

On Christic polytheism and Christian monotheism

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Ho popolato di nomi il silenzio.

[With names, I have but peopled silence.]*

I. The myth about myth

There is a deeper and more lasting vitality to polytheism than is generally recognized. Its apparent demise began a long time ago, first when a movement of peasants turned nomads (Abraham and the other patriarchs) simply left the Mesopotamian city behind, and laid the foundations for what was to become in time a very acrimonious attack on the "idols" by the later prophets and sages of Israel. From Ionia across the Aegean to Greece came the questions of someone like Heraclitus, the ridicule of someone like Socrates or Plato. By then, someone like Jesus did not have to add much against polytheism—though it was the wild fire of the movement he had started that did eventually deal the final blow to it, at least in the West. Politically, the shrewd party platform of Constantine had placed polytheism outside the realm of the expedient; socially, it had become smarter to be Christian than a superstitious "pagan" (which literally means "country simpleton" from *pagus*, village). This was the final stigma that came to be attached to a millennial religious experience and, on the face of it, dealt a crippling blow to the fortunes of polytheism: it was just no longer socially "in" to be considered a "pagan polytheist." (It is an irony of history that

*Giuseppe Ungaretti, *Il sentimento del tempo: Inni*.

the Judeo-Christian religious tradition, which traces its beginning back to a movement essentially "pag-an" in origin, i.e., the rural world of the patriarchs, should have so branded its opposing tradition.)

But it had been a serious religious experience. Polytheistic spirituality had served the need of countless generations in their effort to communicate with the absolute. As such, it was not going to be easily undone. Beyond the veneer of curious mythological narratives and elaborate cultic practices, the basic philosophical underpinnings of polytheism provided, on the face of it, for a more "rational" explanation of reality. Reality—such was the profound message of the polytheistic tradition—is ontologically within the reach of human reason; all that is needed is a sufficiently cumulative process of assimilation; there is no essential qualitative discrepancy between human reason and the totality of knowledge. The gods—these seemingly clownish characters of a fantasy world—are in fact but powerful conceptual windows into different aspects of reality. Fate, on the other hand, is the great absolute principle underlying everything, a principle which serves as the genetic code of all existence, and which is incrementally self-declaring. Religion, finally, is the mechanism which allows us to get progressively more in touch with this sphere of total reality while we are expanding our natural capacity for rational assimilation.

Thus the "myth" (in the negative sense of something fanciful and unreal) is to consider "myth" (in the positive sense of a rational self-declaration of reality) as anything less than deadly serious. And supremely alive. This is a case where, we may say, history has blinded us. Heirs as we all are to polytheistic values, we can no longer see them as values. The irony is all the greater because, as I will try to show, even those who have no allegiance to monotheism fail to recognize their profound indebtedness to polytheism: even within our secular culture, to really appreciate polytheism we must approach it from a non-polytheistic matrix. For, in order to understand what the triumphal survival of polytheism really means today, we must consider the structural oppositions between it and its only true opposite—monotheism.

II. The ontological contrast: Fate versus God

Ostensibly, the words "polytheism" and "monotheism" refer to a diversely quantifiable aspect of the divine sphere: a plurality of gods on the one hand, and a singularity on the oth-

er. But viewed in this light, the contrast between the two is deceptive. While the terms of the mathematical equation, as it were, are correct ("many" does not equal "one"), it is the equation itself that misses the main point, on two grounds. On the one hand, the plurality of gods as such does not begin to exhaust the notion of the divine in polytheism; and on the other, the singularity of God in monotheism is to be viewed not as the result of some sort of mathematical reductionism, but as an altogether different plane of ontological reality. I will take up both points in turn.

The notion of the divine in polytheism would seem at first to be confined to the individual gods who make up the pantheon; after all, our very word "divine" comes from the Latin word *deus* which refers, precisely, to an individual god. But we should not be constrained by this type of semantic argument. Let us consider for a moment what the perception of the divine sphere as a whole appears to be in the polytheistic vision of things. The gods limit each other reciprocally, by virtue of both their nature (they each correspond to a specific and finite force in the natural world) and their becoming (in mythology, they confront each other through a web of relationships, both friendly and inimical). Whether in the ancient mythologies or in a modern rendering such as Wagner's operatic trilogy, there is a built-in "twilight of the gods" in the very notion of beings who are, yes, above our limitations, but still share only vicariously in some higher level of absoluteness.

The gods are not *the* divine, *per se*. In fact, in polytheism there is a clear perception as to what a higher level of the absolute might be. It is generally subsumed under the label of "fate." Fate occupies a specific slot in the conceptual system of polytheism: not only is it so named, explicitly; it also appears in the plot of various myths as an element with which the gods have to reckon. There are, however, two major differences between fate and the gods. First, fate never appears as an individual agent in any of the events narrated in myth: it is only an inert, underlying force, from which the gods may well derive their power, but which does not personally interact with them. Second, there are no prayers to fate, no cult offered in its honor: just as with the gods, fate does not enter into any articulate relationship with human beings either.

In simple terms, we may say that fate is absolute, except for personhood, and that the gods are personal, but not truly absolute. There are some significant corollaries that may be derived from this observation. (1) Fate is not perceived as "will-

ing" anything; rather, its operation is automatic and necessary (one of the terms by which it is known in Greek is precisely *ananke*, "necessity"). It underlies all of reality not only with regard to its nature (described properly as "fate"), but also with regard to its unfolding (described as "destiny"). Fate/destiny are, as it were, the cumulation of all possible existences and events: the rule of their being and becoming is not willed, but is coterminous with the sum total of the fragments and the moments. (This is, in a way, the epistemological model behind the post-modernist and deconstructionist theories in contemporary philosophical and literary thought.)

(2) To this extent, within polytheism there is nothing (ontologically) unknowable, but only the (temporarily) unknown. Polytheism is fundamentally vectorial and segmental, propounding as it does that all aspects of reality can be subsumed and integrated within an overarching and all-encompassing scheme. Hence fate does not "address" anybody: there is, as it were, a self-declaration of fate which coincides with the incremental accessibility of its multiple aspects. Fate is fundamentally predictable, not in the simple sense that it can be predicted, but in the deeper sense that it is the sum total of all realities. The gods may appear whimsical in the externals of story telling, but they are also predictable in that they are themselves (intransitively) a declaration, on a higher plane, of the multiple aspects of reality.

(3) Nor can fate be properly a subject of love—precisely because *it* is not a subject in the first place. As automatic necessity it has no freedom, and as vectorial predictability it admits of no risk. Nowhere is this perhaps so poignantly expressed as in the Greek sense of tragedy, which is, one might say, the perceived reality of freedom and risk negated by the more pervasive sense of inexorability. Significantly, the multiplicity of realizations represented by the gods includes fulfillment and gratification, but not love as affirmation of the other, even at the cost of sacrifice. The valor of a Prometheus and the generosity of an Antigone are qualities not of the divine, but of the heroic.

When in contrast to polytheism we speak of monotheism we may easily fall prey to a semantic trap—if, by monotheism, we mean polytheism of one. The singularity of the one God cannot be viewed as the result of a process of reductionism, which would lead, at best, to what is sometimes known as henotheism. Hence it is perhaps better to speak of a contrast not between the many and the one, but between the numerable

and the non-numerable; between, if you will, the many and the "zero." The single God is the reality beyond the means of discriminatory analysis, the universal who is not the sum of the particulars—as it has been stressed in a long line of eloquent statements from Paul (who warns against the "desires of the flesh and of discriminations [*dianoiai*]" [Ephesians]), to John of the Cross (who argues against excessive trust in "particular knowledge" [*Living Flame*]), to Kierkegaard (who writes eloquently about the contrast between the universal and the particular [*Fear and Trembling*]).

It is in this light that we may look at the Christian doctrine of Jesus addressing the Father and sending the Spirit, i.e., the doctrine to which we have come to attach the term "Trinity." Jesus did not use either this particular term or any other term, but rather presented us with the reality of a dynamic interaction within the heart of "zero," as it were. The Christian perception strongly affirms that through Jesus we do not see God in pieces, or, alternatively, we do not see a piece of God. In him and through him we have the apprehension of the whole, even though this happens but through the cracks of our fragmented perceptual abilities.

Note how fundamental it is for Christian understanding that Jesus did not become a human person; but, rather, that as a person of the "zero" he assumed the nature of the many, remaining the same person and continuing to interact with the other persons of the "zero," i.e., the Father and the Spirit. In this perspective the controversy against Arianism becomes suddenly very relevant: it is a perspective of profound structural contrast with polytheism, in which God (as opposed to fate) is the Father who wills reality in a truly creative mode; God is the *logos* who thinks reality in totally unpredictable freedom; God is the love who accepts the risk of freedom. Far from shrinking the personhood of God, the Christian perception claims that in Jesus we touch the God person.

III. The experiential contrast: Appropriation versus acceptance

There are two basically contrasting trends in relating to the absolute, one towards appropriation or acquisition, and one towards acceptance or surrender. The *acquisitive model* presupposes an indefinite power of cumulation within the framework of human experience: any limitation derives only from the existence of a finite ceiling which defines the current

configuration of such cumulation; but all ceilings are in continuous expansion in such a way as to support the belief that there is no intrinsic limitation on the part of the human subject to encompass all of reality, if only the ceilings can be sufficiently expanded. Thus the acquisitive model builds on the belief that both reality and experience are essentially quantifiable.

The *surrender model* is the exact converse of the first one. Here, a cumulation of finitudes is perceived as intrinsically incapable of subsuming all of reality. Reality is ultimately not quantifiable, and even total quantification would still miss the core of reality. There is a qualitative and dynamic abyss between the absolute on the one hand, and the human subject of experience on the other—qualitative, because the human subject on its own can never subsume the absolute (however full and differentiated its quantifying skills might become); and dynamic, because it is felt that the absolute is absolute in its very power to reach out and fill (quantitatively as well) the human subject of experience. In response to this initiative, human beings can only yield in expectation.

The acquisitive model is at the core the polytheistic spiritual experience. It proposes the unilinear goal of an ever expanding perceptual range, without breaking points, until one will have attained the outer reaches of reality. We are progressively appropriating all spheres of reality, because our human resources are intrinsically sufficient to the task. There is no proper mystery, but only the unknown, the as yet uncovered solution to problems. Reality is the cumulation of fragments, the total cumulation of all finitudes; to the extent that the cumulation of our conscious acts matches the cumulation of these fragments, to that extent we become divine. Integration is not so much given as it is achieved—through the addition of information, the widening of awareness, the increasing means of control. The reason that this is more properly polytheistic than just, let us say, secular or agnostic, is that there are projected models to which we conform. These “gods” (whether geniuses viewed as heroes, abstract notions which guide our striving, or potential forces from which we expect help) are the recipients of our praise, our hope, our subservience—our cult. But not of our love or adoration because neither these gods, nor the underlying *ananke* (necessity), can either love or will.

Love and adoration are, instead, the characteristics of the surrender model, which is at the heart of the monotheistic experience. Within this sphere, the sense of mystery is the ap-

prehension of a reality endowed with a life ever beyond our reach. Mystery is not a secret, an unresolved problem capable of solution, but a different dimension of being which touches us from beyond. Its integration springs from its own core, infinite and absolute, and not from any cumulation of fragments which we recompose into a pattern of unity. Exposure to the mystery is due to an initiative beyond our means; we are led, trained, spoken to—to a point where we experience, as it were, an explosion of perception which raises us and our perceptual ranges to a different ontological status. We crave, then, for adoration. We can respond only in surrendering to this will, which is not a set of decisions asking for conformity, but the very act of creation which upholds us through time and space. The bold paradox of monotheism is its confidence that we do not know pieces of God, but rather we know God in himself as the absolute beyond all pieces—while fully realizing that our perceptual range is intrinsically fragmented into temporal and spatial pieces. It is precisely in adoration that we can sense a whole which we cannot in fact perceive as such. (The abhorrence that some have for what is perceived as undue “adoration” of Mary makes one wonder if there is a proper appreciation of what adoration truly is. Even to contemplate that one could worship Mary would seem to imply that one does not know what worship is.)

Both models are profoundly and jointly operative in the human religious psyche; while they are structurally the opposite of each other, they are in fact present in most of us at all times. An attitude of surrender is found in a polytheistic milieu, for instance where Mesopotamian “ecstatics” behave in ways reminiscent of the biblical prophets, or where Dyonisiac and Mithraic mysteries profess “irrational” short circuits to the divine. But no such religious experience properly attains to the status of adoration, since adoration is not so much recognition of superiority (which may properly be called veneration) as it is total collapse of creatureliness. Hence the non-polytheistic apprehension of the divine in paganism (such as ecstatic trances or mysteries) remains essentially fragmented and incomplete. Conversely, our being a monotheistic tradition does not mean that we are essentially and purely monotheists. Think of the following cases.

Science is, in the one instance, appropriation of truth as a body of knowledge; and, in the other, acceptance of the self-power of revelation that truth has (where truth is conceived as personal, i.e., as God). *Love* is lived as the savoring of what the

other has to offer; or, as the yielding to the surprise of the offer the other makes. The overall *ordering of events* is perceived as being affected by some inert statistical law (luck, fortune, destiny); or, as the caring intervention of the free will of God. The *disruption of order* is felt as an imperfection of the human subject, which undermines our ego (guilt) by diminishing our self-esteem and self-reliance, and which can ultimately be righted only through our own effort; or, conversely, as a betrayal of the friendship of God (sin), which is forgiven by his love, through which an ontological restoration (redemption) of the human subject is brought about. We will return below to this aspect of co-existence between the two models. For now, we may look in some more detail at just three of these contrastive pairs.

(1) One often thinks in terms of a binomial "faith versus knowledge," but this can easily induce a wrong perception of the polarity between these two aspects of experience. Faith *is* knowledge—intuitive knowledge, that is, rather than discursive or analytical knowledge; but, at the same time, analytical knowledge is the stimulus which elicits the intuitive experience of faith. In this sense, we may expect, paradoxically, for faith to continue beyond death. I say "paradoxically," because the very notion of "beatific vision" clearly implies that there would be no more room for doubt, uncertainty, unbelief. The virtue of this paradox lies in highlighting the fundamental continuity between faith and vision. Such continuity can best be understood in the light of the notion of resurrection: the present is not going to be trashed and totally replaced; the present, blessed in all its seriousness by the Incarnation of Jesus, is going to be resurrected and transfigured, hence continued in some substantial way. Rather than perceiving the beatific vision as some sort of black box containing the resolution of all problems, we could think of it as the fullest expansion of a consciousness which we already have, in faith, of the reality of God—in fact, as Jesus claims, of the *total* reality of God, since he proclaimed to have already revealed to us all that there is to be known. Ontologically, it might be claimed that faith shares in the beatific vision.

(2) Another significant contrast pertains to the sense of our personal mission in life. The monotheistic notion of "vocation" is a correlative of the notion of the surrender to the absolute. We are called to be ourselves in response to a creative act which continually upholds and affirms the very fiber of our personhood. To be ourselves means to answer that creative call

which envisages our selves in the first place. If there is a struggle it is the struggle to discover the particulars of this call, and to implement them as lovingly and generously as we can. Our destiny is the creative wish which the absolute reveals to us on a personal basis, and which extends beyond the realm of the empirical and the finite, beyond death.

On the other hand, the polytheistic worldview projects an image of "self-fulfillment" or "self-realization"; there is an innate potential in us which we must bring to full fruition, not so much in openness to the other, as rather in the appropriative mode which builds our ego as it props it up with the widest available range of supports. Our destiny is the actualization of that genetic code, as I call it, which is imprinted in all of us. Like a machine, it functions better the more power it can aggregate onto itself; and just like a machine, it has no horizon beyond the disaggregation of what has been cumulated, no horizon beyond death.

(3) The last contrast we can briefly describe here is that between the person and the individual. It has been one of the achievements of Christian philosophy to have articulated the notion of person, in response to the need to cope intellectually with the self-revelation of Jesus as God on the one hand, and his own revelation of the Father and the Spirit as God on the other—in other words, to cope with what came to be termed the Trinity. Human reflection about the Trinity has caused us to see the nature and value of the person as the fulcrum of choral interaction: a self which reaches the peak of selfhood when it reaches the peak of self-giving; a self which can be perceived, however dimly, even in the absolute, precisely as the trinitarian absolute. In this mysterious sense, then, the Trinity is the climax of the monotheistic perception, but also of the human appreciation of the personal self. Polytheism, on the other hand, cannot attribute selfhood to the absolute, does not see any personal dimension in the ultimate fate and destiny, and instead comes to stress the individual in its impersonal dimension. The polytheistic individual is like a factor in a numeric expression, because the absolute is the sum of all individuals rather than a individual, and a numeric sum results in a new number, not in the communion of individual numbers. Appropriation being the goal, the individuality of what is appropriated is lost. This is why the apotheosis of impersonal individuality is at the same time the climax of psychological alienation. Perhaps never as today could

man fully understand, living as we do for and by electronic control, what becomes of individuality when it is understood merely as membership in a numeric set.

IV. *The great polytheistic cultural matrix*

The complex religious system, polytheism, never really died. Nor did it merely survive. It kept on thriving, and it thrives today, because it does respond to a basic instinct of our human nature. There is a kind of intellectual and moral rule in our perceptual rule of the *divide et impera*. By viewing reality as fragmented, we feel that we can exercise more control over it. And so it is: our analytical powers extend only to the fragments, which we then reconstitute in partial syntheses—but even these are always intrinsically (“ontologically,” one might say) partial, no matter how comprehensive in scope. Note how the essence of the scientific method consists in repeating the experiments precisely as a way of retracing the steps that have helped in bridging the fragmentation. Morally, too, our efforts aim at those concrete and limited moments which affect our life and the lives of those we touch; within this perspective, any feeling of universality is in effect purely sentimental. The striving towards fragmentation viewed as the control of parts is a form of cultural polymerism, which is clearly dominant in our society today.

But while fragmentation as such is the first major aspect of the survival of *polytheism*, the second major aspect (reflected by the second part of the word: *polytheism*) is the reliance on individuals and institutions which, we feel, can help us bring more of these fragments together than we ever could by ourselves. In some cases, the relationship becomes very structured and in effect cultic, such as with the “cult” of the personality and of the state in Lenin-Stalinism on the one hand, and nazi-fascism on the other; the trappings of free masonry or of the Ku-Klux Klan; the machinations of astrology. But the theistic aspect is present in a pervasive set of attitudes, even if in a somewhat less organized way. The great scientists are perceived to hold the key to an ontological explanation of reality, even if we cannot follow their reasonings, and the technology they develop and the methods they follow provide the verification of the validity of their quasi-divine status. For instance, medicine assures us longer life; space science—the indefinite expansion of our territorial imperative; computer science—the widest extrasomatic reach for our individual brain function; weapons of mass destruction—the se-

curity from threats on our socio-political integrity; psychoanalysis—the perfect massaging of our ego towards greater peace of mind; and so on. But even on a more mundane level there are many theistic dimensions in our collective lives: the great “stars” of the world of entertainment or sport are projections of our cultic need to approach someone who is far and near at the same time, and from whom we receive a gratification of sorts.

This great secular matrix of our cultural make-up is then more than just pagan or “secular”; it is in fact theistic and properly *polytheistic*. There is a tension towards a higher plane from which something beckons to us but which is not quite within our reach, and where someone else holds the reins of guidance and control; this something else retains a definite remoteness and can be ingratiated, cajoled, appropriated through some specific initiative on our part. And all of this because, by being a composite of individual pieces, it can be appropriated in a piecemeal fashion. We know that, even though we do not hold all the keys to our individual problems, there are many others who can unlock doors that block us in, and we hope in some secret and unexpressed way to be led eventually and in succession through these doors that define our humanity. All of this is secular only in the sense that it does not rely on the formal aspects of specific mechanisms which have culturally been labeled as religious. But the profound underlying sentiment which pervades our “secular” lives nevertheless uses a great variety of theistic hooks on which to hang one’s hopes, fears and ambitions.

Understood in this sense, polytheism is still an integral part of life today. We all nurture in ourselves, if unwittingly at times, profound polytheistic attitudes, we are all easy prey to the psychological effects of a consumerism which tends to equate fulfillment with saturation. In this respect, the widespread hold of polytheism today may be viewed as the modern version of original sin: we tend to lose the sense of limits, and specifically our ontological limits. On some level of our modern psyche we come to believe, though we might not articulate it so explicitly, that if we could only build a computer large enough to include all knowledge, we would obtain virtual omniscience; that if we could produce enough medicines to avoid all diseases, we would obtain virtual immortality; that if we could expand our consciousness to subsume in it enough experiences, we would obtain unfailing happiness. Such psychological consumerism, such ever-widening appropriation of fragments, is

the apple tree in this modern garden of Eden. And the more we relish these surging waves of fragments, the more we drown in them.

Our emotional dependence on this fragmentation extends even to what may otherwise be assumed to be a Christian perception of the religious domain. Consider the general notion one has of: eternity and the infinite; providence and divine will; sin and redemption; science and wisdom.

(1) *Eternity* is often perceived as a long duration, and *infinity* as immense expansion; but a multitude of days, even unending, does not add up to eternity; nor does the totality of all finite spaces add up to infinity. Since we have no empirical knowledge of anything but space and time, figurative language is of course the only possible means for expression—thus the Gospel of John refers to the eternal reality of the Word in the temporal language of pre-existence (“In the beginning . . .”), much as we say that the sun sets when we know we are saying that the earth revolves around the sun. But even if we cannot empirically touch the eternal and the infinite, we have the experience of the limits of time and space in such a way that we can say we know eternity to be non-time and infinity to be non-space, which is the proper monotheistic perception, beyond the trappings of our human language. Note the contrast with such a sophisticated philosophical synthesis as that offered by Hegel: this remains essentially non-incarnational because it projects an abstract universality which is intrinsically divorced from particularity (something which was sharply articulated in Kierkegaard’s critique of Hegel). Even more specifically, it remains non-sacramental because sacramentality is the link operated personally and particularly by Jesus between the infinite and the finite: outside of sacramentality, the attempt to overcome finitude results in the denial of it, whereas, within it, we affirm finitude by transfiguring it through the incarnate God.

(2) Similarly, *providence* is often perceived as a time-bound mechanism for a digital correlation of events (as some extra-super computer might do), some sort of glorified social secretary or dating system that can successfully match individuals and events; and *divine will* as a vectorial analogue of human will, tending to implement a successively coherent set of decisions at best, or of whimsical tests at worst. These are essentially cumulative (or polytheistic) perceptions. In contrast, a truly monotheistic understanding would accept providence as an atemporal cocoon within which, as it were, events are engendered with

their unique matrix of interactions—or at any rate as the inscrutable, unquantifiable wellspring of time itself. And divine will would equally be accepted as the creative act which posits in time the mystery of human freedom. Hence “doing the will of God” is not the servile implementation of a dictate extrinsic to our best interest and personal growth, but rather a willful conforming on our part to the creative act which posits our own well-being from within.

(3) We often feel oppressed by *guilt* as a cumulation of transgressions, a spider web which suffocates our ego, and for which the best cure is forgetfulness, i.e., the psychological process by which we strive to bypass the burden and escape from its consequences through mere temporal progression. By contrast, the monotheistic counterparts of guilt, ego, forgetfulness, and escapism are sin, conscience, forgiveness, and redemption. *Sin* is not faceless guilt, but the betrayal of a friend, i.e., God in his personal, creative love; it is a choice to “un-create” ourselves, because God’s love continuously posits our being, and by going against his will we opt for a lesser share in his own creation. In this perspective, we may say that there is fundamentally only one sin, un-love. *Conscience* is the awareness of this betrayal and the urge to go outside of oneself for a single act of pardon, rather than for a sequential and progressive scraping of feelings. To obtain such *forgiveness* from the absolute personal love of God is what restores the individual confidence in the self, precisely because the point of origin of forgiveness is outside the self. In other words, restoration is not on account of the self’s own power but on account of the regenerative power of *redemption*, which restores to its original innocence both the ontology and the psychology of the sinner. As a result, the Christian notion of sinfulness is full of hope rather than gloom, because it relies on an absolute initiative which is beyond all limits (and confession is by no means *mutual* reconciliation, but acceptance of sacramentally concrete pardon); conversely, the polytheistic notion of guilt induces an anxiety proportional to the sequential number of accumulated transgressions (and psychoanalysis deals with guilt by removing the scales of such accretions).

(4) *Truth* is perceived as a disposable good, and in this sense science is viewed as the appropriation of an objective set of data, measurable in terms of the size of the data bank. But there is a deeper epistemological bias in the modern attitude towards science, namely that truth is something which can, in ef-

fect, be owned and patented, as if we had manufactured it. The contrast with this attitude is to be found in what may be called wisdom, as the receptive acceptance of a truth which is ultimately a personal reality—one that communicates personal values and cannot be owned and disposed of. Proper Christian epistemology waits for truth all the while it is seeking it; in other words, it assumes that truth reaches out to us as much as, or more than, we reach out for it.

The attitudes and notions described above permeate most Christian lives. Or rather, they permeate the lives of Christians. In other words, the fragmentation which I am labeling here as polytheistic is at the core of the cultural matrix which is essentially non-Christian (as today's correlation to original sin), and yet is part and parcel of the lives of Christians. The symbiosis between (polytheistic) fragmentation and (monotheistic) centering is an integral part of our human condition as Christians, but not of our Christian-ness (we are in the world, but not of the world). It is the task of Christians to become ever more deeply aware of the difference, and not to adhere, in more or less conscious ways, to the development of a Prometheus-like complex which heightens the polytheistic dimension in all of us. To help distinguish between these two dimensions, I would like to use the opposing terms of Christic versus Christian.

V. Christian monotheism and Christic polytheism

The obvious point of reference for Christianity is the person of Jesus. But Jesus is also a point of reference for much that is not Christian. For the sake of our present discussion, I will reserve the term "Christian" for an attitude that recognizes Jesus as God, as the absolute point of reference from which everything else is derived; while the term "Christic" will be used for an attitude that recognizes Jesus only as a relative point of view, however central and important. In this respect much of what is called Christian culture is in fact only Christic; and in some of its aspects even what is called Christian religion may be more properly understood as Christic polytheism. We have just seen some of the attitudes which may more properly be understood as polytheistic than as monotheistic in our approach to eternity and infinity, providence and divine will, sin and redemption, science and wisdom. We will now look at a duality of beliefs which affects more specifically the figure of Jesus and our relationship to him.

(1) The Christian, monotheistic view of Jesus accepts him as *the absolute person*. The mystery of the Incarnation proposes to us—as to the blind man who asked “Who is he that I may believe in him?”—that this very specific and concrete individual, “whom we see and who speaks to us,” is nothing less than our very fate and destiny; the one whom we, as the blind man, ought simply to worship on our knees. Such a collapse of barriers, such a surrender of consciousness to a very historical Jesus, such true adoration is the proper “Christian” experience. The moment we see anything less in Jesus, he emerges at best as an aggregate of forces—a portion, however large and significant, of a fragmented intellectual universe, whose various manifestations we may at best seek to appropriate as part of our “Christic” culture: Jesus the champion of social justice; Jesus the compassionate healer; all the way to Jesus the talisman for personal gain. He may even be viewed as more than an emblematic cultural figure: we may, that is, expect him to exercise some degree of operative power on our lives—but ultimately only as *a god*, not as *God*. In this we are but polytheising Christian experience and reducing it to a mere fact of culture.

(2) If so, we will come up short against the ultimate test of death, for we are ultimately saved by Jesus, not by any form of culture, however Christic its inspiration. What is constitutive of salvation is fundamentally the notion of *grace*. In a Christic perception, the power of grace is seen on the level of a very persuasive, but ultimately partial and accretionary remargination of our wounds, not as an ontological and psychological reconstitution of our being. We are often not bold enough to accept fully, in adoration, the gift of sanctifying grace, which regenerates us ontologically, and of actual grace, which propels us psychologically. We try to expand our consciousness because we cannot fully believe that Jesus can explode it. We try to scale heaven because we are too shy to live for the resurrection. We are, as it were, in-culturating grace rather than in-gracing culture. We should, instead, continuously rediscover the richness of grace as offered by Jesus—habitual or sanctifying grace, which establishes our character and makes us capable of adoration; and actual grace, which makes us capable of concrete and specific acts of consecration, through prayer and spiritual surrender, in a continuous implementation of our personal growth. To be made ontologically capable of adoration is the most wondrous gift possible. How christically reductive is it, instead, to view grace as a cultural accretion of insights and acts, through some

sort of spiritual consumerism which is too often the modern equivalent of Pelagianism, even more sterile, if possible, than its ancient counterpart because it is so profoundly a-sacral.

(3) *Prayer* is the response to grace in a way that is unimaginable outside of the Christian experience. Let us look first at its Christic counterpart. Christically, we try to appropriate the pathways to God by using directions; we construct our itinerary and find a verification of its worth because we develop the sense that our spiritual accretions become fuller and more gratifying in the process; we try to cover all bases as if God needed convincing; and on this path, even the sacraments may become but the prisoners of liturgical narcissism. The contrast with proper Christian prayer is very simple. Instead of being vectorially acquisitive, Christian prayer shares in the profound and absolute creative power of God. Through grace, God elicits in us the desire that is his desire. The sacraments are the real time implementation of this divine plan: through them, our prayer becomes an ontological participation in the creative plan of God, in his Incarnation. The ascent propounded by John of the Cross is astoundingly bold in this respect: by not appropriating anything, the soul "becomes deiform and God"; through the sacraments, the soul becomes substantively part of trinitarian life, she "breathes out in God to God the very spiration which God breathes out in himself to her."

(4) The ultimate fruition of prayer, *paradise*, is perceived christically as the faculty of "having" the beatific vision, as something which we can appropriate in an almost physical sense. The irony of this position emerges when we consider how some can even pose the question as to whether Jesus "had" the beatific vision. Such a consumer's approach to paradise negates the fundamental dimension of Christian hope. Jesus *is* the beatific vision, so how can there be any question about his "having" "it"? What is more, the Father's own beatific vision includes his relationship with Jesus. In other words, Jesus is the beatific vision not only for himself, but also for the Father and the Spirit.

(5) *Theology* is particularly prone to be polytheistic to the extent that it pretends to appropriate and split the core of the mystery—while it should only analyze our own, human modes of perception of this mystery. We can indefinitely split the seemingly unsplitable (the "a-tom") in the world of nature because that is in the nature of finite being, but we cannot split the core of the mystery, which is by definition the ultimate, the real "a-tom." If our analytical modes of perception are raised to

where they become modes of being for the absolute, then we are quite literally polytheists. It is a naive phenomenological approach to assume that the ancient Mesopotamians, say, were so impressed with the power of the sun that they attributed to it divine powers. Rather, being affected by the affecting presence of a really, if mysteriously, perceived absolute, they sought for traces of it in the world as they could analyze it and found it, for instance, in the sun. It is not that, being impressed by natural phenomena, they simply divinized them; it is rather that, perceiving God, they sought him in natural phenomena. Epistemologically, there is a real possibility for "Christian" theology to do the same, and thus to emerge as essentially polytheistic or, because of its intellectual dependence on Jesus, Christic.

VI. The Christian gamble

There is, in this protracted survival of the polytheistic vision, a specific juxtaposition to what can be described, in monotheism, only as a risky intellectual and existential gamble. Monotheism believes that divine intervention in culture is unique and leaves a culturally defined imprint forever: and this is a gamble in that the specifics of divine intervention remain as a fundamental historical presupposition for the subsequent, actual unfolding of human history. Christic "heresies" all have one thing in common, namely, they do not accept certain key aspects of this gamble and re-propose a more "rational" (ultimately, polytheistic) understanding of the Jesus event—tragically so because, on the face of it, they purport to offer a more profound human understanding of that very event.

It seems illiberal to speak of heresies today. Partly, this is because the term has acquired a derogatory connotation with which one came to refer to a substandard deviation from what was perceived to be the truth. Etymologically, the term refers simply to a separation, a distinctiveness of a position which is stated explicitly on its own terms, and for which one is willing to fight. (The same etymological base is more readily apparent in the term "protestantism.") While, in the past, separations were often stressed and courageously defended, today there is more of a tendency to whitewash the differences, in the name of a type of ecumenism which is perhaps more properly a form of syncretism. One wonders what position such Christic ecumenism would have taken in front of martyrdom as accepted by early Christians during the Roman Empire: why not let faith

be purely a matter of internal conscience, and be liberal towards the cult of the gods? Why not save lives by recognizing that these gods were purely a symbol of state authority, to which we would certainly owe allegiance? Not to speak of the battle about Arianism, which might well have been presented as socially irrelevant intellectualizing.

In fact, "heresies" are powerful intellectual movements which crystallize the broad base of religious perceptions around a valid rational kernel. They elicit in turn a more or less explicit counter-crystallization around the core of faith, so that within the continuity of a coherent spiritual experience different modes of awareness are brought into sharper focus by those who choose not to "separate," but to remain behind, to remain orthodox. Thus, for instance, with Athanasius in response to Arianism, Augustine to Manicheism, John of the Cross to Lutheranism, Francis de Sales to Calvinism, Theresa of Lisieux to modernism. As a function of historical dialectics, heresies not only define the choice which guides their own *hairein* (separating), they also place in bolder relief the core from which they have pulled out elements which are spurious when seen apart from the core.

It seems valid to say that such a "pulling away" is a constant, even if it does not always materialize in an intellectual and institutional crystallization. Historically, the lack of crystallization may be due to the absence of either sufficient institutional basis, or a sufficiently comprehensive intellectual framework. Such a relatively splintered and nebulous situation seems to obtain in contemporary Catholicism. There are positions, widely held by Catholic individuals and groups, which seem in contrast with the core of the faith, but which remain in a sufficiently fluid state so as not to cause an explicit breaking away (*hairein*) from it. Of course, the critical issue is the identification of what is truly the core. The reflections adduced here about poly- versus mono-theism may help us to address precisely this issue. More specifically, I would suggest that polytheism may be seen as the common ground for the various heresies which developed historically as splits from a more coherent monotheism. Thus Gnosticism was the persistence of the belief in an underlying, communal fate which explains everything and which is ontologically within human power to grasp, if only human beings are given enough time. Monophysitism was the belief that this overarching fate cannot truly become human flesh, since fate does not have true personal identity. Pelagianism was

the belief that man is a Prometheus-like creature who can reach the divine level on his own, without the assistance of divine grace because there is no true ontological hiatus. Even more intriguing is the polytheistic dimension of the two "separations" which were not only of major import for their theological vision, but also resulted in very explicit and lasting institutional embodiments, namely Arianism and Protestantism.

Arianism proposes that Jesus is a created divine being who raises human consciousness in its ascent to a universal acquisition of knowledge. (Historically, this is based on the philosophical effort to view revelation through the categories of Greek philosophy, which had developed at that point in time into Neo-Platonism.) The implicit, if unintended, consequence is that there could be *several Jesuses* in the course of human history. Even if something of a *reductio ad absurdum*, since Arian theology would not properly entertain such extremes, this conclusion is a logical consequence which points to an effective weakness of the system: if the *logos* is created, it is finite, hence ontologically repeatable; and the Incarnation is no longer the unique personal manifestation of the *logos* (the person-*logos* becomes incarnate as Jesus), but rather an historical adaptation within time (God becomes the person Jesus, i.e., he creates a person in whom he then infuses the *logos*). In orthodoxy, the Second Person exists outside of time; in Arianism, he begins to exist when he is born in time. Thus Arianism effectively rejects the gamble that Jesus is eternal, that no other Jesus could ever be given to us, that to the end of time his Person will provide salvation to all races and all cultures or, for that matter, to all galaxies (quite a gamble for us today as we contemplate the possibility of extraterrestrial, intelligent life).

Protestantism proposes that the Church is the community of human beings who existentially believe in Jesus as a divine savior and intellectually accept his message; it does not, however, accept the Church as a sacramental organism, as the cultural manifestation of the Incarnation of Jesus. In particular, Protestantism rejects the succession of Peter as the institutional memory of his incarnation, as a guarantee of divine presence in culture. The implicit consequence is that, should the Protestant tradition be broken, it could be *reactivated* through cultural process, i.e., through the rediscovery of whatever written descriptions of it might be found archaeologically at some later point in time—much as we can relate today to, let us say, Babylonian spirituality. (Such a short-circuiting of tradition is pre-

cisely what marks the genesis of Lutheranism: in this it tried to reach back to Jesus' own intentions through a type of scholarly analysis which was just then being made possible through the philological accomplishments of the Renaissance. Historically, the Protestant rejection of the Middle Ages and the consequent idealization of primitive Christianity implied precisely that the tradition had been broken and could be restarted.) The Catholic gamble, on the other hand, is that the succession of Peter will continue uninterrupted not only for two, but for many thousands of years, until the very end of time; that the Church is the sacramental medium through which the Incarnation of Jesus, and the salvation he provides, will continue forever (literally) in culturally defined channels, of which the succession of Peter is the most visible one. Were the tradition to be broken, the Church, we must concede, could never be restarted, no matter how much documentation might be found about her archaeologically. Conversely, if the Catholic position is to be fully coherent, it must accept the proposition that the end of the papacy will coincide with the end of the world—no small gamble to take.

Christian "heresies" are, then, in different ways, eloquent restatements of the highest reaches of polytheism. They are profoundly Christic in that they revolve around the figure and message of Jesus, but they are ultimately not truly Christian in that they assume, on some level or another, that Jesus can originate in the human sphere. Thus, for instance, in the specific cases cited, another created Jesus could emerge to suit particular needs, or else the Church could be reactivated through the normal process of scholarly analysis. We speak of an ancient Near Eastern henotheism as a great intellectual conquest—the recognition of the unity of the divine in the single gods that make up the pantheon. The Christian "heresies" are henotheistic in reverse, i.e., they bring the figure of Christ back to the domain of intellectually quantifiable operations. Just as the ancient Near Eastern theologians were henotheising gods, so the great heretical mentors of the Christic tradition have been henotheising Christ.

VII. Jesus and the resurrection of culture

The juxtaposition between Christian and Christic dimensions has been articulated as starkly as possible to bring out its fundamental impact on attitudes and lives. But it should not be inferred that I am advocating a conflictual posture be-

tween "us" and "them." Rather I believe that every Christian is, at least intermittently, in some way or another, essentially Christic in his or her inner dispositions. While it is true that we are ontologically Christian because we are redeemed, it is also true that our culture remains in large segments merely Christic. There are two elements of Catholic doctrine which are particularly interesting in this respect. First, the dogma of the *Immaculate Conception* can be taken to mean that besides Jesus himself, only Mary can truly and fully be considered Christian, without any Christic disposition ever taking over from a fundamental Christian structure of life. This was so not only because Mary was not subject to original sin, but because she remained, of her own choice, "im-maculate" as her life unfolded. Hence the second point. The fullness of her total Christian commitment was so pervasive that her life on earth could not have reached any breaking point in death but would naturally have carried over onto a different, but essentially not discontinuous, plane of reality—through her *Assumption*, and her continued corporeal existence, into "heaven." Viewed in this light, it is only in Jesus and Mary that we can speak of an untarnished Christian culture, never debased by even the slightest Christic motion, of which we can expect many, instead, even in the greatest saints. For the rest of humankind, it is only heaven that may be viewed as the fulfillment of such pure Christian culture in all. It may seem excessively radical so to limit the range of Christian culture, but it is logically consequent.

Lest I be thought of equating the Christic with the finite and the Christian with a disembodied infinite, I would like to stress that the exact reverse is true. It is the Christic position that emerges as ultimately abstract and dis-incarnate, precisely because it denies the finite in its effort to overcome it. Think of the following two illustrations. Any form of mythology may seem at first truly "incarnational" because it presents the gods as very earthy characters; but there cannot be incarnation where there is no proper apprehension of an infinite that can become incarnate in the first place. Hence the gods are admittedly projections whose stories never lay claim to being historical experiences, never command faith in the finite factuality of a concrete event. This Yahweh does, and Jesus does: The series of particular events which constitute our salvation "history" proclaim over and over again that the finite must be retained if it is to be touched at all. In a similar way, we may contrast the incarnational reality of revelation with the philosophical position of, say,

Hegelian idealism. For a Christian, the *logos* is not the synthesis of a number of components, however vast such a number might be; he is not the result of a process which subsumes the finite. Rather, the *logos* affirms the particularity of personal reality and offers the possibility of particular, yet infinite, interpersonal love to all human persons. In this respect, the doctrine of the Trinity tells us that particularity is not fragmentation: we are affirmed as finite through our particular relationship with the infinite. In this sense, the distinction between a Christic and a Christian dimension is a reformulation of the theme of the kingdom used by Jesus, or of Paul's fullness of time, or of Augustine's city of God.

We may continue in the same tenor by elaborating the concept of the resurrection of culture. When we lay stress on the bodily aspect of the resurrection, we should not forget that the cultural template in which we grow is just as important as the physical environment in which our existence is embedded. Jesus was not only incarnate physically as son-of-man, but also culturally as son-of-David; just as we must not shun his physical reality, so, too, we must accept the values of his cultural identity, without falling prey to some sort of cultural monophysitism. Now this speaks for the profound value of human culture; it is so serious in its implications that Jesus lived, died and rose within its confines. "And rose": the Resurrection, transcending as it did all human limitations, was still bounded by a certain cultural framework. The Ascension does not cancel Jesus' Jewish past, which remains with him as our cultural past will remain with us. (The transfigured Jewishness of Jesus is eloquently stressed by the presence of Moses and Elijah at the Transfiguration.) But the Ascension closes the Jewish past of Jesus as a temporal period, and opens the much wider cultural perception of a cosmic Jesus. The event of the Ascension acquires special meaning precisely for this reason. It marked the end of a limited period during which the risen Jesus was present to normal human perception: a period which remained, until the end (i.e., until the Ascension), a "Jewish" period. It is in this perspective that it makes sense to speak of the resurrection of culture.

Babbling, at best, as we are bound to do when projecting for ourselves images of paradise, I still would like to proceed in this vein, bringing to their logical conclusion our reflections about the purity of full Christian experience when compared to all our Christic efforts. The image of paradise is the last one used by Jesus in his life, when on the Cross he promised to the thief crucified with him entrance to this "garden" as soon as

their shared torture would end with their shared death. What a backdrop for the most sublime of hopes! It is one of the most human of all encounters, and one of the most divine. Jesus elicits one last friendship and makes it the basis for this first and most solemn of all canonizations. The point that affects us here is the recognition that Jesus carries over to the next world the cultural limitations, as it were, of this world: "Today *you* will be *with me* in the garden." We may see in this the promise that our friendships, our cultures, will carry over, not only because they are an intrinsic part of our being and as such must also rise, but also because in Jesus they are profoundly valid and essentially good. (The doctrine of the Sacred Heart is a powerful statement of this reality. The risen Jesus is still very much Jesus the son-of-man, the individual human being who interacts as man, albeit mysteriously in a resurrected state, with a human culture which is still truly "his" as much as it is ours; he is still the man whose human friendship for human beings serves as the umbilical cord which holds the cosmos together.)

One way to imagine paradise, using the images I have been developing, is to think of it as the co-presence of all fragments. We will remain fragmented because we are finite; but, in the atemporal cocoon of God's infinity, all fragments will find their unity, will be co-present to our awareness. The Christian concept of expansion of consciousness is not, in the terms described, one of progressive appropriation, but one of out-pouring grace. We can think of paradise as including the intelligence of all of human culture through all of its history. And if this seems in itself too much to bear, it is but nothing when considered against the infinite, eternal, trinitarian vision, which remains of course the primary "dimension" we postulate for paradise.

Ultimately and primarily, Christian culture is not so much a culture which argues from certain premises, as it is rather the expression of an experience which is ordained to Jesus as the absolute; it is not so much a derivative effort based on the congruence of opinions however orthodox, as it is primarily the tensional thrust aiming for Jesus as the single apex of all. It is a risky concept—somewhat like the risk of a poet who must not trust in versification skills, but in the persisting centrality of inspiration. The gamble of Christian culture is precisely to believe in Jesus as the absolute. Should Jesus be otherwise—should he not be God incarnate, not the risen Lord—then Christian culture would also be otherwise; it would be, precisely, only Christic. To com-

promise this is to pretend that which is not: if we can accept only a Christic dimension, we should not present it as Christian.

But I do not intend to propose so rarefied a concept of human culture that it includes only the earthly life of Jesus and Mary and then the beatific vision. There are two ways in which there is Christian culture beyond those two levels.

(1) Our *redemption* is not dependent on our degree of conscious realization of its effects. We are ontologically transformed. We are, simply and truly, Christians. This is the bewildering reality that so electrified the first human beings to be touched by it. That it is an infinite privilege to be Christian may have become, for some, tarnished by centuries of cultural transmission of Christic values. But the freshness of the initial confrontation can still be ours any time we realize how radical our Christian-ness truly is. And through this gift of being Christians, we are called to become, in turn, the sacraments for culture—all of culture, secular or otherwise. The privilege is not just our individual redemption, but being called to co-redemption. Through Jesus, we are the sacrament of culture; we effectively sacramentalize our world. This is nothing we acquire on our own, nothing we manufacture—hence nothing of which we could ever possibly be egoistically proud, or even jealous. It is the profound doctrine of the vine and the branches: his sap flows through us to others, present, past and future, not just sentimentally but through our specific, historical and cultural, involvement. We have been given this extraordinary grace to help make others Christian—not necessarily by the power of convincing, and certainly not by the power of oppressing, but by the power of being Christian for them and with them. Just as the Eucharist is the cultural embodiment of the risen Jesus for us who are sacramentally Christian, so we are, through his grace, the Eucharist for others. It is only in the Church that there is salvation because we are called to be the sacrament of those who are not individually touched by the sacraments. In this way Jesus crafts Christian culture through us as historical, cultural, intermediaries of his single redemptive act—not just those few moments of conscious Christian culture of which we are capable; not just our feeble Christic stirrings; but that whole span of human culture which ignored and ignores Jesus, whether B.C. or A.D. One gift of the Incarnation is that it has sacramentalized, forever, our human culture.

(2) The *resurrection* of culture is a promise we hold, one which makes our immense cultural striving ultimately

worth the effort. There will be a beatific vision because there has been history: in this sense, we build up our beatific vision—obviously not in a polytheistic sense, but in the sense that Jesus was historical, and that our striving is sanctified by his Incarnation and will be resurrected alongside him. Our striving is not child's play with which the gods amuse themselves. Rather, our striving echoes the very striving of God incarnate, God who became man not only physically, but also culturally, and thereby endowed our personal and cultural striving with his own sense of worth. His sacramental presence in our culture transfigures the world of the finite and grafts it onto the trinitarian dimension of the infinite, giving a whole new meaning to the fact of historical growth through time. That is why the end of the world will not be just the last moment in a string of events. Rather, because it will coincide with the resurrection of all individuals who have shared in our human history, only because of that will cultural history be complete. The notion of a final judgment is another statement about the ultimate seriousness of human culture: the resurrection is held in promise not just for us as individuals, but for our communal, cultural existence. It is profoundly true, therefore, to say that the only true history is universal history—which in a Christian sense means only that history which has been perfected through the Resurrection.

VIII. Conclusions

I have highlighted a basic historical dichotomy of the human spirit—historical, because it is found as a central watershed throughout the recorded history of human spirituality; and basic, because it splits in two the universe of human perception: *tertium non datur*. On the one hand, we find the cumulative acquisition of reality, which presupposes, following quite naturally the structure of analytical reason, an ontological fragmentation of the absolute. The help we receive along the way is also fragmentary, resting as it does on a multitude (*poly-*) of idealized points of reference (*-theism*), which are but advanced members of our own race because they are finite; and yet they are in some quantitative way superior because they are one step ahead of us on our common journey towards appropriation of the universe of fragments. On the other hand, we find the explosion of revelation, whereby God, as the personal absolute, relates to us—persons in his image, however finite in our nature. The historical particularity of the encounter, nurtured in the Old

Testament and culminating with the Incarnation of Jesus, heightens the ontological distinction between finite and infinite at the very moment that it consecrates the very possibility of their intercourse. The sacramental transfiguration of finite reality completes creation by bringing to their full fruition these finite specks that we are, newly made capable of personal interaction with the interacting Trinity.

There are as many journeys as there are human beings, and yet there is but a common journey. Glimpses of heaven brighten our path when we feel that fragments explode to be recomposed in a flash of sudden unity, as when a poet can craft those unalterable words which fuse all in one. In this vein, Giuseppe Ungaretti's verse given as an epigram at the beginning clinches the theme of fragmentation: *With names, I have but peopled silence*. The same poet had proposed the answer in an earlier, and justly famous, one line poem: *Mi illumino di immenso*.

In the measure in which we realize that pushing to the limit the cumulation of finitudes cannot yield infinity, in that measure we can find a way towards the apprehension of the reality of God. It would be a sad day when we were able to "prove" the existence of God, much as it would be a sad day when we could prove the existence of a friend. All we can grasp are limits. But, when we let ourselves be grasped by the absolute, then we are truly: *flooded with a light immense*.* □

*Quest'articolo è dedicato alla Facoltà di Teologia di Lugano per l'ospitalità accademica e la fratellanza di spirito.