

NOTHINGNESS DRESSED UP: FRATERNITY STRIPPED BARE
THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE
IN A NIHILISTIC CULTURE

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How is it possible the true happiness has become so scarce in our civilization, which nonetheless has raised humankind far above all the hopes and expectations of earlier generations? Have we not overcome in ourselves the old Adam a thousand times and more? Do we not resemble God more than we do him? Do not our ears hear, thanks to telephonic devices, the sounds that are emitted on the most remote continents? Do not our eyes see, thanks to the telescope, the universe with its myriad of stars, and do they not behold, thanks to the microscope, the whole cosmos in a drop of water? Does not our voice conquer space and time in a split second? Does it not mock eternity by being recorded on a phonograph record? Do not airplanes transport us through the element that was prohibited to mortals for countless millennia? Why is it, then, that these technical achievements fail to pacify and satisfy our most intimate selves? Why is it that the human soul, despite being on a par with God, experiences not the true jubilation of victory, but only the sinking sensation that we have all those splendors merely on loan, that we are not more than «phony gods»?

Stefan ZWEIG, *Sigmund Freud. La curación por el espíritu*,
Barcelona, Acantilado, 2006, chap. 8.

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1. FROM METAPHYSICAL NIHILISM TO THE BANALITY OF EVIL: OUR TRAJECTORY

A world suffocating because God has withdrawn from it and the vacuum left
has not been filled by man.

(Reyes MATE, «Cuando el inocente es declarado culpable»,
in *Europa y el cristianismo*, Barcelona, Anthropos, 2009, p. 90).

Modern, post-metaphysical reason will never comprehend itself
until it understands itself in relation to religion.

(J. HABERMAS, *Entre naturalismo y religión*, Barcelona, Paidós, 2006, p. 116).

The only true religion is this one: helping the victims and staying far away from
the selfishness that structures this cruel world.
(cf. the Letter of James 1, 27).

My fundamental point in the first part of this rather philosophical essay is that the western nihilism which we are going to examine, and which I call “light” or decaffeinated nihilism, is *a phenomenon which derives from Christian faith as a historical process and thus from history endowed with substance, autonomy, and meaning.*

I think that this nihilism of ours would be inconceivable in the religions of the East (even though Nietzsche thought Buddhism to be nihilist). The fact that those religions deny any reality to history might seem to make them a source of nihilism, but it does not act as such since those religions are experienced *apart from* history. Islam appears to be a religion more turned toward history, but it avoids nihilism because its history lacks autonomy and because of its theocratic conceptions. In contrast, be-

cause the Judeo-Christian tradition not only has its religiosity turned toward history, but also endows history with substance, a vocation to growth and progress, and a hope animated by Promise, it provides a place where the nihilism we propose to consider can be born.

In fact, we might say that Christian faith «opens the eyes» of the western world and stimulates its desire for values such as progress, liberty, and fraternity. It desacralizes the world, giving

substance to history and reality, and it places history in human hands, for it has taught –from the second century on– that we human beings have been created «to grow and progress» (St. Irenaeus). For that reason there have been some who, from outside its fold, have accurately called Christian faith «the religion of the end of religion»¹.

In reality, the Christian promise does not seem to be coming true, or at least it has not been well assimilated. It ends up provoking a sensation similar to the torment of Tantalus, who is always just about to reach the drop of water that would calm his burning thirst, but never quite attains it.

What I will attempt to show is that our nihilism is post-Christian and post-modern, and I will do so by means of a quick survey of texts².

1.1. The nightmare of an orphaned world

The first text is the famous dream of the German writer Jean Paul, in his «Discourse of the dead Christ from the vault of the world: that there is no God». This text, with its undeniable romantic flavor, describes an apparition of Christ –«a noble figure exhibiting great pain»– above a church that has been shaken by an earthquake. All the people present ask: «Christ, is there a God?».

«None exists», was the reply. «I walked through the worlds, I entered the suns, and I flew over all the deserts of heaven. But there is no God. ... We are all orphans, you and I; we have no father at all». In the narrative Christ recalls the time when he was on earth: «I

was still happy, still had my infinite Father, and still looked with joy upon the mountains». In reaction to these words, «the shadows of all the dead were shaken as if by fright, ... and each of them found himself *separated from the others*».

The author still presents his disenchantment as «a dream», a bad nightmare. Thus, upon awaking, «my soul was weeping for joy since it could still adore God». It is not true that we are orphans and therefore «separated from the others». However, Jean Paul's recourse to a dream doesn't work: it seems to be only an excuse for making his text known. In fact, his dream is more like a prophecy that is gradually becoming reality. And it produces more or less three reactions.

1.2. From nightmare to reality: three possible reactions

a) For the young Marx, the dream is not a nightmare, but *good news*: the absence of God results in the doctrine that «man is the supreme being for man», and therefore also in the categorical imperative to do away with all relations in which man is an enslaved being.

b) A century later (passing through Nietzsche), another Jean-Paul, the French author Sartre, reads the prophecy of his German namesake as *bad news*, because man is the being who imagines himself God. ... But the idea of God is contradictory, and we become uselessly lost: «man is a useless passion». It is no wonder, then, that this useless passion should yield the well-known definition of Sartre, «Hell is

other people», a sensation so close to the «being separated» described in our first text.

c) Between Marx and Sartre, with a certain air not of prophecy but of *fantasy*, perhaps even the most unlikely fantasy, F. Dostoyevski has one of his characters imagine the future: «As soon as they are left alone, as they desire,... as soon as they are left orphans, the first thing that men will do is warmly embrace one another, ... and all the great excess of former love of the One who is immortality will be directed toward nature, toward the world, toward human beings. ... How readily men will give themselves over to love in order to soothe the sadness in their hearts!».

1.3. The clairvoyance of Nietzsche

Although Nietzsche is earlier than Sartre, he deserves a special section since he is the most significant of all.

First, though, I would like to point out an ambiguity in Nietzsche: he declared himself «the first nihilist of Europe», but I think that word has for him two meanings, and these may help us understand the ambiguous or dialectical aspect of our own nihilism, as we will see in the second part of this essay.

On the one hand, Nietzsche denounces as pure nihilism the whole history of the Platonic-Christian West, since it does nothing but deny reality and life in the name of an unreal ideal, and he sees the fruit of this denial in the *ressentiment* and the envy of the weak. That is the reason for Nietzsche's con-

demnation of compassion and for his call to do away with the weak, who prevent others from living: it is the cry of the Greek god «Dionysus against the Crucified One».

What is paradoxical is that it was an act of compassion toward an animal that was being maltreated by a coach-driver that drove Nietzsche into his final crisis and a state of madness from which he never emerged. Perhaps, however, he himself would not have viewed that as an act of compassion, but as an act of good taste, of esthetics, which was always a particular concern of his. In any case, what I have just discussed would be an *accusation* of nihilism rather than a *profession of nihilistic faith*.

But in another sense, the perception of what the death of God means, which perhaps no one has ever been able to grasp and endure as Nietzsche did, brings him to affirm another form of nihilism, one that is reflected in his mute terror in the face of the eternal return of all that is real. Nietzsche believes that all earlier forms of atheism were still in thrall to what they were denying, and in confronting them, he recalls that Zarathustra «loves those who do not need to seek a reason beyond the stars for sacrificing themselves and perishing, those who immolate themselves to the earth». His program for re-creating all values is in reality a decision to create them «from nothing», because there is no guiding star to which we can refer, there is nothing to indicate the direction in which we should move, there is no way of knowing if we are moving left or right, forward or backward.

It is easy to understand how the horrifying force of this program would end up driving a person mad.

And this is what he finally says in his famous text, *The Gay Science*: «We are all murderers of God. But how have we accomplished this? How have we been able to empty the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? ... Are we moving forward, or backward, or to one side or another? ... Is there still an above and a below? Are we not groping our way in an infinite nothingness? Do we not feel the breath of the empty spaces? ... Must not we ourselves become gods to make ourselves worthy of such a deed?».

So unbearable is Nietzsche's proposal that his influence has been felt more in the first form of nihilism than in the second. I call his proposal unbearable because in all his later works he takes to task anyone who trivializes that act of killing God. Thus can be explained, as I have said, the other ambiguity of our nihilism: its "light" or softened character, which I have sometimes called «Nietzscheism for the people» (as a parody of the classical designation of Christianity as «Platonism for the people»).

Passing now from the 19th century to the second half of the 20th, we cite two texts which allow us to see how the authentic Nietzsche fits in with his legacy in our nihilism "light".

1.4. Analgesics against Nietzsche

a) In his little book, *What it Means to Be an Agnostic*, Tierno Galván neither affirms nor denies God; he doesn't

even say that he doesn't know the answer to the question about God's existence. He is simply *not interested in the question*, since human beings can feel perfectly at home in finitude. «Being an agnostic is not missing God»; it is «believing in the world as utopia». Our dissatisfaction with the world «is never the dissatisfaction that proceeds from the world as finitude, but that which proceeds from the world as manipulated by humans».

Despite his dismissal of the question about God, Tierno is certain that «the finite is the only thing we have», but that assumption is not our main concern right now. What is decisive for this former mayor of Madrid is the option for «fixing up» finitude, in order to be fully at home in it. Being agnostic implies being revolutionary, and «revolutionaries live the satisfaction of finitude as sacrifice and effort» (an option that we have renounced, except in the field of technology).

Tierno understandably considers Nietzsche's proclamation and program to be flawed, because he basically still yearns for God after having killed him³.

b) A few years later appeared *The Era of the Void*, by G. Lipovetsky, whom we will meet again in the next section. Although his talk of the void would seem to relate him to the proclamation of Nietzsche's madman, this author is no longer concerned with philosophical disquisitions, and he is opposed to the profound Nietzschean axiom, «Any sense is better than none at all». Now we no longer need to believe that, and so we have renounced the idea of recreating values and constructing the super-man:

«The postmodern desert is as far removed from passive universal nihilism and its delight in universal inanity as it is from active nihilism and its self-destruction. ... *The joyful news is that God is dead*, the great finalities are dying off, but nobody gives a damn. ... The need for meaning has been swept away ..., as if capitalism must render human beings irrelevant, as it has done with things. ... Think about what you wanted from television, but plug it in».

As is clear, the French thinker coincides with Tierno as regards our feeling fully at home in finitude, but he differs from him totally as regards the option to transform the finite world, which for Tierno meant «sacrifice and effort». Why sacrifice yourself? «Today Narcissus frees himself, wrapped up in amplifiers, protected by self-sufficient ear-phones». A socialist logic still held sway in Tierno Galván, but Lipovetsky subscribes to a capitalist logic in which the question about meaning is replaced by consumption.

Neither of these reactions is definitive, as indeed nothing is in history. In the following section we will introduce a harsh, lucid text of Mario Benedetti, one which, without referring to the two texts cited in this section, may serve as a response to this final stage of our journey.

Before that, it may be good to reflect a bit about this whole process.

1.5. Provisional conclusions

The process we have described resembles the failure or the crash of an air-

plane, but seen «from above», from the intellectual heights. In the following section we will try to see it from a level that is more «down to earth», a level that is human, historical, practical, and closer to the people. First, though, I will propose a few conclusions to ease the transition.

a) In the ordinary conception of religion, God generally functions as the guarantor of an «established order». Christian faith, however, with its strains of «Reign of God» and «sin of the world», helps us to perceive our situation as one of «widespread disorder». And in this regard Modernity will follow the lead of Christianity. Christian faith –and after it (or against it) Modernity– introduces the idea of *historical progress* to confront what Mounier called «established disorder». A stance of resistance to prevailing types of order, justified religiously or politically, is something that Modernity shares in common with the Jesus of Nazareth who announced God's Reign in the face of the people's infidelity. Although it has been done with shameful belatedness (as tends to happen with the hierarchy of the Catholic Church), John Paul II has actually declared that that cry of the French Revolution («liberty, equality, fraternity») is profoundly and fully Christian.

b) But, with or without God, neither progress nor feeling fully at home in finitude seems to have come about. Moreover, there is a growing sensation, as our «modern» history progresses, that God is not sustained in revolution either: whether against God or with

God, revolution seems to be revealing itself as either impossible or disappointing in its results (in Russia, in China, in Cuba, in Nicaragua...). It is quite as disappointing as our modern-day situation would be for Condorcet or any other Enlightenment prophet⁴. At this point we are no longer reading philosophical *texts*, but *historical experiences*.

c) Well, then: in the early church it was easy to perceive a contrast between anticipation («Lord, is it now that you will establish your Kingdom?») and patience («It is not for you to know or decide that», Acts, 1,6.7). By contrast, with Modernity, since nothing is left but

the earth, that antithetical bond is broken, and anticipation would have us believe that «now» has already arrived. And when that anticipation finally realizes it is doomed to disappointment, the only alternative will be disillusionment, not patience. Disappointment will result because, despite all the promises of progress, «the prevailing disorder» continues to advance ever more seriously and terribly with its threefold threat: nuclear, ecological, and the desperation of hunger.

Given this diffuse state of spirit, we can quickly analyze our present moment.

2. OUR SITUATION: DECAFFEINATED NIHILISM

Repentance has become a lucrative industry... Politicians, intellectuals, political scientists, economists, and especially certain opportunists have had recourse to the confessional of the Empire or one of its stylish parishes... There they grumble about their past acts of solidarity, their struggle for just causes, their repudiation of torture. The world of consumers receives them with open arms and, in passing, steals their wallet. Nevertheless, those who benefit from economic cannibalism will never admit them as truly their own; ... in the market of disloyalty, repentance is not the most trustworthy of guarantees.

(Mario BENEDETTI, *El País*, 25 February 1994)

This text of Mario Benedetti marks a reaction against our West's present nihilism. It says to Tierno Galván that the option to change finitude has ended up taking us «to the confessional of the Empire». And it coincides with Lipovetsky (while also opposing him) in the role it assigns to the capitalist system in our process: the port to which we have been carried by our post-Nietzschean trajectory is precisely «economic cannibalism».

The Holocaust, the gulags, and the Second World War have much to do with the sensation of frustration that is felt in the face of what history supposedly promised. A few years after the world war, C. V. Gheorghiu published a famous novel (*The Twenty-fifth Hour*), which may have been one of the first signs of real desperation: the twenty-fifth hour is the hour when «*not even a messiah can save us*»⁵.

Even prior to that, however, we ought to acknowledge the harsh accusations made against our progress by one of the most lucid and honest minds of the past century, Walter Benjamin, who

claimed that progress has become for us «the way back to barbarity». We should also pay attention to the acute observation of another privileged mind: the French Jewess Simone Weil⁶. Familiar with both of these, we will not be surprised by the ironic claim of the great biblical scholar Norbert Lohfink: our progress as humans has consisted not in that we no longer eat one another, but rather in that we eat one another with knife, fork, and napkin. ... So also we find a context for T. Adorno's cruel observation that Auschwitz was not an «accident» in our system, but «a consequence of it».

So we ask: what happens with the religions turned toward history, when history enters into crisis? Either they remain turned toward history, and so give rise to the nihilist temptation, or they turn away from history and allow the gnostic temptation to emerge. I will make some brief observations about the latter before passing on to nihilism, which is what we are presently analyzing.

Gnosticism, according to which salvation is attained by an esoteric knowledge revealed only to a chosen few, arose as a great temptation of primitive Christian faith in response to the non-arrival of the final resurrection⁷. And even though western Christianity fought a determined battle against gnosticism, as José Antonio Marina has rightly pointed out, it ended up seriously disfigured, taking on a gnostic form itself. I will give two examples of this, though I would like to make clear that it is not a question of denying the importance of knowledge; the problem of gnosticism lies in affirming that salvation comes through knowledge.

a) One example of gnosticism is found in the way we present the topic of God. At the exclusively rational level, the problem of God should be presented more as an unavoidable question of our reason than as a certainty or a detailed demonstration. However, this questioning manner of presenting God got blocked in western Christian faith, not only because of resistance from the ecclesiastical hierarchy, but also because of the way Christianity became implanted in Greek philosophy and culture. As a result, the God announced by Jesus got

progressively assimilated to the God deduced by Plato or Aristotle. This way of presenting God continued in practice until Modernity's recuperation of history and historical promise became increasingly removed from, or even opposed to, the Christianity which gave it birth.

b) Another example is found in some of the recent offerings of salvation within Christian faith, especially those having a certain esoteric or even mystical tone. Almost all of them involve a flight from history toward a form of gnosis or saving knowledge. Interiority is indispensable for dealing with the harshness of history, but it must not become a flight from history. If that happens, then faith ends up being a sort of market for spiritual goods, whether in the form of knowledge or human resources, but it is no longer a confident entrusting to God of the totality of one's being.

In other words, the disillusionment we mentioned in the previous section («the God of heaven and earth has failed us») has given way to the kind of disillusionment recently pointed out by Joseph Ramoneda: In the end, even the promise of the earth has failed us. And without heaven or earth, where do we head?

Or to use more philosophical language, which amounts to the same thing: the unbearable theoretical nihilism à la Nietzsche, which forces us to risk defining ourselves and making commitments (as much as faith in God does), can apparently no longer be replaced by the tranquil being at home in

finitude advocated by Tierno Galván. So hostile was he toward Nietzsche that he judged that the intolerability of his nihilism was capable of leading us to the insane asylum; at the same time, he thought that fixing up the earth would deliver us from that threat. Now, however, even that necessary condition that Tierno Galván posited for making ourselves fully at home in the world –determining to «fix up» finitude– seems to reveal itself as impossible. To put it bluntly, we have the sensation that «there is no god who can fix up our finitude». And what is worse, there seems to be no human being who is able to fix it up either.

Has the time come, then, to take up that refrain, «With God dead, dead also is man»? There are two fundamentalist responses to this question that I think we should avoid. One response is positive and has often been used in religious apologetics; the other is negative and seeks to continue believing in man, despite everything, it sometimes appears as the voluntarism of some of the old Marxists. But there is yet another response that is not so comfortable, one that avoids the question in order to remain atheist; or rather, it is a Pilate-style response which, instead of answering, limits itself to asking: What is man?⁸

We now arrive at the moment of establishing the thesis of this chapter: I suspect that *it is that evasive response which pervades our whole cultural ambience, which is today shaped not by the great authors or the great teachers, but by the categorical imperatives of the economy and by the mass media who*

*are the economy's secret but unquestioning servants*⁹.

For this reason, our current nihilism is one that is practical and tacit; it is not formulated or professed or defended, but it acts as a *latent presupposition* of certain behaviors and certain forms of life. Such decaffeinated nihilism will not hesitate to proclaim great technological victories every now and then, to help us toward what A. Camus resignedly proposed as a solution for life: «imagining a happy Sisyphus»¹⁰. However, at the moment of truth and decisive commitment, such nihilism will once again answer as Pilate did: «What is truth?» or «What is man?» That, more or less, is what I have denominated nihilism “light”.

We will dedicate this second part to pointing out some examples of nihilism “light” that seem typical of our present time.

2.1. «The culture of forgetfulness»

It does not seem to me an exaggeration to say that Auschwitz (and everything that word conveys) may be one of the best arguments for a radical nihilism. The only way to counter such an argument would be to take seriously the judgment of T. Adorno regarding that disgraceful page of our history: «the categorical imperative that it should never be repeated». Nevertheless, the world since the Shoah continues to be plagued by small holocausts, heralded one day as vital front-page news and forgotten a few days later to make way for new material with sensational headlines. The result may be more or less what happened

to the Italian writer Primo Levi, one of the most noteworthy survivors of the concentration camps. He dedicated the forty years following World War II to bearing testimony to Auschwitz, and according to common belief, he ended up committing suicide in 1987 because of his disappointment at the world's indifference to the reality of Auschwitz. Levi was able to endure the suffering of the Holocaust itself, but he was not capable of withstanding our forgetfulness and our indifference in the face of that catastrophe.

J. B. Metz has repeatedly spoken of our western society as the propagator of a comfortable «culture of forgetfulness». Perhaps there is no such forgetfulness when it is a matter of *personal* claims, but there certainly is when it comes to what Metz call «*memoria passionis*»: the continuing memory of the crosses with which our humanity is sown (and for a Christian, their connection with the passion of Christ).

From the culture of forgetfulness it is a short step to loss of memory, so that our western society might well be called a «society with Alzheimer's». By this term I am not referring to the *personal* infirmity, which is very sad and which someday we may succeed in combating, but to a *social* diagnosis. I use the term to refer to a society which *experiences only disconnected moments*, like a person with Alzheimer's. Such a society does not suffer, or else it suffers only at the beginning of the process, when it becomes aware of what it is losing; it does not suffer later, when it has lost its memory completely. The ones who suffer are those who see the illness as de-

humanizing because it renders communication with the sick person impossible. And the price of that absence of suffering for those who suffer Alzheimer's is that they completely lose their character as persons and become incapable of recognizing their past or present identity. It is no wonder that the psalmist calls death «the land of forgetfulness» (Ps 87,13).

Can it be, then, that a good part of our present-day culture is afflicted with a *painless* nihilism (a cousin to Lipovetsky's «painless ethics»)? Such an analgesic works in a way similar to what we so often find in our computer programs: «Delete? Yes. Are you sure you want to remove this file to the trash bin? Yes». And on we go.

2.2. Selfish and selective utilization of the Holocaust

Addressing further the monstrosity of Auschwitz, the great writer Elie Wiesel, another survivor of the Shoah, stated that in Auschwitz it was not Judaism that died, but Christian faith. We might comment on this by making one of those classical scholastic distinctions: was it not a certain kind of Christianity that died? Let that be conceded (though paradoxically that same deceased Christianity is sadly still present in many sectors of high society). What my beloved Wiesel does not dare to proclaim, however, is that in the modern state of Israel it is not the Palestinian people that is dying, but Judaism (of course, we would have to specify, «a certain kind of Judaism», in keeping with our earlier distinction). The state (rather than the

people) of Israel, in using the Holocaust as a justification for its crimes, commits the same sin that Christian faith committed in using the cross of Calvary as a justification for its anti-Judaism.

I do not cite this as a criticism of Wiesel, but to provide us with a mirror, for another Jewish author has written: «The Jewish state has attempted to use the tragic memories as a certificate of its political legitimacy, as a warrant for all its political actions, past and future, and especially as an advance payment on all the injustices it might commit»¹¹.

At the same time, there is an extraordinary paradox: those who have most radically denied God after the Holocaust are those who were not there, while many of those who experienced the event believed and prayed. We may be incredulous in the face of such incoherence and want to criticize it, but we should also recognize that the admirable faith of those survivors of the Shoah runs the subsequent risk of understanding the state of Israel in terms of the final chapter of the book of Job (which almost certainly was a later addition!): Israel is considered the prize to which people have a right after so much suffering. For that reason I would like to point out once again that that temptation was the very same one experienced by the early Christians, when they took the destruction of the Jerusalem temple to be God's vindication of Jesus. God, however, does not seek vindication by destroying, but by raising up. We should ask ourselves whether this is due to the fact that we are avoiding the other urgent question:

not where was God, but *where was man* in Auschwitz, or *how to speak about man* after Auschwitz?

2.3. Removing the “saints” from the altars

Another feature of our light variety of nihilism is what I would call its need not to have any “saints”. This means that Saint Teresa was not a woman who had experiences that make us ask questions about God; she simply had orgasms that she could not recognize or describe. Thus do we judge, with absolute security, about things that happened five hundred years ago, even though we have not bothered to do any serious, impartial study of them.

Recently I read a book by J. Cercas (one of the great writers of the moment) about the coup of 23 February 1981¹². Apart from being well written, the book can be shocking, for nowhere does it mention any good intentions in the whole history of our democratic transition in Spain. If anyone performed deeds that might have seemed generous, well intentioned, and ethically praiseworthy, they actually were not such, but were attributable to more or less demeaning forms of egoism and ambition for political power. And this was the case with Suárez just as much as it was with Carrillo or the king. If by chance there is anyone in the book who appears to have been moved by a generous spirit, it turns out to be ... Colonel Tejero (and thus a tacit but clear message is sent to readers about the dangers of *all* generosity). This state of affairs is due

not to any express intention of the author, but to a mentality of the epoch which our author shares without knowing it.

A similar example can be found in the last book about Alfonso Comín, which I prefer not to name. Its author claims that he is not writing hagiography, which is fine, since Alfonso was a man with many defects, but what is surprising in the book is that it is not Comín's defects, but his most noble and dedicated endeavors that are depicted as having been motivated by base ambitions and crude calculations of future power.

The thesis latent in all these examples is this: *every act that appears generous and disinterested is in reality selfish*: it is seeking after power, after admiration, or after cleansing from some unpleasant guilt. *Nothing more*. Absolutely nothing more. It is not that the self is always capable of staining or muddying what is best in us; it is rather the case that the only thing that exists is our self, and nothing more. In contrast to Camus's *La Peste*, these books appear to have been written in order to prove that in man there is nothing worthy of admiration¹³ (at most, the only thing worthy of admiration is the «honesty» of the one who is writing and is above not only all hagiography, but also the meanness, power-mongering, and aggressiveness that he is denouncing). Thus, it is not the case that there is a selfish side in us that sullies all that is noble; the reality is that solely the selfish side exists, and there is nothing noble in us at all.

2.4. Liquid Modernity and the banality of evil

Liquid Modernity is the title of a highly commendable work by Z. Bauman, and I use it here as a paradigm for a series of other works that I will mention forthwith. I use the term also because what I have previously called nihilism “light” could well be called also “liquid” nihilism. It is a reality without solidity or consistency; it is something adaptable and moldable; it is the «continual and irretrievable changing of position» that Bauman mentions on the first page of his work.

Since we do not have time for more detailed analyses, I will limit myself to displaying the titles of important works that appear to me significant.

The much-read Lipovetsky is notable for the evolution of his titles over the years: from *The Era of the Void* in 1983 we move on to *The Empire of the Ephemeral* (1987), and this carries us on to *The Twilight of Duty* (1992). The «void» mentioned in the first title may allude to our sensation of disenchanting nihilism¹⁴, which was the starting point of my reflections. Since that void becomes bearable when handed over to the «ephemeral», Lipovetsky's second work is dedicated to fashion. The ephemeral, however, is not limited to fashion¹⁵. The empire of the ephemeral arises from the very origins of our modernity, as when Voltaire tells us (in *Le Mondain*): «There is nothing more necessary than the superfluous». And the proof that the empire of the ephemeral is not limited only to fashion may be found—just another example—in the expression which the announcer for Radio

Nacional de España got tired of repeatedly shouting when Messi score the second goal for Barcelona in the finals of the European league: «Astral orgasm, astral orgasm!» Astral? At that very same hour thousands of human beings were dying of hunger, many of them children. At that very same hour cancer and AIDS were still triumphing, and a poor unemployed Andalusian, driven by desperation to hold up a pool hall, was savagely killed by the patrons. *Astral no longer means anything more than particular*. The only cosmic reality is my own small satisfaction¹⁶. And so we understand how that downward slope carries us to the «twilight of duty», which also becomes “liquid”; duty becomes moldable and adaptable, as we are seeing in our most public forums, such as politics and the economy¹⁷.

The total absence of ethics and social responsibility ends up making nihilism something we can tolerate, and that circumstance would seem to explain the strange title of Lipovetsky's latest work, *Le bonheur paradoxal* [*Paradoxical Happiness*]¹⁸. It is paradoxical because the author refuses to proclaim that any nihilism exists nowadays, thanks to our «society of hyper-consumerism» and the «market of the soul»¹⁹.

The most serious expression of this paradox, however, is to be found in the famous title of Hannah Arendt, *The Banality of Evil*, a work dedicated to the trial of Eichmann in Jerusalem²⁰. The author states that, in the face of such banality, «words and thought seem impotent» (p. 382) and that is the terrible lesson they teach. Arendt stresses that

Eichmann was not the only one involved, that there were many others like him, «*terribly normal*» (p. 412), and that «not even with the best of will is it possible to attribute to Eichmann diabolical profundity» (p. 434), because then we would still have some guideline or horizon by which to measure the profundity. It may have been possible to speak of something of that sort at the beginning, when Himmler was saying, «We expect you all to be *superhumanly inhuman*» (p. 160). But what happens, Arendt explains, is that «once a crime makes its first appearance in history, its repetition is more probable than its first appearance» (p. 412), and in that repetition the evil takes on a structure, becoming ever more anonymous and invisible. For Arendt, what makes that banalization of evil possible is «the interdependence of thoughtlessness and wickedness; ... such detachment from reality and such thoughtlessness can cause more harm than all the evil instincts that are perhaps inherent in human nature» (pp. 434-35). Given this interrelation, even the classical term «genocide» becomes excessive: what happened was really a question of «*administrative slaughters*», nothing more (p. 435). That expression appears to me to be very close to another phrase, «collateral damage», which our economic system has made familiar to us.

The relevance of Arendt's reflections finds corroboration in another of our literary stars, whom I dare not recommend and whose book was declared by J. Semprún to be the most atrocious he had ever read. I am referring to *The Kindly Ones* of Jonathan Littell. This is

not the place, nor am I the person, to discuss the historical accuracy of the novel (which also takes place in Hitler's Germany during the epoch of the Holocaust and World War II). Nor do I have sufficient authority to comment on the literary value of the work or on the credibility (or skillful recourse) of having the author be present on all the fronts at all moments of war-time Nazism. I think it sufficient to recommend the prologue of the work, which describes repeated cases of diarrhea and dysentery with the same care and detail as would be used in any classic novel to describe a magnificent landscape. This novel is a work in which the main character kills his friend (who had come to save him) as naturally as he would have shaken his hand. As Nietzsche said in the famous text cited in the first part of this essay, we have the sensation of having wiped out the sky with a sponge or of having cut the earth free from its link to the sun, and now we do not know whether there is an above or a below. That's just the way things are. Excrement has as much reality and naturalness as a landscape, and shooting a friend is something as natural as giving him a hug. That is all there is, and the protagonist of the work is absolved.

This explains the other significant feature of Litell's novel, which is its title, *The Kindly Ones*, recalling the famous tragedy of Euripides, *The Eumenides*. In that ancient Greek drama the vengeful Furies (the *Erinyes* or «unnamable ones») change their nature and their name and become benevolent or «kindly» (*Eumenides*)²¹. The tragedy thus shows how justice ceases to be a

mechanical «eye for an eye» or a justification of gratuitous evil and becomes instead a judgment of reason. At least, that was the case with Euripides, but now, in Litell's reworking, the benevolence ceases to be justice based on reason and becomes instead a justification of evil that is gratuitous, and banal as well, without there being any «diabolical profundity» or any question of being «superhumanly inhuman», as Arendt said of Eichmann. That is what the Eumenides do in Litell's work.

That is why I have associated this title of Litell with the title Hannah Arendt gave her book on the judgment of Eichmann in Jerusalem: the banality of evil. That is the form that our nihilism "light" takes.

2.5. «Instrumental reason»

Here I will be more succinct since we are dealing with a point that is already well known and thoroughly analyzed. I will only point out that at the root of this whole process there may be a much more ancient expression, one coined by the two authors of *The Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, especially M. Horkheimer. I am referring to *instrumental reason* as the only form of reason and as the only universal reason that exists. It turns out that the goddess reason, which Modernity has made into a true universal religion, knows how to be universal only when explaining how things are made, but is not so when elucidating the reasons for making the things or when deciding which things need to be made. In the sphere of the hows, reason can produce dazzling suc-

cesses, but also frightening atrocities. The problem is that reason cannot supply the «reasons for»: or else it can supply an infinity of them. The «reason for» is given only by some type of faith, which means faith *in values*, since these are affirmed only in belief. The capitalist system, above all its most savage version, is a superb example of this reduction of reason to the instrumental: if something provides more benefits, that is what must be done (even if it means paying unjust wages, outsourcing jobs, etc., all the way to the awesome engineering involved in the Madoff fraud). A clear expression of this purely instrumental reason is found in the trite argument offered when any humane consideration is proposed: «But those are not economic *reasons*».

It is hard not to recall the title of Goya's famous painting: *the dream of reason produces monsters*.

2.6. The imperative to be happy

If our movement toward nihilism “light” is traceable in part to instrumental reason, its ultimate goal nowadays is expressed in the sub-title of the successful work of Pascal Bruckner: *The duty to be happy*. The final link of the process we have described is that this is what makes us happy; we are obliged to be happy in this way and to proclaim our happiness in a loud voice... (Otherwise our economic system would not function.) Thus do we find ourselves with the paradox that the same society that refuses to accept any obligation imposed from without ends up tacitly imposing on us the obligation

to be happy (or to say and demonstrate that we are). It is another aspect of what Lipovetsky called «paradoxical happiness».

According to Lucía Ramón, that culture of the *homo felix* is «the ideology of consumer capitalism»; it is «what remains of the utopian discourses of modernity and their optimistic faith in progress». In such a culture «prophetic discourse has been sequestered by the consecration of the hedonistic present as transmitted by the festive mythologies of objects and diversions»²². In such a culture, according to Pascal Bruckner, the «right to happiness» has been transformed into a «euphoric imperative», which creates shame and discomfort among those who feel excluded from it. And Lucía Ramón comments: «In this epoch, in which ‘despotic happiness’ reigns, individuals don’t limit themselves to being unhappy; now they feel guilty about not feeling good about themselves. There begins to emerge a new form of marginalization, that of those who suffer, those who are truly excluded and dispossessed, those who are identified as *failures*»²³.

What is characteristic of all theocratic societies (namely, that people are excluded from them by their own fault, as a punishment of God) is reformulated in our consumerist market theocracy in a manner that is secular but equally radical. Corresponding to liquid nihilism and the banality of evil, there is also a banalization of happiness. According to Bruckner, happiness becomes banal because the duty to be happy «supposes a perversion of the most beautiful idea that exists, namely, the possibility con-

ceded to each person to be in control of his or her destiny and to improve his or her existence»²⁴. This is so because «the great mystery of happiness is that it is not reducible to the components that allow or inhibit its appearance. As joined together as we may be in some ideal grouping, happiness exceeds all of us; it does not allow itself to be delimited or defined, and it does not disintegrate, like the wing of a butterfly, as soon as we think we have it in our hand. But above all, life has the structure of a promise, not that of a program»²⁵.

In opposition to the «duty» to be happy, Pascal Bruckner offers a defense of the old wisdom of *knowing how to live*, which consists precisely in making happiness something secondary in relation to other goods like liberty, love, or friendship, and in giving pride of place to certain attitudes and activities with regard to life, such as desiring, discovering, and loving. The secret of a good life would lie in «joking about happiness» or in «considering it always and everywhere secondary, because it arrives only by way of something else». After all, «there is nothing that can compete with the irruption into our life of an event or a being that devastates us and enchants us. There is always too much to desire, to discover, to love. And we leave the scene without having tasted of the banquet»²⁶.

As may be seen, these considerations are not far removed from what A. Huxley prophesied in an old novel, very well known and republished many times; its title in the Spanish translation was precisely *A Happy World* [*Un*

mundo feliz]²⁷. When «the savage» who lands by chance in that happy world expresses his preference for living dangerously, the people in charge tell him that it is better to live comfortably. When the savage insists («I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry, I want real risk, I want freedom, I want goodness, I want sin» ...), the messianic figure, «Our Ford», tells him, «In other words, you are claiming the right to be miserable».

The decaffeinated nihilism which I have tried to describe and which I believe characterizes us seems to have been born in the West out of this fear of being miserable. But that same fear has carried us to the inconsequentiality of not confronting the riskiness and seriousness of nihilism. Thus, after totally relativizing all authentic absolutes, the West also relativizes its own nihilism, limiting itself to a cozy version of it.

* * *

We will offer a rapid summary before finishing this part. On the one hand, our cultural milieu, domesticated as it is by the lure of consumerism, does not have the courage to confront honestly and decisively the question of nihilism. On the other, it prefers to take refuge in nihilism as an excuse for not committing itself to improving a planet and a humankind that are gravely threatened. It seems clear that we have moved beyond Camus's resigned affirmation, «All that is left is imagining a happy Sisyphus»; now we have the urgent obligation, not of imagining, but of *proclaiming* that

Sisyphus actually *is* happy, enormously happy. Perhaps that is the only way we can avoid acknowledging that «the emperor» of human progress is naked. Such a circumstance is what makes a man as unrepentantly optimistic as Lipovetsky to wonder: What if the road being traveled by our technological civilization is a dead end? What if our cult of the *homo felix* is our greatest misfortune?²⁸

2.7. Conclusion

Despite the tone of these remarks, I am not pessimistic; far from it, and for two reasons.

a) The biblical world includes a kind of literature that is usually called «apocalyptic», a word that evokes in us a notion of catastrophe or upheaval. The specialists in that genre, however, insist that apocalyptic literature is not necessarily pessimistic. Apocalyptic literature does not claim that the disasters it portrays are necessarily going to occur; it simply says they *may* occur, and it describes them so that they can be avoided. Furthermore, when the reality described is especially harsh, the apocalyptic literature is simply attempting to communicate to people that, despite everything, «God is the Lord of history». We have an example of the latter in the New Testament book of the Apocalypse²⁹, whereas the former is exemplified in the discourses pronounced by Jesus near the end of his life (for example, chapter 13 of Mark).

These discourses are not issuing a prophecy of doom, but a wake-up call. What I have done, then, is just to give a warning. And besides, I am a Christian.

b) Secondly, I know that I have not described our whole reality, but only that very important part of it which is our culture and the education we absorb through the mass media. Our reality is actually much more polymorphous, though I think that what I have described here is a strong force within it. Furthermore, I continue to believe, with T. Adorno, that «human beings are usually better than their culture» (at least some of them). My exposition has mainly attempted to give a global evaluation, but it is only a partial description; it simply describes what I have called “light” or “liquid” nihilism, or what my colleague, J. Rovira Belloso, years ago called «nothingness dressed up».

It is not the case, therefore, that what I have written should lead people to think, as they so often do nowadays, that «there is nothing to be done». At the very least, we must be conscious of the danger of conservatism inherent in “salon nihilism”. Furthermore, we must learn about and revitalize every non-nihilist cell that may exist in our culture. And finally, we must realize that the key for the human struggle lies not in how much success we will have, but in doing what we have to do.

With these three principles, we move on to the next chapter.

3. THE STRUGGLE FOR JUSTICE IN TIMES OF NIHILISM

It is not our present intention to enumerate all the practices that are possible, many of which are already being implemented, although by minority groups. We will simply outline some features which would shape a mindset or a culture that is opposed to what we have seen in the previous sections.

3.1. A culture of the *memoria passionis*

In response to our culture of forgetfulness and the Nietzschean axiom that «happiness comes only from forgetting», J. B. Metz has asserted the need for an «anamnetic reason»³⁰. I wish to offer a few reflections on this expression of his.

a) In reaction to anything like a warning, the consumerist culture of forgetfulness offers the facile excuse that things happen only «accidentally»; they are done by a minority and are in no way symptomatic. Thus, the Holocaust was only an accident on the road toward progress. Nowadays, the alarming phenomenon of children who physically assault their parents (recently denounced by the attorney general of Spain) is con-

sidered something accidental, attributable to a minority, even though such assaults have doubled in the course of a year. The increase in the numbers of people who vote for fascist parties in countries with a long democratic tradition is another accidental, minority phenomenon, and the 30,000 who die of hunger every day are another accident worth forgetting about ...

Given these evasive responses, we do well to recall the advice of Ignacio Ellacuría (now that we are celebrating the twentieth anniversary of his martyrdom). He proposed that our society do an «analysis of its feces». Without a doubt (and luckily) feces are still something momentary in our lives, and absolutely secondary. Nevertheless, analysis of them can reveal serious illnesses that affect and may seriously threaten the

whole organism (internal bleeding, amoebas, etc.). Thus, all the examples we have just given, and a thousand others that might be added (such as terrorism and the drama of illegal immigration), could well be considered *symptoms* which oblige us not only to alleviate the effects, but also to analyze and cure the causes.

However, this is precisely what we refuse to do, because it throws off the rhythm of the accumulation and the entertainment which the culture of nihilism “light” would make the sole aim of our lives. Turning off the television when we can no longer bear certain images on the newscasts (which are fewer than they should be!) is a psychologically understandable reaction, but it is also a form of tacit complicity, for it is precisely the unbearable nature of the images that should make us conscious of the fact that what is absolutely unbearable is not the images, but all those realities which they only dimly convey. And those realities are what would summon us to the battle. During the times of Franco we were guilty of great hypocrisy, for we felt the moral obligation to avoid the word “whore”, and that served as justification for our forgetting about the injustice of prostitution. And we are equally hypocritical today when we show concern about people killed in traffic accidents, which is understandable, but which seems excessive when we consider how unconcerned we are about those killed in labor accidents or those who die of hunger. Yet we are capable of struggling against these forms of death as well as against traffic deaths.

b) From a Christian point of view, this culture of forgetfulness is actually a translation into secular terms of what Paul called «emptying the cross of Christ». What the cross reveals first of all is that we Christians adore «a delinquent God» (S. Weil). And wherever Love (with a capital «L») is delinquent, there is need of much correction and much reform. Unfortunately, the ecclesial institution has too often used the Cross of the Master not to manifest its total opposition to a society which adores the golden calf or the god Mammon (incompatible with the God of Jesus), but to impose on people excessive loads which only reinforce clerical power.

This misuse of the cross from a believer’s viewpoint has its secular version in the way memory is reserved only for those evils which we believe (rightly or wrongly, it now no longer matters) have done harm to us personally. «I forgive not but I don’t forget» is something we are only too used to hearing. Although such a statement can have a positive meaning (I forgive but I learn), it too often camouflages a tacit desire for vengeance, which inflicts punishment not for the redemption and correction of the perpetrator, but for the satisfaction of the victim.

However, for Christians, the *memoria passionis* is also a reminder that pain and injustice do not have the final word in our history, because God has raised Jesus from the dead as the first-fruits of the final victory, which will in the end rescue all victims, even those of long ago. Some of the most hope-filled pages

of the New Testament are those written during times of persecution or when recalling such times³¹.

I conclude by referring to the old saying, «We remember Saint Barbara only when it thunders». A true culture of memory should always be mindful both of Saint Barbara (reputed patroness against storms) and of «Brother Sun, who announces and brings the day and is beautiful in his splendor» (Francis of Assisi), but who is also there when the horizon is beclouded. There are some things that we have the right not to forget, but there are others that we have the duty not to forget. A Church which excels in humanity should strive to make this culture of memory an integral part of every educational endeavor in society or the family, and it should be constantly exposing, “on top of” the clean tables of our millionaires, all the filth that envelops our world.

3.2. Victims, yes – victimism, no

The reverse of all this is selective memory, which remembers only *one's own* pain and forgets about the pain of others.

Of course, our perceptions are inevitably selective. The orientation and the selectivity of our mind depend not only on our conscious, expressly willed objectives, but also (and often much more!) on an unconscious gravitational law of our knowledge, one well described in that phrase of Saint Augustine: *amor meus pondus meum* («what I love moves me»).

This is particularly applicable in the case of victims. Precisely because what

is most sacred is always what is most corruptible, we commit a sacrilege when we are interested in the victims only to gain from them some personal benefit for ourselves, or when we use them only as an excuse for discharging some of our adrenaline or for the sake of some political or economic advantage.

Let us take just one example from today's Spain. From a Christian point of view, it is incomprehensible that today many persons, who during the 40 years of dictatorship proclaimed and canonized their own victims (and they were victims!), are now opposed to the law of historical memory and are using juridical ploys to denounce Judge Garzón for attempting to carry out that law. At the same time, however, those others who are now claiming justice for their own victims should always be careful to avoid seeking thereby the gratification of *their own victory* over others. Such an attitude in the long run would only leave us all with the sensation that we human beings are incapable of living together in mutual forgiveness and that we can survive only by destroying one another. As a result, we would become even more overwhelmed by that nihilist feeling that there is *nothing* that can be done with us and that the best thing we can do is just dedicate ourselves to consuming and having a good time.

How different such an attitude is from the memory Saint John Chrysostom spoke of, when he claimed that whenever he saw some monumental edifice, he could not help but wonder: «How many tears did that cost to build! How many orphans were left naked! ... How many workers were

robbed of their wages!» (PG 55,517). When we leave Barcelona on the high-speed train, who remembers that at least four workers died during its construction and that we travel as comfortably and rapidly as we do thanks to them?

Remember those who are going through tough times, because you are just like them – that is what the letter to the Hebrews (cf. 13,3) tells us, and only too rightly.

3.3. Recovering the witnesses

Considering what was said earlier about taking the saints down from the altars, and without indulging in hagiography, I would now like to make a couple of observations that are important, at least from an expressly Christian point of view.

a) In the New Testament, the Letter to the Hebrews presents to its readers a number of models of faith, and these models have three noteworthy features:

– They are called «witnesses», because they form «a cloud» that envelops us and orients our eyes toward the One who is the «pioneer and perfecter of our faith» (11,4ff. and 12,2).

– It is expressly said that this world «is not worthy of them».

– And, to our surprise, not one of them is a Christian: the Letter speaks not of Peter, John, or Mary, but of men like Abraham, who knew how to take leave of his home, and Moses, who «preferred to share the

ill-treatment of his people than to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter». The value of these witnesses thus extends beyond the framework of explicit Christian faith.

b) These witnesses were not people made of different stuff from ourselves; they were formed from the same clay. As O. Clément writes in regards to a great witness of our own times: «If we love and venerate Mother Maria [Skobtsov], it is not in spite of her disorderliness, her strangeness, and her passions, but because of them, for they render her an extraordinarily lively figure, amidst so many pious corpses and sweet-talking busybodies»³².

For centuries now Catholic hagiography has adopted a contrary way of viewing saints. It has practically forgotten the value that saints have as witnesses, stressing instead their value as intercessors³³. As a result, the horizon of hagiography has been populated by saints of other epochs than our own, described in language that sadly betrays their true stature: they are made out to be «syrupy», cowardly, conservative saints. Instead of imitating Jesus by indissolubly uniting love of God and love of neighbor, they seem rather to understand love of God as a blind defense of an ecclesiastical institution that can always be reformed and today is badly in need of reform. They are saints who don't make claims on us: that is the problem. However, it is not difficult to see that when holy persons step outside that framework, their influence can be enormous, as the case of Fr. Hurtado in Chile makes clear.

But we are not talking just about the Catholic institution, for our superficial secular culture, with its nihilism, is also prone to this distortion. Take, for example, the greatness of Teresa of Calcutta and the disgraceful way our world makes use of her: she is glorified because she sweeps off the streets the cadavers produced by us; she removes from our line of sight those who are agonizing. But if people with a love like hers seek to help our victims not only to die, but also to live, then we immediately discredit them by labeling them demagogues and populists. And of course, since they are made of the same clay as we, it is quite likely that they have some characteristic or other that warrants our bringing them into disrepute.

Nevertheless, as I have repeatedly said in other writings, the whole of the Christian 20th century was filled with impressive witnesses, many of them women, many of them converts, some of them martyrs, nearly all of them persecuted. Their witnessing goes beyond the sphere of the expressly Christian to include figures like Gandhi and Mandela, Simone Weil and Etty Hillesum, figures of whom the author of the Letter to the Hebrews would probably say again today: our world «is not worthy of them».

We have important work to do to compensate for the dearth of witnesses in a culture that worships models on the catwalk, players on the ball field, or metrosexual stars on the screen. Such heroes pervert the meaning of a title as beautiful as *Corazón, Corazón*³⁴ and evoke no desires deeper than *I want to be like Beckham*. In a world of

metaphysical distrust and cosmological disorder, concrete persons and real lives continue to have considerable power of attraction; they are perhaps the only antidote capable of shaking us out of our indifference. All this reminds us of that well known saying of Jesus: those who will enter the kingdom of heaven will not be those who cry, «Lord, Lord», but those who do the will of the Father.

3.4. The seriousness of authentic evil

The witnesses stand in sharp contrast to our earlier theme, the banality of evil, which has become a feature of our daily life. But now, if we attend to one of the most undeniable root causes of things, following New Testament teaching («the love of money is the root of all evils», 1 Tim 6,10), it seems impossible for us to escape from the nihilism we have described unless we denounce and put on display *all the «Eichmanns» of our economic culture*, all those good and upright genocidal servants of what they hold to be a great cause. I use the term «genocidal» deliberately, because if Eichmann collaborated in or caused the death of millions of Jews, then Mr. Madoff allowed himself to ruin the lives of three million human beings from all over the world by consigning them to a state of misery and desperation, without distinction of race or origin or fortune. The court that judged him calculated the scale of his fraud at 65 billion dollars³⁵.

We ourselves have become accustomed, as if it were the most normal

thing in the world, to hearing about bankers with salaries and indemnifications worth millions of dollars a year, and we know that these practices continue in the midst of our present worldwide economic crisis. Five thousand bankers and board members received more than a million dollars each in 2008, when everything was in a state of collapse. The banker A. O. received more than 33 million dollars from Merrill Lynch, during a year when the company suffered astonishing losses and when many banks were being bolstered with public funds. In Britain, at the Royal Bank of Scotland, executive F. G. obtained an annual pension of almost 700,000 pounds sterling, during the same year that his firm recorded the greatest losses in the whole of British business history. These are only three examples from a list that is already too long, and what makes them significant is that none of the executives suffered even a twinge of conscience as a result. That's the point we might well reach: don't make such a fuss over a few millions!

All this inevitably brings to mind a moralizing phrase of Pius XII: the modern world «has lost the sense of sin». For what is truly tragic is that many of those genocidal businessmen were not hypocrites who were consciously leading a double life. Rather, like the Nazi criminals, they were people persuaded of the «normality» of their ways of proceeding. Even today they continue to consider it «normal» for ordinary people's money to be used to rescue them from the abyss they have got themselves into. For them the bailout in no way

constituted some sort of «socialist» crime (the most abominable type for them). Rather, what they consider to be unspeakably socialist is any attempt to use a bit of the excess of their wealth to help ease the misery they have created.

Maybe Pius was right: we have lost our sense of sin. What is unfortunate is that many of the ecclesiastical leaders who wield that phrase don't seem themselves to have much of a sense of where sin is to be found. Never will you hear from their lips a single utterance, not even as a quote from the Bible, to remind us that it is more difficult for a millionaire to be saved than it is for a ship's mooring cable to be threaded through the eye of a needle³⁶.

3.5. Critique of fragmentary reason

Kant has already undertaken a theoretical critique of human reason. Since then, greater awareness of the limits of human reason and the attempts of the young Marx to find a universality intrinsic to reason, as opposed to the universality aspired to by religion, have caused a definite disillusionment among many thinkers. As a result, they have been led to postulate other forms of reason, which are distinguished from one another by the addition of an adjective to modify the word 'reason'. Thus we hear people talk about 'emotional' reason (or emotional intelligence: Goleman), 'dialogical' reason Habermas, Appel, Adela Cortina), and the like. These are attempts to show that the gift of reason is not limited to just one part of our being or to one portion of

humankind. We talk a lot about integrating “mind and spirit”, but possibly we continue to believe that reason is actually “a part” of the human person. Or we speak with great assurance about «what reason dictates to me», without asking ourselves if what it dictates to me is the same as what it dictates to everybody else.

Our consciousness of these limitations is a hopeful sign, and perhaps at the root of all of them is an awareness which, since Freud and Marx himself, should be an acquired patrimony of humankind, namely, the awareness that, as universal as our pretensions may be, human reason is a *situated* reason. And situation always implies limitation. What is more, it is not just a question of our being situated *locally*³⁷, but of our reason being moved by our particular *interests*. And in being so moved, neutrality is an asymptotic goal that is never fully realizable³⁸.

We have learned that reason, whose pretensions to universality are undeniable, has to move gradually toward being universal, just as every human being has to move gradually toward being what he or she already is. But *universal necessarily means including what is excluded*. If such is not the case, then there is no totality that is worth the trouble, nor is there any genuine catholicity in religious matters.

The excluded are the great blemish on our human history, and their exclusion cannot be justified with the easy excuse that they are excluded by their own fault, an excuse which contains much more of the irrational than the truly rational. There is nothing more rational

than the incisive question which the Dominican Montesinos posed 500 years ago in a famous sermon pronounced before the conquistadors in a recently discovered America: «Are these not men?» And if they are truly men, if they are persons, then there can be no authentic truth or knowledge that does not start off from a desire to free them from a form of slavery that, often enough, we ourselves have imposed upon them. Otherwise, as Montesinos said further on in his sermon, we will not be reasoning but dreaming: we will be «sound asleep and in a state of profound lethargy».

Even the attempts at so-called dialogical reason fail because they run into a similar limitation: the dialogue does not take place in conditions of complete equality. Only the powerful dialogue; when the oppressed are allowed to participate, it is only under unequal conditions. What happens with the so-called G-8 countries and other major movers of the world economy is a striking example: if their principal players are convinced that their vision of the economy is totally rational (and therefore universal, like mathematics), then why do they not admit *everybody* into the dialogue? Why is it that the only universal forum, the United Nations (created with that intent), has been reduced to being only a useless entity? Moreover, why is the universality the U.N. strives for effectively blocked by the veto power of the most powerful countries on the Security Council? The cruel and absolute irrationality that drives the production and trade of armaments becomes totally explainable when we

realize that the five countries with the right to a veto in the U.N. are precisely the greatest exporters of armaments. A multitude of just criticisms could be leveled against Gaddafi, but he should be applauded for his gesture of throwing the U.N. Charter on the floor during the last general assembly.

3.6. Meaning in the face of happiness

There is a curious linguistic detail that we should attend to. Our culture of decaffeinated nihilism speaks a great deal of *happiness*, although it is a compulsive, paradoxical happiness, as we saw earlier on. The religions of the earth, all of them, do not usually speak of happiness; they speak of *peace*.

This detail is significant. Happiness does not belong to this dimension in which we live, because the human heart is essentially restless: it always wants more, or it feels threatened at the thought of losing what it has. The moments of ecstatic joy are brief, not permanent; they appear not as happiness, but as «sacraments», that is, as signs that we are able to move on toward a better reality. If we fail to understand them that way, they may even be dangerous, making us close our eyes to what is around us³⁹.

In contrast, peace can be more consistent and enduring, since it emerges from an experience of meaning or of suspected harmony, an experience such as one sometimes has when beholding one of those marvelous landscapes, where one feels that all the pieces are in place and delightfully combined with

one another. This sensation of harmony transmits the implicit message that there is a universal meaning in everything and that that meaning is a freely given gift.

Now, on this earth nothing is more meaningful than working for universal fraternity, freedom, and well-being. Those who struggle in the pursuit of those ideals come to perceive that, despite their efforts and the persecutions and failures that follow, they are where they should be and are contributing to the world's harmony. They realize that the gratuitous generosity with which the struggle for justice is undertaken is like a response to that experience of gratuitous generosity which follows, say, upon a profound perception of beauty. In contrast, the crazy race in pursuit of the paradoxical, compulsive happiness which gets reduced to hyper-consumerism resembles the futile activity which centuries ago a biblical author called «chasing the wind» (Ecclesiastes 1,14). Running after fraternity and justice can bring out the best in people and make for a fulfilling life, even when triumph is not experienced. Running after the wind is an enterprise for fools.

Perhaps for that reason, two of the great philosophers of our history, Marx and Heidegger, though opposed to one another in many ways, agree in emphasizing a deficiency of human fulfillment we should not forget about. Marx spoke of “alienation” and of the human being as alienated. Due to the harsh and unjust conditions in which labor is carried out, he claimed, human beings are no longer themselves, but appear

estranged. Heidegger, viewing the matter more individually but also more broadly, speaks of falling into “oneself”. No one is authentically *oneself*; rather, everyone says what “one says”, everyone does what “one does”, everyone buys what “one buys”, everyone wears what “one wears”, ... and everyone is what “one is”. Nowadays, years after Heidegger made this observation, advertising has reached the point where it appeals to your need to be yourself and yet *different* from others, and it does so as a way of getting you and everybody else to buy *the same product*. And faced with such a complaint, the established stupidity lacks even that capacity for suspicion which is typical of the woman who is affectionately flattered: «You tell everybody that...».

If the search for happiness in hyper-consumerism brings us humans down to the level of sheep, the experience of fullness, meaning, and harmony, even when they are only partially glimpsed, can fill us and empower us to find happiness, not where it is placed by the culture of savage capitalism (or Benedetti’s «economic cannibalism»), but where it was placed, paradoxically, by the prophet of Nazareth: in the *hunger and thirst for justice which flow forth from compassion*, with all the many positive and negative echoes and resonances that may be awakened by that twofold attitude. That kind of attitude was what Jesus had in mind when he spoke of «fishing for people», that is, fishing the incredible richness of humanity out of that murky sea of humanity that is all of us.

CONCLUSION

The paths proposed here may appear vague and imprecise. No doubt they are limited mostly to the field of strategies. Now it is the task of each situation, each person or community, each moment, to deliberate on the best tactics or orientations, and then to follow through on them. In such an undertaking we may make mistakes over and over again, and often enough the reality will turn out to be far below our aspirations, for this is a very human law.

But we will already have accomplished a great deal if we recognize those objectives as more human, more fulfilling, and more meaningful than the compulsive hyper-consumerism which we hear preached to us from all sides. Perhaps then our decaffeinated nihilism would find itself finally superseded, as it comes up against a reality that is much more real, more intense, and more stimulating.

And Christians would do well to remember one thing: Christian means the same as Messianic. There can be no Christian faith apart from the Messiah, which is the Hebrew word for Christ, *Christos*. For that reason, Christianity must be constantly engaged in the struggle for historical change. The gospels narrate a scene where Peter confesses that Jesus is the Messiah, but that confession is rejected by Jesus because Peter conceives of the Messianic «according to men and not according to God». For God, the Messianic is not a question of easy triumph, nor does it mean a situation of personal well-being and comfort; rather, it means thrusting yourself into the depths of the struggle to free human beings from all forms of historical slavery, bearing with the consequences of that commitment, and knowing how to discover in the process justice (for all), peace (with all) and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14,17). The Messianic is not so much a goal (however much we human beings may achieve) as it is a way in which the believer comes to realize and experience that «God himself is a companion on our journey».

1. Marcel GAUCHET, *El desencantamiento del mundo: una historia política de la religión*, Madrid, Trotta, 2005.
2. The texts may be found more fully and with commentary in the first chapter of my work *Fe en Dios y construcción de la historia* [Faith in God and the Construction of History], Madrid, Trotta, 1998, p.15-38.
3. Even though he does not cite it, Tierno Galván would also have to reject Camus's reflection: «Man is the only animal that refuses to be what it is». That is, unless he understood it only as referring to the reconstruction of finitude.
4. I have always found significance in these confident words of the marquis of Condorcet (1743-1795), who was a philosopher, mathematician, historian, and active politician (parliamentarian of the Girondists); they were written when he was in hiding for fear of the Jacobins: «The time will come when the sun above the earth will shine only on free men who will recognize no other master than their reason; when the tyrants and their stupid instruments will no longer exist except to weep for their victims or to know how to recognize and drown under the weight of reason the first germs of superstition and tyranny, *should they ever dare to reappear*» (abbreviated quote; see the more complete version in my work *Proyecto de hermano. Visión creyente del hombre*, Santander, Sal Terrae, 2000, 3rd ed., p. 275).
5. The novel was made into a movie in the decade of the '60s.
6. «We can no longer have the same naive confidence in progress that our fathers and grandfathers had» (*Escritos sobre la guerra*, Valencia, Bromera, 1997, p. 70). And the reason for that is that our progress has not meant universal growth, but a sacrificing of the present and the past to a hypothetical future.
7. Many of the apocryphal gospels contain a gnostic message. This is one of the principal reasons why they were rejected by the Church.
8. This parallels the question: What is the truth?, with which Pilate cuts off the dialogue with Jesus when Jesus explains to him what he lives for.
9. Thus the old medieval adage that philosophy was the *ancilla theologiae*, the handmaid of theology, is replaced today with a similar adage, which makes the culture of the mass media the *ancilla oeconomiae*.
10. The ancient *Myth of Sisyphus* describes the hell of a man who was condemned to carry a heavy stone up a steep incline, with the promise that he could leave hell as soon as he got the stone to the top. But again and again, just as he was about to achieve the feat, Sisyphus would slip and the stone would roll back down the hill, so that he would have to begin again, and this went on for eternity.
11. Z. BAUMAN, *Modernidad y Holocausto*, Madrid, Sequitur, 1998, p. XI
12. J. CERCAS, *Anatomía de un instante*, Madrid, Mondadori, 2009.
13. In the final pages of *La Peste*, Camus states that the book was written to give testimony that «there are more things in man worthy of admiration than there are worthy of contempt».
14. Above all if we remember that, a few years earlier, Arthur Koestler published a novel which was called *The Age of Longing*. The movement from longing to the void says a lot.
15. I have to confess how dismayed I am that something as frivolous as the catwalks can take up so much space in our newscasts. I suspect that such would not be the case if there were not so much money behind them.
16. Which is, besides, irrational and illusory, because I gain absolutely nothing and my will to power is in no way satisfied by the fact that a bunch of well paid, well trained players

- manage to win a title. I might enjoy the way they play, but nothing else.
17. A basic detail in many of the cases of corruption we are seeing lately.
 18. G. LIPOVETSKY, *La felicidad paradójica. Ensayo sobre la sociedad del hiperconsumo*, Barcelona 2007.
 19. «Is the bride as pretty as that course photograph suggests? The great majority of people declare themselves happy, even though sadness and tension, depression and anxiety form a river that grows disturbingly. Most people declare themselves happy, thinking that others are not so. Never have so many parents dedicated themselves to satisfying the desires of their children; [yet] never have there been so many problematic behaviors ..., nor so many mental infirmities among children. ... If the GNP has doubled since 1975, the number of unemployed has quadrupled. Our societies are ever more prosperous, but a growing number of persons live precariously and must cut back on all their budget items, since lack of money has become an ever more acute problem. We receive ever better medical care, but that does not prevent an individual from becoming a kind of chronic hypochondriac. Bodies are freed up, but sexual unhappiness persists. The incitements to hedonism are found on all sides, but the worries, the disappointments, and the social and personal insecurities increase». And the conclusion that the author draws out of this whole depressing description is not negative; rather, «these aspects are what make our hyperconsuming society the civilization of *paradoxical happiness*» (p. 12). Hyperconsumerism, along with the lack of solidarity on which it rests, is the true god that enables us to bear with the pain and the disappointment of history.
 20. Hanna ARENDT, *Eichmann en Jerusalén: un estudio sobre la banalidad del mal*, Barcelona, Lumen, 3th ed., 2000.
 21. The plot of the tragedy is more or less as follows: Clytemnestra killed her husband, Agamemnon, because he had assaulted and killed their daughter. Then Orestes, their son, kills his mother in revenge, but the spiral of vengeance is kept in check because the goddesses called the Furies appeal to reason at the hour of judgment.
 22. LIPOVETSKY, *op.cit.*, p. 321.
 23. Lucía RAMÓN, *Teología y felicidad*. To be published by the SM foundation.
 24. BRUCKNER, *La euforia perpetua. Sobre el deber de ser feliz*, Barcelona, Tusquets, 2008, p. 18.
 25. BRUCKNER, *op.cit.*, 147-148.
 26. *Ibid.*, 216.
 27. The original English title is *Brave New World*.
 28. LIPOVETSKY, *La felicidad...*, 322. Of course, the author responds negatively to both questions. He always notes carefully the objections to his theses, sometimes with excellent formulations (for example, we consume three times more energy than 40 years ago, but we are not three times happier, p. 331), but he then discredits the objections or shows a readiness to accept them as long as they don't infringe on his holy trinity of hyper-individualism, hyper-consumerism, and hyper-marketing.
 29. I refer the reader to the earlier booklet of this series, in which X. ALEGRE comments on this scriptural text. *Resistencia y esperanza cristianas en un mundo injusto*, Barcelona, January 2010, n. 165.
 30. In Greek *anámnesis* means memory.
 31. Examples are the many phrases of the Apocalypse about the fall of the great Babylon (Rome), about the future city, and about the Lord who will dry all tears from our eyes.
 32. Prologue to the book, *El sacramento del hermano*, by Maria SKOBTSOV (p. 15). Mother Maria was born in the former USSR and became mayor of her town. She later fled to Paris, where she dedicated herself to helping persecuted Jews and Russian émigrés, and in the process revolutionizing the conception of monastery life in the Orthodox Church. Finally, she was imprisoned by the SS and died in a concentration camp in Ravensbrück. She was artistic, impetuous, disordered, and an inveterate smoker, and she didn't turn down a good drink of vodka. O. Clément seems to be alluding to all this in this citation from his prologue.
 33. This is certainly due to a bad theological understanding of what we call the communion

of saints, or «the Holy», which we cannot go into now.

34. Literally meaning «Heart, Heart», this is a Spanish expression of affection, but has been used recently as the name of a television show featuring prominent celebrities. [Translator's note]
35. See *Le Monde Diplomatique*, September 2009, pp. 4 and 5.
36. See Mk 10, 25; as I have explained elsewhere, this translation (also possible from the Aramaic) seems to me more probable than the usual translation referring to a camel, where the excessive exaggeration ends up taking away the force of the image.
37. How is it possible that an Afghan girl can consider the use of a burqa reasonable? Or how can western girls consider reasonable the endless piercings, pluckings, and tattoos with which they torture themselves? In the name of freedom? Let us never forget that everything that has the support and recognition of the surrounding culture can easily become for us a kind of pseudo-evidence.
38. *Knowledge and Human Interests*, by H. HABERMAS, is one of the most important books of the past century.
39. Two details: a) no one has put less value on mystical ecstasies than those who have had

them; for the mystics the ecstasies were not the most essential part of their experience of God, not even when they thought they might be an anticipation of a future life in God. b) Nevertheless, Saint Thomas goes so far as to pose the question, whether *in every sexual act* (even between married persons) there is moral disorder because the intensity of the pleasure makes human beings lose their reason and their control over themselves. He responds negatively, but at the cost of linking the sexual act indissolubly with reproduction: since reproduction is something good for the species, he argues, then seeking that good makes the act rational (ST 34,1,c). We may legitimately consider this opinion to be stupid, but if sometimes happens that the stupid ideas of geniuses (as is the case with Hegel) can teach us something. And in this case we might be taught that the fulfillment (happiness) of human beings is not just any type of alienation, but one in which one finds oneself more whole. That is the paradox of human happiness. It is another matter that Thomas (and after him church doctrine until Vatican II) failed to see that at least an inkling of that fulfillment could be experienced in a sexual relationship that was loving and authentic. Perhaps Aquinas was betrayed here by his celibacy.