

# **Religion and Freedom**

## **The Value of Earthly Reality is not Undermined by the Holy**

By

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What really is important in life is not so much to provide answers, as to discern true questions. When true questions are found, they themselves open the heart to the mystery. Origen used to say: “Every true question is like the lance which pierces the side of Christ causing blood and water to flow forth”. In this light we understand why Christ is not first of all the answer: He is first the restlessness of the query, as we see by the fact that the Gospel opens with the word “metanoéite”, change your heart and life. Only at this price is Jesus also the peace and the truth which enlightens. Therefore if we want to find true answers for our condition as pilgrims in history towards the homeland of God’s promise, we must listen to the true questions which lie at the heart of history itself, since they will open us towards the enlightening darkness of the mystery. Very often Church mission fails because we answer questions no one is asking or we pose questions which interest no one. The challenge is to discern the true questions, the questions that God writes on the tablet of our heart and of our time.

This is why my reflection on “religion and freedom” is developed in three parts, similar to the arches of a bridge joining thought to life. In the first arch - which I call “Horizon” or “searching for the Father-Mother infinitely loving” - I listen to the questions posed by our heart and by the landscape of our times, so that the true question may enter our mind and open us to the horizons of mystery. In the second arch of the bridge - that I call “Principles” or “religion and freedom from modern to post-modern time” - , I listen to the development of the ideas of freedom and religion in modern European history. Lastly, in the third and final part - the third arch of the bridge, which I call “Consequences” or “what to do to respect and promote a true relationship between religion and freedom to-day” - I reflect on what emerges from the two previous parts to inspire practical choices in Church and society.

### ***1. Horizon: in search of the Father-Mother infinitely loving***

a) What is the greatest question which lies *at the heart of our heart*? The question which makes us restless and thoughtful: “Fecisti cor nostrum ad te et inquietum est cor nostrum donec requiescat in te”. “You have made us for yourself and our heart is restless until it rest in you”. It is Augustine who speaks at the beginning of his *Confessions*. The burning question which each of us carries in the depths of his heart is in fact the question of suffering and death. If there were no

death there would be no thought, everything would be a flat eternity: to live is also to learn to die, to live together with the silent, persistent, tenacious challenge of death. It is pointless to search for evasion as we often do, or facile consolation like that of Epicure who says: "When death comes I will not be, and as long as I am, death will not come". These words are in fact only a pun, an illusion, because death is not only the final destiny, the last act, it is an imminence which overhangs and weighs on each day of our fragile, perishable living. To struggle with death means answering questions which suddenly spring up in the heart like piercing wounds: what is my destiny? What is the meaning of life? Where am I going with all my worries, consolations and joys? And when I have all that I desire what else will I long for except that final victory, the victory over death? It is death then which sets us thinking: this is the paradox of the human condition.

The thought of death as our destiny and challenge prompts a counter-attack, like a need to defeat the apparent triumph of death: to think is to struggle against death! So, we are at the same time thrown towards death, as Heidegger says, and yet fashioned for life. Without this contrast we would accept the destiny of death as something obvious and certain, without worrying about it, without seeking to give a meaning to life. The fact that death makes us thinking and that we feel the need to give significance to our acts and days is the sign that deep in our heart we, pilgrims on the way to death, are in fact called to life. Within us there is an indestructible longing for the face of Someone who will take away our suffering and tears, who will redeem the infinite pain of death. When we are alone and sad, when no one seems to love us and we even have reason to despise or criticize ourselves, from the depths of the heart there arises a restlessness, a longing for someone Other who will welcome us, make us feel loved in spite of everything, and defeat the final enemy, death. This longing which appears is the image of the Father, or if you like of the Mother, because "father" and "mother" are in this sense only two metaphors to express the same need inscribed in our heart: the need to have someone to trust without reserve, an anchor, a haven in which to rest our insecurity, our pain, in the certainty that we will not be thrown back into the abyss of our nothingness. As such the figure of the Father is at the same time the figure of the loving Mother, the womb, the homeland, the origin in which we place all that we are. If in the depths of our heart we find anxiety at the supreme challenge of death, and this makes us pensive, if life becomes a struggle to defeat death, then the image of the Father-Mother infinitely loving is something we all need.

Hence we cannot fail to ask ourselves: why, if this is so, is it the case that in so many there is a visceral rejection of the "father-mother" figure? Why do we all, sooner or later, experience a moment when we contest the image of the father-mother in love? Let us try to understand this contradiction between the need of a father-mother figure to overcome our anguish and at the same time the rejection of it, by reading a text taken from "The Letter to the Father", by Franz Kafka: "The feeling of nothingness which often dominates me - Kafka says -, originates in large part from your influence. I was able to enjoy all that you gave us only at the price of shame, fatigue, weakness, and a sense of guilt, I could only be grateful to you as a beggar,

not with facts. The first visible result of this education was that it made me flee from anything which reminded me, even vaguely, of you". How often rejection of the father stems from a need to gain independence! How often paternity-maternity becomes possessiveness, slavery, dominion! This is when we see the dramatic image of the father's murder. In actual fact, one of the most profound causes of the anguish found in the human heart is that - although everyone wants to conquer death - we all need a father-mother in love to embrace us, with regard to whom nevertheless we all, in one way or another, experience moments of rejection for fear of suffocation. The murder of the father is a sort of ritual murder, an act to affirm our independence, our autonomy. So we are all doomed to a never-ending condition of being orphans, consequently longing for a mother and father in love, and yet fleeing in order to remain free and independent like the prodigal son, who chooses to take his heritage in order to manage his own life. This then is the great question: we need someone who will reveal to us the face of a father-mother in love, who does not create dependence, does not make us slaves. A father-mother who loves us and renders us free. A father-mother who does not compete with our freedom, but is its very foundation, the ultimate guarantee of truth and peace in our heart, who at the same time will heal our anguish with the medicine of love, and also heal that fear of losing our freedom, making us feel loved in a freedom which does not make us slaves, and does not create dependence. This is the Father-Mother infinitely loving sought by the human heart...

b) And *at the heart of history*? Here is the second landscape of our search for true questions: what happened to the father-mother figure in the last century, the "short 20<sup>th</sup> century" (Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes - The Short Twentieth Century 1914-1991*, Penguin Books, London 1994), which opened in 1914 with the out-break of the First World War and closed in 1989 with the fall of the Berlin wall and the collapse of ideologies? We built a society without fathers: this - to be brutal - is the basis of the modern process of emancipation. From the Enlightenment onwards, emancipation becomes the great dream of hearts, of minds, of the masses of humanity. But what is emancipation? Karl Marx in his book *The Jewish Question* defines it as follows: "Emancipation means leading everything in this world back to man, to man alone". There is no "God": there is only the human being who must run his life, his destiny alone. This was the great dream of modernity: modern ideologies, left wing and right wing, pursued this ambitious goal of emancipating man, rendering him the subject instead of the object of his history. The "great tales" ("meta-narratives", "mega-récits") of the modernity, which ideologies are - myths just like those they were supposed to replace -, have in common the claim to build a world in which man is the only subject and agent, both the origin and summit of all that happens. It cannot be denied that this project is fascinating and we are all its children. Which of us would want to live in a society which has not passed through the process of emancipation? Nevertheless this dream had satanic effects: the dream of emancipating the world and life was shattered in the unheard of violence which the age of emancipation produced, eloquent signs of which are the Shoah of the Jews and all the holocausts of our times, up to the holocaust of famine consumed day after day.

Is this the fruit of adult reason? Is this the result of the great ideologies of the left and the right?

Now, the fatherless society is precisely the one which followed the dream of emancipation by eliminating the father. The bitter fruit of totalitarian and violent emancipation however causes the need to recognise the face of a welcoming father-mother to be felt once again. This is not the search for the father-mother who is the party, or money, or power, rather it is the search for a father-mother who establishes at the same time each individual person's dignity and freedom, giving meaning to life. We could say then that the most profound sickness of this age which we call post-modern, is that we – orphans of ideologies – are all weaker, more fragile, more tempted to shut ourselves up in the solitude of our selfishness. When there are no horizons of truth we drown in the solitude of our own particular selves. And this shows still more that we all need a common father-mother to set us free from the prison of our solitude, to give us a horizon for hoping and loving, not the violent one of ideology, but a liberating horizon. There is a nostalgia for a hidden face, the need for a common homeland which gives horizons of meaning without exercising violence.

In this light life appears either as a pilgrimage towards a promised homeland or as a mere waiting for death. There is no other choice. Life is either a passion, a searching and therefore a restlessness, or it is a dying every day a little, evading, escaping in all the many drugs with which our society is afflicted, and which only serve to dull our senses and are incapable of posing authentic questions. We need to make the decision: "I will arise and return to my father!" This is the great decision which our post-modern age needs. To help their travelling companions to make this decision, believers are the first who must arise and move towards the Father. So this brief inquiry to listen to our heart and to the heart of our time, leads to a first temporary conclusion: we need to become pilgrims once again, to overcome the frustration which at times grips us, especially when we see no results, no fruits. The most important thing for those who believe in God is not to harvest, but to sow: the sowing will bear fruit in time when and how God wills. Therefore we must say no to frustration and yes to a passion for the truth which leads us to pose true questions so we may search for the hidden face, the face of the father-mother in love. The core of the Church's mission to-day is to proclaim this face to all those who are in search of it.

## ***2. Principles: religion and freedom from modern to post-modern time***

We move now to the second archway of our bridge. Within the horizon of the search for the Father-Mother infinitely loving it is possible to distinguish two different attitudes regarding the relationship between religion and freedom: the first one, marked by rejection of the Father-Mother figure in the name of the emancipation of human being; the second one, characterized by the conviction that without the acceptance of a transcendent Truth there is no possible freedom and no religious freedom at all.

a) The metaphor of light provides us with the most expressive way of talking about the principle which inspired modern reason's ambitious claim to understand and master everything. This project - which lay at the foundations of the Enlightenment in all its manifestations - maintains that to understand the world rationally means to make human beings free, masters of their own future, emancipating them from every possible dependence. *Emancipation*: this was the dream which pervaded the great processes of historical transformation in the modern age, born with the "Enlightenment" and the French Revolution, from the emancipation of the working classes, the oppressed races and the peoples of the so-called "third world", to the emancipation of women, in all variety of different cultural and social contexts. This dream of total emancipation strained forward towards a reality entirely enlightened, where the radiating power of reason might express itself without constraint. Where reason triumphs, there rises the sun of the future; in this sense, it may be said that modernity is the age of light. Freedom - interpreted as self-consciousness, self-determination and self-realization - is light: the light is being set free from every dependence, from every Father-Mother who could decide for us. Freedom is precisely emancipation, liberation from every transcendent Lord, from every historical slavery. Revolutionary freedom as well as the bourgeois one are both aspects of the modern spirit of emancipation. The fullest expression of this spirit is "ideology": modernity, the age that dreamt of emancipation, was also the time of those all-embracing ways of understanding the world proper to ideologies. Ideologies tend to impose the light of reason on the whole of reality, to the point of equating ideal and real. In pursuit of this ambition, the "great ideological narratives" tended to construct a "society without fathers", where there are no vertical relationships - unfailingly thought to imply dependence - but only horizontal ones, of equality and reciprocity.

"Liberté, égalité, fraternité": the sun of reason generates liberty and equality, and hence fraternity, according to an egalitarianism founded on the light of reason, which governs the whole world and all life. The critique of the "father-lord" figure thus leads to the complete rejection of God. Just as on earth there must be no fatherhood creating dependence, so in heaven there must be no Father of all. "Religious freedom" is freedom from every religious slavery, from every fear in front of the divine: human beings alone are the heroes of their own destiny and of the future of society. There are no divine "partners", there is no other world; there is only this history, this horizon. The only idea of God allowed to stand before the court of adult reason is of a God who is dead, meaningless, and with no practical purpose ("Deus mortuus, Deus otiosus"). This collective murder of the Father is carried out in the conviction that human beings must manage their own lives for themselves, moulding their destiny with their own hands. The modern ideologies, whether of right or left, pursued this ambitious aim of emancipating human beings in a way so radical as to make them the sole subject of their history, and at the same time both the source and goal of all that happens.

There can be no denying that this is a mighty project, and that we are all in some measure in debt to it: who would want to live in a society that had not undergone this process of emancipation? And yet, this dream has also led to satanic consequences: precisely because of its all-embracing ambition, ideology becomes violent. Reality is forced to bend to the idea; reason's Awill for power@ (F. Nietzsche) strives to dominate life and history so as to make them conform to its own goals. Inexorably, this all-encompassing dream becomes totalitarian: totality - as understood by reason - produces totalitarianism. Neither by chance nor by accident, all the enterprises of modern ideology, of right and left, bourgeois and revolutionary, eventually issue in totalitarian and violent expression. And it is precisely this historical experience of totalitarianism that leads to the crisis and twilight of the claims of modern reason: "The fully enlightened earth - affirm Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno - radiates disaster triumphant" (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), New York 1969, 3). Thought without shadows becomes violent; far from emancipating, it generates suffering, alienation and death. The modern "society without fathers" does not bear children who are freer and more equal, but, instead, dramatic dependencies on those who at various times offer themselves as "surrogate" fathers. The "leader", the "party", the "cause", these become the new masters, and the freedom promised and dreamt of turns into a painful, grey manipulation of the masses, held in place by violence and fear. The collective murder of the father did not prevent the proliferation of these new, barely camouflaged, fathers and lords. The dream of emancipating life and the world seems, then, to have dashed itself against the unheard-of violence produced by the age of emancipation. Where are the new heavens and new earth promised by the great ideological narratives? This is the drama with which the twentieth century closed: a moral drama, a crisis of meaning, a vacuum of hope. Freedom and religious freedom in a world without God have not made us more free, more equal, more fraternal.

b) *The need for a transcendent horizon* arises from the crisis of the presumptions of the modern era. If, for modern reason, everything found meaning within one all-encompassing process, for the "weak thought" of the post-modern condition - shipwrecked on the great sea of history after the collapse of ideology's claims - nothing seems to have meaning any more. In reaction to the failed claims of "strong" reason, then, there emerge the contours of a time of shipwreck and collapse; this crisis of meaning is the special characteristic of post-modern restlessness. In this "night of the world" (Martin Heidegger), what seems to triumph is indifference, a loss of the taste for seeking ultimate reasons for human living and dying. And thus, too, we reach the nadir of the parabola of modern ideologies, nihilism: nihilism is not simply a matter of giving up values for which it is worth living. It is a much more subtle process: it deprives human beings of the taste for committing themselves to a higher cause, of those powerful motivations which the ideologies still seemed to offer. Our worst contemporary ailment is this lack of "passion for the truth": this is the dramatical face of our post-modern age. In this climate of nihilism, everything conspires to lead us not to think any more, to flee from any passionate striving after

truth. In the dark light of nihilism, to be freed means to be “condemned” to freedom, compelled to make choices, not free to be or not to be free, and religious freedom has no meaning, because there are no Gods and no free human beings!

The result of such a cultural process is the triumph of the mask over and above truth: even values are often reduced to banners hoisted to camouflage the lack of meaning. Human beings seem to be reduced to a “useless passion” (Jean-Paul Sartre: “l’homme, une passion inutile”). One could say that the most serious malady of this so-called post-modern age is the abandonment of the search for a father-mother towards whom to hold out our arms, our no longer having the will or desire to seek a meaning worth living and dying for. Orphaned by the ideologies, we all run the risk of being more fragile, more tempted to shut ourselves up in the loneliness of our own selfishness. This is why post-ideological societies are increasingly becoming “crowds of solitudes”, in which people seek their own self-interest, defined according to an exclusively selfish and manipulative logic: faced with the vacuum of ultimate meaning, we grasp at penultimate concerns, and seek immediate possessions. This explains the triumph of the most shameless consumerism, of the rush towards hedonism and whatever may be enjoyed at once; but this is also the deep reason for the emergence and affirmation of forms of thought which are sectarian, narrowly ethnic, nationalistic or regional. Without the wide horizons offered by truth, we easily drown in the selfish loneliness of our own particular situation, and our societies becomes archipelagos, collections of separate islands.

It is exactly this process which shows that we all need a common father-mother to free us from our selfishness, to offer a horizon within which to hope and love - not the violent one of the ideologies, but one which truly frees all, and respects all. So if the “society without fathers” ran after the dream of emancipation, and to achieve this dream sought to destroy the father, it is precisely the bitter fruit of totalitarian and violent emancipation - and the vacuum it created - that evokes the newly felt need for a transcendent father-mother who welcomes us in freedom and love and guarantees the dignity of each person, the freedom of all, and the ultimate meaning of life. This is the longing for the Totally Other, of whom Horkheimer and Adorno spoke as they foresaw the crisis of the ideologies. It is the yearning for the hidden Face, the need for a shared home, which provides horizons of meaning without violence. There are signs of such an expectation: there is a “longing for perfect and achieved justice” (Max Horkheimer), which can be perceived in the contemporary restlessness and “search for lost meaning”. This is not simply “une recherche du temps perdu”, not mere nostalgia, but a striving to re-discover meaning beyond shipwreck, to discern an ultimate horizon, against which to measure all that is penultimate, and to give an ethical foundation to that we do.

There is a *re-discovery of the other*, in the recognition that my neighbour, by the mere fact of existing, can give me a reason to live, because he or she challenges me to go out of myself, to take the risk of an exodus with no return by committing myself in love to others. The new concern for the weakest - especially for foreigners fleeing from situations of deprivation and poverty of every kind -, and the growing awareness of the demands of local and global solidarity may be counted - even if still

beset by many contradictions - as signs of this search for lost meaning and for a freedom based on respect for each human person and her / his infinite dignity. At the same time, there seems also to be a re-discovery of the longing for the Totally Other, a kind of *rediscovery of the Holy* over against every nihilistic denial. There is the reawakening of a need, which may be described in general as religious: for an ultimate horizon, understood not in the manipulative and violent way of ideology. A transcendent womb which allows us to affirm that the value of creation is promoted and not undermined by the Holy. Under very different forms, there is a “return to the Father”, who sets us free, even though not always without ambiguity or even a certain ideological nostalgia. To witness to such a need of the Other, able to offer reasons for life and hope, and to proclaim the Face of this transcendent Father-Mother in love, is the most important commitment of the Church’s mission to-day. The Second Vatican Council expressed this intuition in a particularly deep way when it said: “One is entitled to think that the future of humanity is in the hands of those who are capable of providing the generations to come with reasons for life and hope” (*Gaudium et Spes* 31). In these words we can espy the role of a fundamental paternal-maternal mediation, of a kind of paternity-maternity of meaning, which might be able to stop the future from falling into nothingness. The Other - ultimate foundation of all true reasons to live, and to live together - seems to be offering Himself as the answer to the truest and deepest question revealed by the crisis of our present age; and the yearning for His hidden face seems to lead us towards a father-mother who has a loving welcome for us all...

### ***3. Consequences: what to do to respect and to promote a true relationship between religion and freedom in Church and society to-day?***

How can believers and non-believers, how can believers of different faiths meet and dialogue in truth given the challenges of the described landscapes? How can freedom be experienced as true and religious freedom be possible in truth and reciprocal respect between them? To respond adequately to this question from the point of view of theological and pastoral responsibility, we must show how Christians, engaged in living and working in this changing world, are required more than ever today to give an account of the hope that is in them, with gentleness and respect for all (cf. 1 Pt 3,15). At both individual and community levels, this means that Christians must be disciples of the One and Only, servants out of love, and witnesses to what it means to follow their Lord. At the same time, in the interplay between faith and non-belief - to which the adventures of modern atheism and the restlessness of nihilistic post-modernism make us especially attentive - believers are called to go beyond every reduction of Christianity to ideology, and to be sincerely attentive to others in all their dignity, whatever their beliefs may be. Thus it is that we discover that the atheist, the only atheist that can be taken seriously, may live in the very heart of believers themselves, because only someone who believes in God, and has experienced God as the Father - Mother welcoming in love, can also “know” what it would mean to deny Him, and what infinite suffering His absence would be.

The non-believer is not outside believers, but within them: this insight leads to a particular understanding of the life of faith itself, lived now not presumptuously, as something possessed, but in humble awareness of the constant need to put oneself at the service of the truth, and to do this not as so many private adventurers, but in the communion of the Church, which has been raised up and is nourished by the Spirit.

a) *Believers, prisoners of the Invisible.* To believe is to be taken prisoner by the Totally Other. This is precisely why believers can bring the truth of faith to bear on human thought, as they let themselves become prisoners of the Invisible, not immediately available and certain. Believing thought does not claim to have an explanation for everything, to throw light on everything, but lives rather as if by night, charged with expectation, suspended between the first and last coming of the Lord, already strengthened, certainly, by the light which came into the darkness, and yet still longing for the dawn. Believing thought is not yet totally lit up by the day, which belongs to another time and to another homeland, but it still receives enough light to bear the burden of keeping the faith. Believing thought is humble: it hangs on the Cross, which in the world=s darkness is, and always will be, the disciple=s guide, the star of Redemption, the revelation of the God welcoming us in love. In their turn, non-believers, once they have crossed the ford of modernity, live in the selfsame state of search and expectation. This is on condition that their non-belief is more than a label, that it is the fruit of their experience of suffering and struggle with God and of their being unable to believe in Him. True non-belief is not a facile denial, with little effect on the person concerned. Serious, thoughtful non-belief, which pays attention to the true questions of the world and of life, means suffering; it is a passion for truth that pays a personal price for the bitter courage of not believing.

One who does not believe, and who lives this condition in a responsible way, is aware of the acute pain of absence, feeling himself / herself orphaned, deeply abandoned: only the death of God can cause such sorrow in the human heart and in the history of the world. Thus it is that the thinking non-believer, just as the conscientious believer, wrestles with God. “My religion is to wrestle with God”: according to Miguel de Unamuno, a voice speaking for the “tragic sentiment of life”, the whole of religion lies in this “wrestling with God”. And since “to live is to yearn for eternal life”, living is inevitably marked by the tragedy of having to fight this unequal combat. Out of respect for the dignity of such non-belief, which emerged in all its clarity after the tragically heady days of ideological atheism and its fall, believers are called to question their faith and rediscover the struggle with God as a part of their love for Him. The company that faith and non-belief keep one another in this way has its origins in the one human condition: when human beings ask the deepest questions about their vulnerability to pain and death, they do this not as people who have already arrived, but as searchers for the distant homeland, who let themselves be permanently called into question, provoked and seduced by the furthest horizon. Human beings who stop, who feel they have mastered the truth, for whom the truth is no longer Someone who possesses you more and more, but rather

something to be possessed, such persons have not only rejected God, but also their own dignity as human beings.

To be human, to be free means to go on a journey outwards: human beings are on an exodus, called permanently to go out of themselves, to question themselves, in search of a home, glimpsed but not possessed, in search of the Father - Mother welcoming in love. If human beings are by constitution pilgrims towards life, Abegging for heaven (Jacques Maritain), the true temptation is to stop journeying, to feel they have arrived, no longer to think of themselves as pilgrims in this world, but masters of an impossible Aeternal instant. This illusion of feeling we have arrived, the presumption of thinking we are already fulfilled, that we have achieved the goal of our existence, this is the fatal illness. All this can be applied analogously to the things of God: in the life of faith, too, the greatest temptation is to stop. Because Christians are called to follow the Cross, where God spoke in the silent, disquieting eloquence of the passion, they are constantly placed before this great choice: to crucify their own expectations on the Cross of Christ, or to crucify Christ on the cross of their expectations. This is exactly the way in which the Cross is the gospel of freedom, as Jesus showed us in the way He went out of Himself in choice after choice, to the point of deepest self-abandonment! In everyday experience, as in the journey of faith, human beings are called to be free by paying the painful price of this continual, inevitable choice, a choice that constantly places us on the threshold, sensing the dizzy alternative of going one way or the other.

b) *Faith: struggle and submission.* As human beings constantly go out of themselves to struggle against death and walk towards life, they are joined by the Word who comes from the divine Mystery, from that God who according to Christian faith "has time" for them. God comes to us so that our history may enter the Mystery of home and there find rest. This meeting between human beings who go out and God who comes, between exodus and advent, is *faith*: it is *struggle* and agony, not the repose of a certainty possessed. Whoever thinks they can have faith without a struggle risks believing in nothing. Faith is what happened to Jacob at the ford of Jabbok (cf. Gn 32, 23-33): God is the one who attacks under cover of dark, who comes upon you and wrestles with you. If you do not know God in this way, if for you God is not a consuming fire, if for you the encounter with Him is always going through the same comfortable motions, your God has stopped being the living God, and is dead. That is why Pascal said that Christ would be in agony until the end of time: his agony is the agony of Christians, the struggle to believe, to hope, to love, the struggle with God! God is other than you, he is free with respect to you - as you are other than Him, and free with respect to Him. Woe to us if we lose the sense of this distance and the suffering involved in our difference from God! In a beautifully naïf medieval insight, to believe (*credere*) comes from "cor-dare", to give your heart, and this involves a continual struggle with God's total otherness which does not let itself be "solved" or "possessed". God is other than you. That is why faith is always tempted by doubt.

Only those who do not know are shocked by the Baptist=s words, when at the sunset of his life, and evidently restless with doubt, he sent to ask Jesus: “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Mt 11,3). This is the trial of faith: to struggle with God, knowing that He is the Other, who escapes from our certainties, and does not allow Himself to be tamed by our presumption. So faith is struggle: the voices that witness to this are innumerable. St John of the Cross speaks of this scandal through the metaphor of the “noche oscura”: “On a dark night / anguished, with burning love / oh blessed fate / I went out, unnoticed / all were asleep at home. /Y / Night, you led me! / oh, night more loveable than dawn / oh, night that joined / the Lover with his beloved / the beloved transformed into the Lover” (*Noche oscura*, 1 and 5). Dark night is both the place of scandal and of betrothal: God is not to be found in easy earthly possessiveness, but in the poverty of the Cross, in death to self, in the night of the senses and of the spirit. This is the place of greatest joy! Darkness is the place of love, and of faith experienced as struggle. Christ is not the answer to our questions; above all, he subverts them. And only after leading us into the fire of desolation, does he become the God of consolation and of peace.

Finally, faith is *submission*: in the combat there comes the moment when you understand that the loser really wins, and so you give yourself up to Him, you submit to the one who attacks at night, you allow your life to be marked forever by that meeting. Then it is that faith becomes self-abandonment and forgetfulness of self and the joy of entrusting yourself into the arms of the Beloved. Faith means entrusting yourself like this to the Other. “O Lord, you have enticed me, and I was enticed; you have overpowered me, and you have prevailedY If I say, >I will not mention him, or speak any more in his name’, then within me there is something like a burning fire shut up in my bones; I am weary with holding it in, and I cannot” (Jer 20, 7.9). In these words of Jeremiah we hear the voice of one of the greatest witnesses to what it means to submit in faith: Jeremiah wrestled mightily with God, but in the midst of the combat he learned how to give in, to submit in love and to entrust himself to God. This is how faith can become a home-coming of beauty and peace. This is not the beauty the world knows, the seduction of a truth explaining everything; it is instead the beauty of the Man of sorrows, the beauty of crucified Love, of Jesus= total offering of himself to the Father and to us.

c) *Consequences*. If faith, then, is all this, if it is struggle and submission, inseparably joined, then believers will not be looking for vulgar signs which exhibit the fidelity of the God in whom they believe. They will still believe in Him even when the answer to the true questions of human suffering stay hidden in His silence. Consequently, believers are, in the end, those who try every day to begin believing and non-believers, as they suffer from the infinite pain of God=s absence, are perhaps people who try anew every day to believe, but fail. If believers did not struggle every day to be faithful to the living God, their faith would be nothing more than worldly reassurance, one of the many ideologies that have fooled the world and alienated human beings. Against every ideology, faith is to be understood and lived as continual conversion to God, a continual handing over of the heart, beginning every

day afresh the effort to believe, hope, and love: in consequence, faith is prayer, and those who do not pray will not live by faith! But if believers are those who struggle with God and submit themselves to Him anew every day, then what of the struggle of non-believers who try anew every day to believe but fail? Not the superficial atheists, but those who struggle with an upright conscience, who have sought but not found, and who feel all the pain of God's absence: will they not be true companions of those who believe?

From this way of understanding the relation between religious experience and conscience, dialogue between believers and non-believers can be understood as an exercise of reciprocal respect and a witness to religious freedom. In the first place, we must say "no" to a lazy, static, habit-worn faith, made of comfortable intolerance, which defends itself by condemning others because it does not know how to live the suffering of love. To this "no" we must add a "yes" to a questioning, even doubting, faith, capable of beginning anew every day to entrust itself to others, to live the exodus with no return, ever journeying towards God's Mystery, disclosed and hidden in His Word. There also arises, however, a "no" to every superficial atheism, to every ideological denial of God and of the holy mystery, as well as a "yes" to the unceasing search for the hidden Face, for the Love beyond every word, the Love which opens itself to embrace our searching hearts. In this age of ours that lacks great hopes, perhaps more than ever the real difference is not between believers and non-believers, but between those who think and those who do not, between, on the one hand, men and women who have the courage to face life's pain, to go on trying to believe, hope and love, and, on the other, men and women who have given up the struggle, who seem to content themselves with the penultimate horizon, and no longer know how to burn with desire and yearning at the thought of our last horizon and last home. In this light we can understand that to put true questions and to challenge everyone to think deeply is the only way to enter into dialogue. Those who cannot even be bothered to stir themselves to think about God -, but who pick up on prejudice and hearsay and are therefore vehemently anti-religion - without knowing either what it really is or who have not even thought of who God is, must likewise be challenged.

Believers thus make their own - in the name, too, of non-believers - the prayer with which St Augustine closes the most beautiful, the most deeply considered, and perhaps the most tormented of his works, the fifteen books of the *De Trinitate*: "Lord my God, my only hope, grant that when I am weary I may never cease to seek You, but may always passionately seek Your face. Give me strength to seek You who let Yourself be encountered, and give me the hope of meeting You more and more. Before you I place my strength and my weakness: conserve the first, heal the last. Before you I place my knowledge and my ignorance; where you have opened, welcome me as I enter; where you have closed to me, open when I knock. Let me remember You, understand You, love You!" (*De Trinitate*, 15, 28, 51). In the restlessness of questioning, the faith of the believer meets the invocation of those who would like to believe: on the ground of a common poverty and of a common search, but also on the basis of listening to the other who dwells in the depth of both partners in a meeting. Dialogue between believers and non-believers is one of the

highest and most enriching challenges in the cultures marked by non-belief and religious indifference, that are particularly those of our post-modern Europe. Are we ready as believers and as Church to accept this challenge without fear, with spirit and full hearts, trusting in the faithful God? And are the various expressions of culture and society marked by the modern spirit of emancipation ready to respect the freedom of believers and to take seriously the challenge of their values and of their vision of life and death? Our ability, as persons, as society and as an ecclesial community, to serve today, in our historical context, the quality of life and the dignity of every human being depends on our answers to these questions.

**Religion and Freedom**  
**The Value of Earthly Reality is not Undermined by the Holy**

by

Bruno Forte  
Archbishop of Chieti-Vasto

***1. Horizon: in search of the Father-Mother infinitely loving***

- a) *At the heart of our heart?*
- b) *At the heart of history?*

***2. Principles: religion and freedom from modern to post-modern time***

- a) *The metaphor of light*
- b) *The need for a transcendent horizon*

***3. Consequences: what to do to respect and to promote a true relationship between religion and freedom in Church and society to-day?***

- a) *Believers, prisoners of the Invisible*
- b) *Faith: struggle and submission*
- c) *Consequences*