

Recent Trends in French Theology: Approaching the Concept of God in a Secular Context

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I denna artikel ger Christoph Theobald, professor i teologi vid Faculté́s jésuites de Paris, en översikt över olika trender inom samtida fransk teologi. Särskilt uppmärksammar han hur teologin på olika sätt har mött utmaningen från det sekulariserade franska samhället och vad detta har inneburit för förståelsen av den teologiska uppgiften.

The saying *to live like God in France* (*Wie Gott in Frankreich leben*) expresses the admiration felt by the Germans for a particular way of life specific to the French. Looking at the programme for this Conference, one might think that God does indeed live well in Gaul, at least in the philosophical community. When we turn to Christian theology however — which I have been asked to do this morning — the result of our findings may not be quite as reassuring. The Church, supposed to attest in history the living God, is doing somewhat less well now than some years ago. For ever, or almost, considered by Rome as «her eldest daughter», the French Church has had to consent, at least since the separation of Church and State in 1905, to a slow erosion due to a secularisation, which, during these last few decades, has gained considerable speed in the «ultra-modern» context. One might certainly reassure oneself by distinguishing between the life of God as God, and the well-being of his «ground troops». Such a distinction is legitimate up to a point, both for philosophical and for theological reasons. But beyond this, there is a risk of distending, even giving up the essential link in Christianity between God and the faith of those, communities or individuals, who profess to owe their existence to Him.

To give an account of recent trends in French theology is therefore not an easy task. Not only because such an account per force includes a judgement about the situation of the Church in France, but also, and above all, because in the current ecclesiastical and social context, the community of theologians is itself undergoing profound changes. Several «diagnoses» have been proposed in recent years. The latest, which

is quite extensive, is that put forward by Joseph Doré, a former colleague and now Archbishop of Strasbourg. He mentions the view, which is widespread both in France and abroad, that «French theology seems to have become extremely silent». He acknowledges «the difficulty in orienting oneself within what it does still produce», and finally he indicates an organizing principle for its productions: «It is probably best to characterise the whole of this more or less hesitant production by saying that it appears above all to *take resolutely into account the way the other perceives Christianity from the outside*».¹

Although this diagnosis was made about ten years ago, it remains pertinent on the whole, even though today it needs to be more nuanced and developed, particularly if we want to focus on the question of God. I will therefore begin by sketching the current conflict of interpretations in the context of French theology. I will then show how that conflict is reflected in conceptions about God in various theological approaches before expounding my own position,

¹ Joseph Doré, *Les courants de la théologie française depuis Vatican II*, dans *Interpréter*. Hommage amical à Claude Geffré (études réunies par Jean-Pierre Jossua et Nicolas-Jean Sed), Le Cerf, Paris 1992, 227–259 (citation p. 229). Joseph Doré distinguishes four trends in French theology: 1. The critical approach through an appeal to human sciences; 2. the existential approach to hermeneutics; 3. the mystical approach of the discreet withdrawal of the religious dimension within culture; 4. the practical approach of communicating faith today (the approach to which J. Doré himself adheres).

which is of course already at work in the more analytical parts of this lecture.

I. The Diagnosis

1. *A Conflict of Interpretations*

During the 1960s and 1970s, religious developments in the West seemed to follow a *linear model*, which could be summarised thus: the more modernisation advances in society, the more religion retreats. This applies particularly to Catholicism, which was indeed the dominant religion in Southern Europe and in France. However, even at this time, the secularisation thesis was divided into two rather different strands of interpretation. Some foresaw the progressive disappearance of Catholicism, while others, more modestly, foresaw a change in its status: loss of monopoly, privatisation, and pluralisation.

It seems that, over the last thirty years, developments have been considerably more complex than this somewhat simplistic scheme would indicate. On a more general level, one might recall the explosion towards the end of the 1960s of new religious movements in the United States, an explosion that rapidly spread to the Third World and Europe. Having arrived in France in 1972, the charismatic movements became very widespread and, after a period of marginalisation by the ecclesiastical institutions, they became progressively integrated into the pastoral structures of the Church. Since the 1980s and 1990s, there has been a return of pilgrimages and in particular of large gatherings of young people (Danièle Hervieu-Léger). The global impression of a «return of religion» is reinforced by the expansion without precedent of «parallel beliefs» (Françoise Champion), such as astrology, telepathy, reincarnation etc., frequently juxtaposed to Christian beliefs. During the same period, fundamentalist movements took on the importance we are familiar with in the Mediterranean world and in the minds of Europeans. This phenomenon is not unrelated to the breakdown of Communism and the secular utopian systems, which led to the impression among many French people of a certain de-secularisation and religious renewal.

In the face of this highly contrastive, even ambiguous panorama, sociological analysis has split into two quite distinct currents. Some sociologists question the secularisation thesis by proposing interpretations in terms of «the comeback of God», the return of religion, new ways of believing and the re-composition of beliefs. They thus disagree with analyses in terms of the loss of religion. Others, on the contrary, remind us that the clear tendency towards the retreat of Catholicism in France and of Christianity in Europe has in no way stopped and has certainly not been turned around. These interpretations, which will help us to look more clearly at the orientation of the different theologies, come from the *group of sociology of religion* of the long-standing French tradition (E. Poulat, J. Séguy, J. Maître), which must be heeded, if one wishes «to take into account *how the other perceives Christianity from the outside*».

2. *Some Significant Facts*

In the year 2000, the journal of this group, the *Archives de Science sociale des Religions*, published an important issue on the religious forms that characterise ultra-modernity in France and in other countries.² This issue was directed by Yves Lambert, the author of the celebrated monograph entitled *Dieu change en Bretagne*. As far as France is concerned, recent investigations show that «almost half the population clearly affirms its distance to any religion, and over a quarter continue to see themselves as Catholics though they are in fact detached from the church».³ Although only about a quarter of people practise their faith, on a regular or irregu-

² I have borrowed from Yves Lambert's introduction the information cited at the beginning of this first part of my paper. One could link the work of this group of sociology of religions to the first approach in Doré's «geographical map» (cf. note above). Because of the conflict of interpretation that permeates this approach, I do not consider it to be comparable to the others, but rather as a sort of «forum for debate» within which theologians can bring to bear their own interpretations of the contemporary situation of Catholicism.

³ *Arch. de Sc. soc. des Rel.* 109 (2000/1), 15.

lar basis, Catholicism nevertheless remains the principal religion, which structures the religious identity of the French, even though it is much weakened, and has become increasingly self-preoccupied.

It would seem as if Catholics had divided into two groups (with some overlapping) : those, relatively on the increase, who participate in one or the other charismatic or spiritual movement or group, and those who continue to base their Christian life on more or less close bonds with a territorial community. The dioceses, for their part, are currently spending almost all their available resources on reconstructing their territorial network, adapting it to the new situation as a minority, and in helping Catholics to sustain their faith in the face of current cultural developments in French society. Most of the few theologians we have are involved in these numerous educational projects. As for the charismatic movements, they are threatened by strong «communitarian» tendencies also found elsewhere in Western societies. All of this does not prevent the ecclesiastical institutions — by some historical irony — from succeeding here and there, in integrating and using more and more these movements for their own pastoral purposes.

Given that only between 4 and 10% of the population are members of other religions (Judaism, Islam or Buddhism), religious pluralism remains a relatively limited phenomenon in France. However, it is very present in the consciousness of the French and profoundly linked to a general transformation of their relation to beliefs and interpretations of the meaning of life. Certainties are regressing in favour of the possible, of doubt and indifference. The exacerbation of individualism has produced more and more diversified options which are all placed under the primacy of personal experience and, generally speaking, underpinned by the view that everything is relative, and by an attitude of tolerance. However limited, religious pluralism is nevertheless integrated as a worldwide fact. At the same time, the split widens between the recognition of that which traditionally belongs to institutionalised religion, which is on the wane, and the affirmation of certain religious beliefs, particularly among young people and with respect to the question of life after death.

The religious *bricolage* is thus more and more common, even at the very heart of Catholicism, as a sign that the creativity and the re-interpretation of the given offers are increasingly becoming part of our contemporary ethos.

3. *How do Theologians react to this Situation of Faith?*

This situation of great contrasts leads theologians to take opposing positions: the conflict of interpretation among sociologists of religion is reflected at the heart of their community, even though they are not always aware of it. The confessional nature of theology relates them in effect more or less firmly to questions of «politics» or of «ecclesial pastoral care» which have become highly sensitive in a minority situation. Many prefer to count on the «return of religion» and at the same time to be fairly critical of modernity. They therefore insist on retaining the totality of the *religious* elements in a Catholicism that they believe to be structuring for French identity. Among that group of intellectuals are some who, from a background in phenomenology and in patristic research, all of which is very lively in France, are connected to the movement sustained by the international periodical *Communio*. Others, on the contrary, are more linked to the hermeneutical paradigm of modernity developed in the German and Protestant tradition. Some among them, such as Claude Geffré, are rather more concerned with the place of Christianity *among other religions*, while yet others, such as Joseph Moingt, attempt to conceive Christian faith in the framework of *the decline of religion*.

So, how can we refine the «geographical map» of French theology, set out some ten years ago by Joseph Doré ? «To take into account *how the other perceives Christianity from the outside*» provides us with a good criterion. I quite simply propose to make it more precise by exploring how theologians integrate, possibly in a self-critical manner, the way Christianity is seen from the outside and, consequently, how they reinterpret «faith». In the re-organisation of our map, this entails giving a real place to the re-composition of Christian tradition which, according to the sociologists, is already in

progress among Catholics, quite aside from the efforts of hermeneutical theology. Could the current situation of faith in God be analysed in terms of a «turning point»? Some sociologists⁴ and some theologians think so. If we want to give an account of the conflict of interpretation just mentioned, it is necessary to integrate this historical aspect into the geographical map. This is all the more necessary today because it has been further accentuated by a change of generation, which we will consider during the latter part of this paper.

II. How to Conceive of God: Some Trends in French Theology

After these contextual and methodological remarks we are now ready to listen to some voices in French theology, chosen from among many others in order to represent three different approaches.

1. *Revelation as a «Saturated Phenomenon»*

Although being firmly rooted in French phenomenology, Jean-Luc Marion is nevertheless the leader of an entire theological current;⁵ and it is from that very limited angle that I here approach his work and in particular his «concept» of revelation. The author of *L'essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation* proceeds in two steps. Having begun by accepting the presupposition put forward by Husserl, that «everything which offers itself to us in our intuition should be taken quite simply as it gives itself, but only within the limits within which it does so give itself». Within this framework of a phenomenality that is essentially limited or poor in intuition, Marion *first* proposes the notion of «saturated phenomenon»: a saturated phenomenon is a phenomenon in which intuition generates more, even immeasurably more than intention could ever have aimed for or foreseen. The four

modes of that saturation — quantity, quality, relation and modality — accomplish themselves through four types of phenomena: event, idol, flesh and icon. Only the icon gathers in itself the characteristics of the three preceding types of saturated phenomena. It is on that concept [i.e. the icon] that Marion then grafts his analysis of the phenomenon of revelation by choosing the manifestation of Christ as his paradigm. Let us note that he will not allow himself to be locked into a debate about the status of the theological aspects of phenomenology, but seeks to go all the way in his effort to free the possible in phenomenality, by detaching it from the equivalences which would restrict its unfolding.

Taking the four modes of saturation as his starting-point, Marion sets out the phenomenon of revelation as it manifests itself in Christ. 1. With regard to quantity, the phenomenon of Christ gives itself intuitively as *a perfectly unpredictable event*, because it is radically heterogeneous to what it accomplishes nevertheless (the prophets); 2. With regard to quality, the figure of Christ attests to his paradoxical character, because the intuition that saturates it reaches, and often even *goes beyond what the phenomenological approach can sustain*; 3. With regard to relation, Christ appears as *an absolute phenomenon that abolishes all relation*, because he saturates any horizon into which a relation would introduce him; Finally, 4. with regard to modality, Christ appears as a phenomenon that cannot be looked upon, precisely because as an icon, it is he who looks at me, *in such a way that I am constituted by him as his witness* and not at all as if he were constituted by some transcendental *I* whatsoever.⁶ As with the phenomenon of the icon, this latter mode of the revelation of Christ — the inversion of looking — implies a doubling of the saturation, because it leads the beholder, not only to place himself before the unlookable beholding (*regard irregardable*) of Christ, but even to abolish all possession and all originarity on his part. It is at this point, in the latter part of his work, that Marion introduces the figure of the one «who gives himself»

⁴ Y. Lambert, *Religion, modernité, ultramodernité: une analyse en terme de «tournant» axial*, dans *Arch. de Sc. soc. des Rel.* 109 (2000/1), 87–116.

⁵ That approach is missing in «the geographical map» by Doré.

⁶ Jean-Luc Marion, *Etant donné. Essai d'une phénoménologie de la donation*, PUF, Paris 1997, 325–335.

(*l'adonné*). This culminates in his analysis of St. Matthew by Carravaggio: «Thus is born the one who gives himself (*l'adonné*), whom the call transforms from a «subject» into someone whose identity is entirely based on what he has received».⁷

In spite of the distinction between the *phenomenon* of revelation and its *effective* manifestation — *fact* which as such, and in its ontic status, remains the proper business of theology.⁸ Marion presupposes a very particular concept of revelation: a concept imported into phenomenology from a certain type of Christian theology. By the way, he admits this, at least implicitly, when he writes: «the fact (if it is a fact) of revelation exceeds the scope of any science, including phenomenology; only a theology, and one that allows itself to be constructed with only that *fact* as its starting-point, (K. Barth or H. U. von Balthasar doubtless more than R. Bultmann or K. Rahner) might accede to it».⁹ The rhetorics of the extreme, and the vocabulary of paradox, that characterise this unilaterally «catalogic», or «descendent» concept of revelation, is effectively emblematic of it. But to an even greater extent, it is the relationship to the figure of «the autonomous subject» that characterises this concept of revelation. The claim to have finished with this figure, radically and for the first time, and to substitute for it «the one who gives himself»¹⁰, represents a «turning point» that relativises the one of «modernity».

We can thus understand the alliance between this kind of thinking and the theological current expressed in the journal *Communio*, of which Jean-Luc Marion is an eminent member. The proximity between his *concept of revelation* and that of the principal inspiration behind this journal, H.U. von Balthasar, could be analysed more thoroughly. I would like to emphasize above all that this makes it possible to establish a *relatively homogeneous relation to Christian tradition*, a relation which skips over, so to speak, the distances created by modernity. It

thus is able to attract a certain number of patristic scholars and medievalists, who have found here a place for theological reflection, in both a social and ecclesiastical environment in which transmission is not working very well. In this regard, the 1999 issue of the journal *Croire en la Trinité* (Belief in the Trinity) is in every respect significant. Historical, doctrinal, liturgical and spiritual articles were written by authors from two different generations, «elders», like Bertrand de Margerie or Xavier Tilliette, and «young» theologians from l'École cathédrale de Paris (the Cathedral School of Paris) and from the séminaire d'Ars (the Ars Seminary). The themes that we just mentioned — a concept of revelation, a way of relating to tradition, and, I should add, a concept of the Church understood as a hierarchical communion — link them one to another. In a situation of minority, the younger authors, for their part, reactivate these points of orientation, often in a «restrictive communitarian» fashion, to demand the right to express *their own* identity ... as a saturated phenomenon, one might say, since in Marion's phenomenology, «what is surprising seems to be [...] that one persists — and without conceptual reason — in denying (God) the right (to appear in phenomenality), or rather that one is no longer surprised about this stubborn refusal.»¹¹

Let us now put some questions to this approach. How does it cope with the ever-present risk of «mysticism» or of «theosophy»? How can it guard against the danger of an ideological distortion between the relation, which it maintains, with revelation as a gift, on the one hand, and the «political» and pastoral treatment of ecclesiastical and social matters, on the other hand? Does not a too unilaterally vertical conception of revelation run the risk of legitimising, from the start and without discernment, the religious integrality of the present-day Church? These questions lead other theologians to prefer to place themselves, following Paul Ricœur, on the historico-hermeneutical side of phenomenology, thus drawing the phenomenon of revelation to this side. The major difficulty in a meeting between phenomenology and theology arises

⁷ *Ibid.*, 369.

⁸ See *ibid.*, 329.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 329, note (my emphasis).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 441f.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 337.

in effect from the status of *immediacy* that some would like to attribute to the phenomenon of revelation. However, we shall not get very far in the phenomenological description of Revelation without taking into account that it is mediated through culture and history.

2. *Christian Revelation amongst the Religions of the World*

Claude Geffré is the first French theologian to have integrated the different stages of hermeneutical tradition into the Catholic conception of theology as inherited from St Thomas.¹² I would like to present here especially the latter stage of his work, where he relates «theology as hermeneutics» to the theology of non-Christian religions.¹³ According to him, inter-religious dialogue is in effect the most characteristic phenomenon of the current religious situation of Catholicism itself. That extension of the hermeneutical paradigm is easy to appreciate. Geffré has, somewhat like Tillich, insisted on «the critical correlation between the fundamental Christian experience, to which tradition bears witness, and contemporary human experience».¹⁴ As his thinking advances, the second pole of this correlation takes on more consistency; even going so far as to identify itself with the cultures and religions of the world. At that point he begins — during the 1990s¹⁵ — to utilise the terminology of «post-modernity».

The pivot of this «turning point» is his distancing himself from «the typically modern idea, according to which there is a fatal contradiction between the quest for the absolute and the quest for the authentically human. That

would amount to postulating the idea that all religion, by aspiring to a certain absolute, is intrinsically violent and dehumanising.»¹⁶ Geffré's position is in reality rather balanced. On the one hand he refuses, along with one part of Western modernity, to set up the *homo religiosus* as an ultimate and universal criterion for the planetary civilisation currently being born; this criterion is rather provided by the *authentically human*, to be debated among human beings. But on the other hand, he also proposes «the hypothesis that the authentic relation to the absolute generates an intensified attitude of humanity, for the religious subject, and for his relations with others and the world».¹⁷ It is therefore insufficient to consider religions, as modernity does, as simply cultural creations or projections, thus «forgetting that they are living responses to the call of a mystical Reality». Geffré terms the *respondent* to this call «*the authentically human*», «that which a human being experiences as a gratuitous gift».¹⁸ There are also other points that confirm this post-modern context of Geffré's thinking, such as for instance his sensitivity towards the Holocaust, and the experiences of suffering in massive and global oppression, and also his insistence on the practical, even liberating, function of hermeneutics, which must one day become «political» or the basis of a new world.

The cultural and religious consistency, taken by the second pole of the critical correlation, flows evidently back toward the first pole, on the interpretation of the fundamental Christian experience to which tradition testifies. This is where the inter-religious *dialogue* comes in, understood as a critical emulation, by which everyone benefits from *the irreducible* otherness¹⁹ of the other, in order better to understand his own identity. Geffré refers, for example, to

¹² See also *Le christianisme aux risques de l'interprétation*, Le Cerf, Paris, «Cogitatio fidei» 120, 1983 & 1988. It is always to that «hermeneutical» aspect of Geffré's thought that J. Doré refers.

¹³ Claude Geffré, *Croire et interpréter. Le tournant herméneutique de la théologie*, Le Cerf, Paris 2001, particularly chapter IV, entitled *Le pluralisme religieux comme paradigme théologique* (91-109).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁵ See for example *Révélation et expérience historique des hommes*, in *Laval théologique et philosophique* 46/1 (1990), 3-16.

¹⁶ *Pour un christianisme mondial*, in *RSR* 86/1(1998), 60.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 61. At this point we are not very far from Marion.

¹⁹ See *ibid.*, 53 and 66 where «the irreducible» is understood to emerge from the Spirit of God who moves where it wishes.

the Islamic conception of the prophet as «warner»: «The intransigent monotheism of Islam may today be a *salutary* warning for Christians who are seeking to confess the divinity of Jesus without undermining the absolute rights of God».²⁰ The point of this dialogue is finally to help one another to gain a better knowledge of the true transcendence of God. This is also how these two religions exercise a *common responsibility* in confessing a personal God in the face of modern disbelief and the growing attraction of transcendence without God. On the other hand, in the ambiguous situation of globalisation, this type of dialogue enables them to resist the myth of a «global religion»²¹ and to propose a new paradigm of universality, more respectful of the otherness of the other, than that which usually underpins the dialectics of globalisation and fragmentation.²²

What are the results of this formidable re-composition of the religious landscape for the understanding of Christianity, which Geffré calls «the religion of dialogue» or «the religion of otherness»?²³ How can he espouse the *paradox* (!) inherent to all inter-religious dialogue that consists in «reconciling the absolute commitment implied by any religious act with an attitude of dialogue and of openness to the convictions of others?»²⁴ In a theological reflection rather close to the intuitions of M. de Certeau, Geffré responds to these questions by putting the figure of the *cross* at the centre as «a symbol of a universality that is always linked with the sacrifice of particularity». «In terms of experience, we may see *the originality of Christian experience* as an experience of otherness, at the same time the otherness of an originary absence (namely that of the body of the Founder) and the otherness of the one who is to become my fellow-man».²⁵ Thus, as opposed to a universality understood as a *closed totality*, Christianity

bears witness in itself to the sign of that which it *lacks*. A distant analogy allows us today to move from the originary «lack», which for Christianity is represented by the irreducible otherness of Judaism, to the «lack» that constitutes the part of authentic religious truth, of which another religious tradition may be the bearer.

Of course, the idea of fulfillment is part of the concept of revelation. — J.L. Marion reflects on this in the framework of the first phenomenon of saturation, that is to say the «event». However, at a great distance from the «radical» concept of revelation of the phenomenologist, Geffré attempts to think of a *non-totalitarian conception of fulfillment* in the relationship of Christianity to Judaism and to non-Christian religions. That means that, according to him, it is now necessary to distinguish between Christ and Christianity, or between revelation as the utmost *event* of the word of God in Jesus Christ, and its *content of truth*, which is necessarily historical and limited. The positive values that are found in Judaism and in other religions can no longer be understood as implicitly Christian, but they testify, through this very dialogue, to the *irreducible* which relates to *the Spirit* of God, which moves wherever it wills.²⁶ One can thus understand why Geffré and others can ask themselves «whether our historical experience of a *factual* pluralism should not lead us to recognise a principal pluralism, that would correspond to the mysterious will of God».²⁷

Founded on this hermeneutical paradigm, Cl. Geffré's theology of revelation has progressively adapted itself to «post-modern» transformations of societies and of French society, thanks to his great capacity to integrate the manifold acquired consensus of a global theology; a capacity favoured by his long-standing collaboration with the journal *Concilium*. While paying great attention to cultural or religious differences, and to the religious particularity of Christianity, this Dominican theologian proposes a universalist or global understanding of Christian faith. The relatively programmatic character of his thought does however give rise to a question concerning

²⁰ *Le Dieu Un de l'islam et le monothéisme trinitaire*, in *Concilium* 289 (2001), 97.

²¹ *Pour un christianisme mondial*, 53f et 59f.

²² *Ibid.*, 63.

²³ *Ibid.*, 63 and 64–66.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 62.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 65.

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 66f.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 62.

his relationship with the *particular* problems of French Catholicism.²⁸ In his contribution to a colloquium on Michel de Certeau (published in 1991), he admits their common nostalgia for an «otherness» (*un ailleurs*), but confesses at the same time that his own life «was far more bound up with institutions that had to be safeguarded or reorganized, be it the Saulchoir or the Institut Catholique (in Paris)».²⁹ Even Geffré's former colleague at the Institut Catholique and Professor at the Facultés jésuites de Fourvière and at the Centre Sèvres (in Paris), Joseph Moingt, to whom we shall turn now, was attracted by this «otherness» (*un ailleurs*). He too followed M. de Certeau, although he gave it an entirely different theological format.

3. *The Unveiling of God through the Retreat of Religion*

In 1993 Moingt published his monumental christology entitled *L'homme qui venait de Dieu* (The Man who came from God) and in 2002 he published the first volume of a work on *Dieu qui vient à l'homme*, (The God who comes to Man) with the subtitle *Du deuil au dévoilement de Dieu* (From the Mourning to the Unveiling of God) which perfectly expresses the orientation and the structure of his thought. It is as a *theologian* that he confronts the massive lack of belief on the part of French society by beginning with an enquiry into the causes of the loss of God. With him we approach those among the sociologists who remind us that the distinct tendency towards a regression of Catholicism in France and Christianity in Europe has in no way abated and even less been turned around.

²⁸ This questioning is deliberately more open than that of J. Doré, which relates to «a debatable relativisation of the fully ecclesial dimension of faith and of Christian life ...» (*Les courants de la théologie française depuis Vatican II*, 242).

²⁹ Claude Geffré (éd.), *Michel de Certeau ou la différence chrétienne*, Le Cerf, Paris «Cogitatio fidei» 165, 159; in his «geographical map» of French theology J. Doré places M. de Certeau together with S. Breton in a third approach which he calls «the mystical dimension of the discreet withdrawal of the religious dimension within culture».

Under the title *The Mourning of God* the first chapter of this volume thus proposes a genealogy of «modernity». Within a very great complexity, resulting from the many strands of thinking examined here, a relatively simple line of thought finally stands out, based on a kind of triple foundation, namely the double trajectory diverging since Descartes, of western philosophy and theology, *both* influenced by, even carried by the third factor, what Moingt calls «religion».

It is in this «retreat of religion» that has been going on ever since the Enlightenment that he places the major responsibility for the current situation of unbelief.³⁰ In distinguishing between «religion» and «religiosity» — the latter remaining after «the retreat of religion», as does the majority phenomenon of unbelief or of agnosticism — he follows the interpretation of these phenomena put forward by Marcel Gauchet, who understands Christianity as the «religion of the departure from religion».³¹ However, according to Moingt the best of modernity does not derive from the Christian *religion*, but from the Gospel: «Modern society does not owe its birth to what Christianity has in common with religion in general — in this respect it has only received constraint and opposition — but to the explosive force of the «Good Word» that drives it [Christianity] forward through history, precisely for the purpose of making history».³² Following the beginning of modernity, Christianity has conspired against itself to liberate history from its own hold, namely by evangelising its own religious constitution.

During that long process, modernity is considered both as the result of the power of the gospel and *as its ally*. It is for that reason that Moingt has proposed, alongside a religious analysis, a long philosophic itinerary.³³ Without

³⁰ Joseph Moingt, *Dieu qui vient à l'homme. I. Du deuil au dévoilement de Dieu*, Le Cerf, Paris, «Cogitatio fidei», 222, 81–130.

³¹ See also Marcel Gauchet, *Le désenchantement du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, Gallimard, NRF, Paris 1985.

³² *Ibid.*, 123.

³³ See also *ibid.*, 41–79 and 131–189.

being able to follow all the subtleties of his argument let us consider its pivotal point: the transmission of the Christian idea of God in Western philosophy stops with *Hegel*, who attempted to «re-found» it by suppressing its exteriority in relation to the world and to history. In this, post-modernist philosophers do not follow him, since they are no longer able to conceive of God. Nor do theologians who have finally returned, whether or not they admit it, to the idea of the God of traditional philosophy. Both Feuerbach and Nietzsche themselves presuppose the metaphysical concept of God when they reproach Hegel with having caused «the death of God». «In the one as in the other, the idea of God found in ancient metaphysics, and that of the «God with us» of Christianity mutually destroy each other by suddenly revealing their apparent incompatibility».³⁴

The positive effect of that «reduction» of the God of metaphysics to the state of mortal remains is to redirect the believer to the *revelation of God* as such. On condition, however, that he or she perceives the history of Western modernity as a prodigious *purification through the gospel* of the idea of God. Since the origin of Christianity, on which Moingt is a great expert, this idea has been a composite notion, in which the idea of God revealed in Jesus is interwoven with those of the God of the Bible, the God of other religions, and the God of reason. The principal beneficial result of this theological genealogy of modernity is thus to have prepared the human mind to receive a revelation capable of making sense of the obscurity, which came to accrue to it over time. So this re-reading of history is already, in the words of the Jesuit theologian, attracted by «an otherness» (*un ailleurs*), «the lifting of a veil»: ³⁵ «God «unveils himself» in the sense that he leaves behind «the veil» of religious life, he leaves religion».³⁶

Entitled *Dévoilement de Dieu dans le corps du Christ*, (The Unveiling of God through the Body of Christ) the second chapter of Moingt's book thus explores the Christian concept of

Revelation. Moingt shows very concretely, in opposition to Barth and Heidegger, that «by making a leap into revelation in order to commit oneself to following Jesus, recovering one's proper thinking about God through *the act* of following Him, and by experiencing truth through the new *meaning* which it gives to one's freedom in the world», the believer does not leave behind the spirit of modernity, but makes revelation communicable to everybody through the language of common reason.

Here the point of connection is precisely where «the proclamation of the death (of God) by contemporary culture is brought back to the site of the death of Jesus: it thus appears that the truth of God consists in being there, in the one who dies. [...]. (Revelation) cannot be understood in itself, as long as it remains outside of God, or as long as it is seen only as an act produced by God, of which God would be the author, without being the *subject*, without being submitted to it himself in himself. In other words — and this is the specific meaning of the Christian concept of revelation: to say that God reveals himself in Jesus is to say that something happens to God. He goes through what Jesus went through, in order to establish and maintain a living relationship to men and women. This can however only be grasped by the believer by going through the same experience».³⁷

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The path that we have been travelling shows the importance taken by the concept of «revelation» in recent French theology. If the theological sensitivity represented here by Claude Geffré attempts to propose a *non-totalitarian figure that inscribes itself into the plurality of religions*, and takes into account the «return of the religious», the way chosen by Joseph Moingt is primarily sensitive to *the absolute singularity of Christian revelation in a world that has become massively un-believing*, as is indicated by his paradoxical description of Christianity as «the religion of the Gospel». The importance attributed to modern philosophy can be explained in

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 270.

³⁵ The title of the last section of the first chapter.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 278.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 287.

this perspective. So too can his attempt to propose, as «prolegomena», a theological genealogy of modernity. On at least one essential point, Joseph Moingt here agrees with the insistence of J.-L. Marion, when he refuses the classical concept of God because the «properties which we attribute to it (are) conditioning elements that *limit his possibilities to manifest his presence*»³⁸ However, as a theologian who takes a very positive view of modernity, and of Hegel in particular, Moingt relies on the theology of the cross here, at the very heart of his concept of God, thus doing for France the work that Eberhard Jüngel did for German culture in his work, *God as the Mystery of the World*.

III. Holiness, Mystery of the World

1. A New Generation of Theologians

With regard to the first approach of theology, I have already spoken of a change of generation, which presently affects all of French theology. The generation, to which Geffré and Moingt belong, and which was inspired by the very great theologians of the conciliar period, — such as Chenu, Congar and de Lubac — was able to dream all the more easily of an «otherness» (*un ailleurs*), as they had known a rather comfortable ecclesiastical situation and were buoyed up by their apostolic enthusiasm. They therefore felt an obligation to gradually take into account the new conditions that French culture had created for Christianity. It is in this context, by the way, that some others could question the degree of rootedness of their theology in ecclesiastical tradition.

Moreover, since the majority of the young theologians have never known the ecclesiastical situation of their predecessors, they seem to accept, by and large, the situation of being in the minority. In view of the scarcity of means and the heavy institutional and pastoral demands laid on them, they find only little time for research and so their work appears rather fragmentary. It is very difficult for an outsider to appreciate the extremely limited conditions for theological

work caused by the poverty of the French Church — a poverty that has nothing in common with the institutional and cultural richness that was still presupposed in the textual corpus of Vatican II. The silence of French theologians at the international level, noted already ten years ago by J. Doré, can thus be explained.

The other facet of the situation of being in a minority is probably an acute consciousness among the younger generation that they must take up theological discourse from the bottom without much help from their elders with whom — aside from a few exceptions — they no longer share the same approaches.³⁹ That silent awareness of a deep chasm between the generations is probably felt more strongly than the divisions and trends that inevitably have re-emerged, and which we have already noted with regard to the journal *Communio*.

Having said this, several works on the question of God have seen the light of day over these last few years⁴⁰ and we can see several common orientations in them. The Christian difference with regard to other spiritual positions taken within the same society is at once clearly affirmed — and in a very personal manner — but it is also questioned. That questioning includes the existential commitment which this Christian difference implies or entails. «What does the act of believing change?» The result of this impoverishment to which we have just referred consists thus in an increasing attention to the immediate and the «common» under-

³⁹ The fourth approach of French theology on «the map» by J. Doré — «the practical dimension of communicating the faith today» (the approach in which J. Doré positions himself) — is probably the one which managed to create a certain continuity between generations.

⁴⁰ Henri-Jérôme Gagey and André Lalier, *Dieu ... tout simplement*, Atelier, Paris 1997; André Lalier, *Dieu est intéressant*, Paris, Atelier, 1998; Jean-Luc Blaquart, *Dieu bouleversé*, Le Cerf, Paris 1999; Dominique Bourdin et Jean-Louis Souletie, *Dieu le Père ... tout simplement*, Atelier, Paris 1999; François Bousquet, *La Trinité ... tout simplement*, Atelier, Paris 2000; Christoph Theobald, *La Révélation ... tout simplement*, Atelier, Paris 2001; H. Laux, *Le Dieu excentré*, Beachesne, «Le grenier à sel», Paris 2001.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 288 and *Etant donné*, 336f.

standing of life issues, and to the spiritual experiences that it enables, and consequently a certain interest in phenomenology, but also much suspicion of abstract universalism. Approaches differ concerning how to evaluate the different developments of Catholicism in French society. While some insist more on its visible representation, culminating in liturgy as the «place» par excellence in which to experience God, others prefer to take up their pilgrim's staff in order to meet those among the «non-practising» or «the non-religious», whose participation in some sort of faith cannot be denied.⁴¹ Although I myself cannot claim to be a «young theologian» I do personally feel close to that sort of sensitivity. Let me briefly explain this.

2. Revelation and Reception

1. A certain number of presuppositions valid for previous generations seem to be shifting now. The *Scriptures*, and in particular the gospel narrative, certainly represent for J. Moingt the basis for his theology of revelation; but they seem to be structured around the symbol of the cross, which in turn becomes the central axis of the concept of revelation. It is no doubt necessary today to pay more attention to the *plurality* of narratives, and especially to what characterizes them *as narratives*; in particular to the fact that their configuration conceals itself, so to speak, in the diversity of episodes and the fragility or the shifting patterns of the human journey, thus inviting us to produce a theology sensitive to

⁴¹ See also the small work by the psychoanalyst and «theologian» Maurice Bellet *La quatrième hypothèse. Sur l'avenir du christianisme*, DDB, Paris 2001: «The fourth hypothesis postulates that there is certainly something that comes to an end: it is precisely this religious system, bound in fact to the modern age in the West and much more dependent on this age than it imagines; and in a sense it is indeed an end of Christianity. [...] Something dies, and we do not know how deeply this death affects us. [...] What we are here concerned with is something like the end of a world, just when it can appear to be at its apogee. *Something* announces itself, and we do not know what it will be. [...] The question is: at this inaugural point, can the Gospel appear as Gospel, that is as the truly inaugural word which opens room for life?» (*ibid.*, 19).

these «next-to-the-last realities» (Bonhoeffer). It is here that we ought to integrate some of the intuitions of «the third quest» for the historical Jesus, and above all the interest in *the lifestyle of the Nazarene and of his followers* at the heart of a Palestinian society that is suffering from a crisis of identity, and in the *motivation of his ethics*. I think that the term «holiness», rooted in a potentially universal ethics formalised in the Golden Rule, and its accomplishment without measure, though still proportioned to the specific capacities of each human being,⁴² characterises this *style* quite well. Somehow there is a mysterious unity to be discerned in the therapeutic action of Jesus, his way of speaking and his lifestyle, manifesting fully his taste for allowing himself to learn from whatever happens, even in adversity, when his adversary must be accepted at the very heart of his own capacity to give himself.

Apart from this capacity of learning of their principal figure, the gospel narratives evoke a large number of sympathising characters who, through their meeting with the Nazarene, emerge at the surface of the narrative to disappear again. None of these characters belongs to the «church» category of the «disciples» or to the more restricted groups of the «Twelve» or «the Apostles». Having benefited from the signs and words of Jesus these people are told: «Walk! It is *your* faith that has saved you!» It is, in their case, a matter of an «anthropological» faith, without any specifically christological qualification, as it appears in the gospel narratives and especially from the confession of Cesarea on. In the current situation of Christianity in France,

⁴² Cf. C. Theobald, *La règle d'or chez Paul Ricoeur. Une interrogation théologique*, dans Coll., *Paul Ricoeur. L'herméneutique à l'école de la phénoménologie*, «Philosophie» 16, Beauchesne, Paris 1995; it would be necessary here to enter into a precise debate about the position of Emmanuel Levinas, who has given a masterly exposition of it in *Du sacré au saint. Cinq nouvelles lectures talmudiques*, Ed. de Minuit, Paris 1977; the text has recently been discussed by Jacques Derrida, *Foi et savoir. Les deux sources de la «religion» aux limites de la simple raison*, Seuil, Paris 1996.

the perception of that dimension is of a particular importance.

2. The definition of the concept of revelation that has served as my guideline for this presentation of French theology must take into account these shifts. Personally, I insist on maintaining the specifically «modern» structure of this concept and on understanding the revelation, with the Second Vatican Council, as «self-revelation», or as «God's own self-communication». God has only one «thing» to tell us, only one «mystery» to reveal to the believer and that is *He Himself* and *He Himself as our destiny*. What more could he say, having revealed himself totally, in his mysterious identity? His self-revelation thus signifies a true end at the heart of our history, one which can only be followed by his silence ...: the *silence* of him who *has communicated himself totally* in the holiness of his Only Son, in his very act of existing (as pointed out by the classical concept of «the hypostatic union»).

However, this is where we need to stress quite clearly — and in view of what has just been said about the gospel narratives and our own spiritual situation — that God does reveal *himself*, not only in Jesus, but in the network of relationships that arise between him *and* those who *freely* crossed his path. It is even necessary to think that He reveals *himself* in the development of human autonomy which is set henceforth, without guarantee before the enigma of evil, and in a world at the same time global and irremediably pluralistic, and invited to develop its potentials of holiness. How could one not go into the depth of the meaning of the concept of revelation? Has not God delivered us *all* through his self-revelation, including himself and his own holiness, in order for us to be able — thanks to his silence — to gain access, *in and through ourselves*, to the source of his beatitude, hidden in that which he has committed into our hands, i.e. his Creation. I have developed this point of view in my latest book on revelation by discussing the three major areas in which we experience revelation, namely encounter, history, and creation. It is within this framework that I also take up again the genealogy of modernity in the West.⁴³

3. These all too brief remarks on the concept of revelation have at least enabled to highlight the importance of developing — in our present situation — a Christian theology of creation. This is one field of work, and not the least, of and for younger theologians in France⁴⁴ and that was little worked on by the preceding generation.⁴⁵ We encounter here once more the cleavages of which we have already spoken. And that is not surprising, because the very concept of theology and its relationship to science, ecology and aesthetics are at stake here. So too is theology's capacity to be present among those, Catholics or not, who ask the same questions about the future of society and of the planet.

For my own part, I understand the *creatio ex nihilo* — creation out of nothing and gratuitously, for nothing — as a gratuitous *gift* that hides, by definition, the Giver in order to leave the receiver free with what is freely given into hands, without making him in any way indebted; with what is given to such an extent that it conceals within itself an unsuspected source of life. It is not Revelation that carries that «source», but it refers to it as to a mysterious otherness, forever unsurpassable, as we have been taught by the Wisdom literature and by Johannine theology (cf. Jn. 4, 14 and Ap. 21, 6). From the theological point of view expounded here, it must therefore be said that the sciences really do *participate* in the, however frequently hidden, real capacities of the universe, of human traditions, of communities and individuals, to regenerate and to transform themselves.

⁴³ Christoph Theobald, *La Révélation ... tout simplement*, Atelier, Paris 2001, chap. V à VII.

⁴⁴ Jacques Arnoud, *La théologie après Darwin. Eléments pour une théologie de la création dans une perspective évolutionniste*, Le Cerf, Paris 1998; id., *L'Eglise et l'histoire de la nature*, Paris, Le Cerf, Paris 2000; id., *Dieu, le singe et le Big Bang*, Le Cerf, Paris 2000; Jean-Michel Maldamé, *En travail d'enfance. Création et évolution*, Aubin, Saint Etienne 2000.

⁴⁵ See however Gustave Martelet, *Evolution et création. Tome 1: Sens ou non-sens de l'homme dans la nature?* Montréal – Paris 1998.

3. *The «Concept» of God: Dynamis, Krisis, Metamorphosis*

Please allow me to conclude by bringing together, on the basis of the previous developments, the structural elements of a concept — biblical and trinitarian — of God that is available, or thinkable, in the present situation in France, which the first part of this presentation sought to account for in sociological terms. We are today (and perhaps after a period of mourning) more inclined to consent to the invisible character of God, though without giving up on speaking of our experience of his presence. That divine presence manifests itself in an ultimate way when we are given up to our forces of resistance in order to confront suffering and evil. The insistence on the implicit reader of the gospel narratives, on reception or faith, and even on freedom or autonomy of subjects in their interrelations, and of communities, *as the visible face of the self-revelation of God*, invites us to envisage the concept of God by referring to the Spirit, and even to the Holy Spirit.⁴⁶

The three terms of *dynamis*, *krisis* and *metamorphosis* thus indicate the three functions of the Spirit, which we find in the gospel narratives and in the entire New Testament. The *dynamis*, or the power to exist and to stand up, is what the Man from Nazareth communicates in a unique manner to those who benefit from his words and gestures of healing. The *krisis*, or the judgement, is that which happens when a relationship emerges between them, the objective of which is *symmetry* or mutuality, however threatened by comparison, jealousy or violence. It is in his resistance to evil, and by his astounding capacity to give himself for the benefit of the other, that the *holiness* of the Nazarene reveals itself, a holiness whose presence he himself admires in various strangers, such as the Centurion or the Samaritan. The *metamorphosis*, or the transfiguration, finally, is what emerges in the relationship when Jesus discloses himself and at the same time is discovered by those, who not only

benefit from his generosity, but who are also interested in his mysterious unity. This unity is constituted — and for Jesus himself since the inaugural experience of baptism — by the voice or the beholding of the Father, in which the Son discovers himself according to some sort of inversion of perspective or of an infinite reflection, as a speaking, beholding and acting being.

One could pursue this line of reasoning towards a trinitarian concept of God, but not without underlining the absolutely discreet or even secret (Mt. 6) character of the experience of the divine Fatherhood, in opposition to the indiscretion of any public cult. However, I would like to suggest the implications of this concept with regard to the presence of Christianity in a secularised or lay society such as that in France. It would be tempting to reduce the experience of Revelation to the last of these three aspects, that is, the phenomenon of «transfiguration». However, the authenticity of the concept of God depends in the final analysis on the proper articulation of the three stages that we developed. An experience of revelation, which would leave behind the sensual ground of communication in order to escape the *ethical* task of the *krisis*, and which would not partake of the elementary manifestation of the power of existence, would be difficult to recognise as bearing the mark of the Spirit. It is for this reason that I feel some resistance to the radicalism of the concept of revelation implied in the analysis of the «saturated phenomenon». The many New Testament figures who are presented as «believers», but who are not found among the followers of Christ, oblige us to recognise, in the power of existence and in the ethical structure of our relationships, never a given, but always to be recomposed, characteristics — religious or not, that is a question of definition — of the social and human bond. A philosophical debate about this point ought to be taken up now. Having said that, I encounter, among Christians and non-Christians alike, people who glow by their very presence. They would suggest that the German proverb is right to suggest that «God is alive and well in France».

⁴⁶ I have developed this point in *L'expérience du «Maître intérieur»*. *A propos du tournant mystique de la foi dans la tradition chrétienne*, in *Le Supplément* 212 (2000), 9-31.