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VIOLENCE IN RELIGIONS?

ABSTRACT

Fanaticism (from Latin: fanum, sacred site) is a pathology peculiar to religions, that seizes and uses divinity according to a religion's particular plan. Fanaticism is a disease that marks human history. Today religions are expressed with a renewed and dramatic strength.

Our essay strives to explore six ways to stem fanaticism.

The first is through dialogue the Catholic Church has opted for, especially following the Vatican II Council. The second is to respect the transcendence of God, assuming God will never be something which man or power can dispose of. The third is through the symbolic language of religious experience which does not claim to exhaust the Immense Object and then to appropriate it. The fourth consists in respecting the freedom of consciousness. By its very nature, the phenomenon of fanaticism is a collective and mass phenomenon that arises from critical judgement of consciousness that is submerged by social pressure. Undoubtedly, to have a personal consciousness is a valuable means of opposing fanaticism. The fifth lies in the distinction between political power and religion. The respect of the autonomy of political life avoids theocratic schemes that often prove to be fanatic. Politics inspired by laicity does not use religion for its interests and is not expected to be totalitarian; it recognises the very role of consciousness and religious values. The sixth and last way is to refuse whatever form of violence, in particular resorting to war in order to resolve conflicts. The Christian consciousness has come a long way in acknowledging that both ethical and holy wars do not exist; and only peace is holy.

INTRODUCTION

There are two formulas and two watchwords that are remote in time and equally deadly. My childhood memories bring back to mind the legend of emperor Costantine who in his dreams saw a cross with the following words engraved: «In hoc signo vinces - With this sign you will win». The cross, placed on shields, brought victory to the Roman army. In more recent years the even more fatal words: «Gott mit uns – God is with us» adopted by the Nazi army. If God is with us, who will dare to go against us? Our cause is worthy, even holy and blessed. The same type of words were said by a great Christian saint, Bernard: «Christ's soldiers fight God's battles fearlessly, and are not afraid to sin when killing the enemy... since as God's ministers they must seek revenge against the malefactors and praise the good people. Thus, when in fact a malefactor is killed, it is not considered a murder but what could be called a "*malicide*", Christ's avenger from evildoers, and a Christian defender» (PL 182, 924).

Such episodes of Christian history ought to be evoked in times marked by Islamic fanaticism so as not to forget that fanaticism is a disease that has polluted and continues to pollute the most diverse religious experiences: man's claim to have seized the Lord in order to use Him, and enlist Him in the army. Another generally known fact is that such disease has not even spared the disciples who followed Jesus who invoke a celestial fire to destroy an inhospitable village.

An adequate hermeneutics of the texts on great religious traditions does not authorise a drift towards fanaticism yet secular history is strewn with such examples. But can religious experience be non-fanatical? Our work strives to propose seven paths to a non-fanatical religious experience, seven paths so that one can say that «fierce faith distills violence» (E. Montale, D. Markus).

Moses said: «Now show me your glory». The Lord answered: «I will cause all my goodness to pass in front of you, and I will proclaim my name, the Lord, in your presence. I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy» adding, «But you cannot see my face, because no-one can see me and live», and He said, «There is a place near me where you may stand on a rock. When my glory passes by, I will put you in a cleft in the rock and cover you with my hand until I have passed by. Then I will remove my hand and you will see my back; but my face must not be seen» (Exodus, 33, 18-23).

This page, drawn from the New Testament, guides my work: the Lord's back, not his face, through symbolism the biblical text affirms that neither Moses nor any other man could come face to face and see the Lord, but only His «back»; there is no immediate evidence, only signs, indications and traces. In other words, God is inaccessible.

Other ancient philosophers speak of such inaccessibility: Heraclitus, in his fragment 86, wrote: «the Lord, whose oracle is in Delphi, does not say and does not hide, but indicates, giving signals». Plato too recognised that man has the ability to say what divine reality is not, rather than what it is. And in fact, the One «has neither name, nor discourse, nor science, nor feeling or opinion. Therefore, it cannot be called by name, expressed, used to make conjectures, as He is unknown, and no existence can perceive Him through the senses» (Parmenides, 142a). Like Beauty: «it is without a face, or hands, and no body parts befit. It too cannot be translated into words» (Convivio, 211b). Such stream of thought is also found in Plotinus. God, whom he refers to as the One, is a reality which is spoken about in the least appropriate way: «The One is inaccessible, because anything said, would be definite. But the one who is superior in everything, superior in thought, alone amid all things has no true name that distinguishes him or that pertains to others. He simply has no name, since nothing can be said about Him». Therefore, «We say the things that God is not, but what He is cannot be said» (Enneadi V, 3, 14). In the 5th century, the Pseudo-Dionigi once again took up the idea that the best way to speak of God is through negation. Not because He is void, but as He goes beyond, and transcends human qualities, which in Him are so eminent and superlative to be undescrivable in our language. «As we move from the bottom to transcendence, and approach the peak, discourse tapers off, until, when the peak is attained, it becomes completely mute; only then do we join the One who is indescribable» (*De Mystica Theology*, 3).

The ancient warning on the preservation of God's irreducible transcendence seems particularly fitting today as renewed forms of fanaticism have to be faced. Fanaticism is a disease which has spread into the most diverse spheres of existence. It can fall into categories like: political, ideological and sport fanaticism but its roots have been traced to the changes of religious consciousness. Fanum fanaticism, the sacellum of divinity, the place where it abides.

Fanaticism claims to put its hands on the place of the divine presence and thus possess it. We shall now cross the seven paths to a non-fanatical religion.

THE FIRST PATH: DIALOGUE

Two conditions are required to trigger authentic dialogue: recognising the value of one's interlocutor and being conscious of one's limits. Over the past fifty years the Catholic Church has moved along a dual track, securing its traditional self-sufficiency that led to the saying: «Extra void ecclesiam salus.»

Dialogue was made possible by a renewed consciousness of the Catholic Church: that reflection has reconciled its most authoritative expression.

The Church Christ wanted is to be authentically found in the Catholic Church, that is, it «exists» but does not identify itself with it exclusively. In such a way the Council recognises that non-Catholics are members of Christ's Body. If the Church of Christ subsists and does not purely and simply identify itself with the Catholic Church as it historically stands, it means the Catholic Church is already, and at the same time is not, the Body of Christ: «The Church already on earth is adorned by true holiness, though imperfect». For this reason, the Council affirms that the Church «always needs to be purified», «and must never neglect penitence and its renewal», «it never stops to renew itself». The journey the unity undertakes cannot be simply viewed as return of the «others» to the Church as it is now. Rather it involves an effort of conversion on everyone's part which accrues devotion towards a single Lord and Master. That is also why the Catholic Church, after initial resistance, has entered ecumenical dialogue, considering such a choice irreversible.

THE SECOND PATH: TO PROTECT TRANSCENDENCE

The second condition for a non-fanatical religious experience is to preserve God's transcendence and at the same time his manifesting himself to man, in other words His immanence. We are speaking of transcendent immanence or of immanent tran-

scendence. In fact, only by safeguarding God's transcendence can the fanatical capture, its expropriation be avoided, but such transcendence must be regarded, manifested and be in some measure immanent if it is to be a historically significant experience: they are the many places God has manifested himself, and his proximity.

THE THIRD PATH: GOD IN SYMBOLS AND PARABLES

Religious experience talks of God, not through the innumerable objects available to our cognition but through its privileged language that is symbolic. Symbolic language belongs, not exclusively but certainly in a privileged form, to human religious experience. If God is that principle that He is everywhere and at the same time is something other than what is manifested of himself – such alterity can only be explained through references and cross-references. Religious language can only be a language of ambiguity. When talking about a reality, it claims that, in a particular moment, it is everywhere and nowhere, found all over and inexorably nowhere.

Jesus as well in disclosing the Kingdom's mysteries, therefore a reality that is beyond our verification/control, has recounted parables. In fact: «With a many parables it announced them the Word according to what they could intend. Without parables he/she didn't speak to them» (Mc 3, 33-34).

Why does Jesus often uses parables in discourse? Why is the largest and most varied illustration of the Kingdom, and therefore of God's design for all of humanity and each one of us proposed in parables?

The social value of the religious symbols was recently in the spotlight attracting public attention. One such case for instance is the debate over the cross in Italian schools. France passed a law that regulates the use, among students, of the Islamic chador, the Jewish kippah and the Christian cross. The social nature of a religion also helps to understand the role symbols have in the public imagination.

THE FOURTH PATH: THE SUPREMACY OF CONSCIOUSNESS

Fanaticism is known to arise and spread in the places where there is less critical consciousness that is submersed by environmental pressures of the masses. Hence, cultivating a free and critical consciousness may be a way to check fanaticism.

To bring back consciousness in religious experience means to take it back to individual freedom. The claim to violate consciousness, a claim that is at the heart of fanaticism, contradicts the very nature of religious experience.

Religious experience comprises the relationship of God's free and independent initiative, God's supremacy and man's free-hearted response-consciousness.

Having established the pivotal role of consciousness, we must however recognise its «localised» character which led some thinkers – the so-called the «Masters of Suspicion», with Marx in particular, to propose a «passive» notion of consciousness.

At times however, consciousness rises to judge, oppose, or in fact object. Consciousness not only receives and is affected by environmental pressures but it is also capable of saying no, and not only to conform itself in a conformist way; one need only to consider certain counterculture phenomena, or turning points in the name of utopia that have brought changes over the course of history.

THE FIFTH PATH: MAN AS AN END, NOT A MEANS

Recognition of the «sacredness» of human life, in birth, death and suffering is singular, whereas fanaticism uses individuals and moulds them according to its violent death schemes. Therefore, the recognition of a person's dignity – as an end and not a means – can serve to check fanaticism. Since religious experience affirms the relationship between God and man's life, it safeguards its intrinsic dignity. And such dignity is independent of a person's qualities. But dignity and quality of life must not be confused. Never before as in recent years has the need to take on the quality of life been so marked. Undoubtedly a noble task! However the conviction that value and dignity of life correspond to the quality of life make a life without quality not worth living. Certainly, a newborn does not have many of the qualities that are only in his power. The elderly too and

«the alternatively abled» do not have certain qualities. These people, in a certain measure, are men and women lacking qualities. Are we then to conclude that their life is worthless and lacking dignity? Many have in fact reached such a conclusion. Needless to say, that quality of the life deserves every effort. Yet a call for the quality of life is often overly generic and belittling. Likewise, when quality of life and comfort correspond. Human needs, and therefore the qualities of life, also include a certain level of psycho-physical comfort. Though the most profound needs, the ones that confer value to existence are not to be set solely within the sphere of *having*, but also in that of *being*. The most authentic needs is the «Sense». Hence, it is important to react against the reduction of the values of life to the overall conditions of life, which though are extremely important, for its well-being. The value of life has to be safeguarded and consequently supported in all possible ways. Human life is not worthy for its qualities, on the contrary it is because life has an inner dignity, an intrinsic meaning, that it needs to be qualified to include all the necessary qualities. This has occurred and occurs with the disabled who for a long time have been segregated and marginalised. Today they are increasingly integrated in society since society has begun to recognise their dignity even in absence of certain qualities. The recognition of such dignity has led to improved intervention in integrating them. What was said about the disabled is true to all forms of «differences» that are a pretext to marginalise and of marginalisation. Religious consciousness, in affirming an essential relationship between the Creator and creatures institutes a criterion of value-dignity that precedes the presence of quality. To speak of God as the principle of life and to speak of men as the image of God implies that life is not something that we possess, but it is something that takes possession of us as it is a gift and an invitation to a human being's life itself. Only when an individual's value and dignity of life becomes an unobtainable asset can the person not be considered a means to be used, but an end, in fact unobtainable.

THE SIXTH PATH: A PERSONALIST APPROACH

Fanaticism, when it enters the political sphere, can generate, as is the case today, terrorism. Religious experience can serve to check fanatical trend borderlining with terrorism if it manages to

safeguard the distinction between politics and religion, thus distinguishing between Caesar and God.

Jesus' word is decisive as he says, «Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's» (Mt 22, 21). Through these words Jesus recognises Caesar's role as emperor, and therefore his political authority. The above-mentioned words do not authorise a religion to substitute the legitimate spaces of politics: theocracy is not authorised. Undoubtedly, Caesar is not everything, nor is politics, and the ruler must not be made absolute to pave the way for totalitarianism. Politics is the person: in the places where a personalist approach to politics is respected, the fanatical governments will be held back and a «virtuous circle» between ethical-religious values and politics can be established.

Recently Europe's unsuccessful attempt to recognise its Christian heritage within its Constitution illustrates the difficult relationship between politics and religion.

THE SEVENTH PATH: BLESSED PEACE BUILDERS

The last condition required for a non-fanatical religion is a net repudiation of all forms of violence, especially the violence of wars. The evolution of Christian consciousness towards an unconditional recognition of the value of peace and consequent repudiation of wars has not been easy, quite the opposite. But today, and above all owing to the untiring magisterium of John Paul II, that follow in the footsteps of John XXIII, the decision to pursue peace has become irreversible. In his Peace Day Messages, held each 1 January, Pope John Paul II has made an articulate reflection on the precepts of peace, in particular on personalism: «An individual is the foundation and the end of social order, with inalienable rights that do not come from the outside but originate from a person's individual nature: nothing and no one can eliminate them, no external constraints can destroy them since they are deeply rooted in human nature. Similarly an individual is not weakened by social, cultural and historical, conditioning since the human spiritual soul seeks to attain what transcends life's variable conditions. No human authority can oppose a person's individual realization», as stated in the 1988 Message. The text embodies all the essential elements of a personalist anthropology and its «political» consequences. The

decisive nucleus of a person is his/her inner-spiritual dimension. The appeal to recognise at heart and in one's consciousness the site from which peace can be built and wars are provoked is insistent: «The deep roots of contrast and tensions that mutilate peace and development are to be traced in man's heart. It is mostly the heart and people's attitudes that ought to be changed, yet this demands a renewal and a conversion on the part of individuals» (1986).

We can say that the peace cause is man's cause. In fact, «When man questions himself on peace, it evokes questions regarding the sense and condition of life, at a personal and a community level» (1982). The insuppressible propensity towards dialogue and therefore peace is embedded in a person's relational and dialogic structure: «Every man, whether a believer or not, though aware of his brother's possible obstinacy, can and must preserve sufficient trust in man and his abilities, in his ability to be reasonable, in his sense of righteousness, justice and equality, in his possibility of brotherly love and hope, never totally deviant, to resort to dialogue and a possible recovery» (1983). Dialogue, as a path towards peace, must be founded not only on opportunistic motivation but also on «the recognition of men's inalienable dignity»; dialogue is «the search for what is common in everyone, even amid tensions, contrasts and conflicts» (1983). The peace process must therefore be grounded on the dynamisms of men and women, recognising their true nature, sociability, vocation and their common path. It is the common human bonds that we all share that make it necessary for us to live in harmony. The dignity of each man is rooted in a common sense of belonging to human nature, the primacy of consciousness, the dialogical structure which make up the elements of a «grammar of the spirit» that is necessary when speaking of peace.

And at the base of the peace process lies obedience to human truth. Even the victims of injustice who feel inclined to surrender, to resignation or violence can recover their courage when confiding in «the hidden peace force of the men and women who suffer» (1980).

The Message of Benedict XVI for the celebration of the World Day of Peace 2007 addresses the «personalist» theme: the Human Person, the Heart of Peace. On the 40th Day, anchoring peace to people is certainly not a casual choice.