

‘Ungraspableness’ of God and space of religious

Religion has swept back onto centre stage in recent years. Publically, phenomenically, it seems to have already firmly reestablished itself and, notwithstanding frequent declarations of “the end of religion”, we are witnessing a steady reflowering (almost a repositioning into the domain of secularization of the anthropological theory of revival and survival) of interest in religious matters. From Habermas to Gauchet, and from Hervieu-Léger to Charles Taylor, the phrase “post-secular society” seems almost to have become a mantra . . .

Nevertheless, this does not mean that we should avoid looking long and hard at the question of the meaning and value of this self-styled “post-secularization”, the renewed interest in the public aspect(s) of religion, the ideas around it, its implications for the relationships between faith, reason and politics. Indeed, religion and politics are – possibly uniquely – perilous fields of thought, requiring a rigour and clarity of thinking and expression all the more essential given the confusion which so often reigns in these domains. Paolo Prodi (Lessico per un’Italia civile, ed. Pietro Venturelli, Diabasis, Reggio Emilia 2008, p. 178) was right when he observed that the roots of European civilization lie not so much in the individual contributions of Christianity, humanism, or the Enlightenment, as in the affirmation of secularism as a duality between the realms of the sacred and the political: a duality which is the fruit of centuries of institutional tensions and conflicts between Church and State. The path towards secularism largely coincides with what Max Weber identified as the Entzauberung der Welt: the “disenchantment of the world” which implies, however, not the expulsion of the sacred, but its “otherness” in relation to power.

How, then, should this “otherness” of the religious and the sacred be understood? These dimensions undoubtedly reveal an ambivalence: this is manifest not only in the fact that nowadays the only religious identity considered authentic is the cho-

sen one; but also in the claim that, even when someone's acceptance of the precepts of a religion has been established, the forms which this acceptance can assume are then also open to personal choice. I must be the one to discover, for myself, what this reality means to me. Thus, it is not just a question of choosing a religion: that religion "must also speak my language, it must make sense in terms of my spiritual development, as I interpret it" (Charles Taylor, *L'età secolare*, ed. Paolo Costa, Feltrinelli, Milan 2009, p. 612). In other words, religion must be able to resonate with what an individual feels within and with his desire for self-realization: far from opposing this desire, it must be in harmony with it. It is easy both to understand the ambivalence inherent in this process, and to perceive the inability of traditional philosophical and theological interpretations of liberty of conscience and of religion to develop convincing responses to it.

Recently, Jürgen Habermas, in *Verbalizzare il sacro. Sul lascito religioso della filosofia* (It. Tr. Leonardo Ceppa, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2015) has underlined how the renewed vitality of religious movements and fundamentalist beliefs represents a double challenge for – already largely – secular European societies, which must, on the one hand, develop new ways of living together and, on the other, rethink the changing role and function of religious communities, which have – perhaps prematurely – been relegated to the private sphere. There is also the question of how philosophy can best approach this resurgent religious impulse, which appears to be proving its unexhausted contemporaneity. What independence is the religious going to be allowed, as a mode and as a structure of human consciousness, in relation to the rational faculties of thought and other expressions of the spirit – art, politics, law? How may we understand and explain – philosophically and theologically – the deep changes that an almost overwhelmingly pervasive technological development has produced in the religious question faced by contemporary man?

Our era could, indeed, be described as one of dramatic conflicts of values, in which religion is playing an increasingly important role. "As well as the one God of the Jews, Christians and Muslims," the theologian Friedrich Wilhelm Graf wrote, "there are many gods still living among us. If not before, at least since 11 September 2001, the enduring power of religion has been made evident to us all. Through the symbols of religion, man can learn his own limits and find firm foundations for a humane ethos of tolerance, legitimate diversity and the acknowledgement of the other. However, religious certainties can also be expressed in violence, terror and mass

murder. Religious myths speak of angels and saints. But they also talk about devils and demons. This fundamental ambivalence of the religious element requires deeper explanation. Interpreting transcendence and the symbols of religious certainty is however a difficult and theoretically ambitious enterprise” (Friedrich Wilhelm Graf, Die Wiederkehr der Götter. Religion in der modernen Kultur, Beck, Munich 2004³, p. 9).

This ambivalence in itself undoubtedly shares a feature with the modern humanities: they are all inextricably interwoven with our pluralistic culture and the awareness of the multiformity of cultures. This very multiformity is their common foundation; indeed, they require it, if it is true, as Gunter Scholz wrote, that “they are working against the obtuseness of those who retain that the bounds of their own conceptual modes cannot or should not be crossed. Comparison and juxtaposition with the unknown/foreign does not necessarily mean the relativization of existing norms; it too follows an ethical norm. In fact, norms are implicit in the acceptance of pluralism. In no way does pluralism means “anything goes” (Gunter Scholtz, Zwischen Wissenschaftsanspruch und Orientierungsbedürfnis. Zu Grundlage und Wandel der Geisteswissenschaften, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1991, p. 12).

*Scholz`s words find particular resonance in the well-known theses of Marcel Gauchet, set out in *Le désenchantement du monde*, in 1985. Here, Gauchet gives very serious consideration to Weber`s famous idea, which appears in his lecture, *Science as a profession*, according to which the destiny of Western civilization forces us to live in a world “without God and without prophets”; a world in which, to paraphrase Nietzsche (in *The Joyful Wisdom*), God is no more, is dead, leaving only “huge heaps of rubble, of countless images of the gods (and idols)”. Gauchet believes – implicitly echoing Comte and Frazer`s model of science as the third evolutionary stage of human history, whose role is to supplant magic and religion (the latter having already taken over from the former) – that modernity, with its paradigm of triumphant scientific rationalism, has sanctioned a definitive exit from religion. This translates not into a radical opposition of Christianity and science, but into a sort of practical realization or Hegelian *Aufhebung* of the former by the latter: if modern society represents a complete exit from religion, this “does not mean that the religious must no longer speak to man”. Here we come to Gauchet`s notion of the persistence of “the religious after religion”: “An ineradicable subjective layer within the religious phenomenon should be recognized, in which the latter is a personal experience, independent of any*

*defined dogmatic content. [. . .] Even presuming that the era of religions has ended forever, it is still necessary to accept that, what between personal piety/religiousness and substitutes for the religious experience, we will probably never be done with the religious” (Marchel Gauchet, *Il disincanto del mondo. Una storia politica della religione*, tr. it. di Augusto Comba, Einaudi, Torino 1992, p. 293).*

And so Gauchet had no time for theories which postulate the religious dimension as the product of an innate human need for the symbolic; nor for those which attempt to write it off as the final remains of a projection of man`s basic needs. Readers who venture into the complex weave of Gauchet`s thought may well be left wondering whether, in the end, that religious dimension with which we will probably “never finish” has been accepted as an original structure of normative autonomy; or is just tolerated, as one might an ugly vice, which the sloppy laziness of everyday life stops us from ever tackling.

When Gauchet then speaks of the continued existence of the religious “after religion”, it is as if his “urbanization of the Comtean province” had revealed a residual irrationality which even the neo-Positivism – which, in fact, he implicitly proposed – could not destroy. This residue – which characterizes and qualifies man “after religion” – condenses around three levels of experience, which take on the character of epiphenomena: that of undifferentiated thought (the inexpressible); that of the aesthetic (akin to Rudolf Otto`s phenomenology of the sacred); and that of the construction of one`s own identity, which becomes an exclusively interior, personal, task – no answers can any longer be found in heteronomous structures.

But does all this really mean the destruction of religion, the ruins of which nevertheless continue to weigh upon our souls, or should these agonizing questions, in fact, be situated in a perspective which might recover the free, unconditioned surge of religious feeling in the very moment when it structures our consciousness and reveals itself as a question? Do the doubts which arise in, as Karl Jaspers put it, the “limit situations” of existence really eradicate the communitarian dimension, represented by religion, frittering themselves away in the hollow, lonely, despairing religiousness of the individual?

*In his 1952 book *The Courage to Be*, the theologian Paul Tillich introduced a seminal methodological distinction (taken up, for example, in a number of the Dominican thinker Claude Geffré`s works) which is still extremely useful today: that between trust, the confident faith, and belief. Tillich held that there was an ineradicable an-*

thropological dimension of belief – a basic faith, the “confident faith” mentioned above – which, from our mothers` knees, enables humans to relate to one another, and upon which religious belief is later grafted (without, however, any automatism); the latter then continues to be nourished by the “confident faith”. This is the line developed by Emmanuel Falque in the first number of the “Rosmini Studies” series, in which he reasserts the presence of the other as the “preferential way” to the religious dimension.

Antonio Rosmini was well aware of how productive this retrieval of the anthropological dimension could be. Indeed, in his dedication of his (still unpublished) work *Del divino nella natura*, to his friend Alessandro Manzoni, he said that his research into the divine dimension of the natural order “dealt with that which we can call the patrimony of Poetry and Philosophy” (Antonio Rosmini, *Del divino nella natura*, a cura di Pier Paolo Ottonello, Città Nuova, Roma 1991 [«Opere edite ed inedite di Antonio Rosmini», vol. 20], p. 19) both disciplines, in fact, as Aristotle wrote in his *Poetics*, treat the world not as it is, but as it should be.

For Rosmini it was just this “should be”, with its implicit recall of the Augustinian *abditum mentis* (the “hidden place of the mind”), that represented the “divine ray that penetrates creation”, the intelligible grasped by the mind, or – not without echoes of neo-Platonism – the idea. An idea, however, which is not confined to the hyper-rational spaces, which does not just refer to abstract existence, but takes on the features of an actual person, as in God`s/JHWH`s self-revelation in the Sinai: “God said to Moses, “I am that (who) I am” (Ex. 3:14), and then: “He who is ; he does not name merely an impersonal being – or essence – but the being-person, a being which speaks and establishes itself, saying: I am; and which orders Moses to go to the Israelites. The incarnate Word names itself, not saying, vaguely, that it is already existent, but: “ἐγώ εἰμί”, I am” (ivi, p. 85).

The divine, therefore, in order to be more than a mere object of thought, to become fully, truly understood, must present itself as a person. The idea is one which Rosmini has, of course, taken from the Christian theological tradition, but which is nevertheless relevant also to the history of philosophy, idealism in particular. In fact, about 30 years before Rosmini`s book was written, the German philosopher Johann Gottlieb Fichte – reflecting on the same phrase, ἐγώ εἰμί (“I am”), which, taken from Ex. 3:14, becomes the name of Christ in John`s Gospel, or rather the name by which Jesus invariably called himself and defined the meaning of his mission – actually

identifying his own philosophy (understood as “Logologia”, “logos of the Logos”) with the doctrine of the Fourth Gospel which “is even set out using exactly the same images and expressions as we do” (Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *L’iniziazione alla vita beata*, in *Id.*, *La dottrina della religione*, a cura di Giovanni Moretto, Guida, Napoli 1989, p. 311).

Actually, Fichte’s claim is simply continuing a line of thought that can be traced back to the so-called “deutsche Mystik”. Meister Eckhart, for example, referring to the interpretation of Ex. 3:14 given by Mosè Maimonides (the 12th Century Jewish philosopher) understands the phrase from the perspective of “negative theology”: the name of God can only be “unspoken”; in other words, it is not possible to define Him by genus or species, He is pure, undefinable, without essence, always an aliquid higher than any other being or entity. In saying “I am that (who) I am”, God means that He contains within Himself all things, and their opposites; He contains, from the beginning, everything – in all its purity, fullness, perfection and causal power. Man, when he reaches out to God in words, can only speak of Him in approximations, saying, apophatically (“negatively”), what characteristics He does not have; He cannot be objectified, as an entity may be objectified. For Eckhart, as for Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, God is ineffable: nameless, since no one can speak of, or understand, him.

The notion of the “incomprehensibility” or “ungraspableness” of God – Unbegreiflichkeit Gottes – found its ultimate expression in Fichte: the impossibility of forming a concept, a Begriff - something graspable, tangible - from the idea of God and his sphere. For Rosmini, too, negative theology, or the “ineffability” and “incomprehensibility” of God, is the universal figure for all religious phenomena: “there is, in the beginning, a natural mystery, the incomprehensibility of God, of whom the human mind can only have an abstract, negative, perception: this mystery lies at the root of all [forms of] religious worship” (*Del divino nella natura*, cit., p. 198).

The “ungraspableness” or “incomprehensibility” of God, the fact that he cannot be conceptualized, has thus opened the doors, in the history of Philosophy and theological thought, to two different and antithetical ways of approaching the question of the religious. Following the lure of negative theology, and starting from the unknowability of the idea of God, the idea that religious intuitions and feelings are germinating in the deepest recesses of the human soul has often been pursued, particularly in the theories of a “religious a priori”, found – in various forms – in the work of

thinkers like Cusano, Spinoza, Lessing, Kant, Fichte, Schleiermacher and Troeltsch. Or, on the other hand, the use of the term “religion” has been forbidden (by Karl Barth, for example), since it would, in its anthropomorphic arrogance, substitute an image (Bild) of God - fashioned for us to use and consume - for the revelation of the divine reality: in sum, in place of the “divine service” (Gottesdienst) to which people are introduced by faith, religion leads them to an “idolatrous service” (Götzendienst), and religion, in fact, can be equated with Unglaube, “non-faith”.

Barth’s prohibition of [the use of] the term “religion” finds an authoritative antecedent in the contrast – put forward by Hegel in his Vorrede to Hinrichs’ philosophy of religion, between the “animal” attaining of the divine, typical of “natural man”, and the “pneumatic” attaining of revelation, typical of “spiritual man”. The polemical target of Hegel’s contrast was, of course, Schleiermacher’s theory of religion, which was based on the mystical feeling of the absolute dependence of the individual on the transcendent which (s)he senses within; but this view, because of its idealtypical universality, is clearly also destined to establish itself as a hermeneutical key by which the development of the overall configuration of the relationship between philosophy and religion within the history of the culture can be understood.

In the antithesis between the a priori intuition of a “natural” man and the knowledge, mediated by revelation, of a “spiritual” man, one undoubtedly catches glimpses of another, far more radical, antithesis: that between a configuration in which the intuition of the religious is a prius, in both the temporal and the essential meaning of the term, of dogma and revealed forms, and one in which the scriptural and dogmatic canonization of revelation and faith are the starting point for any reflection on the divine. This is the antithesis synthesized by Karl Jaspers, in his debate with Rudolf Bultmann, comprising the conceptual pair Orthodoxie/Liberalität, “orthodoxy” and “liberality”, which are primarily distinguished by the different positions they adopt on the idea of revelation. The first holds that God has revealed himself in space and time on one occasion only, or in a sequence of acts, while the second states the necessity of a revelation which is constantly renewed, thus recalling both the free, unconditioned act through which the religious element becomes a constant living presence in the consciousness of all men, and the universality of the religious kerygma which, in order to authenticate its own existence, cannot allow any exclusive principle.

It is again Fichte, with his emphasis – shared by Lessing - on the human process of self-education, who has probably best understood the meaning of a religious revelation which universalizes and renews itself idem et alius. But Rosmini, too, contributed decisively to this dynamism of revelation, when he defined the “theocratic society” – or religious community – as the “universal society of mankind”, evidently suggesting that the ecclesia visibilis, the historically determined, imperfect Church, subject to error and semper reformanda, is just – the most superficial – part of that ecclesia invisibilis which is the Church understood as the societas universalis. And it is in this very societas universalis that, as we read in his Philosophy of Law, “the perfect theocracy is realized not just in Christ, but through Christ also in all men with whom the Christ concorporates, communing with them in his divinity, so that this [divinity] will prevail in them as it does in him” (Antonio Rosmini, Filosofia del diritto, a cura di Michele Nicoletti e Francesco Ghia, Tomo III, Città Nuova, Roma 2014 [«Opere edite ed inedite di Antonio Rosmini», vol. 28], p. 195).