Religious Leadership in Secular Society
The Pattern of Moses

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1. *The Secular Society and the "murder of the Father"*

The metaphor of light provides us with the most eloquently expressive way of talking about the principle which inspired modernity - adult reason's ambitious claim of understanding and mastering 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 at last, masters and captains 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 "age of lights" and the French Revolution: from the emancipation of the exploited classes, the oppressed races and the peoples of the so-called "third world" to the liberation of women, in all the variety of the different cultural and social contexts. This dream of total emancipation strained forward towards a reality entirely illuminated by the idea as such, where the power of reason may 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. This heady modern spirit lies behind claims that absolute reason can vanquish every shadow and resolve every difference...

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 of the 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" ("mega-récits") tended to construct a "society without fathers", where there are no vertical relationships - held unfailingly to imply dependence - but only horizontal ones, of equality and reciprocity. The sun of reason generates liberty and equality, and hence fraternity, in an egalitarianism founded on the one light of thought, which governs the whole world and all life: "liberté, égalité, fraternité" are the sweet fruits of reason's triumph. The critique of the "father-lord" figure thus leads to the complete rejection of God (and also, in a certain sense, of religious leaders). Just as on earth there must be no fatherhood creating dependence, so in heaven there may be no Father of all.

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 the dwellers in time in a way so radical as to make them the sole object and 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 in all some measure its debtors: 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 "will 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 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 enlightenment, in its fullest sense as thought in continuous progress, - affirm Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno at the beginning of their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (1944) - has always aimed at freeing men from fear and making them their own masters. But the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant" (New York 1969, 3).

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 this 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. Eloquent witnesses to this are the wars, ethnic cleansings, crematory ovens, the Shoah and genocides of the last century, as well as the massacre caused by hunger every day in the world. Are these the fruits of adult reason? 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. 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 century which has not long ended, that is, nihilism.

Nihilism is not simply a matter of giving up values for which it is worth living, but a 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. This is the triumph of the mask over truth: even the very values themselves are often reduced to banners hoisted to camouflage the lack of real 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 definitive 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 "collections 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 possession. This explains the triumph of the most shameless consumerism, of the rush towards hedonism and whatever may be enjoyed at once. Yet it is exactly this process which shows that we all need a common father-mother to free us from the confines of our selfishness, to offer a horizon for which to hope and love - not the claustrophobic, violent horizon 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 (also in the sense of a religious leader), it is precisely the bitter fruit of totalitarian and violent emancipation - and the vacuum it created - that evokes the newly felt need for a father-mother who welcomes us in freedom and love. This is certainly not to seek a father-mother whose place could be taken by the party, or the boss, or unquestioned leaders, or money, or capitalism; it is, rather, the longing for a father-mother who, at one and the same time, founds the dignity of each person, the freedom of all, and the meaning of life.

In short, faced with the indifference and lack of passion for the truth which characterise our present age, our greatest need is to discover the countenance of the father-mother who loves us. It is our 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 home to be shared, which provides horizons of meaning without violence. This is what emerges from the whole arc traced by the modern age: from the triumph of reason in the Enlightenment, which sought to embrace and explain everything with reason's light alone, to the more diffuse experience of fragmentation and non-sense which followed upon the collapse of the mighty horizons of ideology.

And yet, paradoxically, it is precisely from this continuing and evident denial of fraternity among human beings that there rises up all the more loudly the cry of need for a re-discovered brotherhood, for which only a father-mother can provide the foundation. There are signs of 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 make out an ultimate horizon, against which to measure all that is penultimate, and to give an ethical foundation to what we do.

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 sacred* over against every nihilistic denial. There is the reawakening of a need, which may be described in general as religious: for an ultimate horizon, a home, but not in the manipulative and violent way of ideology. Under very different forms, there is a "return to the Father", even though not always without ambiguity or even a certain ideological nostalgia. In fact, if the crisis of the modern age marks the end of the claims of the absolute subject, the signs that its time is over - beyond nihilism - all point in the direction of a rediscovery of the Other, able to offer reasons for life and hope. 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 optimism" (*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 and its seductive power. The Other - ultimate foundation of all real 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. It is in this light that the role of religious leadership must be understood today.

2. *Moses: a model of religious leader for our post-secular society*

If we want to find in the Bible a model of religious leader which meets the expectations emerging from the crisis of the so-called "society without fathers", it is the figure of Moses, which comes before our eyes. The Bible tells us that Moses enjoyed a uniquely privileged relationship with the Eternal One: while others are only allowed to glimpse God from behind, Moses is God's friend, and speaks with the Eternal One "face to face" (Ex 33, 11; Dt 34, 10; Num 12, 8). In an expression of God's tender care for this man, a midrashic tradition tells of "Moses' little door", located beneath the throne of the Most High: when the angels – generally so well-behaved – are suddenly possessed by envy of God's special love for Moses and are looking for a way to make life difficult for him,

the Lord pushes the little door with His foot, and ushers the disconcerted Moses inside, so that no harm may befall him (*Exodus rabbah* XLII, 5).

The unique place occupied by Moses in the heart of the Eternal One is reflected in the way he is venerated in the whole Jewish tradition: the book of Deuteronomy assures us that the long-awaited Messiah will be like a new Moses (18, 15: "The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet"). In the New Testament, too, Moses occupies an important place, so much so that he is mentioned a full eighty times! Paul, in particular, says (in 1Cor 10, 1ff.) that our fathers were all under the cloud, crossed the sea and were baptized in Moses ("eis tòn Mousèn"), clearly finding in him a symbol of the Messiah who will come.

Gregory of Nyssa draws on this wealth of imagery in his very beautiful *Life of Moses*, where the Patriarch is portrayed as a model of virtuous perfection, and an excellent example for all of us in the journey we have to undertake in order to be pleasing to God. According to Gregory, Moses on the holy mountain experienced the "bright darkness" of a mystical experience of the divine (II, 163), because he was "on fire with love of beauty" (II, 231), and never ceased to walk forward towards the vision of God: "To see God means to experience a desire for Him which is never satisfied… our thirst for what is good increases despite being slaked" (II, 239). Precisely because he always went on growing in this way, Moses was a "model of beauty", teaching us to bear witness like him to "the seal of the beauty which has been shown us" (II, 319).

In the Bible are narrated some great events which make of Moses the forerunner of the Messiah and of every religious leader in God's people. The first of these events is his experience of the "burning bush" (Acts 7, 30-31; Ex 3, 1-15; cf. Ex 6, 2-13 and 6, 28 – 7,7). We need here above all to underline Moses' *amazement*: he is tending his flock near Mount Sinai and suddenly sees a bush which burns without being consumed. "He approached to look…": this is important, because it tells us that Moses, even though he has been through so much, is still capable of experiencing wonder, of being open to what is new! In this sense he is a radically human person, in search of the Mystery: where there is awe, there is this openness to the new things God does, to His impossible possibility! Only where awe does not exist, there is no more life, no more surprise. A religious leader like Moses must never give up being a pilgrim, a searcher; even though he has settled down in exile, his heart must still go on secretly yearning for home.

At this point *God's call* comes: "Moses! Moses!". God calls us by name. None of us is anonymous for Him: each of us is a "you" - absolutely unique, singular, loved infinitely. Moses experiences himself as loved personally by God. This is no experience of wanting to take hold of God for oneself: on the contrary, the admonition is clear, "…Come no closer! Remove the sandals from your feet…" (Ex 3,4-6). It is instead a matter of letting yourself be taken hold of by God, because it is only God who can make the desert into holy land! "I will send you". It is no longer Moses who is the prime mover, who makes the decisions and

claims to be able to change the world: it is God who sends him. “Go to Pharaoh”. As if nothing had gone before, as if he had never experienced failure, Moses accepts this new beginning. God makes possible the impossible: His name is a promise, “I am who I am”, “I will be with you”, the faithful God (Ex 3,14). Moses had not asked for a definition of God’s essence: he had asked God to commit Himself for him and his people. The holy and blessed Name is thus a guarantee, founded in the reality of God’s fidelity, and on such a foundation Moses can begin his adventure. No religious leadership is true without God’s call!

In response to God’s call, Moses experiences the *test of his faith*, the crossing of the Red Sea (Ex 14, 5-15, 20; cf. 1Cor 10, 1-2; Heb 11, 29). On the one side there is the sea with its high waves, on the other Pharaoh with his chariots and horsemen. In such circumstances, human logic would counsel calculation, the choice of compromise. Moses is afraid: humanly speaking, the alternative is between death in the sea and submission to Pharaoh (cf. Ex 14, 10-14). The choice is imposed: either to trust God or to calculate by human logic. Moses has no hesitation in involving the people, to encourage them: “Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance the Lord will accomplish for you today” (v.13). Yet he remains alone before God, bearing an enormous burden, because to trust God now may look like failing to take proper action. In his loneliness he cries out to his God, so much so that the Most High asks him: “Why do you cry out to me?” (v.15). And yet he goes on bearing witness to the people that he trusts the fidelity of the Eternal One: “The Lord will fight for you” (v.14). Moses is now a true leader, because he realizes that what he can allow himself to be and to say in direct interaction with God, he must temper with the wisdom of love when he speaks to his people: we must never unload our own crosses onto the shoulders of those who are weaker! And Moses understands that there is another possibility: to believe in God in spite of everything, in spite of God’s apparent defeat. This is the lifestyle of a true religious leader!

So Moses reaches the most important moment of his life: he trusts God, he believes against all the evidence to the contrary. Making in darkness his leap of faith, he obeys the Lord who says: “Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground” (v. 15f.). Now the waters of the sea roll back, the people pass through them unharmed, and the Egyptians who are pursuing them are overwhelmed. The symbolism employed here is tragic and very hard: the waters of life for the Hebrews are the waters of death for the Egyptians. Moses, leader in the faith which passes through the sea, is saved from the waters together with his people. It is then that he experiences faith’s victory: in the night, trusting blindly, seeing nothing, he witnesses the Passover, and from his heart his song of gratitude flows, the song of the saved (cf. Ex 15).

From then on Moses will always be what he was on that night at the Red Sea: the man of intercession and responsibility (cf. Ex 17), the man of the Word (cf. Ex 19, 3), who suffers out of love for his people and out of love for his God, in a continual, hope-filled exodus towards the land of God’s promise. So, here are

the characteristics of a true religious leader, which also apply in secular society: called by God, he must respond with total faith, loving his people and listening to Him and saying always the words of God to all, without fear. A free and courageous person, whose authority comes from listening to all, ready to dialogue, and from obeying God only, always and unconditionally.