

# POST-RELIGIONAL PARADIGM: FAQ, FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

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The present article, in the form of Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ), seeks to respond to the doubts and criticisms of this profound transformation of the so-called post-religious paradigm. We also call it the post-secular paradigm, because we are not only moving from a religion to a kind of supra-ethics, but also from a postmodern secularity to plural meanings of deep solidarity.

Our purpose is to dismantle or deconstruct both extremes: on the side of religion, dogmatized narratives foreign to today's world; on the other side, a lack of narrative or a single thought foreign to humanism.

We want to express a meaning of unconditional love that seems to us to have been the revolution of Jesus of Nazareth in history. Today we call it maximum civility, an invitation to fraternity without limits, also "divinity", or the supreme dignity that emerges in humanization.

Some understand this unconditional solidarity as a bottom-up transcendence and seek to express it through symbols consistent with today's mentality. It is an attempt to reconstruct Christianity and the supernatural perspective, formerly segregated in a heavenly world, and today emerging from "the same love and the same rain". The following objections are usually raised against this project.

## **THE POST-RELIGIOUS PARADIGM...**

### **- It destroys Christianity by denying or reducing to a symbol the Mystery of Salvation.**

The "Mystery of Salvation" is the central axis of Christianity. It is the "answer" to the need and longing for meaning, to limitation or contingency and above all to evil and death that seem insurmountable. It is especially comforting for the remission of "sin" and guilt, reassuring for anxiety and fear, and consoling in the face of the lost past and the suffering of innocent victims. But it offers this answer as actual facts of a parallel world literally described by Revelation. And then the believer may find himself looking like an outsider in today's world, speaking in a vacuum, or contradicting common sense and science, and thus encountering very serious nonsense. The most striking of these misunderstandings consists in identifying faith as "believing what is not seen" instead of "believing in favor of and in spite of what is seen".

In our opinion, the great mystery of salvation is a "Great Metaphor". Its value lies in giving a way out of the great questions, its error in explaining it in a realistic way. Salvation", in addition to its indefiniteness and its referral to the supernatural realm, is not a temporal sequence of immense miraculous events. The Trinitarian pre-existence, the Creation, the Incarnation and the Redemption, or the Resurrection and eternal life, are symbols of very deep experiences and longings. The task of the believer is to reach the background in these myths.

This is how Jesus of Nazareth understood it, who never pretended to say what things consisted of but to encourage with parables, gestures and even with very risky and scandalous practices, to a life in fullness.

And whenever he came to base goodness or to encourage unconditionally to a full life, he always resorted to very close symbols such as "Father", "Kingdom of God", "Son of Man", "Resurrection", "Paradise"... but never as real descriptions, eternal or dogmatic truths, but as a beautiful seductive impulse.

- **It does not guarantee absolute truth and therefore leaves people empty of a definitive and comforting meaning in life.**

Nor can it do so. The conception of truth has varied greatly since mankind came into the use of reason. It began with mythical explanations held to be true; it continued with philosophy as a claim to total, radical, strictly rational truth, without concessions to the imagination. It was followed by scientific epistemology based on hypothesis and refutation, and finally many critical theories have appeared that place it in the sphere of suspicion, either by legitimizing oppression, conditioned by the unconscious, or camouflaged by the lack of value for life.

But, above all, it is lately understood as limited by language, modulated by use and contexts, constructed by critical consensus, again as myth, but not true but signifying; also understood as the "face" of the other rather than the light of my mind, neuronally determined or subject to uncertainty and chance. In this context the affirmation of an absolute, eternal truth becomes very difficult and prevents a sincere dialogue between the multiple visions of reality.

The truth affirmed as unquestionable only in the religious sphere by an infinitely truthful divine authority is nothing but the human pretension to absolutize and legitimize a particular worldview. To do so, it needs to leave contingency and unfold reality in a meta-world where everything is pure, eternal, indisputable. We are faced with a contamination of the gospel by Judaism, which excludes other peoples, and by the dualistic philosophy of the Greeks.

Human beings are not capable of rationally solving the enigmas or "mysteries" of our condition. We are doomed to belief and symbol, in all orders. To trust in reason itself as an instrument for truth, to the conviction that there is a world independent of our mind, to the basic belief in the harmonious dialectic between chance and necessity, to faith in the goodness and "sacred" value of humanity and the planet. There are no defining truths or answers. Absolutized truth kills the dynamism of reason and subjugates it; in the end, this straitjacketed reason drifts into skepticism and gives up its signifying dimension. On the contrary, the symbol nourishes it with meanings, enraptures and liberates it.

That is why religion turns to another world, to obtain assurances. But we think that the other world is faith in this one. And that the important thing is, knowing the minimum necessary, to love as much as possible. This is how it seems to us that Jesus of Nazareth proceeded, who had little knowledge and imposed few truths, but who loved much. This is the ultimate meaning, true, full of meaning, capable of igniting a life.

The evangelical paradigm, that pre-understanding and pre-disposition to hope and unconditional love from the poor, is not necessarily expressed in a particular scientific worldview, religion or sociology. It is open to all of them as a call and encouragement. As a symbol.

- **Denies God. It leads to atheism or at least to skepticism and relativism.**

The post-religious paradigm not only does not deny God but frees him from definitions that falsify him. To put it crudely: it does not place the absolute in a tabernacle, in the Kaaba, in the inner emptiness, in morality or in money. With all the biblical and ecclesial tradition, we agree that God is unnamable. Present in an unknown and absent way. Both scholastic theology and medieval and later negative theology have rejected any evidence of divinity. Recall the futile attempts of scholasticism and rationalism to prove his existence.

We place ourselves in an open agnosticism. We derive the question of God to the realm of practical reason or morality and to that of silence. We believe that our mind is open to fullness, whatever it is called. And divinity manifests itself to us as a horizon. It is the deep longing that seeks its fulfillment knowing that when it reaches it, it loses it, like the kiss that brushes the bubble and breaks it in the same act. Divinity is unattainable. Only love brings it closer and only the symbol glimpses it or glimpses it imperfectly.

That is why all gods are valid if they are forged in the beautiful and good universalist reason. There is no possible definition and even less unique. As long as we understand by God the dynamic that leads us to fullness and that is realized in the successive incarnations of goodness and justice. Rather than existing, we make God in the hope that he can be. The great argument is a wish, an immense, "infinite" desire that evil and injustice do not have the last word.

The most classical image of an omnipotent and saving God, out of this world but provident, which has predominated in the history of Judaism and Christianity, no longer corresponds to today's mentality. It has always been impossible to reconcile omnipotence and supreme goodness with the existence of evil. Creation" attributes evil to the autonomy of nature or of the human being (in God there is no room for evil or sin), while when it comes to grace, salvation and morality, these come heteronomously from above (we can do nothing by ourselves, otherwise it would be Pelagianism...). What an arrogant interpretation! Very different from Jesus' message: "Your faith has saved you".

Today we feel autonomous. We believe that divinity is the impulse of the best love, the breath of creative intelligence, the soul of compassion, the beauty of art, the vitality of nature. As approximations, as some of the thousand names or metaphors that bring us closer to the mystery of reality.

Our experience of the Mystery is neither theistic nor atheistic. There is no God outside, inside, above or at the bottom, but Reality itself is transparent to itself in human consciousness as divinity. To believe in God is not to affirm an idea or a superior being, but to live from the call of the best, humbly and liberally. Whether we have a name for it or not, whether we are believers, atheists or agnostics, let us live as if the best were possible for all, as if divinity were a real promise.

This is the image of "Father" to which Jesus invites us. The inner feeling that everything has an unconditional value that deserves its existence and respect. God is not omnipotent, nor omniscient, nor father or mother, or quantum energy, attractor boson of a field of power and structuring. But he is also all names, affirmed, denied, sublimated and denied again in a constant shared veneration.

#### - **Post-religious paradigm undervalues revelation**

It does not undervalue it, but rather puts it in its place as one of the most beautiful and beneficial stories of humanity. But the Bible cannot be read literally, and in need of interpretation it often happens that interpretation reinvents it epoch after epoch, as can be seen in the anachronism of much religious painting. The written or transmitted text is only a matrix. This is not to deny or devalue it. On the contrary: the temptation to absolutize it and derive from it a socio-political, a moral and marvelous and ritual practice, that is to discredit it as contradictory, miraculous, partial and incomprehensible in many cases.

It is known that the infancy gospels were elaborated or invented with some testimony and multiple references to comparative anthropology. Fundamentally to magnify the origin of Jesus. Remember for example the numerical symbolism in the genealogy of Jesus or the suggestive stories of the flight to Egypt, the Magi, etc.

Also recently, archaeological research shows a Torah elaborated by the scribes of King Josiah in the 6th century B.C.E. to magnify the origins of the people of Israel and to legitimize the kingdom. How much has piety and theology been inspired by the myths of Genesis, and how much has liberation theology been inspired by the departure from Egypt and all the other marvelous events of the Exodus! The very institution of the Eucharist or supper of Jesus was not a renewal of the Jewish paschal rite but a farewell supper in a context of persecution. And we could continue with other examples.

There comes a time when the set of interpretations has created a different story. What to do then when there is so much to discriminate, so much to translate and update. Well, there is no other attitude than to refer from the "spirit", the beautiful and good reason, to its basic intention: the contagion of hope and noble attitudes of justice and liberation, the animation for the accompaniment of life with comforting messages. But then it is not the Bible "that is right"; rather it has a soul, and shares its light with many other words, arts and figurations where beauty provokes an interior commotion that says: "it is good weather, it is God", let's get out of the ark.

- **It places reason above faith, does not apologize for or combat the deviations of science contrary to Revelation.**

Scholasticism affirmed the supremacy of faith over incipient science. Truth could only be known by revelation. Today we know that it is first the self-confidence of reason and then its positionings. First it is the believing reason and then the sciences, the arts and the stories that give symbolic form to its verbal impotences.

Reason, like language, has many functions or uses and it is not convenient to mix them. The language of faith is symbolic and the language of science is explanatory. It is not a question of a double truth but of a truth and a meaning, of a scientific worldview and of an impulse that animates research, enriches its process and opens up its results in a symbolic way. Faith leaves science free to be criticized only in its progress from within, from its own methodology.

This is the great mutation of our time, the metamorphosis of religious epistemology. The whole of humanity, without divisions into theists and atheists, listening first to what a "plural reason" says, neither reductionist nor evasive, most valuable and humble, (first what we all say about the immediate and about the great questions), and then to what they say that God has said, and this as mirrors that do not represent but lengthen the gaze.

- **It is incapable of providing an answer to the problem of evil and death.**

The problem of evil is unsolvable. It can only be lessened by goodness. We are limitation, incomprehension and weakness. And we will always be on the way, desiring. And we will never be able to affirm our destiny. But we can create beautiful metaphors for ourselves, do good and find there an experience of happiness, an active mysticism whose consistency some of us will call God, others reality, plenitude or Jesus of Nazareth, because of its resemblance to that infinity that emerges from our deepest being. What post-religious faith cannot do is to offer postulates as certainties.

- **It denies the supernatural order and reduces symbols to intramundane meanings.**

The affirmation of a supernatural order parallel to this is a Platonic inheritance. Jesus of Nazareth moved rather in the realm of transcendent freedom, that is, of morality overflowing with the maxims of justice and goodness. His hyperbolic call to forgiveness, to love of enemies, or to turn the other cheek, his preference for the poor, opens up another world, not at all supernatural, but anchored in nature itself, elevated to its highest dignity. It begins the Kingdom of God, that parable that expresses a way of life marked by gratuitousness and unconditionality. This is truly "supernatural", something that is far beyond "natural", ordinary behavior.

The symbols of this world elevated by the gratuitousness that attends its very being, are not the seven sacraments that imprint character or transmit grace like rain, or magical phenomena only possible by the intervention of an external god. It is his own moisture that condenses like dew. The credible symbols today are the multiple natural expressions of this superabundance of love: the kiss to the leper, the response to injustice, the donation of an organ, the discovery of a medicine, the representation of beauty, the planting of a tree, the caress of an animal... They are not only natural signs, nor supernatural. They are intra-natural, births of a pregnancy of divinity that we carry inside. They lead us to the depths of life. And like everything else, they have a greater or lesser degree of significance.

- **The denial of a life beyond death demolishes any social or moral, human and planetary constructs that may be definitive.**

This is a very serious objection. More so when many of the liberation projects have failed and religious salvation has not been very successful in human dramas, or at least with the generosity that its theology

affirms. Nothing can guarantee that the world, society and people will achieve the perfect society, a life of perpetual bliss. And so, we ruin all the utopias that claim to be certain. Death kills all achievements and the afterlife is not guaranteed. All our constructions are uncertain and are obliged to find fulfillment in their partial realizations while waiting for the unexpected to happen.

That which is born limited cannot claim the unlimited, if not as hope. But hope never affirms, it only yearns and gradually realizes its desires without any certainty of a definitive achievement. In some sense we would say that it needs a God, an eternal life, an omnipotence, but it cannot affirm it. Once again, we are before the postulates of morality, of the conditions of possibility of the good conscience without which, in the last instance, it would not be. We return to the beginning of religion, but a religion from within, open, without dogmatic affirmations, believing from agnosticism and naturalism.

- **If the divinity of Jesus is not real, the Resurrection did not take place and faith is vain.**

The divinity in Jesus is not a superaddition to his person. The value of Jesus is rich enough in itself. As rich perhaps as unrepeatable, at least in the image that we translate for one another, whether or not it corresponds to the historical, Jewish Jesus, born of a woman as Paul says. The title Son of God is more a symbolic expression of Jewish roots than an objective reality. It indicates the transcendence of his being entirely for others. In Jesus, unconditional love, that which expresses itself in immoderation, in forgiveness, that leads me to love the enemy or to prefer the helpless, acquires name and figure. That unusual inversion of values, that is divinity; the fullness of the human, something so difficult in this society where one only aspires to get ahead or to respect the law by coercion or reciprocity, and where just and invisible action, without reward, is considered impossible or meaningless.

When someone gives his life without expecting anything in return, he is having an experience of absolute goodness, of unconditionality, that is to say, of absoluteness, of divinity.... That is how we read the life of Jesus, that is why we believe that he was called the Son of God; that is why we consider him as the origin of a moral revolution unthinkable from the point of view of biology alone. The human mind has that quality that many call *agape* and that at last appears so conspicuously in Jesus.

This appearance of a universal and unconditional *agape*, or in other words, this exhumation of all dying reality, we call Resurrection. Some people of our time use other words: resilience, overcoming, etc., but no one dares to apply it to the whole of reality. A universal recovery, the experience that nothing is lost, is more hope than miracle. Believing in this definitive recovery, and I say believing, not "knowing that it will come", is the only way, without falling into illusionism, to face a lost past and see a future with a zest for life. He who trusts in the value of the present compensates himself for the loss of the past and promises himself for the future. That is believing, not imagining other worlds. Resurrection is the permanent experience of renewal in the love given and received unconditionally.

- **It overturns centuries of Western civilization, culture, and governance.**

On the contrary, it values that civilization, assumes it and surpasses it. Like other Eastern, African or Amerindian civilizations. On the five continents, religious beliefs have caused a lot of good, and quite a lot of harm. Western civilization, built on oppression, moral and even physical repression, slavery, imperialism, the deterioration of the planet, etc., is not - it must be said - a panacea. Even if we must recognize the progress of law, welfare (for some for the time being), science, etc. In all these areas the contribution of religion is debatable.

The process of humanization is leading us to greater autonomy and a different perspective on the enigma of being, life and conscience. We are not satisfied with the religious interpretation understood as a unique and superior truth, as a letter. We do not believe in unfolding, supernaturalism and submission. We do believe in the divinity of the real, and in the unconditional fraternity shown by Jesus of Nazareth as something possible among us.

We call for an effort to reinsert religion into culture as a supra-ethic, helping our century to recognize its unavoidable dignity, to build it among all. That is the civilization we want. We reach it not through worship and an organization parallel to society, but through open politics, personal virtue and the experience of deep meanings in the very world in which we live. A secular culture that does not renounce its questions and sketches of answers, new symbols and poems. Because poetry is not the letter but the feeling that is transmitted. Because civilization is not the institutions of domination but the advancement of freedom and equality that is achieved. Religious histories, bibles and vedas, sacred arts, philosophy and theology, etc., have not been useless but historically necessary, but they must be reinterpreted.

- **The prophets or guides of this post-religious movement have no theological consistency, nor structure or institution to give them continuity. They are diluted in highly variable social movements. On the contrary, the Catholic Church and doctrine, as a direct succession of Jesus and in spite of its betrayals, has prevailed over other secular institutions.**

Indeed, the post-religious mentality moves better in a secular world where there are no institutions of power or authority above the democratic consensus. And it is a sensibility that awakens, it is not mature enough. It is difficult to adhere to a liberating theology or anthropology, because it demands a kenosis, a real abasement with all the consequences, such as the Jesus of the poor. These consequences are many times the postponement, the negation and the oppression; even more if one denies the whole religious system filled with recognition by the powerful and the well-thinking.

We also want to acknowledge that in the years in which these new perspectives have been making themselves heard, we have not been able to hear any serious observation or criticism from the great faculties of theology. And in that sense, this article is an invitation to be criticized, in order to get closer to that consistency that is denied to us. Liberation Christianity received all kinds of criticism, especially from the magisterium and ecclesial dogmatism; the post-religious paradigm, however, is being increasingly assumed by the little theology that remains, and above all it is being convergent with multiple movements of deepening in the human, social and planetary.

It is the same Church that formed us to overcome it, to build the international of hope, the sacrament of the Kingdom, which is no longer only the Catholic Church. The message of Jesus was confined in a Judeo-Hellenic religion, in a doctrine, in a theocratic power. The time will come when the Vatican will be the seat of an instance of supreme morality, of defense of human rights, of care for the planet, of communication between peoples, of the silence of hope; a house of the poor and of those who defend them; a convention of humanisms and religions to animate scientific, political, humanitarian institutions...

- **On the contrary, and well interpreted, this Christian model is the same as always with different words, a different religion.**

Of course. It is the same as always, the answer of freedom to questions that have to do with the meaning of life, the equality of all human beings, the care of the planet, the value of the person, the postulates of divinity, the yearning for immortality or the overcoming of anxieties and fears. But not in a supernatural or realistic key, but in a supra-ethical and symbolic key. Something of always but forgotten.

The existence of a god is not categorically affirmed, nor is his nature defined, but rather it is yearned for, sought, postulated. It is not placed at the top but, not being able to overcome the limitation of language, plural and partial expressions are preferred, less shocking with the current mentality. And so, we speak of the depths of our being or of inexplicable dignity. We do not accept the mystery of salvation, but we learn of its basic intention to give meaning to life; we do not accept the Bible as a revelation of another life parallel to this one, and even less unique, but we value the invention of God and of religion as one of the best creations of human conscience.

The focus is on the praxis of the love of Jesus of Nazareth, as always, but noting that we are facing a radical metamorphosis of the traditional story. The great revolution of Jesus of Nazareth is taken as a

reference and interpreted differently. Jesus of Nazareth will always be a Jesus of faith - not the Jesus of an objective history that we do not know what he was really like - and a universal Christ, not the Christ anointed and sacralized by theology and dogma and rituals, but the one recognized in all times as the expression of the best and most universal human aspirations.

- **In any case, what is important is not how we interpret Christianity or under what paradigm, but how we live its evangelical proclamation.**

Indeed, this is so; and in this there is a very widespread common feeling. And it is also true that such evangelical life in certain charisms and understandings has been shown in a more transparent way, and how, on the contrary, it has turned out to be contradictory and even anti-evangelical in other cases. Suffice it to cite innumerable models of goodness that have been given in our tradition in spite of many inappropriate forms or constructions, such as the sacrificial accent in the celebration of the Passion, the pyramidal interpretation of society in the celestial manner or the special dedication to the influential classes.

The Gospel must be credible and therefore understandable; in a double sense, because we are faithful to what Jesus of Nazareth said and did and because his message is adapted to the "hearer of the word". That is to say that it unites a sincere following of the person and the project of Jesus of Nazareth and a dialogued and critical expression in the also sincere molds of the people of each epoch. It is in this sense that we propose to change the paradigm.

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