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Cultural challenges to faith: a reflection on the dynamics of modernity

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ABSTRACT

The primary challenge modern culture offers Christian faith is that the former is itself the fruit of a historico-cultural process deeply influenced by Christian faith. In many ways modern culture is an elevated, sophisticated one, containing a great variety of precious anthropological insights and strengths, with a surprising adaptability and openness to absorb, to clarify and to unite. However in the present moment it comes across, in many cases, as a ‘culture without faith’, a culture wilfully disconnected from the faith that gave life to it in the first place, and thus, ultimately, a fragile culture. This has led many of those influenced by modern culture to a generalised loss of faith and to a pathology of individualism and ingratitude, as they attempt to live in isolation from their fellows, unprepared to recognise the world they live in and the privileges they enjoy as God’s gifts. This suggests the need to widen the scope of human rationality in two directions: with others and towards others; other humans and ultimately God, the source of all goodness and truth. This study will consider the relationship between culture and Christian faith in terms of the influence of faith on culture and of culture on faith, with a view to understanding (1) how modern culture, formed and informed to an important degree by faith, now challenges faith anew to provide answers to questions that have not been asked before, and (2) how faith can challenge culture anew, not just by providing solutions but also by posing new questions. The topic of course is very ample and complex, and so the study will only provide an introductory reflection.

1. Introduction: the terms

Three words go to make up the title of this study, none of which should be taken lightly: culture, faith and challenge.

First of all, culture. We live off culture, it feeds us, it carries us along, it makes communication possible, we hand it on to other people, to other generations, through words, gestures and actions. It expresses and communicates our identity and that of the people we interact with. It is what we have in common; in fact culture is what
makes the ‘we’ possible. Culture is inseparably both content and mediation (see Prinz 2016). In 1871 the anthropologist Edward B. Tylor (1970, 1) described it as ‘the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society’. An ample definition, doubtless, that includes the whole of reality, all, that is, except nature. Thus Herskovits (1948, 17) is right in describing culture as ‘the man-made part of the environment’. We might say that whereas man encounters nature, he creates culture; culture and not nature is what distinguishes him from other living beings.

Besides, culture refers to man in his entirety. It is not about man on his own but together with others, for culture is ‘the total, shared, learned behaviour of a society or subgroup’ (Mead 1953, 22). Neither does culture refer to man in his spiritual interiority alone, for ‘culture is a well organised unity divided into two fundamental aspects – a body of artefacts and a system of customs’ (Malinowski 1931, 623). Besides, culture is not fixed at a particular time, for it is ‘an historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life’ (Geertz 1973, 89).

In a sense, culture is like an already existing text or artefact that stands in need of interpretation. Yet it is not merely a reality to be explained, for humans not only receive culture, but actually make it and then hand it on to others. As a result we may say that culture consists of ‘rules that are said to be implicit because ordinary people cannot tell you what they are’ (D’Andrade 1995, 143). But the rules are there, they are present and influential, though limiting and guiding, in every aspect of life, even though we are often incapable of recognising and explaining them. Boyd and Richerson (2005, 5) describe culture as ‘information capable of affecting individuals’ behaviour, that they acquire from other members of their species through teaching, imitation, and other forms of social transmission’. Likewise, Sperber (1996, 33) defines it as ‘widely distributed, lasting mental and public representations inhabiting a given social group’. And for Prinz (2016, n. 1), culture is ‘something that is widely shared by members of a social group and shared in virtue of belonging to that group’. On a lighter note we can say with T. S. Eliot (1949, 100) that culture ‘is simply that which makes life worth living’.

Faith of course is a central concept for Judaism and Christianity (see O’Callaghan 2016, 307-319). In general terms, it denotes trust, belief or confidence, whether in reality, in other people, or ultimately, in the divine. The very possibility of there being ‘faith’, however, begs the question of the trust-worthiness of the reality or person we believe in. Faith in someone or something unworthy of it is by definition misplaced. In other words, the dynamics of faith are determined more by its object (the one believed in) than its subject (the one who believes). In the context of Christian religion, the entire profile and dynamics of faith is determined by the One we believe in, God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Lord, Creator of the universe and Saviour of humanity. If God did not exist then there is no real place for religious faith. Even ‘faith in man’ would be meaningless. If God were different than he is, then ‘faith’, such as it is, would take on a correspondingly different profile. If divinities of one kind or another existed but were considered grasping, greedy or envious (as in polytheistic religions), then faith would at best be generic, at worst empty. In real terms,
humans would relate to the divine not through faith, but perhaps through ‘collaboration’ or ‘negotiation’.

All in all, it can be said that faith is possible and meaningful because God is ‘trustable’. In effect, one of the key terms the Bible applies to God is that he is ‘faithful’… and the faith of creatures is possible because in the first place God is faithful in his actions and words to the Covenant he established with humans, being at once all-powerful, good and merciful. And in the New Testament the same idea is to be found: God is omnipotent Love, and therefore is worthy of unreserved faith. If God was not faithful then faith would dwindle, slump and die. In other words, faith is not ‘our’ contribution to a religious life, ‘our’ trusting attitude towards ultimate reality… Rather it is the adequate response of humans to a faithful, loving God who reveals himself to us, who infuses the light of his life into our hearts. In that sense it makes no sense to speak of ‘faiths’ in the plural: there is only one ‘faith’ because there is only one God. There are different religions, because God created us as religious beings, “in his image and likeness” (Gn 1:27). But there is only one faith, because there is only one God who reveals. In the letter to the Ephesians Paul says that there “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Ef 4:5). “If faith is not one, it is not faith”, to cite Gregory the Great (In Nativ. Domini Sermo, 4, 6).

Interestingly, the terms ‘faith’ and ‘culture’ in the modern and Christian meanings were absent on the whole from the lexicon and world-view of the ancient world.

The Greeks spoke of faith (pistis) in a religious context, but gave it very little weight, in keeping with the nature of the divinities it was directed towards (Silva 2014, 3, 760–72, s.v. πίστις). Gnostics took it that faith was the destiny of inferior human beings, whereas the spiritual ones enjoyed gnosis, that is, pure knowledge that dispensed with faith. Fides for the Romans was important in a legal context, but is virtually absent in a religious one (Glare 1968, 697f., s.v. fides).

Our term ‘culture’ derives from the Latin term cultura, which referred in antiquity to cultivation or tending, mainly of the soil. Only in the 16th century was the term applied to the cultivation of the mind and its faculties, or of manners and human behaviour. Obviously this was possible because humans were seen to be agents of their own existence and, indirectly, of that of others. Modern thought is structured, according to Guardini (1940, 1–9) around three magnitudes: nature, subject and culture. Nature, what we encounter or what is given to us, is transformed by the human subject, and this is what produces culture. From the time of the Renaissance onwards, however, the subject is commonly perceived as superior to and autonomous with respect to nature. As a result, culture, produced by the subject, is itself seen to be superior to nature, ultimately occupying its place. More and more in fact does ethical reflection come to refer to nature at a merely material level, but to culture at a formal one, a position that culminates in the writings of Kant (Fassò 1966, 2, 375–90). Humans are meant to transform the world, freely following each and every desire and imagination, setting aside the constrictions of nature. Corporal and cosmic nature offers them the ‘prime matter’ as it were, but they are the ones to determine the meaning, consistency and purpose of things: humans become ‘creators’ of the world. Perforce, ecology becomes an issue.

In brief, ‘faith’ is meaningful because God is God, culture is possible because humans are not just part of nature, but are both free and social. One and the other would have a very different meaning and profile if God or man were not as they are.
Yet both faith and culture involve two inseparable elements: transmission and content. Both are received, assimilated and handed on from one generation to the next, faith often transmitted as culture, and culture on the basis of ‘faith’. And both have a content, a vision, a doctrine, an intuition, that stands in need of interpretation and comprehension. Faith which arises from divine revelation, and culture which springs from the human spirit, invariably interact with one another. In the famous words of John Paul II (1982), ‘the synthesis between culture and faith is not only a demand of culture, but also of faith… A faith that does not become culture is a faith that is not fully received, not entirely thought through, not faithfully lived’. And elsewhere, he says: ‘culture itself has an intrinsic capacity to receive divine Revelation’ (John Paul II 1998, 71) (See also Brague 2014, 195–246).

The notion of ‘interaction’ brings us to consider the last term, challenge, which literally means to accuse, to object, to find fault with, to reprehend, to defy. The roots of the term, through Old French, are to be found in the Latin term calumniari, to calumniate, that is not just to accuse or object, but to accuse falsely (Glare 1968, 261). Within our present-day dynamic of culture, progress and change, however, the term is generally considered in a highly positive way. People, cultures, lifestyles and religions, we are told, ought to be challenged, not just confirmed, they should be made to face up to their potential, to their errors and responsibilities, even to their vocation. It should be clear, however, that this semantic shift appears in the context of a new anthropology, in which the truth about humans is not fully available or established in the here and now or presentness of their lives, but is ahead of them,beckoning them, urging them to improve, to grow, to surpass their present achievements. In other words, ‘to challenge’ becomes meaningful and positive on account of an anthropology in which culture, change and history play an essential part in our worldview. Should things be as they are now, that is simply unchangeable, blocked and bound within an eternal return, culture would be no more than nature, and challenging it would constitute a form of sterile or destructive defiance.

Before considering present-day cultural challenges to faith, we need to ask what contributions Biblical faith has made to human culture in the first place, that is, how faith has influenced culture.

2. Some distinctive elements of Biblical ethics and anthropology

Jonathan Sacks, for many years the UK chief rabbi, gave a memorable inaugural lecture at King’s College, London, in 2014 (Sacks 2014). In it he pointed out seven distinctive anthropological affirmations that mark Judeo-Christian faith and tradition, clearly present in Scripture, with powerful, world-changing ethical ramifications. All of them have both challenged and left their mark on the culture of the societies they were present in. His point of reference is principally the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, but of course the same positions are to be found substantially in the New. They are as follows.

(1) The dignity of every human being, each one of which is ‘made in the image and likeness of God’ (Gen 1:26f.). The Egyptians applied the notion of ‘image of God’ only of royalty, the Bible to each man and woman. In a single move Biblical religion eliminates elitism and establishes equality. Each human being is called a ‘person’.
This constitutes a powerful ethical and anthropological message. (2) A special emphasis on human freedom and choice, and therefore on personal responsibility, conscience and the possibility of being punished and rewarded. (3) The sanctity of human life, which should be respected and cared for at every stage, again because humans are made in the image of God. Murder is considered illicit: ‘Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed; for God made man in his own image’ (Gen 9:6). Respect for life from beginning to natural end is central to Biblical belief.

(4) A culture of righteousness and guilt as distinct from one of honour and shame. The former, linked to hearing and accusation, is typical of the Bible and is rooted in the person’s relationship to God. The latter is common in societies where people are seen to behave well or badly, thus incurring in honour or shame before the community. For the former the act is right or wrong, whereas for the latter the person is good or bad. For the former, repentance, rehabilitation and forgiveness are possible. For the latter people are exalted or condemned perpetually. Ruth Benedict (1946) describes North American culture as a ‘guilt culture’ and Japanese culture as a ‘shame culture’ (see also Williams 1994). ‘It is an extremely significant point’, Sacks observes, ‘that the Hebrew Bible introduced a guilt culture to a world that only knew shame cultures, because guilt cultures make a distinction, and shame cultures do not, between the sinner and the sin. What is wrong is the act, not the person’.

(5) The significance of marriage as the fundamental matrix of society (see also O’Callaghan 2015b). There is a close bond in the Bible between monotheism and monogamy, between fidelity to one’s spouse and fidelity to God who is faithful. God’s blessings are meant to be passed on from one generation to the next through marriage and family. Human fertility and happiness depend on the solidity of the institution. It is the fundamental living cell of society. (6) The covenantal character of society, rooted in the covenant God established with his people. It is lived out in terms of human solidarity, of a common belongingness. And as a result, citizens are seen to have collective responsibility for the workings of society; society is a moral and not just a political achievement; and the fate of society is dependent on how it treats its most vulnerable members. Lastly, (7) all human power, all political authority, is subject to the transcendent authority of the Divine. In practical terms this means there are moral limits to the exercise of power, and right is sovereign over might. Despotism and totalitarianism are excluded.

After listing these major ‘contributions’, Sacks commented: ‘Those are the seven features that I think make Biblical ethics different from any other ethical system. It is the only ethical system in which love and forgiveness are at the heart of the moral life’.

Yet he adds somewhat ominously: ‘It seems to me that all seven of those beliefs are currently at risk’. The first (human dignity) by some strains of evolutionary biology which question the distinctive quality of humans in respect of animals. The second (freedom) is threatened by scientific theories that hold human life is entirely determined by physical, biological and psychological factors (see also O’Callaghan 2016, 442–71). Third, the holiness of life is under threat by a widespread culture of abortion and euthanasia and other forms of maltreatment of our fellow human beings. Fourth, a culture of justice and guilt is being replaced in many places by one of honour and
shame, especially with the frequent phenomenon of trial by public shaming; people’s
good name is wantonly destroyed in the public media, the only commandment being
‘thou shalt not be found out’ (see also Rodríguez-Luño 2015). And once the person
has been shamed in public, their relationships are wrecked, their lives come to an
end. In ‘shame cultures’ suicide is frequent and gradually becomes socially acceptable.
Fifth, the institution of marriage and family is tottering in many parts of the world.
In some places as many as half of children are born out of wedlock, and half of all
marriages end in divorce. And all this gives rise to a generalised increase in poverty,
Sacks observes, particularly among children. Sixth, a sense of solidarity is substantially
absent in many parts of the world. Society is like a hotel where each one can do what
they like in their own room as long as they pay (their taxes) and do not disturb their
neighbours: the situation of others is of no concern to me. In respect of the seventh
and last contribution, that all power should be subject to the divine, it has become all
too easy to move from saying ‘I have a right to do such and such’, to ‘I am right to
do such and such’. Whatever is not forbidden by civil law is considered to be morally
acceptable and therefore reasonable. Morality has become fused with the observation
of public law. Specifically, Sacks warns that we may not be respecting the moral limits
of power: ‘If we no longer make a distinction between law and morality, if we rely
entirely on the market economy, on laws and on regulatory bodies we will have the
kind of economic malfunctioning that we have today with greater and greater inequal-
ities and economic behaviour that should be unacceptable’.

Of course Christians and Jews would be honest enough to admit that the seven dis-
tinctive elements deriving from Scripture and described by Sacks, never predominated
completely in any country, or culture, or period of history. That is to say, faith never
challenged culture to a degree that changed culture completely, and still less, irrever-
sibly. Believers one and all ignore their deeply rooted sinfulness at their peril. Yet faith
has left a mark on culture, just as culture(s) have influenced the assimilation of faith.

Three questions, however, are in order at this stage. First, in what way does a
faith-vision come to influence culture in the first place? Second, why did believers’
convictions of an anthropological and ethical kind ultimately deteriorate instead of
consolidate and become permanent? And finally, how can we renew society and cul-
ture in the light of faith for future generations? The suggestions offered in the follow-
ing pages attempt to clarify these processes.

3. How culture challenges faith and faith informs culture

In principle it should be straightforward enough to list the cultural elements in our
present world that condition or challenge or confront Christian faith in its cultural
concreteness, in terms of faith’s doctrinal content and transmission. This would allow
Christians to focus their explanation of belief and religion in a way that would more
or less successfully convince their listeners; it should in principle facilitate a more effi-
cacious evangelisation.

However, things are not quite as simple as that. And this for the simple reason
that our ‘culture’, Western culture, in its many and varied elements, has already been
formed, or modulated, or shaped by Christian faith. In fact, as we saw in the first
part, the very concept of modern ‘culture’ is made possible on the basis of a faith-
inspired anthropology. In that sense modern ‘culture’ cannot be considered as a neutral presupposition before which Christian faith attempts to situate itself. Many elements of the culture that marks the modern Western world are the fruit of an intelligent and practical assimilation of Christian revelation. This thesis rings dissonantly to the ears of many, of course, although the explanation of Sacks just offered points clearly in this direction. The fact is that many would define modern culture in terms of a clear disconnect from ancient, Christian and medieval culture. The relationship between faith and culture is a complex one, however, also because (according to Christian faith) humans and culture-making processes are infected by sin, which grace is meant to heal through faith. Faith and culture therefore do not relate in a specular way. In real terms there is no such thing as a ‘pure’ Christian culture, in that sin infects and disturbs the process of culture in the making; neither is there such a thing as a pure, disincarnate Christian faith which confronts a completely neutral a priori culture.

The theologian Rahner (1968, 32f.) had the following interesting observation to make: ‘The apparently secularised ethos of our times, which speaks (and, hopefully, not only speaks) of freedom, of the dignity of man, of his responsibility, of love of neighbour … is it not all the result of Christianity? It is, indeed, a legitimate son, but a son that has escaped from home and wrecks its own patrimony far from his father’s home’ (author’s translation). Hence, when we speak of ‘cultural challenges to faith’, a key issue arises: can Christianity allow itself be challenged by its own children? Should it not, rather, in the first place, clarify its relationship with culture and seek a family reconciliation?

Let us return for the moment to the affirmation just made, that modern culture (in its anthropological and ethical content and transmission) has been shaped to an important degree by Biblical faith, that is by the human reception of divine revelation. A genetic narrative is called for in this case, which may be presented in eight stages (O’Callaghan 2013).

1. Christian revelation received by faith has made the discovery of a series of fundamental truths about God and man philosophically possible. We have already seen the contributions suggested by Sacks. Among these truths, John Paul II’s 1998 encyclical Fides et ratio (FR) specifically mentions ‘the problem of evil and suffering, the personal nature of God and the question of the meaning of life or, more directly, the radical metaphysical question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?”’. The same document speaks of our knowledge of sin and evil, ‘a knowledge which is peculiar to faith’. ‘The notion of the person as a spiritual being is another of faith’s specific contributions: the Christian proclamation of human dignity, equality and freedom has undoubtedly influenced modern philosophical thought’ (FR 76). Besides these, several other fundamental truths may usefully be mentioned.

First, the contribution made by Christian revelation to our appreciation of the close union between the material and the spiritual in man, body and soul, created by God and destined to final resurrection. The latter provided an elegant solution to the dilemma posed by the perennial dualism-monism issue in anthropology: between a dualistic but anti-mundane Platonism neglectful of matter, society and history, and a unitary and mundane Aristotelianism uncomfortable with the challenge of accounting for the immortality of the individual (O’Callaghan 2016, 43n41). Second, the value of
human subjectivity, developed especially by Augustine, Bernard and others, and sifted
in the vast melting pot of Christian prayer. Third, the centrality and value of human
freedom and conscience (O’Callaghan 2016, 442–71). Fourth, the weight Christian
revelation gives to time and history (O’Callaghan 2016, 472–94). And last, the special
contribution made to philosophy and anthropology by the application of the
Trinitarian notion of ‘person’ to the individual human being, who is no longer con-
sidered as a simple exemplar of the human species, but as an irreplaceable, immortal
person (O’Callaghan 2016, 552–77).

2. Of course, Christian revelation received in faith does not possess a monopoly over
this culture-forming process. Jerusalem, Athens and Rome all played a crucial part.
Among other authors Philippe Nemo (2004) has explained that the cultural morpho-
genesis of the West involved five elements which he situates: in Athens, with the
invention of the city, freedom before the law, science and philosophy; in Rome, with
the invention of law, private property, the person and humanism; in Judaism and
Christianity, whose substantial contribution lies mainly in the area of ethics
and eschatology, leading to the public presence and acceptance of mercy, benevolence
and social progress; in the papal revolution of the 11th and 12th centuries (the
Gregorian reform) which provided a public synthesis of the three: Greek thought,
Roman law, Christian faith, and founded the notion of ‘Christendom’; lastly, in the
advent of liberal democracy, firstly in Holland, England, USA and France, and then
in other parts of the world.

As Brague (1992) points out, what is significant in this process is the fact that the
respective contributions of the different stages were not absorbed but rather assimilated
by Christian faith, giving rise to the pluralist cultural phenomenon of
Christianity. This is what he calls ‘cultural secondariness’. The Christian West, he
says, is secondary with respect to its living origin which is Sacred Scripture, Greek
thought and Roman law, because it has not absorbed or eliminated them, but main-
tained with them a living relationship. In that sense Western Christianity (Brague
refers especially to Europe) is the only civilisation that has stayed perennially depend-
ent on its living origin, the Word of God. The same may be said of the relationship
between the Old and the New Testaments: just as the New did not absorb or eliminate
the Old, neither did Christian civilisation eliminate any part of Scripture, but just
deepened in its interpretation. Second-century Gnostics such as Marcion, however,
attempted to substitute, absorb and eliminate the Old Testament by means of the
New for deeply theological reasons: the God of mercy of the New Testament would
set aside and obliterate the God of justice of the Old. This position was stalwartly
opposed by St Irenaeus of Lyons (Adversus Haereses) who for this very reason should
be considered, Brague suggests, not only a Father of the Church, but also a ‘Father of
Europe’.

3. Still, modern humanism finds its roots in a Christian theological context typical of
the early Middle Ages. During the XIX century the historian Jacob Burckhardt (1958)
onered a particularly influential work-hypothesis to account for the humanism typical
of the modern period, saying that it is rooted in the Renaissance period, that is in the
late Middle Ages, a period that attempted to integrate Christian and pagan values.
From the aesthetic and technological standpoint he was right in many ways. But as
regards more fundamental issues, for example, those which refer to the dignity of the
human person as an individual, Burckhardt’s hypothesis has been definitely superseded by a wide variety of recent studies that situate the discovery of human interiority and individuality well before the Renaissance period, towards the beginning of the Middle Ages (or perhaps earlier) and under the direct sway of Christian reflection and spirituality (Ullmann 1967; Southern 1970; Morris 1972; Hanning 1977; Bynum 1980; Gurevic 1994; Taylor 2007). Still, as Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote, ‘the light shed by Christianity was necessary not only to illuminate what is meant by ‘person’ in terms of supernatural vocation and dignity, but also to show us those elements of pre-Christian individuality that had already prepared the way for the meaning of ‘person’” (Von Balthasar 1990, 387).

4. On the basis of its material fidelity to Christian faith and on its own merits, the modern period should be considered, from many points of view, a highly positive phenomenon. The fruits of civilisation and well-being we presently enjoy may be seen by all, and are at the disposal of many, if not most. Speaking at Regensburg in 2006, Pope Benedict XVI (2006) pointed out that ‘a critique of modern reason from within has nothing to do with putting the clock back to the time before the Enlightenment and rejecting the insights of the modern age. The positive aspects of modernity are to be acknowledged unreservedly: we are all grateful for the marvellous possibilities that it has opened up for mankind and for the progress in humanity that has been granted to us’. John Paul II in Fides et ratio 5 had the same thing to say: ‘Modern philosophy clearly has the great merit of focusing attention upon man’. And elsewhere he observes: ‘even in the philosophical thinking of those who helped drive faith and reason further apart there are found at times precious and seminal insights which, if pursued and developed with mind and heart rightly tuned, can lead to the discovery of truth’s way. Such insights are found, for instance, in penetrating analyses of perception and experience, of the imaginary and the unconscious, of personhood and intersubjectivity, of freedom and values, of time and history. The theme of death as well can become for all thinkers an incisive appeal to seek within themselves the true meaning of their own life’ (FR 48).

5. It is frequent among modern philosophers to admit that Christian revelation and theology has contributed to the growth and consolidation of modern anthropology, with its affirmation of the value of the individual person, of subjectivity, of the body, of freedom, of equality, of autonomy, of history, etc. Many of the same authors, however, take it that the full consolidation of these values will depend on a definitive emancipation from Christian faith and from the Church, the structure that maintains faith and keeps it in existence. To use a terminology familiar to Freud and Lacan, their conviction is that the son will not mature until he has superseded his father once and for all, that is, unless he abandons house and home. In different ways this thesis is held by Rousseau, Hegel, Kant, Mill and others. The philosopher Jürgen Habermas (2005, 164) observes that Kant ‘on the one hand considers religion [obviously, Christian religion] as a source of a morality that satisfies the canons of reason, but on the other hand as a dark rock, which philosophy must purge from obscurantism and fanaticism’ (author’s translation). And John Stuart Mill (1874, 97f.) writes: ‘I grant that some of the precepts of Christ as exhibited by the Gospels—rising above the Paulism which is the foundation of ordinary Christianity—carry some kinds of moral goodness to a greater height than had ever been attained before, though much
even of what is supposed to be peculiar to them is equaled in the *Meditations* of Marcus Antoninus [the Roman emperor, †180 AD], which we have no ground for believing to have been in any way indebted to Christianity. But this benefit, whatever it amounts to, has been gained. Mankind have entered into the possession of it. *It has become the property of humanity, and cannot now be lost by anything short of a return to primeval barbarism*.

Likewise Hans Blumenberg in his 1966 work *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age* admits the influence of Christian faith in the development of modern anthropology, but explains that we need to take a further, definitive step, that of burying once and for all the Christian doctrine of grace. In effect, man under divine grace will never acquire perfect autonomy and freedom, because he will always remain under the dominion of God, or of the Church (Blumenberg 1985; Pannenberg 1968; O’Callaghan 2016, 50–51). And this must be avoided. Grace and freedom simply do not go together. For man to be fully and finally free, faith and grace must go into permanent retirement.

6. In spite of the above statements, many Christian authors are of the opinion that without the living sap of Christian revelation springing from the action of the Holy Spirit of Christ in the world, anthropological categories and advancements dearly won over the centuries will eventually decay and die. Among them may be found F. Dostoevskij (Ravasi 2005), George Bernanos (1970), Jacques Maritain (1930), Karl Löwith (1967), De Lubac (1949), Wolfhart Pannenberg (1968), Marcello Pera and Ratzinger (2005, 6), Romano Guardini (1998) and T. S. Eliot (1949). All of them are aware of what might be called the ‘cultural inertia of ideas’ that are rooted in Christian reflection over the centuries. But they also recognise that the admirable monuments Christian and philosophical reflection (manifestations of culture) has given rise to cannot remain standing forever without the living, driving, purifying, uplifting power of lived Christian faith.

Guardini in a 1950 essay, significantly entitled *The End of the Modern World*, said: ‘when man fails to ground his personal perfection in divine Revelation, he still retains an awareness of the individual as a rounded, dignified and creative human being. He can have no consciousness, however, of the real person who is the absolute ground of each man, an absolute ground superior to every psychological or cultural advantage or achievement. The knowledge of what it means to be a person is inextricably bound up with the faith of Christianity. An affirmation and cultivation of the personal can endure for a time perhaps after faith has been extinguished, but gradually they too will be lost’ (Guardini 1998, 98f.). And in the late 1940s T. S. Eliot spoke in a similar way: ‘The dominant force in creating a common culture between peoples each of which has its distinct culture, is religion. Please do not, at this point, make a mistake in anticipating my meaning. This is not a religious talk, and I am not setting out to convert anybody. I am simply stating a fact. I am not so much concerned with the communion of Christian believers today; I am talking about the common tradition of Christianity which has made Europe what it is, and about the common cultural elements which this common Christianity has brought with it… It is in Christianity that our arts have developed; it is in Christianity that the laws of Europe have—until recently—been rooted. It is against a background of Christianity that all our thought has significance. An individual European may not believe that the Christian Faith is
true, and yet what he says, and makes, and does, will all spring out of his heritage of Christian culture and depend upon that culture for its meaning. Only a Christian could have produced a Voltaire or a Nietzsche. I do not believe that the culture of Europe could survive the complete disappearance of the Christian Faith. And I am convinced of that, not merely because I am a Christian myself, but as a student of social biology. If Christianity goes, the whole of our culture goes with it’ (1949, 126).

7. However, anthropological truths that Christian faith brings to life are, or pretend to be, universal, natural truths, rooted in human nature, that belongs to all persons without exception. They are not ‘truths of faith’ in the strict sense of the word, as are the mystery of the Trinity, the Incarnation of the Word, etc. But an important question should be asked here: if they are ‘natural’ truths, why can they not be discovered and developed by the philosopher simply with the help of human reason? Perhaps faith can give an initial impulse, but that should be enough; reason should then take over. In effect, John Paul II recognises that the genesis of anthropological convictions is not a simple affair: ‘Revelation clearly proposes certain truths which might never have been discovered by reason unaided, although they are not of themselves inaccessible to reason’ (FR 76). In that sense we must ask: what permanent or perennial contribution does faith make to reason, to culture?

With John Paul’s Fides and ratio we can say two things. First, that faith purifies reason of a fallen humanity. ‘As a theological virtue, faith liberates reason from presumption, the typical temptation of the philosopher… The philosopher who learns humility will also find courage to tackle questions which are difficult to resolve if the data of Revelation are ignored—for example, the problem of evil and suffering, the personal nature of God and the question of the meaning of life or, more directly, the radical metaphysical question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?”’ (FR 76). As Benedict XVI said in the Collège des Bernardins in Paris (Benedict XVI, 2008b), ‘the humility of reason is always needed, man’s humility, which responds to God’s humility’. And second, faith provides the conviction that man himself, and everything that relates to his existence and life, is the fruit of God’s creative action. But if it is truly creation, then it is the fruit of a free, divine love, which can only be appreciated fully in the light of faith. In any case, it should be clear that the secret of discovering the truth and depth of human existence is to be found in the confluence of faith and reason. Briefly put, we may say that faith opens reason out to the extraordinary amplitude of reality, indeed to the divine itself; reason in turn is meant to assimilate the nutrition faith provides it with. In that sense faith, a ‘pure’ faith that excludes reason, produces nothing substantial in human thought, because it is not digested and does not form culture; yet reason and culture without faith remain isolated, malnourished, diminished and alone.

Benedict XVI spoke on repeated occasions of ‘the great rationality’ that is the fruit of faith, and of the need to ‘amplify the horizons of reason’ (Benedict XVI 2008a; see O’Callaghan 2011b, 50f.). In effect, humans think – at least they should think – with their whole being and in rapport with others, and not merely with an isolated or individual ‘reason’ capable of analysing in computational and mathematical terms (O’Callaghan 2011a, 37-39), or as a separate ‘intellectual faculty’ (Angelini 2009). Humans think at the same time as they love. In fact love is what gives wings to reason, challenges it, making it resourceful and creative. Following a line of thought that
finds its roots in Augustine and Richard of St Victor, Hannah Arendt in her famous work (Arendt, 1959) *The Human Condition* explains that the response to the question *what is man?* is provided by reason, whereas to the question *who is man?* the response can only come from love. Only the one who *thinks as they love* will be in a position to discover the human person in all his or her richness and individuality. Pope Benedict speaks suggestively of ‘a love rich in intelligence, and an intelligence full of love’ (Benedict XVI 2009, 30). Pure intellect, should it exist, is abstractive, generalising, conceptualising… it is simply incapable of reaching the individual. This incapacity is of minor importance when only material objects are involved, because each one of them is no more than a simple exemplar of the species. They can be considered in simply quantitative terms, what René Guénon (2001) denounced as the ‘reign of quantity’. Things change entirely when we attempt to know (and to love) the exemplar of the human species, that is the person, ineffable and irreplaceable in his or her individuality and openness to other persons. This is the greatest paradox of Christian anthropology: the person can only be discovered in love and by love, only in relation to the individual who relates to the Creator and to all other humans and creatures. And faith is what opens up to us this vast range of real relationships, both visible and invisible (Benedict XVI 2012b; O’Callaghan 2016, 552-577). Without faith, reason would just not take off, would never realize its full potential.

The issue is an important one: truth about man and his dignity is a deeply rational truth, but it involves a rationality that is not simply *at our disposition*, a shared rationality, because it comes to us from another, from beyond, from other things, and in ultimate terms from the Creator of the universe, supreme Rationality, the *Verbum spirans Amorem*, ‘the Word that breathes Love’, as Aquinas (S.Th. I, 43, 3) says repeating Augustine (*De Trin. 9, 10*) (see O’Callaghan 2008).

8. And now to the final stage. *What modernity has lost is not so much cognition but recognition*, not so much knowledge but acknowledgement, not so much conquest but thanksgiving. Modern philosophy to a greater or lesser degree has retained and developed a rich and ample view of humanity and the cosmos, emphasising the value of the individual, of human subjectivity, of freedom, equality, autonomy, history, and all that derives from these: human rights, democracy, social freedoms, etc. In that sense modernity is Christian and Christianity is distinctly modern. Perhaps it would be more precise to say that the Christian is modern *materially* but not *formally*, in that he focuses his anthropological convictions differently from one who does not take religion into account. He gladly recognises the living source of his wisdom, while the moderns are less willing to do so. He thanks as he thinks. We might say that whereas Christians understand their situation in terms of *gift* (see Barclay 2015), moderns and post-Christians consider it rather as *conquest*.

It is indeed a question of *recognition*. Charles Taylor in his work *A Secular Age* (2007) on secularity and secularisation, has reached the conclusion that modernity suffers substantially from what he calls an ‘eclipse of cult’, because in reasoning things out humans have stopped recognising God as the source of all good and intelligibility (see O’Callaghan 2009). Thus they have stopped thanking God, they no longer recognise the world the live in as a gift, they no longer live ‘eucharistic’ lives. Speaking of Vatican II’s decree on liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Vatican Council 1964), shortly before its fiftieth anniversary, Benedict XVI (2012a) said: ‘by starting with the
theme of the “liturgy”, the Council shed very clear light on the primacy of God and his indisputable priority. God in the very first place… Wherever the gaze on God is not conclusive, everything else loses its orientation’.

Ignatius of Loyola (1955, 55) said that ‘ingratitude is the most abominable of sins’. Shakespeare in Twelfth Night (3:4): ‘I hate ingratitude more in a man than lying, vainness, babbling drunkenness, or any taint of vice whose strong corruption inhabits our frail blood’ And for Kant, ‘ingratitude is the essence of vileness’. Perhaps De la Rochefoucauld (1949, 226) got it best when he said that ‘too great a hurry to discharge an obligation is a kind of ingratitude’ (author’s translation). As Christians we are meant to spend eternity, like the angels, thanking God for his being and his gifts (see Leithart 2014). So it is not an indifferent issue.

Perhaps we may say that a secularised view of things has become common either because we deny that creatures find their origin in God, or because we see no need to give them back to God, their origin, their giver, their Saviour and their end. Johann Auer (1972, 152–55) finds the roots of this movement in the late Middle Ages. He says that love for the world as developed by nominalist authors ‘leads to a secularised image of the world, in which the loving God of Francis is no longer apparent, but rather the capricious God of nominalism. The Dominican-Thomistic affirmation of the world can become a secularised view of the world when in its philosophical underpinnings the Neo-Platonic element of “return” is wiped out’ (author’s translation).

For this reason a dialogue between equals – modern culture on the one hand, Christian faith on the other – just cannot work. Before the dialogue can take place, a kind of family reconciliation is needed, one that recognises two things. First, that Christian faith has in the past impulsed, enriched and catalysed human thought processes, and is still in a position to do so. On account of this, ‘new evangelisation’ should be in a position to give life to an ample and rigorous philosophical reflection capable of recognising and receiving the impulse and light of Christian faith. And second, faith needs to rummage generously and creatively in the vast storehouse of human thought, wisdom and culture for elements and instruments most useful to carrying out its essential mission of touching the mind and heart of all humans in God’s name. The theologian Eugen Biser (1987, 55 & 172) rightly speaks of the need to rediscover what he calls the ‘historical-cultural self-actualising of Jesus Christ… in the midst of the contents of the supporting structures of society that are hidden underground on account of secularisation. The best name for this complex reality is “structural Christianity”’ (author’s translation).

Conclusion

The primary challenge modern culture offers Christian faith is that the former is itself the fruit of a historico-cultural process deeply influenced by Christian faith. In many ways modern culture is an elevated, sophisticated one, containing a great variety of precious anthropological insights and strengths, with a surprising adaptability and openness to absorb, to clarify and to unite. However in the present moment it comes across, in many cases, as a ‘culture without faith’, a culture wilfully disconnected from the faith that gave life to it in the first place, and thus, ultimately, a fragile culture.
This has led many of those influenced by modern culture to a generalized loss of faith and to a pathology of individualism and ingratitude, as they attempt to live in isolation from their fellows, unprepared to recognise the world they live in and the privileges they enjoy as gifts they should be profoundly grateful for. This suggests the need to widen the scope of human rationality in two directions: with others and towards others; other humans and ultimately God, the source of all goodness and truth (see MacIntyre 2009; O’Callaghan 2015a). A greater awareness of the place a living faith should occupy within the dynamics of culture brings us to perceive that the riches we possess and the beauty we enjoy are the result of God’s gift received through the mediation of other people.

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