

Religion and Knowledge

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It may be an exaggeration to say that the September attacks of 2001 marked a major turning-point in contemporary history, but there can be no doubt that the event has obliged us to reconsider a number of problems. One in particular is highly pertinent to this series of articles devoted to the knowledge society. It raises the following question: what might be the role of religion in such a society?

At first it was thought that the role would be almost nil, largely because religion, confined to the sphere of private life, had been transformed into a harmless archaism. Next, by its very nature, religion was incompatible with all forms of rational knowledge.

The attacks upset both these assumptions. Initially, they brought into sharp focus something which had been suspected for a long time. Ever since the fundamentalist phenomenon had succeeded in attracting the attention of the media and the universities, religion had proved less domesticated than the West had wanted to believe. The American black September displayed the full fury of a return of repression, all the destructive violence of a volcanic eruption. Secondly, this barbaric act was very technical, bearing all the hallmarks of a scientific experiment.

Here, I should like to concentrate on the last aspect. Might the collapse of the World Trade Center not refute the theory of the deep incompatibility between science and religion?

This is a classic thesis of the Enlightenment. At that time, the spheres of myth and religion and the spheres of techniques and science were opposed. Where religious tradition held the high ground there were no cumulative processes of technical development; where such processes developed, together with revitalizing empirical skills, religious tradition could not remain inviolate.

Max Weber expanded this conception in his analysis of gradual secularization. Science, initially enshrined in religion, broke away as a separate autonomous sphere of value alongside the other spheres of value (*Wertsphäre*): art, morals or law. Science fills the profane space left vacant by the retreat of myth. This is disenchantment – *Entzauberung*. Technical and scientific progress brought about by disenchantment is

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the agent of disenchantment at one and the same time. Each step forward in empirical knowledge and the harnessing of nature represents a stage in the withdrawal of the mythical and religious universe.

In his description of this process, Weber does not opt for disenchantment as such. One might even say that he shows a certain nostalgia for the pre-secular world, because in his view *Entzauberung* exposes man to loss of meaning – *Sinnverlust*. But in a general way the upholders of a scientific view of the world make no attempt to conceal their hostility towards religion, seeing it as incompatible with rational knowledge.

This attitude originated in the anti-religion campaign waged by the philosophers of the Enlightenment. Voltaire's exhortation 'écrasez l'infâme' sums up the struggle against religious obscurantism, which was an obstacle to independent thought. Kant transposed the same notion into the seemingly less belligerent form of a line from Horace: *sapere aude*, dare to reason. He regarded official religion as inhibiting and censorious, subjecting the mind to an illegitimate tutelage, perpetuating the minority status of the human being and thereby bringing the learning process to a standstill.

On the whole, this model stayed in force throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. Stimulating knowledge meant freeing humans from the fetters of religion.

This is what Feuerbach thought. For him, religion was the estranged form of the essence of a person; knowing lay in going beyond that estranged consciousness, guiding the mind back to where religious illusion had germinated, the 'rugged reality' of material life. Marx shares Feuerbach's view of religion as no more than a straightforward projection of real needs. It is the 'sigh of the oppressed creature, the emotion of a heartless world, the spiritual expression of social conditions deprived of spirituality'. Certainly, the critique of religious illusion cannot be a priority political task because the target must be the transformation of the relations themselves. In that respect religion merely conveys the 'odour of spirituality'. But there is no doubt that, for Marx, religion remains the antithesis of scientific truth. On the one hand, there is the science of historical materialism, which grants access to the real world by uncovering the laws of the movement of capital and, on the other, religion, which offers a mystification of that world, plunging social participants into a 'false consciousness' and in that sense operating as 'opium for the people'.

Freud is the direct heir to this tradition. For him, too, religion is an illusion, the purpose of which is to prolong the state of infancy, encouraging the belief in a supra-sensible father so as to allay the suffering imposed by nature and an unjust society. Religion is an obstacle to scientific progress, in so far as it provides a short cut for half-truths to the detriment of the long and tortuous path which leads to the modest certainties of science. Thus, in the best tradition of the Enlightenment, Freud espouses Heine's opinion that we should leave Heaven to angels and sparrows.

According to the thesis of the incompatibility of science and religion, the road is charted quite naturally for those who seek to root out religious fanaticism; it will suffice to develop scientific teaching to the utmost without going quite so far as to proclaim atheism as the philosophy of the state, as occurred in the Soviet Union.

Now, the dramatic events of September 11 have severely tested the incompatibility thesis. It has become evident that techno-science and religion can co-habit without undue upheaval. Terrorists recruit their militants by the Internet. Their

leaders are technicians who are MIT graduates and specialists in systems analysis. Osama bin Laden is a civil engineer. On the tapes recorded after the tragedy he boasted that he had used his technical expertise to cause as many casualties as possible. One of the terrorists came from a German university. The perpetrators not only knew how to fly the planes that brought down the towers, they had calculated the exact speed the planes had to reach at the point of impact in order to achieve total collapse. And, lest anyone should say that religious radicalism cannot produce the basic scientific research required to create technology of its own, though it may be compatible with the use of technology developed by Western scientists, I would remind readers that one of the two most brilliant Asian physicists, co-producers of the atomic bomb made in Pakistan and who, according to some, had links with the Al-Qaeda terrorist organization, wrote a report in which he set out to prove (scientifically) the existence of the immaterial beings mentioned in the Koran, the *jinn*s.

Faced with these facts, should we abandon the incompatibility thesis altogether? Should we admit that it betrays an outmoded rationalist way of thinking or 19th-century anticlericalism?

I do not think so. The contradiction is there. It is a matter of seeing the thesis as relative. The conflict between certain types of knowledge and religion or between certain types of religion and knowledge vanishes with the entry into play of other types of knowledge and other types of religion.

This line of analysis requires us to re-examine each of the two poles which make up the relationship between knowledge and religion. What kinds of knowledge are compatible with religious extremism? What kinds of religions are compatible with knowledge?

Let us begin with the first pole and try to establish a hierarchy among the different types of knowledge on the basis of their more or less close connections with religion.

Knowledge of the first type would be knowledge where the distance is minimal or non-existent. Broadly speaking, this is the case of theology. Unlike the sociology or psychology of religion, theology does not demand a neutral investigation of its subject-matter, merely the principle of allegiance to the content of a revealed faith. In the case of religious extremism, the kind of knowledge gained is that dispensed in schools designed to prepare militants. In the Muslim world, this type of school is the madrasa, where the ulemas teach the Koran and Islamic law, the *Çharia*. One such school, in the holy city of Qom, in Iran, won notoriety for having taught a star pupil, the Ayatollah Khomeini. In the world of Judaism, the rabbis teach the Torah, the Talmud and the Cabbala in the yeshiva. These schools have always been bastions of orthodoxy, aiming their teaching from the start against heresies like Hassidism; then against reformed Judaism like the belief advocated by Moses Mendelssohn, Haskallah, which was the equivalent of the philosophy of the Enlightenment; and today, in the State of Israel, against the secular state. The chief adepts of Messianic Zionism, the most fanatic of Jewish fundamentalists, are trained in the yeshivot (plural of yeshiva). Lastly, in the Christian world, there are the Biblical schools such as the Northwestern Bible School or the Moody Bible Institute and nowadays the Regent University, founded by the televangelist Pat Robertson, which, as the name indicates, prepares students to exert a kind of regency, assuming power in expectation of the second coming of Christ.

Skills associated with technology and partly with the natural sciences make up what might be called the second type of knowledge. From the ethical and political point of view, such skills are neutral and their scope is restricted to postulating causal links between natural phenomena or drawing useful instrumental consequences from their learning. As a rule, this type of knowledge is unaffected by considerations of values and, accordingly, can be applied to serve all causes impartially. Bio-science can fabricate micro-organisms for a bacteriological war or medicine for the treatment of cancer; the new information and communication technologies may be used to ravage a country or to compose symphonies, to sell goods or to gain access to the archives of the Library of Congress. This is the knowledge available to religious extremists. Their expertise is more remote from religion than in the previous case because it is not intended for religious purposes in either production or dissemination and can be mobilized just as well by the adversaries of religious movements. It nonetheless remains that the link with religion is comparatively narrow, not only in the instrumental sense (there is no present-day religious extremism without modern weaponry and without media dramatization, which can only be achieved by what Derrida calls tele-technoscience), but in the negative sense of failing to afford any means of immunization against religious irrationality. Such knowledge makes no contribution to freedom of thought and partially belies the conviction of the Enlightenment whereby each step forward in learning marks a victory over the irrational powers of myth.

Lastly, the distance is greatest in respect of the third type of knowledge, which concerns the social sciences, philosophy and the humanities. By working with values, including universal human values, by rising above national and cultural particularities, such learning commits its forces on the side of reason and freedom, and in so doing holds out the hope that it will not be easily mobilized by religious obscurantism. Critical sociology, for instance, might say that, had the terrorists of September 11 not been immersed in myth and the concomitant 'false consciousness', they might have identified the true roots of the state of affairs they were fighting and instead of battling against Satan and an imaginary anti-Islamic Crusade, engaged in the combat in favour of internal democracy, against theocratic tyranny, which to some extent is always the accomplice of imperialist interests. What is valid in the cognitive domain is also valid in the domain of moral assessment. Being steeped in the humanities, with all that that implies in questioning and criticism, or in history, with its inexhaustible lessons on tyranny and resistance to tyranny, allows one at least to assume that those who follow this process will not become easy prey for religious fanatics. It is this third type of knowledge which, by means of a paradigm, illustrates the contradictory relation between learning and religious obscurantism inherent in the philosophy of the Enlightenment. There is a basic antagonism between religious extremism and critical social science, between religious ideology which impedes thought and science which opens the way to true social relations, beyond ideological mystification. There is an unsurmountable conflict between a heteronomous conception of morality where the principle of action springs from the will of God and secular post-Kantian moral philosophy where moral law is discovered by reason itself.

That said, one must beware of allotting too much credence to such similarities.

They must be taken with reservations, especially where the third type of knowledge is concerned. Why should philosophy, the social sciences and the humanities enjoy the privilege of extraterritoriality from the legions of God? The argument of their 'immunity' in the face of irrationality is based on the doubtful assumption that those who cultivate these disciplines have proved better than their colleagues from the natural sciences or informatics at keeping intact their degree of critical awareness. This assertion is not borne out by history. History is full of examples of peaceful co-existence between a rich humanistic civilization and an absolutist regime. One need look no further than the Florence of the Medicis, the France of Louis XIV and the Austria of Maria Theresa. The wonderful tradition of humanism in Germany was powerless to prevent Nazism. Heidegger's connivance with the Third Reich was not an isolated case. Everything points to the fact that the humanities co-habited without serious clashes with the national socialist state. Dachau was only a few kilometres from Munich, with its art galleries and its concert halls, and Weimar, the birthplace of Goethe, was not far from Buchenwald. Some of the greatest Nazi butchers, in charge of the 'final solution' in Eastern Europe, were accomplished performers of Bach and attentive readers of Rilke. During the military dictatorship in Brazil, Latin professors denounced the students, psychoanalysts transmitted data on their patients to police agencies and a torturer applied electric shocks to his victims while listening to Beethoven. There is no reason why the representatives of the human sciences and the philosophers, who showed no immunity in the face of political totalitarianism, should develop antibodies to religious totalitarianism. It should suffice to remember that the young Marxists of the 1970s, who read Marcuse at Berkeley and Stanford have since joined Hinduist sects and can now be found among the partisans of apocalyptical and millenarist movements, awaiting the end of the world.

Why is there no stronger correlation between secular knowledge of the third type and a critical awareness capable of immunizing people against insanity and steering them away from irrational action? On this subject there are four answers. The first comes from the Freudian Marxist repertoire. Reason can be dulled by affective phenomena (mass psychology, the death wish, rationalization and other protective devices) or social mechanisms (false consciousness and ideology) which lead the individual – no matter how vast his or her personal scholarship – to a non-perception or a distorted perception of reality. The second answer is epistemological. It is not the social sciences as such which encourage a critical attitude but a form of enquiry which has abandoned the positivist paradigm. The third answer concerns moral philosophy. Today, only very dogmatic Platonism would have us believe that there is a necessary coincidence between knowledge and moral behaviour. We must be more Aristotelian than Socratic, trusting knowledge but also habitus, the readiness for moral action, for virtue, that which cannot be acquired by a merely theoretical view of what is good. And, perhaps, we need a stiff dose of Kantianism, to return to the idea of a wider conception of reason, embracing both theory and practice. In the light of that wider approach, techno-science dissociated from morality would also be unilateral and hence just as 'irrational' as a form of morality which rejects science altogether or deprives itself of the means to act in a technological universe. Thus the extended conception of reason allows us to understand why religious extremism is compatible with the first type of knowledge; why fanaticism is not inhibited by the

second type of knowledge; and why the humanistic and liberating 'vocation' of the third type of knowledge has been short-circuited. In all three cases there has been a failure in the reasoning process. The technical and cognitive vector of thought is mobilized but not the corresponding normative vector, which judges the legitimacy of actions in the light of universal criteria. The fourth answer is political. Open democratic debate is the *sine qua non* for avoiding all mental pathologies, including religious pathology. Democracy can permit the dissemination of religious extremism on television but democracy alone can authorize pluralism and prevent the message of the fanatics from becoming all-pervading. The lack of a democratic tradition in Germany may help us to understand why so many philosophers, with no political background whatsoever, could give seminars on Plato while barbarism was howling at the gate.

Now we must turn to the opposite pole in our relation. Just as we discerned different types of knowledge, so we must try to discern different types of religion. For present purposes, it is enough to note the contrast between the fundamentalist variant, based on a literal interpretation of the sacred texts, on rigorous ritual practices derived from those texts, on an idealized view of the past, supposedly untouched by contemporary corruption and on the desire to reorganize society and the state in the light of divine law, and the rational variant, based on a flexible interpretation of the Scriptures, which fully accepts the secular character of modern society.

It was the fundamentalist variant which filled the headlines of all the newspapers after the events of September 11 but it has to be admitted that the term was primarily used to refer to Islamic fundamentalism. That use was correct, but too restrictive. If we wish to understand the ideological dimension of the crisis, we must grasp the fact that there were three forms of fundamentalism involved in the conflict, not just one: Islamic fundamentalism, of course, but also Judaic and Christian fundamentalism.

Taken in the widest sense, Islamic fundamentalism preaches a return to the religious roots of Islam and a reform of customs and society according to the precepts of the *Çharia*, the law of the Koran. The term 'fundamentalism' covers a host of trends. Of those, there is a radical current which resorts to violence to attain its ends. Initially, radical fundamentalism operated within the national framework. This was the case with movements like *Al Jihad*, based in Egypt, responsible for the assassination of Sadat, and the *AIG* (Armed Islamic Group), in Algeria, which carried out so many massacres. But, as time went by, radical fundamentalism gravitated towards action within an international framework. The most spectacular example has been that of *Al-Qaeda*, led by Osama bin Laden, who wanted to found a pan-Islamic caliphate (which counted Egyptians, Jordanians, Yemenites and Saudi Arabians among its officers as well as others), by setting up support groups in almost 50 countries.

Judaic fundamentalism took shape as a scrupulous ritualization of daily life according to the precepts of religious law, the *Halacha*. This movement is made up of two groups. On the one hand, there are the *Haredim* Jews who are resolutely apolitical and, on the whole, reject the State of Israel, regarding it as too secular. For them, the law of God has an absolute value and must be observed in every detail. The central activity of the men is prayer and the role of the women is to procreate and ensure the material wherewithal of the family through work, freeing men so that they can accomplish their religious duties. The children's education amounts to religious

education. Contact with persons outside the community is to be avoided. Unlike the liberal Jews, who propose integration in local society, the fundamentalists cultivate an attitude of systematic self-segregation, in relation to both Gentiles and the other trends in Judaism itself. The second fundamentalist group consists of religious Zionists, who are very different from the secular nationalist early Zionists. The members of this group fiercely uphold the policy of colonization in the West Bank and the Gaza strip and are hostile to any form of negotiated peace. Their movement has produced fanatics like Baruch Goldstein, who killed dozens of Arabs in the Cave of the Patriarchs, in Hebron, and Yigal Amir, who assassinated Prime Minister Yitzak Rabin.

Christian fundamentalism has a Catholic side – integristism – which goes back to the anti-liberalism and anti-modernism of the *Syllabus* of Pope Pius IX. But it was in North American Protestantism that fundamentalism truly prospered. The name itself was coined in the United States of America, for a series of pamphlets printed between 1909 and 1915. These provided ministers of different persuasions with a vehicle whereby they could expound the fundamentals or fundamental points of the Christian faith from which no church should depart. The most important of these was the infallibility of the Bible. Protestant fundamentalism was ridiculed across the world when a schoolmaster in the State of Tennessee was taken to court and judged for having taught evolutionism to his pupils, in breach of a law of that state. But the fundamentalists are still very much alive and very active. During the Cold War they unfurled the banner of anti-communism and today fight feminism and homosexuality. Like the Islamic and the Jewish fundamentalists, they have their violent current and indulge in attacking abortion clinics. In general, they are pre-millenarists, or rather, they believe in a return of Christ *before* the beginning of the millennium prophecies in the Apocalypse. They defend a Messianic patriotism, seeing America as the chosen nation. The fundamentalist religious right-wing has changed into an irresistible electoral force, imposing its ideology on all candidates with electoral duties. Its power stretches beyond the United States; a large number of Evangelical and Pentecostal sects active today in Brazil, for example, are ramifications of North American fundamentalism.

Directly or indirectly, the three forms of fundamentalism shared in the tragedy of September 11 and its consequences.

First and foremost, there was the Arab–Israeli conflict; the Americans were ‘punished’ above all for being the ‘accomplices’ of the State of Israel. Yet that conflict was waged in great part by Islamic fundamentalist factions (Hamas, acting in the Palestinian territories, and Hezbollah, based in Lebanon) and by Jewish fundamentalists, some of whom work through extremist organizations inspired by radicals like Rabbi Meir Kahan, who seeks to restore the State of Israel as described in the Bible. The least one can say is that both types seriously hinder the peace process. Where Islamic fundamentalism is concerned, the irrationality of a movement which operates by the suicide of its militants, no matter how legitimate its aims, needs no underlining. But the fundamentalist Jews, even when non-violent, are by no means shining examples of lucidity. Their views on subjects as grave as the territorial boundaries of the State of Israel and the justification for colonies in the occupied territories are influenced more by the promises God made to the Patriarchs than the

contemporary reality of the conflict with the Arabs. Given the electoral weight of the ultra-orthodox religious parties, it would seem almost impossible to form a stable centre-left government, yet without one no true negotiation with the Palestinians can succeed.

The first official and popular reactions to the attacks in the United States conveyed the impression that a third movement had just come on to the scene, Christian fundamentalism. The secular values which had always characterized American democracy seemed to have been replaced by a Biblical fervour worthy of the Puritans who reached America on the Mayflower. The President of the most powerful country on earth said that the approaching encounter would be a monumental war of good against evil and that God, whose right to neutrality he had contested, was on the side of the Americans. The ayatollahs of the Pentagon followed suit. The anti-terrorist operation was baptised Infinite Justice, a term openly Biblical in origin, because only divine justice can be regarded as infinite. All in all, the American religious right, ever influential in the political life of the country, seemed to have seized power. Perhaps the finger of the fundamentalists was visible even in the zeal and patriotism with which the entire nation reacted to the crisis, because, as we saw, for the people America is the chosen nation: loving God and loving America are the two sides of the same coin.

Although the September attacks have brought out the aversion of Western public opinion to fundamentalism, the prevailing impression is that receptivity towards the rational variant of religion has actually increased. It is no longer possible to say, like a 19th-century journalist who refused to publish an article on religion, 'God is not a current topic'. A new frame of mind is taking shape, not anti-religious, as during the Age of the Enlightenment and the 19th century, not apologetic, as during the neo-Thomist phase of the inter-war period (Maritain) or in the wake of Jean Guitton or Teilhard de Chardin, who strove to reconcile science and faith. Without being overtly pious and without ever challenging modern secularism, this trend betrays a remarkable acceptance of the phenomenon of religion. A distant model might be Kant's *Religion within the Bounds of Pure Reason*, where the philosopher tries to translate into moral terms, according to purely secular categories, the principal concepts of Christianity, like evil, sin and atonement.

The first symptoms of what might be called, somewhat sensationally, the return of God preceded the attacks by very little and in a sense served as seismographs of the new times.

One of the most interesting texts published in this connection is the book *Religion*, which contains contributions given in 1994 at Capri, by a group of philosophers, including Jacques Derrida and Gianni Vattimo, who were the editors. In the first article, Derrida illustrated the links between faith and learning and in the second Vattimo presented an essay in which he noted that the 'return of the religious element' was an essential aspect of any religious experience.

Next, in 1996 Luc Ferry produced his *God or the Meaning of Life*, a book which was particularly representative of the new times. There is no doubt, the author said, that modernity has brought in its train a 'loss of meaning' but the loss can be compensated for by the resources inherent in modernity itself. Modernity, in actual fact, signifies a humanization of the divine, an irreversible rise of the secular spirit. This

was extraordinary progress for the human mind, because at last it was allowed to think for itself. But modernity also comprises an opposite trend which Ferry calls the divinization of the human. The humanization of the divine implies the end of authoritarian 'vertical' transcendence, situated outside and above the individual. In that sense, modernity is the realm of immanence. But it is possible, too, in the entrails of immanence, to think of something which might lie beyond, an elsewhere, a wandering towards 'horizontal' transcendency, freely consented, purely human. That would be the divinization of the human. The driving force of horizontal transcendence is love, which brings men to leave behind their monadic inwardness and to attain the Other. Modernity permits the arrival of that love.

Basing his remarks on the analyses of Philippe Ariès, Ferry reminds us that sentimental, conjugal and parental love was unknown in pre-modern times, when physical attraction was undisputed and the family unit was a matter of property. Modernity has engendered a specific form of love. Modern love must be thought of not as *eros*, which presupposes the lack of the object desired and fades with the fulfilment of desire, but as the *philia* of Aristotle, an affection which, on the contrary, demands the loving and constant presence of the one who is loved. *Philia*, in turn, calls up another kind of love, the Christian *agapê*, an attachment formed even for those to whom we feel indifference, even for our enemies and, as a virtual horizon, even for the whole of humankind.

For Ferry, 'transcendental humanism' is the perspective which leaves modern immanence to reach a transcendence dependent on conditions within modernity itself. Humanism, indeed, because there is no question of reverting to pre-modern positions, where the human held second place in relation to the divine, but transcendental humanism because it instils values that go further than a purely immanent definition of what is human. Humans are not the blind product of a network of alien causal events. Immanence, therefore, is open to freedom and hope.

However, this raises the question of the relations between transcendental humanism and Christianity. The divinized human met by immanent thought at the end of his course is not Prometheus who stole the fire of Olympus, not Lucifer who usurped the throne of God, but rather, in a very Christian way, a being capable of love and charity, who seeks to complete *philia* with *agapê* and to extend to the whole of humankind the love felt for those closest. Ferry does not shy away from these religious implications. Like Christianity, the new humanism upholds the existence of transcendental values based on love. Ferry finds that such values cannot always be explained by reason and states that they are religious in the etymological sense of *religare*, in that they forge a link among all men. He also claims that they make up a domain which must be seen as sacred and believes that they build a bridge with eternity and immortality because such values are worth fighting for and dying for and therefore lie beyond terrestrial life. Only, this is not an *a priori* religion, which appeared before humankind in order to endow it with legitimacy but an *a posteriori* phenomenon, discovered by humankind within immanence. It is found not at the beginning but at the end. It is not part of a tradition, upstream of consciousness but lies downstream, something to be constructed and thought out. It is no longer possible to accept the heteronomous form of the Christian religion based on ex cathedra teaching and rejected since modernity founded the freedom of reason. But it

must be meditated by virtue of its content, as a message of love. The social relations of the day did not allow that content to take shape, but after the emancipation of the form with the advent of the new times it can at last be achieved, paradoxically, as a result of that very modernity whereby, apparently, it should have been eliminated. So, once again it has become possible to examine the question of meaning because transcendental humanism, by working with principles and ultimate values can provide answers which elude purely empirical knowledge.

These books have proved to be important precursors of the new *Zeitgeist*, but it is since the attacks that the spirit has taken on definite contours.

It is impossible to mention all the publications since September 2001 which deal with religion. Suffice it to say that these culminated in the launching, in November, of the substantial work by Régis Debray, *God, an Itinerary*. In this respect, I should like to discuss just two texts.

One, the speech given by Jürgen Habermas when he was awarded the Peace Prize of the German Book Fair in October 2001, was highly significant. Habermas not only praised the secular spirit, purely and simply, which was to be expected of a sociologist with a Marxist background, but spoke of a post-secular society where there was no sign of the disappearance of religion as a social reality. In such a society, believers and non-believers would engage in dialogue. Each religion must learn to live with other churches, to accept the authority of science and the rules of democracy which oblige the state to follow the principles of a profane morality. Further, believers must 'translate' their religious convictions into secular language if they wish their arguments to be debated in the public arena. Thus Catholics and Protestants must express their religious view of the sanctity of the embryo in terms of human rights. But the process of apprenticeship must not be a one-way street. Non-believers must also make an effort and develop their sensitivity to the semantic potential of religious tradition, which is often lost when rendered in profane words. Such is the case when sin is converted into fault and to break the Ten Commandments becomes to infringe the law of humankind. There is no secular equivalent for the concept of forgiveness, which calls for the cancellation of the suffering imposed on others and not the mere righting of a wrong. Walter Benjamin's desperate hope of saving the dead – he too was profoundly influenced by the Judaic religion – of atoning through remembrance for all the massacres of history, became unattainable with the end of the idea of resurrection. Of course the process of secularization must be carried forward, provided that it is a redeeming force and preserves rather than destroys religious content. One must take leave of faith, without closing one's mind to its intuitions. A post-secular civil society, Habermas concluded, even while distancing itself from religion, can draw from religion those resources of meaning which are becoming increasingly rare in a market-dominated world.

Two months after that speech, in December of the same year, Habermas delivered the *laudatio* when the American philosopher Richard Rorty was awarded the Meister Eckhart Prize. There was something slightly surrealistic about awarding to a thinker who was an avowed atheist like Rorty a prize named after the German mystic. In his thanks, Rorty did not fail to stress the paradox, but devoted the whole of his lecture to religion even so. Was it a sign of the times? Perhaps, because instead of arguing from the standpoint of atheism, Rorty referred with great sympathy to a text

by Gianni Vattimo *Crederci di credere* (1997) where Vattimo makes a Catholic profession of faith. For Vattimo, Christianity bears no relation to truth and therefore cannot be refuted (a position which merits the applause of a thinker like Rorty who was brought up in the tradition of analytical philosophy) but is related to love, in the terms of Chapter 13 of the First Epistle of St Paul to the Corinthians. When God became man by the Incarnation, he renounced, through love, all his power and all his authority, giving them to humans. Christianity consists of God's self-alienation. Therefore secularization is the founding characteristic of a genuine religious experience. The divine lies precisely in the absence of God. Rorty ended by saying that his chief divergence from Vattimo was the fact that for the latter the sacred lay in the past, in the act of love whereby God had renounced the command of humans, while for Rorty the sacred lay ahead, in future hope, in a state of affairs where people would be free and, as far as possible, equal. I do not know whether Rorty has read Balzac's *Mass for an Atheist*, but the conclusion of his speech might well be entitled *The Prophecy of an Atheist*. His atheism has an oddly religious ring. His utopia resembles almost to the letter a Messianic utopia and, lest there be any shadow of doubt, he uses the word 'sacred' as an adjective.

So, what can we say about the relation between these two types of religion and knowledge?

In the case of fundamentalism, there is an obvious connection with the first type of knowledge, for the perfectly secular reason that it is intended to prepare the leaders of the militants. With regard to the second type of knowledge, we have seen that there is no incompatibility with either the most advanced technology or the natural sciences which might serve as instruments for fundamentalist action, but there is a tenacious resistance to accepting scientific doctrine which might contradict a literal interpretation of the sacred texts. This was demonstrated when the keepers of Catholic orthodoxy condemned heliocentrism, or when geological discoveries clashed with biblical chronology. There are similar conflicts today. Protestant fundamentalism, which rejects Darwinian evolutionism in the name of dogmatic creationism, ignores modern medicine and psychiatry by practising exorcism and opposes all the principles of the rational hermeneutics of the Bible. Lastly, fundamentalism shows a basic hostility to the third type of knowledge, whether in the human sciences, secular by definition, or the values espoused by humanism which, for that very reason, are alien to the sacred. Fundamentalism thus condemns feminism, homosexuality, religious tolerance and non-denominational education. The most pious of fundamentalists have no hesitation in calling these values 'diabolical'.

In the case of rational religion, it seems fair to say that, since Rome ceased condemning scientific propositions which might be in disagreement with the scriptures, this form of belief only conflicts with the first type of knowledge handed down by the fundamentalist schools.

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Having clarified the relation between knowledge and religion thus far, we must return to the point of departure: the place of religion in the society of knowledge.

What makes up that society? It may be defined by analogy with the 'informational' society, a concept created by Manuel Castells. According to Castells, the

informational society indicates the 'specific form of social organization where the generation, treatment and transmission of information is changed into basic sources of productivity and power, thanks to the new technological conditions that have emerged during the historical period considered'.

Taking up that definition, one might say that a society of knowledge would be one where knowledge became the principal pivot of social organization and where all the social strata in all the countries of the world would have the same opportunities, ensured by global and national democratic processes, of partaking in the generation, treatment, transmission and appropriation of knowledge. They would also have access to the information indispensable to the learning process, interpreting knowledge in the full sense, embracing not only technical and scientific disciplines but also philosophy and the humanities.

Quite plainly, the importance Castells attributes to information is not in dispute. It is not information, however, but knowledge that is the determining factor in the social system. It has been known for some time that scientists and technicians make up the major work force at the present stage of capitalism and, as a result, knowledge has become the strategic input of the new society. Obviously, information is essential in such a society. Without the instantaneous diffusion of information in all the areas of global capitalism, it would be impossible to mobilize the flow of money across borders, to take transnational decisions on the (de)localization of companies, on the creation and fragmentation of conglomerates or on recruitment policies or the rationalization of staff which characterize economic management in the present phase of global capitalism. Without information, political decisions could not be taken with the required speed. And, more important still, without access to the information needed for the production of know-how, the agencies which generate knowledge would be brought to a halt. In other words, without information there would be no knowledge society. But it is knowledge which is decisive.

Our concept of a knowledge society is based on that understanding but endeavours to diminish the negative aspects. Technicians and scientists, both civil and military, should not be allowed to form a new and frightening power elite capable of dictating the ways of the universe. The importance of democracy and the rule of law must be stressed as the sole means of checking illicit domination. Considering the restrictions placed on national democracies, which have no influence over the decisions taken in hegemonical states, one must turn to the idea of worldwide democracy, where *demos* would be humankind as a whole. The digital divide which now separates countries in possession of the new technologies from the other members of the international community is in danger of turning into an even more sinister version of the income gap which separated and still separates the industrialized countries from the developing countries. In order to prevent this, we must introduce mechanisms to eliminate the asymmetries of knowledge among countries, and in order to correct the factors of exclusion in global capitalism we must imagine the egalitarian access of all to the universal heritage of knowledge. Finally, so that knowledge is not confined to the natural sciences and practical skills, which would lend a unpleasantly technocratic note to the new social model, transforming it into an engineers' paradise, identical weight must be given to the other types of knowledge, the human sciences, philosophy and the humanities.

Utopia? No doubt. But there are good and bad utopias, and this one wants to be a concrete entity, filled with hope, hope in the sense stated by Ernst Bloch, but hope infused with the trends already found in the real world, a *docta spes*, not merely subjective phantasmagoria.

So now we can come back to our question again: is there a place for religion in the society of knowledge thus defined?

No, in the case of fundamentalism; yes, if it is rational religion.

With fundamentalism, it is not enough simply to say no. Fundamentalism must be fought. Further, it is not enough to fight it solely on the level of ideas, as if the splendour of science were sufficient to dispel the clouds of ignorance, in the style of the *Magic Flute* of Mozart: *Die Strahlen der Sonne vertreiben die Nacht* (The sunbeams drive away the night). An effort is needed to identify the causes of this phenomenon and to adopt a course of action which will bring a remedy.

What are the causes of fundamentalism? There are circumstantial factors. The war in the Middle East stimulates the flight towards irrational solutions, when all political routes seem barred. It is a vicious circle, where peace is foiled by the fanaticism of both sides and where the total lack of any likelihood of a lasting agreement fans the flames of religious exacerbation. But there are also structural factors, some of which are specific while others are applicable to all variants of fundamentalism. With regard to Islamic fundamentalism and Brazilian 'Pentecostal' fundamentalism, for example, it is easy to see the anomy caused by the urbanization process, the dissolution of traditional bonds of solidarity, ethnic discrimination, social marginality and the declining prestige of Marxism as a secular religion. Among the common factors applicable to all variants of fundamentalism there is the difficulty of integration into the economy, at a time when capitalism is displaying structural signs of exclusion, as well as the disorientation caused by the loss of traditional values as a consequence of globalization. With its ability to recreate the bonds of group solidarity, to give meaning and a sense of purpose to life, to invent a mythical past when the strains and uncertainties of contemporary life were unknown, to raise hopes of a future which would compensate for present humiliations and make religion a bulwark of cultural resistance, capable of confronting the levelling pressures provoked by globalization, fundamentalism seems to offer an answer to all the frustrations of the modern world.

Much can be done, even under present conditions, to sweeten the evils of fundamentalism, but it is clear that only worldwide democracy as advocated by our model of a knowledge society will be equipped for the action required to tackle the causes. Democracy can do so at the circumstantial level, by exerting effective multilateral pressures on the parties involved, which would permit the resolution of conflicts like that in the Middle East. It can also do so in structural ways, by providing secular education for all, which would help to neutralize the negative side of the religious tradition; by setting up programmes of economic development, to remedy the effects of social exclusion; by widespread implantation of democratic processes, ensuring community political participation, capable of overcoming the isolation brought about by the speed of urbanization; and above all through international measures to fight social and cultural pathologies generated by globalization. This is such an ambitious programme that it might almost be confused with a worldwide policy for

the elimination of ignorance, tyranny and exploitation, but if it is true that religious fanaticism is the 'sigh of the oppressed creature, the emotion of a heartless world', as Marx said of religion in general, this programme may be the price that has to be paid to make fundamentalism superfluous.

As for rational religion, it has a rightful place in the knowledge society because it obeys the basic principle of political and cultural modernity: the respect of secular principles. According to Ferry, it is secularization itself which permits the embodiment of a Christian ideal hitherto deemed unachievable, namely that of universal brotherhood. Vattimo goes so far as to see secularization as the true mark of the divine. In that sense, religion raises no obstacles to the full establishment of a knowledge society.

Does that mean that religion is condemned merely to playing a negative role, not interfering in the society of knowledge, or might it also have a positive role to play? Beyond not inhibiting secular knowledge, might it not also contribute through specific learning to enhancing the society of knowledge?

Habermas lets us glimpse a positive reply. Yes, religion can be a voice which comes from the sacred, from an immemorial time far older than secularization, bringing us a message of wisdom that has been lost in its modern guise. Can we understand Eichmann without using the religious language of the evil, the diabolical? Can we seriously believe the President of the United States when he apologizes for slavery instead of asking for forgiveness? Can we forgo, in politics, the categories of remorse, atonement and promise? If we consider that these categories and others of a similar type are important, we must recognize that faith has a role to play in the knowledge society. Religion would contribute knowledge of its own, like an antique *phronesis*, different from the simple modern *epistémê*, prudential learning of its own which can add to knowledge without distorting it. Thus we can revise our definition of the knowledge society by including among the types of knowledge it contains some aspects which are religious in character.

The very concept of a knowledge society may be no more than the secularization of one of the attributes of the divine, omniscience. It is a grandiose dream, but it is the religious universe which makes us aware of that dream, warning us that it is a sin, the sin of pride. Religion, too, can provide a remedy to correct our arrogance. It can encourage self-denial, which comes from the sacred, from a pagan belief expressed in the concept of hubris, that inordinate pride which exposes man to the chastisement of the Gods, and a Biblical belief expressed in the idea of the Fall, a hereditary flaw, caused by the sacrilegious pretension to accede to knowledge reserved for God. As a utopian impulse yet conscious of its limitations, the role of religion in the knowledge society is assured.

'When passing from religious aspiration to conscious social praxis', Horkheimer wrote in 1935, 'an illusion always survives. It can be refuted, but not exorcized . . . Mankind loses religion on the way but it does not disappear without leaving its mark. Partly, the impulses and desires preserved by religious belief break free of the mould in which they were cast and return, as productive forces, to social practice.'

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