

Editorial: Some Thoughts on the Recurring Crises in the Contemporary World

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Christoph Stenschke's thought-provoking editorial on World War One in the previous issue of this Journal brought to my mind further questions with regards to the contemporary scene. In the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries we have witnessed major economic crises, two world wars and the rise and fall of two murderous ideologies, not to mention genocides as well as extensive persecution of Christians.

Analysts have offered different explanations to account for such dramatic events: conflicts and crises related to the monotheistic religions, to the clash of civilizations, to racial and socio-economic ideologies, to inadequate educational and political systems... No doubt one can find some truth to each one of these analyses, but they seem to come short of the central issues at hand.

In fact, the contemporary crises are primarily linked to the fundamental questions of our existence, both individual and community-wise. Two contemporary authors have expressed this fact in a recent interview related to the financial crisis: 'Every great financial crisis is in a certain way, a cultural, religious crisis, a crisis of civilization, of faith. With this present crisis, it is a whole set of values which has collapsed.' This is what 'happens when money has become an end in itself, instead of it being a means.' Excess (*hubris* for the Greeks) is at the core of this crisis. One can see it in the disorders pertaining to nature (the climate change and biodiversity crises), in the development of social injustices and in the division between virtual and real economy.¹

Albert Camus, the famous French novelist, expressed similar thoughts when he said:

We human beings have been thrust into existence with neither knowledge of our origin nor help for the future. We have questions about our meaning and purpose that the universe cannot answer. In a word our very existence is absurd.

Camus goes on to say that the silence of the universe 'betokens the evils of war, of poverty, and of the suffering of the innocent.' This leaves him with only one alternative: 'to commit suicide, intellectual or physical suicide, or to embrace Nihilism and go on surviving in a world without meaning'.² He chose the latter. What is interesting, though, is his continued search for meaning even to the point of considering Christianity as a possible answer.³ Such a plight shows profound insight, for Camus understood that the answer we give to the ultimate question of human existence has dramatic consequences on the way we act in the city!

In an article dealing with the twentieth-century 'European problem', George Weigel argues rather convincingly that its roots 'go back to the nineteenth century, and to the drama of atheistic humanism and the related triumph of secularization in Western Europe'.⁴ Weigel refers primarily to Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Henri de Lubac. The former saw in the Great War (1914-1918) 'the beginning of a civilizational crisis, in Europe, and perhaps especially in Western Europe, whose effects are much with us today'. Solzhenitsyn relates the origin of this crisis to 'the failings of human consciousness, deprived of its divine dimension'. In other words, 'the leaders of Europe lost awareness of a Supreme Power above them'.⁵ De Lubac considers the mid-twentieth-century tyrannies as 'expressions of an atheistic humanism that took its cues from' nineteenth-century philosophers such as Comte, Feuerbach, Marx and Nietzsche.⁶ Thus, according to de Lubac, the horror of these tyrannies resulted in the combination of 'atheistic humanism and modern technology'. But, beyond the nineteenth century one should also consider the impact of the rationalism and humanism of the Enlightenment on the contemporary cultural climate!

In fact, this is what the French philosopher, Luc Ferry, does in a recent monograph which relates the debate he had with Cardinal Gianfranco

Ravasi. Though aware of the significant contribution of Christianity to the development of Western civilization, Ferry nevertheless argues forcefully in favour of a purely horizontal perspective of the world and human existence. Since the Enlightenment and especially Nietzsche in the nineteenth century, the idea of a transcendent God is irrelevant with regards to matters pertaining to the city. Thus norms and civil values no longer rooted within a theological setting are characteristic of the 'democratic space' in our contemporary world. Such is the heritage that the Enlightenment and the French Revolution have passed on to us, 'the end of political theology'.

This means that 'the human being is the ultimate lawgiver' and that it constitutes the very 'essence of secularism (*laïcité*)'. This is true for both law and ethics. Ferry goes on to argue that 'the emergence of the major secular ethical systems as from the 18th Century onwards predicts the end of an Ethics rooted in theology' and he concludes his thoughts as follows: 'We believe we can and are able to handle the question of public life and to take the right decisions regarding it by ourselves without receiving orders from above.'⁷

The above examples remind us that, as we are confronted with the contemporary crises, we need to consider their roots. Without denying the importance of dealing with their more apparent political, economic, social and educational aspects, it is crucial to take into consideration the world and life views and historical events that have brought about such drama and disaster within the public space. We need to examine the philosophical origins of the tragedies we have witnessed in our midst. As Christians we need to recover and develop a theologically informed understanding of history. Such an alternative to secular humanism implies a united field of knowledge and a high view of the human being created in the image of God. It is both credible and relevant as it offers the full picture of the creature's plight and of God's generous work of redemption and restoration. It is no doubt revolutionary, but it carries the hope of genuine renewal and reformation within the human community. In fact Christianity, both Catholicism and Protestantism, has a rich heritage within this field, the best of which draws abundantly from the Scriptures, both Old and New Testaments.⁸

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Endnotes

- 1 Cf. *TGV Magazine*, June 27, 2009. For a development of this analysis, cf. P. Viveret, *Pourquoi cela ne va pas plus mal* (Paris: Fayard, 2006) and B. Montaud, *Bénie soit la crise de l'Occident. Une analyse spirituelle de la crise* (Caudecoste: Edit'As, 2009). Patrick Viveret is 'conseiller référendaire' at the *Cour des Comptes* and has been the editor of the magazine *Transversales – Sciences et culture*; Bernard Montaud is a body psychoanalyst and advocates a lay spirituality grounded in ordinary life.
- 2 Howard Mumma, *Albert Camus and the Minister* (Brewster MA: Paraclete Press, 2000) 13.
- 3 This is well documented in Mumma, *Albert Camus*, who relates the conversations he had with Camus in Paris over a period of years.
- 4 George Weigel, 'Europe's Problem – and Ours' on www.firstthings.com/article/2004/02/europes-problemmdashand-ours, 10 [accessed 06-12-2014]. Weigel offers a catholic perspective influenced by the excellent writings of Christopher Dawson.
- 5 A. Solzhenitsyn, 'Men Have Forgotten God'. The Templeton Address, 1983, quoted by Weigel, 'Europe's Problem'.
- 6 Weigel, 'Europe's Problem', 9. Cf. Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Le drame de l'humanisme athée* (Paris: Spes, 1945), which remains very helpful in understanding the contemporary scene from a theological perspective.
- 7 Luc Ferry and Gianfranco Ravasi, *Le cardinal et le philosophe* (Paris: Plon, 2013) 97-98.
- 8 In 2009 I had the privilege of participating in a congress in Aix-en-Provence organised by the Research Centre in Economic Ethics (University Paul Cézanne). The theme was *Qu'est-ce qu'une société juste?* (*What is a Just Society?*). I took part in a panel discussion on 'Les religions et la justice' and read a paper entitled 'Les religions et la justice : un regard protestant réformé' which was published in the conference proceedings: *Qu'est-ce qu'une société juste ?* (Aix-en-Provence: Presses Universitaires d'Aix-Marseille, 2010) 138-154. In this article I further develop some aspects of the significant contribution of the Reformation to these vital questions. A non-published English translation is available.