

Philosophy and Revelation

Some considerations inspired by *Fides et ratio*

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Knowledge of God and Earthly Goals

Implied in the general relationship between philosophy and religion are many complex problems. In this section, as well as the next one, we would like to take a look at three of them: (a) whether or not the knowledge of God should be today considered an extraphilosophic problem; (b) in what the task of 'philosophy of religion' consists, (c) whether or not there exists an insuperable difference between philosophy and religion so that a 'philosophical religion' would be an equivocation.

In a secularized West there is a rather widespread idea that knowledge regarding God does not belong to the culture by now definitely involved in worldly goals. That is something best left to the realm of private sentiment and what does not constitute knowledge. Analogous opinions sometimes circulate regarding the Bible which is acknowledged as the 'great Codex' from which the Western spirit has continued to draw sustenance for many centuries, but which is now considered surpassed, together with Christianity. An influential part of the culture of Western people looks forward to a postmodern environment which assumes the forms of a postmetaphysical, postbiblical and post-Christian era. In the process something decisive emerges, so that, in the relationship between Western culture and Christianity, the problem most worthy of being reflected upon is whether the first can really do without the second,

while it remains true that Christianity can do without Western culture. This of course assumes the great inadequacy of a secularized and laicized Christianity, often the precursor of atheism. Thus once again there is a choice to be made for or against Christianity. At this crossroads we meet the most arduous problem for presentday culture and theology: how to reconcile within existence free human goals, endowed with autonomy and determination, with a religious conscience. And how to do it in such a way that those goals, in the multiple variety of their worldly aspects, are fecundated by the divine and brought back to it. It remains one of the most important tasks of religions, especially of Christianity within the era of late modernity, to reconcile the position of worldly goals with religious knowledge and prayer, so that these are not rendered irrelevant by the increasing extension of worldly activities, which constitutes the spirit of the Enlightenment. Which is the proper balance between knowledge of God and earthly knowledge with its goals? And how does one achieve it within the present explosion of mundane knowledge? The answer does not seem to be possible within the mere ethical realm which in itself is the norm of the worldly; that would imply accepting the challenge on the favoured field of the Enlightenment, where with a choice laden with important consequences God is considered an aspect no longer pertinent to philosophy and prejudicially kept at the margins.

Be that as it may, the problem is real. While religion teaches that God has created everything, the subject sees now that it is man that has done and has continued doing everything through the multiplicity of his earthly praxis. The crisis of religious consciousness originates from its deprivation of the perception of God's activity. It is as if He were only on a far corner of a polygon while man occupies all the others. Conscience therefore remains in a sundered state: while it *believes* that everything is made by God, it *sees* at the same time that everything is made by man, so that the subject's very feeling of his dependency vanishes. The autonomy of the praxis tends to feed on the destruction of the religious sense and to separate itself from the truth of things, according to which the authenticity of what is worldly rests on the divine.

Christian conscience can answer by discerning, among mundane aims, the ones which are assumable under a transcendent viewpoint looking for reconciliation. Reconciliation is the word of Christianity: of the human and divine, of the intellect and of the heart, of freedom and grace. Reconciliation is a theological event, something that places God within the issue, not only an act which belongs to the mere moral order, as seems to happen in Hegel: "within the ethical there exists and is fulfilled a reconciliation of religion with the worldly, with reality".¹

A revealing statement! Within this Hegelian form of reconciliation the theological element seems to have vanished, replaced by the ethical. Since it establishes the universal, while the event of Christ is placed on the side of singularity, that kind of reconciliation is problematic because in it the fundamental actor remains excluded from the picture. Although Hegel individuates lucidly the problem of Christianity's conciliation with a modern culture which seems not to need God and remains outside religion, his proposed solution, which attempts to hold together finite knowledge and religious sentiment, the finite and the infinite, remains dubious because religious consciousness is placed below philosophical consciousness (we will return to this subject). Concerning the Enlightenment, it has hardly ever attempted the road of reconciliation, much preferring the method of separation (*autaut*). It resolves the conflict between intelligence and religion by simply abandoning religion, that is, letting go of one pole and holding on to just one. This way, however, the spirit remains in turmoil and strife: if I neglect religion I will eventually reach religious indifference, which is often the legacy of superficial souls. If I hold on to religious sentiments and reject the worldly, I run the danger of holding on to a dividing wall between one and the other and consequently the spirit will not assume a fundamental interest in religion. Neither option is recommendable: neither reconciles authentically because they both leave out some essential elements, among them mystical experience and the possibility of a revelation.

¹ G.W.F. HEGEL: *Lezioni sulla filosofia della religione*, Bologna: E. Oberti and G. Borruso, Zanichelli 1974, vol. I, p. 60.

Philosophy of Religion and Revelation

Religion is still considered nowadays, but we question ourselves less and less on the philosophy of religion: its very identity seems to have become problematic. We do know that it is an academic discipline that is traditionally inserted within the realm of moral and anthropological disciplines —a curious but revelatory attribute, because it suggests the idea that religion belongs to or is one and the same as morality. This collocation raises the general question as to whether or not the philosophy of religion possesses enough credentials to even exist as an autonomous discipline capable of founding itself epistemologically.

In order to clarify in a preliminary way this important issue, we need to ask ourselves: What is the philosophy of religion and what does it deal with? It revolves around the knowledge about God that man is capable of reaching and his relationship with Him. The primary object of religion is God and man's relationship with Him. That is also the object of the philosophy of religion. Religion and philosophy of religion, but secondarily and always in reference to God and man, are both interested in cult, in religious practices, sacrifices and the sacred.² Since the philosophy of religion revolves around a (natural) knowledge of God and man's relationship with Him through *religio*, which is at the very least piety and cult, it is not an autonomous discipline capable of founding itself; rather, it is valid as a section of metaphysics (and anthropology). It is in fact one of the tasks of metaphysics to investigate the impulse of man's reason towards God on two levels: within the framework of natural religion and without excluding the eventuality of a divine revelation. The possibility of an adequate philosophy of religion that does not stop at phenomenological investigation into the sacred, the religious, the numinous, rests on metaphysics, that is, on the capacity of the intellect to transcend the realm of the empirical in order to journey into the metaempirical.

² According to Aquinas, religion is essentially concerned with man's relationship to God, towards whom man is naturally ordained (*religio importat ordinem ad Deum*), see *S. Th.*, II-II, q. 81, a. 1.

Having introduced the terms of the problem it is easier to intuit that the philosophy of religion has also been involved in the crisis of metaphysics, to the point that it lacks its own proper object and has to rely on phenomenological elements which can be useful and propaedeutic but not decisive. If the object of the philosophy of religion is religion, understood as revolving around God and man's relationship with Him, then the discipline may be in danger of ending up in a disaster inasmuch as God, for centuries now, is no longer an object about which philosophy thinks it can affirm or negate anything. It considers Him unreachable, unknowable, something beyond the reach of the intellect. From this situation springs the attempt to change the very object of the discipline, which invents for itself new objects as it goes along, depending on the trends of the times, with a preference for the sacred or trying to attribute maximum value to the religious behaviour of man, but with a bad conscience, since the immense Object is never reached and that behaviour consequently is addressed to an 'x'.

All this is said without in any way denigrating the considerable contributions which have been offered by religious sociology and psychology, as well as by cultural anthropology which studies the religious habits of people. The fact that for a long while now philosophy turns towards God with increasing hesitation was recognized almost two centuries ago by Hegel with these powerful words: "There was a time when the whole of science was a science of God. Our era, on the contrary, can be characterized above all by the fact that it knows an infinite number of objects and nothing at all about God".³ The proliferation of specialized knowledge revolving around the finite has drastically reduced the area of knowledge about God. It is no longer strange that one knows nothing about God: on the contrary, proceeding *etsi Deus non daretur* is elevated to a methodological universal principle. Nevertheless, our purpose as philosophers, the very goal towards which we aim, is that of knowing being and, through being, God: not God as He is in his eternal essence, but at the very least that He exists; to know Him from far away, in the mist, indirectly through his created mirrors:

³ F.W.G. HEGEL: *Lezioni...*, vol. I, p. 64.

That is the concern of the highest part of metaphysics as well as that of philosophy of religion.

The highest concept of God that metaphysics, understood as natural theology, and the philosophy of religion can formulate is that of God as *ipsum esse per se subsistens*. God as being: that is a notion to which we can attain naturally. And with that notion we can attain to God as spirit and as thought, able to manifest Himself as *Deus absconditus* (a hidden God). This is the crucial hinge connecting metaphysics and philosophy of religion and which remains open to a possible Revelation. Since it is connected and dependent on metaphysics, the philosophy of religion cannot presuppose its object. Hence it finds itself in a more difficult condition than that of revealed Christian theology, which accepts its content from faith and Revelation. At this crossing comes forward the support of *Fides et Ratio*. By proclaiming the natural knowledge of God by the human intellect (and by metaphysics as a discipline), and by reconstituting its object (about the other side of its object, that is, man, there is no doubt), it makes possible once again the philosophy of religion. Not only that, it also suggests that it constitutes itself as an open discipline —open, that is, to a possible Revelation and therefore ready to complete itself as an anthropological metaphysics which individuates in man the radical ability to remain in wait for the hearing of a possible Revelation, should it happen. Thus the philosophy of religion, which is essentially a natural theology in union with an anthropological metaphysics, takes the position of a *praeparatio evangelica* in relation to the more general task of evangelical preparation concerning the whole of philosophy.

The other focal point of the encyclical (perhaps less developed than the one revolving around philosophy and its claim to truth) is the problem of Revelation without which there is no Christianity. *Revelation is by its intrinsic nature a selfrevelation*. In fact, when God reveals, He reveals nothing but Himself. He communicates Himself and His greatest selfcommunication is that of sharing His son with men. Before being a divine suggestion to man, a help for the journey of a limping reason, Revelation is essentially a self

Revelation, which is at the same time a revealing and a doubling of the veil, according to the double meaning of *revelatio*, in which occurs God's dialectic: He reveals Himself by hiding Himself, and He hides Himself in His Revelation. Revelation as *veritas semper indaganda* emerges as the place of contact and of confrontation between philosophical thinking and theological thinking (see *Fides et ratio*, n. 79), within a kind of circularity through which philosophy is guided by God's word towards new objects, and theology attends to the development of faith's understanding, asking and receiving the help of reason's energy. A hint that here we may have touched the most delicate nerve of the relationship between Christianity and modernity is the fact that two ecumenical councils within the span of one century attended to Revelation and dedicated to it their most important dogmatic constitutions: *Dei Filius* of Vatican I and *Dei Verbum* of Vatican II. Even today the issue is crucial and in this regard the Jewish philosophers (Buber, Rosenzweig, Lévinas) best elucidate its importance. A reflection on Revelation is something we cannot shirk, keeping in mind the two poles within which it takes place: that of man, inasmuch as he can potentially be a listener to a word that may be addressed to him by God,⁴ and that of God since He may freely decide to speak by carrying out an action which is a gratuitous selfcommunication to man; that is, grace.⁵ Here we might employ the term 'philosophy of Revelation', thus clarifying its significance. Theology is not born by having a philosophical look at theological objects, but rather by operating within a movement wherein the instrument of knowledge is faith, while philosophy

⁴ "Man is the entity who within his own history must have his ears open for an eventual historical revelation of God through the human word" (K. RAHNER: *Uditori della parola*, Turin: Borla 1988, p. 208). Also: "Man is the entity who, by freely loving, finds himself before a God of a possible revelation. Man listens to the word or to the silence of God in the measure in which he, by freely loving, opens himself to the message of the word or the silence of the God of revelation" (p. 136). A Philosophy is open when in its fundamental anthropology it shows that man is always, that is, by nature, predisposed to listen to a possible Revelation.

⁵ "It was pleasing to God, in His goodness and wisdom, to reveal Himself and manifest the mystery of His will, by which men through Christ, Word incarnate, in the Holy Spirit, have access to the Father and are made participants of the divine nature. In fact through this revelation the invisible God in His great love speaks to men as if they were friends and dwells among them" (*Dei Verbum*, n. 2).

carries out a task of cooperation by which it is elevated and almost 'transubstantiated'. Aquinas writes that "*Qui utuntur philosophicis documentis in sacra Scriptura redigendo in obsequium fidei, non miscent aquam vino, sed convertunt aquam in vinum*" (Those who employ in the Holy Scripture philosophical documents, bringing them in faith obedience, do not mix water with wine, but transform water into wine).⁶

When the idea of a Revelation is not abolished a priori, but remains an open possibility, then the idea is established that it can bring something new to man and to his mind, disclosing to him unexplored realms. One of the most significant sentences of the encyclical, perhaps the most pregnant and characteristic, is this: "Revelation introduces into our history a universal and ultimate truth which stirs human mind to ceaseless effort" (n. 14). To open oneself to Revelation is to open oneself to the Incarnation, to the cross. There is a powerful stimulus to philosophical thinking in the *Verbum caro factum est* and the *In cruce unus de Trinitate mortuus est*. Taking a stance of openness towards a possible Revelation within history, reason does not contradict itself, rather it takes up a stance of critical listening for something which could stimulate it and give it a tension that would allow it to express its optimal yield: in other words, something that puts the subject in motion for a neverending journey, in which also theoretical contemplation has its place. At the risk of offending rationalist ears, we cannot fail to mention here the inexhaustible speculative solicitations which can be derived from the content of dogma. Altogether we can now easily understand how *Fides et Ratio* invalidates the idealistic and neoidealistic thesis according to which religion constitutes an inferior form of philosophy, because it knows as myth and representation what philosophical knowledge knows as conceptually and consciously expressed truth.

In this regard we encounter some difficulties raised by presentday thought. Today it rarely declares itself explicitly atheistic; rather it stays strictly within the finite and, when it turns toward the divine, it

⁶ Sancti Thomae AQUINATIS: *In Boetii de Trinitate*, q. II, a. 3, ad 5um.

understands it in two ways: (a) at times in the version of a polyvalent presence of the divine as in paganism, that is, within a propensity towards polytheism: not God but the gods, the pantheon; or (b) within the categories of deism, as a faraway God, indifferent to human history, expelled from the world and not acting on it. Consequently the essence of religion becomes ethics as interested in interhuman relationships. Within this instance one prescind from any knowledge that may come from God, implying that such knowledge does not constitute a fulfilment of any kind, neither is it something relevant for the management of life. In relationship to ethics the idea is then developed of a minimum moral common denominator, a sort of universal ethics, which claims to be more valid and higher than religious confessions, placed at the same level and assessed as equivalent by an intrinsic pluralism. By considering philosophical truth a path which prepares for and leads to the acceptance of Revelation, *Fides et Ratio* invites us to take up again the study of God as the highest object of knowledge: God as being, spirit, love; a God who reveals Himself and lives in His people.

Philosophical Religion or Religious Philosophy?

While a philosophy of religion (with the abovementioned caveats) is legitimate, and so is a *religious philosophy* capable of being inspired by and of integrating in its fabric the religious element, a *philosophical religion*, understood according to paradigms devised by Hegel and Gentile, has little foundation: these are philosophes that wholly incorporate within the movement of reason the transcendent content of religion, digesting it, dissolving it within their speculation, at best letting it alone for the use of ordinary uneducated people. This approach eliminates faith as a source of knowledge distinct from mere reason. But there are no reasons to think of philosophy as the supreme and complete exposition of an absolute system of truth, as both Hegel and Gentile thought. If we look at Gentile we will see that his constant position was that myth resolves itself in reason, and religion in philosophy. He never renounced his understanding of actualism as a kind of thought capable of 'reducing' art and religion, or his appraisal of religion as, at best, an inferior kind of philosophy (*philosophia inferior*) which

must remain such and therefore stay away from any attempt at modernization and renewal (that explains his strong opposition to Catholic modernism), or else it must transcend and transform itself in philosophy. Religion for Gentile begins where the critical process of reason stops. Revelation can reveal nothing that reason does not already know.⁷

We would like to demonstrate now that philosophical religion—understood as one with an immanent genesis of all its content from reason, with a full resolution of its content in the concept—is an equivocation. To trace the parameters of its impossibility we must invoke the profound life of the self, that subjectivity which is such because of its mystery and its profundity, without forgetting that any of God's messages to man are first addressed to his subjectivity, to that precariousness that the self carries within himself, to that puzzling mystery that is the individual, every individual. Religion, and in a very special way Christianity, is an ultimately non-objectifiable relationship between two persons, between an interiority and another interiority, between the human subject and the divine Subject; *it is all in the relationship among subjects*. God is a 'Thou' not a 'him' or, worse, an 'it'. Our first affirmation will be this: individual subjectivity and its profound experience, within which the religious phenomenon shows itself, is ultimately to be placed outside the grasp of the concept and therefore outside the grasp of philosophy. The concept is by its own nature objectifying; that is, *it knows subjects as objects*: to know through the concept means to objectify, to universalize, to go in the opposite direction of knowledge of the individual subjectivity as such. Conceptual

⁷ In Hegel, the *revelatio*, which reveals and veils, has simply become *Offenbarung*, open and full manifestation, so that the speculative concept of God as spirit allows one to know the intimate necessity that He reveal Himself: "God reveals himself. To reveal oneself means a conversion of infinite subjectivity, a judgment of infinite form, self-determination, to be for another: this self-manifestation belongs to the very essence of spirit. A spirit that does not manifest itself is not a spirit. God as spirit is essentially this: to be for another, to manifest oneself" (*Lezioni sulla filosofia della religione*, vol. II, p. 250). Religion understood as the place of the necessary manifestation of God cannot but dissolve the mystery, which is exactly the way by which one attempts to reach the *episteme* and thus destroy *sophia*.

knowledge, which is necessary and indispensable, pays a high price in not being able to reach the subject in its individuality. If the mystery of subjectivity is unreachable by the knowledge through the concept, it is also unreachable by philosophy; it is outside it.

The unsurmountable limitation against which philosophy finds itself is due to the fact that it knows without any doubt subjects but it knows them as objects, it is completely within the relationship intelligence-object, while religion is within the relationship between subject and subject. That is why every philosophical religion and every philosophy which claims, as Hegel's does, to assume within itself and to integrate religion, is in the final analysis a mystification.⁸ Within a philosophical religion the relationship to God is not an interpersonal relationship, where God is before man and the two subjects can communicate.⁹ Beyond this objectifying knowledge reached through the concept, there is a non-objectifying kind of knowledge of subjectivity which can reach the subjectivity of another individual. It moves on the wings of empathy, of connaturality and love. This kind of knowledge, understood as a non-alienating relationship, meets the requirements of a very profound desire on the part of the subject of not losing one's self, of finding a meaning in life, *and to be recognized*: that there may be someone in the world or out of it who recognizes me in my wounded and precarious individuality; someone who knows me better than I know myself, who looks with mercy and renders me justice. Perhaps man can do without the desire to be happy, but he cannot renounce that of being recognized, or the desire that somebody should render him justice. Hell is not being recognized by anybody.

Beyond a deluded philosophical religion, faith and philosophy have much to communicate to each other. Here we can recall a

⁸ J. MARITAIN: *Breve trattato dell'esistenza e dell'esistente*, Brescia: Morcelliana 1965, p. 58.

⁹ Taking a rather hard look, M. Buber writes that "Philosophy begins with a decisive prescinding from its concrete situation, i.e., with an elemental act of abstraction" *L'eclisse di Dio*, Milan: Comunità 1983, p. 56.

famous thought by Adorno as a way of stimulating this reflection. It concludes his *Minima Moralia*:

The kind of philosophy which alone can justify itself face to face with despair, is the attempt to consider all things the way they would show themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no other light but that which emanates from the redemption of the world: everything else ends in an *a posteriori* construction and belongs to technique. It is a question of establishing the perspectives within which the world disarranges, estranges itself, reveals its cracks and crevices as it will one day appear, deformed and lacking under the messianic light.¹⁰

There is a great divergence here between the perspective of this passage of Adorno and the idea of a strictly philosophical religion. How can they communicate with each other? Perhaps through the question of death which is implicit in Adorno and which philosophy cannot avoid. Here one remembers Gentile once again and his reflections on death which close *Genesi e struttura della società* (*Origin and Structure of Society*). The two perspectives communicate on the question of death even if they confront it differently. If we investigate their reasons, the answer would be this: within a rationalistic philosophical religion there is no real overcoming of death. That kind of philosophy either avoids the problem of death or places it in the background, resorting to the cruel assertion that 'everything that exists deserves to die (or is worthy of death)', by which according to Engels one would recognize the powerful and authentic soul of Hegelian dialectic. Here we have not a simple awareness of the general declining and the vanishing of entities, but a universal law; that is, the *deserved and due destination of everything to death*. With this reference to death as something ontologically deserved there appears the idea of existence as an *ontological fault* intrinsic to it rather than as an event which comes after because of a disobedience due to free will. Consequently philosophy, for which the theme of *meditatio mortis* seems to be

¹⁰ T.W. ADORNO: *Minima Moralia*, Turin: Einaudi 1954, p. 235 f.

something which it cannot do without, owing to the perspectives it can disclose and the question on the beyond that it can raise, runs the risk of being intrinsically tied to death, since it posits everything as worthy of death without exceptions and without residues of transcendence. A philosophical religion pays the price of being satisfied with the enigma of evil, by bringing it back to a universal guilt and finally to the mortality of everything. In Adorno's statement appears a different perspective because he, without forgetting philosophy's task to relate to death, looks at it from the standpoint of redemption, in an attempt to consider being not only from the perspective of its declining and perishing, but also from the perspective of what could happen to it under the impact of the messianic redemption.

Postmodern Philosophy as 'Praeparatio Evangelica?' Five Characters

In the relationship between philosophical knowledge and Revelation two significant issues address us. First, can we generally think of philosophy as evangelical preparation (*praeparatio evangelica*), that is, as an area of knowledge predisposing one to the kind of listening which is open, friendly, not prejudgmental of the Christian message? *Fides et Ratio* answers the question positively, basing itself on the experience of St Justin and of Clement Alessandrian (see n. 38). Second, more particularly, can we consider postmodern philosophy within the horizon of *praeparatio evangelica*? Has not such a thought, in its numerous manifestations, declared itself atheistic or antitheistic? Is it not currently on the road to nihilism, or at the very least does it not befriend it? Various indications and signs would suggest an affirmative answer to these questions.

On the other hand, it is not the philosopher's task to prepare the daily agenda for the future: it is enough that he carry the burden of the concept. We would already have made some progress if we could simply determine what we mean by evangelical preparation. In having recourse to this expression we are employing an ancient concept as employed by Clement Alexandrian, who understood

Greek philosophy as a path and a journey that prepares one for the reception of the Gospel: something similar can also be found in Augustine in respect of Platonic philosophy (see *De civitate Dei*, I, VIII). For Clement the 'Testament' utilized by the Gentiles was philosophy. It justified the Greeks who, according to Clement, in some way perceived the two fundamental truths about God as creator and providence of the universe. It needs to be remembered here that this thesis was disputed by the gnostics and the Marcionists, who understood philosophy as a diabolic sort of wisdom given to man by the fallen angels. Philosophy and knowledge were regarded as fruits of the snake.¹¹ One can individuate this kind of philosophy which prepares the way for the announcement of the Gospel as a natural equivalent to the task of John the Baptist who prepared the way to the Word: he who prepares the way removes the major obstacles so that the journey be not tortuous. This idea of Clement could be valid today too, as long as we can identify the most urgent form of evangelical preparation which philosophy can offer. If I question myself on the issue I begin to see that this preparation should include a recovery of the sense of truth and of God, as well as the ability to remove from the ground the major obstacles, among which nihilism, which has shattered not only the idea that philosophy could be valid as *praeparatio evangelica*, but also another 'traditional' task which understands philosophy as a cure and a medicine for the soul.

In respect of Clement's horizon, which confronted the ancient world as it was before the coming of Christ, we of course live under different historical circumstances, since the Gospel has already been announced. Therefore the subject of a preparation by philosophy

¹¹ "Before the Lord's coming, philosophy was necessary for the Greek's justification, now it is useful to lead souls to God, since it is a propaedeutic for those who arrive at faith through demonstration ... God in fact is the cause of all beautiful things, but of some in a special manner, such as the Old and the New Testament, and of others in a secondary manner, such as philosophy. And perhaps philosophy was a gift especially for the Greeks before the Lord would call them also: since it led the Greeks to Christ as the Law does for the Hebrew. Now philosophy remains as a preparation which places on the right path he who is perfected by Christ himself" (CLEMENT: *Stromata*, I (5), 28). We should add here that in Clement's view the Greeks learned many doctrines from the Jewish prophets.

cannot be understood in a mode substitutive or surrogative of something that is not there yet, rather it should be understood in a cooperative and opening mode: to prepare for the journey by not placing obstacles in the way to something which has already manifested itself. In a more determinative fashion, this means that philosophy should not adulterate the sense of the true and of the good, and should so operate that the subject is steered in those directions. In trying to understand how philosophy can undertake a task of evangelical preparation, there are different paths and methodologies which could be apt for the purpose. Our way will adopt a narrative method which, however, encompasses philosophical potentials. We will turn to characters of past history and will claim that from their example could issue a permanent inspiration for the understanding of evangelical preparation and the cooperation between faith and reason. We will choose persons who are capable of incarnating philosophy and faith in their purest form. Who is/are the representative(s) of philosophy? Who is/are the representative(s) of faith? We will recall before the mind's eye five characters: Socrates, Jesus, Pilate, Abraham and Odysseus/Ulysses, and will observe their behaviour. Socrates has traditionally been recognized as the representative, and in some sense the father, of philosophy, worthy of the kind of love that the pupil Plato nurtured for him and that never failed, within that nostalgic wonder which one day surprised him in the encounter with the master. Even Nietzsche, who had an adversarial relationship with the cyclopic eye of Socrates, to which he attributed the dissolution of Greek tragedy and the birth, with philosophy, of a disproportionate theoretical optimism, recognizes Socrates' exceptional relevancy (see *The Birth of Tragedy*). In Jesus lives the eternal incarnate Word, or at the very least an exceptional personality, a great moral teacher, as Kant recognized. If we now observe attentively these two characters, similar in several aspects, something draws our attention and stimulates our reflection. Socrates *questions*, Christ *is questioned*. The Athenian goes around the public square, the agorà, asking questions and frequently irking his interlocutors, to whom he appeared to be an inopportune gadfly. He goes around asking questions such as What is justice? What is the good? What is happiness? Philosophy was born out of these questions, as well as

those of the preceding Ionic philosophers. So Socrates questions. Jesus, on the other hand, is questioned along the byways of Galilee and Judaea. He is questioned by the Scribes, by the Pharisees, by the rich young man, by the people, by his mother, by the High Priest, by the apostles, by the disciples, and so on. He is questioned because he is expected, with his answers, to give testimony to the truth.

Socrates is not the truth, hence he questions. He questions to know and also to correct, by a critical dialogue, unfounded opinions. Christ's interlocutors intuit that in him there is something awesome and mysterious, perhaps truth itself; therefore they question him. He who questions does not know already. He is searching. He who gets questioned, already knows and is questioned on what he knows. This introduces a divergence between the two characters which is the difference between philosophy and the divine. Philosophy searches for God but it is not divine: it does not know but wants to know. To this search it dedicates its best efforts and rarely arrives at a condition of quietude. Here surfaces another difference as to the character of the questioning: Socrates asks questions with the purpose of arriving at the truth of ethical essences. Ultimately Christ gets questioned about himself:

"Who are you?" they ask him. They also ask him, "What is truth?" The question of identity and the question of truth come together and merge into each other. That was the question of Pilate during Jesus' trial. Pilate asks: "What is truth?" (*quid est veritas?*), but does not wait for an answer. He is too busy. He is in a hurry to conclude the trial in any way whatever, so as not to displease too much those whose favour he courts and whose support he does not want to lose. He is perhaps the very prototype of so many important people who have always something urgent waiting for them and nothing really essential to do. Pilate is distracted and therefore does not bother to wait for an answer. He turns to the rabble and asks: "What do you want that I should do with him?" He asks, but not in relation to the truth. Truth has no answer for those who are in a hurry.¹²

¹² The question of Pilate —What is truth?— is not badly or inappropriately put: it was in fact *the* question. We must chide Pilate as a man and as a philosopher, not

If there is a teaching that stands out from the dialogue between Jesus and Pilate, it is the invitation to peace and quiet: to the reiteration of the question and the waiting for the answer with patience and perseverance. Socrates is tireless in his questioning, and his questioning is authentic, not fake and rhetorical. He is in no hurry. Perhaps he is a contemplative. As a matter of fact he is one, as the episode of Potidea attests. There, during a military campaign, he remained transfixed in uninterrupted reflection for a whole day and night, to the amazement of friends and soldiers (see *Symposium*, 220ff).

What should we think of Jesus, of Socrates and of Pilate? Jesus who is questioned on his divinity is beyond philosophy and faith. Socrates seems to be the representative of philosophy. Pilate is open to more than one interpretation. He is authority unfaithful to its task. Perhaps he is the curious who asks negligent questions, quite differently from the way Socrates asks them. While we have found the representative of philosophy, we have not yet found that of faith. It cannot be either Pilate or the Word Incarnate. As we have not recalled Abraham yet, the dialogue between philosophy and faith cannot go forward. Abraham is the father of all believers; he believed against all hope (*spes contra spem*). "Abraham believed, therefore he is young, since he who always hopes for the best thing, he grows old because he will be disillusioned from life; he who always expects the worst, he will grow old prematurely; but he who believes retains an eternal youth", wrote Kierkegaard in *Fear and Trembling*.

Our 'staging' could well come to a conclusion here, having determined who is the representative of philosophy and who is the knight of faith. However a scruple of faithfulness and adhesion to the events of history leads us not to stop at this already significant conclusion. It is our turn to ask now whether we can find in Socrates

because he raised the question, but for not having waited for an answer. It would not be too daring to conjecture on what Jesus would have answered had Pilate really been interested in the issue: I am the truth, or else: do as I do; conform yourself to my person. This possible answer of Jesus confirms the idea of truth as conformity or adequation, expanding it beyond the still necessary declarative element.

as father of philosophy and in Abraham as father of all believers some analogous, fundamental attitudes, so that by bringing closer the two characters we bring closer philosophy and faith. In the behaviour of Socrates and Abraham, something special and capable of establishing a secret affinity between the two comes to the fore and surprises us. It is the obedience to a voice addressed to them and from whose listening issue two quite different outcomes. In order to obey the voice of conscience and not to disobey the laws of the *polis*, Socrates remains in jail in Athens, drinks the hemlock and confronts death. In order to obey God's voice, Abraham leaves his native land and goes forward. *One stays, the other goes*. One stays in jail, the other leaves behind his native place. One goes towards death, the other towards the unknown. *They both left a thing behind and took a thing with them*. Socrates left behind his desire to go on living and took with him the hope of immortality and of being able to continue philosophizing in the Ades. Abraham, by his readiness to sacrifice Isaac, left behind all human standards of common sense and took faith with him: a faith that was pure and absolute, since no request of that kind, no sacrifice of his son was ever required of Socrates. However, they are both united by the fact that they both listened to a voice which spoke to them and they both obeyed it. It is the same voice that calls and speaks in every man. Neither Socrates nor Abraham criticized, refused or emptied out the appeal addressed to them: by submitting they tried to understand; they were far from the pride of a thought centred upon itself which repulses anything that does not fit its own measurements. In culminating acts of their own existence, the representative of philosophy and the knight of faith considered that it was not possible to avoid obedience to a voice. They listened and they obeyed. So, with postmodern philosophy, even if scarred by so many sceptical turns and so many formalistic temptations, it can function as *praeparatio evangelica* if it is able to recover a point of contact with Socrates' testimony, listening to his teaching, without losing sight of that of Abraham. To find a point of contact once again can here mean two things: not to interrupt the search too soon and too cheaply, that is, not to be too easily satisfied, as Socrates was not too easily satisfied, in dialoguing about truth; not to lose sight of the fact that Socrates repudiates the accusation of

atheism which Meleto and others raised against him. The father of philosophy was not an atheist: 'But here is the hour to go away: I to die, and you to live. Who of us goes towards the better part is obscure to everyone except God' (*Apology*). Socrates had intuited that being in the highest sense is being forever.

Now, if Socrates, as Kierkegaard thought (see his *The sickness unto death*) is at a higher stage than modern philosophy, should we not add that Abraham is at a higher stage than Socrates? He is at a higher stage not according to an order of merit but as to election, since Abraham intuited something of the mystery of the Cross. From Socrates it was requested that he accept the unjust death sentence of the city, from Abraham it was requested that he sacrifice his only son. From whom was more requested? To the man from whom more was demanded and a greater hope was requested, was given a presentiment of the Cross. In the Cross (and in the Incarnation) we have the culmination of Revelation which happens 'with events and words which are intimately connected' (*Dei Verbum*, n. 2). Socrates and Abraham are great men and their greatness has deep analogies, but between them there is the Cross, of which Abraham has an obscure intuition when he consents to obey the request to sacrifice Isaac. No dialectical structure, no rational argumentation can take away that Cross because it is beyond the human and beyond philosophy.

But our journey is not over yet. Besides Jesus and Pilate, Socrates and Abraham, Odysseus/Ulysses also has something to tell us. Once again this character points towards Abraham, since they both went on a journey and confronted the unknown, albeit for different purposes: Abraham to get out of his native land, Ulysses to return there and once more dwell in the place which is origin and spring (*origo and fons*) of all that is good and of family sentiments. Abraham is impelled by God's calling, the Dantean Ulysses by a great desire for 'virtue and knowledge': there is with him a passionate thirst for knowledge, capable of challenging death itself and giving testimony to the natural desire to know. He too, like Socrates, is an image of philosophy which must always return to its origins. To accomplish this task, philosophy is compelled to carry

out a long, risky journey. He is led not by a vain *curiositas*, but by a desire to know, to go beyond the pillars of Hercules. Ulysses has nothing of the Nietzschean *Übermensch*. He is a symbol of human research, of the philosophy without faith, which magnanimously and valiantly risks everything, while remaining ultimately unable, by its own unaided strength, to go beyond those pillars. What does this character have to teach us? In answering, I beg to differ from Lévinas, for whom there is in Odysseus the Greek a dubious element identifiable in his desire to return to his point of departure, that is, to origins. Lévinas understands this attitude as the paradigm of an isolated subjectivity, closed upon itself, identical with itself, perhaps indifferent to the other's face.

There is, however, another possible interpretation. Both Abraham, leaving his native town, and Odysseus, attempting to return to his, risked all for truth. Given the fact that no word of God was addressed to Odysseus, he had to journey and take decisions by his own wit, attentive to the eternal voice of nature and to those affections which powerfully impelled him to a return to his native land by overcoming numerous dangers. All by himself, he risked all for the truth of origin: *he won and he lost*. He won by holding on steadily to his desire for knowledge; on the other hand, he lost the challenge of the unknown. Perhaps this is philosophy's destiny: to walk part of the way of the journey but never the whole: to know something and to be ignorant of something. To be able to journey further, it must ally itself and unite its cognitive energy with that emanating from Revelation. When or how this will happen in the postmodern world we do not know, but we hope that philosophy will at least walk with its own strength and trample on the solid ground of being! That is the condition of conditions and it bears many names: realism, sense of being, intellectual intuition of being, and so on. A philosophy oriented in that direction is by its own intrinsic nature open to the transcendent; it conceives of man as structurally predisposed to listening for a possible Revelation and overcomes the narrow finitude of the criterion of immanence. At this point we could ask the delicate question as to which and how many are the contemporary philosophies who respect the abovementioned conditions. When wonder before being is authentic, philosophy finds

itself on the right ground to encounter the infinite wonder of the Incarnation, of the God-man. On this threshold the *praeparatio evangelica* is over and gives way to the *itinerarium personae in Trinitatem* (the journey of the person in the Trinity).

One could ask why, in determining the concept of philosophy as *praeparatio evangelica*, we turned to ancient characters and not to postmodern authors. This attitude could involve two different positions, both regrettable: that we are not sufficiently informed about postmodern thought, or that this thought—oriented towards scepticism, historicism and criticism of the idea of truth—is not suitable to promote a real evangelical preparation. On this matter some short reflections were suggested at the end of the previous chapter. Here it is opportune to add that, except for some ethical positions, postmodern radical thinkers seem inhabited by an intense rage against reason and by an antirealism which place them in the shadow of forgetfulness of being. Some of them maintain the death of philosophy, the final crisis of reason and the separation between faith and philosophy. Only in a very peculiar way, and perhaps as a dialectically negative approach, could *praeparatio evangelica* be conceived in this area. In a kind of apophatism faith should be born as a cry which climbs on the ruins of any human certainty. A different approach can be found in some scientists who ask about cosmos, its laws and origins, its evolution. They do not refuse to bring their research into contact with philosophy and theology. The problems that over the past three decades interested the dialogue between science and faith (such as the inadequacy of reductionism and of mechanicalism) do not constitute an evangelical preparation in a full sense, but at least do not contradict it.

To some extent *praeparatio evangelica* begins and ends up with the question on truth. The Pilate's question is vital: *quid est veritas?* He did not wait for the answer. Anyway a silent, wordless answer was given by the Tried, and it is the very same question of Pilate, only differently read. In fact the anagram of "*Quid est veritas*" is '*Est vir qui adest*'. Truth is *Logos*.

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