

# SPEAKING OF GOD IN POST-MODERN EUROPE

Bruno Forte

In autumn of 1799 a poet and thinker, Georg Friedrich von Hardenberg, better known under the pseudonym Novalis, wrote an essay entitled "Christianity or Europe" (*Christenheit oder Europa*), published first in the edition of the *Schriften* of 1826. The context, in which the work had been written, was the crisis of the European consciousness connected to the French Revolution and, more precisely, the uneasy transition to the time of Restoration. Novalis intended to sketch a messianic - spiritualistic perspective, to foster a solution of the problems and contradictions produced by Protestantism and by the secularization of the Enlightenment.

The key idea, stressed by Novalis, is the primacy of religion, which alone can reawake Europe and give it security and unity in the midst of the current risks of disgregation: only the order of Christianity, only a reestablished *respublica christiana* - evoking the Medieval World - could save the old Continent. This process, however, is not conceived as a return to the past, but as a utopic revolution, oriented to the creation of a "new Christianity", that Novalis imagines as the reconstruction of the visible universal Church, without boundaries, embracing all the souls thirsting after the Divine.

The evident limit of the proposal was the Novalis suggested a system as ideological as the one against which he struggled, the modern "ordre de la raison". To the crisis of his time he simply opposed the elimination of history, a utopic return to the past, that was conceived idealistically, but in reality had never existed. That explains why the thesis of Novalis did not constitute more than a suggestion, ready to be exploited by reactionary interpretations.

The "case" represented in "*Christenheit oder Europa*" is particularly relevant in understanding a time like ours, characterized by a crisis of the European consciousness actually not so different from the crisis following 1789: the collapse of the Berlin Wall showed the end of the ideological world, that inspired the system of the opposing political blocks, whose clearest expression was precisely on the European Continent. The disgregation, following this process, demonstrates that

the true identification, characterizing the time of European Modernity, was not between Europe and Christianity, but much more between Europe and the ideological paradigm, produced by the Enlightenment. Is the European Continent perhaps not the cradle of both the bourgeois and revolutionary ideologies exported everywhere in the world? Instead of the formula of Novalis, "*Christianity or Europe*", one could thus propose the formula *Europe or Ideology*, or even *Europe or Modernity*, in order to understand better the crisis of the European consciousness in our time. It means that the crisis of Europe today is the crisis of ideological reason or more broadly the crisis of the Enlightenment.

The following reflections try to describe the parabola of Modernity and to sketch the task of Christian theology in this parabola, in order to answer the question of how to speak of God in a non ideological way, in the context of post-modern Europe.

### ***1. The parabola of Modernity and the restlessness of the European consciousness.***

#### *a) "Adult reason" and the thirst for totality*

An emancipated "adult reason" is at once the agent and the aim of modernity: it started with the shift to the subject by Descartes, continued with the various developments of the "Enlightenment", up to and including the mature fruit of the French Revolution and the dryly speculative systems of Hegel. In all this the "order of reason" tends to embrace the whole reality of the history of humanity and of the world. Everything has to be brought back to the norm and the measure of reason, so that the slightest shadow is dispersed and every resistance to the process of emancipation of the spirit is overcome. This speculative equation between "ideal" and "real" mirrors the practical aim of making the human being the only subject of historical development and the yardstick of the world including all its relationships. Similarly it represents an ambition for a crystal clear form of thought, where everything is transparent and obvious, without anything remaining outside or any sense of the beyond. In this way "modern thought" posits a thirst for totality, which, by its very constitution, makes it absolute and violent: a world explained conceptually tolerates no resistance, puts up with no interruption, and seeks only to exorcise any search for singularity and any surprise arising from difference.

The highest speculative celebration of the triumph of reason is found in the

Hegelian system: this system presents itself as “its own time turned into concept”, and hence as the faithful theorizing of the “exit from (under age) minority” by reason and the realizing of the victorious process of the spirit to the point of arriving at a total order of truth transparent to itself. Truth is totality: this, earned and embraced in the “toil of the concept”, is the exhaustive answer to the question of meaning, which stems from the painful contradictions of the real. In the vital thrust of this process every contradiction is dissolved, and every division overcome: “What is a contradiction in the kingdom of death is not so in the kingdom of life” (G.W.F. Hegel, *Theologische Jugendschriften*).<sup>1</sup>

What in Hegel had been a response to an acute need of historic reconciliation, after the dramatic crisis of the French Revolution and of its aftermath, frequently becomes a seduction of embracing totality within the manifold inheritance of Hegel - a giving in to the lure of absolute knowledge, a presumptuous historic protagonism of adult reason. It is here that one finds the constitutive and dramatic limit of modern ideology, in its many configurations, bourgeois and revolutionary. The legacy of Hegel, as a product of the achieved synthesis of ideas and reality issuing in a system, is the ideology that aims to change the world and life itself starting from the concept. Reality as lived must adapt itself to reality as programmed. “Negative” and “positive” will be brought into a synthesis, transcending them both, by means of a dialectic process merging relationships between history and real situations. Totality, embraced in thought, will not take long to convert itself into totalitarianism, a hard and violent historicity, a revolutionary transformation reaching out to adapt reality, however intransigent or obtuse, to the progressive and enlightened ideal.

#### b) The “dialectic of Enlightenment” and the loss of meaning

The parabola of modern ideologies only highlights this frightening causality: lacking attention to the “real” reality and closed to the new and its surprise, it results at once in a terrible boredom and a high cost of ideological presumption - which in human terms is both social and ecological in its impact. In this way the “dialectic of the Enlightenment” sprang from the obvious and painful consciousness - experienced mostly in Europe - that “the earth fully enlightened gleams under the

1 G.W.F. Hegel, *Theologische Jugendschriften*, (hrsg. H. Nohl) (Tübingen 1907). Italian translation: *Scritti teologici giovanili*, (tr. E. Mirri), (Napoli 1977) 420.

banner of a triumphant misfortune" (M. Horkheimer Th.W. Adorno)<sup>2</sup>

This fate of modern age mingles revolutionary and bourgeois ideologies. If the totalitarianism of the former is brazen and openly repressive and violent, the totalitarianism of the bourgeois is subtle and pervasive, propagated through the "hidden persuaders" of the welfare society, which in their way are no less demanding and imperious than the various "lords" of the revolution. Both cases presuppose a meaning imposed on everything, an ideal justification which exorcises the dramatic price paid; if this great plan is to be accomplished, it must be carried through totally in order to function in its entirety.

The bitter failure shatters both dreams of totality: collective boredom is no less great than the nausea of someone who has everything; an anxiety about freedom is no less great than the need for justice and for a genuine quality of life. On both sides the future is viewed with the vague hope that it may not be a repetition of the past, and that the meaning promised and distilled from ideology may not come to oppress anew the toil of living. From both East and West the crisis of "adult reason", shows itself as a rejection of a satiated and programmed totality, as the collapse of the horizons of meaning offered by this totality, and as a need for difference, that is new and truly revolutionary in its potentials. All of this seems to break the circle of answers derived from an identity that has been taken for granted until now. The future thus arrives with surprising rashness: it is not something programmed or simply derived from the present, as in the case of ideology, but something darker, more worrying and not easily available to life and to real history. Beyond modernity and its particular parabola, the so-called "post-modern" arrives as unease, intolerance and rejection.

c) *The "Weak Thought"*

The crisis of "totality" of the modern spirit has come to show itself mainly in the shape of a "collapse of meaning": whereas enlightened reason had clear and obvious solutions, worked out within the context of an all comprehensive and transparent meaning, the post modern has rediscovered the dark recalcitrance of

2 M. Horkheimer \* Th. W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, (Amsterdam 1947). Italian translation: *Dialettica dell'Illuminismo*, (Torino 1967) 11.

life with respect to any ideal "sense". Thus there remain the painful fetters of finitude and of death, the unresolved toil of negativity, and the difference that undermines any facile presumption of having an identity. The outcome is a farewell to security, a reinstatement of death and of nothingness, the abandoning of any basis, in order to voyage towards the unknown, "devoid of meaning", and even finally liberated from the lure of meaning. "Weak thought", "a long goodbye to being and to basics", the "adventure of the difference" taking over from the Bacchic triumph of identity, seem to result in an utter "collapse", in a permanent fall into the void.<sup>3</sup> The loss of meaning, which stems from the crisis of the totalizing answers of modern reason, is carried forward on waves of refusal, so to speak, and is becoming increasingly a loss of the desire even to pose the question of meaning. Thus what is in trouble is not so much the answer, as the very legitimacy of the questioning and even the coherence of the pain from which such questioning is born. If all "collapses", will not this pain also fall into nothingness? For what is the point of looking for meaning? Why seek any exit? Indifference or disinterest in even posing the question of meaning, rather than the actual lack of a meaning, constitutes the real "mortal illness" that pervades the quite diverse societies of Europe at the end of this millennium.

The future - immersed in all the anxiety and obscurity left by the ashes of ideological prisons - seems in danger of drowning in a new wave of totality. When a "strong" foundation, all-inclusive and reassuring, gives way to an absence of foundations, the result is no less vast and total. If nothingness can pass itself off as simply the reverse side of completeness, as a minus sign placed in front of the bracketing of reality, once again the future loses its obscurity: it will be a continuation of the present, a perpetuation of weakness, a free fall prolonged. Paradoxically the very category of the "future", in connection with which the failure of the "strong" reason of modernity has become obvious, reveals the real continuity that links nihilist post-modernism with the world from which it stems and which it so forcefully rejects. "Weak thought" deduces the future from the present in an equally totalitarian manner as "strong thought" identifies the real and the ideal. It is incapable of any wonder or of any welcome for the new, and at least insofar as it remains incapable of it, it shows the totalizing presumption of ideological reason.

The new and non-deducible traits of the future call then for a different kind of

3 Cf. ad esempio il volume collettivo *Il pensiero debole*, (Milano 1983), nonché di G. Vattimo, *Al di là del soggetto*, (Milano 1984) e *La fine della modernità*, (Milano 1985).

thinking, not negligent, able to leave behind the prisons of ideology, but also alert enough not to fall into trap of its own reversal. To open oneself up to such thinking involves relying on the authentic differentness and newness of the future, and hence measuring it against the ultimate, - without deducing it from the penultimate. Eschatology, in so far it is precisely the doctrine of things both last (*eschata*) and new (*novissima*), the *memoria futuri*, grounded in faith in the promise of God - reveals here its surprising actuality and critical reserve, in the face of the shoals of modernity and of its nihilist tendencies. This horizon of eschatology involves "new" thinking because it dares to think through the "new", and to open itself completely to its surprises.

## ***2. Searching for lost meaning: theological criticism and the crisis of ideological worlds.***

### *a) The criticism in the name of the absolute primacy of God: Karl Barth and the "Deus dixit"*

If theology is the "new thinking", capable of embracing the non-programmed and non-deducible newness of the future, it is no surprise that the key turning point in the overcoming of "modern reason" should spring from theological reflection. The doctrine of the last things, which had become an innocuous closing chapter in Christian dogmatics, comes alive with fresh actuality and unexpected interest in the theology of twentieth-century Europe: <<Whereas for nineteenth-century liberalism the saying of Troeltsch could apply: "The eschatological office is closed from now on", from the beginning of this century, on the other hand, it has worked overtime>>(H. Urs von Balthasar)<sup>4</sup>. The question of the future is giving new vigour to all aspects of thought and is inviting it to tackle what is new and emerging in Christian hope. Thus people discover anew that the "eschatological element is not one of the components of Christianity, but in an absolute sense the high road of Christian Faith; it is the note through which everything else finds itself in tune, the dawn of awaiting a new day which colours everything with its light"(J. Moltmann)<sup>5</sup>.

4 H. Urs von Balthasar, *Eschatologie*, (Einsiedeln<sup>3</sup> 1960). Italian translation: *I novissimi nella teologia contemporanea*, (Brescia 1967) 31.

5 J. Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung*, (München 1964) 12. Italian translation: *Teologia della speranza* (Brescia<sup>2</sup> 1971) 10.

Hand in hand with the discovery of eschatology goes a recovery of the question of meaning and of possible response to it, in a way that goes beyond the modern crisis and the nihilist abyss of post-modernism. This renewed appearance of ultimate horizons thus link up with the search for lost meaning.

Karl Barth must be credited with having rediscovered the eschatological content of Christian faith in all its irreducible objectivity: against the presumptions of the liberal universe, unmasked by the crisis of historical time, his commentary on Paul's *Letter to the Romans*, in its second edition (1922), carries a cry of accusation, at once violent and liberating. The ultimate source of the absolute primacy of the eschatological element - against the totalizing presumptions of ideological reason - lies in the transcendence of God, in his being as pure Object, non-reducible to the limits of the subject. Christianity is completely and in every dimension eschatological, insofar as it has to do in every way with the ungraspable sovereignty and transcendence of the God of revelation, who communicates himself to humanity under the form of promise and of hope, not as some object to be known.

*b) The criticism in the name of existence: Rudolf Bultmann and the theology of decision*

Barth, however, does not subtract from the radicalism of rejection: the dialectical confrontation with liberal thought leads him to deny any coherence between the human or worldly and the God-who-comes. And because of this Rudolf Bultmann, who had at first been on his side as part of the front of anti-liberal "dialectical theology", reacted and distanced himself, in order to recover dignity for the human subject, not in enmity to but rather in relationship with the offer of the eschatological gift of God. The eschatological moment for Bultmann is where the God-who-comes encounters each person, in all the concreteness and the distinction of his or her uniqueness. The determining trait of this moment - "the moment of decision" - lies in the fact that nobody can make a decision on behalf of anyone else, nor can anyone programme or deduce his or her own time: "Just as I have to live my life, so must I die my death" (R. Bultmann).<sup>6</sup> Here lies, moreover, the fascination and the drama of ideological presumptions, of total visions of the world: "It is easy to grasp why ideologies (*Weltanschauungen*) are so cherished by man: ... often they

6 R. Bultmann, *Glauben und Verstehen*, I, (Tübingen 1952). Italian translation: *Credere e comprendere*, (Brescia 1977) 428.

are very useful to him: they enable him to be freed from himself, they dispense him from the problems posed by his concrete existence, from the cares and responsibilities connected with it... in this way, just when his existence is shaken and becomes problematic, he finds a way of liberating himself from all that, and instead of tackling the issue head-on, prefers to understand it reductively as a case of familiar generality, to fit it into a context, to objectify it so as to evade his own personal existence" (R. Bultmann).<sup>7</sup>

c) *The Theology of hope and the future of the world*

In contrast with the "violent historicity" of "strong" thought in modern reason, the rediscovery of Christian eschatology - above all in the form of the theology of hope - sets up an "open historicity", which holds the human present and the divine future in an essentially asymmetrical relationship: it forgets neither the otherness on God's part nor the "novum" which his promise opens out for history. Far from supposing the identity of the real and the ideal, consciousness of the "eschaton" keeps the subject open to the permanent beyondness of the pure Object, and hence to the newness of the future of the living God, not deducible from any premise, but radically the outcome of his freedom. This future remains indetermined in its beyondness: it is attained only in the form of "promise" and of journey towards, not by any realized anticipation or "prolepsis". It is not the *cor inquietum* that invents or produces the tomorrow, but rather according to Christian faith, the resurrection of Christ makes the heart restless, liberating it even now from false securities and provoking a commitment to the liberation of the world, drawing into the human present something of the future promise of God. The "already" is marked with the "not yet" which comes to make its home in the now. The meaning which the theology of hope offers to restless humanity is not a tranquillizing certitude nor an illusory possession, but challenge and trust, struggle and contemplation, watchfulness and serene waiting, which even now alter the present tense of mankind.<sup>8</sup>

7 Id., *Glauben und Verstehen*, I, (Tübingen 1933). Italian translation: *Credere e comprendere*, 40.

8 Cf., J. Moltmann, *Theologie der Hoffnung*, (München 1964).

### 3. *“In finibus Europae”*: post-modern time and Christian theology

#### a) *Theology as critical guardian of historical praxis*

From the rediscovery of eschatology flow some important consequences that influence the understanding of the current critique of faith as well as the dialogue of faith in advanced society with various cultural expressions that have known the parabola of modernity. Conscious attention to ultimate horizons requires that faith, theology and Church are able to live with the tensions involved in “penultimate” time: these include that between the “already” of the first coming of Christ and the “not yet” of his return. A “realized eschatology” today runs the risk of falsifying the tension between the “already” and the “not yet”, making Christian faith into an illusory “ecstasy of fulfilment”. If the present is “the hour of harvest of past history”, the dramatic nature of intermediate time disappears, and the future ends up emptied of any energy of potential newness. The tension between “already” and “not yet” has a vital importance for Christian praxis in the complex societies of so-called “post-modernity”. All this entails for the Church a need to become a *conscious and critical guardian of historical praxis*, in the name of the permanent transcendence of the Kingdom which is to come (*an eschatological reserve*). Far from being sucked in as a function of the now, the Christian community is called to vigilance, to a costly commitment to solidarity, to denunciation and to proclamation in the name of a greater hope. The inculturation of faith, interpreted as the witness of the “eschaton” in the complexity of human cultures, asks of the community of believers a praxis of prophetic freedom, rooted in concrete commitment, and being at the same time a critical leaven and a permanent reminder of the beyond and of the newness of the living God.

#### b) *A new language of faith*

What seems to be asked of faith and of Christian theology is neither the projection of human desires, present or past, nor some reconstruction in fantasy of an unattainable future, but obedience to the Word and to the Silence of the divine self-communication, in order to produce a *language of faith* capable of speaking with relevance to post-modern cultures. In searching for this language, the believing community will unite metaphor and symbol with the concretely existential and with doxology. By means of a metaphoric and symbolic language faith will strive

to express for the cultures of advanced societies the ineffable of the future of God, while respecting what remains essentially inexpressible. It will evoke the final coming, starting from the first coming of the Word made flesh, without presuming to exhaust it or grasp it completely. By means of a language that is existential, concrete, descriptive and self-involving, eschatological faith will strive to express the present condition of mankind and of the world, into which the ultimate horizon brings at the same time light and unease, hope and conflict. Finally, by means of a lived and celebrated language of faith, in particular through forms of prayer and praise, the Christian word will try to link together the encounter between human condition (*exodus*) and God's revelation (*advent*) which is celebrated again and again in hope. In this light, eschatological thought cannot but build itself up as solidarity in the actual living of the Church, as well as in a conscious responsibility towards the past, the present and the future of the people of God.

### c) *Death and the question of meaning*

The rediscovery of the eschatological aspects of faith will also lead to a rediscovery of the *theme of death*, inevitably linked to the *question of meaning*, which re-emerges from the ashes of ideological presumption and from the not less total negation involved in Post-modernist nihilism. If the optimism of emancipated reason had exorcized death, relegating it to the status of a merely negative moment in the overall process of the spirit, the pessimism of the "long farewell" of the modern enlarged the embrace of death to everything and to every moment of life, understood as a permanent call into the void, and thus served to marginalize even more the dramatic nature of dying. The claim that death is nothing or else the idea that everything is a continual dying turn out to be complementary ways of avoiding the basic question that death poses to life: thus death is denied, evaded, suppressed. This "decline of death" is summed up in the figure of "death overturned", of the death of death, of death thus expelled from the flow of life which does not tolerate interruptions and silences.

The return of the question of meaning and of the theme of eschatology, over and above these "philosophies without death", entails a courageous move to "restore death". For Christian faith this "return to death" is the spur to come back also to *that* death, where in a unique way the death of death is consummated - the death of the Son of God in the darkness of Good Friday and his rising into life. In the infinitely painful event of the "death of God" the meaning of human living and

dying is revealed and promised. In that event, read in the widest horizon of the history of salvation as the story of the covenant between God and the world, the eyes of faith search for meaning; what is seen is not only life as a road of responsibility in learning to die, but also death as a “*dies natalis*”, that supreme and mysterious act of being born into that life which lies beyond death.

*d) A new dialogue between philosophy and theology*

And here - at the foot of the Crucified and with the disturbing question of the silence of his death - opens a new space of possibility for a *dialogue between philosophy and theology* beyond the collapse of meaning brought about by the crises within the ideological worlds of modernity, insofar as it involves a critical theory of real history, philosophy can betray itself and become mere commentary on the present moment, and hence an ideological justification of the now; this will happen unless it allows itself to be challenged by the encounter with irreducible Otherness, with an ungraspable newness of Difference, never reducible to Identity. It is not enough, then, that philosophy be a responsible exercise of memory, nor simply a critical consciousness accompanying the present: philosophy cannot abdicate that questioning about the beginning and the end which stems from what is deepest in present pain. It is the “cross of history” that brings to birth the question of its meaning: the ruptures and the falls, the renewals and the new initiatives raise an unavoidable question about the possible meaning of all this. They stimulate a quest for a kind of connection that might unify all the fragmentation of the works and days of mankind, and might nourish this desire with a goal that would make all the burden of living in some way worthwhile.

“In the last analysis the interpretation of history is an attempt to understand the meaning of human action and suffering” (K. Löwith)<sup>9</sup>. For Christian faith the silence of Good Friday is the place where God’s Advent, with all the non-graspable newness that marks it, has met the exodus of the human condition, with the depth and weight of its contradictions and of its incompleteness, which are included in the “*verbum abbreviatum*” of human finitude: death itself. The same question about the “cross of history” has been a crucial motivation for modern “philosophies of history”, whose parabola of triumph and decadence has reawakened with new actuality the

9 K. Löwith, *Meaning in History* (Chicago 1949) Foreword. Italian translation: *Significato e fine della storia*, (Milano 1989) 23.

scandal of the Cross of the Son of God as a unique potential meaning for the “cross of time” and so as the basis and central content of a vision of the world and of life that can give meaning and hope to history.

When the violence imposed by ideology on reality has run up against the tough resistance of the real itself, it has become obvious that it is not enough to change the world and life on the level of thought in order then to produce effective change in the concrete world of so much complexity. The crisis within the ideologies of historical progress is a crisis of a closed totality. It is the breakdown of a horizon that wanted to impose itself as ultimate, and which - precisely in the fragility and in the incompleteness of all it was able to contain and produce - has been shown up as plainly “penultimate”. Beyond everything that the philosophy of history wanted to embrace and include, an unknown and strange country presents itself, a region of “otherness“, a nondeductible being, a Homeland glimpsed but not possessed.

“Christianity today”, wrote the Italian philosopher Luigi Pareyson who died recently, “is not something before which one can remain indifferent. One has to choose for or against. There is no middle way: any intermediate position has been swept away by the crises of modern culture. In its fall modern culture has split in two, and philosophy, as its critical conscience, has viewed these two aspects as alternatives. The question is therefore philosophical, in the strongest sense of the word: hence it is unavoidable, and the resulting dilemma is imperative. It is useless to object that it deals with a question that goes beyond philosophy and is exclusively religious, and hence intimate, private, and of interest only to a certain type of person. As a philosophical question, arising from the critical consciousness of a definite historical situation, it interests everyone: faced with the ruins of modern culture the problem of a new culture arises, of a new world to be built, in which we all have to live (*de re nostra agitur*), and it is at this point that the choice for or against Christianity becomes decisive. Not less than a question, philosophy is also a decision: it is philosophy which gives shape to the dilemma; it is philosophy that poses the either/or, thus compelling towards an option. There is no getting away from it: *il faut choisir*”.<sup>10</sup>

Pontificia Facolta Teologica dell'Italia Meridionale,  
Sezione S. Tommaso d'Aquino,  
Viale Colli Aminei 2,  
80131, Napoli.

10 L. Pareyson, *Esistenza e persona*, (Genova<sup>4</sup> 1985) 11-12.