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**BEING A
CHRISTIAN IN
A POST-
MODERN
WORLD:
REFLECTION
ON A
DIFFICULT
ISSUE FROM
A WEST
INDIAN
PERSPECTIVE**

by

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The difficulties involved in being a Christian have always existed throughout time, whether it be the apostolic era where the church faced persecution from without and heresies within, or the imperial era with the arrival of Constantine in the fourth century. In the latter period, formalism and moral laxity joined together, thus making it difficult to know who were really Christians. It would therefore be quite naïve to believe that our problem is more acute than that of any other era.

How can I live my Christian life in a manner that is authentic and true to the Scriptures? This is the question that Christians have always asked themselves. The problem of authenticity and faithfulness is constantly confronted with the social environment, the surrounding discourse that influences both the way we live, as well as the way we read the Word. The Bible tells us:

Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (Rom. 12:2, NIV).

Consequently, we cannot adopt a proper Christian attitude without taking into consideration the challenges and opportunities of our era, which has been dubbed the "postmodern" era. But what is postmodernism? Although it was announced prophetically by Jean-Francois

Lyotard¹ (the first to coin the expression), Gilles Lipovetsky justified it philosophically. Postmodernism is a "manner of saying that the era of revolution, . . . of futuristic hope, inseparable from modernism has come" (Lipovetsky 14). This society is characterized by a hedonistic individualism, without idols or taboos, with emphases on trivialities in all discourse. This is general apathy.

Alain Minc, of the Saint Simon Foundation, in his work, *Le Nouveau Moyen Age*, places postmodernism in history and gives it a "historical" sense. He sees postmodernism as the period which begins with the fall of the Berlin wall and will end with the modern era. It is the last stage in the modern era, the period after communism.

The world capitals were surprised by the demise of communism, since they had not been prepared for this reversal of history. This has led to numerous disasters, as seen in Russia

and Europe. Europe has become a turbulent zone, as demonstrated by the outbreak of ethnic conflicts in Bosnia, Croatia and Kosovo.

Permanent reversals, known by the title of Lipovetsky's work "the ephemeral (fleeting) empire," can be noticed in this changing world (1987). In effect, new concepts, e.g., globalization, cyberculture, bioethics and so on, have appeared.

We have also come to the realization that "from now on it is the emptiness that rules us, albeit an emptiness which is neither tragic nor apocalyptic" (Lipovetsky 1987, 16). In fact, there is no more center, no more truth, no more ideal, no more symbols, no more absolute value, but "an emptiness that cannot be filled by an ideology of substitution" (Ferry 23).

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¹J.F. Lyotard is known as the theoretician of postmodernism, and is noted for having written *The postmodern condition* (1979) and *Postmodern morality* (1993).

If the fall of the Berlin wall and the end of the opposition between the two blocks erased what constituted the symbols of western society, it behooves us to realize that Christianity is no longer faced with the atheism of Communism as its enemy. However, faced with the existing chaos that characterizes the modern world, certain challenges and opportunities have arisen for Christian witness.

The Challenges of Postmodernism

By challenges we mean certain obstacles which face us, which we have to overcome in order not to melt away into the world's philosophies. For in this period of confusion, the message of Christ can become somber and syncretized in a world which refuses to rely on any single value system. It was not in vain that the French philosopher Luc Ferry wrote, "The fall of Marxism,... has inoculated us against all such projects" (4).

Two such challenges demand attention: The humanization of the divine, and the deification of the human.² These challenges, if not addressed, will continue to mar the Christian faith, pushing it to cooperate with the devil and taking away the credibility of the message. These challenges contain great risks for Christian witness because confusion and mystery, incomprehension and misunderstanding, support each other, and because weakness of faith and the temptation to sell the Word short go hand in hand.

Humanization of the Divine

The first challenge, the humanization of the divine, can be observed at the level of belief, as well as at the level of the authority crisis. What can be observed at the level of belief? Analysis of a poll which appeared in the March-August, 1995 edition of *CSA/La Vie*, and carried out by Jean Baubérot and Jean-Paul Willaume, two leading

²This is a reference to the two hypotheses of Luc Ferry which mark the end of the sovereignty of God, while taking away from him the attributes of the sacred. The reception accorded to this work, itself well thought through and well developed, forces us to take it into account in our own study.

figures of French Protestantism,³ shows that in periods of liberty when Protestantism flirts with power, it loses its soul. Can it be otherwise when 43% and 47% of those questioned responded respectively "Not at all" to two questions: Do you believe in salvation by grace alone? and, Do you believe in the resurrection of the dead?⁴, answers which would make Martin Luther turn in his grave!

Even if the persons questioned are not regular churchgoers interrogated at the end of the service, such results cause us to reflect. If Jean Baubérot in politically correct language considers the results of this poll quite disappointing and believes there is reason to find this Protestantism quite lukewarm, we affirm that it has nothing to do with its founders (*Le Christianisme* 515:9). It characterizes no more or less the beliefs that mark our society. We can say, like the theologian Paul Wells, "that 20th century Protestantism is full of ideas of the Reformation which have gone mad, been deformed, warped . . ." (31).

But how can it be otherwise when collective doubt has set in, and heaven seems inaccessible? Closer to home, is it not commonly said: "Madonne le Josseau, don't cry for nothing"? The last novel of Raphaël Confiand, *La vierge du grand retour* (Paris: Grasset, 1996) serves as a reminder to us.⁵

³Jean Baubérot is the director of the Laboratory of the Sociology of Religions and Laity, a center of research shared between the Practical School of Higher Studies and the CNRS. Jean-Paul Willaume occupies the chair of History and Sociology of the Protestants at the School of Higher Studies. They are authors of several works on Protestantism.

⁴One can read advisedly the results of the poll in *Le Christianisme au XX^e siècle*, no. 515-516.

⁵Raphaël Confiand, a Martiniquan writer, (*Eau de café*. Paris: Grasset, 1991, and *Ravines du devant-jour*. Paris: Gallimard, 1993) traces in his latest novel an authentic story, but also a taboo, which has left its mark on Martiniquan consciences. The story of the madonna of the Josseau was a real religious swindle. In January 1948 there arrived in Martinique a redemptive virgin, Madonna of the great

This humanization of the divine affects what is commonly called the authority crisis. It is clear that authority has disappeared from the modern world. Under the pretext of democracy, multitudes of power centers have appeared, each one holding a share of authority. A struggle to possess the maximum power has begun between the trade unions, the media, the political parties and public opinion—each one is determined to exercise its power. The freedom and authority that each one possesses as a guarantee of what he considers to be a democratic act, are, in fact, simply the result of a simultaneous regression of liberty and authority insofar as the liberty and authority of some is exercised against the power of others.

Consider the example of the power of the media on elections, or, better yet, that of the trade unions in the face of legislative measures. Everyone who has the right to speak exercises this right in the manner Paul castigated, "for everyone looks out for his own interests" (Phil. 2:21), instead of in the manner Paul praised, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves" (Phil. 2:3). This also abounds in the Church.

What is authority? For the Christian it is, first of all, the Word. Now this Word has been manhandled, transgressed, even blasphemed. The original concepts are disappearing, giving place to those of our era. Does the word "sin," for example, still exist in the mouths of

return, according to the name of the bishopric, of centenarian virtues which were recognized, apparently, in all of France. This Madonna was to save the Martiniquans. This statue was to be carried from parish to parish, giving rise to so-called miracles and conversions as it passed. But the goal of this trip, orchestrated by the highest religious authorities, was to reap the largest offering ever collected in Metropolitan France. In the form of a collective hysteria Martiniquans did not wait to be asked to show such generosity. After three months of pilgrimage, a simulated departure of the virgin, with much pomp and ceremony, was organized—just to announce three weeks later that she would remain permanently on the island. The organizers of this disastrous trick left with the pile, but not to enjoy it. The hydroplane Latécoère which was to take them back to Paris sank at sea. This event has contributed considerably to the loss of trust in the sacred in Martinique.

preachers? Is it not preferable to speak of moral error? Does the pastor, figure of authority that he is, have the right to look at my personal life? Or rather, how does my personal life concern him—whether it is a question of my marriage, my sexuality or my driving? Is it not his duty to simply preach the Word and mine to adapt it according to my life situation! As Moliere's Tartuffe has said: "Certain arrangements are for heaven."

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Could this humanization of the divine be also a manifestation of the entry of the world into the Church? The English theologian and philosopher Os Guinness has with good reason pointed out that:

Modernity is a new metamorphosis of the spirit of the world which has slipped in among us without our knowing. We have tried to use the strengths of modernization to our advantage, but in spite of our wishes, we have allowed ourselves to be fashioned by them. We have set up streams of sentinels to detect the dangers of the world in our societies, but the devil has pushed this new society life up to our noses and beards even in the Church (80).

Deification of the Human

The humanization of the divine leads to another deviation: the deification of the human. We are constantly presented with man as the possessor of his own salvation, master of his own destiny, by the development of a lay ethics, in an age of technology, from whence comes the world of chaos.

As G. Lipovetsky has shown, the ethical rule no longer comes from the Church (1992, *passim*). There is in fact no need to be Christian to practice good. Christians do not have any monopoly on the heart, and even less on morality. Committees on ethics are rising up in every corner, ethical professions of faith, in order to ensure a style of behavior worthy of the modern man. The word "ethics" has become the prerogative of all conscientious circles of reflection where the

people are well off. Can we speak about moral progress for all this? No, this is, in fact, only a reactionary attempt in the face of a clear cut defiance, and which is becoming more and more frightening.

One has the feeling that every marker can be moved. Every norm apart from [the individual] considered as repressive by the modern individual. But if today we regard homosexuality as normal, why not zoophilia tomorrow? Here is the salvation proposed to us by the man-God, who, in order to appease his conscience multiplies the philanthropic masses, the charity shows.

For although they knew God, they neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Although they claimed to be wise, they became fools . . . (Rom. 1:21-22, NIV).

This deification of man is equally characterized by the technological progress called the third age of humanity or, quite simply, the age of technology. The extent of this technological progress is still unknown, whether it be that of the multimedia, the information highway or virtual reality. It cannot be pursued without being accompanied by a large procession of perverse effects (Feldon 94). It is becoming increasingly clear to us that the State powers are overwhelmed by the simple power of the Internet, which is supranational.

All this is effectively the world chaos as understood by the Martiniquan thinker and writer E. Glissant, former chief editor of *Courrier de l'UNESCO*:

What I call world chaos is the present shock of so many things which are flaring up, repelling each other, disappearing, subsisting, falling asleep or transforming, slowly or at lightning speed, these fragments, these explosions, the principle or economy of which we have not yet begun to grasp (8).⁶

⁶Edouard Glissant, Martiniquan playwright, poet, novelist, essayist and Professor of Literature at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, develops an idealistic concept of a new world coming, the result of which is the "Chaos-world." This world, according to him, is

But for us the result is not necessarily beautiful. Indeed, it shatters any claim to being beautiful. What does it lead to? To man still without God. Consequently, without contradicting Edouard Glissant, "chaos" means disorder, nothingness, disharmony. It is deceptive to believe that herein lies the reserves of the future of today's humanities.⁷

The Opportunities of Postmodernism

Postmodernism at the same time leads to a situation in which the Christian message, far from melting away, must be reaffirmed. It seems that faced with the disillusion with progress, the social malaise and the return to religion, we have to invest ourselves in society in order to make our voices heard. Surely this is an opportunity to reaffirm our message, and to reframe it.

The Disillusion of Progress

These beautiful speeches on progress have revealed an underlying disillusion, which did not begin today, but which has been built up over time.⁸ It is characterized by the transformation of the city:

creole, the result of relations between several cultures to glean from it its original character. See Glissant, 1993.

⁷Here we are using the expressions of Edouard Glissant in "*Le chaos-monde, l'oral et l'écrit*", *Ecrire la "parole de nuit", la nouvelle littérature antillaise* (Paris: Gallimard, 1994, pp. 111-129); in order to best oppose the world to his manner of thinking. One can read with interest: Edouard Glissant, *Poétique de la Relation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990).

⁸From 1969, almost one year after the events of May 1, 1968 which marked the authority crisis, the French philosopher Raymond Aron published a book entitled: *Les désillusions du progrès, Essais sur la dialectique de la modernité* [The disillusionions of progress, Essays on the dialectic of modernism.] (Paris: Calmann-Levy, 1969) in which he traces the different failures of modern society. This book is still very relevant.

formerly the place of urbanization and civilization, it has become the symbol of bad living and annoyances. The crossroads of the great sociological evils of our time: poverty, marginalization, insecurity, pollution, ugliness, disarray, solitude (Romanet 1).

The principal economic activities rub shoulders with the malaise of the suburbs, the growth of individualism, the absence of lodging, unemployment, the lack of a future. This is a world phenomenon, which evidently touches the French West Indies, and from which emerges many social ills, the most notable of which is violence. The events of Ash Wednesday 1994 in Martinique are still fresh in the memory. There, for the first time, we saw a social riot led by the youth against all the objects symbolizing well-being and integration. This violence was the result of the social malaise.

The Social Malaise

When we think of the situation of gross unemployment (25% in Martinique, 26.1% in Guadeloupe), idleness, drug trafficking, and prostitution, we wonder about the future of our children. Since school no longer leads necessarily to employment, we are led to wonder if our children will not come to increase the number of the RMIs.⁹ In Martinique in 1992 there were already 25,000 beneficiaries, that is 7 beneficiaries for 100 inhabitants (Lucrèce 83). In Guadeloupe in 1994 the 26,387 beneficiaries, along with their dependents brought the figure to a total of 58,000 persons, or 14% of the population (INSEE 73). This situation, of course, is getting worse.

Faced with this true social relegation, with towns like Dillon, De Briand, Godissard, Morne Abélard, Trénelles, Citron, Ermitage, Texaco, Rive'Droite in Martinique; and Boissard, Mortnol in Guadeloupe to name but a few, where dwell families who accumulate difficulties, where the rate of unemployment varies between 40% and 100%, where

⁹RMI refers to the beneficiary of the minimum revenue of insertion, the social welfare program in France.

delinquency is high,¹⁰ how can one resist the temptation to do drugs or crack in particular, which appeared in the French West Indies in 1987 as the principal source of revenue? When nothing is left, there is still the problem of the rent to be paid each month. For these areas, for these families, for these young people, it is utter despair. What can we propose?

Is the Church ready to confront this new reality? What do we have to say to these outcasts, these lesser beings, and these new poor? Can we rise to the challenge, take advantage of the disenchantment vis à vis the secular ideologies and utopias, point out their failure, the result of a general disarray?

It is this general disarray which is the cause of the unprecedented development of legalized gambling (*jeux de chance*). Concerning this legalized gambling, the sociologist A. Lucrèce has observed:

The massive consumption of forecasting games, as well as of games of chance reveals the existence and the importance in the community of a system of beliefs which conceives the resolution of daily problems, not by a collective effort, but by a system of indecision (uncertainty), the game, which each week designates its winner (69).

This system of beliefs favors the development of cults.

The Return of the Religious

Beyond the legalized gambling, we cannot help noticing the growing number of cults in the West Indies. A situation which is in fact worldwide, dubbed "a return to the religious," can be particularly observed in the West Indies, in all the social sectors. There is clearly fertile ground there. The case of the Order of the Solar Temple with its ramifications in the West Indies exists as a reminder to us.

¹⁰ Criminal behavior, that is the number of criminal offenses and minor offenses against persons, is higher than the national average in the French Departments in the Americas. The incidents of robbery with aggravation in Guadeloupe doubled in five years from 1989 to 1993 (INSEE 14, 16, 78).

Let us point out in a more general way the development of satanic cults notably among young people. For example the journal *20 ans* of August 1996, as well as the *Nouvel Observateur* of August 22 to 28, 1996 mentioned, using witnesses, this neosatanism of post-industrialized societies. The case of the Carpentras cemetery shows that this is a reality much more important than we can imagine. It stems from an emptiness which leads to an avid pursuit of power, no matter what the cost—even a pact with the devil.

It seems increasingly crucial for us to give an adequate response, the fruit of collective reflection, to this dying world which needs to hear from us.

The Attitude to Adopt in Order to Live as a Christian in a Postmodern World

Any discourse concerning this dying world should not be based on anything but the Word. Consequently, it is important for us to develop, through a firm spirit and a tender heart, an urban theology which is nothing less than a theology of our insularity, while playing the role that has been assigned to us, that of a microcosm of the celestial city.

An Urban Theology

Any approach to the problems we have raised and the responses that we have suggested must show a strong determination to be anchored in the Word. No confusion, nor fusion. The recommendation of Jesus: “**Be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves**” (Mt 10:16, NIV) is still relevant today. It is based on this postulate that we can conceive of an urban theology that will allow us to reach out to our contemporaries.

We must develop an urban theology which responds to certain vital questions. How do we see our island? What do we think about the social malaise? What do we think about life?

This theology will have to be contextual with five basic principles, drawn from the work of Ray Bakke:

- It must be rooted in an inductive study of the Bible
- It must be the result of collective and individual commitment and reflection.
- It must listen to the weak.

- It must be consistent with our doctrine.
- It must be relevant to a specific locale (113-114).

It is in the light of these five principles that we must analyze what the Bible has to say concerning our era in order to put the Word of God into practice in our daily lives. Should we not incarnate the values of the Kingdom of God for our fellow men? To be able to incarnate these values in the eyes of all requires a capacity to communicate. How can we communicate to our contemporaries the reality of the Christian message in an era that is both religious and irreligious? The response is clear. We must follow the example of Jesus.

While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and "sinners" ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples:

Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and 'sinners'? On hearing this, Jesus said, "It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners (Mt. 9:10-13, NIV).

Consequently, "if we want to announce the Good News of Jesus today, there is no other way but to become city dwellers with the city dwellers" (Bakke 125).

And in this we must be the head and not the tail—the spearhead of a developing society, the microcosm of the one we hope for. For "our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil. 3:20, NIV). Let us never forget this.

The Church as a Microcosm of the Celestial City

It goes without saying that, while we invest energy in denouncing evil, calling to order and proposing an alternative, we ourselves have to be examples. As F. de Coninck has said:

the life of the Church should be the topic of our conversations, that is where should be incarnated above all what goes beyond the law, forgiveness, the living out of the values of the Kingdom of God (230).

We must therefore work so that our Church becomes a sign of the Kingdom. This must be the concern of each and every one of us in every area of our lives. We must be examples as far as sharing, showing hospitality, brotherly fellowship and loving our neighbors are concerned. We must especially not be satisfied in a restricted group, for we are in the world in order to be a light to the world. "Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven" (Mt. 5:16, NIV).

The Christians' work therefore has two sides. In the world they witness, propose new ways, make appeals, live a restored humanity... In the Church they live mutually satisfying renewed human relationships, and, by the same token, they do a work of healing and serve as examples for the world around them (Coninck 230).

Therefore, the Church is not here for the comfort of a few parishioners who come every Sunday to sit on pews others have carefully cleaned. The Church is here for its inhabitants who have never heard about Jesus Christ. It is not written: "For God so loved the Church", but "for God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (Jn. 3:16, NIV).

The Church cannot therefore treat the world around her as an abstraction. On the contrary, we have to "enter into the town," that is, "incarnate the good news" by seeking to "establish networks of relations" on ecclesiastical, social and economic planes. This is a vital investment for the future of the Church, for its *raison d'être* here below. This teaches us to expand our vision, discern needs, and also gives us subjects for prayer (Bakke 125-135).

We are in fact called to pray for the world and the society.

I urge, then, first of all, that requests, prayers, intercession and thanksgiving be made for everyone—for kings and all those in authority, that we may live peaceful and quiet lives in all godliness and holiness (1Tim. 2:1-2, NIV).

Prayer pushes us to be concerned about those around us. Not to be concerned about injustice, suffering and poverty is to treat one reality of

Scripture as a mere abstraction. For this, it is important that we have an active love for the world. This must be manifested in two ways: On one hand, by a better exercise of love for our neighbor and by our witness, and on the other hand by the proclamation of the good news of Jesus Christ as Lord and savior of the world.

The exercise of love for the world consists in being free of our prejudices and never forgetting that love gives without expecting anything in return. As far as our witness is concerned, two aspects must be manifested: presence and difference. Our presence among those around us, as someone to be counted on. Our difference in our manner of acting, doing and speaking. It is the union of these two aspects which manifests the reality of our witness, of our personal relationship with God.

It seems evident that if the reality of our witness is not seen, it will make no sense to proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior of humanity. But if such is the case, it behooves us to multiply without restraint the strategies of evangelization.¹¹

Today, when increasingly the reality of Christianity is fading in the face of the predominance of secularism, we should not fear to affirm our Christianity by showing lucidity, responsibility and hope, "lucidity concerning the reality of this world, an awareness of its true situation and its hidden tendencies which push it towards disorder," responsibility with respect to the commitment which should be ours, following the example of Jesus Christ (Rodorf 10-11). But also hope. Let us not believe that we can change this world, for our city is not here below. Even when disappointment arises and pushes us to abandon it, we can pursue our mission motivated by our blessed hope—to see Christ face to face one day.

Let us then live our Christian life with all that we have, with an active love for those around us. Above all, let us not forget that we have been saved by grace, not a "cheap grace," but a "grace which costs," that which cost the life of a man: Jesus Christ! God is making

¹¹ Ray Bakke has mentioned a whole gamut of strategies that can be employed in evangelization such as the arts, inner city committees, cultural manifestations, chaplaincy, media events, church planting, politics, sports, emergency assistance, etc. (136).

man. That is a grace which calls us to live according to the Gospel whatever the cost (cf. Baubérot 193).

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