

BEACONS IN THE FOG

THE SECULARISATION PROCESS AND THE INTERPLAY BETWEEN SECULAR AND RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCES

Víctor Pérez-Díaz

ASP Research Paper 125(b)/2022

Research Papers



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Introduction: a pentagonal schema of the religious experience as drama, questions, impulses, limits and community

I have written this essay as a kind of open and tentative exploration in an attempt to stimulate a conversation. As if seeking light through a sea of fog, while thinking about religion insofar as it is *lived* religion, as a shared experience. And to consider that what we share is not only an interpretative framework but a way of being in the world. A way that is complex because it means being in the world yet not being entirely part of it - and thus, with that in-built tension, trying to construct a sort of community within the changing, fleeting context of each historical moment.¹

I interpret this moment (with reference to Western civilisation) as one of ambiguity: a time of crisis of the religious experience but one that is also conducive to its development. In so doing, I distance myself from those who see it caught up within a process of growing secularisation. I understand this process rather as one that is contingent: an open drama made up of convergences and divergences between religious culture and secular culture. Today the drama that confronts us is largely one with the attributes of a problematical order, institutional drift and intense socio-cultural anxiety. It is a situation which may continue indefinitely but, in the meantime, it does follow a course from which we can learn.

I suggest that the indecisive nature of this ongoing process and the persistence or, if you like, the resilience of the religious experience across space and time, can best be understood in the light of a singular interpretative framework of the human situation, by means of which religions have tended to offer a fairly persuasive answer to the demands for meaning of our species in its different avatars. This interpretative framework is based on a simple heuristic that many people from very different cultures and conditions have been able to share and, as a result, that has enabled them to communicate about their corresponding experiences.

It is what we might call a pentagonal schema of the human situation with five key terms or points of reference. I summarise these as: (1) a vision of life and history as an open *drama*, before a relatively indeterminate audience of witnesses; a drama whose development depends largely on the relatively free decisions that we choose to make. This leads to (2) some *questions* about the meaning of such decisions, including the ultimate questions about the meaning of a life meant to last, and of death; (3) an ascensional *impulse* that includes the attempt to bring some order to the world (consistent with the answers to those questions), or at least to contain the disorder, which entails the tension between being in the world but not being entirely part of it; (4) a *sense of limits*, including those of our own ability to answer those questions, and thus to be able to understand and bring that order to the world, which refers to some kind of a search for help. (5) All of the above (drama, questions, impulse and a sense of limits) experienced by people in society, not as an aggregate of isolated individuals but (with more or less distance between them) as part of a network of interactions, feelings, beliefs and interests, in other words, as part of a *community* or of a network of communities.

Based on the above, I suggest that religious experiences can help to enlighten agents in order for them to make their choice and play their role in the ongoing drama. In this paper I focus on the role of impulses and limits. I assume that the dramatic choice requires both the right impulse and the sense of reality of knowing our own limits. This involves a choice to either sit back and let go, or do something to bring order to the world right now. Resolved to make that choice of being in the world in one way or the other, and of giving one answer or the other to the questions, I shall put forward a re-reading

¹This essay is an addition to a long series of works with a greater or lesser input of empirical material. See Pérez-Díaz (1987, 1991, 1993, 1997, 1999, 2008, 2013), Pérez-Díaz *et al.* (2013) and Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez (2021).

of a few historical experiences.

From today's perspective, I seek examples of specific experiences drawn from the past, within different contexts. Although these do not indicate any significant trend that we can adhere to, nor a logic of history that we can adopt, they can, on the other hand, give us clues about our own uncertain times. Clues provided by the convergences and divergences between religious culture and secular culture.

A caveat is in order: we cannot aspire to untangle a logic of history with such clues, in the same way that it would be presumptuous to try and guess a divine reason - it is rather a question of "doing what one can", as Philip Neri used to suggest. Indeed, although we like to turn to explanations and justifications with which to identify an apparent reason of history within the context of major trends in progress, we humans are almost always feeling our way blindly forward. This does not, however, prevent us from using different experiences as heuristics, which provide us with support and inspiration - like intermittent flashes. Beacons in the fog.

1. Secularisation as an open drama, and the keys to religious resilience

1.1. Drama and resilience

Phenomena such as the process of secularisation should be discussed with caution. It is a topic that should be relativised rather than being taken for granted, as is done by those who, believing that they are observing a trend, consider it to be an unquestionable fact; in reality, it is an open, complex and contradictory process: a drama with many possible outcomes and many avatars ahead.²

I should state that the situation is very different in "modern and advanced" Western societies compared to the rest of the world. In the former, it is true that there has been an increase in secularism which has led to marginalisation of the religious experience in the public space.³ This has been going on for some hundred or two hundred years - or perhaps longer, if we narrow it down to the "select and enlightened" minorities of those societies. It is clear that they have continued to expand their area of influence - but within limits. Limits that result from the fact that the world comprises far more than the West; and that, even in the West, the situation is more complicated.

The case of the United States, for example, which is generally seen as the most advanced society in the world, casts doubt on the inexorable advance of the secularisation process.⁴ This is not only because there is a large minority of religious people who are committed and practicing believers as well as a significant, though contested, presence of religious symbolisms and rituals in the public space. It is because, in addition, when that society is considered *as a whole*, what can be observed is an abundance of soft-line or undecided attitudes held by people who are not secularised so much as having mixed feelings. They combine, in different stages of their lives, religious enthusiasms with a wide variety of civic enthusiasms.

In present-day Spain, which we can use as an example of how this argument applies to a large part of Europe, surveys usually show (see, for example, Pérez-Díaz and Rodríguez, 2021) that, even if we look closely at the broad sector of those who identify themselves as non-practicing or lukewarm Catholics,

²See Gauchet (1985) and Casanova (2021).

³I shall not discuss here the possibility of interpreting variants of modern secularism as religious simulacra - to which I have referred in an essay that is complementary to, and in parallel with, this one (Pérez-Díaz, 2013).

⁴See Putnam and Campbell (2012) and Campbell (2020).

many of them provide evidence of ambiguous experiences. Although their participation in rites of passage is low, even those lukewarm or non-practitioners turn to meditations and rituals in extreme situations: times of loneliness or illness, and the death of loved ones or the approach of their own. Moments that are unavoidable, almost impossible to forget and all too frequent. These people say that they have little faith in the Church as an institution, but their distrust (as regards a Church probably understood in terms of hierarchy and clergy) does not tend to be greater than their distrust of the political, economic or media élites - perhaps because they distrust human élites to a greater extent than divine figures. Incidentally, they claim to have a high regard for the social work of the Church, its charitable works and its fight for justice. This appreciation may be related to broader considerations. Thus, for example, those who take for granted, and make no objection to the fact, that they live in a society “with Christian religious roots and values” tend to be in the majority. This does not, however, imply that they accept interventions by the Church (the hierarchy or the clergy...) in politics, without first using their own judgement.⁵

In short, we are talking about limited degrees of articulation and coherence, about doubts and nuances, and about variants of a *modus vivendi* - which, moreover, may evolve in one direction or in another, and tends to be light years away from being part of an unambiguous process or subject to a dominant tendency.

At all events, it is important to bear in mind that, apart from the West, there remains a “rest of the world”. A rather numerous “rest” - that perhaps deserves to be identified as “Rest” with a capital letter. The fact is that, if we round up the figures and calculate the world population as being some 8,000 million individuals, the “Rest” would include, say, “only” some 7,000 million. Who are probably not secularised. That seems a lot. Above all if they are compared with the, say, tens of millions who are confirmed secularists.

The keys to religious resilience and the five-point schema

If we consider that, nowadays, we find ourselves in the middle of a process of secularisation that questions the religious experience (though not overly much), and which we should treat as an open drama, this must lead us to assess the reasons for the persistence of an experience that is so alive, so widespread and so enduring over time. As I have indicated above, I believe that, in general terms, the religious experience has been and continues to be perceived as providing an interpretative framework and a way of being in the world that constitute a plausible response to a demand for meaning on the part of society.

This is due to the combination of the various factors already mentioned, and I shall highlight, briefly, the inter-connections between them. (1) The human experience, if understood as a continuous drama or a contingent process, entails an (explicit or implicit) option of taking one path or another through the wood. (2) It may be the right path or the wrong one, good or bad, which then leads one to ask questions about the meaning of the itinerary. Then comes the consequent attempt to answer these questions or to learn to live with them, as opposed to the *aspernatio rationis* [contempt of reason] that does not even recognise their existence (Voegelin, 2002 [1966]) and avoids or denies them entirely. These questions include the “ultimate questions” on the meaning of life and death: we can give them a full response or we can just live with them.

⁵A complex but quite traditional attitude which was relatively widespread, for example, among the Castilian peasants of the last century who were “old Christians” and accustomed to “holding the priest at arm's length” (Pérez-Díaz, 1971).

(3) The ascensional impulse, that Bachelard (2001 [1943]) applied to the world of aesthetics or (in other words) to the realm of the sublime, is already implicit, in its bolding and as a choice, in the *sapere aude* [dare to know] concomitant with formulating the ultimate questions. It is an attempt to understand, and to love, and to bring (some measure of) order to the world - which may involve remaining in it, returning to it, or simply enduring. In any event, it is an attitude opposed to the inertia of those who sit back and let go, who “keep blundering on”, presumably to nowhere.

(4) The sense of limits, as opposed to *hubris*, would balance out and reinforce that impulse, and would endow it with a degree of realism: of recognition of the resistance of a reality that we rather encounter than create - the limits, in fact, of our own human capacity for understanding and for love.

And all of this together with (5) the corollary of all these factors, which is the immersion of each and every one of the actors involved in that drama in a context of inter-related agents who fight and/or cooperate among themselves. It is where, the encounter with (and the appeal to) “others” takes place; including that “other” who is usually some kind of divinity (in monotheistic, henotheistic or polytheistic form...) - and some or many others who surround the divinity. In Christian culture, for example, these may be prophets and disciples, the faithful and the clergy organised into parishes, and religious orders or other diverse structures, saints and heretics, angels and devils, etc. They include neighbours and those close to us as well as strangers - who accompany us and share with us that dramatic, impulsive, questioning destiny, conscious (at times, only to some extent) of their limits. These “other” and “others” who answer, or help to answer, those questions; who can strengthen our impulse; and compensate for our limitations when it comes to imposing cognitive, moral and emotional order (or holding back disorder) by means of the production and reproduction of a certain kind of community.

1.2. The current historical moment: crisis, drift, a challenge, an opportunity

Doubts have been cast on the resilience of the religious experience throughout the modern and contemporary age. A complex society seemed to emerge with growing institutional differentiation, the evolution of whose economy, politics and social and cultural structures responded to the interplay of certain factors with the religious experience playing an increasingly marginal role.

The economic system had followed, *grosso modo*, its own logic: one of an “extended order” based on the search for private gain, that in fact underlies a “creative disorder”, with attempts made to readjust this over and over again. Something analogous could be said of the political system, where the will for domination would be curbed by the balances of power. These balances *sui generis* “channel” the will for domination of all sides, leading to a *modus vivendi* after the requisite pacts are agreed (post-Westphalia, post-Utrecht, post-Congress of Vienna, post-Versailles, post-Yalta...), whose effects generally last for a few generations. The societies of the time would become quite fragmented, and all the different social identities would fight ceaselessly to prove themselves valuable on their own terms. Lastly, the many voices of a perpetual cultural debate would swing between more or less successful attempts at the indoctrination of others, and provisional consensuses.

This would amount to a kind of Heraclitean system of changes, and perhaps progress through conflict: of big and small fights being played out *ad nauseam* in pursuit of a triumph that would always have to be reaffirmed. With the societies involved in that process adopting a variant of the concept of “a city upon a hill” or, in other words, of cities/societies leading/lighting up the world. It was an expression that contained mixed motives and, in the long run, the dominant one was of a secular nature with religion playing a rather ancillary role. But the fact is that, eventually, it led to the dubious kind of

progress of complete catastrophes - such as the great carnage of the twentieth century that carried to its limits the centuries old impulse for total war underlying a long series of tensions, European civil wars and colonial adventures on a global scale, *urbi et orbi*, of previous centuries.

To some extent, such a result could have been seen as an extreme disorder waiting to happen. As if it were perhaps implicit in the complex *modus vivendi* of a market economy and a class society, clientelist networks and sundry oligarchies. In the version of eighteenth-century England, or the version of revolutionary-Bonapartist France between 1789 and 1815. These were enlightened, civil experiences that did, nevertheless, contribute greatly to unleashing a whirlwind of conflicts of all kinds. They evoke the symbolism of the words uttered by Prospero (in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*), adapted by the young Marx of the 1840s (in the *Communist Manifesto*; Berman, 2010) - "all that is solid melts into air". And which resurfaces as part of the intrahistory of anguish and suffering of nineteenth-century *fin-de siècle* culture (an intrahistory repeated several times over the past century and a half) - not to mention the subsequent horrors of total war and totalitarian states.

The last half century

After a rather reassuring experience of peace and prosperity and democratic expansion in large parts of the world, that mix of order and disorder is experiencing a new mutation, with the headlong rush towards globalisation, unstable governance, fragmented societies, a confused public space and a culture of permanent innovation - innovation which, by the way, is put forward as the key to human experience while it is not understood that the very suggestion of the culture of innovation as a categorical imperative is, in reality, a demand for continuous adaptation to ongoing changes and thus it constitutes a revealing feature of its true nature as a culture of imitation.

So, let us focus on the "here and now" of "our time" - of the last half century, straddling the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, since the Soviet implosion and the conversion of China to the principle of "socialism is the market". A period that has been considered an end to history, but may well signal the very end of the academic fantasy of the end of history.

But we are talking not of a logic of history but of an open drama. So maybe we are just facing a disconcerting world in which alarm bells are ringing, and warning signs are being detected that indicate a drift towards disorder of middling to high intensity. So, the world is adrift.

It is a world that may be defined by what perhaps it is *trying* to be but *not* what it is. It is not "a home", in spite of its many, undeniable advances, which are emphasised, with a wealth of data and plausible reasons, by many (for example, Pinker, 2018). Data about basic issues concerning the way of life of all kinds of peoples throughout the world - and, in particular, those classes categorised as subordinate or inferior - at least if one compares their situation with that of a hundred or two hundred years ago, for example. There are improvements across the board in life expectancy, (nutrition, hygiene, healthcare) literacy... As the old saying goes, as the sea level has risen, so all the boats have risen with it. This is true up to a point and yet... There are many people who seem to be further than ever from seeing their world as their home - a home that is both a point of departure and one of return. It is no longer even an open, but accommodating, space for the wandering of nomads, who return time and again to their familiar surroundings: bands of shepherds migrating with their flocks, crop pickers, itinerant artisans, wandering poets - *jaimas* [tents] in the desert. Instead, it has become a confusing, changing and uncontrollable space that they acknowledge, deep down (in their heart of hearts) as quite incomprehensible.

This situation can be seen as the result of the confluence of four processes (1) an economic globalisation that largely overwhelms and confuses the immense majority of society, causing precarious employment and placing substantial numbers of people in subservient positions; (2) governance that is generally shared out among party-political and bureaucratic establishments that are quite inaccessible and embroiled in distant geopolitical manoeuvres; and with the questionable counterpoint of “mass” or “populist” social movements that generally end up channelled and subordinated to some oligarchy or other in due time; (3) some societies that are quite distant, indifferent or suspicious of one other, fragmented from within, and with very powerful currents of polarisation and atomisation; and (4) a fast-paced, confused and superficial culture spearheaded by futurist but heedless cultural élites. It all adds up to a very noisy public debate liable to cause a kind of bi-polar disorder in many who feel themselves, in turn, either impotent or omnipotent... and “sovereign”. “Sovereign” as citizens and consumers, and as masters of a virtual space (their mobile phone, computer or TV...). Do they dream of being omnipotent and wake up impotent and underpaid? With knowledge that quickly becomes obsolete? Full of “businessmen without a (real) business”?

There is no need to “predict” (or “prophesy”) that the world, or the West, or Europe, or Spain... will “necessarily” continue in that direction “to the bitter end” - that will become clear. It is not that disorder “will prevail” or that it is an “inescapable necessity” - in fact, it is obvious that my whole argument is decidedly indeterministic. However, for the purposes of this discussion, I suggest that there is a semi-acknowledged perception quite widespread in society that the probability that we are already approaching the edge of such an abyss, even if we have not yet begun to fall into it is about 50/50. I would also suggest that provision should be made for a change in that ratio, at any time and with little prior warning, to 60/40, and that any such change could become the trigger of an acute general crisis...towards 90/10. A crisis in which the narcissistic-Cainite obstinacy of some would combine with the lack of commitment of others to cause disaster. It conjures up the words of Yeats (1920) about the end of innocence because “The best lack all conviction, while the worst /Are full of passionate intensity” - leading to the ensuing Shakespearian outcome of all that is solid melts into air. Words that were recited, and listened to, back in Yeats' own time, against the backdrop of the first Great War which, combined with a false peace, led to the two totalitarianisms of the twentieth century, another world war, and an endless string of other minor wars.

However, could this crisis be propitious for the religious experience?

It could be propitious insofar as: (1) The sensation of drama increases. (2) The questions remain hanging in the air. The current disorder foments dissatisfaction with the responses from political leaders, the élites in power and the media apparatus and their platitudes. Everyday life becomes suspect. Questions remain unanswered even as they are formulated with rising anxiety. (3) The impulse wanes. Mere action resolves little; energy is squandered; idleness and inertia can overcome the spirit. The ascensional impulse is lost. (4) The limits become more obvious. The situation highlights the limits of what was believed to be a path of indefinite progress, based on what society as a whole knows and can do. The Prometheism dominant at certain times in the recent past now appears to be unsustainable, and a realistic look at what is truly known and actually possible seems long overdue. (5) It becomes clear that the cooperation of the “others” is increasingly necessary, to begin with their respect for the common rules that would guarantee co-existence.

In short, the crisis would raise the demand for those forms of religiosity that are defined by the five-point schema of life as drama, the ultimate questions, and the ascensional impulse (if only to escape from the shipwreck, the maelstrom... of Poe) combined with a sense of the limits (we would be

witnessing a society chastened by the current crisis and the clumsy way in which it has been handled), and with care in the relationships with the others.

2. Beacons in the fog: seeking to learn from testimonies from the past of limits and impulses

I shall now explore the possibility of the spread and reinforcement of religious experiences in the light of certain historical testimonies, following the path of some who shine like beacons from the past. To do this, I shall concentrate on two of the five key points in the schema as regards the agents: those of their limits and impulses. Firstly, the limits of the moral character of the agents and, in particular, of the character of (the many, almost all of) those who are understood to be “really rather average” or, in other words, “generally deserving of Purgatory”, which may have served to foster the development of modern civil society. Secondly, the importance of the ascensional impulse, both moral and emotional, which can be summarised as the “sublimity of feeling”, with contemporary examples, which has served to advance the agenda of reforms of this kind of society.

2.1. Limits: the (re)discovery of the medieval Purgatory, and the importance of “people who are neither (so) good nor (so) bad but just average” in a civil society

As we know, the Greek *polis* did not last very long and “eternal Rome” turned out to be less enduring than anticipated, partly for reasons to do with natural phenomena, plagues such as the Antonine Plague and others, as well as an economic quasi-stagnation for centuries and foreign aggression but partly, and crucially, due to internal political, social and cultural shortcomings that neither the republic nor the empire knew how to overcome. The élites were not as far-sighted as they believed themselves to be, with or without the help of their gods, and neither were ordinary citizens. Their greatest monuments became the astonishing ruins that we gaze upon today.

It is not hard to assume that they should have been more conscious of their limits. A sense of limits that should have resulted from remembering, alongside their successes, the mistakes that were committed by them all including, of course, the religious actors of the time. Mistakes committed not just once or twice but doggedly over centuries and millennia. Neither is it hard to understand, because they were human beings with their limitations and therefore (more often than not) neither (so) good nor (so) bad but simply average. So they needed to have a more realistic (true) vision of the human condition, and a better sense of its limits.

It is conceivable that such a vision was consolidated in Europe at the start of the second millennium, in connection with, and influenced by, the socio-cultural construction of the imaginary of Purgatory. This facilitated substitution of the binary schema of “the good and the bad” for a more complex interpretative framework of (1) the “good” (exemplary, and deserving of Heaven from the Day of Judgement), (2) a broad spectrum of the “average”, grouping together the “imperfect good” and the “not-wholly-bad”, for whom Purgatory offers a temporary refuge, and (3) the “bad” who are “downright wicked” and heading straight for Hell. These were the distinctions put about by the Victorines of the eleventh and twelfth centuries, and especially by Hugh of Saint-Victor (Le Goff, 1981). In contrast to that, the enlightenment tendency (not that of baroque culture) towards simplistic, polarising, binary frameworks, such as the antagonism between darkness and light, is quite striking. It was perhaps a regression to pre-mediaeval times, to the esoteric and emotional cults, including Manichaeism, of the Late Roman Empire.

To understand the emergence and spread of the idea of Purgatory, we must take into account the difficulties experienced by Christianity in the early centuries of its dealings with the world around it,

and its attempts to survive within it. It had to function within a bewildering economic and political system. And if the Romans were unsure of the direction in which they were heading, one has to admit that Christians had no more idea either: many were waiting for the Parousia at the end of time. Although the early centuries of persecutions were deeply distressing, the execution of the great designs of Constantine and Theodosius was also full of unresolved questions.

From the outset, the way in which Jesus treated the common people (not only his own disciples but other actors of every kind, including his opponents) indicates the patient, compassionate attitude of one who anticipates their misconceptions and failures when it comes to dealing with the world around them. And frequently, as the occasion offered, he would shape his rhetoric for that reason. We should not forget how Jesus responded to the Pharisees who tempted him: "Render unto Caesar that which is Caesar's...". Enigmatic words because it remained to be seen what, exactly, *was* Caesar's. He avoided the trap but hit back with an answer that was a question. As if saying "try and live with that question and answer it as best you can, trusting in me, but you will see what that may be and how to do it in every moment. It is your business and your responsibility. It will take you time and, also, through prayer, discretion...". The irony of the situation is that the actual object causing the argument was a coin, suggesting that what was at stake was politics and the economy *combined*. To which one could add the biblical reference to "through the eye of a needle": as if wealth, or success in business, for example, and salvation were incompatible; and this was as a matter of common sense as it applied to a humble life, tied to the soil, to the land - a means of answering the basic questions of Jesus' own putative father, who was artisan, carpenter, a maker of tables and a seller of ploughs - private property and markets, so to speak... And Jesus, it is supposed, was a carpenter until he was thirty years old. "Be like me". Not meaning for all of them to be carpenters, of course, but for almost all to be artisans, workers, farmers, traders...

Brown (2012) reminds us of the complex transformation that occurred among the early or second-generation Christians who, over time, ceased to be the dispossessed and became the prosperous middle classes. He proposes some of the ways in which they could legitimise their wealth in religious terms. By making good use of it, for example, in donations to the poor and especially to the Church which, in its turn, used the funds to remedy the poverty of the lowly. This ultimately led to the Church acquiring a prominent position of power and civic responsibility as the empire began to collapse. The rich, in turn, would be compensated for this practice of donations by the promise of justification and salvation in the next life. Parallel "realist" transformations took place in politics - such as the pact with the empire, i.e., an alliance between Church and State, which was forged with Constantine and Theodosius. This removed the existential threat of the further persecution of Christians from time to time. However, it also led to the temptation to use imperial power to impose the True Faith by means of indoctrination and, later, by violence - culminating in the practices of the Inquisition which, set up at the close of the twelfth century, continued in operation until the early nineteenth century.

Average people and their role in the formation of modern civil society

After the disastrous wars of religion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, civil wars, considered by Pascal to be "the worst of all evils" (Pascal, 1950 [1658-1661]: fragment 313), he experienced a moment of clarity and passion about his Hidden God which led him to propose his Wager on what would be both the hope of eternal life and the opportunity for a discreet, prudent and rational life - as a means of avoiding further civil wars and advocating... a civil peace, a "civil society" of sorts (before the concept was redefined by the Scottish moral and political philosophers).

Baroque culture and the moralists of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries exemplify the chiaroscuro of a society⁶ that, while extolling a liberality of achievements and a return to classical beauty, indulged in vicious religious and political wars. European civil wars of all kinds. Acts of cruelty and campaigns of indoctrination were carried out against a background of intense violence which, to put it another way, was a scenario ripe for the unfolding of a drama among peoples who were, in the best of cases, rather “average”.

Although, strictly speaking, it could also be interpreted as a scenario that promotes the process by which the model of a “civil society” started to emerge as a complex institutional framework.⁷ That is, a social order that includes a state with a representative apparatus and with a public space open to more or less general participation, a market economy, a society of social classes that can foster a certain social mobility, and with a plural associative fabric and a culture of mutual tolerance and civic participation. It is the kind of society that encourages the spread of a moral culture that believes that “enlightened” self-interest is paramount - bearing in mind the negative freedom of “my home is my castle”, private property, the state that guarantees physical safety and freedom of movement of peoples, and a working market economy.

This is not an order planned for saints, or citizens devoted to a common good, or friends engaged in friendly conversation, or people who are, above all, charitable and altruistic. And, although it promotes a kind of *Minima Moralia* that supplements the main focus on oneself with a certain amount of consideration for others (a consideration all the greater when those others are more closely connected, and with more compatible interests), the central characters in the drama are those “typically average people” who largely go about their own business.

This model came to be accepted as a *plausible* model or, in other words, one that though ideal was also actually possible, by a substantial part of Western thought over the last three centuries. It is conveyed in the writings, for example, of the Scotsmen Adam Smith and Adam Ferguson at the end of the eighteenth century. The model has always allowed for very different variations, interpretations and realisations. It includes one variant which is the development of a culture that contrasts with a culture of supposedly enlightened self-interest, emphasising a community dimension connected, in turn, with a plural associative fabric (and social and family networks).

What is clear is that, in recent centuries, that community dimension has played a subordinate role. And that, as we progress from the baroque age of the seventeenth century to the Age of Enlightenment, we see how society enters a “bourgeois order” of powerful markets and industrial revolution, of representative governments, of a culture that exalts reason, and of the self-affirmation of Faustian spirits (or those most able to survive)... What is offered to the public is.... an ambiguous recitation of the vicissitudes not of a divine comedy but of a “human comedy”, in which ambition reigns supreme and culminates in Rastignac's challenge “à nous deux, maintenant!” [it's between you and me now] to Paris, at the end of *Père Goriot* (Balzac, 1969 [1835]). It is a cry from the profoundly critical perspective of an author who simultaneously acknowledges and distances himself from what he sees, a mixture of order and disorder. Perhaps above all, he sees himself as witness to growing disorder, which he regards with consternation.

⁶And the chiaroscuro of the moral character of its agents (von Balthasar, 2004).

⁷On different levels of the meaning of civil society, see Pérez-Díaz (2014).

2.2. Impulses: “sublimity of feeling” and some elective affinities between romantic positivists and contemporary Christians (Giacomo Leopardi, Luigi Giussani, and others)

Relying on average people to be the cornerstone of the social order to which we should aspire, has its own limits. Their impulse may fall short. Those average people may be the “lukewarm ones” about whom Jesus is believed to have said “I will spit you out of my mouth” (Apocalypse, 3:15). Even worse, they may be the ones who play a double game of order and disorder, of good and evil; those whom Dante finds at the entrance to hell, who are “neither of God nor of the devil, but who pursue only their self-interest”; and to whom Virgil advises him to pay no attention: *guarda e passa*, [look and pass on] (Inferno III, 65-69).

The denunciation of half-heartedness is explained because the resilience of the religious experience and of the project of constructing world order need a greater impulse. Because, although it is true that there will always be the ultimate questions that appear difficult, if not impossible, to answer, it is also true that there will always be something that can be done about them. An example of this is the existence of evil (the accumulation of disorder) even in the presence of divine omnipotence - leading to the problematic predicament of a Job, resigned or not, who accepts God's grace which, deep down, seems as incomprehensible to him as the disgrace which preceded it (Gómez Marín, 2021). One way or the other, what remains unresolved is what to do about that “absence of good” (or, as common sense tells people, the presence of evil). Here we find the possibility of a fight against evil that could be a way of saying a fight in favour of a benevolent order of peace, friendship, truth, beauty, being. In modern times, this task is usually carried out for a number of motives that are both religious and non-religious. Although these are sometimes in conflict, they may also converge and provide mutual reinforcement.

A very brief example of this is the Italian poet of the *Risorgimento*, Giacomo Leopardi. On the one hand, he was a zealous defender of an interpretation of the world that made him view it as hurtling towards nothingness, and of the human being as condemned to unhappiness. On the other hand, however, in the very act of affirming these things, by his way of affirming them and within the emotional context of that affirmation, his words say the opposite. They are an affirmation of life, of love of life, and of participation, sudden and immediate, in the fullness of being. His strange alter ego, the “wild cock”, sings the story of an adventure that leads to death and unhappiness; but it also affirms the relevance and the possibility that, at least, there is a time early in the day and early in life in which happiness can not only be envisioned but it can be lived intensely. “*In sullo svegliarsi ritrovano nella loro mente pensieri dilettoni et lieti*” [When they awake, find again in their minds delightful and joyful thoughts] (Leopardi, 2021 [1924]). A magical moment, so to speak, that reveals the essential fact that moments of happiness like that “*se ne producono e formano di presente*”... [are produced and formed in the present]. But that present should be understood as a continuous present: it is renewed regardless, from moment to moment. And it is enriched by the encounter with the other: giving rise to the “sublime” moment of the encounter, or the imminence of a new encounter, or the memory of the previous encounter, with one's beloved.

Leopardi's poems express his ascensional impulse, his bid for love, which the very melancholy that results from his desire for truth justifies. A longing to live, devotion to the land, glorious memories, nostalgia for an ancient Italy and a renewed Italy - all united in an attempt at clarity. In that poetry, a Christian like Luigi Giussani found a personal and intellectual religious reference - one hundred years later and in an Italy that was no longer engaged in the complexities of a process of unification achieved largely by a stroke of luck, but in those of the fight for survival, and of dealing with the memories and confused desires of the First World War, Fascism, the Second World War, and the baroque games of

the postwar. He used that reference when he came to found the *Comunione e Liberazione* [Communion and Liberation] movement which was, largely, a sustained attempt to reclaim, attract and respond to the Italian and European youth movements of those tumultuous years of the 1950s and 1960s, and what he considered their demands for meaning and feeling (Savorana, 2015).

Giussani sees in Leopardi an essential reference for his own divine and human adventure to bring order to the world, which means achieving its best possible manifestation, and for a union with God. He espouses the Christian claim of being the answer to the longing that underlies mankind's ultimate questions. In particular, he believes that he can achieve this from his project of love - of love and identification with the woman beloved. A project that finds cause for both restlessness and peace, at the same time, in the endless and abrupt, substantial and transitional nature of that experience of love. Delving deep into the experience of what he calls the sublimity of his feeling (Giussani, 2001; Savorana, 2015). In contrast to the mediocrity of feeling... of a large number of the characters in Balzac's triumphant Paris.

According to Giussani's reading, worldly triumph is petty, the reflection of a trivial and self-indulgent egotism lacking in aspiration. Without *élan vital* [vital force]. While intense love craves eternity, the simple desire for "this and that", satisfaction of the desire for money, power, prestige, conspicuous consumption, the settling of scores or fleeting success... seems so ephemeral. It is perhaps enough for the satisfaction of elemental or basic needs, important in and through their own humility, but, on balance, they are worth little. It would be different if they were applied to the encounter with a reality too immense for anyone to have been able to invent or create it themselves. This reality - in this case, Jesus *cum* a community of true friendship - welcomes you and protects you. And then the loving rapture is sustained. This would be so both for Leopardi, the atheist poet, and for Giussani, the committed Christian who appeals to his flock to prepare specifically for that encounter, that adventure, that project for a unique kind of order of peace, and of conversation, and of diversity.

In short, Giussani's bid for the sublime both responds to and contrasts with (and, to some extent, extends) the vision of the sublime that Rilke proposes in his verses: "the sublime is a separation / something of ourselves that / instead of following us separates / and lives in the heavens" (Rilke, 1959 [1906-1909]: 79); although, for Giussani, the sublime is clearly not the moment of separation but of encounter, and perhaps of the recuperation of something that is the object of nostalgia, nostalgia for the fullness of being, which we have never fully relinquished.

We can find experiences that are analogous to those of Leopardi, from the first half of the nineteenth century, and Giussani, in the middle of the twentieth century: experiences of relative convergences and affinities between different ways of feeling. They can be found in the long and continuous tradition of the romantic positivists, for example, who were devotees of science and interested in experiences and experiments, but who combined all that with a moral outlook that made them faithful to a project and to the hope of what they understood as a better humanity. Their narratives, or arguments, may be more or less persuasive but their testimony to life is unequivocal. Let's consider, for example, the testimony of a thinker like Pierre Curie when he writes to Marie Skłodowska at the crucial moment when he is trying to define his relationship with her. He reminds her of the *raison d'être* for his loving commitment, and the fundamental moral sentiments on which that commitment is forged and acquires full meaning. He says that it is a love bound up with a shared scientific passion, whose essential nature is, in turn, intimately linked to the fact of sharing other, very important feelings: a patriotic devotion and a humanitarian passion. In Marie, we see the passions appropriate to a young woman of the Polish professional middle class, coming from a family of the *drobna szlachta*, the minor nobility, which had suffered the consequences, devastating to so many Polish people, of

the partition and serious risk of the disappearance of the Polish nation. In Pierre, we see those of a man from a milieu of educated, enlightened professionals desirous of a social justice which they see becoming more remote due to the authoritarian drift and the victory of various modalities of “parties of order” in the France of the second half of the nineteenth century - and also those of sympathisers with the Communards (Quinn, 2011).

What is it that produces the definitive impulse for the scientific passion of Pierre? And which he takes for granted drives Marie? It is the argument that their capacity for doing good for humanity is virtually nil in an uncontrollable political world - doomed to come up against countless obstacles - whereas it is substantially greater on the far more solid foundation of science. Because politics, with all the paraphernalia of its exhibitions of power is, ultimately, at least insofar as bettering the world is concerned, on an infinitely shakier foundation than science.

Other testimonies that are variations of this attitude can be found, for example, in the recent revival (although, strictly speaking, these have occurred throughout the entire history of the Church) of the “Benedict option” (Dreher, 2018), which contrasts the islands of a religiosity lived in community with the turbulent seas of a chaotic world. Committed and distant, community members are citizens of the city of the world and nomads of the wide-open spaces, looking up at the sky, and listening to today's equivalent of the music of the spheres of the ancient Romans. To some extent, these communities are not so different from the laboratory of Pierre and Marie Curie. This is not an attempt to return to the situation of St. Benedict and the sixth century, as if by so doing we could retreat from the present. We would continue to be in the here and now of the twenty-first century; but that Roman soldier who became a monk continues to challenge us as if he were still alive today. With his *ora et labora* [pray and work] - his combination of willpower and submission to Divine Will. With his indirect strategy of the creation of a micro-social order as testimony and reflection of the macro-social order, which was to be built, dismantled and rebuilt in its own mysterious way. As if it were a constantly renewed beginning.

However, such a beginning is not without its hint of irony, which suggests that there are grounds for additional humility. Ultimately, it would be a question of regaining *all* of history, all “the time lost” from the beginning to the end. Time for celebration, and time for repentance. So that while this task points a way to a path of better understanding and care, it is a task rather impossible to fully realize, given our limits.

In any case, it would have to be recognised that Christians had been and would continue to be jointly responsible for a world created by everyone, including themselves, century after century. It would mean, from the outset, drawing attention to what was done by them from positions of authority, from their earliest incursions into the sphere of control of the political space, with Constantine and Theodosius, during the fourth century. Of understanding the circumstances, in view of the mutual inculturation and adaptation caused by the Christianisation of the Roman and Romanised middle classes throughout the third and subsequent centuries (Brown, 2012); which was followed by processes of repeated accommodation at different times, in different places and in relation to different peoples. A testimony to the capacity for hybridisation of the religious experience, and of the incorporation *sui generis* of every kind of experience.

Such experiences remind us that, if religious people have been and continue to be witnesses to their religiosity, they also continue to be witnesses, and jointly responsible, for the world as it is today - with its share of order and disorder - and jointly responsible for what they do - what we all do - with it.

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