

Presentation of Postmodernity

I am a catholic priest and I belong to the diocese of Milan, but for these past ten years I have been teaching theology of mission at the Pontifical Urbaniana University and I introduce one of the catholic positions. A lot depends on what one intends with post-modernity; usually the post-modernity is understood in opposition to modernity that I understand on the basis of the unlimited perfectibility of the person, on a conception of history as progress and happiness as an ethical instance. The failure of this plan is evident and drives J. Habermas to think post-modernity as a critical recommencement of the failed objectives.

I will recall two interpretations linking the first to the thought of G. Vattimo and R. Rorty and the second to the vision of Z. Baumann and of Ch. Taylor. Vattimo abandons the traditional Christian vision of rationality as a way to truth about God and man, and in post-modernity he perceives the attitude of whoever welcomes precariousness, multiplicity and the contradictory of an ephemerous reality; according to him, in its weak thought he perceives the key for the decrease of violence and the democratisation of society with the spreading of pluralistic and tolerant attitudes. The position of Rorty is similar.

The position of Z. Baumann and of Ch. Taylor is different, for they try to re-think Christian faith in a post-modern epoch. Here I speak only of Taylor who analyse the history of secularisation where he pointed out the presence of an anthropological constant, which had substituted the preceding spiritual order centred on God with two immanent realities: the rational control of nature and the authentic and uninhibited expression of one's own subjectivity. According to his point of view, these two anthropological constants have acquired an absoluteness that have made people put the question of *fullness* in a new way, that is a kind of interior richness and fullness which are symbolic way of people's integral being-in-the-world. This humanism has maintained the dignity of the person, but instead of founding it on God, it is described according to an immanent conception.

These are the *unquiet Frontiers of Modernity*, which are continually challenged by existential fragility, futility and mediocrity of our real life. Whilst Vattimo and Rorty totally adhere to this, Baumann appeals to ethics and Taylor retains that Christianity should

not express an antagonistic conception that proclaims the truths of the faith and their metaphysic and natural foundation, but needs to accept to take its place in this pluralism, as one of the possible choices which the person could make. In this pluralistic context, Taylor puts the question of *fullness*: this term refers to a kind of fullness of life, to an interior richness, to a deep reconciliation which believers relate to the meeting with God, while non-believers associate to a sort of authentic humanity. If faith can cultivate the dream of a rebirth, of a “born-again”, it is in this challenge that it needs to enter.

For this reason the post-modernity invests above all anthropology; it touches, even more, the whole of Christian soteriology and puts Christology and the role of the Church in question. In this immanent vision of salvation, our time pursues salvation without a Saviour, reconciliation without a Reconciliator. To face this problem Taylor start from the *turning point*, that is a “theism characterised by providential traits” that has led to an “organic but impersonal conception of reality”. This poses the problem of relationships between the theological understanding of reality and the intellectual vision of the cosmos: the theological conception is destructured and then recomposed around reason and human freedoms as the centre of history.

There is two challenges. The first is a conception that reduces knowledge to scientific knowledge, forgetting that at the core of knowledge we do not find the “experiment”, but the totality of the “human experience”. The second is the separation between politics and religion; after the fall of the wall of Berlin and the explosion of fundamentalism, the reflection on the public role of religions oscillates between the private conception of the West, that looks upon religions as a person’s right, and the Arabic-Asian conception which makes of it a criterion of people’s unification and an orientation for custom.

In this situation of human reflection I understand a ontological and gnosiological reductionism which expresses a widespread distrust of truth; here I find a renunciation of the totality of sense and its fragmentation; the human and the humanising sense of faith is under discussion as well as the meaning of reason in the sphere of the act of faith. This challenge catch up with faith. According to my point of view, the Christian revelation is agapic-kenotic: its content is found in the divine agape and the *kenosis* is a form at the height of its content; the mission, sent in service of this love, has its heart within this

agape, in the openness towards the other and in its donation to the other. Being a living and personal crystallization of this love, the believer and the Church are at the service of a love which is addressed towards everybody. Consequently it is not possible neither believing without belonging nor belonging without loving the reality of finiteness of our life and it is necessary to accept the challenge which Taylor indicated as the aspiration to *fullness* within the experience of fragilization.

In this way, the Church is in need of a faith ally of intelligence; this is the fruit both of the traditional catholic mind and of the discussion after Regensburg. According to Christian Duquoc, this is the time for a theology where the solidity of faith does not match with the capacity of organic and global synthesis: for the postmodern theologian, the exchange with this culture functions as an opening for a search for truth which represents a further peculiar motive of faithfulness to the revelation. According to Christoph Theobald, we instead need to re-understand in terms of wisdom the work of reason. If there can be a theology, it needs to be a theology of this kind. Postmodern theology appears to be a theology without global and definite solutions, but capable of understanding the providential sense of this difficult time which solicits the development of the prophetic role of the Church as a school of humanity, and to transform the deep sense of the limit in a need for spirituality and for transcendence.

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