

A Time of Change: Fundamental Options in the Present Dialogue between Believers and Society

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We are astounded by the epoch-making changes which occurred in Central and Eastern Europe in 1989. Perhaps we should remember that the entire 20th century has been a century of radical changes. Let us recall just a few of them, which concern our vocation and our spiritual calling. In the field of the natural sciences, the centre of gravity has moved from matter to spirit; as part of the technical and scientific revolution, it has been revealed that man — who was created in the image of his Creator — may himself become a creator of values; in the philosophical field, existentialism, personalism, and other similar schools of thought have involved the very centre of man's being and have worked with other socio-political factors to highlight the crucial theme of man's right to independence; in the domain of the history of religions, the concept of the sacred, the divine, has been acknowledged as a fundamental constituent of consciousness: the idea that religion is simply 'opium for the people' has been rejected. In the Christian world and in the religious realm in general, we can see constant dialogue taking place as well as an increasing number of worldwide ecumenical forums which are concerned with God and the *homo religiosus* and which aim at unifying consciousness.

These are all-pervasive and irreversible historical changes. No 'iron curtain' can be permanent in an age of ever more sophisticated means of communication. All these changes have contributed to the conflict between society and totalitarian regimes. A time of change has become inevitable here too, brought about by both external and internal forces. The major internal force was a global crisis — not only an economic crisis, but also, and more profoundly, a moral and spiritual crisis. The totalitarian system of Eastern Europe, characterised by materialism and atheism in particular, has produced a tragic spiritual vacuum, which shows itself in two main phenomena: an identity crisis in the individual, and a general sense that existence has no meaning. The identity crisis afflicts several areas of the world, not only those countries which were feudalised by totalitarianism: it lies

behind man's search for a lost definition of personhood. The crisis regarding the meaning of life, which accompanies the identity crisis, reveals that man has lost contact with the Ultimate Truth of existence and constitutes the fundamental crisis of the world. The personalist philosopher Jean Lacroix remarked that 'God is the meaning of the world, while the world is His language.'

It is clear, then, that the reconstruction of society and of the world, just as any other genuine human activity, must take place on three different levels: spiritual, moral and economic. These three elements have to be listed in this hierarchical order because the spiritual element, in cooperation with the moral element, has to support the economic element — in other words, the building of the individual must be in keeping with his vocation and calling. Moral and economic regeneration will not be achieved in the East until man has been fully restored to his prelapsarian condition. Like a child who, after having inherited and enjoyed his parental heritage, rejects his parents and chooses to live in a desecralised world, man today hears the Creator's voice ever more dimly. The crisis has its origin in the fact that man has turned aside from his vocation and has shunned his responsibilities before God and the world. This is the point at which dialogue between believers and society begins.

The totalitarian experience of the 20th century was the result of a historical process which started with the humanism of the Renaissance. This humanism claimed that man is 'the measure of all things' — a claim which was continued by the 'rationalism' of the 'Enlightened' 18th century and by the atheistic positivism and materialism of the 19th century. All these tendencies generated the final crisis of the 20th century which by dint of its 'absolute' nature is now being experienced as an 'end of history'. We should note the fact that, in the totalitarian states of the East, materialism was enforced, paradoxically, as an ideology: as a utopian ideal, as a redeeming solution, rather than as pragmatic existential reality. In this context, a significant comment was made by Dzerzhinsky (the founder of the Cheka, later to become the KGB), during his dialogue with the Christian philosopher Berdyayev. Summoned by the former, Berdyayev spent some 45 minutes expounding the religious, philosophical and moral rationale of his hostility towards communism, assuring Dzerzhinsky at the same time that he himself was not a political man. According to Berdyayev, 'Dzerzhinsky was listening to me intently. He interrupted me only occasionally to make a remark. At a certain point he said to me: "One can be a theoretical materialist but an idealist in real life, and vice-versa."'¹ This remark helps us towards a better understanding of totalitarianism in its

¹N. Berdyayev, *Essai d'autobiographie spirituelle* (Paris, 1979), p. 301.

Eastern European manifestation: in the light of a certain anthropological ideal — the spiritual essence admitted by Dzerzhinsky — totalitarianism attempted to transform man, to recreate Adam, often in the most brutal and inhuman way. How could we account otherwise for those shattering ontological changes in the human condition which took place in the 1950s? The perpetrators, using brainwashing and other 're-educational' techniques, compelled their fellow men to repudiate what they held 'most sacred': first and foremost God (if they were believers), then their family, wife, lover, friends, the past, down to the very last drop of personhood that might have assisted them in recreating their personality, their humanity. How were these abhorrent goals achieved? By means of physical and psychological torture. The 're-educated' individual, thus altered in the image and likeness of a dehumanised human being, was supposed to become, in his turn, an educator; the victim was programmed to become a tyrant who would transform his fellow human beings, his closest friends — even those with whom he had shared all the suffering, all the trials and tribulations inflicted on them. Having experienced this ultimate evil, having lived through hell itself — that realm where evil has reached its utmost limits and potential — man's only possible salvation lies in the 'Ultimate reality of the world'.

Let us now look more closely at a number of fundamental errors which, from a religious point of view, can be seen to have generated the crisis and which now constitute the crucial topics for dialogue between believers and society.

Nature was postulated as a substitute for God and, at the basis of existence, matter was made a substitute for spirit. The hybrid concept of evolution came to replace the divine act of creation, obscuring the complementary relation between creation and evolution which guarantees the freedom of the individual. The masses that crushed the individual annihilated the human being as creator of values. Dictatorship drove out freedom. Hatred, metamorphosed into a life principle, and conflict, seen as the mechanism of 'becoming', replaced love as the divine principle of existence. The dictator — the godless 'man-god' — usurped the place of the 'God-man'; in the words of the Apostle Paul: '. . . the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them' (2 Cor. 4:4).

These fundamental errors, these tragic distortions have debased the human condition to the point of denaturing it. Certainly, such evasion of truth leads to suffering. In fact, God Himself is the first who suffers in our suffering, in our fall. These are the errors and

distortions which have led to man's ruin — to the ruin of our society.

On a more analytical level, we observe that when nature becomes a substitute for God, man becomes, in his own estimation, a product of nature. This understanding is at variance with the scriptural assertion that God created man in His Image, so that he should be eternally like Him. For us, this is man's true identity; man's true identity consists in being God's image and in striving to become like his Creator. Seen in this context, in the spirit of the Scriptures, the commandment to subdue nature — 'Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it' (Gen. 1:28) — that man received from God, and not from nature (which would never have offered him such a privilege, or for that matter such consciousness) would not have led to today's ecological crisis, since God entrusted the Garden of Eden to Adam, that he 'dress it and keep it' (Gen. 2:15). Instead, godless man, or the 'man-god', as a surrogate of God presumptuously and irresponsibly arrogates to himself the calling not only to change nature (as was being trumpeted in the totalitarian countries in the 1950s) but sometimes even to destroy it, nonchalantly and with the ambitious illusion — as we have already pointed out — that he will create it, as well as himself, anew.

By the same token, to postulate matter, in lieu of the spirit, as the basis of existence, means setting up blind force and chance as the foundation of the universe. Does this not account for the crisis of meaning so often observed in today's scientific world? We cannot help noticing, for example, a radical change in the modern natural sciences — a shift from a 'largely mechanistic view of nature . . . characteristic of our particular time and culture, to a spiritual perspective, in which consciousness occupies an ontologically fundamental position'.² The same scientist calls attention to the fact that the extremely inert and mechanical view of nature that has emerged from the physics of prior centuries defines a certain paradigm or world view which is deeply inscribed in our thinking and in our educational institutions. As regards the place and the rights of the spirit in the structure of the brain, for example, it is enough to quote Dr Roger Sperry, a Nobel prizewinner:

Les concepts actuels relatifs à la relation entre l'esprit et le cerveau témoignent d'une rupture radicale par rapport à la doctrine matérialiste et behaviouriste bien établie qui a dominé la neurologie depuis plusieurs décennies. Au lieu de renoncer à l'étude de la conscience ou de l'ignorer, la nouvelle interprétation

²Thomas Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago, 1970).

reconnaît pleinement la primauté du phénomène intérieur de la conscience en tant que réalité causale.³

Yet other reductionist and pseudo-scientific distortions have contributed to the historical process, culminating in today's tragic crisis. Concepts such as evolution, ideology, dictatorship, and the primacy of the masses; the cultivation of hatred between fellow human beings, and the disintegration of humanity through fratricidal conflict — all these are organically part of the totalitarian system, and unquestionably demonstrate that it was not unsuitable and inadequate leaders who falsified and compromised a system which was in essence a good one, but that, on the contrary, the totalitarian system degraded man: this demonic system distorted the character of the individual. Without God, without spiritual reference-points, without responsibility towards the Absolute, without absolute values, this system promoted individuals who, terrorised by ideology, enforced arbitrary relative moral standards and criteria, while allowing all sorts of degradation and perversion to proliferate in nature and society.

We could indeed say that we are all victims of the totalitarian system, both oppressors and oppressed. I was once in a labour camp with a reformed pastor from Cluj. We were in spiritual communion through our profound brotherhood in Christ. We came to the realisation that the two of us were free, while our armed guards were the real prisoners. All of us need to heal ourselves and to feel solidarity in the process of healing ourselves and one another, for the sake of carrying on a dialogue between believers and society.

How can we overcome the crisis in which we find ourselves? God Himself has already given Christians a solution — namely, the message of redemption proclaimed by our Saviour: 'Repent ye, and believe the gospel!' (Mark 1:15) — *metanoite!* The Apostle Paul constantly stresses *metanoia*, the transformation of thinking. *Metanoia* is essential precisely because of the fundamental errors highlighted above. As a new way of thinking about the world — the divine way — it was imprinted on man's mind by the Creator Himself. In the words of the prophet, 'Return unto me; for I have redeemed thee' (Isaiah 44:22). Man must undergo a radical transformation, a crucial change in his way of thinking, at all levels — ontological, existential, spiritual and moral.

A radical transformation of this kind means, first and foremost, that we must be recentered in the Trinitarian God, who has revealed unto us both the uniqueness of the individual and the unity of being. As Christians, we understand that the Trinity is the redeeming icon of

³ Jean E. Charon, *L'Esprit de la Science* (Paris, 1983); 'Changing Priorities', *Annual Review of Neuro-Sciences*, Vol. 4 (1981), pp. 1-15.

the world; we thus bear witness to the fact that the Three — the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost — are yet but One. As they are One, we should also be one.

We have realised, this time from experience, that the freedom won as a result of the Revolution has led to an outburst of individual assertiveness embodied in the appearance of a host of new socio-political formations, all of them far too eager to solve their subjective identity problems. We are faced with multiple options which are not only diverse, but adverse as well: they have generated tensions and contradictions; and more seriously still, fear and the risk of violence. When we promote the philosophy of individualism, we run the danger of going to extremes. We become oblivious, in the turmoil, of what unites us. We consume one another in our separateness and disunity, ignoring the fact that the creative act can be accomplished only in unity, in communion. Without getting involved in politics, the church has a duty to serve society by offering it the true Model, the paradigm of social life. As we have already stated, this paradigm is the Holy Trinity.

God has revealed to us the mystery of the Persons of the Trinity both in their uniqueness — if seen separately — and in their Trinitarian unity. No longer do we contemplate this mystery from an infinite distance. The living reality of the divine presence has been revealed to us, in the divine-human Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ, the Son Incarnate. Jesus Christ, God and Man, is, at one and the same time, the second Person of the Trinity and also the Revealer of the Holy Trinity. Divinity and humanity coexist in Him. He reveals both the uniqueness of the individual and the unity of divinity, of humanity, of existence in its entirety.

The ultimate tragedy which is totalitarian dictatorship had its origins in the substitution of human models for the Archetype, the Model given us by God the Father in Whose image we were created. These human models were dictators, godless men who proclaimed themselves gods. Although such dictators claimed to govern on behalf of the masses, claiming to personify the collective ego of the masses, in reality they proved themselves fierce individualists and exclusivists. Now, from a theological point of view, individualism is precisely the demonic principle, the very source and 'being' of evil in the world; as a result of egocentric individualism, man may join the family of the evil one: seeing himself as the centre of existence man becomes oblivious of God. Individuals or minority groups proclaim themselves supreme decision-makers, supreme rulers over the majority; and then they assert this supremacy through tyranny and terrorism, since their claims run counter to human nature.

There is a profound relationship between the denial of God and

dictatorship. As the Orthodox theologian Father Justin Popovitch comments:

‘L’essence de la chute dans le péché est toujours la même: quelqu’un veut devenir bon par lui-même; quelqu’un veut devenir parfait par lui-même; quelqu’un veut devenir dieu par lui-même . . . Ce n’est rien d’autre que de vouloir rentrer dans sa nature, de ne vouloir rien d’autre en soi que soi-même.’⁴

In order to fulfil our humanity, we feel a fundamental need for a model of humanity — a model that would conjoin perfection with what we call *vinculum unitatis*. But has there ever been a man who could serve as such a model? Where is the man who can honestly say: ‘Which of you convicts me of sin?’ (John 8:46). Our model is not — and cannot be — simply a human model; it must be a divine-human model. He is not — and cannot be — simply a man, but God and Man. Consequently, in the words of Father Justin, ‘le combat pour le Dieu-homme est essentiellement un combat pour l’homme.’⁵

Cut off from God and deprived of divine inspiration, dictators have no hope of fulfilling the aspirations of the people they are supposed to serve. Jesus Christ, Who carries within Himself both the infinitude of divinity as God, and the infinitude of the human condition as man, reveals Himself to us as ‘the common Person of humanity’ (St Cyril of Alexandria). He is the plenitude, the fullness of the Divine Being, the *pleroma*. He is one with the Father and also one with us. He is one with us and for us all precisely because He is without sin. He is the incarnation and the revelation of love; and only love can save us.

In order, therefore, to overcome both our identity crisis and the crisis of the meaning of life, we must first ensure that the human person is finding fulfilment in the Image of Christ — the Divine-Human Person of the Holy Trinity. Secondly, we need to revive and renew our consciousness: we need to accept Christ as our source of grace, as model, as icon, and as the source of transforming power. Thirdly, we must restore the human person, as the bearer of divine and human substance, of all absolute values, and of the hopes and aspirations of humanity; in doing so we must be conscious both of the errors of the past and of the requirements of the present. All these tasks require love. In a world still ruled by fear and conflict, everything must be done in the spirit of love. We should constantly call on the Holy Spirit, who ‘sheds the love of God in our hearts’ (Romans 5:5).

We need, therefore, to learn how to love, especially nowadays when we are so disunited. It is no longer enough simply to proclaim love; we

⁴Fr Justin Popovitch, *L’Homme et le Dieu-Homme* (Lausanne, 1989), p. 150.

⁵*ibid*, p. 133.

need to do our best to deepen love, to reach its ultimate essence as far as it is humanly possible. Has it not been said that 'the measure of love is to be without measure', while its depth is the depth of God? In the first place, a true Christian should strive to answer the question: 'How can I love my enemy?' In other words, how can I awaken love in my enemy? Therein lies the meaning of Christ's commandment. We need to understand what the Scriptures mean when they say that man was created in the image of God. Since God is love, man as the image of God is not only consciousness and freedom, as dogmatic theology usually teaches us. We have to learn that, at a deeper level, man is love.

Consciousness, freedom and love thus make up our essential identity. We should cling to this identity as we cling to our own redemption; we should keep it unaltered. We must understand that only by keeping our ontological identity intact can we implement our Saviour's commandment, 'Love your enemies' (Matthew 5:44). The core of the problem is this: if we hurt the enemy who hurts us, we hurt and betray our own identity; or more seriously still, we allow the evil that tears our enemy apart to contaminate us, thus becoming our enemies' slaves. Furthermore, we are ourselves guilty before God, because instead of helping to extinguish the demonic fire of hatred, we prolong this agony of the soul, an agony prompted by evil. On the other hand, if we respond with love to the evil that our enemies have inflicted on us, we preserve our identity. Divine love, as we know, should inspire us all, nay, pervade us; only if it does are we in a position to hope that our enemies — our fellow human beings — will finally be saved, too.

Should we then ignore the real existence of the evil that holds our enemies prisoners? Or the evil in ourselves, for that matter? Of course not. We must make a distinction between evil and the man who is haunted by it; while I hate evil, I love man. Our Lord has warned us that however violent our enemy might be, there is only one evil that he can inflict on us of which we need to be afraid: the destruction of our souls (Matthew 10:28). This can happen only if we allow ourselves to be contaminated by evil — by responding to evil with evil.

Our Revolution highlighted the profound, indestructible divine image within us, the substance of love. The young men and women who started the Revolution had not allowed themselves to be atheised: they had not allowed their innermost being to be annihilated. Self-sacrifice and martyrdom are the most revealing expression of the divine image within us and the highest token of love. A unique self-sacrificial power inspired these youngsters at the sacred hour of their nation's resurrection. Self-sacrifice pertains to the essence of religion, to the revelation of the Gospels; since the church was founded on self-sacrifice, we know that our Revolution, which was

also founded on self-sacrifice, was founded on something firm and authentic.

With holy awe in our hearts, we watched our young people face blind force, carrying candles and flowers in their hands, wearing little crosses on their chests. With awe we listened to them shouting: 'God is with us!' Our task now is to strive to cultivate these indestructible spiritual qualities. Those of us who profess a religious faith are called on to uphold the following fundamental principles in our dialogue with the world.

— Man's responsibility, for himself and for nature, is to the absolute authority of the Creator; any other kind of responsibility, which ignores God, has proved irresponsible.

— It is essential that believers themselves should reach a consensus about their understanding and knowledge of God, in order to avoid what the Saviour Himself warned against: 'The time cometh, that whosoever killeth you will think that he does God service. And these things will they do unto you, because they have not known the Father, nor Me' (John 16:2-3). Believers must recognise the centrality of the New Testament revelation that 'God is Love' (John 4:8).

— It is just as essential to arrive at a generally acceptable definition of man. According to the Biblical revelation, man was created in the image of God, with an infinite likeness to Him. We therefore fervently believe that a definition of man as the image of God as Love, and as revealed in Jesus Christ, is the redeeming solution which should inspire any dialogue aiming at the spiritual revival of this world.