

## **The End of Christendom**

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We have yet to fully realize the far-reaching transformation which our society is undergoing: the end of a sixteen-century old civilization. The death of Christendom is not, however, a sudden event. Apart from few exceptions, civilizations do not collapse unexpectedly: they break down and gradually fade away. During the last two centuries, Christendom has been forced to fight for its very existence—a moving and heroic agony indeed. Christian culture has put forth significant efforts to survive, having established a coherent world in all areas of life which is called “Christianity”. Christianity has built a civilization that has existed according to distinct laws, principles and dogmas for sixteen centuries.

To some extent, the French revolution set itself to oppose Christianity; the latter has always been, perhaps sometimes mistakenly, considered as restrictive and antagonistic to modernity.<sup>1</sup> Historians have illustrated how the 1789 French revolution, which is the fourth of its kind in the West, was unique compared to earlier population revolts. In overthrowing the social order, like Archimedes balancing a lever in the right place, the Dutch, British, and American revolutions were able to rely on, and be supported by, religion as a substantive base. Unlike these contexts where protestant reformation did not represent an obstacle to the development of new ideas, the French revolution did not have such a strong support to rely on, as in France the Catholic religion was opposing all of the principles, starting with freedom and equality, advocated during the time of the upheaval. Not only did the former three revolutions not conceive vengeful and delusive utopias, but they installed stable regimes where politics and religion could rely on bonds which tied them together. By contrast, the French Revolution resolved into acrimonious debates and constant conflicts between the Church and the State, with disastrous outcomes: entirely devoid of any religious values, the political sphere inevitably fell into dangerous extremes. The Church, reduced to a public enemy in revolt against the law and social customs, saw its pervasive force slowly withering away.

Christianity has been intricately intertwined with the history of Western society, and this is particularly true for Catholic Christianity, a religion which promotes a comprehensive view of society and challenges a culture of individualism. It is natural for Christianity to clash with

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<sup>1</sup> Here I use the term Christianity to refer to the Catholic and Orthodox traditions.

modernity; having reached its apex, it has begun declining to finally disappear. Of course, several attempts have been made to adapt Christianity to the modern spirit; here I would like to recall, for instance, those pursued in the nineteenth century by Charles de Montalembert and the movement of liberal Christianity. Such adaptations, however, are unlikely to gain ground; any endeavor of this kind on the one hand involves accommodating but on the other hand scents betrayal. The essence of the Christian religion as an institution is as such which makes it intrinsically and irremediably prone to oppose modernity, seen as a real threat to its bedrock principles: truth, hierarchy, authority and coercion. After the Second World War, the culture of late modernity has regarded the Church as an outdated, obsolete institution; between the second half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century, the gap separating the Christian and late modern worldview exacerbated. Liberalism and libertarianism are in exact opposition to ecclesial thinking. Today the overwhelming majority of the Christian clergy and believers are committed to modern principles of freedom of thought, conscience and religion —apart from some groups of people who, unlikely those who openly disagree with its radical views, secretly value the so-called *Syllabus of Errors* but will not dare to defend publically this set of propositions, issued in 1864 by the Holy See under Pope Pius IX.

André Malraux, speaking in a kind of prophetic mode, said that the twenty-first century would be religious. Among Christians, we appreciate this observation, as it negotiates against time: “religion” can only imply “Christianity”. Nevertheless, the spiritual scenario has not unfolded as expected: it is true that the twenty-first century is religious, but it is no longer Christian. The Western religious milieu has become richly plural and diverse. It is not peculiarly predictive to foretell that a century will be religious, for all centuries are. As long as humanity is imperfect and mortal (certainly until the end of time, despite post-humanist theories), it will always have a religious instinct and continue to create religious systems, wisdom and morals. Only the extremely scientific rationalization of the Enlightenment, detached from the real world, could support the naive view that religious beliefs will give way to atheism. Atheism represents a conscious act of vanity and egotism and is, at the end, unfeasible because as soon as Christianity falls, all other types of gods will replace it. No, the end of Christendom will not correspond to the emergence of an atheistic society, precisely because this latter does not exist. Societies are not constituted of a few intellectuals but of peoples who are at least agnostic if not believers, and whose common sense suggests that there is a mystery beyond life and the knowable. Habermas’ pupil Hans Joas writes ironically: “Perhaps a future without religion is

conceivable, but is one without music and dance and theater, to mention other non rational forms of human communication?”<sup>2</sup>

Social and ethical values change and are reshaped throughout history, yet disenchantment does not coincide with atheism and all-powerful rationalism. Daily experience confirms that morality does not disappear with the fall of Christendom and, what is more, that morality pervades everything—but this is a different story. Neither civilization nor morality ends with Christendom: they reinvent themselves in a dynamic way and develop through other routes. We are not heading toward hell or going to suffer a total loss of what characterizes humanity; there is a paradigm shift happening before our eyes that, although it can be considered as radical and questionable, it nevertheless promotes some respectable principles. My teacher Julien Freund, troubled by the signs of late modernity of our decadent society, spoke of a New Age.<sup>3</sup> Here I also wish to use this expression: the new age will be the age of wisdom and paganism, inevitably rediscovered following the collapse of transcendence. I believe that we should understand the present age of transformation as a “revolution”: the etymology of the word indicates a “revolving, turning back”, and in the case here discussed is applicable to both the areas of morality and ontology. Since about the 1950s–60s, our Western society has undergone a complete inversion of the hierarchy of values and morals. It can be widely observed that, in respect to individual behavior and social norms, during the last decades what was considered as a bad thing has now become perfectly acceptable and, vice versa, a previously disliked behavior is now admired. There has been a dramatic shift in values. For previous generations, in the world of our fathers, colonization was a generous and admirable endeavor, torture and war were the last resort; today colonization, war and torture are diabolic acts to avoid by all means. Homosexuality was banned and despised, and today it is justified and acclaimed. Abortion, previously criminalized, is legitimized and advised. Pedophilia, always a prohibited contact but previously somewhat silently accepted to protect families and institutions, is now criminalized. Divorce, which was virtually almost impossible even to conceive, has become quick and easy to get. Suicide was illegal and despised (those who killed themselves were not offered a religious funeral), nowadays this type of death is considered to have some practical advantages, and in some countries the legal system helps citizens to accomplish it.

Morality refers to what societies sanction as right and acceptable. In a society, ethics, the system of moral principles and behavior, plays a major role in guiding and giving meaning to

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<sup>2</sup> H. Joas, *The Power of the Sacred: An Alternative to the Narrative of Disenchantment*, trans. A. Skinner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 85.

<sup>3</sup> J. Freund, *Le Nouvel Âge* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1970).

people's behavior. Moral principles tell us which acts are right and which are wrong; modes of conduct, acceptable or forbidden behavior, reflect the cultural sense of an era. Taboo and transgression must be understood from a socio-historical and socio-cultural perspective; they reflect long-held core ethical values. Radical changes in societal values have occurred within the lifetime of many of us; ethical behavior in general reflects what society values. As cultures evolve and societies develop, people change the way they think about life. Morality and moral sensibility are not rigid or monolithic; any signifying act reveals a conscious or unconscious belief. You may decide to try, sometimes unwisely, to stay with a difficult spouse instead of separating from them: it is because you value, perhaps unconsciously, a certain idea of loyalty to oneself, in other words of personal responsibility. When a woman decides not to terminate an unwelcome or unexpected pregnancy, it may be because she respects the embryo's dignity and individuality. Social and cultural norms are rules and expectations of behavior based on shared beliefs. While often unspoken, norms offer social standards for appropriate and inappropriate conduct. Typically, our personal, and often unconscious, values dictate our actions. The norms that characterize our time, radically reversed according to adult generations, appear to be natural to the young people, who are increasingly influenced by the social environment and the media. It is true that coping with such dramatic changes is difficult for the elderly, but has not always been an age-related characteristic to be nostalgic and feeling that anything in the past was better than the present days? The conditions of our post-modern society trouble some Christians, which explains the reason why people join the "Manif-pour-tous" and other pro-life associations.

It is about the time for us to give a name to this inversion of values: I contend that this story brings to light the end of Christendom. I shall elaborate on this point by turning my attention to the origins of Christianity: Christianity itself was, in fact, established by a normative inversion, although in a different direction. The fourth century CE represented a break from the preceding paradigm, both in the philosophical and ethical sense. The Christian system of values was the opposite of that of the Romans': the former introduced a dualism between the temporal and the spiritual, humankind and God, whereas the ancient religious world was deeply unified. The Romans must have felt as if they were entering into a new intellectual and spiritual dimension, their familiar world being fully torn apart. Only within a few decades, a revolution of moral principles and norms took place: the old system of morality was being replaced; in the social context, there was an inversion of the system of values and principles of conduct. Everything was being reversed, as the second-century Christian theologian Tertullian wrote: "It is therefore against these things that our contest lies — against the institutions of our ancestors, against the

authority of tradition, the laws of our governors, and the reasonings of the wise; against antiquity, custom, submission; against precedents, prodigies, miracles — all which things have had their part in consolidating that spurious system of your gods.” Long before Christianity, the Romans were monogamous, but lawful divorce became more and more permissive over time to the extent that even women could ask for a quick and easy divorce. On the contrary, the Christian emperors penalized and finally forbade divorce. Abortion and infanticide had always been legitimate practices, except for Jews and Egyptians. The Greeks and Romans practiced them widely; for instance, unwanted baby girls were left to die and only the first-born female was to be kept and raised.

In the Roman patriarchal family law, according to the principle of *patria potestas* a women’s fetus and child belonged to the father, who had full power over his children. The Jews and then the Christians rejected these practices.<sup>4</sup> Homosexuality, widely practiced and known in Athens as pederasty or pedophilia, was also perfectly acceptable among Romans. In a law of 390, Theodosius I declared that passive non-heterosexual male prostitutes should be burned alive. The new morality had started spreading from the center to the peripheries, being the countryside latter commonly behind—hence *paganus* (“peasant”), from which the word “pagan” derives. The term “pagan” was both convenient and inappropriate: it was created by the enemies. The dissemination of Christianity from the centers to the outskirts, and thus from places of sophisticated culture to villages, was accompanied by feelings of pride, as if the new was better. The “pagans” were considered as conservatives looking backward; Christians called themselves “modern” —notably, the term *modernus* appeared at that very time.<sup>5</sup> Paganism came to be seen as superstitious and outdated.<sup>6</sup> The march of progress had started gaining ground: history is written by the winners, it is the winners’ interpretation of facts that prevails.

The eighteenth century, a revolutionary period, represented what can be called the beginning of the end of Christendom: in the West, the decline and overthrow of the common civilization had just started. The whole process has lasted two centuries, and consisted of comings and goings and struggles between detractors and defenders. It looked like the siege of a town. One could tell the story of this succession of crashes; let us consider, for instance, the example of divorce in France. A law authorizing divorce was promulgated in 1792 during the Revolution;

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<sup>4</sup> Philo of Alexandria explains that the foetus is “a living thing,” in other words an innocent being: the act of killing a foetus is a murder. See Philo of Alexandria, *De Specialibus Legibus*, books 3–4, ed. and transl. A. Mosès (Paris: Le Cerf, 1970), 3:37–119.

<sup>5</sup> See *Gelasius to Bishops Rufinus and Aprilis*, in *The Letters of Gelasius I (492-496)*, pastor and micro-manager of the Church of Rome, transl. B. Neil and P. Allen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2014), letter 23, 195.

<sup>6</sup> P. Veyne, *Quand notre monde est devenu chrétien (312–394)* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2007), 170.

it was abolished in 1816 under the Restoration and reestablished in July 1884. On 2 April 1941, a law of the Vichy regime prohibited divorce. Finally, after the second world war divorce laws became more liberal. The fights against the principles of Christianity have suffered failures and setbacks. Christianity has defended itself and tried hard to keep the authority over legislative and moral power. Yet despite some episodic successes, for the last two centuries a rising wave of shifting social norms and cultural values have started sweeping away, never stopping, what were once key moral principles. The recent history of abortion laws elucidates well the turmoil which has accompanied a drastic change in moral attitudes and which has produced extreme reactions in both directions. When the law passed, some were crying out with joy and some with horror, and one could experience an excess behavior everywhere. Emotional intensity is always present in crowd phenomena: women were marching by screaming that their bodies belong to them, extremist groups were trying to block the operation of abortion clinics. The same can be said about the evolution of public opinion or protest against same-sex marriage, assisted reproduction or assisted suicide. Christians try to defend their traditional moral values relying on non-Christian arguments: they know too well that their dogma would not be heard at all. They strategically argue from the perspective of nature, natural law or related reasons which are not necessarily less important. In doing so, they even find sometimes unexpected allies, as when groups of psychoanalysts and psychiatrists with no religious beliefs join Christians in the defense of fatherhood. Yet with no practical meaningful results ever. Our society is not concerned with natural law: people widely believe that rules of right and wrong are created by society, and are not intrinsic to human nature. They also question the relationship between politics, power and traditional religion. Traditional morality is irreversibly declining. The crisis of traditional ethics is slow but persistent, radical and undeniable. Christian supporters struggle to construct compelling arguments and their style no longer appeal. Being aware of losing their case without obtaining the slightest concession, they find a certain justification in the application of the principle *ad majorem dei gloriam*. Countries that resist changes are singled out by others and treated as being backward looking, as if it were a matter of good taste, reasoning and intelligence to eradicate old values. Political movements that defend the old system of morality, although elected by many voters, have difficulty being represented by moderate candidates, and often end up only with extremist representatives, like Donald Trump. The fate of a movement condemned by history is to become increasingly extremist, its most reasonable supporters will inevitably walk out in protest over the radical views.

The normative inversion of the last two centuries is almost the exact opposite of what happened in the fourth century. Plutarch's cry "The great Pan is dead" might have anticipated the demise of paganism, or at least that is how Christians then interpreted it to their advantage. Pan, or Priapus, was the God of sex and violence. Today's society tells us the story of the return of the great Pan—the wheel has come full circle. In this paper, I have compared two dramatic normative inversions, which have taken place sixteen centuries apart and have moved in opposite directions, to emphasize that the current moral emancipation is pushed by a somewhat coherent social force. This emancipation is not sufficient to measure social progress, it does not necessarily champion an outward looking approach which will give us the gift of freedom; as highlighted above, in the fourth century the exact opposite movement took place, and it was as just as inevitable. In each era, "progress" consists in reconciling realities (laws, customs and moral principles) with widespread and sometimes unspoken beliefs, which are a driving force and evolve throughout history often silently. . To put differently, the global social situation is the result of a radical transformation of beliefs. A strong stream holding together collective shared values, the tenets which shape our society, flows before our eyes: why is such a stream invested with hopes for the future? Because people yearn to find meaning and achieve what has yet to come to fruition. In the fourth century, it was the Christians who invented the "modern," and pagans were on the defensive, opposite side of the social world. A normative inversion, especially of this magnitude, is intertwined with and rests on the basis of a philosophical inversion. This is quite natural: the system of morality is shaking because its foundations have been replaced. Each culture or civilization establishes, at some decisive moment in their history, a set of ontological choices which create and rule morals, laws and customs. For Christendom, this decisive moment was the time of the first ecumenical councils, which set out the first truths on which sixteen centuries of Christianity would survive: God, the person and the moral system.

There comes a day when trust in core principles breaks down. We are now living at a breaking point where ontological choices concerning the meaning and place of human beings, nature, and gods in the universe are overturned. If beliefs collapse, laws and morals will continue to have some power for some time without further justification and by the force of habit alone —this situation will not last too long, and they will eventually collapse being considered as illegitimate. Beliefs empower people; what we believe, we accept as our truth. Only beliefs can empower the set of original ontological choices. A first ontological reversal of a similar magnitude took place at the early stages of Judaism. Moses successfully, and to some extent fiercely, led the transition from polytheism to monotheism. Tacitus sums up this event as follows: "In order to secure the allegiance of his people in the future, Moses prescribed for

them a novel religion quite different from those of the rest of mankind. Among the Jews all things are profane that we hold sacred; on the other hand they regard as permissible what seems to us immoral.”<sup>7</sup> This story illustrates well the link between ontological inversion and normative, moral inversion. Historians of religions have differentiated between two types of religions: cosmotheist or polytheist religions, which are natural and obvious, and monotheist or “secondary religions,” which are more complex constructions. The latter appeal to the concepts of revelation, faith, inner wisdom, and require to be constantly reaffirmed and nourished. By contrast, not only do polytheist religions arise spontaneously and proliferate without the need to be continually fed in order to survive, but also instantly reoccupy their social place as soon as it becomes available again. This is exactly what is happening today. Although Western society has been shaped by monotheism at all levels, cosmotheism has never fully disappeared from the scene. Several authors have been inspired by it to varying degrees: here it suffices to mention alchemy, the *cabbalah*, Spinoza, freemasonry, Lessing, German romanticism, Goethe, Freud, Nazism, the new age, and so forth. There is no doubt that cosmotheism neither disappears nor dies: it is asleep but always ready to rise and grow again as soon as the secondary religion shows signs of weakness. In his famous 1917 lecture, *Science as a Vocation*, Max Weber describes how monotheism has dethroned polytheism in the name of universal reason and how polytheism remains, lurking in the background, awaiting for revenge.

Christians have long believed that Christianity could only be replaced by atheism, nihilism or both; in other words, by negative forms that would bring darkness, which is a way of considering Christianity as irreplaceable. Péguy writes in *Dialogue of History and the Carnal Soul*: “There have been so many peoples and so many souls who have not been charmed or reached by Christianity; so many peoples and so many souls who have lived abandoned and who are not, who were not worse off, my friend; there, exactly there, there is, unfortunately, the secret, the hollow mystery.”<sup>8</sup> Believe or making people to believe that if Christianity collapses everything collapses with it is, in brief, talking nonsense. The Christian dominion has already been replaced by familiar and well-known primitive historical forms. While Christianity is collapsing, Stoic values, paganism and Asian-type spirituality are gaining ground. Nietzsche predicted this evolution when he wrote: “[...] a kind of European China, with a delicate Buddhist-Christian belief and, in the practical sphere, an Epicurean savoir.”<sup>9</sup> At the

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<sup>7</sup> Tacitus, *The Histories*, book 5: 4, trans. K. Wellesley (London: Penguin Classics, 2009), 252.

<sup>8</sup> Translated in English from the original French; see C. Peguy, *Véronique. Dialogue de l'Histoire et de l'Âme Charnelle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), pléiade III, 70.

<sup>9</sup> Translated from the French edition; see *Fragments Posthumes 1887–88* (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1986), 86.

start of the twenty-first century, the most established and most promising philosophical movement is a form of cosmotheism linked to environmental protection; one could also speak of pantheism or polytheism.<sup>10</sup> Most of our Western contemporaries no longer believe in a transcendent reality; the meaning of life must be found in this lifetime, and not after or beyond it, where there is nothing. The sacred is already here: the sacred is experienced in nature and among us human beings. At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, we look at and understand the world differently. Cosmotheism helps humankind to feel at home in the world, which represents the only existing reality and which contains both the sacred and the profane; from the monotheist perspective human beings are strangers in this immanent world and long for another, eternal and divine world. For the cosmotheist, this world is their home; for the monotheist, this world is only a temporary stay. The post-modern mind is tired of living in a temporary accommodation; it needs a proper independent home. The post-modern mind becomes cosmotheist again as it wishes to reintegrate and experience this world as a full citizen, and no longer as a sort of guest or “resident non-citizen,” an expression denoting Christians as described by the anonymous author of the *Epistle to Diognetus*.<sup>11</sup>

The post-modern human being intends to overcome distinctions—their favorite adjective is “inclusive.” Cosmotheism suits this mindset because it overthrows the old dualism characterizing Judeo-Christianity; it evades the contradictions between false and true, God and the world, faith and reason. Ecology today represents a religion and a belief, which does not mean that ecological problems should not be considered scientifically true, but rather that scientific data about climate and ecology produce irrational convictions, direction and certainty—in brief, religious beliefs, as these beliefs are endowed with all features of a proper religion. Today, ecology has become a liturgy: it is impossible not to speak about it in any given occasion. It serves also as a catechism: it is taught to children since the kindergarten to help them to develop good habits of thinking and acting. It is also a consensual dogma: whoever asks questions showing doubts about environmental problems is considered as mad or judged negatively. Above all, and this is the clear feature of a strong belief rather than a rational science, a passion for the environment pushes us to accept what was challenged by

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<sup>10</sup> M. Tarrier apologizes to pantheism and polytheism in *Les Orphelins de Gaïa* (Toulon: Presses Du Midi, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> See the following passage in *Epistle to Diognetus*, transl. A. Roberts and J. Donaldson, in *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, chap. 5, ed. A. Roberts, J. Donaldson and A. Cleveland Coxe (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co, 1885). “They dwell in their own countries, but simply as sojourners. As citizens, they share in all things with others, and yet endure all things as if foreigners. Every foreign land is to them as their native country, and every land of their birth as a land of strangers.”

individualism: personal responsibility, the legacy that we will leave to future generations and our duties towards the community. It is therefore in the name of this immanent and pagan religion that we are bringing together the basic dimensions of our human existence, which were previously cultivated by the system of Christian values.

The new ecological religion is a form of post-modern pantheism: nature becomes the object of a cult. Mother earth becomes a kind of pagan goddess, and not only among indigenous Bolivians but also among Europeans, to the extent that Pope Francis speaks today of “our mother earth,” in a Christian sense of course, but using a language in tune with contemporary beliefs. Our human fellows are trying hard to protect nature overexploited by humankind, what is more is that they have also started, literally speaking, embracing trees. In the vast field opened up by the decline of Christianity, the set of new beliefs are still in the process of settling down. Disaffection with religious dogmas and truths, once presented as unquestionable, now gives rise to the triumph of morality: morality stands alone, independent. There is a kind of philanthropy unfolding before our eyes, the desire to promote the welfare of others and a love for humankind directly inherited from the teachings on love found in the Gospel, but without the same religious foundations. Late modernity gets back to the Gospel but deprives it of all transcendent aspects. For contemporary American political scientist Joseph Bottum, a deformed Protestant morality without transcendence dominates the moral sphere across the Atlantic. The number of Protestants have fallen from 50% to 4% in half a century; the deadly sins have become intolerance, power, militarism and oppression. In other words, a debased Gospel has generated the decolonial movement— and, one must add, after having generated the communist ideology. In pagan societies, religion and morality are separate: religion demands sacrifices and rituals, while the rulers impose the system of morality. This is exactly the formula we are about to experience again: our governing elite legislates and enforces morality. Our morality is post-evangelical and no longer based on religion; it is the same morality dominating the present media landscape, and which controls schools and families. When it needs some readjustments or redirection, it is the governing elite to intervene. In this perspective, the European rulers represent the priestly tabernacle. In short, we are back to a situation of paganism: we have a state morality.

What will be of the Church without Christendom? In response to the current state of affairs, the Church as institution has shown several and diverging reactions. The most common, and especially among the clergy, are acceptance and surrender. The time is long past for the supporters of the *Syllabus of Errors*, although one still finds some traditional, and perhaps eccentric, sympathizers. Things go even further: not only has the Church, disarmed in every

way, ceased to claim back the lost power but it also whispers a *mea culpa* for having abused it. Church leaders are now discreet apostles, nothing alike those proselytizers within the tradition we are used to. Conquest, no longer part of the agenda, has been replaced with humble testimony; evangelizers of the past are now often blamed for disseminating bad taste propaganda. Conquest is banned for both religion and states. Downgraded to the state of silent witnesses, Christians today are soldiers fighting a losing battle. Their social fights, especially those concerning principles and values, lead nowhere and have no chance of succeeding. I am not quite sure they got it right: Christians who fight and protest tirelessly against abortion or assisted reproduction laws should understand that they can win the battle only if they first initiate a spiritual revolution: convert people to Christianity, to the intrinsic dignity of each embryo, and only then you can try to abolish abortion. It does not work the other way around: imposing ritual confession on non-Catholics is extremist nonsense. Beliefs and the adherence to certain principles precede, in fact, acceptance of laws.

No longer planning to conquer the world, like the ancient Jews we will focus on living and surviving – and that will be enough. You can search everywhere but nowhere you will find somebody having a plan of conquest and, although this may be some hearts' secret, no one dares to share the dream. Many Christians are relieved to see the end of Christendom, and its hegemony and hypocrisy. We are all, Christians and not, the children of this era: we prefer gentleness to domination, imperfection to grandiosity. “When one cannot be a power, one can be an example,” said Camus. Modernity, in fact, is probably both a rejection of Christian power (a challenge to societal laws) and a renewal and adaptation of Christian principles (especially social ones). In all its dimensions, modernity has developed against Christianity as a civilization rather than against Christianity itself. Modernity challenges the power of religion and not religion itself, as Tocqueville explains: “It was much less as a religious doctrine than as a political institution that Christianity had aroused furious hatreds.”<sup>12</sup> In the end, it is pointless to press the question whether Christianity as a civilization was legitimate or not: today we are urged to think about how to approach the rest of this story.

We must, I believe, resist the temptation to transform Christian thought into ideology, creating a world which can be cut with a knife so to speak, and soon Manichean. New beliefs are taking shape, and tolerance is fading. A culture that feels threatened group together its troops and country to prepare them for war. Yet some look with nostalgia at Christianity, wishing to preserve its last expression before the final disappearance: “Stop, oh Lord, the clock with which

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<sup>12</sup> A. de Tocqueville *The Old Regime and the French Revolution*, trans. A. Goldhammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 16. First published 1856.

You measure our dissolution” (Lucian Blaga). For most of us, the past has become a foreign land and, I would add, an unwanted one. After the events, sometimes touching and sometimes deadly, of the last two centuries we have given it up. It is no longer Christendom leaving us: it is we who are leaving it. Why? Because we no longer choose (and accept) power, hegemony and coercion. In other words, are we not able to experience or identify Christianity with power and hegemony? Should mission necessarily be synonymous with conquest? One can think of Christianity by looking at the example offered by the monks of Tibhirine rather than the one presented by Sepulveda. It would be probably best if we were only silent witnesses, and ultimately secret agents of God, because despite the normative and philosophical inversion Christianity is still, in its way, the spirit of the place. Renouncing Christendom does not seem a painful sacrifice. The experience of our fathers provides us with a certainty: our aim should not be to produce societies where “the Gospel governs the States” but rather, as Saint-Exupéry puts it, to “walk gently towards the [ultimate] source.”