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1. Photographing the Void

What will stay with us after the CoViD-19 pandemic is over is not only the bewilderment at a life change that no sane person could have foreseen only a few months ago or the collective anxiety for an indeterminate and insidious threat impending over mankind. Besides this, there are some images that have disturbed the consciences of those who, to evoke Max Weber, are still religiously musical despite the apparently inexorable process of the disenchantment of the world.

Some of these images have already gone down in history.

The most evocative ones are the [photographs](#) of Pope Francis shot during the extraordinary «Urbi et Orbi» blessing of March 27. Overlooking a deserted and rain-lashed Saint Peter's square, he gave voice to the feeling of disorientation afflicting Christians and non-Christians alike since the beginning of the pandemic with these powerful words: «Like the disciples in the Gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other».

The second picture is dated a few days before that ominous late-March Friday and features again Pope Francis. In this case, the [photograph](#) portrays him frontally as he proceeds, surrounded by several bodyguards, in Rome, along a spectral via del Corso, with his head bowed. The destination of this remarkable ensemble of people is the church of San Marcello al Corso where the Holy Father was going to pray for the end of the pandemic.

So far, one might think that the religious imaginary troubled by the coronavirus epidemic is only that of the secularized West. In actual fact,

however, even in Saudi Arabia, religious authorities did not wait long before taking drastic measures to stem the contagion. Thus, [photos](#) of the most sacred place in Islam, the Kaaba, the cube-shaped building in the center of the great mosque in Mecca, without the tens of thousands of faithful who normally stay around it, began to circulate in the Western media since the beginning of March.

But perhaps the image that more than any other picture seemed to support the claim of those who think that during the CoViD-19 epidemic «[pietas itself died out](#)», it is the sadly famous [photograph](#) of the column of military trucks, parked in Borgo Palazzo street, in the city of Bergamo, where the epidemic hit the hardest. Given the saturated condition of the city mortuary and crematorium, the vehicles were rallied to transport 486 coffins of coronavirus victims to other Italian provinces.

In this case, the imagination of believers and non-believers was stirred by an event that is religious only in a broad sense. For the cultural ghost summoned by the anomalous funeral procession is the collapse of those social practices that in ordinary conditions function as a wall separating the artificial realm of civilization from what modern political constructivism has pictured since Hobbes as a «state of nature»: a fictional place only suitable for wolves, where dignity, values, morals, memory, meaning, respect, are by definition excluded.

2. Mercy is Dead

It must have been a mental association of this kind that urged a refined philosopher like Giorgio Agamben to harshly reproach the Catholic Church for abdicating its role as a barrier to universal profanation during the epidemic.

«Because I have declared the responsibilities of each of us – he wrote in a short article entitled [A Question](#) – I cannot fail to mention the even more serious responsibility of those who had the duty to keep watch over human dignity. The Church above all, which, in making itself the handmaid of science, that has now become the true religion of our time, has radically repudiated its most essential principles. The Church, under a Pope who calls himself Francis, has forgotten that Francis embraced lepers. It has forgotten that one of the works of mercy is that of visiting the sick. It has forgotten that the martyrs teach that we must be prepared to sacrifice our life rather than our faith and that renouncing our neighbor means renouncing faith».

The theoretical background of this stern talking, which could sound insensitive and hard-hearted considering [the many priests](#) who lost their lives in Northern Italy during the peak of the CoViD-19 pandemic, must be sought in a previous musing by the author of *Homo Sacer* that was published on the same day of the «Urbi et Orbi» blessing. Here one of the cornerstones of Agamben's criticism of modernity makes its critical appearance: the concept of a *bare life*.

«Another thing to think about», he proclaims at the end of a 500 words monologue called [Reflections on the Plague](#), «is the obvious collapse of any conviction, or common faith. One could say that men no longer believe in anything at all – except for bare biological existence, which must be saved at any cost. But proceeding from the fear of losing one's life can only result in tyranny, the monstrous Leviathan with his drawn sword».

During the health emergency, Agamben chose for himself with poorly disguised pleasure the role of devil's advocate in the global conversation in which we are all willy-nilly engaged. However, it is not only he who ended up embracing the doubt that the main victim of CoViD-19 was less the infected people than the belief in life-transcending goods, i.e. that fragile but priceless asset which the sick people, their loved ones and more generally modern men tend to underestimate at their own risk and danger.

By widening the circle of dissenters, I do not have in mind here primarily the political leaders who suddenly started to thunder against the closure of the churches for blatant electoral opportunism. I am thinking, rather, of those thinkers who, while striving to do justice to the fragmentation and fragilization of modern moral horizons, have nevertheless espoused Agamben's merciless diagnosis.

An example for all. In an article entitled [Religion behind Closed Doors](#), Italo Testa, probably the most well-read and talented among the Italian philosophers of my generation, expressed doubts similar to those articulated with less tact by Agamben, taking his cue as well from Bergoglio's solitary walk in via del Corso.

«The image of Pope Francis – so begins his account – walking along the deserted streets of the Eternal City, surrounded by a police escort kept at a safe distance, while it recalls ex negativo the frames of *Habemus papam* ... is perhaps the living symbol of that eclipse of religion which, among other things, seems to be confronting us these days».

The term «eclipse» is deployed here purposefully. Testa, in fact, is no less severe than Agamben in registering the «voluntary abdication», the «silence», the «liquefaction», «desertion», «retreat», «capitulation», not only of the Catholic Church, which voluntarily gave up the administration of the sacraments out of respect for public health, but of all organized religions, left on the margins even in handling the symbolic dimension of the crisis. Thus, while more or less everyone took it for granted that shopping malls should remain open for the collective secular rite of weekly shopping (now suffused with a sacrificial aura due to the impending risk of contagion), baptisms, weddings, communions, confirmations, consecrated holidays, as well as the Sunday Eucharist and funerals, were immediately ousted from public life, or at least relegated to the shadows, almost without protest.

3. Prisoners of an Image: Religion under Scrutiny

But is this really the case? Can we be satisfied with such a ruthless diagnosis?

In my privileged condition as a scholar who in the last ten years has been almost full-time occupied with studying [the new secularization debate](#), as I come across this kind of arguments, no matter how subtle they are, the first image crossing my mind is different from those that monopolized people's attention during the peak of the pandemic. It resembles rather the picture invoked by Ludwig Wittgenstein in a famous paragraph (115) of his *Philosophical Investigations*. In that short remark, the Austrian-British philosopher suggested that entire systems of thought, which are seemingly impeccable from a logical point of view, can actually be held captive by an imaginary that is not up to the task, lurking and reproducing itself in the folds of their vocabulary.

More specifically, the imagery ensnaring the meditations on the alleged eclipse of religion at the time of the pandemic is not different from that which dominated the golden age of the theory of secularization. It is always the idea-force, I mean, of the zero-sum game between belief and unbelief: the water and the oil of human history that never mix and indeed continuously compete to stratify themselves in the most advantageous way. And together with it, what dominates the scene is the image of a religion constantly under scrutiny, required to prove that it lives up to both the present time and its past glories.

On the contrary, the recent secularization debate has taught us an opposite lesson. I would summarize it as follows. Religions have always been secular realities all the way down. And even more so are the faiths and cults that, after the rise of soteriological religions, have interpreted the invisible and enigmatic core of human existence in terms of the denial of the primacy of what [Alfred Schutz](#) called the prominent reality of work, fatigue, ingenious problem-solving, frustration of desires, death. Put more simply, believing that the world does not have the last word does not mean believing that the world is always wrong.

For a religion, to accept itself as (also) an immanent reality means, first of all, to deal honestly with the world for what it is and not for what one would like it to be. What we learn from the excellent book by Frank Snowden, [Epidemics and Society](#), is not surprising, therefore. In the wake of the trauma of the Black Death (XIV century), the response of all European nations to bouts of epidemic plague was, without exception and regardless of cultural and religious differences, a progressive centralization of the management of sanitary emergencies under the guidance of Health Magistrates who were exclusively led by the ancient precept *salus populi suprema lex esto* («the health of the people is the highest law»). Despite their having no reliable scientific explanations of the mechanisms governing the disease they were facing, the containment strategies pioneered by the northern Italian city-states of Venice, Genoa, Milan, and Florence (closure of borders, rarefaction of economic activities, quarantine, confinement of the infected in the Lazzaretto, periodic washing of the streets, etc.) actually met the rational constraints which, notwithstanding the reluctances that seem to be inborn in human beings, were abided as well by each state during the current pandemic.

Everything considered, it cannot be said that religious communities have fared worse than many secular agencies (governments, parties, the Italian Football Association, Tourism Departments, etc.) when they were forced to come to terms with the robustness of epidemiological facts. In extreme circumstances, the latter may even occur in the apocalyptic form of a collapse of ordinary sociality. Such was the case with the plague epidemic of 1656, which caused the death of nearly half of the Neapolitan population. The then catastrophe is described by Snowden with these chilling words: «Every activity of normal life ceased amidst shuttered shops, unemployment, and hunger. As in the well-known plague adage, too few of the living were left to bury the dead. Corpses were abandoned, both indoors and in public spaces. In the end, reports

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4. The Drowned and the Saved

The «run-for-your-life» experience in which every trace of civilization is wiped out, therefore, is not a monopoly of the modern era. Sure, in past times such experiences did not arouse the waves of hyperbolic doubts about the relevance of religious experience that we are used to witness today. But, in its revised form, the secularization thesis precisely boils down to coming to see and absorbing the radically innovative character, both in theory and in practice, of the rise of secularism as a self-contained life-form. In other words, what has changed with the emergence in Europe of the [secular option](#) – the condition that was fittingly pictured as an «[Immanent Frame](#)» by Charles Taylor – is the routinization of the possibility once reserved only to the elites to see themselves as self-fulfilled people even outside the domain of religious agencies and world views. If, that is, before the modern turn, religions could plausibly claim an exclusive right to symbolically and practically cope with the limit experiences from which no human being is exempted (birth, entry into adulthood, sexuality, fatherhood/motherhood, aging, bereavement, death), for a couple of centuries now the personal search for a good life has become a competition of all against all, where those who should act as referees make use of a regulation contested without exception by all the contenders, who do their best to exploit the new situation with expeditiousness and ingenuity.

Such competition is also a shrewd mirror game. It is not surprising, therefore, that, faced with an epidemic that caught almost everyone off guard, someone should maliciously require from religions a sort of mystical self-sufficiency. As I said above, however, there is something unfair or at least anachronistic in claiming that they ought not to modulate their behavior by creatively adapting their sense of inherent worth to the skills and knowledge that, in different historical circumstances, enable people to successfully navigate their way through this world. This is not how things work for people who do their best to maintain a precarious balance between two opposing realities both claiming absolute prominence over them.

What we have experienced in the past dramatic weeks, then, is not an irrevocable diagnosis of death. It is rather another interesting chapter

of the uncertain story kicked off by modern revolutions, whose most typical feature is dynamism. So, we better wait before giving up religions at the hands of CoViD-19. Many of them are old, it is true. Still, they have effective antibodies on their side. In particular, they have a rock-like trust in the fact that death, suffering, in a word «evil», can never have the last word, even when they seem to celebrate their most exalted triumph.

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If one thing can be said with certainty as of now about the coronavirus pandemic, it is that it is not an undisputed triumph of evil. In short, the boat on which we gathered is staying afloat and, despite the inevitable rough waters and strong winds, is moving towards the port. And while no one can say for sure what exactly that port consists of, hope does still make sense and most people will continue to be hopeful in the future as well, balancing realism and boundless desires as they have always done from time immemorial.

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