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**Dowers of a Light**

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## **Abstract**

We are experiencing a dramatic moment in the history of our planet in this first quarter of the new millennium. Not just a crisis, but a radical upheaval of the values on which our civil life was based, for better or worse, and no one knows where this situation will lead us. Everything is in turmoil. And even religious traditions, at least where they continue to exist with a significant presence, have once again become a danger, as, when expressed in a strongly identitarian manner, they can spark destructive and unstoppable hatred and violence.

## Dowers of a Light

In the historical moment we are living in, the word "God", interpreted in various religious traditions and within the countless communities that claim some divine presence, has once again become a dangerous spark that ignites unstoppable hatred and violence. Although the Scriptures are full of invitations not to be idolaters, we see how easy it is to idolize not only false images, not only money, not only earthly goods, but also the very face of God, his very Word. It is very easy to forget that no one possesses the truth (much less a truth superior to that of another), and to convince ourselves that we are the exclusive recipients of a revelation, interpreters of an indisputable presupposition, of an arbitrary superiority. This is the first great temptation of those who ask few questions about the word "God" and forget that it is merely a generic word attributed by humans to something/someone unknown to anyone, to a greatness that transcends us, to an immensity that envelops us. The second great temptation is to transform the religious tradition with which we identify into a strong identitarian claim, to make the faith we profess a national faith, which in turn becomes a fomenter of revenge, wars, and the foolish exclusivist designs of the politicians of the day.

Today, I believe, is no longer the time for a univocal and separatist religiosity. Perhaps it is time to abandon all religious appropriation and instead seek, each within our own tradition, something that helps us respect every living being in its uniqueness and, at the same time, in its equality with other living beings, knowing that we are not the possessors of a certainty, but humble "dowers of a light" (André Neher) that can illuminate our path.

This historical moment is obviously the result of a slow, multi-stage process. And yet, most of us had not foreseen it. We found ourselves faced with a surprise. A nasty surprise. Wars in many parts of the planet. Violence. Extermination. Blatant violations of individual rights. Contempt for international law. Force triumphing over law. Democracies in danger. Growing inequalities. These are now repeated litanies.

Not only is there a **proliferation of wars across the world**—even though our media focuses primarily on the two that concern us most closely—but we are also witnessing a **subversion** of what we thought were the principles of a civilized coexistence that we believed we acquired, having evidently underestimated the underlying and destructive power of mediocrity, of self-satisfaction, of moral adjustment, of the power of the arrogant, of failing to consider the care of the *polis*, and of the earth as a whole, as the primary duty of humanity. And so we stand, surprised, on the brink of a new era, in which the earth is threatened with destruction, in which we dread the prospect of a non-human intelligence, which our minds cannot contain, but which will nevertheless be directed by humans who will be controlled by who knows who. In short, perhaps for the first time in history, the **absence of a future** presents itself as a plausible prospect, one that our gaze cannot sustain.

And yet, despite the fact that the pace of history is not always the same (the pace experienced by a Northern European city, for example, is not the same as that experienced by a tribe on the Amazon River), and the weight of religious beliefs is inevitably not the same for everyone (the European continent is showing an unstoppable trend of radical secularization, while on other continents some religions are resurfacing), from a cultural perspective we once again find ourselves grappling with the **"God problem"**. We hear this name evoked and invoked as a flag of identity from many quarters and on

different fronts. We find it once again as a divisive element, in some cases brandished as a threatening weapon, in others used as a puppet in the hands of skilled swindlers (Trump is a prime example, but he is certainly not the only one). The words of Martin Buber inevitably come to mind, when he spoke of the name of God as the most soiled, most lacerated, most betrayed, most dust-covered, most blood-soaked word.

But it is precisely for this reason, Buber said, that it must be saved, not abandoned, and "raised above a moment of great anguish." And Martin Buber is certainly among those who have not obscured or betrayed this word.

But here it is. More than a hundred years have passed since Buber's words. And the conviction is dawning on me that it is no longer just this.

The time we live in is confusing, mendacious, deceptive. But it can also be liberating, very demanding, very critical, very lucid. We are called to feel the responsibility of this "demand": perhaps precisely by seeing how the word "god," or religious affiliation (which is valid even where there is no God present, as in the so-called monotheistic religions, but nevertheless an identity of faith and beliefs), even the most sincere and least violent, can be a source of misunderstandings, misinterpretations, ultimately a "constriction of the mind" from which the historical moment we are experiencing needs to free itself.

It is not just a matter of **freeing the image of God** from the patina of superficiality and superstition that has shrouded it for centuries, from interpretations that are uncomfortable, embarrassing, difficult to sustain, and therefore easy to accommodate. It is not just a matter of saying that certain interpretations are deviations, aberrations, or, ultimately, abuses of the intended meaning of a text, a word, a narrative—implying that one interpretation is more "true" than another, despite every "infinite interpretation." Every religion is historically and manifestly plural and contradictory, the product of the culture and civilization in which it came to fruition. No religion is authentically universal. Every religion oscillates fearfully between a sense of **universalism** and a sense of **identity**. Therefore, no religion can authentically be the only "true" one.

We should then begin to think of religions as **historically determined facts**, and not as keys to a universal understanding of the world. The fascination of religious traditions lies precisely in tracing **the efforts** that human beings and peoples have made to establish non-destructive norms, to come to terms with the complexity of relationships with others, and the fragility of living things; and to ask the great questions about the mysteries of existence, the immensities that surround us, the enigmas of light and darkness.

Many considerations arise from this observation. I'll try to list a few, starting with the most obvious.

The "**dialogue between religions**". Naturally, the so-called dialogue between religions is welcome. Although it may sometimes appear formal and insubstantial, behind every "representative" of individual religions there are communities that must accept the fact that they must engage with and necessarily coexist with other diverse communities. But today the stakes are higher. It is **with the surrounding world—religious or otherwise—that individual communities must engage**. They cannot live as closed circles in their beliefs and fears. Each must confront—naturally according to their possibilities and capabilities—the demands of **contemporary life**. Not to give in to a modernist drift, but to adapt their feelings and lives to what history has gained: ecologically, civilly, and morally. And the fact that so-called "values" are more often than not distorted and contradicted does not mean they should be

abandoned. It is not about pitting a "civilized" world against a more "backward" one. Rather, it is about the fact that scientific knowledge, the acquisition of rights, and the universality of duties **must be discussed, but there can be no retreat.**

But, above all, every culture must confront the demands of the times. It is first and foremost about effecting a **paradigm shift**, which involves acknowledging certain realities.

1. Every religion, for the most part, **presupposes a "truth"**. Be it "revelation", the authority of a text, a doctrinal field, etc., all of this has its own meaning, its own history, its own reason for being. But today it is necessary to accept the fact that no truth is ever given forever, that human beings—by definition fragile, insecure, constantly developing and constantly declining—can only attain **provisional, never eternal, truths**: and therefore they are required to tear down the tombstone of eternity.

2. **The world belongs to everyone.** Or rather: it contains everyone and everything, in the infinite variations of species, but everyone and everything has the right to existence, protection, conservation, and development. One could also say to goodness and beauty. Respecting the **differences** of species, needs, cultures, diverse abilities, etc. **Equality** is a difficult path to follow. Not only because we are far from having achieved it, but also because it cannot be separated from respect for differences. It is a delicate balancing act to hold equalities and differences together. But it is a game worth playing. Like the relationship between duties and rights, studied in depth by Simone Weil, but then culpably neglected.

3. As for religions, I do not advocate a universal religion, which would, precisely, end up flattening the differences between individuals, peoples, and cultures. And thus destroying their potential riches. What comes to mind is that what is needed, I repeat, is a **paradigm shift**, an **inversion of the pyramid of meaning**. Starting from human needs, from the rights of every living being, from everyone's desires for freedom and growth; from duties toward every living being and also toward the earth, to save it at least to the extent possible. And from there, from this primary recognition, we must seek sources from which to drink in wisdom, distilling wellsprings of wisdom and understanding that the rivers of religious knowledge can contain. Without worrying at all costs about conferring the dignity of absolute truth on contents unacceptable to contemporary consciousness. Therefore, first and foremost it is not a religion that claims to be universal. But the universality of action and thought to preserve and create. Through individual paths that take into account each person's individuality. Knowing that every space of individuality finds its limit in the space of the individuality of others. It no longer seems enough, I think, to extol infinite interpretation as if it were a guarantee of a free and incessant exercise in reading the truth. The **assumption that must be undermined** is that there is a revealed truth, or a path that leads directly to enlightenment: that there is a **point of origin** from which everything flows. And, in parallel, that there is a **predetermined purpose** toward which each person can strive. The very **multiplicity of religions** (or "visions," or wisdoms) contradicts the presupposition of revealed truth.

What remains, then? What remains is the arduous path of each life. The falls and the rises. The tiring and painful moments of people, their explosions of joy when calamity is overcome. Thought, too, knows its peaks and expansions, its moments of stagnation and dead ends. But it is inevitably mobile, dynamic, wriggling or slimy, depending on the situation. We must be aware of this, if we do not want to remain prisoners of it or entangled in slimy and suffocating nets.

What still exists **is the life** that fortuitous circumstances have generated. It is all we have. It must be protected, cared for, enjoyed, suffered. Ours and that of others. Ours and that of the environment that hosts us. Its fallibility must be accepted. Sometimes extreme and inevitable. Sometimes perfectible, correctable. Even knowing how to surrender to its transience. Which dismays us, causes us pain. But there is no solution.

Religions? They should not be thought of as residual waste. Rather, they should be thought of as the repositories of an **immense heritage** that still needs to be explored, investigated, and loved, of wisdom, of knowledge, of tensions between the inevitable violence required to conquer a place on earth and the equally inevitable need to find a way to coexist, grow, create, and hope. In this sense, a verse from the first letter of Apostle John seems exemplary to summarize the journey thus far:

"No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us" (1 John 4:12).

As a provisional conclusion, I would not say that religions have exhausted their historical role. Not even in the so-called West, now largely massively secularized. Rather, I believe it is of great interest to try to understand, through the history of religions, or even of a single community, the struggle that human beings have always made and continue to make to "conquer evil with good," to defeat destructive forces and explore paths of harmony, coexistence, and pacification.

This is why it was necessary to "invent" God, or to cloak in largely legendary narratives certain figures who have become myths or who have marked our history: to give confidence in the efforts and endeavors of humans, to envelop with authority the most precious teachings, those still to be gathered, dropping the cruel and violent words that lead nowhere.

I repeat: a radical shift in priorities is needed. First, the task we have chosen to carry out on this earth. Then, possibly, a secret path (the "discipline of the arcane," as Dietrich Bonhoeffer called it) to deeply embrace the essence to be extracted from ancient wisdom.

Moreover, the Scriptures are full of invitations not to be idolaters (one can idolize money, worldly goods, false images, but even the very face of God). Yet it is easy to forget that idolatry is the great temptation. To forget that no one possesses the truth (much less a truth superior to that of another), and to convince ourselves that we are the exclusive recipients of a revelation, interpreters of an indisputable presupposition, of an arbitrary superiority. This is the first great temptation of those who ask few questions about the word "God", forgetting that it is merely a word attributed by humans to something/someone unknown to anyone, to a greatness that transcends us. The second great temptation is to transform the religious tradition with which we identify into a strong identitarian claim, which in turn becomes a fomenter of revenge, wars, and foolish exclusivist designs.

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