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The Signs of the Time: With or Without Post-Modernism?

Theodor Damian

This essay starts from Charles Taylor's idea about the world's self-possession, and analyzes childhood and maturity as two distinct phases in the history of our civilization. He embraces this idea in order to propose the periodization of this history not into three sections—i.e., pre-modernism, modernism, and post-modernism—but only into two—pre-modernism and modernism. The argument is biblical. The essay takes as the point of departure the Pauline expression "the fulfillment of time" (Galatians 4, 4) and the parable of the prodigal son.

Commenting on the new book by Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, Wilfred M. McClay spoke of the need of a mature humanity that would eventually have evolved into the phase of self-possession ("Uncomfortable Unbelief" in *First Things*, Nr. 183, May 2008, p. 35). In other words, the state of self-possession would indicate the coming of age of humankind.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer already declared in his time that humankind had reached adulthood.¹ If by "adulthood" we understand the term to mean the entering into maturity, then the Hitlerist and Communist holocausts would have some kind of explanation: When you become adult, in a sense, you are just coming out of the phase of *terribilism* that precedes adulthood and whose reminiscences can still be found in the new phase.

On the other hand, adulthood does not mean complete maturity. In this case the following question arises: If humankind needed so many millennia to come of age, how many more millennia will adulthood last, and then, after becoming mature, how many millennia would characterize the old-age phase? Evidently, still another question arises here as well: In how many millennia would humankind die, and how could one imagine a death that would last millennia?

If we understand Bonhoeffer's expression in the sense of maturity, then the question about the two holocausts and other catastrophes of the last century is posed with more stringency. It would be interesting to have a debate on this issue in the context of the definitions given to modernism and post-modernism and in the context of the periodization of our recent history.

I do not subscribe to what I consider the artificial distinction between modern/modernism, on the one hand, and post-modern/post-modernism on the other hand. Yet if post-modernism, as an epoch which is apparently our time now, is understood as a recuperation of pre-modern values and a new understanding, interpretation and application of them (as

¹ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (New Greatly Enlarged Edition), Collier Books, McMillan, New York, p. 341.

Constantin V. Negoita, for example, writes²), then this means that humanity already long ago reached maturity and that modernism represented only an “exit from the natural,” from the normal, from a way of being. Consequently then, post-modernism would mean a coming back to normal.

Following André Malraux, Negoita is right when he considers the recuperation of religious values as the most important sign of the coming back to the pre-modern, evidently in a different context from several and essential points of view: epistemological, experiential, hermeneutic, etc. This discussion framework seems fit to allow me to propose an all-together new theory and a serious reflection topic regarding periodizations and definitions of the pre-modern, modern, and post-modern categories.

The theory starts from two key elements, both biblical, and which, if combined, shed a new light on the history of humanity in its pre-modern and modern periods. These elements are: the Pauline expression (“the fulfillment of time”) and the parable of the prodigal son, much endeared by philosopher Constantin Noica.³

The expression “the fulfillment of time” (Galatians 4, 4) has received many different interpretations. I propose here the following one: Jesus Christ came into the world at the fulfillment of time, that is to say when humanity was no longer in its phase of childhood. Nor was humanity in the phase of adolescence, but at least in the one of adulthood, if not, even better, that of maturity, a phase in which the world was capable of understanding the divine teaching revealed by Him.

The Fathers of the Church, Irenaeus of Lugdunum amongst them, considered that at the time of the primordial fall, man was in the state of childhood; that is why obedience was an imperative, and an absolutely vital issue. In this case, the entire time until Jesus Christ’s coming into the world was a time of childhood, young adulthood, a time of growth, of preparation for the great event that was going to happen: the incarnation of the Divine Logos in history.

Just as in some traditions, cultural and/or religious, coming into adulthood is an event marked by the ritual of passage for which a long preparation is necessary, and that is awaited impatiently by both the subjects of the ritual and those around them; the same thing happens at the fulfillment of time. This was the moment when, after the waiting and preparation that took place in advance, something new happened. It happened just because the time was right (*kairos*).

Thus the incarnation of the Divine Logos in history represents a passage ritual of humanity—humanity’s stepping from one phase into the other. Logically speaking, if

² Gorun Manolescu, "Interview (non-virtual) cu Constantin Virgil Negoită", in *Noema*, vol. VII, 2008, p. 193.

³ Constantin Noica, *Jurnal filozofic*, Humanitas, București, 1990, p. 9.

humanity would not have reached the necessary stage when it was able to understand the culminant revelations of God in Christ, this coming would have happened at a later time.

Ewert Cousins calls this period of Jesus' coming, including the five centuries that preceded it (which I consider to have been the passage ritual for humanity), the second great axial period of human civilization.⁴ In this case, humanity reached adulthood not when Dietrich Bonhoeffer said, but it happened when Paul spoke of the "fulfillment of time."

It is from this time on, from Christ's coming into the world, that one can speak of pre-modernism, according to some periodizations. As any historical period and as any period in human life, it has its own *incrementa atque decrementa* (growth and decay).

Now I am moving on to the second key element of my new theory: the parable of the prodigal son.

Right from the beginning one has to specify that in the biblical sense, the prodigal son represents not only a person but also the whole world. Consequently the type of relations and their evolution in the story refer not only to the personal relation of the human subject to God, but also to the relation between the world and God.

The problem of the prodigal son is that he had a phase of *errance*, of estrangement, while everything was okay with him both before the departure and after the return. The phase of *errance* has to be seen as a deviation from the normal, natural, regular order of things. That is the reason why, when he was in the ultimate depth of suffering in his *errance*, we are told that "he came back into himself," into who he used to be, into the regular order of being. This period of *errance*, I propose, corresponds to what is generally called the modern phase in human history, which means the period that begins with the French Revolution and lasts until the time of the fall of the Communist regimes in Eastern Europe.

Just as the prodigal son suddenly abandoned the traditional values of his family and of his own history, so Enlightenment, Darwinism, Marxism and other movements, philosophies and mentalities tried with sustained effort to throw away the traditional values of their own history, the one in which they had appeared, starting with the most important of them all, religion, which they targeted throughout this time. Yet, the intense process of secularization that those movements initiated is small and short compared with the time that preceded it, just as in the case of the prodigal son, the time of estrangement was shorter than the one spent in the normal order of things in his father's home.

It is noteworthy to remark that what brought the son back to normal was the suffering he experienced in the ultimate level of human misery, a direct consequence of having abandoned his father's home, of having separated himself from his own history. By the

⁴ Ewert H. Cousins, "Greek Metaphysics in Judaism and Christianity Viewed from a Global Perspective," in *Archivio di Filosofia*, Anno LIII, Nr. 1, 1985, p. 116.

same token, our modern secularized history is one which through two holocausts—Hitlerist and Communist—experienced the ultimate level of human degradation, inflicting the deepest suffering possible to imagine upon human society. Yet it is exactly this suffering that represents the point of departure for the son's return back to normal, as if from hell he is coming back onto the earth, as if the experience of death brings him to resurrection.

Likewise, in the case of modernism, the two great sufferings became themselves the points of departure for a new type of conscientization, which led to the coming back to normal or to the coming into the self (the authentic self which was deserted), which means the coming to resurrection.

Now one might ask the question: if post-modernism is a return to pre-modernism, which is a reprise of the old existential line over the accidental abyss of the time of *errance*, do we still have to divide history into three periods, or is it sufficient to divide it only into two: “pre-modern”—until the second great axial epoch, which culminates with the incarnation of the Divine Logos in History—and “modern”—from Jesus Christ to the present time?

If we consider the fact that Christ came into the world at the fulfillment of time, when humanity reached its maturity phase, and if at the present time we have not yet entered the phase of death, extinction, but are still in the phase of maturity, which—based on the human paradigm—is the longest one, then we can justifiably agree that we are finding ourselves in the period of modernism in this new understanding.

Some philosophers, on the other hand, speak of the present time as being “post-human.” If we accept this idea, it implies that we are finding ourselves in the final phase of the history of humankind, and thus, indeed in a third and last period. But what does “post-human” mean? If the expression refers to the abolition of the human and its replacement with the machine, as N. Berdiaev observed,⁵ then we are facing a certain state of things. Yet the question still remains: what is the maximal point of this abolition, what exactly does it consist of, and how do we know that we are there?

If the expression refers to the “human” only, in the sense of what happens strictly in human interpersonal relations, then we are faced with a different state of things. The machine can be imagined as replacing the human, but that does not necessarily mean that man will become a beast to his or her fellow man, a sort of *homo homini lupus*.

Ideally, man should be a *homo hominis Deus* (man being a god to man) or at least a *homo hominis homo* (man being a man to man) for those around him. American philosopher Abraham Heschel wrote that what makes man a human being is not the being but the being

⁵ Nicolas Berdiaev, *The Fate of Man in the Modern World*, Ann Arbor Paperbacks, The University of Michigan Press, 1963, p. 43.

human.⁶ Something similar is mentioned by a Romanian proverb: "To be great is no wonder, to be truly human is the big achievement."

Thus if we are finding ourselves in the third phase, the final one of the history of humankind, that of death, it is not clear yet.

We need clearer criteria in order to be able to read "the signs of the time." If we think of André Malraux's prophecy regarding the state of religion in the twenty-first century ("The twenty-first century will be religious or it will not be"), if we notice that religion did not disappear and that the world is still in place and if, on the contrary, we are correct in noticing a recuperation of religious values, an already evident return to religion, even at this beginning of the twenty-first century, one would have reason to believe and to hope that humanity is not (yet) on its death bed.

Coming back to Wilfred M. McClay's declaration that a mature humanity can possess itself, as if this feat is something positive, a big question mark arises: what exactly would humankind in a state of self-possession mean?

Of course, one connotation of the expression refers to the independence characteristic of the age of maturity. Children are dependent. They do not possess themselves. It is others who possess them. Yet, when one is old, it is the same. The Scripture says: "When you will be old, someone else will put the belt on you and will take you where you do not want" (John 21, 18). Thus, maturity, through its specific independence, leads to self-possession. You are in control of yourself, of your own destiny.

Yet if we place this idea in a theological context, in the context of religious values mentioned above, the expression takes on a negative connotation. When we say "independence," what do we mean? Independence from what? Of man from man? That is not possible. Man is "condemned" to communion, to inter-dependence. "No man is an island," the proverb says. Man is created in God's image, the tri-une God, Christian theology says.

Man's independence from man would lead to the drama of the prodigal son who, considering that he had become adult and mature and that he had the right to ask for his part of the family possessions, asks for it and gets it, probably just because he had become mature. What followed after that is well-known.

Man's independence from man also leads to the drama of individualism generated by the philosophies of the Enlightenment. It is this type of individualism that, according to Robert Bellah and his colleagues, is at the root of all major crises of the twentieth century.⁷

⁶ Abraham Heschel, *Who Is Man?*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA, 1965, p. 32.

⁷ Robert Bellah et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Harper and Row, New York, 1985, pp. 276-277.

If we move from the idea of man's independence from man to that of man's independence from God, the consequence is not at all better. If the prodigal son's father from the parable is God, and this is the sense in which the story was told, and if the prodigal son is the world, then man's distancing from God, his independence at this level, leads implicitly to the drama told in the parable.

Thus, if we are referring to the modern period with the Enlightenment and all the other secularizing movements that characterized it, if we have in view the individualism and the other consequences of the anthropocentric philosophies that eliminated God from man's life, the ensuing drama is the same as in the case of man's independence from man, if not worse. What followed are catastrophic tragedies, as those of the two aforementioned holocausts.

In both cases, God was thrown out of history and man took His place. In Nietzschean terms, God is dead and He was killed by man. Man, this incorrigible usurper, self-proclaimed destructor, as Cioran calls him,⁸ takes God's place, but soon, in that place which is not his, he finds himself inadequate, and it is from here that starts his suffering that ends in suicide.

Let me go back to the previous question: independence from what or from whom? Isn't this type of independence exactly the opposite: not a sign of maturity but of immaturity?

Would not the idea of human freedom conjugated with human inter-dependency and with dependency on God, as Christian theology promotes, be the best and true solution to this impasse?

In terms of self-possession, the fundamental question arises: Is it good that man possesses himself? As Erich Fromm writes, whatever man possesses man destroys.⁹ Cioran calls man a self-proclaimed destructor. This is the sense in which Karl Barth wrote that before God man cannot but die.¹⁰

The idea that man destroys what he possesses is present in the story of the prodigal son also: "Father give me my part of all possessions." He wanted to be sure of being the sole possessor of them, and he destroyed them, destroying himself.

The same thing, yet in a different form, happened in Hitlerism and Marxism: man believed he had the right to possess others and trampled them under his feet, destroying their dignity, the human condition itself.

⁸ Emile Cioran, *The Fall into Time*, transl. from French by Richard Howard, Quadrangle Books, Chicago, 1970, p. 42.

⁹ Erich Fromm, *To Have or to Be*, cf. Theodor Damian, *Theological and Spiritual Dimensions of Icons according to St. Theodore of Studion*, The Edwin Mellen Press, New York, 2002, p. 3.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *The Word of God and the Word of Man*. transl. by Douglas Horton, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1957, p. 140.

If the twenty-first century will be religious, then the maturity of humankind will not be characterized by self-possession. Rather, man will accept and follow the existential Trinitarian paradigm in as much as possible at a human level, and follow the paradigm of an existence put in the service of others with love and respect as offered by the divine Logos incarnated in history.