

SACREDNESS AS EXPRESSION OF FREEDOM AND HUMAN DIGNITY

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Abstract: Of the great chapters of Christian theology, anthropology is the most challenged—and challenging—component of this thought. Paradoxically, the interest of the postmodern individual for their existence is increasingly evident. At least two of the predominant existentialist values are at the forefront: the freedom and human dignity. The paper analysis the point of view of secular contemporary anthropology in parallel with the true teaching on human being and its position in society, as the Saviour Jesus Christ, the God-Man, saw and applied it through his own incarnation, death and resurrection. These divine acts, integrated in the liturgical life of the church, can fix the shortcomings and incoherence of a secular anthropology that isolates more and more the contemporary individual from God and his fellow human beings.

Keywords: anthropology, autonomy, deification, mission, society, testimony, evangelism

From the perspective of the Christian anthropology, the beginning of the third millennium antagonizes, without any reserve, two concrete existential notions: transcendence and purely immanent autonomy.

The first notion concerns the being, the people and the work of God, called Theology, while the second one refers to the philosophical conceptualization of the being, the person and the work of the human being in a limited and intrinsic framework, without any external report to existence.

Theology uses the supernatural belief in defining human beings and the purpose of their creation, as well as their purpose, while

philosophical anthropology only uses human reason as a determining tool to explain and convince individuals of when they are in themselves. We deal with two types of anthropology: a Christian one—that applies to us—and a philosophical or a speculative-rationalist one.

Seemingly contradictory, these two types of anthropology are complementary, because both of them focus on human dignity and freedom, although progressive circles emphasize *autonomy*, the watchword in the street and in postmodern families. Under these circumstances, the religious perspective is completely excluded, and dialogue on human beings and their destiny is practically impossible.

In a hypothetic dialogue, the God of Christian anthropology, abstract notion rejected by progressives, could at most be accepted as an absolute monarch, as a Father who constrains his own creatures left in a permanent state of existential inferiority. “Autonomy qualifies itself as condition—the condition specific to the self-sufficient human being, rather capable of self-regulation, but who persists in a permanent isolation in their ability of solving everything—for fulfilment, a fulfilment throughout history.”¹

The climax, proposed by anthropocentric philosophy, places the lonely individuals in the centre of (post)modernity, on a level of exclusive conditioning by rational knowledge, a transfer sometimes imposed by the need to reconcile religion with a state of autonomy independent of any external conditioning. In this case, it is not just about denying the existence of God, respectively that of human dignity as viewed through revelation; it is about the great boldness of standing before God and claiming an equivalent dignity, a diabolical and substitutive egalitarianism: *iuxta propria principia*.

This explains why this philosophical perception is about the individual, not about the person, as the individual, practically and even theoretically, is a so-called indivisible entity, a monolithic incommunicable, irrefutable anthropology with a rigid mind-set, opposed to dialogue, communication and any form of interpersonal communion.

The European community and even the world base their principles on the possibility of changing mind-sets, where historical and political dynamics can be applied for the common good of all humanity. If current Christian living lacks human attachment and compassion,

1 Adriano FABRIS, *Filosofia delle religioni*, Carocci editore S.p.A., Roma, 2012, p. 48.

the divine gift of *wisdom becomes science*—the human being becomes a axiomatic-deductive path with their own geometry of life, a purely rational knowledge taken to the extreme. “Science comes into being as a knowledge that respects the path and opens itself to experience.”²

From the beginning of Christianity, the link between faith and knowledge manifested itself in various forms. Saint John the Evangelist testified about this complementarity by saying: “*That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon, and our hands have handled, concerning the Word of life—the life was manifested, and we have seen, and bear witness, and declare to you that eternal life which was with the Father and was manifested to us—that which we have seen and heard we declare to you, that you also may have fellowship with us; and truly our fellowship is with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ. And these things we write to you that your joy may be full*” (1 Jn. 1:1-4, NKJV).

The Christian teaching on human nature and its ultimate destiny can only be accepted by faith, which presents itself as the only access way to the Godhead, and the only way to salvation, that is the deification of the human being: “therefore the Son of God was made man and he united in himself human and divine nature so that human beings may evolve in their light and mystery in relationship with Jesus Christ, who made our communion with him as God through his humanity.”³

The sixteenth century, through the Reformation, proposes anthropological knowledge from a metaphysical perspective, by virtue of a complete freedom from anything and anyone: “the mere mercy of God through Christ (...) can worthily and sufficiently justify and save the person; (...) a Christian man needs no work, no law, for his salvation; for by faith he is free from all law, and in perfect freedom does gratuitously all that he does.”⁴ This is where the emancipation of human dignity from the individual’s perspective who strives for autonomy through self-reliance without the consent and work of divine grace begins.

2 *Ibidem*, p. 49.

3 Dumitru Stăniloae, *Persoana umană, lumină și taină în unire cu Sfânta Treime în Hristos cel înviat*, în vol. *Iisus Hristos lumina lumii și îndumnezeitorul omului*, Editura Anastasia, București 1993, p. 196-197.

4 Martin Luther, *Despre libertatea creștinismului*, Scrieri, vol. I, trans. Petru Forna, Editura Logos, Cluj-Napoca 2003, p. 170; Martin Luther, *The Freedom of the Cristian*, 2011, Raleigh lulu.com, p.31.

Secularisation in all its forms is the impression of modernity that no longer unites human dignity with the dignity of the God-Man, Jesus Christ. Modern anthropocentrism supports secularization as a withdrawal process of the religious from the public sphere. "From now on, *autonomy* designates a different way of understanding the connection that, from a religious perspective, was set by God with the creature. From now on, human beings, seen first and foremost in their relationship with themselves, must be placed at the centre of the various relationships that unite them with the world, with their peers, and finally with God."⁵

In modern times, human dignity claims its own autonomy; it shows itself capable of freeing itself from any religious connection. The sacred appears as an alterity constraining human existence, its dignity and freedom, but useful "in the foreseeable future, for millions of people who will continue to profess their religious and mystical faith, not only for the mysticism existing in their minds, but mainly for the great comfort that gives meaning to a future life/ existence."⁶

The utility of the sacred is increasingly emphasized. Post-modern society cannot ignore nor abolish it. There appears a form of compromise, a cohabitation through which the religious experience attests the presence of the sacred in the ecological niche of the contemporary individual. Human freedom gives its consent from a desire for a spiritual cleansing from empirical imperfections and flaws. Nevertheless, there is a risk: without a model of human dignity and freedom through grace—Jesus Christ—slippage in the religious experiences of the post-modern individual leads to sickening mysticism, extreme ecstatic states, to depression and anxiety, and even to transcendental meditation (*TM*) of diabolical inspiration. "We lose what is alive and specific to the human being's humanity."⁷

For human history, the sacred—whose significance clearly acts as a common denominator—is a way of listening and classifying reality and has the role of supporting social cohesion and religious experience in their anthropological function. The sacred is a structural and univocal interpretation of human existence that presents itself as a

5 Adriano Fabris, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

6 Lewis Wolpert, *Sei cose impossibili prima di colazione. Le origini evolutive delle credenze*, Codice, Torino 2008, p. 193.

7 Franco Ferrarotti, *Il ritorno del „sacro“*, in G. Mura (ed.), *Testo sacro e religioni. Ermeneutiche a confronto*, Urbaniana University Press, Città del Vaticano 2006, p. 377.

movable horizon, moving from transcendent towards immanent, from the anthropological limit to the threshold of the absolute, from the religious feeling to the need for spirituality. For Protestant Rudolf Otto,⁸ the sacred is not a personal God, nor a God in three persons with an ineffable personal freedom, but an impersonal essence. The acts of the divinity can be rationally conceptualized and analysed. This is the first step of the human being towards empowerment. “An object that can thus be thought conceptually may be termed *rational*. The nature of deity described in the attributes above mentioned is, then, a rational nature; and a religion which recognizes and maintains such a view of God is in so far a ‘rational’ religion.”⁹

The value of the person—whether God, angel or human—resides in the impossibility of fully understanding their actions. This is where Christian theology introduced the concept apophatic theology. In itself, the person is an apophatic reality—an unfathomable mystery that can only be partly quantified due to their lucrative association with other people or the environment, which is why we always name the person according to their works, as expressions of freedom of action and standards for their dignity, while keeping in mind that they do not fully cover intrinsic reality. For Rudolf Otto, attributes or the way we call the free involvement of the person are also important, but they are separated from their support, that is, the rational hypostasis that generates them: “They are ‘essential’ (...) attributes of that subject, but they are also (...) *synthetic* essential attributes. That is to say, we have to predicate them of a subject which they qualify”¹⁰ and when explained rationally, they “[exhaust] the idea of deity.”¹¹

In French sociology and especially for Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) the sacred is not only a social factor that determines and imposes order, but also the emotional experiences of the individual, which is a storage of energy poured into everyday life, a force used in helping other individuals in order to change the society for the better. Here freedom of choice and the display of human dignity come into play.

8 Rudolf Otto, *Sacral*, Editura Dacia, trans. I. Miclea, Cluj-Napoca, 1996.

9 See Rudolf Otto, *The idea of the holy: an inquiry into the non-rational factor in the idea of the divine and its relation to the rational*, H. Milford, Oxford University Press, London, 1923, p. 9.

10 *Ibidem*, p. 2.10.

11 *Ibidem*.

Acquiring social balance involves emotional changes, new standards in life, the direction of emotional centrality towards a higher purpose constantly undergoing changes. These statements confirm the sacred as an indicator and a path of an anthropological desire/ aspiration that alludes, beyond structural reality, to the ability to assert one's own identity in the spiritual and historical sphere; this is why the sacred has the fluid configuration of a movable construct disposed for dissemination and/ or dissolution. "If there is, at present, a different correspondence between profane/real and sacred/possible, the sacred represents the element of surprise, the unexpected."¹²

The mystery created by the sacred is a logical sense of suffering of the mind which seeks to understand and desires to know it. The problem of the sacred can be placed under the sign of a possible experience from the sphere of the unreal, of the immaterial, of what is not seen but felt, and then appears as something concrete, that is explainable (Gr. *ἱεροφαντέω-ῶ*, to explain the holy mysteries). This paradox, of seeing the unseen, of explaining the inexpressible, is only and anticipation of the supernatural discovery of the possible. The sacred does not homogenize reality, but it allows us to see a true coincidence between aesthetics and ethics. "The sacred is a biological feeling, not exclusive to the religious man, on the contrary—it is a feeling that accompanies our existence at all times, independent of any creed or subjective belief. The sacred is the very biological movement that interposes in front of the possible, which makes the imperceptible as if it would be perceptible."¹³

In this hypostasis, human anthropology shows itself as a cognitive model of reality and of processing/ interpreting the senses of life and outlines a horizon of symbolic opposition between the dimensions of actual reality: space-time, transcendent-immanent, spiritual-material. The sacred invigorates reality—it presents itself as part of the human structure that invigorates the objective reality—but it also introduces an abyssal distance in relation to the profane. A negative outcome consists in the creation of an antinomic image of two worlds: a subjective world and an objective one. But there's also a positive outcome: the sacred generates

12 Carmelo Dotolo, *Teologia e postcristianesimo. Un percorso interdisciplinare*, Editrice Queriniana, Brescia 2017, p. 150.

13 Felice Cimatti, *Il possibile e il reale. Il sacro dopo la morte di Dio*, Codice Edizioni, Torino 2009, p. 137.

a particular relationship with *gnosis* (natural knowledge) and with *theognosis* (supernatural knowledge/ religion). The sacred stimulates anthropocentric logosity and encourages it towards continuous renewal through determining actions.

If the notion of the sacred stimulates the desire for knowledge in various fields of the free individuals, desire manifested towards themselves and toward their fellow human beings, their personal dignity transforms this thirst into the final purpose of their existence. How can this gnoseology be whole?

While in complete freedom, the individual cannot reach the limits of knowledge *ad se* and *per se*. This is where comes into play the need for a Person, a synthesis of the two plans—transcendent and immanent—who can take over and then convey the content about true freedom and authentic human dignity. In the incarnated Son of God, our Lord Jesus Christ, the natural and the natural, the created and the uncreated, natural energy and divine grace are united and the human beings know clearly their origins, their directions and especially why they have been brought into existence.

In the Divine-human Person of the Saviour there is no antagonism between sacred and profane, between natural and supernatural, between transcendent and immanent, between reason and faith. “There is no dialectical opposition and no total separation between person and nature, *logos* and symbol, being and energy, body and soul, the powers of the mind, heart or reason, cataphatic, apophatic or existential knowledge, the stages of purification, enlightenment and deification, the world and God, created and uncreated.”¹⁴

Intending to make the separation and antagonism between sacred and profane ever more obvious, secular post-modernism is getting closer and closer to the Nestorian heresy (Ephesus, 431) which condemns the coexistence of the two natures of Saviour Jesus Christ, divine and human, in a single Hypostasis, or Person, that of the Son of God and Logos of the Father. Admittedly, there is nothing new under the sun: secular post-modernism is a resurrection and reactivation of an old heresy from the beginning of the fifth century A.D. Now, both human freedom and the dignity of our nature could not be strengthened and emphasized more

14 Calinic Berger, *Teognosia. Sinteza dogmatică și duhovnicească a părintelui Dumitru Stăniloae*, trad. Nectarie Dărăban, Editura Deisis, Sibiu 2014, p. 22.

strongly than by an act of incarnation through which God becomes man. Thus, Christianity gives the fullest testimony regarding the sacred, sacredness and the way to them faced with universal challenges for religious pluralism. No religion—even if it manages the sacred or just pretends doing so—is capable of bringing human nature back to its true dignity.

Human sin is incompatible with divine grace, which is why as we commit sin, our nature is degraded within its ontological content. This degradation leads to either physical either spiritual death and ultimately to eternal death. For our freedom and dignity, hell represents the place and the state with the highest degree of degradation, the most profound and intense degradation. According to Christian teaching, the individual can come out of this state in and through Christ—his human nature becomes, for the whole church, the source for moral correction—as he is the head of the church (Ephesians 5:23). Our freedom and dignity are restored only by following the path of the human nature present in the Saviour, from his incarnation (our baptism), passions (our sufferings in this world), death (our physical death), resurrection (our repentance), exaltation (the renewal of our nature), until he will be seated next to the heavenly Father (we will be in the eternal kingdom). The spiritual path proposed by Christ is not to be walked selfishly, but in fellowship, all gathered around his Church, the place where we become sons and daughters of God.

Outside this holy space there is no salvation. Saint Cyprian (200-258), bishop of Carthage, stated that *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus*¹⁵ while being aware that human beings acquire their true freedom by the grace of God, in his church, and that human nature's true dignity is equivalent to the state of holiness.

The new context of Christian mission—one that is European and, why not, worldwide—requires a new phenomenological, historical and cultural approach to religious pluralism. Every religion seeks to impose its own way of valorising freedom and human dignity in its own spirituality. In return, every Christian denomination wants to display the spiritual path with Christ as convincing as possible, while also displaying, or not, proselytizing tendencies. The question which could arise in this context might be: is Christianity still the religion of communion and protection of one's neighbour—of the one next to us—for the diversity of spiritual pluralism?

15 Sanctus Cipriano, *Epistulae*, 73; 21: PL 1123 AB.

Here comes the need for dialogue. There is no mission without dialogue, and no dialogue without a mission. The lack of dialogue is the saddest reality of social life. Through dialogue, the individuals use both their freedom and their dignity. There's no other option if what we wish for is a world of inner and outer peace. Through dialogue, I am able to become the other, to enrich myself through them and them through me. All theories, reflections and conclusions become common theories, reflections and conclusions. Christian theological thinking must accept the existence of other religions and enter into dialogue with their spirituality, an attitude that promotes a Christianity of the highest quality: openness to *the other*. In its mission, the Church recognizes parts of the Divine revelation preserved in some form in other religious, spiritual and denominational groups. They become the common ground for dialogue. Missionary dialogue is built on common foundations, as many as they are. This ecclesial-missionary attitude cannot be translated as *adaptation*. If Christ, the head of the church, *continues forever* (John 8:35, Hebrews 7:24), meaning that he does not change, neither his teaching nor dogmas can be adapted according to the missionary context, or the interests of any community. Therefore, we speak about assuming, not adapting.

While on a mission trip in Athens, the Holy Apostle Paul assumes, within the Hellenistic culture, a short passage from a pagan poet: "**for in Him we live and move and have our being**, as also some of your own poets have said, '**For we are also His offspring**.'" (Acts 17:28). The uniqueness of human nature, freedom and human dignity, is the key to Pauline missionary interpretation in the Athenian context. For one human race, for one salvation from the curse of the law (Galatians 3:13) we have *one Lord, one faith, one baptism* (Ephesians 4:5), and yet a pagan text becomes part of the Holy Scripture claiming to keep divine revelation inspired, becoming an integrating part of it (2 Timothy 3:16).

Through chapter 17 of *the Book of Acts*, the entire history of the human race acquires an eschatological value—it becomes "a reflection on human existence in the light of the Christian creed."¹⁶

In Athens, we witness a harsh contact between paganism and the message of the Gospel, but Paul's missionary message is one of great refinement that opens the door of evangelism towards pagan spirituality

16 Hans (Hanz) Conzelmann, *The address of Paul on the Areopagus*, in Leander E. Keck and J. Louis Martyn, *Studies in Luke-Acts*, Abingdon Press, London, 1966, p. 148.

in three directions: right teachings (orthodoxy), resurrection and mission. The Pauline mission proves that it is an expression of repentance and of the whole ecclesial interest, meaning that the Church must have a universal mission: mission must be assumed; it is not only an adaptation to concrete situations encountered in the mission field; true mission is Christocentric.

“By disturbing the understanding of a closed, self-sufficient, autonomous and impersonal worldly system, Apostle Paul was bringing the message of the work of a personal God who created the universe out of nothing, who leads and protects the world and intervenes decisively in history. As opposed to the concept of an individual who works automatically, the focus is now placed on freedom and love, which are activated in communion with God and other human beings. Through this paradox, which—for Athenians—reached the realm of the irrational, Apostle Paul introduced a new way of thinking. It was a profound review of Hellenistic wisdom, by accepting Christ as the centre of creation and the purpose of the world.”¹⁷

Mission’s ultimate goal is sanctifying the lives of the believers, taking them out of the wickedness of human nature, of sin and death. Having overcome these three impediments, the Christian comes to experience authentic human dignity in complete freedom.

Conclusions

Face with various egocentric challenges, Christian anthropology is invited today to respond to the tendencies of frequent empowerment, due to its ontological alienation, in relation to God in general, and in relation to the Saviour Jesus Christ in particular.

Only in Christ, the God-man, Christian believers can see the stages of their righteousness, their aspirations for freedom and truth mirrored. Christ’s human nature becomes, after ascending and being seated next to the Father, the only means of sharing grace to the whole world, for the whole human race.

The Christocentric character of Christian spirituality is the business card for the mission of the church in a post-modern society, because, in him and through him, the dignity of our nature is elevated to the highest levels of holiness and to perfection.

¹⁷ Anastasie Yannoulatos, *Misiune pe urmele lui Hristos. Studii teologice și omilii*, trans. Ștefan Toma, Editura Andreiana, Sibiu 2013, p. 228

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