

When I reflect on the history of Christianity, three key words stand out for me: incarnation, kenosis and parousia.

Incarnation: the self-revealing God (logos) become “flesh” (sarx) and enters the material of the world, history, humanity. The world, history, humanity and culture become the agent of the logos, the form of God’s self-communication.

In the Hebrew bible, the Creation story (the world and man are a parable and image of God; creation is *similar* to God) precedes the story of the Fall, which amends the previous one (the world and mankind are *dissimilar* from God, they are a damaged image). The outcome is the paradox proclaimed by Christian theology: the world and mankind are similar to and dissimilar from God; we now see God in the mirror of the world (in nature, history and humanity) only partially, like in a riddle. We will not see God fully until we see God “face to face” – *in eschato*: the historical world will not truly reflect God until it is whole, at the moment that history is fulfilled, the moment of parousia (Christ’s second coming), as St Paul taught<sup>1</sup>.

Similarly, the New Testament, the Christmas mystery (the incarnation of the Logos) is complemented and “amended” (protected from too naïve a notion of divine and human identity, the Logos and “flesh”) by the Easter message of the cross, the mystery of *kenosis*, God’s self-emptying, surrender and self-destruction: He who was God’s equal destroyed himself, taking the form of a servant, and became obedient unto death on the cross.<sup>2</sup> The outcome is again a paradox: the message of resurrection and redemption. Defeat means victory. Those who give and sacrifice their lives will obtain them, those who wish to keep their lives for themselves, will lose them. Resurrection is the mysterious

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 1 Cor 13.12

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Phil 2.6-8

answer to the painful question of the dying Jesus: O God, why have you abandoned me? What was the point of it all?

Resurrection isn't the happy end of the Easter story. Victory over death is not evident to "all people", it can only be accessed and experienced through faith, love and hope<sup>3</sup>. The history of Christianity is the history of a search for the Beloved, who is concealed and surprises (as in the Song of Songs), often appearing in the form of a stranger, like on the road to Emmaus<sup>4</sup>, who appears in the anonymity of the "the least of his brethren", an anonymity that will only come to an end at the moment of the last judgment <sup>5</sup>

Yes, throughout the history of Christianity, the Christmas mystery of *incarnation* merges with the Easter mystery of *kenosis*: Christ is present in the manifest life of the church, in the liturgy, and the proclamation, and indeed in the visible institutions of the church and the "baptised world". But we must not forget about the other, dim and mysterious form of God that disrupts our notion that we are capable of fully grasping the meaning of incarnation with the tools of our own reason, imagination and previous experience.

Christ is present in his church, and his truth (he himself as the fullness of truth) is present in the proclamations of the church. But at the same time, Christ divinely transcends the historically-conditioned institutions of the church and its verbally-articulated proclamations and teachings at a specific time and in a particular cultural and social space.

The Second Vatican Council accepted a very important truth about the church when it chose the expression "subsistit in" to replace the previously proposed word *est* (the Church of Christ is identical with the Catholic Church), when defining the relationship between the church of Christ (in its

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Acts 10.41

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Luke 24, 13-24

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Matt 25, 31-46

eschatological fullness) and the Catholic church in its historical form.<sup>6</sup> This means that the church of Christ “subsists” in the Catholic church, but the fullness of Christ’s church is not entirely exhausted in the Catholic church as we know it from historical experience; it is not fully contained in it, without any remainder. There is space for others beyond the borders of Catholic church institutions. There are many authentic gifts of the Spirit that are part of the fullness of Christ’s church that we find in other churches and Christian communities. That is why the Christian churches and communities should be regarded as “*communiones viatorum*”, pilgrim communities that should come together and enrich each other on the journey through history by sharing experience and “exchanging gifts”.

I think we can seek an answer to the complex question of the relationship between truth and pluralism by applying the concept of “subsistit in” analogously to the relationship of the Truth that is Christ to the truth as taught by the church. In church doctrine Truth subsists, but it always necessary to add that the culturally and historically conditioned forms of church doctrine do not contain the fullness of truth. There is always scope for further seeking, for questions and interpretations; the door can open for anyone who knocks on it with a sincere desire for the truth, because the Spirit that leads to the fullness of Truth “bloweth where it listeth”.<sup>7</sup>

Likewise church doctrine subsists (sometimes implicitly more than anything else) in the religious consciousness of individual believers, but no single believer “owns” it fully and the religious consciousness of individuals and groups of believers does not contain solely the defined faith of the church. There is room in the hearts and minds of believers for critical questions. Likewise there must be space in the faith of the church for meditative silence, for quiet repose

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<sup>6</sup> The Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 8

<sup>7</sup> John 16.13; John 3.8

in the cloud of unknowing, for the unending path of seeking, and the humble endurance of questions that remain open, such as the question of the origin and meaning of evil (*mysterium iniquitatis*). So long as we treat God's truth with the arrogance of monopolistic owners, we forget that Christ alone is permitted to say "I am the Truth". At every moment of history we are disciples *on the path* of following the Lord; we are a pilgrim community (*communio viatorum*), and fullness of truth is an *eschatological* objective. The work of Christ's Spirit, which is our mystagogue on the journey<sup>8</sup>, remains an unfinished project. The Spirit of the Lord undoubtedly speaks through the verbally formulated doctrine of the church, but also through "sighs too deep for words"; it is also present in the pain and longing that pervade creation and our hearts. <sup>9</sup>

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Christianity has been embodied in culture, society and history. A dream lies at the foundations of European Christianity. It is said that on the night before a battle the Emperor Constantine had a dream in which he saw the sign of the cross and heard the words: Through this sign you will be victorious! Next morning Constantine ordered Christ's monogram with the cross to be fixed to the standards of his troops, and he did indeed defeat his enemy in the ensuing battle. So the emperor convinced himself that the God of Christians – the cross as a protective amulet – was a reliable guarantor of a powerful victory, the triumph of power. In gratitude he set Christianity on the path of freedom, and soon afterwards on the path of triumph and power. I ask myself over and over again what would have happened to Christianity, the church, Europe and the world if the emperor had understood his dream differently, if he had had at his

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<sup>8</sup> John 16.13

<sup>9</sup> Romans 8.26

disposal more intelligent dream interpreters, who would have offered him a profounder hermeneutic of the sign of the cross.

Fifteen centuries after Emperor Constantine another dream entered European history. A madman carrying a lighted lantern arrived in a marketplace in the full light of day and cried out that he was seeking God. “God is dead! God remains dead!” God was simply a projection of people’s wishes and fears; religion was an illusion. Religion was opium for the people. Didn’t the three great prophets of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Nietzsche, Freud and Marx, all express the same experience, just in different words, namely: that *God no longer serves as a tool of power nor does Christianity as a triumphalist ideology?* Didn’t those three magi from the West bring us the royal gift of a deeper understanding of Emperor Constantine’s dream? A different hermeneutic of the symbol of the cross?

Although many beautiful and profound things have been written about the cross by great theologians, mystics and saints, and although individual Christians and many local churches have endured the burden of the cross, it seems that only now in the period of latter-day modernity has Christianity of the West been able to experience the “Good Friday of history”, when the cry of the abandoned crucified Christ was heard in the darkness of God’s silence. No longer were they individuals who entered the “dark night”; God’s hiddenness gradually became a collective historical experience in many countries with a thousand-year-old Christian culture.

To understand Constantine’s dream one must understand the meaning of the cross: loss can be gain, and gain loss; victory can be defeat, and defeat victory; the cross and suffering can become *kairos*: the right or opportune moment.

Isn’t what some call “secularisation” and others “the death of God” – that dark night of God’s hiddenness – *kairos*, the opportune moment? And isn’t it as such a royal gift to the cradle of a new *kenotic* Christianity, *a space for a deeper*

*and more mature faith?* Do not faith and the church need, in a certain sense, to endure weakness, suffering and death, in order to experience resurrection and be a believable witness to Victory over death?

If the god who guarantees military victories and is a reliable ally of the powerful is really dead, if the Christianity as Europe's ideology is dead, need Europe and the church become a "mausoleum of the dead God", or could they become the Bethlehem of a new understanding of the gospel?

The history of Christianity and the history of the church, faith and theology, have not, are not and will not be a definite one-way highway of progress, but rather a drama of alternate decline and revival, of straying and return, a dynamic current of continual recontextualisations and reinterpretations of the message entrusted to them.

Perhaps the pontificate of Pope Francis will mark the beginning of a new chapter in the history of Christianity, a new reading of the gospel – the promise of an open, ecumenical Christianity for the planetary age. The present transition from one historical form of Christianity to another – like similar transitions in the past – could well involve crises, tension and conflicts, and the "gift of discernment of spirits" will probably be of greater need than ever.

The reforms of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Vatican Council would have been unthinkable without the efforts of the great theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It strikes me that the reforming pontificate of Pope Francis also urgently needs the support of the painstaking work of today's theologians; it needs a "new theology" of which an essential part will be "kairology" – the art of reading the signs of the times. In other words, a theological hermeneutic, a critical interpretation of contemporary culture, which is the context of our faith life.

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One of the evident signs of our times is the “return of religion”, expressed in the title of one popular book as “God is Back”.

But God is back in what form? The religion that is returning has surprised both the proponents of the secularisation theory and the representatives of traditional religions. It is returning in a form that is different from the religion that existed before the era of secularisation. Indeed even present-day fundamentalism, which swears by fidelity to tradition, is far from being “good old time religion”, but is a typically modern phenomenon, a modern reaction to modernity. Psychoanalysis has shown us that the displaced and suppressed content of our minds resurfaces from the subconscious in a different form. Likewise, religion, which was suppressed in modern times by the process of secularisation, is resurfacing in a new form. Rather than a return of religion, it would be more appropriate to speak of a transformation of religion.

At the present time this transformation takes three main forms: the transformation of religion into a political ideology, the transformation of religion into philosophical hermeneutics and phenomenology, and the transformation of religion into spirituality. Whereas the latter two transformations of religion chiefly concern western culture and would seem to vindicate the theory that the post-modern era is a post-secular one, the politicisation of religion is a global phenomenon.

In his 1991 bestseller “*La Revanche de Dieu*” (God’s Vengeance) Gilles Kepel noted that politicisation is not restricted to Islam but is the reaction of all three major monotheistic religions to the crisis of liberal democracy in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The entire cultural revolution of 1968 and the whole of the “second Enlightenment” of the 1960s were the culmination of the secularisation process in the West and also the end of modernity. The conservative wave of the 1970s coincided with beginning of the “post-modern era” and the deepening of the globalization process. The Czech philosopher Radim Palouš called 1969 (the

year that humans landed on the Moon and microprocessors were invented) as the symbolic beginning of the “global age”.

If we study the recent political awakening within Roman Catholic Christianity we discover that it is a multifaceted phenomenon full of contradictions. On the one hand there are the left-wing currents inspired by liberation theology, and on the other, conservative attempts in the spirit of the American evangelical Religious Right. But another aspect of the political involvement of Roman Catholics is the part played by them in human rights movements in communist countries and the important contribution made by the Catholic church to the peaceful transition of both left-wing and right-wing authoritarian regimes to democracy and civil society – in Spain, Chile, Argentina, Poland, the Philippines and many other countries.

Since the Enlightenment the relationship of religion to politics has been perceived chiefly as a relationship between the state and the church; the separation of state and church was regarded as the final ideal solution, protecting the freedom of civil society from the danger of church domination, and the freedom of the churches and religion from absolutist state power. Today’s situation is different, however. The nation states have lost their monopoly of politics and the churches have lost their monopoly of religion. The relationship between religion and politics needs to be considered afresh.

An interesting phenomenon is the use of religious language by secular politicians. It seems that in very dramatic political situations when emotions are extremely powerful, secular language is unable to express them, and politicians instinctively resort to religious concepts: the enemy is the Great Satan, its sphere of influence is “the Empire of Evil”, etc. The secular world underestimates, however, the potential energy that religious symbols conceal; religion can be a force for healing in international relations, but it can also become a weapon that transforms political conflicts into a destructive apocalyptic war between Good and Evil, first in people’s minds and then in political reality.

I ask myself whether the use of religious language for political phenomena and for political conflicts between different ethnic and interest groups is not one of the main reasons for religion's presence in politics nowadays. That would mean that instead of talking about the politicisation of religion we should be talking about the sacralisation of politics: the radicalisation of political conflicts through the power of religious symbols.

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I can only deal briefly with two other forms of the “return of religion”. Whereas up to about the middle of the last century any mention of God in academia was often looked upon rather like the mention of sex in Victorian society, in recent decades there is talk of a “religious turn” in post-modern philosophy. A major step away from traditional philosophy of religion and from theology cultivated within traditional metaphysics was when Paul Ricoeur made a distinction between first and second naïveté<sup>10</sup>: we cannot return, however, to the pre-modern world of a pre-critical relationship to religion; we must pass through the “desert” of rational criticism: “reconstruction”. Only then will a post-critical new relationship to religious symbols present itself to us – by means of interpretation.

In my own books I speak similarly about faith as the courage to enter the cloud of mystery, as the art of living with mystery, living in the midst of life's paradoxes and persevering in an open space of questions for which no answers will be found in this world. God often comes to us as a question – and there are questions that are so good that it's a pity to spoil them with answers. Unlike the impatient and superficial answers of dogmatic atheism, fundamental religion and

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<sup>10</sup> Even before Ricoeur, second naïveté was defined by Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911): “If we cannot live the lives of others with the original experience of them, we can, through interpretation, attain a second naïveté. It is through interpretation that we can see and hear again, that we can come to understand others and, thence, ourselves.”

fanatical religiosity, which amount to ways of “having done with God”, mature faith is patient in the face of mystery.

Let us move on to the third transformation of religion: the increasing emphasis on spirituality, particularly mysticism, as religious experience. The burgeoning interest in spirituality since the 1960s has been a reaction both to the cold rationality of technological civilization and to the spiritually insipid offerings of the Christian churches. The wave of syncretic linking of oriental mysticism and psychology termed “New Age” is on the decline and spirituality is seeking new paths. Among Christian thinkers are the most influential authors of spiritual literature like Thomas Merton, Henri Nouwen and Anselm Grün.

A theology drawing on the sources of Christian mysticism is capable of speaking to people beyond the churches’ visible borders. There are many people who could be described as “seekers”, who generally say of themselves that they don’t believe in religion but are spiritual people. Some of that group are former practising Christians who parted ways with churches (either having formally left a church or remaining in passive membership), but have not ceased to be “believers in their own way”. These people now constitute a diffuse church in the West, one that is possibly more numerous than the church of “practising Christians”. Pope Benedict has evidently realised that were church to identify solely with “practising Christians” and were it to concentrate on them alone, it would soon become a sect. That is why he has urged the church to do like the Jews did in the Temple of Jerusalem and open a “court of gentiles” for those who do not fully identify with the teachings and practices of the church, but nevertheless have an “ear for religion”.

Pope Francis’ pontificate would seem to be creating scope not only for “pious pagans” but also for “ex-Catholics”. In a sense the future of the church is the future of western civilisation and it largely depends on whether the church will realise that another task awaits it, in addition to pastoral care for disciplined

parishioners who have been termed “dwellers”, and in addition to classical missionary activity, namely: accompanying spiritual seekers in dialogue. This differs from classical missionary activity that seeks to bring “seekers” into the church and squeeze them into the existing institutional and intellectual boundaries of the church. Instead it seeks to extend those boundaries and enrich the treasury of the church with the experience of those “who don’t walk with us”.

A new ecclesiology should be based on Jesus’s firm response to the disciple’s wish for a monopoly of the truth: “Who is isn’t against us is for us”. A new ecclesiology should be kenotic in character and abandon any nostalgia for a “mass church”; it should abandon notions of the church as a sect creating a counter-culture against contemporary society, and also the model of a church that is uncritically conformist in its attitude to majority society. For the church to have an open door, Christians must have open minds. “New evangelisation” will only be truly new if it is preceded and accompanied by humble silence and attentive listening – the contemplative reading of the “signs of the times”.

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