

What We Have Lost with Religion

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My title is deliberately provocative. It is intended to give pause to all those – quite a few, I imagine – who are convinced that they owe nothing at all to religion in any shape or form and who, as a result, think they have lost nothing in the recent difficulties that have stripped the Christian churches of most of the hold they still retained over European society. Because it goes without saying, in today's thinking, that religion is a question of personal choice, individual participation and private belief. This is not the kind of religion I am talking about. The thesis I should like to advance is that, whatever our beliefs, church or degree of involvement, until quite recently all of us used to owe something to religion, and that we have all lost something in the enormous change which has carried us with it over the last thirty years and which, among other things, is currently completing its liquidation of the vestiges of religious organisation that remained among us. This something is directly related to the 'dehumanisation of the world' with which we are now so preoccupied.

Certainly this is a paradoxical phenomenon since, from other perspectives, the recent period has been characterised by the collapse of what remained of the religious pillars of heteronomy and the triumph of the metaphysical principle of human independence. None of us, including the most committed believer, any longer doubts that the social tie that binds us together is the work of human beings, and human beings alone; we do not even regard it as having any historical logic. From this point of view the crypto-religions of political salvation have been undermined just as much as the great organised religions. In this metaphysical sense we are right to speak of an advance in the humanisation of the world. However it is also apparent that the dehumanisation that concerns us here may be connected to the practical, very unexpected forms that this metaphysical humanisation has taken; the former may have a hidden connection to the concrete social forms adopted by the latter.

This something that eludes us and which we owe, in my opinion, to the legacy of the religions, is precisely the element that enabled us to understand our societies as coherent wholes. It is thus the element that enabled us to imagine that we could act together to transform those societies, however that act of transformation may then have been conceptualised, whether it was intended to be gradual or radical. The debate is no longer between reform and revolution: neither reform nor revolution now exist. There are only changes, which have to be more or less well managed or contained, but which, a basic level, elude our grasp.

We were living in the calm certainty that we could take hold of the collectivity, decode its internal dynamics and, to a degree as yet unknown, guide its construction of itself over time. This was more than a presupposition, it was a tangible fact. However, the

sense of security on which we based this view was deceptive. The availability of society to its participants is far from self-evident; it is not an inherent quality. It reflected the particular historical state that our societies were in, and which is currently falling apart. In practice we owed this kind of coherence, and the resulting theoretical and practical accessibility of our societies, to the persistence of the religious mode of structuring human communities, which had quietly outlived the religious organisation of the world.

We have had five centuries of modern transition, roughly speaking 1500–2000: five centuries during which the slow break with the order of the gods has expanded into the surviving mould of the religious social bond. Our explicitly extra-religious definition of human society has been built on foundations that are implicitly religious. The construction of its increasingly autonomous organisation has continued from a base of heteronomous origins, which may certainly have gradually lost its solidity, but which had stubbornly persisted until very recently. It was this tacit foundation that allowed us to dream of the time when the collectivity would attain full power over itself. In the meantime it enabled us to take measured action to change societies that were sufficiently unified to support the project to master their mechanisms.

I make no claims to describe the nature and substance of the religious structural mode in a few sentences. I shall confine myself to stressing its underlying strength and importance for the modern project. This can be seen in terms of three fundamental aspects: tradition, participation and hierarchy. One could show how the prodigious novelty of future-orientated history has constantly drawn on the link to the past, as embodied in tradition. Similarly one could establish the extent to which the reign of the individual with rights has always presupposed that this individual is also at the same time a member of communities. Membership of these communities may indeed be voluntary, but they are all the more intensely communitarian because their members participate in them of their own free will. Lastly, one could also show how the ideal of self-government, and the aspiration to a political community able to make its own laws, have drawn on the old model in which the role of authority in the community is to relay its supreme reasons for existence.

It is this structuring compromise between independent content and a form implicitly derived from heteronomy which has fallen apart with the exhaustion of the legacy of the age of religions. It is to the immemorial heritage of religions that we owed the possibility of having power over our world and the ambition to acquire further power. This is what we have lost.

In one sense, as I indicated at the outset, we have now achieved full power over ourselves. Except that this ultimate metaphysical conquest has adopted an unexpected social face. It has completed the emancipation of individuals. It has freed them from the frameworks which perpetuated the stamp of the religious order within a secularised society. It has delivered them from whatever remained of the constraints of tradition. It has released them from all possible obligations towards the reference points of family and Nation. It has disconnected them from the reverence for hierarchy and ties of obedience towards authority, even when that authority was accepted. In a word, it has given them, or works to give them, full power over themselves. But in so doing, it has emptied collective power of its substance.

We enjoy an unequalled freedom to govern ourselves, each in our own corner and for ourselves alone. But our sense of common government has faded. The idea that we all have a grasp on the organisation of our world no longer has any support, means or relay.

We can now scarcely imagine historical action other than as the result of a myriad disparate initiatives, all seen as legitimate and all resolutely refusing to give up any of their independence. We can no longer imagine human coexistence other than in terms of a generalised market. This has become the sole mode for realising of the common possibility of equal freedoms. In passing, I should say that this suggests to me that the criticisms of economics and capitalism that are currently gaining ground, with the aid of old habits and the strength conferred by gain, are only wrestling with shadows. They are attacking only consequences and symptoms and not allowing themselves to tackle the problem at its source. In so doing they confine themselves to adding yet another aspect to the powerlessness against which they protest.

It is true that the decision to look directly at the cause of our dilemmas is a hard one to take, given the extent to which it goes against everything we have learned to think. Yet surely it is this dispossession, whose source is not external to us but which seeps from within our ownership of ourselves, that is the true name of the dehumanisation of the world.

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