

Secular Culture and the Crisis of Religion

IN THE WORLD WE live in, reconfigured by the contours we examined in chapter 1, religion appears as a powerful force that touches and affects human desire. But in the midst of secularity and pluralism, it seems to have lost the power to configure the behavior of society. The situation of religion today will be the subject of this chapter.

Contemporaneity preserves religious symbols, often transforming them into touristic and historical monuments. And people go their way with independence and freedom regarding what the religious institution seems to be saying to them. On the other hand, the search for God and the desire for spirituality grow in equal proportions, emerging on many shores that are no longer solely or primarily the historical churches.

Given this state of things, historical Christianity, more than two thousand years old, will have to rethink itself, and perceive what central point it must communicate to the men and women of today if it is to motivate them to be guided in their lives by the way called Good News, which was capable of turning a decisive page in history and of molding the life and culture of a large part of the world.

Secularity and the Apogee of the Real

Religion is the most omnipresent and the most universal of the elemental characteristics of humankind. All human actions, from the most sublime to the most commonplace, have been identified with religious phenomena.¹ Even today, in a time of full secularization, religion continues to be the object of observation and study, often becoming what redefines modern and postmodern preoccupations, at least in the last resort.²

1. See Bauman, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*, 166.

2. *Ibid.*, 170.

Even when its importance is denied, religion more than ever constitutes part of the current of everyday life. And this is because death, despite having been relegated to the business of professionals (doctors, intensive care personnel, and funeral homes), continues to assault the imaginations of people who, day after day, continue to feel frequently and fragmentarily threatened in their desire to live. Although the death of a loved one has become a private and secret affair, human death as such has become a daily occurrence—in the news media, in the congestion of large metropolitan areas, and in the violence and injustice on display in our societies—much too common to cause fear. It is just one show among many.³

Meanwhile human beings, ever more eager to own and benefit from a life they feel is threatened, and not knowing how long life may last, need a “mountaintop” experience. Such experiences are no longer offered by institutional religion—through the practice of meditation, spiritual seclusion, and their attractions—but have migrated to the arena of worldly seductions, to the desire for earthly goods. They have developed into the driving force of intense consumerist activity.⁴ This was a long process, which first began with a denial of religion, along with the revelation and faith that inspired it, just to restore it later in another place.

As we reflect on the historical sources of the phenomenon of secularization, we can place them at the roots of modern culture. Secularization is the product of an understanding of the world as no longer based on myth (*mythos*), but on rational discourse (*logos*). This vision and the process that disenchant myth and establishes the primacy of *logos* come from ancient philosophy and lead to a certain demystification of knowledge, and to a liberation of ordinary life from theological norms.

Bruno Forte, in his book *Trindade para ateus*,⁵ reflects on the multiple difficulties faced by the believer in the midst of modernity’s process of secularization. Among them he lists immediacy, secularist restlessness, the triumph of powerful reason, and the fecundity of the Enlightenment. These factors give rise to the atheist ideologies of the masters of suspicion (Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche), which, in turn, lead to the dissipation and almost disappearance of inquiry through the Senses—the only ground from which the quest for Transcendence and for the belief in and the naming of God can take off. Bruno Forte states that “this is the true mortal disease that permeates the societies of Europe and the whole secularized world”⁶

3. Ibid., 175.

4. Ibid., 180.

5. See Forte, *Trindade para ateus*.

6. Ibid., 137.

in our moment in history. And although this question may present itself in different forms, according to the circumstances, we tend to agree with such an affirmation.

The same phenomenon continues even in the midst of the so-called crisis of modernity. It would be too complex to analyze here all the aspects of this “crisis.” That would require the analysis of all the faces by which the crisis makes itself visible and palpable in our historical time. We cannot do this, nor is it our objective within the limits of this analysis.⁷ What matters here is for us to understand how the axial dislocation—of the question of the sacred, the Divine, and God, and of the conception of a theocratic world into one of an anthropocentric world that proposes the human being as the measure of everything—makes itself visible. After that, we will see how this same transition, in turn, admits a questioning and a crisis that will destabilize modernity, which appears so solidly established.

Father Henrique de Lima Vaz, in his monumental text “Religião e modernidade filosófica,”⁸ places the dawn of modernity not at the beginning of the sixteenth century but much earlier, in the time of Plato. The modern, according to Father Vaz, was already for ancient philosophy the new thing that arrives and questions the present in its established situation. To what we call modernity and place at the beginning of the sixteenth century, he gives the name “modern modernity.”⁹

The characteristics of this long period of history would thus be:

1. The transition from theocentrism (God as the measure of all things) to anthropocentrism (the human being as the measure of all things).
2. The transition from tutored science to emancipated and autonomous science, searching for its own method and path without asking for permission from institutional religion (see the case of Galileo).
3. The transition from heteronomy (the primacy of the other as ruling life, the other understood as God, the church, institutional religion) to autonomy (the subject as the sovereign of his or her own life, following a chosen way in full freedom, and not having to be accountable to anyone).
4. The transition from a conception of religion as the explanation of the world, to a conception of the world and reality as self-explanatory for

7. For a deeper understanding of the so-called modernity crisis, see Azevedo, *Entroncamentos e entrecchoques*. See also Mardones, *Las nuevas formas de la religión*; and Taylor, *A Secular Age*, among others.

8. Vaz, “Religião e modernidade filosófica.”

9. *Ibid.*

the human being. This is sometimes called the “disenchantment of the world.”¹⁰ The world is no longer explained by supernatural premises and parameters. It is no longer inhabited by supernatural beings that magically explain, transform, and illuminate it, as had been believed since the time of Thales of Miletus, five thousand years before Christ. All explanation must be found at the very heart of reality, in the constitution of the world itself.

5. The transition from a conception of learning and knowledge as centered in theological reflection (the University where theology is queen of the sciences and the center around which irradiates the very idea of the University, exactly as it existed in the Middle Ages) to a conception centered in human beings and their surroundings (anthropology, the human sciences, the social sciences, and the exact sciences) as the perspective from which the world and reality is conceived and understood. Religion and theology are just another field of learning, all of which is compartmentalized and organized into separate specialties.
6. The transition from a conception of the world where faith in God and in the church as an institution is at the center of everything, of all fields of knowledge and all of life, to a conception where human reason is central. The Cartesian “I think, therefore I am” is the motto of modernity. The human being as a thinking being is at the center of modern, secularized modernity.

This new way of conceiving the relationship between the “secular” and the “divine and supernatural,” a relationship of the “profane” with the “Sacred,” unavoidably raises the question of the space remaining for the sacred in a world and a reality thus conceived. What faces can still introduce the Sacred to our contemporaries in understandable and assimilable ways? What faces of the Sacred can still interface with a secular mentality structured in such a way?

Since it is a long historical process, secularization grows in complexity as time goes by, and after more than four centuries it no longer admits a univocal interpretation. On the contrary, it reveals itself to have acquired, over time, a plurality of aspects. And, because of this complexity, it has been crossed by numerous interfaces by which it can be discovered and understood, on a new basis and with different cues for reading.

If we consider the process of secular culture from the point of view of theology, we will discover the inadequacy of a model of understanding shaped by the idea of conquest, that is, a vision of secularity as a harmful

10. See Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde*.

system, implying that it needs to be evangelized at all costs to bring about a recovery of the hegemony of faith and religion in the world. This is no less true for a hierarchical model, which would put secularity at a lower level as a benefactor of humankind, while a society ruled by a religious model would be superior and should be preserved no matter what. Equally inadequate would be a model in which levels are superimposed upon one another, which would give rise to a confusion of concepts rather than making them clear and consistent. What is important is to look at the phenomenon of secularization relative to faith and religion as a relation between two faces that touch each other, thus opening up the possibility of new syntheses.¹¹

Even in a first approach, one is already conscious of the existence of a positivity that is very much present in the process of secularization. It has to do with a phenomenon that is not at all negative—as it was considered for a time, especially according to Christian thought—but which, on the contrary, introduces some faces of visibility that challenge faith, religion, and theology in a fecund and vital way.¹²

Most especially, regarding historical Christianity, we could enumerate some of those interfacing points where we find, visible and flourishing, the presence of secularization as a positive challenge to theology:¹³

1. The conception of creation: the process of secularization helps humanity to remember a truth that the biblical revelation has always affirmed: the created world is not sacred. Neither is it divine or supernatural. Nothing except God is divine, and any attempt to see tangible, immanent, and provisional realities as sacred deflects the focus of transcendence away from the right understanding that there is only one God, that this God is not identifiable with anything that exists, and that all things are the work of God's hands. Creation can, therefore, be a way to arrive at God and to see God's presence in the world. In fact, many forms of spirituality see nature as the source of the Sacred and of the experience of the Sacred.¹⁴ But it is definitely earthly, not divine, and therefore is secular even in its sacredness. A theological interpretation of secularization, underlining the desacralization of the world, refers to the condemnation of idolatry, which was ceaselessly denounced by

11. See on this matter Queiruga, *Fin del cristianismo premoderno*, esp. the chapter titled "La Modernidad como cambio radical de paradigma," 17–21.

12. *Ibid.*

13. We basically follow here the elaborations on this matter in the works of Queiruga, especially *Creio em Deus Pai* and *Fim do cristianismo premoderno*.

14. See the entire ecological current and the holistic spirituality that flourishes nowadays as a result of this vision.

Israel's prophets. On the other hand, by affirming the existence of only one God, distinct from the created world, biblical religion initiates a process of understanding the world from the perspective of both the human person and the Creator. The world is not God, but neither is it a power hostile to God. The world speaks of the one who created it and proclaims the glory of God.

2. The conception of history: neither is history, in its processes and injunctions, divine. It constitutes the ground for human operations and interference. It can and must be transformed and changed by the human being. Secularization was clearly important enough in the twentieth century for a theologian such as Karl Rahner, among others, to affirm as a basis for his understanding of history that there are not two histories: one transcendent and the other profane. Chronological history—where humanity struggles, building the present and desiring the future—is by now already the history of salvation, permanently running the risk of becoming a history of perdition.¹⁵ In history we find manifestations of the sacred, although history itself is not divine. And in the biblical Revelation, God reveals God's self to Israel inside its own history, remaining present in it and guiding its people by the internal workings of that same history.
3. The understanding of the worship of God and the dignity of the human being: in the process of the biblical Revelation the human being comes to perceive that Sacred spaces are indeed relative and provisional, and do not contain and arrest the divine. In truth, the divine is more certainly found in the humanity of the human being. Relocated from the temple to the human being, the axis of the sacred will be a *leitmotif* of the biblical revelation, and, above all of the New Testament,¹⁶ revealing injustice and idolatry to really be two sides of the same coin—or better, of the same sin. In losing the right way to relate themselves with God, human beings lose as well the right way to relate with the other, that is, with their neighbor. The struggles for justice and human rights against all forms of oppression are in truth sacred struggles, even when they take place in complete secularity. The process of secularization brings the issue of the primacy of the human being—that is, of Otherness—into the center of Christian theological reflection and into the life of faith.

15. See Rahner, *Curso fundamental da fé*.

16. See the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:30–37). See also the text of the last judgement in Matt 25:31–46, among others.

4. The Mystery of the Incarnation understood as a secular Mystery: the Mystery that is at the center of the Christian faith is, in truth, understandable and even credible from the standpoint of secularity. The mystery of the incarnation says that since everything has been deeply touched by God, everything has positive value. Nothing is less dignified, less noble, less valuable for being in the midst of the secular. All was assumed by the Word made flesh in the fullness of time. Therefore everything, without exception, is seen through the screen of secularity, including even God, whose person and presence give it positive value via the kenotic process of descent into the human core. In Christianity, the incarnation confirms the dignity of the world and of humanity and its differentiation from God. Secularization thus emerges as the continuation, in time, of a “de-divinization” of the world and of the human being on the part of none other than God. This desacralization is positive since it allows God, in the fullness of God’s divinity, to gloriously shine in the midst of the creation, at once as wholly other and as radically near to humankind.¹⁷

In view of these considerations, we believe that a possible opening can be found in Christianity and throughout the biblical revelation for an interface with a mundane and secular conception of the world, in which religion and religiosity do not impose themselves as constituting a univocal and essential understanding. In fact it can be said that there is already, even in the biblical text, an emancipation of the human being in relation to God and religion. The process of secularization does nothing other than reinforce this on a new and more universal basis. Presenting a positive rather than only a negative face, secularization reminds us that the emancipation of the human does not necessarily mean the sunset of God. And also that if secularization can be seen (in many of its faces) as the enemy of a certain conception of religion, particularly institutionalized religion, that doesn’t necessarily mean that this same secularization, in some of its other faces, cannot live together—that is, interface—at an acceptable level of cordiality with the human experience of faith.

The assimilation of this state of things is not yet complete in the faith community and in theology. One still sees hesitations, fears, and denials, as well as attempts at an impossible return to premodern Christianity, with the hope of rescuing, from there, the hegemony that institutional religion enjoyed in other periods of history. On the other hand, modernity itself is in deep crisis due to the demise of the utopias on which it had built its model,

17. On this and other references to secularization, see Bingemer and Andrade, *Secularização: novos desafios*.

and to the emergence of a new subjectivity that questions the conception of the human being as basically configured by rationality, while claiming the right to values that would seem to belong to the past, such as affectivity, graciousness, and contemplation.

As a result, our current context has received several names—such as modernity, late modernity, hypermodernity, postmodernity, and liquid modernity—and it is a “movable”¹⁸ context. And this brings significant transformations to human life, its configuration, meaning, and self-understanding, together with a feeling of great uncertainty, insecurity, and even anxiety.¹⁹

One of the deepest impacts of the transformations of the current time is undoubtedly their effect on religion. If during the Enlightenment—as we have seen—human rationality became more and more visible and gained the status of the central governing principal in human life, what we see today is different. The crisis of modernity made way for a new state of things that human knowledge is far from having assimilated deeply. And it is during the twentieth century that we see this new process with greater clarity.²⁰

Religion suffers the consequences of this new world vision. In a modern perspective, for something to be considered legitimate or true it must go through the process of rational understanding—as an antidote to the fanaticism, superstition, and intolerance that religion was always accused of bringing with it.²¹

This valorization of the rational caused human beings to consider themselves autonomous and emancipated. Science and technology, instead of beliefs, would solve their problems. The individual, possessing ever more power through science and technology, would be the center of the universe, of phenomena and events, taking the place of God. Human beings alone would be responsible for seeking and finding happiness and the meaning of life, with their capacity for thinking and reasoning.

Yet, just as at the beginning of modern times the theocentric conception fell into a deep crisis and lost the power to explain the world, so now something similar is happening with Cartesian reason. It is seen as insufficient and as having failed, in a certain way, in its project.²² This comes about

18. Here we use the word *movable* with the meaning of “changing,” “insecure,” “volatile.”

19. *Ibid.*

20. See Muller-Armack, *El siglo sin Dios*, on the idea of the twentieth century as the century without God.

21. See Castiñera, *A experiència de Deus na pós-modernidade*.

22. See Damasio's remarks on this point in *Descartes' Error*. He states that the absence of emotion and feeling can destroy rationality. See also the affirmation of Simone Weil in *Sur la science*: “A aventura de Descartes acabou mal,” “Descartes' adventure finished in a bad way.”

as a symptom of the birth of a New Era, the one in which we live today. We have seen that, with the utopias in progressive collapse, with certainty disappearing, and with an incredible abundance of means being put to meager, scarce, and poor ends, contemporary human beings look anxiously for experiences that may give meaning to their lives with the message that it is still worthwhile living on this planet.²³

Institutions, organized belief, and “religious organizations,” with their message of the perpetual insufficiency of the human being, are no better positioned to facilitate and communicate these experiences, especially to those excluded from the “gains” of civilization. Neither are the achievements of human rationality.

Human living has come to be considered synonymous with enjoyment of the delights of consumerism at the reach of one’s hands. Living fully would mean satisfying the endless avidity of human desire in a very material way. A certain deification of the capacity and power of consumerism is elevated to something similar to real religion, a major cult in mass societies. Thus, it is no longer a matter of “I think, therefore I am” but of “I consume, therefore I am.” Implicitly or explicitly, this is the commanding motivational word in human life today. We find ourselves standing before a kind of sacralization of commercial and consumerist relations.²⁴

Yet, religion as a relationship with Transcendence has not been abolished from the human horizon, as the “masters of suspicion” had always prophesied.²⁵ The same modern thinkers who so much criticized the superstitious and magic elements of Christianity are now called to recognize the strength of Transcendence as a constitutive element of humankind. Even avowed atheists, such as André Comte-Sponville, speak of an “atheistic spirituality” that offers human beings some experiences which cannot be classified as rational or natural.²⁶

23. See Baumann’s expression, *Postmodernity and Its Discontents*, 180.

24. See the excellent reflection on this issue by Mardones, *La transformación de la religión*, 48–49. On 50, Mardones says, citing Vattimo, that “at the root of consumerism there is a Christian stamp, reoriented toward immanence, a fruit of European and Western curiosity in exploring alternative worlds.” See also the excellent study of consumerism by Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed*.

25. On the expression “masters of suspicion,” see Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy* and *The Conflict of Interpretations*.

26. See Comte-Sponville, *L’Esprit de l’athéisme*: “Quite frankly, do you really need to believe in God to realize that sincerity is better than lying, that courage is better than cowardice, that generosity is better than selfishness, that sweetness and compassion are better than violence or cruelty, that justice is better than injustice, and that love is better than hate? Obviously not! If you believe in God, you recognize these values in God; or maybe you recognize God in them. It is the traditional picture: your faith and your

Religion becomes something private, belonging exclusively to the inner forum of human consciousness, without mediation or institution. More and more it is to be lived out in the sphere of private life, where each person believes and welcomes the truths presented, appreciating them and discerning them according to the affective affinities or gratifying sentiments that come from life experience.

A godless century, in which even the deities are ephemeral and transitory—consumer goods—the twentieth century takes the postmodernization process to intense levels as a challenge to human thinking. It rescues Transcendence, but rejects its traditional form, introducing this same Transcendence without a face, without an identity, without Absolutes. Religious experiences proliferate once again where they seemed to have vanished. Yet they assume a different configuration: consumption of sentient experiences, which speak to the senses and are interchangeable with others that are equally superficial. And the result is an exhaustion of the potential for fulfillment and delight, thus creating a more and more “frigid” society.²⁷

Observing all that is happening in religion today is tantamount to taking into account what is happening in society, or at least in so-called Western and Christian society.

Therefore, when we say “religion” in this Western late modernity, we are utilizing a generalization of the predominantly Christian phenomenon that configured it in terms of civilization. And if not exclusively, then at least primarily, we have before our eyes the dominant religious fact among us, which is historical Christianity, whether Catholic or Protestant.²⁸

In traditional societies religion holds a monopoly on the worldview. The consequence is that religion there is more than religion. It plays such an important social and cultural role that practically all social realities (political, economic, juridic, or artistic) as well as behavioral realities (family, psychological, or symbolic) depend on it for legitimacy. Religion is what sets the rhythm of time with the tolling of bells—for the morning mass, the angelus, and the vespers, for the deceased or for religious feasts—and signals the different moments of the day, the week, or the year.²⁹

faithfulness go together, and I am not the one to criticize you for that. But those with no faith, why couldn't they perceive the human greatness of these values, their importance, their necessity, their fragility, their urgency, and respect them for that?”

27. See on this point the acute and pertinent analysis of Heisig, “The Recovery of the Senses.”

28. See Mardones, *La transformación de la religión*, 8.

29. *Ibid.*, 18–20.

With modernity there came a transition to a social situation in which religion no longer occupies the center of the scene, having been replaced by politics and economics. It no longer dictates behavior, which is now ruled much more by the new psychoanalytic maxims, the mass media, or by new technologies such as the Internet. Religion, so to speak, is pushed to the periphery, ceasing to play the principal role and moving to a secondary place.

For the West—the part of the world where historical Christianity had clear and strong roots—this process implied a complete social and religious restructuring and reconfiguration. Religion lost the cultural plausibility and the leadership to intervene in society and its processes. “The religion of modernity is a decentralized religion which loses strength in the hearts of the faithful.”³⁰ And in spite of the postmodern turnaround that rescued the search for Transcendence—and in some measure even due to that turn—it arrived at the twenty-first century with a very low level of institutional communication with the more advanced modern culture.

The reaction of institutional religion to this situation has been the rejection of modern sensibility. Today we observe the recrudescence of ultraconservative groups, together with the neoconservative groups that are regaining visibility in the Western religious scene. We also see the exponential growth of the Pentecostals of both denominations, Catholic (Charismatic Renewal) and Protestant.³¹ With the Second Vatican Council, historical Catholicism undertook a serious task of dialogue with modernity, including new theological elaborations. But this task remained inconclusive in view of the “return to great discipline” during the pontificate of John Paul II³² and the consequent intensification of the contra-position between modernity and Christianity.

According to some authors, what really happened after the Council was an attempt to “adapt” the historical Christian religion, whether Catholic or Protestant, to the new state of things brought about by modern secularization. Yet one of them comments, “when adaptation is such that for the sake of it one surrenders the identity of the faith, we are facing a cognitive capitulation.”³³ What we see today is that the symbolic religious capital is no longer in the hands of the churches, and has been coopted by other actors and subjects—such as the sects or the media—which manage it in different ways.³⁴

30. *Ibid.*, 28.

31. See on this matter Comblin, “As religiões hoje”; see also Comblin, “O Cristianismo no limiar do terceiro milênio,” 147.

32. See Libânio, *A volta à grande disciplina*.

33. See Mardones, *La transformación de la religión*, 30–31.

34. See the book by Campos, *Teatro, templo e mercado*, on the Universal Church of the Kingdom of God.

According to the French sociologist Danièle Hervieu-Léger, secularization today can be defined not as the loss of religion in a society definitively emancipated from any code of belief imposed from above, but rather as a general process of institutional deregulation of belief.³⁵ There is an increasing deinstitutionalization, that is, a growing withdrawal of individuals from religious institutions, to which they no longer turn as the regulating and legitimizing agency of their religious practice or formulation of faith.

On the other hand, individualism and the call for a more authentic conduct prevail in a climate that favors affectivity. Expression of feelings is no longer taboo. On the contrary, it is sought by those tired of the modern rational rigidity, and thirsty for an affective interchange and experience searching for ways of expression. Although criticized by some authors as “hedonistic individualism” centered in the “I” and avidly pursuing self-realization, self-expression, self-experience, and such, this tendency points to what may be called the “expressive revolution,” which involves issues of gender, a primary matter of debate today.³⁶

Furthermore, the generational breach perhaps appears nowhere as intensely as in the field of religion. There is a profound crisis in religious socialization, that is, in the transmission of the Christian message to succeeding generations who no longer adhere to dogmatic formulations or moral norms. They seek an experience that will touch them emotionally. The official Christian institution has failed to find a way to do that.³⁷

The situation of religion in the Western world today is, then, characterized by the loss on the part of ecclesiastic institutions of a good portion of their hegemonic religious monopoly. The religious initiative finds a new elaborating and irradiating center in the individual. An individual who seeks Transcendence or greater meaning in life will often choose a religion, reordering and structuring it, and giving it form, at the margin of the institution. A religion lived out in this way will not necessarily be configured faithfully according to the historical Christian model. It could be a plural religion that includes other elements, synthesized where religiosity appears nebulous and fluctuating, reconfigured as open and without well-defined frontiers or boundaries.

The secularization that generated this state of things not only questioned the existence of Transcendence, but also deregulated Transcendence wherever it was accepted and believed. It brought into crisis the traditional

35. See Hervieu-Léger; Mardones, *La transformación de la religión*, 36.

36. *Ibid.*, 39, on the crisis of masculinity and the claims of men regarding the expression of sensitivity. See Nolasco, *De Tarzan a Homer Simpson*.

37. See Mardones, *La transformación de la religión*, 40.

ways of believing, and introduced new ways that are quite different from the previous ones.³⁸

Religiosity, once disconnected from the institution that gave it structure and stability, begins to acquire from society an unstable and “wandering” form, a mixture of syncretism, eclecticism, and even a double or multiple religious affiliation.³⁹ This diffuse and fluid religiosity, which develops at the margin of institutional religion, presents a certain symbolic nebulosity and a consumerism of sensations generating indifference and incredulity in the more critical and skeptical individuals and groups. On the other hand, it is often the breeding ground for new religious and mystical experiences provoked by artificial elements and substances, some of which can be classified as hallucinogenic.⁴⁰

This leads to a dangerous distinction between religion—with tradition, code, and institution—and a new emerging “spirituality,” belonging more to the emotional arena, without tradition, and spontaneously born of a purely subjective and emotional experience.

Anthropocentrism and Human Autonomy

While in the Middle Ages God was the measure of all things, in modernity the human being came to be this measure. The famous drawing by da Vinci of the Vitruvian Man⁴¹ describes well this conception. It is a nude male figure separated into two superimposed positions, with the arms inscribed in a circle and in a square. This drawing has been interpreted to represent Leonardo’s conception of the map of the human body as a cosmography of the *minor mondo*, to the extent that he believed the human body could be considered an analogy of the universe.⁴²

The anthropocentric paradigm allowed all areas of knowledge, especially the reflection on faith or theology, to achieve a veritable Copernican revolution, starting from a human perspective (human reality, context, and condition) in order to be able to speak intelligibly to the modern world—and to persons molded and configured in the kiln of modernity and secularization—about

38. *Ibid.*, 42–43.

39. *Ibid.*, 70. See also Fernandes, *Novas formas de crer*.

40. See for instance the Brazilian ecological religion called Santo Daime, or the União do Vegetal, also Brazilian. On Santo Daime, see Araujo, *Navegando sobre as ondas do Santo Daime*; Lodi, *Estrela da minha vida: histórias do sertão caboclo*.

41. A famous drawing based on calculations by the Roman architect Vitruvius, made around 1490 in one of the artist’s diaries.

42. See <http://leonardodavinci.stanford.edu/submissions/clabaugh/history/leonardo.html>.

transcendence, religion, and the divine Mysteries.⁴³ But it also brought—in large part because of the dialogue with an anthropology not informed by faith—the risk of a conception of human beings as needing, in order to affirm themselves as free beings responsible for their destiny, to distance themselves from any and all tutelage, above all from religious tutelage.

Modern humans came to be generally considered as beings who have dismissed God, who have emancipated themselves from religiosity, and who no longer consider their lives dependent on this aspect—whether they are called atheists, agnostics, theists, polytheists, or are simply indifferent to religious questions. But we can see that this definition is not so easy to make. These human beings, in reality, find themselves in a situation that besides presenting them with the option of desacralized secularization, confronts them equally with a crowded pantheon of new gods, which postmodernity tries to “sell” to them every day. And they—whether atheist, agnostic, or believer—feel vulnerable before these new idols and divinities that are offered daily to their potential for belief. Ultimately they may find themselves perplexed before the emergence of a new plurality and a new religious consciousness, which increasingly complicates their visual and affective field as well as their thirst for Transcendence.

Traditional sacredness presented a heteronomous face, that is, one that presumed adherence to a set of norms and truths which, coming from outside, imposed themselves on the human being as indispensable for the experience of faith and the practice of religion. Today, after the advent of the crisis of modernity, heteronomy is in the shadows, and in its place, clearly and unquestionably, rises autonomy—the liberty of human subjects to define their options, to choose their own way and their own destiny, without being subject to any authority outside of themselves and their conscience. Modern philosophy reinforced this affirmation and thus had an impact on, and consequences for, theology.⁴⁴

With the fall of the old paradigms and the advent of new ones, and with the increasing complexity in the sphere of religious life, the place and role of autonomy and heteronomy present themselves in a different way. It is important, once again, to look at the definition of the relevant terms to verify what is understood by each, and to clarify the concepts by which we comprehend the processes of the world and the historical moment in which we live.

43. See on this point the verifications in the manuals of introduction to theology, and their analysis of the theological method before and after the Council. Cf., for instance, Boff, *Teoria do método teológico*; Libânio and Murad, *Introdução à teologia*.

44. See above all the works of Feuerbach, Nietzsche, etc.

The idea of the human influences the concepts of *authos* (same), *heterós* (other), and *nomos* (law). Premodernity and, within it, the classical and traditional theologies, understood religion as a set of external norms that must be followed for the worship of the true God to occur. Modernity brought about a dislocation regarding this conception, in placing the axis of the sacred in the profoundest depths of the human subject, understood as conscious and productive freedom—productive, in a way, of its own *nomos*, its own law.

The fragmentation of the modern in the hard-to-define postmodern poses both the problem and its questioning in a different way. Currently, amidst secularization and religious pluralism—that is, amidst the fragmentation inherent in postmodernity—human beings rediscover the primacy of Otherness, and revalue the experience of this same Otherness. And from this standpoint they discover themselves as relational beings, intelligible to themselves only through relationship. As they do, the *authos* interfaces with the *heterós*, opening a space for a new *nomos*, a new law. A new moment emerges: that of subjectivity, which must live together with the intense individualization that brought to human beings the enormous loneliness of their egos.

Some modern philosophers have centered their reflection on autonomy, seeing it as the sovereign and solitary capacity of individuals to decide their destiny without recourse to any other source of influence. For some of them this logic went as far as anathematizing Otherness as a threat to human happiness. One cannot forget, for instance, the clamor of Jean-Paul Sartre, through the mouth of the character Garcin in the play *No Exit* (*Huis Clos*): “Hell is other people!”⁴⁵

Yet other contemporary philosophers follow a totally opposite line. One of them is Emmanuel Levinas, who clearly opts for the element of responsibility for the other as the basis of a human society. For him, this society would be built on the transcendental basis which consists of an epiphany of the Face of the other. It is only there that the I-other relationship can be initiated, resulting in a rational law and a political structure as guarantors of freedom—a freedom which “presupposes” that each individual enters freely into relationship with others in a way that makes possible both the law and the structure. This relationship, this dialogue with the other, is essentially characterized by the absolute configuration of the ethical relationship, which, according to Levinas, is the relationship “par excellence.”⁴⁶

45. See Sartre, *Huis Clos*.

46. See Levinas, *Liberté et commandement*, 267/18; 270/21–22.

The naked and mortal face of the other seduces me and reduces me to myself, revealing to me my potential for violence as well as my loneliness.⁴⁷ But it seduces me with the illusion of freedom in manipulating the other for my own benefit. The most intoxicating thing about this seduction is that the ego discovers and understands that this is not in any way forbidden, but on the contrary, it is effectively possible to manipulate the other in his or her weakness.⁴⁸ Here one finds, according to Levinas, the heart of a responsible, dialogical and nonviolent ethic. In the exposed vulnerability of the Face of the other, I discover myself as a potential murderer. At the same time I discover the poverty of the other as a substantial force, a radical resistance to my totalizing and reductionist cupidity. The Face of the other thus appears as opposition, insofar as it places itself in front of me and against me, confronting me as a radical prohibition and a resistance to all my intentions.⁴⁹ And this resistance, this force, this accusation, which rises up against me in my reductionist and violent potentiality, does not come from the free choice of the other, but from the essential Otherness of the other, from the dismissal that proclaims itself a protest against the violence of the ego.⁵⁰

Levinas thus arrives, with his reflection, at a radical inversion of the Cartesian cogito, in affirming that to be human is to remain under accusation by the Face of the other. Human subjectivity inverts from the nominative *I* to the accusative *me*. No longer can I, in my previously self-sufficient and violent ego, conceive of myself as the origin (*archè*), the measure of all things, but rather I am myself being questioned and measured by the other, by the Face of the other who judges me.⁵¹

Before the appearance of the other, human freedom can still present itself as innocent and without a sense of culpability in its own selfishness and violence. But through the encounter and appeal of the other, such freedom receives a shock, seeing in the face of the other, as in a mirror, its selfishness and violence. Thus, according to Levinas, there occurs a “conversion from the inside to the outside,” a cathartic inversion of the barbaric and dogmatic effort to be. Only in this way can the spiral of violence and war be finally interrupted and broken.⁵² The only basis for a truly ethical justice is the unconditional responsibility conveyed to the ego with the appearance of the Face of the other.

47. See Levinas, *De Dieu qui vient à l'idée*, 271, 244–45/161–63.

48. See Levinas, *Éthique comme philosophie première*, 124.

49. See Levinas, *En découvrant l'existence avec Husserl et Heidegger*, 173/105.

50. See Levinas, *Hors-sujet*, 141.

51. See Levinas, *Autrement qu'être ou au-delà de l'essence*, 140/109.

52. See Petitdemange and Rolland, *Autrement que savoir*, 64; Levinas, *Humanisme de l'autre homme*, 49/97.

If the ideal or purpose of the human being is the I in and of itself, then heteronomy and Otherness—which appear as the norm—can indeed be experienced as slavery, as alienation before the other who obliges, oppresses, and alienates me. If the ideal and purpose of the human ego is the good, the building of community, and the establishment of relationships of solidarity and freedom to be lived out in reality, then the Otherness of the other becomes—with all its risks, dangers, and conflicts—the condition for the possibility of the I, something that establishes and anchors it, and allows it to be and to exist.

In times when human autonomy is exalted, accompanied by a profound identity crisis of the human condition, perhaps the stumbling block lies in overcoming the understanding of autonomy and heteronomy as two irreconcilable poles, with no possible exit from the impasse. Ethics, in truth, calls attention to this point when it places at the center of thinking and living the primordial nature of the other and the other's rights, which questions and summons the ego. The biblical vision tries to take a step in this direction by saying that freedom, rather than coming purely from the outside, is inside the human being. It is like an inscription engraved there of the epiphanous questioning that makes manifest the Face of the other—of the poor, the widow, the orphan, the stranger—establishing for the believer the only law, which is the law of love, as in Exod 22:22, Deut 16:11, and Ps 146:9, among many others.

Love is understood there not as a search for pleasure or the satisfaction of instincts and needs. It brings with it a stamp of sacredness when seen from the standpoint of an exit from oneself, of the free delivery of oneself, and of oblation—all at the service of building human solidarity in new relationships.

Modern anthropocentrism, for all its importance in contributing to the idea of human beings as free and no longer subject to external laws alien to their subjectivity and dignity, runs the risk of reducing itself to an atrophying and individualistic loneliness.

The objectivity of the world—a product of modernity—is an extreme result of the separation of human beings from the institutionalized belief in God, a separation that liberates them and establishes them as the subjects of their knowledge, making them autonomous before the divine intelligence and normativeness. God—or Transcendence—has withdrawn from the world, leaving human beings on their own in their search for meaning.

The end of anthropocentric humanism (with its perverse androcentric and ethnocentric deviations) opens the way for a new vision, a new perception—which would consequently become a new experience—of a humankind that has survived the decline of the utopias and the change of

paradigms, and feels an emergent desire for an encounter with Transcendent Otherness, which reason can neither explain nor circumscribe.⁵³

The Hegemony of Reason, the Power of Science, and the Misconduct of Practice

Scientific knowledge depends on a society in which discoveries are made while their content remains neutral, belonging neither to nation nor class. Yet as a body of knowledge science never ceases to be strictly associated with power. The resistance of the scientific world to Einstein's discovery of relativity is an eloquent example of this point.⁵⁴ And World War II, one of the gravest chapters in human history, represented, among other things, a sealed alliance between knowledge and power, with science and technology used to perpetrate one of the greatest cases of genocide ever seen by humankind. Likewise, the long Vietnam War demonstrated that the contributions of mathematicians, physicists, chemists, and biologists can result in the production of the cruelest and most destructive weapons, such as napalm and missiles, among others.

There is a fundamental confusion of content between science and technology. Technical progress is accused of causing damage to humankind, when the true responsibility for such harm belongs to the political and economic structures that influence policies regarding scientific work and research.

The use of computers in the economic field has magnified the importance of numbers and calculations in facilitating their performance. But precise machines are of no use in achieving exact calculations in optimal time if the data used are false or misguided and thus not conducive to an accurate result. Economic models are not immune to ideology. By the use of certain simplifications and approximations—think inexactitude—results can be obtained which do not correspond to the proposed hypotheses and are more in the service of a political choice than of objective truth.⁵⁵ For this reason, and given the privileged condition of exact scientific research—which tends to make researchers into unintelligible communicators using a language that nobody understands, and whose claims are therefore difficult to contest—the

53. See on this point Bingemer, *Um rosto para Deus?*, ch. 1.

54. See for example Einstein's relativity, the objection of Cesar Lattes, and the proposal of Andre Assis; see <http://stoa.usp.br/cienciacultura/weblog/82774.html>.

55. Examples could be multiplied. Economic data are often expropriated by the executive power, and the information that reaches the population about inflation, the GDP, etc., is often false, or at least distorted.

natural sciences today are often at the service of a political power interested in a rupture between the keepers of knowledge and the people.

The human sciences have as their objective a knowledge of the behavior, human activity, and all that human beings produce, such as language, art, and history. They also manage privileged resources for their work, although in general more modest ones than those of the natural sciences. But in distinguishing between the two areas a question of principle arises: the proof of truth in the human sciences is not obtained by *strictu sensu* experimentation, as in the case of the natural sciences. Experimentation, when employed, cannot be carried out without the consent of the individual or group. And the human subject will be changed in the course of the experiment. That is why the results in the human sciences are always dynamic, and continually changing. Any *a priori* attempt to establish a structure to fix them in some political, economic, and social model can lead to alienation and a repressive culture.⁵⁶

Science is one of the movers of the development of humankind and of life. Its progress has been responsible for great improvements in human life, especially during the last century, although the fruits of this progress have not been equitably shared in the world. On the other hand, the misuse that is often made of scientific knowledge was, also in the twentieth century, a cause of the worst afflictions ever suffered by humankind. For this reason, even if the progress of science—made possible by modern rationality—is highly positive, even if we agree that science is the mover of socioeconomic development, the efforts by several countries and regions of the world in the field of science still remain far below minimum desirable levels.

The recent phenomenon of globalization, unleashed by the demise of the utopias and the progress of information and communication technology, led to the opening of national economies the world over, and never ceases to engender international commercial and financial relations, as well as a transnational genesis of knowledge and a new worldwide division of labor. The “end of geography” is provoking the beginning of a new conception of the world, where scientific activities must be reorganized.⁵⁷

Strong interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary capabilities, which require innovative mechanisms, will be needed to facilitate the investigation of complex problems that go beyond the immediate spatial and temporal horizon. On the other hand, science should always be carried out more ethically and with more conscience. Research must be transparent and socialized. It

56. Many military regimes that ruled Latin American countries in the decades of the 1980s and 1990s were examples of this point.

57. On the question of the end of geography, see our reflections in the first chapter of this book.

should be concerned not only with quality, but also with communicability.⁵⁸ Scientific discoveries must serve humankind, now living through a delicate and important moment in history.

The moment in which we are now living is, from an economic and technological perspective, one of neoliberal globalization. The dynamism of the capitalist free-market economic system, with tools for the systematic application of a functional science and practice, has acquired planetary dimensions. This hegemony corresponds with a univocal way of thinking—reinforced by the fall of the socialist block—which destabilized the world balance of power. There remains only a neoliberal thought, expanded and generalized. The law of the market is seen as no less evident than the law of gravity. And if socialism fell because it lost—engulfed by the thirst for power and totalitarianism—the mystique that sustained it during its first years, it must be admitted that neoliberalism, which is nothing more than capitalism with a few ornaments, is deprived of ethics.

This entire state of things could not have escaped being a powerful influence on culture and values. We are facing a technological leap and a shaping of scientific thought that do not control themselves, and nobody yet knows the consequences of this lack of control. And there are reasons to be afraid. As Hans Jonas says, the mere possibility of a threat of danger must become an element of ethical reflection.⁵⁹

To this globalized and technoeconomic situation corresponds a type of rationality, and consequently a way of understanding reality, called the functional conception of reality.⁶⁰ It is focused on dimensions that are measurable, strategic, and functional. It specializes in the instrumental point of view of adequate means to reach an end. But it misunderstands those same ends and their ethical objectives. It remains at the level of the means, analyzing and evaluating reality according to the criteria of efficacy, profitability, pragmatism, and functionality.⁶¹

This functionalist homogenizing of the world produces several perverse effects. The first consists in valuing only that which is measurable and can be expressed through numbers, statistics, and instrumentality. All that results from abstraction, from Mystery, from inspiration, and from poetry is set aside as useless, as something that cannot be controlled by instrumental reason, which—with its diabolical and reductionist pride—imagines itself

58. See Mayor, "Science," in *Encyclopaedia Universalis*.

59. See Jonas, *The Imperative of Responsibility*, according to Mardones, *La transformación de la religión*, 50.

60. See Mardones, *En el umbral del mañana*, 124.

61. *Ibid.*, 125.

to be rendering a service to the world, driving out the superstitions and magic conceptions of life that keep people infantile.⁶²

Furthermore, with it comes a withering of traditions and memories, a dessication of the search for the meaning of life—a constitutive aspect of the human being that gives nobility and dignity to human life itself. All that comes from memory, from the cultivation of the riches of aboriginal cultures, and from enriching traditions—the breeding ground of human creativity—is diminished, devalued, and confined to an insignificant place in reality.⁶³

This is a society of sensations, immersed in the consumerism of mercantile fetishes, generating injustice, nihilism, and a sterile *ag-nosía*.⁶⁴ Universalization, catapulted to the highest power by the social media, uniformizes behaviors, anti-values, and sensations, based on triviality and vulgarity.⁶⁵ There is a sameness in fashion, tastes, flavors, music (especially music for young people), and movies—which are primarily formatted after the North American model. The United States is the matrix that exports this culture, which is avidly consumed especially in the developing countries and is even conquering old Europe.

The linguistic phenomenon itself says something about this. The *koiné* of modernity is English.⁶⁶ Nowadays even those who do not know English, but need to work with the Internet or computers, have adopted English words with pronunciations in local vernaculars—creating a new Esperanto based in banality. Not infrequently one can hear words such as *delete*, *copy-paste*, *link*, and others from the mouths of ignorant men and women who surely do not know even half the wealth of their own native language. It is a case of babelization through uniformization rather than through diaspora, and this dialectic communitarianism is far from leading humankind to greater understanding and solidarity.

The modern dream has preserved some of its very positive foundations, such as the primacy of reason, the advent of technology, and the autonomy of science. But it has lost the purity of its objectives and its ethics. In place of the wholeness made possible by human reason, by technology, and by the digital and communication sciences, what we see is the dissolution

62. Ibid.

63. Ibid., 126.

64. Ibid.

65. Ibid., 127.

66. *Koiné* is the technical term most commonly used to refer to the Greek of the Hellenistic period. This Greek word simply means “common.” Hellenistic Greek, or *koiné*, is the popular form of Greek that emerged in classical post-antiquity (c. 300 BC–300 AD).

of the whole in the plurality of multiple fragments and a variety of partial perspectives. Modern historical continuity, which unfolds in a continuous linear progress, is replaced by discontinuity, a plurality of fragmented visions of the world—a post-history or the end of history.⁶⁷

From the point of view of religion, especially in the Judeo-Christian tradition, the relationship between faith and reason has luminous and shadowy points, pros and cons. The undue tutelage of reason by faith that continued for a long period of history, generating an equally undue subordination of scientific reason to faith, played an important role in the acquisition by reason of a consciousness of its autonomy. The result was a conflict that entailed a total rupture of the relationship between faith and reason, and the replacement of the supremacy of faith by the supremacy of autonomous reason at first, and later of scientific reason, only to degenerate eventually into that of instrumental reason. The prestige and success of scientific thought led to the identification of reason with scientific reason, leading science to be considered the only valid form of knowledge. To summarize, we are confronted with an epistemological monism.⁶⁸

This sterilizing conflict is overcome when instrumental reason finds itself in crisis and performs self-criticism. Then the affirmations of the human sciences—relegated to second place by the hegemony of the “precision” of numbers—as well as the affirmations of faith and of religion, begin anew to find some possibility in the realm of reason. The need for an articulation of meaning is felt,⁶⁹ and religion becomes a theme even in the writings of the great agnostic thinkers of today, who speak of it in a nostalgic, but not a polemic, tone.⁷⁰

A positive and effective articulation between faith and science is needed for the development of an ethical vigilance over the practice of science without taking anything from its autonomy. In this way, it is possible to articulate the presence of faith with that of philosophical reason and that of scientific reason.

67. See Mardones, *Hacia donde va la religión?*, 28–29.

68. See Velasco, *El malestar religioso de nuestra cultura*, 156, who further says that the reality to which this reason gave access was proclaimed the only valid form of reality, producing an ontological monism.

69. See Ladrière, *Articulation du sens*.

70. See Habermas et al., *An Awareness of What Is Missing*; Eagleton, *Reason, Faith and Revolution*.

Plurality and the End of Unicity

Pluralism has been present in the history of Christianity since its beginnings. Already in its first centuries, Christianity, born in the heart of Judaism, needed to find ways of self-expression in the pagan and polytheistic world of ancient Greece and Rome. To that end it had to make use of the categories of the ancient pagan Greek philosophy, and was compelled to dialogue with the different gods of that world, to be able to make visible and audible the experience of its God. A delightful and powerful example of this pluralism and of the entry of Christianity into it is the episode of Paul in the Areopagus in Athens with his announcement of the unknown God, described in Acts 17.⁷¹

This pluralism seems to have become obscure in the Middle Ages, when the Western world was massively and almost totally Christian. Those who professed different creeds were considered heretics and infidels, to be combated and eliminated.⁷² The Protestant Reformation reintroduced the question of pluralism, rupturing the univocality of Christendom. The process of secularization, with the autonomy of reason, rationalism, and the crisis of the institutions, brought new elements into an area where homogeneity was already, if not ruptured, at least questioned.

Today this pluralism appears to be reconfigured. We are seeing a privatization of religious life, which accompanies the autonomy of the modern human being *versus* the heteronomy that ruled the theocentric medieval world. Each composes its own recipe for transcendence, and the field of religion resembles a huge supermarket, as well as a place where traffic comes and goes.⁷³ Modernity did not liquidate religion. On the contrary, religion rose anew, with new strength and a new form. It is no longer institutionalized as before, but rather plural and multiform, wild and even anarchical, and lacking the conditions to return to its premodern ways.⁷⁴

The question of sacredness introduces, then, another face, which goes together with that of modern secularity. It generates suspicion and atheism wherever Transcendence is subjected to unrelenting criticism by the Enlightenment's reason and logic. It is the face of plurality. It implies the

71. Acts 17:1ff.: Paul in the Areopagus of Athens, speaking of the unknown God from the standpoint of the Greek polytheism.

72. See Bingemer et al., "Violência e não-violência na história da Igreja"; Bingemer et al., "Violência e não-violência na história da Igreja (II)."

73. On religion as supermarket and as place of traffic, see Libânio, *Crer num mundo de muitas crenças e pouca libertação*, and Certeau, *La faiblesse de croire*.

74. See Bingemer, *Alteridade e vulnerabilidade*; see also Libânio, "Fascínio do Sagrado"; Couto Teixeira, "O Sagrado em novos itinerários."

existence of an interface of different attempts at interreligious dialogue, of multireligious practice and of double belonging, and of the religion of the other as a condition for the possibility of living out one's own faith in a more radical and deeper way.⁷⁵

In phenomenological terms, the category of religious pluralism simply refers to the fact that the history of religion portrays a plurality of traditions and a wide range of variations inside each tradition. Philosophically, however, the term refers to a particular theory of the relationship among these traditions, with their different and competitive characteristics. According to this theory the great religions represent a variety of conceptions and perceptions of, and responses to, the ultimate and mysterious divine reality.⁷⁶

The issue of religious pluralism is increasingly prominent in today's world, itself a pluralist one, assaulted by an explosive resurgence, unrestrained and almost barbaric, of religiosity. Not only do the ancient and traditional religions appear to be growing in importance and becoming a strong voice for historical Christianity, but new religious movements are springing up from all sides—inside and outside the ecclesiastic communities—causing perplexity and questioning among the followers of the traditional and historical churches.⁷⁷

It is clear that, on the one hand, historical Christianity is aware that it has lost its earlier secular hegemony, especially in the traditionally Catholic Latin Mediterranean countries—where Christian affiliation was more an inheritance by birth than a free choice by adults. To be a Christian today is not that obvious, and Christianity is called to find its place among of a plurality of other religious traditions and confessions of diverse hues.

On the other hand, this religious plurality raises some very serious questions for Christianity regarding the very contents of its faith. For a real dialogue in a multireligious world, historical Christians must be willing to find new words to express ancient and traditional ideas and to make them understood.

The question of God and the experience of God is one of those delicate issues to which theology must devote special attention as it approaches interreligious dialogue. If an interface is really theological contact and not an imposition, it presupposes an openness to dialogue, which in turn implies a renouncing of the preoccupation with an explicit adherence to the past.

75. See on this issue Bingemer, "Religions and the Dialogue among Cultures."

76. See J. Hick, "Religious Pluralism," in Eliade, *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12, 331.

77. See on the new religious movements, Campos, *Teatro, templo e mercado*; Luz, *Carnaval da alma*; Hortal, *O que fazer diante da expansão dos grupos religiosos não católicos?*.

There must be, here, a spiritual and mystical aspect that humbly and confidently seeks an experience of God common to more than one tradition.

Undoubtedly, historical Christianity is called to find its place in the multireligious fabric that permeates society today. In so doing, it is invited to participate in a common project in which religions would play an important role in promoting the good of humankind as a whole. According to important contemporary thinkers, the traditions of the entire world are being called to contribute to the elaboration of a new world ethic. And they cannot refuse or ignore this call.⁷⁸ Nor can they comply by letting go of that which constitutes the profoundest depth of their identity.

It seems, therefore, that Christian faith, Christian theology and Christian mysticism today must deal with the question of their identity, which is sometimes lost and fragmented amidst a sea of experiences presenting themselves as religious but not necessarily embracing Otherness—which in its total freedom reveals itself as Holiness, or an absolutely other Otherness. If we easily legitimize any experience of seduction by the sacred, we run the risk of baptizing many deities with this name, but not touching that which for us and for contemporary followers of other religions can be understood as the experience of God.

The ascent of multireligious sacredness does not necessarily imply the sunset of adherence to traditional religion, with all the consequences this would bring. But it does imply a constant and acute discernment, to the effect that the living of the faith and reflection on it must be, more than ever, submitted to a reflection on the very heart of its identity. The fecundity attained by the interface among religions runs the risk of becoming diluted as long as the face of sacredness remains diffuse and lacking any contour, resulting in the failure of any effective attempt to fulfill the dream of the creation of a robust and consistent synthesis.

In the dialogue about and the desire for an interaction and encounter among religions, one experiences a tearing asunder of love and truth. At the profoundest depth of the extraordinary desire to meet the other, one can also find the desire to learn through the other things that only the Spirit of God can teach. But for a dialogue to take place, one must engage in it without losing the identity of one's own experience, even if—fortunately—this requires always being open to learning through the other how to wait for the future that we are all called to build in rich reciprocity, but which, on the other hand, is and will be graciously given to us.

78. See Küng, *Christianity and the World Religions*.