

# Spirituality, a Search for Meaning

Patronal Feast Day Speech  
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Honorable audience,

In the philosophical-theological approach of the human essence, one obvious thing is that man is multidimensional. And the spiritual component is predominant. It differently colors all the harmonics of the human being. From the outset of philosophical reflection, it became clear that man had immediately grasped himself as a metaphysical project, constantly engaged in a *BEYOND* that provided a meaning and an ontological founder. Life here on earth is apprehended as a passage, a transhumance towards another mode of existence. Spiritual life instills in our daily life, be it happy or tragic, existential connotations transcending spatio-temporal coordinates, and putting man in front of a destiny that goes beyond particular determinations.

Needless to say that nowadays the term "spirituality" (from the Latin word *spiritus*, spirit), is alas and alack! laden with plain, diverse and contradictory connotations, especially from the Age of Enlightenment. On this point, one could quote, among others, the German Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch (1885-1977), in his famous work *Das Prinzip Hoffnung* (The Principle of Hope), published in three volumes from 1954 to 1957. Bloch advocates, in his project of a new society, to transpose the immense treasures, buried in the religions which he considers as the repositories of the most perfect utopias, in a secularized thought, preaching a Kingdom of Heaven without God, deposing God from his heavenly throne and putting man on the pedestal of the historical and operational absoluteness in a finite time. And the expected new Messiah is reduced to an economic and political savior, nothing more.

Still, spirituality, taken in a religious setting, which is actually the original setting, means to be "connected" (*religare* "to connect" in Latin which would have given the term *religion*) to a "Being Superior", to a being upstream and downstream all that exists, to a "God", to a "Divine". In this very precise context, spirituality unfolds in a relational and personalized field with this "Superior Being". It includes all the intellectual and behavioral practices that bring man closer to this "Sublime Being" who is "Spirit" by nature and gives to any intimate relationship with Him a spiritual dimension, liberating the gravity of matter in which the man is surprised to be drowning. Thus, prayer, meditation, mortifications, asceticism, acts of charity, forgiveness, reconciliation, universal love, inner peace, moral rigor, are presented as appropriate "techniques", indispensable to transmute the life of man into a vectorial journey towards a beyond, the keystone of all existence, antidote to destructive time and indirectly derivative to the absurd and nonsense.

On this subject, Mircea Eliade, a great explorer of the religious subconscious, leaves us with striking analysis, revealing the abyssal structure of the "self" of man. He says in full: "For the historian of religions, every rite, every myth, every creed or divine figure reflects the experience of the sacred [...]. "The awareness of a real and meaningful world is intimately linked to the discovery of the sacred. Through the experience of the sacred, the human mind has grasped the difference between what is revealed to be real, powerful, rich and meaningful, and what is devoid of these qualities, that is to say the chaotic and dangerous flow of things, their appearances and disappearances fortuitous and void of meaning "(The Nostalgia of Origins, 1969, pp. 7 ff.). In short, the "sacred" is an element in the structure of consciousness, not a stage in the history of this consciousness. At the most archaic levels of culture, living as a human being is in itself a religious act, because nutrition, sex life and work have a sacramental value. In other words, being - or rather becoming - a man means being "religious" (ibid., P.9).

In the wake of Mircea Eliade's approach, the Bulgarian-French philosopher and psychoanalyst Julia Kristeva conducts a striking analysis of man's natural need to "believe". She wonders, "Is not it surprising that our secularized societies have neglected this incredible need to believe? [...] It (analytic listening) is content to open perspectives of observations and theorizations, which, by allowing a more complex understanding of the psychic apparatus, reveal how much the need to believe is constitutive of the speaking subject, 'before' any specific religious construction, and of course within secularization itself. A 'building site' barely sketched, and it is up to us to continue building. Because I am convinced that by taking seriously the need

to believe pre-religious, we could better face not only the fundamentalist drifts of religions in the past and until today, but also dead ends of secularized societies. "

In his famous speech at the *Collège des Bernardins* on Monday, April 9, 2018, President Emmanuel Macron rectifies the false trajectory of secularism in France. Straightforwardly, he says: "I consider that secularism certainly does not have the function of denying the spiritual in the name of the temporal, nor of uprooting from our societies the sacred part that nourishes so many of our fellow citizens ... I believe that politics, so disappointing that it may have been in the eyes of some, so desiccating sometimes in the eyes of others, needs the energy of committed people, your energy. It needs the energy of those who give meaning to action and who place in their hearts a form of hope. More than ever, political action needs what the philosopher Simone Weil called effectiveness, that is to say, this ability to bring into reality the fundamental principles that structure the moral, intellectual life and in the case of spiritual beliefs. This is what French General de Gaulle, Georges Bidault, Robert Schuman and Jacques Delors brought to French politics, as well as the great French consciences who have enlightened political action such as Clavel, Mauriac, Lubac or Marrou and it is not a theocratic practice nor a religious conception of power that has emerged but a Christian demand imported into the secular field of politics. "

Under his analytical scalpel, President Macron decrypts the process of moral degeneration of our current societies, pushing people to cultivate disengagement and carelessness, and thereby triggering a kind of fatal hemorrhage of the being. He points out that "what strikes our country ... it is not only the economic crisis, it is relativism; it is even nihilism; that's all that suggests is not worth it. No need to learn, no need to work, and no need to reach out and commit to serving more people. The system, gradually, locked up our fellow citizens in "the good for what".

Admittedly, the metaphysical and spiritual dimension of man is eroded more and more by atheistic and nihilistic theories, and therefore reductionist of the original multidimensionality of man. The latter is surprised to be reduced to a diminished ontological status, manifesting itself as the result of the intrinsic evolution of matter, vigorously controlled by the notion of chance. No finality, no existential project presiding over this incommensurable existence besieged by many unknowns and mysteries. Nihilism, on the other hand, exasperates the semantic problematic of being, putting the nothingness in alpha and in omega of existence. The culture of the

absurd thus reaches dangerously high levels, causing man to sadly experience total nonsense and spleen.

In the American Archives of Psychiatry, an issue was devoted to the testimony of cancer patients, collected in a hospital equipped expressly to admit patients in the final phase. It was found that the atheist patients suffered terrible pain, with terrible anguish, void of any meaning. While the believing patients lived a lower degree of anxiety and conferred on their suffering a spiritual dimension, transforming their ordeal into pain of childbirth. They saw in the degradation of their physics a gradual transition to an ontologically different existence, thus joining what Teilhard de Chardin said on this subject, "if I die, I change my state". This belief in the afterlife allowed them to drastically reduce the degree of anxiety and maintain the flame of expectations of a future life, much better than they led in the valley of tears.

No less revealing are the last moments of President François Mitterrand, on his deathbed. Baptized a Catholic, he soon becomes in his youth agnostic. However, he will always be searching for meaning. He will often come to Taizé to meet Brother Roger and the young people in prayer. Diagnosed with a prostate cancer, he still continues to govern France. After the end of his term, his general health deteriorates. The chemotherapy sessions end up generating unbearable pain. He asks his doctor about the possibility of stopping treatment. He tells him that stopping treatment means imminent death. President Mitterrand then makes an appreciative judgment on life as such. He says life is absurd. And about death, he says that if one does not succeed in elucidating the mystery of death, one lives it entirely. Given the failure of medicine and the irreversible degradation of his body, what can he still hold on to? To the basic data of agnosticism? To the sublime principles of the Republic? To the noble precepts of socialism? Or the "values" of secular spirituality, or the secularized "spiritual" exercises of New Age? He asks for a piece of paper and he writes: "Mass would be possible".

Thus, at the last minute, François Mitterrand, inhabited, like any other man, by the desire for eternity, revives Christian hope and embarks on the long journey for another way of life. A funeral service will be celebrated in memory of François Mitterrand in the N-D cathedral of Paris, in presence of some sixty heads of state and government. Cardinal Lustiger pronounces the homily and quotes the last writings of François Mitterrand: "Civilizations before us looked at death in the face, today no. There is spiritual drought. The relationship with death has never been so poor, "so begins the last lines of F. Mitterrand. He is a mortal who addresses other

mortals. Seven years ago, F. Mitterrand visited a hospital for palliative care ... "The broken body on the edge of the infinite, another time is established". F. Mitterrand asked this question: "Is there not in man a part of eternity? "

This tragic observation of the human condition, after the collapse of religious belief in Europe and the collapse of the spirituality related to it, Claude Imbert communicates to us on a register can not be more pathetic and rotational: "Our old compasses are now spinning and we have no new ones. The secular treaties that the God of a Christian time had concluded with our peoples, are torn apart. What new god, what idol, what new Park will succeed to the sky of old to dream our future? Mystery! ». Claude Imbert projects in this way the metaphysical and therefore enormous spiritual vacuum left by the degeneration of the religious. No more transtemporal horizons for our earthly passage. Everything is exclusively linked up to the consuming instantaneousness, the destructive time, without any opening to a beyond, to another life, to another mode of existence that gives meaning to a mediator and evanescent here and there. This deficiency pushes humanity on the roads of nowhere. For Claude Imbert, "... the intellectual handicap of our time is to reason in a moribund perspective on an indecipherable future, to reason as ancient men of the possible advent of a new man. On the other hand, he finds in the analysis of modern times that the Czech writer, Milan Kundera, conducts a precious and perfect illumination: "The only divine truth has broken down into hundreds of relative truths that the men share. Thus were born modern times. "

That said, it is none-the-less interesting to note that Claude Imbert does not maintain any privileged relationship with religious faith. He values the forces of faith as an incredulous man. He presents himself as "an orphan of the Christian ark painting it sinking" and describes, not without bitterness, "the slow disruption of the Christian order, the keystone of a spiritual, moral, economic and political system that is cracking ". In clear words, he says: "I have, I confess, no gift, or any taste, for the transcendent, for the Truths from above, for the truths 'revealed'. If an uppermost truth exists, my conscience is discouraged in advance from knowledge confined to the hereafter, isolated from the sensible world where we are. ... the older I get, the more I walk away - and how many do the same! - the great humanist *meccano* that borders the "real" absolute (that of God, the Sacred, the Being, the Essence, or anything else...) in the unattainable and imperceptible. "

The fact remains that Claude Imbert does not rejoice at this aversion to the revealed religious which was indeed the matrix of a great civilization, that of Christian

Europe. He puts this repugnance in the framework of a temperamental complexion, favoring this kind of principled rejection. "This rooting," he adds, "this refusal to be flying, I do not preach it at all. But finally, it's mine! It is, moreover, possible - as I say in passing - that it comes to me quite flatly of a disposition of a nature to love the life, the instant, seen, heard, grasped, at hand, within sight, at reach of lips life. "

It is nevertheless clear that this self-analysis reveals to what extent the deep embrittlement of Christian spirituality in Europe generates a huge crisis of values and a great socio-cultural destabilization. The ersatz that is advocated to fill the spiritual gaps left by the collapse of Christianity, namely the unusual patchwork of various beliefs that puts forward the New Age, culminating in Europe with the image of Christ, presented as a "principle or an "energy" rather than a person, secular spirituality that takes up the main Christian "values" and amputates them from their theological background, or the so-called nebula "brotherhood" preached by the Freemasonry, were quick to reveal their failure. On that point, Julia Kristeva's famous book, which I mentioned above, is sufficiently eloquent. Ultimately, a point of overlap of all these currents of thought, secularized to excess, is, as Claude Imbert, Julia Kristeva and many others will so pertinently say, "the deadlock".

This uneasiness of a civilization, disoriented and drifting from it, despiritualized religiously and weaned from any kind of metaphysical contribution, Claude Imbert, as a disillusioned defector, painted it in terms that could not be more adequate and revealing: "You imagine it well it is an uncomfortable situation for a non-believer of my kind to feel at the same time as supportive of a history, a civilization, a culture plowed and seeded by the Judeo-Christian imaginary. Since I am saddened by the decline of a Western epic, which was long that of the Cross, and I find in the decline of the Christian faith a strong component of this decadence, I feel that, in my unbelief, I betray my own story, in short that I compete with his (my) own annihilation. Misery of the defector: the happy feeling of fulfilling my personal freedom on the ruins of moribund beliefs for me is corrupted by the observation, all around, of a social and political collapse that entails the ruin of beliefs and values that they had inspired. A fatality carries with it my most irreducible reason and assent, in a way, out of myself, I mean out of a certain history of which I feel constituted. "

It should be noted, moreover, that the spiritual drought that ravages most of Europe is also exacerbated by the fact that the whole life of man is only entrusted to reason, as the only reliable instance, to the exclusion of other references, no less constitutive

of the complex truth of man and of society. This lethal deviation, Claude Imbert approaches it in the following terms: "In fact, we suffer from this claim of reason to organize the world and society, from its inability to recognize that" an infinity of things exceed it, " from its vanity to impose the straitjacket of any master plan for the good of humanity. It was during all my generation the intellectual obsession and the bankruptcy of the Cartesian left. In other words: in Western heritage, rational mechanics stifle spiritual and moral tradition. And the 'fatal vanity' of reason leads us to a dead end. "

The erosion of the religious has been deleteriously reflected on the vitality of society and the enthusiasm that governs the renewal of generations. The man who is presented in the Bible as the most sublime being on earth, his high dignity stemming from his status of being created in the image of God and with his likeness, is surprised to be reduced to the rank of any living being, emerging from nothingness by the intrinsic evolution of matter, and returning to it inevitably by death. To the big and backbreaking question of life, Darwin thought he could answer by pointing out that "in its broadest biological sense, evolution is a process in which life emerges of inert matter and then develops entirely by natural means ".

This reductive theorization of the unparalleled greatness of the phenomenon of life, bringing back the emergence of life to an intrinsic evolution of matter, nevertheless fascinated the scientific world. So many researchers had set themselves to the task of creating life in laboratories from complex chemical equations. So far, all their attempts have failed. And now, some people are rightly wondering why what happened at the beginning of life no longer succeeds in bringing life out of the material. The response of Darwinism indicates that the process, which had been the principle of life, extended over millions of years after the emergence of matter. This idea has reigned supremely over a century on science.

Still, this heuristic hypothesis, considered obvious or axiomatic for this entire period, has been deeply shaken by the shocking discoveries made by the research team led by Professor Mark Harrison of the University of California, in Los Angeles, at Jack Hills, in western Australia. In recounting this major event, it is emphasized that: "The discovery, made using graphite that was trapped in ancient crystals, could mean that life began almost immediately after the Earth was formed. The researchers have described it as "potentially transformational scientific advance". It follows that the phenomenon of life and the irreducible complexity of the living cell refuse to be explained by simplifying and reductive theories. So far, all the phenomena of nature

show that life comes only from life. Life certainly manifests itself through matter, but without being confused with it.

On this atheistic inheritance and thereby reducing the phenomenon of life to a simple element of matter, are grafted later melancholy, gloomy and sad pseudo-philosophical approaches. For Michel Onfray, in his book *The Power of Existence*, it is meaningless to think of endowing society with new energies, with the aim of guaranteeing its perpetuity. "The physiological possibility of conceiving a child," he says, "does not oblige to the act - just as the power to kill does not create the duty to kill. If nature says, 'You can', culture does not necessarily add, 'So you must'. For one can submit one's impulses, one's instincts, and one's envy to the analytic grid of reason. Why make children? In the name of what? To do what? What legitimacy is there to bring out from the void a human being to whom we propose, after all, a brief passage on this planet before returning to the nothingness from which he comes?"

As a service atheist, Michel Onfray sees in religions and especially in the spirituality preached by Christianity only a castration of the thought and momentum of life. For him, religion rhymes with pathological state. So he calls for a purification of atheism from the residual deposits of Christianity: "A post-Christian atheism. The expression post-Christian atheism could give the impression of a redundancy: the only substantive one suggests that we have gone beyond Christianity and that we are downstream religion. But by virtue of the principle of Judeo-Christian impregnation of the episteme of our time, atheism is also stamped Catholic. So that there is a Christian atheism and that the expression, under its oxymoronic appearance, characterizes a true conceptual object: a philosophy which clearly denies the existence of God, certainly, but which takes over the evangelical values of the religion of Christ ... The sky is empty, okay, but the world can live better with the love of neighbor, the forgiveness of faults, the practice of charity and other virtues formerly baptized generosity, compassion, mercy, gratitude, prudence, temperance, etc. "

An impressive number of critics turn down flat the "pathological" analysis that led Michel Onfray. They claim that Christianity does not castrate thought or act. Cultural fertility, they say, (artistic, philosophical, literary, architectural, scientific), and humanitarian Christianity have been the breeding ground of modernity. Other atheists, they chained, much more honest, as André Comte-Sponville or Luc Ferry recognize it. Similarly, the subtle and luminous observations provided by the Viennese psychiatrist Victor Frankl, founder of logotherapy, following his

experience of the death camps. He maintains that certain neuroses derive from a repression of the religious dimension ... and that it is this religious sense that has helped him resist the ordeal, allowing him to maintain confidence and hope.

As to see in religious spirituality a death drive, as Michel Onfray says at every turn, many rebellious feathers retort by reporting, among other things, the extraordinary book-reportage of Luc Adrian *Flowers in Hell*, Bronx Fioretti at Renaissance Press 2004. As everyone knows, New York is a group of five cities, including the Bronx. The latter is one of the largest poverty areas in the United States. In 1987, eight Capuchin brothers, driven by the desire to reconnect with the rigor of the rule of St. Francis, decided to engage fully with those left behind. The Archbishop of New York at that time, Cardinal O'Connor, advised them to "follow Christ to the cross by living in the heart of poverty, in this zone of lawlessness". Twenty years later, this neighborhood of misery, drugs, violence, is transmuted, thanks to the radiant and soothing presence of these sowers of hope, in a much more human space and haven of life. One wonders there wisely, where is the death drive?

On the other hand, it is none-the-less useful to quote the thundering article of Edgar Morin in *Le Monde*, on January 18, 2011, under the title "*The nights are pregnant and nobody knows the day which will be born*", to see whether modern and postmodern times, relieved of "religious pathologies", at least in Europe, have truly enabled the gestation of a new world, more human and more peaceful. The sociologist and the philosopher painted a dark and sad picture of the evolution of the world situation: "The march towards disasters will be accentuated in the coming decade. To the blindness of *homo sapiens*, whose rationality lacks complexity, joins the blindness of *homo demens* possessed by its fury and hatred. The death of the totalitarian octopus was followed by the tremendous outburst of religious fanaticism and financial capitalism. Everywhere the forces of dislocation and decomposition are progressing. However, decompositions are necessary for new compositions, and almost everywhere these arise at the base of societies. Everywhere the forces of resistance, regeneration, invention, and creation multiply, but scattered, without connection, without organization, without centers, without heads. On the other hand, what is administratively organized, hierarchical, centralized is sclerotic, blind, often repressive."

In short, the collapse of religious spirituality and the emergence of blind and blinding religious fanaticism, exasperated by the failure of spirituality without metaphysical horizons, and the sterility of promises of happiness in cities "without God", push

humanity to cultivate the total nonsense of life. In order to recover from the despair, we find no more adequate than the recourse to the splendid wisdom of the great philosophers of Antiquity, especially to the advice of Aristotle, in his *Nicomachean Ethics*: “It is therefore not mandatory to listen to the people who advise us, on the pretext that we are men, to think only of human things, and, on the pretext that we are mortal, to renounce immortal things. But, to the extent possible, we must make ourselves immortal and do everything to live according to the most excellent part of ourselves, for the divine principle, however weak in its dimensions, prevails, and much, on everything else by its power and value”.

In sum, recovering the original spiritual sense of being is the only lifeline to give the human being the joy of living and the hope of dying in a world here at the rhythm of the afterlife already there.