenge faced by our civilisation.

In contrast, postreligiosity assumes that all the institutional age-old religions have contributed what they had to give to the growth of cultures and civilisations, with all their lights and shades. It believes that, at the present stage of development of human consciousness, religions should withdraw to give way to another type of spiritual manifestation for which the word 'religion' is not suitable. This attitude is marked by a character that is more rationalist and secularist than the previous ones.

### ***Heteronomy, Autonomy and Theonomy (or Ontonomy)***

Another three pointers may help us to understand better what type of spirituality is beginning to emerge as religious consciousness evolves. They are terms that are to be found in the work of two outstanding thinkers,

Paul Tillich and Raimon Panikkar: heteronomy, autonomy and theonomy (or ontoonomy).<sup>3</sup>

*The Moment of Heteronomy*

*Heteros-nomos* signifies a norm, a rule or a law (*nomos*) imposed from outside (*heteros*). This external authority is associated with an Absolute Being, creator of the world, who governs it for its good. Such an image of a Supreme Being arises with the appearance of the great civilisations of the second and third millennia prior to our own. The background to this is an unassailable, all-controlling political authority, which finds reflection in such an image of the divinity. It belongs to a pre-modern epoch. The stress is on transcendence to the detriment of immanence, the sacred is separated from the profane, and God is thought of as an omnipotent Being, source of all the norms of conduct and the foundations of meaning.

The biblical account of Yahweh handing the Ten Commandments over to Moses, who stands at the top of Mount Sinai, is a prototypical image of this conception of the divine and of the relations that a human being can have with it. Such a notion of an Ultimate Being is clearly indebted to anthropomorphic projections, and emotion is dominant. Within the heteronomic paradigm, the function of religion is to act as an intermediary between the finite world and the infinite world by means of certain beliefs and cults, a hierarchy and some very precise rites. At this stage of religious consciousness the key word is 'obedience'.

*Autonomy*

Modernity is born as a reaction to the previous stage. It presumes an exaltation of immanence as opposed to transcendence, of the profane against the sacred, and it evokes a suspicion or negation of a personal God. This is rebellion against any submission to some exterior, invisible and oppressive force. It demands the emancipation of the 'I' to replace subservience.<sup>4</sup> Hence the name 'autonomy': the *nomos* (law, rule) belongs to oneself (*auto*). The three so-called 'masters of suspicion' become prominent: Marx denounces religion as the legitimisation of exploitation by the ruling classes; for Nietzsche it is an escape from the risk of liberty; and for Freud

<sup>3</sup> See Paul Tillich, 'Religion and Secular Culture', in *The Protestant Era*, translated by James Luther Adams (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 1948), 56–57; Raimon Panikkar, *Opera omnia*, volume 9, part 1, *Mite, Simbol, Culte* (Barcelona: Fragmenta, 2009), 435–436.

<sup>4</sup> Relevant here is the work of the US Lutheran theologian Mark C. Taylor. In *After God* (Chicago: U. of Chicago P, 2007) he claims that modernity begins with Luther's assertion that conscience should not be submitted to any institution.

religion is a mechanism of the unconscious projecting upon some superior being both paternal authority and the need for maternal protection.

This stage corresponds to a rationalist paradigm, according to which full confidence should be placed in the calculating, pragmatic power of the mind. Science takes over from belief to provide security for the vulnerable human being. Nevertheless, reason produces myths of its own. The twentieth century bore terrible witness to the limits of this autonomy. When the 'I' is abandoned to itself, we create worse monsters than existed in the previous stage. The key word that now becomes dominant is 'liberty'.

Postmodernity emerges from the disillusion felt before the arbitrary decisions of a human being that has emptied heaven but been incapable of satisfying the longing for meaning and for transcendence. Caught at this crossroads, we witness three different options being taken: there are those who fall into the polytheism mentioned earlier, each person making a god of personal wishes; others return to the securities and identities of old, with the danger of a fundamentalism which avoids the challenges of the changing epoch in which we find ourselves; and there are those who advance into unknown territory with a new mentality. These last belong to the next section.

*Ontonomy (or Theonomy)*

There are various indications that point to the emergence of a new paradigm, which might be called *ontonomy*, 'the order of being', or *theonomy*, 'the order of God'. But the word 'God' refers now not to some Supreme Being alien to the world, nor to consciousness, but to the depth and final consistency of all that exists. With this, spirituality takes over from religion, where 'religion' is understood as the agglomeration of intervening heteronomous factors: a clerical class separated from the lay; a *magisterium* which lays down moral norms and the correct interpretation of a creed; a written corpus wherein the word of God is distinguished from what it is not, and so on. In the newly emerging paradigm transcendence is seen to be at the heart of immanence, the sacred at the heart of the profane. The Ultimate Being is glimpsed as a Presence which, while not ceasing to be transcendent, is intimately present and close; it lies at the heart of what is.

***Transcendence  
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This spirituality can also be termed 'interiority', something opposed not to what is exterior but to what is superficial. In other words, this *ontonomous*—or *theonomous*—attitude surpasses the fixation on the 'I' which resulted from the autonomous emancipation of reason, and reaches out instead to a greater depth and at the same time to a greater

consciousness of the relationship that everything has with everything. At this stage, the key word is ‘consciousness’.

It is possible that this gradually emerging phenomenon is related to the second Axial Age promulgated by Karl Jaspers.<sup>5</sup> The first Axial Age (based mainly in the fifth century BC) was marked by the appearance of figures of outstanding spiritual stature in different civilisations across the planet, even if they had no contact with one another: Confucius and Lao Tse in China, Buddha and the creators of the Upanishads in India, Zoroaster in Persia, the great Old Testament prophets in Israel, the major philosophers and dramatists in Greece.

For Jaspers, the distinctive feature of the second Axial Age would be a spiritual awakening that is no longer based on individuals but appears in collective movements. Some analysts would claim that this is what is happening at the present time. But what is peculiar is that it is happening not in a Christian context but in one that is post-Christian, in so far as the traditional points of reference have disappeared, giving way to features that have other origins: some come from the Orient; others from indigenous peoples who were colonised in the past, economically, culturally and religiously, but are now becoming aware of their own wealth; and still others from diverse sources such as science—quantum physics investigating the ultimate components of matter, and astronomy delving ever deeper into the limits of space—the arts, new technology and so on.

The younger generations have hardly any knowledge of biblical history and its characters: thus they cannot understand the statues, *retablos* or stained-glass windows of the great cathedrals, or the frescoes of Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel. While so much ceases to be relevant in Europe, to be replaced by new legends and images, still there exists at the heart of our civilisation in crisis a longing for spirituality and transcendence. We live in a period of transition towards other ways of thinking of God which are no longer governed by earlier parameters. We need to delve deep and investigate in what direction the wind of the Spirit is blowing as new times are being born.

### ***The pneuma of Our Age***

The Polish philosopher Zygmunt Bauman, writing in the final years of the twentieth century, created something of a sensation with his analysis

<sup>5</sup> See Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History*, translated by Michael Bullock (London: Routledge, 2010 [1953]).

of contemporary society to which he gave the name *liquid modernity*. This phrase served as a harsh diagnosis of our times. Bauman was convinced that present-day attitudes are like a crust on lava, which hardens but constantly melts again, ceaselessly changing its form. From outside, these attitudes may appear stable, but in reality they are extremely fragile and subject to constant rupture. They lack any external support. Each of us has to create one temporarily for him- or herself in order to survive. Bauman argues that in liquid modernity the great need is for each person to invent an identity that is flexible and changeable, in order to face up to the different mutations to which one is subject throughout one's life. But there is no consistent, firm nucleus or base on which to build with any certainty.

When presented with such a depressing picture of our society, both modern and postmodern, in which nothing solid and consistent is to be found, our reaction may well be one of despair tinged with a harmful nostalgia for the past, or one of disillusioned cynicism about both present and future; or, on the other hand, we may ask what the nature of the newly emerging spirituality is, that has broken away from the earlier points of reference on which we were able to build. The basic, true meaning of the term 'spirituality' can be appreciated from its etymology: *spiritus*, *pneuma*, 'breeze', 'wind', 'breath', 'flux'. This was what Jesus himself gave Nicodemus to understand when the latter saw his old certainties beginning to sway: 'you do not know where [the Spirit] comes from or where it goes' (John 3:8). Spirituality, therefore, indicates that there can be virtue, direction and wisdom in this allowing oneself to be carried. A *liquid* society can also be a society that flows, and is therefore predisposed to a spiritual dimension much more than a society that is rigid, in which everything has been established beforehand.

All growth—and all identity—requires two poles: at one end permanence, stability, consistency; and, at the other, fluidity, permeability, elasticity. Talk of 'spirituality without religion'—and that could well have been the title for this article—emphasizes the second pole to the detriment of the first; while the fundamentalists incline towards the first without the second. But it is indispensable to take account of both elements in our postmodern and post-Christian culture. Moreover we are called not simply to take account, but to accompany, and one can accompany only when there is understanding and empathy. Now 'understanding' means identifying the process in action, its origin and its goal, whereas 'empathy' implies that one refrains from passing judgment. As long as there is judgment, there will be violence against the other, which will provoke a reaction—defensive

or offensive—and the natural process will be stopped from appearing and developing. Then there will be no *pneuma* and there will be no *ruah*.

Ignatian discernment has much to offer in this area, because its focus is on the dynamics of the Spirit rather than on their specific content. The latter is always influenced by culture and change. To concentrate on the dynamics involved allows one to identify whether a process is directed towards new manifestations of God in history or whether it is a side-track and a regression. Here the distinction made by Ignatius between consolation and desolation has much light to shed. What is peculiar to consolation is that it moves the 'I' from self to a God who is ever greater and to a reality that is ever wider; the goal of one's love no longer refers primarily to oneself but is placed in a broader horizon.

By consolation I mean that which occurs when some interior motion is caused within the soul through which it comes to be inflamed with love of its Creator and Lord. As a result it can love no created thing on the face of the earth in itself, but only in the Creator of them all. (Exx 316)

St Ignatius adds two more criteria to identify consolation: the appearance of tears for love of God, that is to say when there is a capacity for empathy; and every increase of faith, hope and charity which causes interior happiness and leaves the person at peace with God. These signs make it possible to recognise if the state in which a person finds him- or herself comes from life in the Spirit, or if it is the result of a self-complacent narcissism. The risk of any spirituality without religion—or one that is post-Christian—is that it implies subjection to the 'I', lacking any relation to the other, whereas an authentic life in the Spirit includes a radical decentralisation.

In contrast, St Ignatius identifies desolation as,

... obtuseness of soul, turmoil within it, an impulsive motion toward low and earthly things, or disquiet from various agitations and temptations. These move one toward lack of faith and leave one without hope and without love. One is completely listless, tepid, and unhappy, and feels separated from our Creator and Lord. (Exx 317)

These features would fit a description of depression, but they have to be understood not in the key of psychology but in that of spirituality. They point to the regressive, compensatory nature of this state ('an impulsive motion toward low and earthly things') while also indicating a climate of distance and absence from God. All this can help us to focus on the



effects of any form of spirituality; and for us now to identify the fruits that spring from the newly emerging spirituality. They can also help us to recognise what is our reaction to it, how far we are open or closed, consoled or desolated, not in virtue of some personal satisfaction with the epoch in which we live as it happens to please us, but in so far as we see that it is imbued with a dynamism towards God and is a way of allowing the integral development of our being.

### ***The Christian as the humus***

One of the most important questions that requires an answer concerns what remains of Christianity in this post-Christian Europe. If by 'post-' we are to understand the negation of what has gone before, then we rush headlong into wandering and exile because we no longer have memory and roots. But what if it is not a question of rejection but rather a realisation that a weight of tradition has brought us to our present position, and it can act as a basis from which to proceed? Then Christianity becomes a sort of *humus*, that fertile earth beneath the trees from which new trees can burgeon. This is where a spirituality shows itself to be something very different from an ideology. In every ideology there is pretension to totality, a rejection of all that does not derive from itself. But, in contrast, what is proper to a spirituality is its open and unpredictable character ('you do not know where [the Spirit] comes from or where it goes'); it is all listening; it is radically humble and is capable of gaining wisdom.

The sediment left behind by Christianity in Western society is definitely a part of its civilising legacy. The principle of incarnation entails the recognition of the sacred in each person, and this lies at the basis of democracy and the declaration of human rights. The central position of the person has fortified a scale of values thanks to which the collective conscience



Cottage Garden with Crucifix (*detail*), by Gustav Klimt, 1911–1912

recognises a gradation stretching from the transcendent and universal to the particular and utilitarian: thus it has been established that the end does not justify the means; Christianity has demonstrated the inseparable nature of the true, the good and the beautiful; it has brought—and fought for—justice and peace. All this has left its mark in the field of thought and of the arts; similarly with regard to education and health, creating many institutions that defend these values. It has also influenced the landscape, both urban and rural, marking sacred places with emblematic buildings that serve as reminders of the intangible beauty of the Spirit. All these things continue to exist and have the capacity to enrich us if only we are able to preserve them in a contemporary frame of reference.

Once again, the vision of St Ignatius can help us. At the end of the *Spiritual Exercises* he offers the Contemplation to Attain Love. In this text he invites the retreatant to ‘consider how God dwells in creatures; in the elements, giving them existence; in the plants, giving them life; in the animals, giving them sensation; in human beings, giving them intelligence’ (Exx 235); to ‘consider how God labors and works for me in all the creatures on the face of the earth’ (Exx 236); to ‘consider how all good things and gifts descend from above; for example, my limited power from the Supreme and Infinite Power above; and so of justice, goodness, piety, mercy, and so forth—just as the rays come down from the sun, or the rains from their source’ (Exx 237). This gaze allows us to understand that nothing is separate from God; rather all that exists participates in God. But such a realisation goes far beyond any particular frame, whether Christian or post-Christian. What is at stake is to get one’s mind round the Presence of the One who is at work in the world, and especially at this particular moment of such delicate change taking place in our history. In addition, this stage of transition is one that affects not only Christianity but all the religions such as we have known them so far.

### **Three Openings**

We have said that a spirituality is basically listening and openness. We have to examine if the new forms of spirituality imply this movement from the ‘I’ to a God who is ever greater and to a reality that is ever wider, as mentioned above. St Ignatius expressed it in this way: ‘in all spiritual matters, the more one divests oneself of self-love, self-will, and self-interests, the more progress one will make’ (Exx 189). This divesting of self-love brings with it a heartfelt experience which lifts today’s human person out of his or her prison and points in three directions.

- Towards the Mystery: no matter what name we give to the ultimate being, the one who sustains all that exists, the Being-beyond-all (*Deus semper maior*) who is also the Being-nearer-than-all (*Deus intimor intio meo*), we are aware that although names can give us a direction, they can also be an obstacle. Openness to the Mystery involves an immense respect for the different paths that lead into it. This direction opens up the mystical way.
- Towards the sacrament of the brother: an ethical sensitivity is constantly reinforced. The globalised world in which we now live obliges us to be aware of the complex society around us, so as to encourage different forms of solidarity and the attainment of social change. It is not permissible to be naïve. This direction opens up the ethical way.
- Towards respect and veneration for the earth: earlier anthropocentrism has had grave consequences for our relations with nature. The emerging spirituality is indicating, in all sorts of ways, the need to re-establish ties with the earth. This direction opens up the ecological way.

This triple openness is present in all the traditions, even in those humanist ones that think of themselves as non-religious. What is important for us is to be present—in a receptive and active frame of mind—to this religious change. Many of the elements that have characterized Christianity and all other religions—their frames of reference in beliefs, sacred texts, rites, moral authority expressed through the life and teachings of their representatives—are now being seriously questioned. But that does not mean that they cease to be necessary. External forms do change, but what is important is the internal dynamism. Someone borne up by the Spirit has nostalgia, not for the past, but for the future.

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