

The way of Sense through religion, faith, philosophy

by Giovanna Morelli

The secular age

We are invited to ask ourselves whether “religion, faith, and philosophy are contrasting ways of life.” This question suggests another, which logically precedes it: do religion, faith, and philosophy correspond in today’s globalized cultures to recognizably distinct ways of living?

We are also encouraged to reflect on the secular age and its presumed end. Some authors, from Klaus Eder to Peter L. Berger, speak of the end of secularization, that modern secularization understood by the fathers of sociology in terms of not only the separation between church and state but also as a cultural decline of transcendence or the disenchantment of the world (Max Weber). The contemporary philosopher Charles Taylor speaks of our time in terms of a “fragmentation of the horizons of Sense,” an explosion of new forms of personal spirituality gathered under the name of “wild” or unstructured spirituality, whereas Danièle Hervieu-Léger talks about a kind of “bricolage religiosity.” At the same time, we are witnessing the return of religious imagery propagated by the mass media, which leads to the manifestation of the desire for belonging and spiritual guidance (think of those crowds that gathered on the occasion of the death of some pontiffs or the day dedicated to “God’s influencers,” digital missionaries, during the Jubilee 2025). Sometimes, the return of a religious identity is linked to nationalism or to the recovery of austere and normative models that indicate the lack of an existential self-shaping.

Nevertheless, this situation does not authorize us to accept the end of secularization, of the materialistic skepticism of thought. Our globalized consumerist world is more disenchanted than ever. Certainly, as the above examples show, the secular era is not purely secular, but that is a phenomenon inherent to secularization, which is intrinsically and necessarily incomplete because it denies fundamental dimensions of the human, which will therefore re-emerge as they can.

We should rather distinguish a modern and a post-modern secularization. Pluralism, or the postmodern Babel, is exemplified by the spectacularization, promiscuity, and total horizontality of the network, with the related “social” perversion of religion and spirituality, which makes impossible any real experience of internalized transcendence. The socio-anthropological chaos of the postmodern Babel with its ethical and cognitive inconsistency, has opened the way to the last landing place of secularization: the paradoxical “immaterial materialism” of cybernetic techno-science.

Regardless of what might differentiate them, religion, faith, and philosophy have, over the long process of secularization, undergone a common decline, marked by disembodiment. The ways of life of those who profess a faith, adhere to a religion, or are nourished by philosophy, are today indistinguishable from each other and, indeed, from any other way of life. Certainly, there are some polarizations, for example regarding so-called bioethical issues and sexual identities, but these occur within the non-sense propagated by broader epochal forces that prevent anyone from shaping a personal life. We can speak of their common *corruptio* as the disappearance of *askesis* that united them in antiquity: here I mean *askesis* as a deep conversion, a spiritual exercise that engages life. As Pierre Hadot has told us about the Hellenistic and Roman schools of philosophy in which philosophy was an art of liv-

ing: a search for and care of Sense, the Sense that concretely inhabits our days and in turn guards the Sense of our humanity within the framework of being.

For a new metaphysics of Sense

When I speak of Sense, I am referring to the ideal purpose—to the “good”—that a thinking Will recognizes as appropriate to human self-determination, in the variety of its possible manifestations. But what ontological status do we confer to Sense? A psychic fantasy motivated solely at the human level? A Sense in the realm of the Non-Sense? Or do we “have faith” in a Sense of man, inscribed in a larger design or Sense of being? The ethical tension of which man is the bearer—the capacity to conceive, pursue, and even betray what is recognized as the good—interrogates the mystery of being. In that mystery the blind senselessness of chance could be hidden. Or conversely, that mystery could harbor an ethical awareness, a metaphysical teleology in which to inscribe the Sense of our lives and man’s existence.

We know that faith is the prerequisite of every religion. But not every faith, every spirituality, recognizes itself in a religion. Just as not every philosophy demands faith. We know that religions have been and still are the communal heritage of vast segments of humanity, while traditionally, philosophy is a practice of a few. From a truly post-secular era, we would hope not so much for the return of religion in its divergence from philosophy and free forms of spirituality, but rather for their convergence at the table of a renewed *askesis* where a mutual conversion of philosophy, faith, and religion is possible, according to a new metaphysics of Sense. Even for those touched by the gift of faith, it is a matter of having faith in one’s faith, as Illich once wrote. This is faith in man and his archetypal feeling of Sense.

The awareness that contemporary philosophy has

embraced the awareness that every *Weltanschauung* involves an act of “interpretation”, does not condemn us to relativism. Jung’s position is exemplary in this regard. In his cross-disciplinary research on faith, Jung acknowledges that every design of Sense is mediated by the human psyche but trusts that the psyche resonates with mystery through the symbolic interpretations inspired by our whole being. *Logos* does not oppose *pathos* but makes a pact with it, beyond the old opposition between the rational and the irrational, body and mind, aiming rather for integration. Sensory perceptions, feelings, thoughts, conscious and unconscious insights are the many organs of knowledge called upon to contribute to the imagination of Sense.

We can reclaim the search for truth without repeating the dogmatic and moralistic errors of the past; an open idea of truth, that is symbolic, transcultural, evolving, and overlooking a mystery that each of us can touch in the depths of our own mysteriousness, metaphysical as much as embodied “presence” to ourselves.

Corresponding to this embodied presence is the embodiment of the symbols through which the charism of mystery passes, be they words, acts, images, or creaturely beauty. In the faith experience of Bonaventura da Bagnoregio, Ugo di San Vittore, Hildegard von Bingen and many other masters of the faith, imagination accompanies the way of contemplation. The way of Sense is as ethical as it is aesthetic. Mosè and Aronne—the two characters in Arnold Schönberg’s work—teach us that otherness, the silence of transcendence is irreducible, inalienable, but equally irreducible is man’s need to intone his songs to that silence, to consecrate earthly *contemplatio* to that silence, when even the mute mystery of a rose is worthy as prophecy, charisma of Sense.

Illich cultivated this search for truth—the integral incarnation of truth—at the table of *philia* and textual culture.

The table is where Illich placed his faith, religion, and philosophy in front of each other. Illich's life and his path of research stand on the border between the three dimensions, in a shifting balance. His hermeneutics of the revelation will eventually converge in the Christological theme of the Incarnation, according to an admirable dissimilar complementarity between faith, philosophy and religion. For Illich, the transcendent mystery of being, through the physical and metaphysical figure of Christ, is incarnated in the face of man, in the relationship that binds us to one another as witnesses to a mystery of love and salvation¹.

Each of the three dimensions will have to look at themselves in the mirror of the other and trust each other, like friends at the table of that *philia* which is a shared search for truth, cemented in love. The "life of free insight" and the "life of obedient love" are not irreconcilable, as Leo Strauss believed. Free understanding can lead to love and reveal to us the beauty of free obedience.

Jürgen Habermas and Benedict XVI point to this reciprocal learning between secular-philosophical and religious perspectives as a hallmark of the possible post-secular world. The "faith of philosophy" – *der philosophische Glaube* – of which Karl Jaspers writes, travels, in its own way, this path of reciprocal learning, in a hermeneutic tension toward transcendence. Reversing Jaspers' formula, I will call "philosophy of faith" or "philosophy of the sacred" the post-secular philosophy that, according to the invitation of John Paul II (Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, Sept. 14, 1998), rediscovers its own metaphysical "audacity." It is a philosophy open to that mystery which, while imposing its limits on reason, also expands it in the feeling of a *conspiratio*, a teleological architecture guarded by the transcendent mystery of being. Philosophy is

1 G. Morelli, "Ivan Illich and the Phenomenology of the Incarnation", *Conspiratio*, Spring 2023.

nourished by the truths of faith, and the truths of faith can be regenerated by the *recta ratio* of philosophy.

Philosophy of faith

In this perspective, philosophy explores the territories of the sciences, the arts, religions, myth, and the humanities (anthropology, sociology, psychology...) and listens to life, without prejudice. Through the multiple designs of Sense adopted by humanity, philosophy will be able to reconnect with the “cosmic intelligence of being”², taking care of the complexity and proportionality of our *Weltanschauungen*, that is the dissymmetrical complementarity of material and immaterial data, nature and psyche, world, man and transcendence. Humanistic visions, aware of the first transcendence that is given to us: the surprising incarnation of human self-consciousness in the framework of the world, where man, thanks to the freedom of his relative indeterminacy, is called to shape himself beyond the predetermined plane of natural law. An immaterial and irreducible sphere, call it soul or spirit, which perhaps abhors the idea of death because it unconsciously knows it is immortal.

We need a gaze that makes the fullness of the psyche blossom, from personal Sense to shared Sense, through the concentric circles of the individuation process: integrating the differentiated and often conflicting parts of ourselves and relating them to what lives beyond ourselves, up to the affirmation and safeguarding of our common humanity.³ We need an anthropological principle that allows us to distinguish the specificity of man within the framework of creation; that allows us to distinguish a machine from a living, sentient, thinking, organism. Considering chatbots as “Alternative Intelligences” or accusing those who discriminate against them of “speciesism” is an idiocy, as is the dream of digital immortality. Religion, faith, and philosophy will not change our lives and will not

2 G. Morelli, “Nature from Kosmos to the system”, *Conspiratio* Fall 2024.

3 G. Morelli, “Renewing La Convivialité, a half century later”, *Conspiratio* Fall 2023.

save themselves, without the critical tools capable of dealing with the ethical and cognitive chaos of the present.

Science itself should sit at that table of renewed *askesis*, agreeing to question its materialistic parameters and all their contradictions, as the theory of Intelligent Design has begun to do. The way of Sense is ethical, aesthetic, and logical: can the incredible autotelic complexity of the living world be the work of chance? Can the feeling of Sense manifest itself in a world devoid of Sense? Beyond the specific arguments raised—and regularly challenged by detractors—the proponents of Intelligent Design accuse dominant science of being closed to the supernatural, and dominant science accuses them of not being sufficiently positivist. The dispute, in the scientific forum, is destined not to be resolved, because its foundations are philosophical and existential.-

The secular skepticism of thought, the “barbaric interval” that Jung speaks of in the mid-twentieth century is characterized by the overcoming of traditional forms of coopting the archetypal depth and by the absence of new possible forms of myth. According to Jung, one cannot voluntarily return to belief, but an understanding of the symbols of faith and their “abysmal wisdom” could help us “attain faith”.

Although religious revelations are often judged unfounded fantasies and illusory consolations, the most valuable legacy of religions is precisely their grounding in reality—which is anything but illusory—of the feeling of Sense. Their strong hermeneutic weaving opens the gaze beyond earthly life and its death, confronted by the mystery of being and the enigmatic coexistence of good and evil, inscribing evil in a design where it finds its reason. In this perspective, we can also approach the “*Credo quia absurdum*”, faith as acceptance of the absurd, that which seems to contradict all Sense. The initial sacrifice of Sense, like the “folly of the Cross” in Christianity is, in fact, the one that supports, paradoxically, the whole framework of Sense.

There are those who have read the loss of influence of the

Church on secularized society as an opportunity for the individual realization of Christianity. Illich went a step further, arguing that secular modernity carries within itself the secret heart of an institutionalized, perverted Christianity.

Postmodern spectacularization and cybernetic dystopias mark the decisive collapse of modern expectations in the management of social life. A new hope is thereby made visible and possible. We can preserve eschatological time, now and here, in our own inner time/temple, in our post-secular spaces of *askesis*, to practice an appropriate disconnection from the dominant imperatives and enjoy “a contemplative life in a technogenic world.” The “rivers north of the future” flow through the veins of every man who does not lose the grace of faith, incarnated in those moments of *conspiratio* that appear as a prophecy of Sense, through harmony, dedication, gratitude, mutual recognition, and the feeling of eternity.