

## L'ÉGLISE ENTRE L'HUMANITÉ RÉELLE ET L'HUMANITÉ RÊVÉE

■ PIERRE MANENT

Every epoch has its “secular religion”, a “perverse imitation” of Christianity that takes this or that part of the Christian proposition and diverts it toward this world. It was not so long ago that communism transformed charity for the poor into hatred for the capitalist society, and ultimately for every society that recognizes the rights of the “human person”. Today, something like a “religion of humanity” has taken hold of supposedly enlightened opinion and increasingly guides the judgments and actions, private or public, of people in the West, especially in Europe. This is not simply a fashion or opinion trend; it is a genuine large-scale project for governing the world through international rules and institutions, so that nations, losing their character as sovereign political bodies, are henceforth only “regions” of a world en route to globalization, that is, unification. And, as formerly in the communist conception of history, the *is* and the *ought* are regarded as coinciding: if you doubt that globalization is desirable, you will be told that it is irresistible and that you refuse to see reality; if you doubt that it is irresistible, you will be told that it is desirable and that you reject the evidence of the Good. In brief, “the world” is presented to us as the supremely legitimate object of our desire. Such a proposition requires a serious effort of discernment.

Everyone is called to this effort, but especially Christians. Christians in fact are particularly susceptible to accepting the present tendency with favor, and to viewing it as a felicitous sign of the times, because globalization attacks the reality and the legitimacy, the fact and the law, of sovereign nations, which the Church has always regarded at least with mistrust, and has sometimes explicitly condemned or chastised. The hostility of the Church is not unfounded, because these sovereign political bodies are inseparable from a will to power or a desire of domination which leads princes and subjects, statesmen and citizens, to address their wishes to the earthly city and to set themselves up as “independent”, to the detriment of the divine kingdom and the human vocation. In fact, the consolidation of nations in Europe is inseparable from an increasing domestication of the Church, which sometimes practically leads to its expulsion from the public sphere. Without wishing to trace the modern history of Europe here, we will content ourselves with noting that the Reformation signified the “nationalization” of the uni-

versal Church, and that, from that time on, the nation, not the Church, was the “community par excellence” in Europe. The Church contributed less and less to determining the political and spiritual configuration of Europe, as witness the admirable and vain efforts of Benedict XV to moderate national frenzies. From a Christian point of view, nations can seem like idols produced and formed by pride. It was thus not by chance that the first and decisive impulses for the “European project” were given by Catholic statesmen. And for a number of Catholics even today, the initiatives of Robert Schuman, Konrad Adenauer, and Alcide De Gasperi have the character not only of a courageous and judicious political choice, but also of a sort of collective conversion ratifying the passage from the immemorial political order of power to a new order of disinterested cooperation.

However tempting or persuasive may be the “grand narrative” which accompanies and justifies the European project, we cannot fail to notice that it rests upon a very one-sided reading of European history, and on a very biased estimation of that properly European political form known as the nation, a bias which suggests, moreover, that it is not so easy as one would wish to rise above one’s political passions. Furthermore, and symmetrically, it rests upon a superficial understanding of what the constitution of an effectively universal human association requires. Injustice with respect to the nation and incomprehension of human universals thus reinforce each other and are inextricably connected.

The nation state is not immune from the ambiguity of human works. Produced by sinful man, it simultaneously expresses his grandeur and his weakness. We have briefly evoked the flaws of the national form, which are always present to the minds of our contemporaries and whose persistent memory gives both color and blandness to European political and moral life. It is important to recall its merits. If God in creating man left him to his own devices, then the nation has also had a part in the goodness of creation, because it is both the framework and the result of the most constant and varied efforts by human groups to organize self-government. The credit goes to the first inventor, and the honor of Athens will never be taken away; outside of Christian Europe, one has never seen such stable and extensive political bodies in which so many human beings have found the conditions for an honorable and conscientious life. Furthermore, though nations, like the rest of cities and empires, may be carried away by the will to power, it must be noted that the division of Europe into rival nations prevented imperial petrification, and that the extraordinary fertility of European history results from the constant interplay among the diverse European nations. Catholic political thought is often very severe, not without reason, with re-

spect to the notion of sovereignty. However, it must be noted that it is this very sovereignty, and the recognition by each nation of the sovereignty of others, that permitted coexistence and even emulation among nations of very unequal power. The recognition of the equal sovereignty of small nations – which certainly has had its failures! – is one of the great accomplishments of European public law. We ought to be sensitive to this aspect of things today, now that small European countries have been placed under guardianship on the basis, or the pretext, of the financial crisis. This gives us an idea of the profound inequality that threatens the life of Europeans as soon as some of them are denied the right to be independent.

Without wishing to make an inventory of the accomplishments of the nation-state, its contribution to moral life should be underlined. I am not thinking here of the education through national language and literature, which preserves its legitimacy only with difficulty today in the face of the worldwide circulation of information that knows only generic human beings. I am thinking rather of this: there is no more powerful source of moral development for everyone than concern for the common good or the *res publica*. It's not a question here of generalizing norms of conduct, which could only produce a mechanical and mutilated morality, but rather of enlarging our being in order to take account of the intelligence and the will of that being which is greater than each one of us and that we form together. In brief, the education and the deployment of the human virtues require the participation in a unified action before the members of which we feel ourselves responsible, and for which we incur both praise and blame. If we lose that, we will have nothing left to orient ourselves by but a general idea of humanity which will be powerless to draw us away from the passivity of private life.

It will certainly be objected that the eclipse of nation states will overcome particularism, and thus provide us with access to a truly universal perspective which takes into account not only the circumscribed group, but all human beings, that is to say, humanity in its entirety. This is not only an illusion, and not only the most widespread and approved illusion in Europe and the West; it is the illusion in the name of which and by means of which powerful forces mean to tear us away from the active concern for the common good that in its political aspect is called friendship, and in its religious aspect is called charity.

One can, of course, speak of the common good of humanity. The preservation of breathable air, for example, is part of such a common good. But it is an extrinsic common good, because humanity does not constitute a real community of action. Such a common good can only be preserved by

the activity of each real political community (that is, each nation), activity which includes collaboration with other nations. Nature will be not be preserved by a humanity that does not exist politically. There is no point of view of humanity concerning humanity itself, even though modern means of communication can give the impression of a real presence of humanity to itself. We truly live only where we act, and we truly act only in the community of action that we form with our fellow citizens or our associates. International institutions are or can be useful instruments for collaboration among nations, but they do not make humanity into a community. There is, of course, a human species, but it is actualized only within the plurality of human communities.

I was speaking just now of powerful forces that mean to tear us away from an active concern for the common good. No, I am not detecting a conspiracy! But Christians ought to be concerned by the use which is being made of the notion of humanity. From the Christian perspective, the healing and the unification of humanity enter through the element of charity of which the Church is the bearer and the instrument. Charity is a common action, a common operation carried out visibly or invisibly by the Church and its Head. The Church invites everyone to enter into this common action, to participate in it. There is no other way to really heal and unite a humanity that is wounded and divided by sin. To this proposition of the Church, which is dismissed because it “excludes” those who refuse it, reigning opinion opposes the proposition of a humanity that is virtually unified and healed, since, beneath the still-separating activity of still-separated human groups, there is present or latent a humanity that nothing separates or distinguishes, a humanity that is visible and tangible, a humanity already existing for those who are able to see and to feel the similarity of human beings behind their differences, for those who experience the sentiment that Tocqueville considered as the democratic emotion par excellence, “fellow feeling”. Obviously, this contemporary religion of humanity excludes and rejects the Christian religion. The healing and unity that the Christian seeks through participation in the operation of charity of which Christ is the Head is sought by the European who “believes in humanity” in the sense of the resemblance among human beings. That which the Christian only hopes to find at the culmination of a transformative process which is the work of God himself, and through participation in the community of action that is the Church, the humanitarian claims to obtain by detaching himself from all communities of action in which human beings participate and by passively enjoying his resemblance to other men. It is in letting themselves move beyond action and responsibility for action that today’s

Europeans find salvation for themselves, giving it to themselves and experiencing certainty in so doing. To be sure, this humanitarian faith does not ignore works (that is, humanitarian acts), but these actions by themselves, as useful as they are, contribute very little to the strengthening of human communities. Humanitarian virtues are admirable, but they are not productive of community. To be sure, the Christian proposition, which requires long-range action whose results are uncertain and largely invisible, is infinitely less attractive than the humanitarian proposition which realizes its promise as soon as it is formulated because it both begins and is fulfilled in the recognition of the humanity of the other person. This can encourage the Church to present itself in the terms and in the forms of the religion of humanity. That move would not be innocuous, because the integrity of the Christian proposition would be harmed, and it would be useless because it would only serve to further validate the religion of humanity. The Church would be better advised to deal amicably with the other real communities known as nations, which, Christian or not, at least provide the framework of education and action within which human beings can effectively put into operation the search for the common good.

I can imagine the enlightened European response to these observations. Perhaps you are right, they would say; perhaps common action, political or religious, is the highest human effort, but it's also the most risky. After all, at times when the Church exerted herself to the utmost in order to bring human beings together into the Christian body, she was led to commit or tolerate actions for which she has not yet been forgiven by public opinion, including the opinion of Catholics. And as for the nation-states – without wishing to charge them with exclusive responsibility for the disasters of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – it seems clear today that, at least in Europe, they have lost the capacity and even the will to satisfy the hearts and fix the horizons of their citizens. They offer to protect their citizens from the upheavals of globalization, and citizens, whatever they say, in reality do not ask for more. Furthermore, continues the enlightened European to whom I have given the floor, it's necessary to organize the human world on different bases from the common actions that were crystallized in nations and churches. And we do not have to search for this new method; we have found it. It resides in the common rules provided by the organization of reciprocal dependence among human beings, the organization of commerce – or, rather, it obliges us every day to perfect these rules. The new world, instead of relying on the dangerous competition of collective bodies, revolves on the reciprocal dependence between the Chinese worker and the American consumer, a reciprocal dependence that promises us a humanity that is perhaps less glo-

rious, but doubtless more calm, and ultimately more human than that of our fathers.

This argument certainly does not lack persuasive force, and it forms the basis of the point of view that directs, one may say, nearly all of the European “decision-makers”. It deserves a response.

In the first place, it must be pointed out that the theory of the pacifying and civilizing effects of commerce is a *locus classicus* of modern European history, and that, unfortunately, the facts have refuted it as regularly as they have confirmed it. Voltaire described with ecstasies of enthusiasm the London Stock Exchange where all religions and sects gathered and worked in cordial understanding, and where the only heretic, according to him, was the bankrupt. The hopes of the Enlightenment hardly prepared our ancestors for the quarter century of wars of the Revolution and the Empire. Yet those hopes did not disappear, and they resurged even more strongly in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Auguste Comte assured us at the time that we had necessarily left behind the “theological and warrior” age. We all know what happened next, and it’s useless to continue this recitation. I do not mean to suggest that the present phase of globalization is condemned to encounter the same destiny as the two previous phases, but only to recall that others before us, who were neither less lucid nor less courageous than ourselves, entertained the same hopes as we do, and that ought to incline us to sobriety.

For the rest, it’s not so difficult to see where the limits of the power of commerce are located. Its force resides in its facility. Between agents in an exchange relationship, one needs only very limited agreements bearing on the characteristics of the objects in question and their price. It’s also necessary to have a certain reciprocal confidence which permits each actor to engage his capital or other resources. But that’s little enough in the end; the actors may never see each other and may deal through intermediaries which neither sees except for a moment in a transaction that is already devoid of human relationship. In short, commerce requires but little “in common”, and thus it produces but little that is “common”. The question, therefore, is whether we can live humanely without things in common, or with having in common only the “rules of the game” that bind specialized institutions that do not need to be political and that function better when they are less political. This question demands a negative response. Human relations go far beyond the exchange of goods and even the exchange of goods and services. Without supposing that human beings are destined to passionately follow their gods or their demons as Max Weber thought, it seems rather clear that human life encompasses relations of justice, political or collective, which cannot be subsumed under the “rules of the game”. The distribution

of honors is part of justice, and the mastery of relations of honor is one of the most difficult parts of political prudence. At the mention of the word, honor, weary Europeans shrug their shoulders, but shortly thereafter they explain the grievances of this or that human group by invoking the “humiliation” that the group has suffered at the hands of the West for two centuries. Europeans do not take account of how much of the disdain that they attach to relationships of honor is a rather pale reflection of two large political facts: they have dominated the world for two centuries, and in the latter period they transferred this responsibility to their American cousins. He who enjoys domination without accepting the responsibility of government is in the worst position to judge political relationships. Anesthetized by this long irresponsibility, Europeans dream of a humanity reunited in peace by the rules of commerce and the spread of the feeling of common humanity.

To apprehend the vacuity of this notion, it suffices to pose certain questions. How – with what intelligence, what prudence – will the United States handle the decline of its capacity to assure the political direction of the world? How – with what intelligence, what prudence – will China handle the sudden augmentation of its resources and its power in Asia and in the rest of the world? How – with what intelligence, what prudence – are Europeans going to organize their relations with the Muslim world in the new situation created by the settlement of numerous Muslims in the European countries? How – with what intelligence, what prudence – are the Muslims for their part going to organize the “community of believers” in the new situation? One can see, that none of these questions is soluble – it is barely touched – by the extension of the rules of commerce and the spread of the sense of a common humanity. However desirable these things may be, they hardly affect the relationships that I have just mentioned, because these relationships bear on the direction of the actions carried out by common entities that are political or religious.

Europeans, for some time, have refused to take account of the gravity of these relationships because they feel themselves capable of seeing, beneath apparent divisions, a humanity that is already tending toward unification. I have already characterized this religion of humanity as, of all religions, that which is easiest to show as based on an illusion. The world will not find its order and its tranquility through the multiplication of the faithful of this religion. This is a strictly European affair, and it will remain so. The world will repose, as always, on the precarious equilibrium determined by political and spiritual decisions taken by human communities, and for the description of which there is no other lexicon than the catalog of the cardinal and theological virtues.

There is a pre-condition, however, to the exercise of these virtues in the political and even in the spiritual order. It is to achieve an exact view of the present state of affairs. The principal factor today, as I have already mentioned, is the weakening of the directive capacity of the West, even though the United States remains by far the most powerful individual actor. This relative weakening, in connection with the corresponding reinforcement of previously “peripheral” powers has produced a “multi-polar world” which many people hope will find its equilibrium in this very plurality. For my part, I think that the international order can leave hegemonic power behind only with difficulty, and that the weakening of America is freighted with menaces. But this is not the place to pursue these conjectures. What must be emphasized, is that today, in the light of “a common world”, all the “greatnesses” which previously had been overshadowed by the western monopoly on “progress” are now coming into view. Where there used to be the West and the rest, there is now, besides the West, China, India, the Islamic world, etc. If one also considers the political role of Israel, one is tempted to say that the depths of history are today coming to the surface for a sort of political reunion of humanity. But as I have emphasized, humanity must not be confused with the idol that has been created out of the feeling of a common humanity. Real humanity is made from coexistence and from the tension between the propositions about humanity that are insoluble in the humanity dreamed of by humanitarians. China, Islam, the Jewish people, the Christian world, these are not diverse colors of a human rainbow, these are “greatnesses”, these are political and spiritual entities that present themselves as propositions and affirmations about humanity and that ought to be rendered compatible. It is not sufficient to say and to think sincerely that we are all human beings. What’s important is to find the means of a political and spiritual mediation among these propositions, because the West will soon no longer be strong enough to hold the world together. This effort of mediation is spiritual as well as political. It seems to me that the Catholic Church is called to play a decisive role. I say that she is called to play this role; I do not say that she will play it. That will depend precisely on the virtues of Christians. What role?

When I look at the trend of the present state of affairs, one thing strikes me. The majority of other great religious and political communities of the world have a temptation to an “extremism”: There is the Jewish “zealotry” quite recognizable in the colonization of Judea and Samaria; there is the fundamentalism, or “literalism”, of the Protestants, that has given rise in the Christian world to a missionary spirit mingled with powerful political and social passions; the Russian Orthodox Church, liberated from communist

servitude, has made itself the declared supporter of the successor power and encourages nationalism; and of course there is Islamism. As for the religion of humanity, I have already evoked its fanaticism. The Catholic Church is not given to such transports. One can say without exaggeration that she does not know bias or political passion. Perhaps this praiseworthy impartiality is as much the product of its weaknesses as of its virtues. Perhaps it is in part the consequence of the fact that every imprudent gesture on her part is immediately criticized by this or that other party, so that she keeps herself in check. It doesn't matter. Only the Catholic Church is in a position to enter into a serious conversation with each one of these "greatnesses" that I have just mentioned, and with all of them. Because she is the only real universal community that is completely constituted – the only "perfectly spiritual republic", she can address herself to all other religious communities who seek support in a political association and in a certain confusion of spiritual and political orders. She can address herself as well to that pagan empire that is China. In brief, she is the center from which and toward which the spiritual constellation of humanity is ordered.

It's a characteristic of the present situation that mediation is urgently required, while impartiality seems impossible. Consider the relationship between Israel and the "nations". In recent years, the state of Israel has experienced a disquieting loss of legitimacy. Not only does the Muslim world continue to reject it for well-known reasons that are inseparably religious and political, but contemporary universalism, the religion of humanity that is so powerful in Europe, has scarcely any better understanding for a nation that desires to preserve its very existence and its sovereignty including by the force of arms. At the same time, and in response to this loss of legitimacy, Israel has increasingly based its rights on references to the Shoah. The actions that it carries out, like those that it announces, are explicitly meant to prevent a new extermination. Without judging the political or moral merits of this move, I would like to emphasize that it touches the very meaning of Judaism. The original vocation of the Jewish people was to be the witness and the vehicle of the Covenant between humanity and a God that is friend to humanity. If Israel roots its legitimacy henceforth in the Shoah, it makes itself spiritually dependent on its worst enemies, and bases its legitimacy henceforth in that absence or silence of God which is summed up in the name Auschwitz. Only a Catholic Church that takes account of its debt and its dependence with respect to the Jewish people and the calling of Israel will be capable to witness divine friendship. The religion of humanity and the religion of the Shoah are two versions, enemies and friends, of a religion of the absence of God that is currently destroying and

demoralizing the West. The West will only take courage if it recovers faith in the goodness and friendship of God. The Catholic Church, mediatrix of the Mediator has no other political task, but it is an urgent one, than making itself a convincing witness of the goodness of God.