

“BEYOND SECULAR REASON”
Some Contemporary Challenges for the Life and the Thought of the Church,
as Seen from the West.

A talk given in the presence of Metropolita Filaret (Vachromeev), de Minsk, at the occasion of the Conference organized by the Foundation “Russia Cristiana”, of Seriate, Bergamo (Italy), together with the Synodal Theological Commission of the Moscow Patriarchate, on the topic: “Orthodox Theology and the West in the XXth Century. History of a Meeting”, on the 30th-31th October 2004.

Javier Martínez
Archbishop of Granada.

Your Grace:
Dear friends:
Ladies and gentlemen:

I probably do not need to emphasize what a great blessing it is for me to be here today as a participant in this meeting which, a mere fifteen years ago, would have been unthinkable. The Foundation “Russia Christiana”, which for so long now has had a tradition of fostering among us the friendship proper to the disciples of Christ, and the Theological Synodal Commission of the Moscow Patriarchate have gathered us, Russian Orthodox and Roman Catholics, to reflect together and to give thanks for an encounter, so promising for the Church and for the life of the world, that has taken place by the mercy of Our Lord in the aftermath of great difficulties throughout the 20th century.

I personally rejoice to have this opportunity, your Grace, to pay homage, in your person, to a beloved sister Church. Circumstances did not allow us Christians of Spain to know this Church directly during so many years of silent suffering and martyrdom. But even through the knowledge we could have--limited as it was to the sacred beauty of some of her icons, and to a few literary or musical texts, such as the *Russian Pilgrim*, the novels of Dostoevsky, or the

Vespers of Rachmaninoff--we were taught from childhood to venerate and to love her.

My reflections this morning, however, will not be concerned so much with the past as with our situation as Christians in the present and the future. Although I am going to speak, as I am bound to do, from my local experience in Spain, I will be addressing an issue that affects profoundly the whole of Western Christianity and doubtless will have begun already to affect the Church in Russia, as well as Russian Christians living in the Diaspora.

It is my conviction, rooted both in my own experience and in that experience of the Church that we know as Tradition, that all the circumstances in which we find ourselves, no matter how trying, have a saving purpose in the divine *economy*. The fact that we are given in our days the possibility, new after so long a time, to help one another and, as disciples of the Holy Spirit, to learn from each other's experiences, striving together to formulate issues and answers in the best possible way, as the Lord shows us, is a precious sign of that infinite Mercy of Our Lord that never ceases to give to his Church new opportunities to grow in unity and communion.

The statement of this conviction is especially relevant to the complex phenomenon I want to address this morning, which I consider one of the greatest challenges Christianity has had to face in the twenty centuries of our history, comparable only in scope and in danger to the Gnostic or the Arian crises. If those crises (and the Christological disputes that followed) are best understood as just different phases of the same difficulty of expressing and living the novelty of the Christian event in the utterly inadequate context of Hellenistic rationality, then the analogies with our situation are seen in a sharper light. And yet, in the long run, through that very conflict, Christianity came to save the best of Hellenism and Hellenistic culture. This aspect also is relevant for us today.

I. LIBERALISM OR SECULAR REASON.

Let me formulate without further delay the challenge I have in mind. One name for it is “liberalism.” To put it briefly, I understand by this term what the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre means by it when he uses the word “liberalism” in his works, especially in his book *Whose Justice? What Rationality?*¹ Liberalism (with its economic counterpart, capitalism) is the dominant system of belief at the political, economic and cultural levels, which has remained in the world after the fall of communism (with the possible exception of the Islamic countries). As a system of belief, I consider it to be a major danger for the freedom of the Church and for the future of the world. In a sense, it is a danger that could prove worse than communism, because it masks itself and remains hidden, and for that reason, it does not generate resistance against itself. It might well happen that liberalism could succeed where communism has failed, that is, in destroying the Church as a real people with a culture and a tradition, and in emptying Christianity of its human substance.

Instead of “liberalism” we could say, broadly referring to the same phenomenon, “the Enlightenment”, or “Modernity”. These names designate the ideal of a world that would be fully human by first domesticating, and then rejecting and replacing the Christian world. MacIntyre himself has spoken of the culture of the Enlightenment as “The Predecessor Culture.” He sees it remaining today as one of the “three rival versions” of moral enquiry and philosophy, but remaining more and more only as the language of the official culture. Truly it is just the necessary background to understand the culture in which we actually live, which could be characterized instead as the heritage of Nietzsche. For MacIntyre has also shown that, for all its appeal to universal reason, the culture of the Enlightenment is just one more tradition, born from

¹Alasdair MacIntyre, *Whose Justice? What Rationality?* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988). See especially chapter XVII, “Liberalism Transformed into a Tradition.”

particular circumstances in the history of European Christianity. Moreover, as a tradition, it has three characteristics: 1) it masks, first of all to itself, its character as tradition; 2) it is constitutively intolerant, among other reasons, as a necessary consequence of its unawareness of its traditional character; 3) with all its predicament and power as the official culture everywhere in what was once the Christian world, it is already an intellectually dead culture, because it creates an alienated type of humanity. Thus it disintegrates itself and is bound to dissolve itself into nihilism. In fact, its triumph coincides with its destruction.²

MacIntyre, of course, is not the only serious thinker that has seen dissolution into nihilism as the destiny of the Enlightenment, paradoxically parallel to its triumph. Even apart from the great Christian critics of the Enlightenment,³ or the intuitions of an honest enlightened man like Alexis De Tocqueville in *De la*

² Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981). The “predecessor culture” is named in the title of chapter 4 of this work: “The Predecessor Culture and the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality.” In chap. 5 of *After Virtue* MacIntyre shows “Why the Enlightenment Project of Justifying Morality Had to Fail.” Then he explains different consequences of that failure, which bring the Enlightenment culture to the final point of Nietzsche’s nihilism. MacIntyre has developed this thought also in another work, *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry: Encyclopedia, Genealogy and Tradition* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990). As for the character of liberalism as a “tradition,” and its need to mask precisely its traditional condition, see MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?* (*supra*, note 1). On alienation as the characteristic of the man created by liberalism, and its definition, see MacIntyre, “Marxist Mask and Romantic Face: Lukács on Thomas Mann” in the journal *Encounter* (April, 1965), and then again in *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy* (London: Duckworth, 1971). See especially p. 66.

³ Some examples are S. Kierkegaard or J. H. Newman, or writers like G. K. Chesterton, T. S. Eliott, or C. S. Lewis in the English speaking area, or L. Bloy, Ch. Péguy and G. Bernanos in France, nor to mention other early Christian critics of modernity (Gianbattista Vico, Johann Georg Hamman, Franz Heinrich Jacobi). Among the Russians, one should mention at least F. M. Dostoevsky, V. Soloviev and N. Berdjajev. In fact, Dostoevsky’s novel *Demons* is one of the most powerful and prophetic descriptions of the “parabola” of secular modernity of which I am aware.

Démocratie en Amérique,⁴ there are other voices. One thinks of the works of Hannah Arendt, for instance, or of Alain Finkielkraut. From a different perspective, Marx Horkheimer und Theodor W. Adorno had convincingly argued already in 1947 the “unceasing self-destruction of the Enlightenment”.⁵

A name that I particularly like for the whole of this phenomenon we are discussing is “secular reason.” It is in fact part of the title of this paper. I have borrowed it from the title of an important book by the Anglican theologian John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*.⁶ The term “secular reason” includes what MacIntyre calls “liberalism,” but it also has a wider scope. It has the advantage of including also the various fragmentary positions into which liberalism and the Enlightenment Project have disintegrated. It also emphasizes the fact that these post-Enlightenment positions share many basic assumptions with traditional liberalism. Another advantage of the term is that it makes clear in just two words that “secular reason” is not just “reason *as such*,” but just one mode, historically conditioned and contingent, of understanding “reason”, and one mode which is particularly limited and reductive. Precisely

⁴ Cf. Alexis De Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, (New York: The Library of America, 2004).

⁵See M. Horkheimer–Th. W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* in Adorno’s *Gesammelte Schriften* 3 (2nd ed; Frankfurt a. Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), p. 11. I owe the attention to this book to a work of J. Ratzinger, *Svolta per l’Europa? Chiesa e modernità nell’Europa dei rivolgimenti* (Milano: Edizioni Paoline: Cinisello Balsamo, 1992), p. 140. According to Ratzinger, “l’autodistruzione dell’illuminismo” takes place, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, “là dove l’istanza illuministica si afferma incondizionatamente e non vuol riconoscere nient’altro che la dimensione quantificabile, che può essere spiegata, negando nel contempo l’esistenza di ciò di cui non si può disporre oppure confinandolo nella pura sfera privata. Per esprimersi in altri termini: una società, che nella sua fisionomia istituzionale è costruita su basi agnostiche e materialistiche e autorizza l’esistenza di tutte le restanti possibili convinzioni soltanto a condizione che rimangano confinate al di sotto della soglia di quanto è pubblico e ha rilevanza civile, non sopravvive a lungo” (*ibidem*).

⁶ J. Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990). Although I would not endorse all the positions of this book, I completely agree with and welcome its main thesis and most of the judgments it contains.

because of its reductive character, secular reason cannot found a real sociality or a true humanity. Rather it ends in violence.

My first point is then, after all, quite simple, and not especially original. The secular reason that we know as modern liberalism is both intellectually and morally exhausted. Its mythical character and its lack of foundation are already unmasked. It has all the power, but power is all it has; defeated by itself, in fact it has lost already the case of rationality, as it has also lost all the cases it used to uphold in the past, like freedom, joy for life and love of this world. Even to say that what comes after liberalism is nihilism is just part of the truth, because the term “nihilism”, in the form of “post-modernity” or in any other philosophical garb, seems to lend somehow a respectable, professorial halo to the phenomenon. What comes after liberalism, if it is left to its own self-destructive dynamics, is the taking over of the *polis* by the Barbary Coast. It could be in the form of anarchy, or it could be in new forms of totalitarianism not yet even imagined. MacIntyre, again, speaks of “the new dark ages, which are already upon us.”⁷

Today, nihilism is not a philosophy. It is above all a practice, and a practice of suicide, even if it is a soft suicide. It is the suicide of the depressed. It is also a practice of violence. The secular society lives in daily violence, violence with reality. This violence shows that nihilism cannot and does not correspond to our being. But it shows also, in a very concrete way, how the secular society annihilates itself by engendering the very monsters that terrify it most and that it hates most: the twin monsters of fundamentalism and terrorism. After 11th September 2001 and 11th march 2004, it is more and more obvious that Islamic terrorism, like Islamic fundamentalism, for all its Muslim coloring and a certain

⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 245. A valuable description of the present “dark ages” can be read in G. Lipovetsky, *L'ère du vide. Essais sur l'individualisme contemporain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983). [I do not have available an English edition of this work, published also in Spanish by Anagrama, Barcelona, 1986.]

vague connection with traditional Muslim ideas and practices, is not understandable or thinkable without the West. It is mostly a creature of Western secular ideologies. It is pragmatic nihilism using Islam instrumentally, very much like the emergent modern nation-states used a Church institution like the Inquisition in their own political interest.⁸

II. THE DESTINY OF CHRISTIANITY WITHIN SECULAR REASON

One has to recognize that, at least in the West, the Church in general has not been successful in taking a stand that will allow her to recognize, not to say to overcome, the strategies of secular reason. Without doubt, there have been many reactions to liberalism, to secularism, to laicism, and so on. But most of these reactions, no matter how strong, share so many assumptions with the secular worldview that for a significant part they work in the last resort for the implantation of “the secular,” and very often with no awareness whatsoever of that fact on the part of their proponents.⁹

This is my main reason for distrusting the urge that so many feel nowadays in certain countries (this is the case in Spain) of bringing the Church *as Church* into

⁸ Very recently, three books have been publishing from very different perspectives, which sustain the idea that Islamic terror is a Western phenomenon. See Ian Buruma and Avishai Margalit, *Occidentalism: The West in the Eyes of its Enemies* (New York: Penguin Press, 2004); John Gray, *Al-Qaeda and What It Means to Be Modern*, (New York: New Press, 2003); Paul Berman, *Terror and Liberalism* (New York/London: W. W. Norton & Co., 2004).

⁹ I do not resist the temptation to quote here a magnificent confession MacIntyre makes in the Introduction to the 2nd edition of *Marxism and Christianity* (London: Duckworth, 1995). Although spoken in another context, the thought is relevant for the issue we are discussing here. He says: “Among my as yet unquestioned assumptions was a belief that the only possible politics that could effectively respond to the injustices of a capitalist economic and social order was a politics that took for granted the institutional forms of the modern state and that had as its goal the conquest of state power, whether by electoral or by other means, so that I could not as yet recognize that those who make the conquest of state power their aim are always in the end conquered by it and, in becoming the instruments of the state, themselves become in time the instruments of one of the several versions of modern capitalism” (p. xv).

the political arena to fight propositions that utterly offend the Christian understanding of human life (the so-called “marriage” of homosexuals, other obvious destructions of marriage, experiments with human embryos, “liberalization” of euthanasia and abortion, etc). The very interest that the proponents of these monstrosities seem to have in the provocation makes me extremely suspicious. On the other hand, I cannot bring myself to imagine the Church of the second or third century trying to overthrow and take over the Roman Empire to make it Christian, instead of converting it. For us Christians, that kind of “battle” is always a distraction and a trap. For one thing, it will make us forget how much *we* have contributed and still contribute to this very state of affairs that now so much offends us. To put just one example, the sexual morality and the so-called “bioethics” of the advanced capitalistic societies is obviously tied up with and depends in many ways on the economic interests of particular industries, and on very deep assumptions about the meaning of human life common in a capitalistic mentality. It is pathetic to see some Christians renting their garments about the propositions about sexual life that come from secular society while at the same time defending wholeheartedly the moral autonomy of modern economics or politics.¹⁰

¹⁰ A powerful expression of the inseparability of the capitalistic conception of life and the purely “utilitarian” understanding of sex is found in Wendell Berry, whom David Schindler considers “one of America’s most thoughtful and imaginative writers.” See. W. Berry, *Sex, Economy, Freedom and Community* (New York: Random House, Pantheon Books, 1993.) It is no objection to his reflections the fact that the destruction of marriage and the family has been much greater in the countries under communist rule. It is no objection because communism, for most of its history, has not been anything but a form of state capitalism. If one couples Wendell Berry’s thoughts with the accurate analysis that MacIntyre does at the beginning of *After Virtue* on the interminability of moral debates and disagreements in the contemporary scene, and the causes for that situation, one can come to some important conclusions as to how to conduct moral debate in our times. For it becomes obvious that, even if it is always necessary for us to state as clearly as possible (and in the most positive and meaningful possible way) the moral positions of the Church, those statements are not, in the present situation, the place for the real debate, which takes place at the level of the anthropological and ontological assumptions behind the different moral and political positions, and implies necessarily reflections about how to solve the “conceptual incommensurability” both of these assumptions and of the arguments and conclusions derived from them. For our purposes, that means that the true debate is about the meaning of the Christian faith for the destiny of man, and therefore, for the meaning of

I do not believe, therefore, that any strategy to win influence or power in our societies will benefit the Church or the cause of Christianity in any sense. As Christians, we cannot foster nostalgia for the past and, least of all, for those very conditions that have led to the invention of the secular as a reaction against a decadent and already reductive image of Christianity. A strategy of seeking influence will only continue to hide from most Christians the fact that the real “enemy” is not truly outside us, but within us, in the exact measure (which is a very large measure) that we share the very assumptions whose consequences we criticize so sharply in the decisions of some politicians (but in general only of some).

In consequence, that strategy will distract us from the only “politics” needed in the present situation, and the only politics that can really make a difference in the world: being the body of Christ and living in the communion of the Holy Spirit in this concrete hour of history. In other words, the “politics” we most need is conversion in order to build up of the Church again as a banner among the nations, as “a nation made from all nations”. Distraction from this end allows the immense energy that Christianity unlashes to be used instrumentally in the favor of political programs that do not and cannot, in any way, be identified with the life the Lord has given us. That life lives in the Church, and not in a political party, not even in one that would eventually present itself as

reality, and about the ways to verify the truth of its claims, if faith has to be a human act. Only reflections at this level can avoid that statements about morals, no matter how strongly they would be made, could be understood by the recipients of them (and perhaps also by the makers of them) in an “emotivist” framework, just as expressions of preference and will. Only reflections at that level can avoid that we take stands that are in plain contradiction with the premises from which we try to derive them (as when we try to justify Christian morality from Kantian or utilitarian premises), or again, that are in contradiction with stands that we take for other areas of life, as when we appeal to some kind of “natural law” premises for reflections on marriage, and then use purely capitalistic ideas of maximizing profit, or utilitarian arguments, when talking about economics or politics. See “The Nature of Moral Disagreement Today and the Claims of Emotivism” in MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, pp. 6-21.

being at the service of “Christian values.” The circle closes when one realizes that the instrumentality of the Church to a political program becomes by itself--in complete independence of the content of that program--a hindrance to the freedom of the Church and to the faith of the world in Jesus Christ.

Let us turn to the question of what happens to the Church when she understands herself within the framework set up by secular reason. In the very beginning of his book, *Theology and Social Theory*, John Milbank poignantly describes that situation in reference to theology:

The pathos of modern theology is its false humility. For theology, this must be a fatal disease, because once theology surrenders its claim to be a metadiscourse, it cannot any longer articulate the word of the creator God, but is bound to turn into the oracular voice of some finite idol, such as historical scholarship, humanist psychology, or transcendental philosophy. If theology no longer seeks to position, qualify or criticize other discourses, then it is inevitable that these discourses will position theology; for the necessity of an ultimate organizing logic cannot be wished away. A theology “positioned” by secular reason suffers two characteristic forms of confinement. Either it idolatrously connects knowledge of God with some particular field of knowledge--“ultimate” cosmological causes, or “ultimate” psychological and subjective needs. Or else it is confined to intimations of sublimity beyond representation, so functioning to confirm negatively the questionable idea of an autonomous secular realm, completely transparent to rational understanding.¹¹

For Milbank, the subject of the sentences in this paragraph is theology, but the statement would be equally true if, instead of theology, the subject was the Church. Within the framework of secular reason, the Church can only survive in one of the two modes of confinement indicated by Milbank. In the first confinement, “*ratio*” and “*fides*” are parallel lines that never meet, even if it is conceded that they do not contradict one another.¹² Now, the separation

¹¹ Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 1.

¹²It is perhaps interesting to note in passing that there is a Spanish theological journal, named *Reason and Faith (Razón y Fe)*, which was probably born to express the unity of

between “*ratio*” and “*fides*” is just the reflex of many other divisions, and ultimately of the division between God and reality. Thus, the first confinement always leads to the second one where, in the end, “*fides*” vanishes among the fantasies of the human mind, leaving only “*ratio*” as the ultimate logic or principle of organization.

In fact, there is only one confinement in two phases. As soon as the sphere of the religious, in which Christianity as a whole is placed, designates a particular sphere of human activity next to other spheres (philosophy, morality, the sciences, the arts, and so on), it is thereby severed from all other human realities. Becoming autonomous, it also has to become unreal. This is because every parcel of reality possesses its corresponding sphere of knowledge, in relation to which it is completely transparent. The implication of this fact is that the different spheres of knowledge expect complete dominion over their assigned parcel of the real world.¹³

both in the spirit of the Vatican Council I. But “*and*” is an expression of unity and also of juxtaposition, and juxtaposition is bound to be understood in the framework of modern dualism and the confinement of “*fides*.” *Razón y Fe* is now in Spain, in fact, an instrument for the inner secularization of the Church. In this context, I would like just to recall that the title of the Encyclical Letter of John Paul II inverts the order of the terms (*Fides et Ratio*). This is hardly an insignificant fact.

¹³Compartmentalization as an essential part of the classical liberal ideology is put into relief in this description of MacIntyre: “The bourgeois society of the nineteenth century articulated itself in terms of concepts and beliefs, which, although they took on differing theoretical forms, were all part of the apparatus of secular liberalism. Liberalism is the theoretical mirror in which the nineteenth century was able to see its own face; and just as the social structures of the nineteenth century depend upon division and compartmentalization, so liberal theory similarly develops a view of the world as divided and compartmentalized. The most fundamental of the distinctions inherent in liberalism is that between the political and the economic. Just as in its actual social practice the bourgeoisie’s goal is that of a purely negative, non-interventionist relationship between the state--conceived narrowly as a device for protecting the citizen from foreign invasion and internal disorder and for upholding the sanctity of contract--and the economy of the free market, so in liberal political theory it is thought possible to divorce a man’s political status from his economic status. Thus liberalism can combine within itself a drive towards ideals of political equality with an actual fostering of economic inequality. And just as the political is separated from the economic, so morality, too, tends to become a realm apart, a realm concerned with private relationships” (MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity*, pp. 132-3). Two observations that

To religion there is no reality left, and therefore it cannot even be a kind of knowledge but instead has to belong to the purely private and subjective realm of sentiment and preference. Its concern, if it is conceded that it is for something “real”, has to be for a wholly otherworldly “reality.” Since this “reality” has no relationship to or bearing on anything in this world, it will, in the end, have no reality outside of the purely subjective imagination (Feuerbach’s religion). As Henri de Lubac pointed many years ago, and as we shall see in what follows, that “other” world, precisely because it *has to be* born in the imagination of the believing subject, cannot be really “supernatural.” Neither can it bring any novelty to this life. It cannot be anything but a replica of this world, its motivations, and its social structures. It cannot be anything but a wholly conservative human institution (Durkheim’s religion).

The confinement of Christianity by secular reason has taken place more or less in all Christian traditions, though in various ways. In Catholicism, the confinement has come about through the exasperation of the necessary

can be made to this text are, first, that the drive towards division and compartmentalization, even if it reaches its highest point in the nineteenth century, and then also became the mirror expression of its social life, did already exist as a marked phenomenon much earlier, from the beginnings of modernity (late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries). Such love for division and compartmentalization is one of the most characteristic features of secular reason, and it was born with it. It implies the assumption that reality, once disentangled from religion and morals, is completely given to the human knowledge and power. In the ideological use of theology to justify this autonomous dominion of the earth, it is often said that mankind thus “fulfils” the commandment of Genesis about the submission of the earth. Of course, this reference to Genesis is hypocritical: it is merely a pretext for the modern project of a limitless exploitation of the earth. It is also what remains in liberalism of Christian anthropology, or rather, the dislocated fragment of it that fits into liberal anthropology. The second observation is that, although MacIntyre in this paragraph does not mention religion, in liberalism religion, like morals, is assigned a “field,” a sphere of its own. The very concept of “religion,” understood and used in this fashion, had to be invented, and was in fact invented at the beginning of modernity, to submit religion to the emergent absolutist, modern state. See William T. Cavanaugh, “A Fire Strong Enough to Consume the House: The Wars of Religion and the Rise of the State” in *Modern Theology* 11 (1995), 397-420. Also Idem, *Theopolitical Imagination*, T & T Clark, Edinburgh/New York, 2002, pp. 20-42.

distinction between “natural” and “supernatural” so that they are seen as two completely separate orders of “reality.” De Lubac has denounced this dualistic position, which has dominated “a large segment of modern theology” within the Catholic Church. Although this division, at least in its classical form, is not any longer influential in schools of theology, it nevertheless still shapes and determines a great deal both in Catholic thinking and practice. Already in 1965, Henri de Lubac saw in this dualism something similar to the two ways of confinement more recently noticed by Milbank. First, the compartmentalization of the supernatural makes it lose its proper supernatural character. The fact of this loss becomes one of the deepest causes of secularization and atheism within the Catholic Church. Concerning this first point, de Lubac writes:

[This “large segment of Catholic theology”] sees nature and supernature as in some sense juxtaposed and in spite of every intention to the contrary, as contained in the same genus, of which they form as it were two species. The two were like two complete organisms; too perfectly separated to be really differentiated, they have unfolded parallel to each other, fatally similar in kind. Under such circumstances, the supernatural is no longer properly speaking another order, something unprecedented, overwhelming and transfiguring: it is no more than a “super-nature”, as we have fallen into the habit of calling it, contrary to all theological tradition; a “supernature” which reproduces, to what is called a “superior” degree, all the features which characterize nature itself.¹⁴

And again:

Thus the supernatural order loses its unique splendor; and (...) by a logic whose headlong course we cannot halt, often ends by becoming no more than a kind of shadow of that supposed natural order.¹⁵

The notion of the supernatural order as a “kind of shadow” of the “supposed natural order” bears recognizable proximity to the theses of Feuerbach and Durkheim about the origin of religion. De Lubac’s argument helps to explain

¹⁴ Henri De Lubac, *Le mystère du Surnaturel*, (Théologie, 64) (Paris: Aubier, 1965), p. 61. The English title is *The Mystery of the Supernatural. With an Introduction by David L. Schindler* (New York: Crossroad/Herder, 1998), p. 37.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* p. 60. English version, p. 36.

what was true in those theses and in those of other critics of religion who later followed them. Though these critiques need not be the whole truth about religion, as MacIntyre says about the Marxist critique of religion, they “hold true for a great deal of religion, and in particular for a great deal of nineteenth-century religion.”¹⁶ In fact, as already stated, De Lubac saw this “dualism” as a cause of atheism:

On the one hand, though the dualist--or, perhaps better, separatist--thesis has finished its course [in the theology schools], it may be only just beginning to bear its bitterest fruit. As fast as professional theology moves away from it, it becomes so much more widespread in the sphere of practical action. While wishing to protect the supernatural from any contamination, people had in fact exiled it altogether--both from intellectual and from social life--leaving the field free to be taken over by secularism. Today that secularism, following its course, is beginning to enter the minds even of Christians. They too seek to find a harmony with all things based upon an idea of nature which might be acceptable to a deist or an atheist: everything that comes from Christ, everything that should lead to him, is pushed so far into the background as to look like it is disappearing for good. The last word in Christian progress and the entry into adulthood would then appear to consist in a total secularization that would expel God not merely from the life of society, but from culture and even from personal relationships.¹⁷

These words of de Lubac were prophetic and have been more than fulfilled by the dominant tendencies in twentieth century Catholicism, whether of the “progressive” kind, leaning more toward accepting certain Marxists tenets as the instrument to understand nature and history, or whether of the more “conservative” kind, that (paradoxically) uses “liberalism”¹⁸ and liberal

¹⁶MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity*, p. 108.

¹⁷de Lubac, *Le mystère du Surnaturel*, p. 15. English version, p. xxxv.

¹⁸ It is curious that the term “liberalism,” is used in the Anglo-Saxon world to describe a lax or despising attitude toward Christian dogma and tradition, and therefore, the psychological and intellectual approach to Christianity typical of the “Enlightenment,” while in common Spanish usage, it has come to designate a rather “conservative” position, because the term is defined mainly in reference to Marxism. Of course, this factor, as we shall see later, hides for conservative catholic liberals how much of the

ideology for exactly the same function as “progressive” Catholics and theologians used to employ Marxism: as a necessary tool to interpret reality. The implication has been that the Christian faith, simply, not having to do with anything “of this world,” could not be employed for such a use.

All of this raises a question as obvious as it is inevitable: What interest could there be in a faith that cannot give meaning to reality, but can only be instrumental for an already existing philosophical social, moral and political system? Asking this question puts into a sharp light the atheism implicit (but not wholly hidden) in both the “progressive” and the “conservative positions.” It also reveals the breadth of common ground shared by adherents of the two positions, and this in spite of all the bitterness of many of their debates during a large part of the twentieth century.

The combination, then, of modern compartmentalization, in the form of dualism or in other forms, with that metamorphosis of the supernatural into a “double” of this word already mentioned causes two main phenomena.

The first of them is the “disappearance” of the Church, that ceases to be understood as “the body of Christ” and therefore as His “sacrament”, as the human place of flesh where we meet Him, and becomes instead an aggregation of individuals who share (more or less) the same “beliefs” and the same “values” (these “values” being generally understood in Kantian or relativistic terms).¹⁹ The Church loses both ontology and mysticism. Whatever remains of

Catholic Tradition and worldview is lost in their understanding of Catholic faith and practice.

¹⁹ A very strong description, in a dramatic context, of the disappearance of the Church and of the reasons for it, is found in the work of William T. Cavanaugh, *Torture and Eucharist: Theology, Politics and the Body of Christ* (Challenges in Contemporary Theology, Oxford: Blackwell, 1998. Cf. especially chapter 3, “The Ecclesiology of a Disappearing Church” (pp. 121-150), and chapter 4, on the influence Maritain’s thought on the “Distinction of Planes” for that disappearance (pp. 151-202). Insistence on the “distinction of planes” is not only Maritain’s affair. A similarlar insistence is found in

these two aspects of reality (and what remains are mainly dislocated, isolated fragments) is functional to the empty platitude of liberal “ethics”. Strictly correlative to this metamorphosis is the replacement of the sacramental logic that has been the characteristic of the Christian *logos* in relation to reality by the kind of formal, instrumental and managerial logic proper to late capitalism. This is what fills so many “pastoral plans” and other documents produced by the diocesan chanceries and episcopal conferences. The sacred liturgy remains, of course, but it remains mainly as a strange and rather meaningless fragment of a world already gone. Now, a Church thus conceived and lived in this manner is already “nothing” but a residual fact. It is not only that she has no real continuity with historical Christianity, but it is that she does not exist anymore. Since community and tradition are everywhere the only space for rationality and morality, neither Christian faith nor Christian morality survive for long in that situation.

The second phenomenon, a consequence of the previous one, is the complete identification of Christianity with secular thinking, so that being a Christian becomes meaningless, and makes no difference in real life. David L. Schindler has expressed how this phenomenon happens in America this way:

My argument, as it concerns Christians, is that the problem of secularism in America begins in a significant sense within the (Protestant and Catholic) churches themselves and their theology and religious practices. To put it in its most radical and indeed what seems to me also most precise terms, the disappearance or indeed the death of God is a phenomenon occurring not only in the 5 percent of Americans who do not profess belief in God but also and more pertinently in the 95 percent who do.²⁰

Yves Conger, as a reaction to a clerical “integrity” Catholic position. See Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 207.

²⁰David L. Schindler, “Religion and Secularity in a Culture of Abstraction: On the Integrity of Space, Time, Matter and Motion,” in Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (eds.), *The Strange New Word of the Gospel: Re-Evangelizing in the Postmodern World* (Grand Rapids, Michigan, Eerdmans, 2002) pp. 32-54, especially pp. 33-34.

The phenomenon to which David L. Schindler refers here is not a particularly American phenomenon. Although the percentages of believers may not be the same in America and in Spain (or in other European countries), the reality described by Schindler is exactly the same or almost the same as that of most Spanish Catholics. This is so because the problem he is describing is the problem of a Church that has accepted to disappear by accepting to understand herself within the framework of liberalism, or, what is the same, within the framework of secular reason.

In the end, the paradox of the Church in secular society is the same that MacIntyre expressed many years ago as a dilemma for (Protestant) theology.

We can see the harsh dilemma of a would-be contemporary theology: [1] the theologian begins from orthodoxy, but the orthodoxy which has been learnt from Kierkegaard and Barth becomes too easily a closed circle, in which believer speaks only to believer, in which all human content is concealed. [2] Turning aside from this arid in-group theology, the most perceptive theologians wish to translate what they have to say to an atheistic world. But they are doomed to one of two failures. Either [a] they succeed in their translation: in which case what they find themselves saying has been turned into the atheism of their hearers. Or [b] they fail in their translation: in which case no one hears what they have to say but themselves.²¹

This is not only the doom of contemporary Protestant theology. It is everywhere the dilemma of Christian media, of Christian morals, and of Christian education. It is the dilemma of Christian presence in the world today.²²

²¹MacIntyre, *Against the Self-Images of the Age*, pp. 19-20.

²²The American Methodist theologian Stanley Hauerwas has perceived this same dilemma (so much so that I consider the attempt to help the Church to answer to this dilemma one of the main *mottos* of his whole theological enterprise), and has expressed it in various ways. This is one: “Christians, insofar as they endeavor to remain political actors, must attempt to translate their convictions into a non-theological idiom. But once such a translation is accomplished, it becomes very unclear what they need the theological idiom in the first place” (Stanley Hauerwas, “On Keeping Theological Ethics Theological,” in Stanley Hauerwas and Alasdair MacIntyre (eds.), *Revisions*, Notre Dame, Indiana: Notre Dame Press, 1983, pp. 16-42, especially. p. 30.

And yet, with all this critique of secular reason as one more particular tradition, and with the observation of the deadly consequences that its uncritical acceptance has for the Church and for secular reason itself, I have to recognize, and it is essential at this point of our argument to note, in order that this argument not be misunderstood, that at least one aspect of secular reason is the direct heir of Christianity: the affection for reason as such (as for freedom as such, or for the human dignity as such) is so much a characteristic of Christianity and of Christian tradition that Christianity is uniquely able to embrace whatever truth is contained even in the “secular” criticism of religion. In fact, the secular critique of religion, be it that of Feuerbach, Marx, Durkheim or Nietzsche, could not have happened or flourished outside Christian soil.

III. “RETURN TO THE CENTER”.

One cannot see the desert unless one belongs somewhere else. One cannot rationally criticize a position or perceive its limits unless one has seen something else. And of course, we have seen something else. We have seen the martyrs, the saints. We have seen their resplendent humanity, and we know two things: first, that such a nation of saints cannot be built on a falsehood, and second, that the promise of Christ hold true: “I will be with you to the end of time” (Mt 28, 28). We can make our own the words of Newman at the end of his now famous “Biglietto Speech”, in which he expressed very strongly the dangers of liberalism in religion as the enemy he had fought all through his life:

Christianity has been too often in what seemed deadly peril, that we should fear for it any new trial now. So far is certain; on the other hand, what is uncertain, and in these great contests commonly is uncertain, and what is commonly a great surprise, when it is witnessed, is the particular mode by which, in the event, Providence rescues and saves His elect inheritance. Sometimes our enemy is turned into a friend; sometimes he is despoiled of that special virulence of evil which was so threatening;

sometimes he falls to pieces of himself; sometimes he does just so much as is beneficial, and then is removed. Commonly the Church has nothing more to do than to go on in her own proper duties, in confidence and peace; to stand still and to see the salvation of God. *Mansueti hereditabunt terram. Et delectabuntur in multitudine pacis.*²³

This is a fantastic witness of faith and confidence in the promise of Christ. “The Church has nothing more to do than to go on in her own proper duties, in confidence and peace.” Nowadays, however, “religious liberalism” has gone so far in deluding Christian minds that even “her own proper duties”, from preaching to the sacraments, are understood (or rather, misunderstood) in the frame of secular reason. Newman himself, seeing this danger, said in the same speech: “Never did Holy Church need champions against it [liberalism] more sorely than now, when, alas! it is an error overspreading, as a snare, the whole earth. Newman knew that liberalism (or secular reason), and not only in religion, has an immense ability to disguise and mask itself, to present itself as “the natural way”, the way things have always been, and should always be. It is therefore necessary to make a great effort, both intellectual and moral, to unmask its strategies, to show its ideological character, both outside and inside the Church, and to return again to the Holy Tradition, disentangling it from the bonds that have tied and crippled it so that we may propose it anew, in all its freshness, to today’s man.

As we have already intimated, the problem with most critiques of liberalism is that they have been made in the name of Marxism, or from the partial acceptance of Marxist outlooks. This has implied the acceptance of the beliefs common to Marxism and liberalism (since Marxism was, as MacIntyre says, “in

²³The so-called “Biglietto Speech” is a very short text that he read the day he was appointed Cardinal by Pope Leo XIII, on May 12, 1879, published on the *Times* (and in Italian version, on the *Osservatore Romano*) the next day. This text has a very synthetic definition of “liberalism in religion.” Although it would obviously be insufficiently critical to identify without further qualification what Newman calls “liberalism in religion” with political or economic liberalism, it would be equally naive not to take into account the many ties which link among themselves the different kinds of “liberalism.”

the first instance a critique of liberalism and of bourgeois society in their own terms").²⁴ With them came the implicit or explicit assertion of the unavailability and the uselessness of Christianity for the "things of this world."²⁵ Thus, most critiques of liberalism, in the long run, have worked in favor of the establishment of that same secular culture which was at the base both of liberalism and of its critics.

In many ways, the Marxist critique of the liberal society was and is true, but the failure of Marxism in its predictions about the future crisis of capitalism and in its own economic and moral achievements has left the world with no other ideological alternative than liberalism. As MacIntyre recognizes, the intellectual and moral debate nowadays (to the degree that there is still any real debate over the intellectual and moral value of political systems, beyond political charlatanry and mere nihilistic consumerism) is limited to a debate within liberalism.

Liberalism (...) does of course appear in contemporary debates in a number of guises and in so doing is often successful in preempting the debate by reformulating quarrels and conflicts with liberalism, so that they appear to have become debates within liberalism, putting in question this or that particular set of attitudes or policies, but not the fundamental tenets of liberalism with respect to individuals and the expression of their preferences. So so-called conservatism and so-called radicalism in these contemporary guises are in general mere stalking-horses for liberalism: the contemporary debates within modern political

²⁴MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity*, p. 133. The emphasis is mine.

²⁵This has been the main flaw of the so-called Latin-American "liberation theology." In its conception of freedom and of the role of the state and of liberation, there were too many assumptions taken from liberal, modern secular ideas about life. Christian vocabulary became, therefore, instrumental to ideology. See Stanley Hauerwas, "Some Theological Reflections on Gutierrez' Use of 'Liberation' as a Theological Concept," *Modern Theology* 3 (1986), 67-76 and, by the same author, *After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999), pp. 50-58; Cf. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, pp. 207-209. 232-252; Daniel M. Bell, Jr., *Liberation Theology After the End of History. The Refusal to Cease Suffering*, Radical Orthodoxy Series (London and New York: Routledge 2001), pp. 42-84.

systems are almost exclusively between conservative liberals, liberal liberals and radical liberals.²⁶

Now, if liberalism is everywhere successful--although its very success constitutes the death of all its professed ideals--and if it represents a major danger to the Christian Church--a danger for the most part hidden or unrecognized--what can we do?

What is needed, in my view, is indicated in the title of the French version of a little book written by Hans Urs von Balthasar in 1969: "*Return to the Center.*"²⁷ For the author, the center is not the middle way between right and left, as in politics, but the center understood as the point from which the whole novelty of Christianity springs. The "center" is Christ, the gift by which the Triune God gives himself in creation and redemption. This gift, given today in the communion of the Church, constitutes the very meaning of all reality in such a way that we recognize Jesus Christ as "the heart of the world."²⁸

In fact, one could describe the best theological efforts of the nineteenth and the twentieth century, at least in the West, and the only ones that will survive the devastating effects of time, as attempts to recover the Christian Tradition and its meaning for human life, beyond the dualistic or otherwise fragmenting distortions created by secular reason and the several variants of a secular reinterpretation of Christianity. In other words, these attempts aim to recover the Tradition while avoiding the above-mentioned dilemma signaled by

²⁶MacIntyre, *Whose Justice?*, p. 392.

²⁷ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Einfaltungen. Auf Wegen der christlicher Einigung*, Kösel Verlag, München, 1969. The French version appeared in 1971 in Desclée de Brouwer, Paris, with the title *Retour au Centre*. The title of this work in English is *Convergences: To the Source of the Christian Mystery* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1983). Although the thematic in this book is not exactly the same as ours here, it is clearly related.

²⁸Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Heart of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1979).

MacIntyre: the attempt to buy meaning by selling tradition, that is, by making tradition say what secular reason says already without the need of faith.

IV. ON THE WAY TO "THE CENTER": LANDSCAPES AND LANDMARKS

In this final part of my paper, I would like to call attention to a few signposts marking the way to the center. Although I will remain mainly in the field of theology, as is proper in the context of this conference, I want to mention that "recuperation" of the "center" implies three aspects that are interrelated in a sort of "perichoresis," whereby, in a unique way, they belong to and need one another for the wholeness of Christianity: These three aspects of the Church's adherence to its center are the magisterial teaching of the Church, the efforts of theologians, and the charismatic life of God's people. Of course, from these three aspects of the life of the Body of Christ, the Apostolic Ministry has the particular mission, given and guaranteed by the Lord Himself, of preserving and handing down the Holy Tradition. But no one of the three aspects can be severed from the other two without destroying, or at the very least, doing serious damage to the entire Body of Christ. Such is the case, for instance, when the Magisterium insists on the social teaching of the Church as an essential part of the Church's life. If most of the Christian people understand their own life within the framework of secular reason, they will regard the Church's social teaching as abstract and theoretical. A few will take it seriously, by most will ignore it. If it happened that the teaching of the shepherds was not truly "theological" but based on the very modern and very deadly division between theology and pastoral care, the Christian people would be without guidance. Moreover, the Christian faith would be severed from reason and would soon dissolve itself in the world, perhaps in the form of a religion with some Christian coloring. Conversely, when theology does not represent systematic reflection on the experience of the Church and does not attend sufficiently to

the authority of the Tradition and the Magisterium, it inevitably becomes the instrument of ideology and of the powers of this world.

Let us begin with theology. The works of Hans Urs von Balthasar and Henri de Lubac, cited already in this paper, These Catholic theologians, in my opinion, by far the greatest of the twentieth century, have to be read clearly in the context of the concerns I mentioned in the first part of this paper. Von Balthasar's transformation, for instance, of an "aesthetic theology" into a "theological aesthetics" expresses well a certain movement of thought in which theology does not accept confinement and therefore does not allow itself to become an instrument of other areas of knowledge or to be positioned by them. Rather, it permeates and judges all of them.²⁹ The same movement that happens here in relation to beauty can and should take place in relation to the other "transcendentals", truth and goodness. The same hold true in the relationship between theology and knowledge, theology and ethics, as well as in the relationships between theology and the so called "human sciences" such as economics, politics, and any other area of human activity.³⁰

²⁹Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: a Theological Aesthetics*, Vol. I: *Seeing the Form* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982). In the introduction, chapter 6 (pp. 79-117) is entitled: "From an Aesthetic Theology to a Theological Aesthetics." On Balthasar's theology, see A. Scola: *Hans Urs von Balthasar: Uno stile teologico* (Milano: Jaca, 1991).

³⁰Balthasar himself has done this in many respects in his *Theo-Drama* and in his *Theo-Logic*, the two other parts of his great theological enterprise, and in some other works, as in *Love Alone is Credible* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004). From a perspective different from the Catholic one, Stanley Hauerwas has developed a similar thematic with relation to Ethics and Politics, a field less within the immediate concerns of Balthasar. Among the vast production of Hauerwas, see especially the following works: *Against the Nations: War and Survival in a Liberal Society* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1992); *In Good Company: the Church as Polis*, Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995; *After Christendom? How the Church Is to Behave If Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1999); *A Better Hope. Resources for a Church Confronting Capitalism, Democracy, and Postmodernity*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2000).

As for Henri de Lubac, he wrote about his own work, in a note to be published in the Italian edition of his complete works: “My task has basically been (...) to help know better, and therefore, understand better and love more, the treasures of the great Catholic tradition--I would say gladly, some of its great common places--misunderstood by so many, very little truly known even by those who would in all sincerity like to preserve it and to defend it”.³¹ In his first book, *Catholicism*, published in 1938, a work in which he wanted to bring to the foreground “the social aspects of the dogma” as they are expressed in the Christian Tradition, de Lubac wrote: “By revealing the Father and by being revealed by him, Christ completes the revelation of man to himself”.³² The Second Vatican Council inserted this sentence almost literally in a passage in *Gaudium et Spes*, now famous because it has been very frequently quoted by John Paul II. In fact, I think this sentence can be considered one of the keys to understanding the Pope’s teaching and ministry: “Christ...in the very revelation of the mystery of the Father and his love, fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling.”³³ Now, this is, in every sense, exactly what Tradition has always said about Christ and mankind and what was already in the New Testament and in the Nicene Creed. But the important thing about this quotation is that, when taken seriously, it makes it impossible for a Catholic to maintain a liberal position, and goes beyond any secular dualism or fragmentation: Christ belongs to the very definition of man, in such a way, that to think of man without Christ is just to leave the understanding of man incomplete. It is to miss what matters most, even for the building of the *polis*, namely, mankind’s destiny and vocation to share in the divine life of the

³¹ Henri de Lubac, *La Posterità spirituale di Giocchino da Fiore. I. Dagli Spirituali a Schelling*, Opera omnia, vol. 27), (Milano: Jaca, 1981), p. 10.

³² Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism* (London, 1950), p. 185. The title of the English version now commonly available is *Catholicism. Christ and the Common Destiny of Man*, San Francisco Ignatius Press, 1988, and the quote referred to is found in p. 339. The title of the French original is *Catholicisme. Les aspects sociaux du dogme* (7th edition; Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1983), p. 295.

³³ Council Vatican II, Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22.

Son of God. One could say that the whole meaning of de Lubac's work has been to unearth tradition and liberate it from the confinement of secular reason.

Von Balthasar and de Lubac are not the only theologians in the West to have tried to free Christian experience and language from the limits and reductions of secular reason. However, one has to admit that not many theologians relate the "center" of the Christian event to the different issues of Christian anthropology and moral life without falling into the dilemma spoken of by MacIntyre. Not many are aware of the traps of secular liberalism as they relate the Christian message to human experience in its different dimensions of knowledge and action. Most theologians who are thus aware come from the tradition of Balthasar and De Lubac.³⁴

Again, although this is not the place to do it, it would be possible, and perhaps necessary, to show that the deep meaning of the teaching of the Council Vatican II, and in fact the very key to understand its teaching, is exactly its attempt to recuperate Holy Tradition from the marsh lands in which the semi-conscious acceptance of liberalism and secular reason has thrown it. The same could be said of the teaching of the post-conciliar popes, especially John Paul II. The first sentence of his first Encyclical Letter declares that "Jesus Christ is the center of cosmos and history."³⁵ Papal teaching on the body and on marital love is based on a renewed awareness of the meaning of Christian anthropology. So too is

³⁴David L. Schindler and A. Scola are two names within the Catholic tradition to mention in this respect. Both have worked in different areas of human life connecting the message of the Church with human experience aware of the traps of secular reason, and going beyond them. See especially David L. Schindler, *Heart of the World, Center of the Church: "Communio" Ecclesiology, Liberalism and Liberation*, Edinburgh/Grand Rapids, Michigan: T & T Clark / Eerdmans, 1996); A. Scola, *Il mistero nuziale* (2 vols.): *I. Uomo-Donna; II. Matrimonio-Famiglia*, Pontificia Università Lateranense, 1998, 2000.

³⁵ Juan Pablo II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptor hominis* (4th march, 1979), n. 1. Again, it is a text that, if it is received in an intellectually honest way and is taken seriously, goes "beyond secular reason," and makes clear the deep incompatibility of catholic faith with liberals modes of thinking. See also the splendid n. 10 of this same Encyclical.

the Pope's insistence on the importance of the social doctrine of the Church. These are just two decisive aspects of the guidance of the Church "beyond secular reason".

A very recent theological movement I would not like to leave unmentioned involves several Anglican, Protestant, and Catholic theologians (not wholly unrelated either to Von Balthasar and De Lubac). This movement, named "Radical Orthodoxy" by its initiators, is a conscious attempt to go "beyond secular reason." Whatever the achievements of this movement, or the future of the movement itself, at least as far as its purposes go, it is relevant to our reflection.

In the introductory essay to the collective volume entitled *Radical Orthodoxy*, the three editors of the volume, J. Milbank, C. Pickstock, and G. Ward, observe that "the great Christian critics of the Enlightenment (...) in different ways saw that what secularity had most ruined and actually denied were the very things it apparently celebrated: embodied life, self-expression, sexuality, aesthetic experience, human political community." Their contention in this volume was that only transcendence, which "suspends" these things in the sense of interrupting them, "suspends" them also in the other sense of upholding their relative worth "over-against the void."³⁶ On the other hand, having recognized that "the Enlightenment was in effect a critique of decadent early modern Christianity", but also, "following the great English literary visionaries William Shakespeare and Thomas Nashe", that the abuses and errors of that decadency

³⁶ J. Milbank, C. Pickstock, G. Ward (eds.), *Radical Orthodoxy. A New Theology*, London/New York: Routledge, 1999, pp. 1-20; cf. p. 3. In the very first paragraphs of this introductory essay, the three editors note that "today the logic of secularism is imploding," and insist that "the present collection of essays attempts to reclaim the world by situating its concerns and activities within a theological framework. Not simply returning in nostalgia to the premodern, it visits sites in which secularism has invested heavily--aesthetics, politics, sex, the body, personhood, visibility, space--and resituates them from a Christian standpoint: that is, in terms of the Trinity, Christology, the Church and the Eucharist" (p. 1).

were “the result of a refusal of true Christianity,” Radical Orthodoxy tries to “articulate a more incarnate, more participatory, more aesthetic, more erotic, more socialized, even ‘more Platonic’ Christianity.”³⁷ Adopting a theological perspective centered on the concept of “participation,” they re-emphasize the value of tradition and the articulated unity of “*fides et ratio*,” but in the sense that it is “*fides*” that can save “*ratio*,” and it is theology that can rescue philosophy and the intellectual life from the shallow lands. Only this return to tradition--“to credal Christianity and the exemplarity of its patristic matrix”--after all, can adequately offer a true alternative to the “soulless, aggressive, nonchalant and nihilistic materialism” where the ideals of modernity have ended. This is how these three authors express their theological insight:

The theological perspective of participation actually saves the appearances by exceeding them. It recognizes that materialism and spiritualism are false alternatives, since if there is only finite matter there is not even that, and that for phenomena really to be there they must be more than there. Hence, by appealing to an eternal source for bodies, their art, language, sexual and political union, one is not ethereally taking leave of their density. On the contrary, one is insisting that behind this density resides an even greater density –beyond all contrasts of density and lightness (as beyond all contrasts of definition and limitlessness). This is to say that all there is *only* is because it is more than it is. (...)

This perspective should in many ways be seen as undercutting some of the contrasts between theological liberals and conservatives. The former tend to validate what they see as the modern embrace of our finitude –as language, and as erotic and aesthetically delighting bodies, and so forth. Conservatives, however, seem still to embrace a sort of nominal ethereal distancing from these realities and a disdain for them. Radical orthodoxy, by contrast, sees the historic root of the celebration of these things in participatory philosophy and incarnational theology, even if it can acknowledge that premodern tradition never took this celebration far enough. The modern apparent embrace of the finite it regards as, on inspection, illusory, since in order to stop the finite vanishing modernity must construe it as a spatial edifice bound by clear laws, rules and lattices. If, on the other hand, following the postmodern options, it embraces the flux of things, this is an empty flux both concealing and

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

revealing an ultimate void. Hence, modernity has oscillated between puritanism (sexual or otherwise) and an entirely perverse eroticism, which is in love with death and therefore wills the death also of the erotic, and does not preserve the erotic as far as an eternal consummation. In a bizarre way, it seems that modernity does not really want what it thinks it wants; but on the other hand, in order to have what it thinks it wants, it would have to recover the theological. Thereby, of course, it would discover also that that which it desires is quite other than it has supposed."³⁸

It is in this way that theology will save reason (if not in the secular modality), and the rest of the ideals of modernity. The essays forming the volume *Radical Orthodoxy*, then, "seek to re-envisage particular cultural spheres from a theological perspective which they all regard as the only non-nihilistic perspective, and the only perspective able to uphold even finite reality."³⁹

I do not need (and I would not be able) to judge the respective merits of the particular essays contained in the volume *Radical Orthodoxy*, or of the volumes that have followed in the series. A cursory and *amateurish* reading of some of them tells me that I would not want to go all the way with all of them, and that in some cases, from these same premises, I would come to quite different conclusions.⁴⁰ Yet, from the melody I have heard, it seems to me that even discussion of particular points of disagreement would not be unwelcome. On the whole, I completely endorse the statements just quoted. They seem to me to indicate with remarkable precision the theological challenge and the task before Christianity in this hour.

³⁸ *Radical Orthodoxy*, 4.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ For a preliminary assessment from the Catholic point of view, both of the *Radical Orthodoxy* volume of manifesto and of the theological movement, see Laurence Paul Hemming (ed.), *Radical Orthodoxy?: A Catholic Enquiry*, (Aldershot, UK: Ashgate, 2000).

All the “landscapes” we have mentioned up to this point are theological. But the journey “beyond secular reason” cannot be done by theology alone. Neither is it primarily a problem for theology. This is because theology is the intellectual articulation of the experience of the Church, and it can only be done from that experience. When that experience is lacking, or is confused, the thought cannot but be confused, and theology becomes just a variant of secular reason and the expression of the dominant cultural outlook. Even the teaching of the Church, alone and by itself, is not enough. The reason is that “the snare has overspread the whole earth” in such a way that most of those who receive and read the teaching of the Church—even those whose good will is undeniable—receive and read it through the filters of secular reason, either reducing it in a pietistic manner, or reducing it to “liberal values” and morality.

In my view, the challenge is so great that implies all of us: every single Christian, every Christian family and every Christian community, wherever we are and whatever our history and whatever the wounds we may have caused one another through that history. The challenge cannot be addressed without our being open to learn from one another, both from our failures and achievements, and so to help one another with the charity that is proper to suffering and wounded members of the one Body of Christ. The first fragmentation of the Christian experience is our division; the first fragmentation of the Church and the first opening to the rise of secular reason happens when we cease to understand one another as members of the one Body of Christ.

One truth that has been opened to me in the conversation with the work of MacIntyre is the awareness that life (history) is not the application of ideas, but that there is always a very close interaction with and dependence on practice. (political and economical, familiar, educational, artistic, cultural), and theory. Practice embodies theory so that even the slightest human gesture implies a whole ontology. But practice is also able to create or modify theory, as theory

often serves to justify, modify or create practices. This is a key point scattered throughout MacIntyre's work.⁴¹ Community is prior to tradition and is the place of tradition. It is the place of rationality (both practical and theoretical), and therefore, it is the place of intellectual and moral life. It is also the place for "the individual" to belong, and by belonging, to become a person, to obtain an identity for the self and for the world. If this is true, as I think it is, the consequences for the challenge I have been discussing in this paper are of great import. The issue before us, in fact, is not a question of changing some of our

⁴¹In his first work, *Marxism: an Interpretation* (London: SCM Press, 1953), there was a chapter on philosophy and practice omitted in the 1968 edition entitled *Marxism and Christianity*. In the introduction to the 1995 edition of *Marxism and Christianity*, MacIntyre comments: "That chapter was originally included because it attempted to pose what I had rightly recognized as the fundamental problem. It was later omitted because I had by then learnt that I did not know how to pose the problem adequately, let alone to solve it." A vivid prove of both this acknowledged difficulty and the permanence of the problematic about the relationship between practice and belief is found in the Riddell Memorial Lectures given in 1964, and published in 1967 by Oxford University Press under the title of *Secularization and Moral Change*. In the third of these lectures, MacIntyre challenged the "familiar thesis" that "decline in religious belief is the primary cause of moral changes (proponents of this thesis would often say, of moral decline), and that the decline in religious belief is itself caused by intellectual scepticism." He argues instead that "the view that the moral history of English society is, if anything, a cause rather than an effect of secularization" (*Secularization and Moral Change*, p. 37). In 1995, he still insists on the utmost importance of practice, even for theology. Speaking of the evolution of his thought after the rediscovery of the functioning of "Aristotle's view of social and moral theory and practice," and how through this discovery "I had thereby discarded philosophical assumptions that had been at the root of my difficulties with substantive Christian orthodoxy," something that was "one, even if only one, necessary stage in my coming to acknowledge the truth of the biblical Christianity of the Catholic church," MacIntyre writes: "I also understood better than I had done earlier not only what had been right in the official Catholic condemnations of Marxism, but also how much had been mistaken and rooted in obfuscating and reactionary social attitudes. Part of what Catholic theologians--and more generally Christian theologians--had failed to focus upon sufficiently was the insistence by both Marx and Marxists on the close relationships of theory to practice, on how all theory, including all theology, is the theory of some mode or modes of practice. Just as the propositions of scientific theorizing are not to be either understood or evaluated in abstraction from their relationships to the practices of scientific enquiry within which they are proposed, revised and accepted or rejected, so it is too with other bodies of propositions. Detach any type of theorizing from the practical contexts in which it is legitimately at home, whether scientific, theological or political, and let it become a free-floating body of thought and it will be all too apt to be transformed into an ideology" (MacIntyre, *Marxism and Christianity*, pp. xxviii-xxix).

ideas or of our language. For what is at stake is not only theology as the articulated language of faith. What is at stake is faith itself. Or rather, what is at stake is the Church as the human space created by the Triune God for the fulfillment of humanity, and faith as the recognition of this fact.

In this light, one can perhaps understand better MacIntyre's call at the end of *After Virtue*, quoted already in part above. He compares our time with the epoch of the decline of the Roman Empire: "What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us".⁴² For John Milbank also, the task is not so much a voluntaristic decision about a new turn of thought but the building, or the recovery, of a certain community--a new, unique community--named the Church. This community, Milbank says, "is *already*, necessarily, by virtue of its institution, a «reading» of other human societies".⁴³

So there is theology, there is the teaching of the shepherds of the Church, there are individual persons, families, parishes and monasteries, to whom Holy Tradition and the teaching of the Church has reached and the grain found good soil, and the sowing is fruitful. They perceive the danger; they suffer it; and they can still lovingly recognize the infinite signs of the presence of Christ in the world. They know God loves them immensely, and they love God with all their heart. I have met them many times. They are frequently alone without a roof over their heads and living in the open. They are the scattered remnant of the Christian people, the most beautiful human reality ever grown upon this earth. They need to be sustained by the Church; they need to be recognized by the others at home.

⁴²MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p.245.

⁴³Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory*, p. 380.

Then there are the experiences that the Lord makes grow, a little everywhere, in parishes, in centers of study and culture, wherever there are persons of faith who gather “in the name of Jesus Christ”, and for whom Christ becomes the center of thought and action because He is a gift “more precious than life.” They are sometimes called “movements”, and they are in a sense like new forms of monasticism. They are realities in which the experience of being the Church--a Church with a body--is renewed with a freshness that fills life with joy and hope in the midst of all the sufferings and trials of life. In them, even if sometimes in a different manner from the one has been usual, Christian rationality grows and can compare itself with other ways of living and thinking. There is again a tradition to pass on, and theology can flourish again.

I would like to finish by mentioning some characteristics of this new discovery of the Church. Or perhaps I should say, this new disclosure, or “revelation”, since the Father, the Risen Lord and the Holy Spirit are the ones who over and over again create and regenerate the Church in history, and allow us to see “what many prophets and kings wished to see, but could not see” (Lk 10, 24). These characteristics can for the most part be deduced from what has already been said.

1. The Church needs to become again, at all her levels, “the house and the school of communion,” as John Paul II has reminded us.⁴⁴ The Church has to be a community life, in a sense, “a family” life, like the life of “a body.” She needs to recover “social” density, not as a ghetto, but as real family life, always open to life and to society. “Family”, “mother”, “house, “nation”, “body”, are not just names for the Church; they are social realities essential for the life of the Christian Tradition. The Church is a company for life, and for everything in life. In other words, the Church has to be “rescued”, so to speak, from the drying and inhuman

⁴⁴ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (6th January, 2001), n. 43.

power of managerial logic and has to recover the sacramental logic, which is the one that belongs to her.

2. The Church is a community life centered in the liturgy, especially in the Eucharist. The Eucharist, with all its dimensions (without being reduced in a pietistic and individualistic way) is *the* practice of the Church, and so, it is a school: a school of community life, a school that allows us to understand in a unique way who God is, who Christ is, who we are, who we are for God, and who we are for one another; and what the world is for us. The Eucharist is the only place of resistance to the annihilation of the human subject. The Eucharist is also the place where one can learn and experience true universality, not the abstract and false universality of modernity and not in opposition to local realization, identity and fullness.⁴⁵
3. In that community, the movement of the heart (mind and all) is a movement that goes in the direction of a rediscovery of Christian Tradition, with all the riches and the variations that this tradition has, and not of a flight from it. For us Christians, differences are not an obstacle, but a treasure, as long as those differences are understood and lived in the light of the sacramental logic of the Body of Christ. Even the Gospels are four, and God is the communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit.
4. The experience of life in the community of the Church is a human experience. Because it is also an experience of Christ, it becomes a way of looking at all reality; that is, it becomes a source for rationality, and it refers to all dimensions of human experience and human practice

⁴⁵ Cf. William T. Cavanaugh, "The World in a Wafer: A Geography of the Eucharist as Resistance to Globalization," *Modern Theology* 15 (1999), 181-196.

(knowledge, art, and all kinds of human relationships, including the political or economic).

Of course, to make these things to happen is not just in our hands. Even to desire them is already a grace. The Church is not ours, but the Lord's, although we know the Lord desires His Church to shine in the midst of the night. To us it remains, first of all, to give thanks for what we have. Indeed we already have everything since we have Christ and the Holy Spirit. We give thanks also for the graces the Lord never ceases to give us—graces such as our meeting this morning. And then we can desire and pray that every one of us may flourish and grow “until all of us come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of god, to maturity, to the measure of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4, 13).