



## The challenge of Post-Theism

**Forms of Christianity after Christianity. Or, again, a post-Christian Christianity.**

An interpretation of Christianity in a predominantly ethical key, the divine as a profound, if not exclusive, dimension of the human. The various options of post-theism, now widespread in Italy, are presented to us by philosopher and theologian Giovanni Ferretti with a precise examination, attentive to capturing the differences between them and their common aspects. Even in the face of the need for a profound reinterpretation of Christianity in the current historical context, marked by the changes brought about by modernity and postmodernity, the horizon described by post-theisms appears to be highly problematic.

The risk, Ferretti concludes, is that of depriving Christianity of its salient features, of distorting the core elements of Christian truth: the transcendence and personality of God, creation, revelation and incarnation, eschatology and resurrection. This is an imminent challenge in the face the cultural collapse in the Catholic Church and in Christian life.

**I**Post-theism in Italy arose above all as a "import phenomenon," through a series of translations of texts by foreign authors whose ideas the editors appear to share. Among the latter are the Catholic priest Ferdinando Sudati and the editor of *Adista* Claudia Fanti; among the publishers, Massari (Bolsena, VT), especially for the books of John Shelby Spong, and Gabrielli (San Pietro in Cariano, VR), especially for the edition of the four volumes of the series "Oltre le religioni" (Beyond Religions), openly post-theistic, featuring the leading exponents of international Christian post-theism.<sup>1</sup>

The publisher Gabrielli also published the first books or collections of essays by Italian authors who were members or sympathizers of the movement, such as Paolo Sequizzato, Gilberto Squizzato, Paolo Zambaldi, Paolo Gamberini, Bruno Mori, Franco Barbero, Federico Battistutta and others.

Among the main characteristics of this phenomenon, I would highlight the fact that it is a "genuine movement," not merely the position of a single author, as in the case of Richard Kearney's "ana-theism";<sup>3</sup> It is a theological-pastoral movement that has spread within the "Catholic sphere," which is a significant development, even though it draws heavily on Protestant authors such as Episcopalian Bishop Emeritus John Shelby Spong, and with them, the authors of the radical theology of the death of God and, before that, the demythologization proposed by Rudolf Bultmann, the non-religious Christianity of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and even a philosopher such as Baruch Spinoza.

And for the constructive aspect, to thinkers of the mystical tradition, in particular Meister Eckhart, and to a Catholic scientist and theologian such as Teilhard de Chardin.

The date of birth of this Catholic movement has also been identified, as indicated by theologian José María Vigil in the first volume, *Beyond Religions*, of the series of the same name.<sup>4</sup> It dates back to a proposal by the International Theological Commission of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EAT-WOT) launched under the title "post-religious paradigm." This proposal was discussed for the first time at the Fourth International Symposium on Theology and Religious Studies, entitled "Religion and Culture: Memories and Perspectives," organized by the Pontifical Catholic University of Minas Gerais in Belo Horizonte from September 12 to 14, 2011.<sup>5</sup>

In Latin America, the proposal was discussed and adopted as study material by countless grassroots groups as a "new necessary phase of liberation theology." For authentic Christian-inspired social liberation, it would in fact be essential to free the people from the mythical religiosity that still pervades Catholic religiosity and religion in general; a religiosity that passively relies on extraordinary interventions by a God understood as an almighty lord, separate from the world and who can intervene at will when prompted by prayers and acts of worship. This mythical belief would prevent

be an active commitment to the process of liberation inherent in history.<sup>6</sup>

A few years later, on the initiative of José María Vigil, the proposal was taken up again, involving people from different continents who were in agreement with it or had made similar theological proposals themselves, such as John Shelby Spong (with his post-theistic reinterpretation of Christianity) and Roger Lenaers (with his commitment to a reinterpretation of Christianity in non-religious terms).

The outcome of the debate between these authors was published in the journal *Horizonte* 13(2015) 37, in the "Dossiê: Paradigma Pós-Religional" section. The chapters of the book by authors J.S. Spong, M.L. Vigil, R. Lenaers, and J.M. Vigil, *Oltre le religioni (Beyond Religions)*, mentioned above as the first volume in the series "Oltre le religioni" (Beyond Religions) published by Gabrielli.<sup>7</sup>

## GENERAL THEORETICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Given the magmatic nature of the movement, it is not surprising that there are different theological positions and sensibilities, both in the definition of theism that one wishes to abandon and in the alternatives that one intends to propose to theism, with the relative reinterpretation of Christianity in a post-theistic key. At first glance, it seems to me that two theoretical forms of post-theism can be identified, one more moderate and the other more radical, which naturally also includes the former.

Common to both is the criticism of the concept of God as a supreme being *separate* from the world, "who lives high in the heavens," intervenes in world events from outside, with supernatural or miraculous actions beyond the laws of nature, imposes laws of ethical and religious behavior, rewarding those who observe them, the good, and punishing those who do not observe them, the bad; who is sensitive to prayers and sacrifices, to which he responds by bestowing his favors, etc. This conception is identified with classical theism and is said to be the basis of religion as it has historically taken shape since the agrarian period of the Neolithic era.

A human invention that would supplant the previous Paleolithic religiosity, which was naturalistic and matriarchal, considered nature and its vital energies sacred, and believed itself to be in deep symbiosis with it. This new theistic conception would be adopted by both Israel and Christianity. It would pervade the stories of the Hebrew Bible as well as those of the New Testament; and consequently all Christian dogma.

The mitigated form of post-theism seems to maintain the *distinction* between God and the world and therefore a certain transcendence or otherness of God with respect to the world, albeit expressed in terms of "depth," "ultimate meaning," "profound dimension," or similar concepts, which are often not without ambiguity. And to a certain extent, it also seems to want to maintain the person-

God's goodness, creation, and God's free action, even if immanent in the course of the world.

*The radical or extreme form of post-theism* seems instead to deny any kind of transcendence, otherness, or distinction of God from the world, and consequently his personality and his free action in relation to the world; thus creation, providential guidance of the course of the world, to the point of denying an *eschaton* beyond space-time history.

As an alternative, it proposes a "cosmic religiosity," which understands God as the "primordial energy," venerates the "infinite majesty of the universe," and stands in reverence and wonder before the "mystery of the world." This is a form of "cosmic monism" that is close to Eastern religious traditions, particularly Buddhism, as well as to Western mystical traditions such as Meister Eckhart or even Spinoza's philosophy, where God is understood as the only, eternal, and necessary substance, neither personal nor free.

Common to both positions is the belief that theism is definitively "dead" in the consciousness of modern man as a result of scientific progress, with its new vision of the universe (astronomical discoveries, evolution, psychoanalysis, quantum physics, relativism, neuroscience, new cosmology, etc.) and its progressive explanation of natural phenomena.

According to this diagnosis, it is modern science above all that has caused the progressive detachment of modern man from religion in general and from Christianity in particular, considered to be in solidarity with theism, which is now scientifically untenable; and the parallel spread of atheism, understood as the simple negation of such theism and therefore specular to it (as argued by Kearney's anatheism).

With the crisis of theism, all the miraculous stories of the Old and New Testaments would consequently be reduced to mythical, simply human constructs. Since these would be the basis of Christian dogma, the fundamental statements of which it consists would also turn out to be purely mythical inventions, today completely unbelievable. Such, for example, are the doctrines of creation, the Fall, redemption through the incarnation of God in Jesus (the story of the virgin conception of Mary being entirely mythical, of course), the sacrifice of the cross, the resurrection, the ascension, the Trinity, etc.

From this diagnosis and from the conviction that the end of theistic religion (considered a mere historical construct) does not mean the end of *spirituality* (which is essential to human beings), the theological-pastoral intent of the movement derives: to strip Christianity of its mythical theistic trappings in order to express its essence in post-theistic terms: the only way to safeguard its future in the modern age and to bring its essential core to fruition, considered capable of offering an important contribution to human maturation even today.

In this impressive operation of "demythologization," one feels urged and authorized both by the results of *religious studies*, which would have attested to the historical origin, and therefore—as can be deduced—to the simple human invention of theistic religion, considered an archaic attempt to make sense of natural phenomena whose actual causes were unknown; and by the findings of *historical-critical studies* applied to the Bible, the Old Testament, and even the New Testament, which have established the non-historicity of all the accounts of miraculous events narrated therein, and therefore the nature of all elements of Christian dogma as mythical human constructs. Hence the commitment to return to the original experience of Christ as recounted by his disciples, in which the essence of the original Christian message is to be found.

On the positive side, proposals range from identifying what human experience these now obsolete mythical constructions were intended to convey—a form of interpretation of the meaning of Christian myth consistent with modern thinking and universal human spiritual experience—to the proposal to leave aside all the so-called "sacred history" described in biblical accounts, in order to adhere to the universally accessible "new sacred history," that of modern cosmological and evolutionary science.

For the first position, which is part of the mitigated form of Christian post-theism, I would like to mention the thinking of Spong and Lenaers; for the second, which is part of the more radical form, the thinking of María López Vigil. I will then go on to outline some examples of other conceptions that oscillate more or less between the two positions. In describing the various forms of post-theism, I will also highlight the main conceptions that characterize the phenomenon and that are found to a greater or lesser extent in its exponents.

## SOME TYPICAL FORMS AND CONCEPTS OF CHRISTIAN POST-THEISM

### Spong and the "new reformation"

The core of John Shelby Spong's (1931-2021, American Episcopal bishop) theological thought, which is explicitly post-theistic, is contained in the 12 theses he proposed in 1998 for discussion by Christian churches as a call for a "new reformation." He commented extensively on them in his essay "The 12 Theses: Appeal for a New Reformation."<sup>10</sup> Thesetheses are a summary of his book from the same year, *Why Christianity Must Change or Die. A Bishop Speaks to Believers in Exile* (HarperOne, New York 1998).<sup>10</sup>

The first thesis declares the death of theism, in the definition it gives, and the duty to find a new way of conceiving and speaking about God. This thesis is decisive for those that follow concerning fundamental concepts.

of traditional Christianity, from Christology to eschatology.

"Theism as a way of defining God is dead. We can no longer credibly perceive God as a being with supernatural power, living high in the heavens and ready to intervene periodically in human history to fulfill his will. Therefore, most of what is said about God today is meaningless. We must find a new way of conceptualizing God and talking about him" ("The 12 Theses," 71).

Hence the crisis of Christian faith in which we live, expressed in theistic terms. Suffice it here to recall the second thesis, on Christology: "Since God cannot be conceived in theistic terms, it makes no sense to try to understand Jesus as 'the incarnation of a theistic deity'. Traditional concepts of Christology have therefore become bankrupt" (*ibid.*, 81).

Spong, for his part, thinks positively that the core of the Christian message and faith is to be found in the "experience of encountering God in Jesus" made by the first disciples (cf. *ibid.*, 84). Meanwhile, the attribution to Jesus of supernatural powers that would allow him to perform "miracles," as well as the stories of the virgin birth, the incarnation, the resurrection, and even the concept of the Trinity, are considered to be later constructions, through which people sought to express this experience in terms of the theism typical of the religious culture of the time. Today, however, the original Christian experience could be expressed differently in post-theistic terms. For example, by saying: "Perhaps people saw and experienced in his life 'the source of Life', in his love 'the source of Love' and in his being 'the foundation of Being'. Perhaps they heard in him and from him the call to live fully, to love generously and to be all that each person could be" (*ibid.*, 84f).

By conceiving the divine and the human no longer as two separate realms but as "one continuous reality," the path to fullness and the divine would consist "in becoming deeply and fully human" (*ibid.*, 85), "in transcending the need to survive and in being capable of giving oneself in love for others" (*ibid.*).

As can be seen, this is an interpretation of the essence of Christianity in a predominantly ethical key, without entirely eliminating some mysterious transcendent source, distinct but not dualistically separated from the world. Thus, for example, he states elsewhere:

"I experience God as 'Other', as 'Transcendence', as 'Depth' and as the ultimate meaning of life (...) The divine is the profound dimension of the human."<sup>(11)</sup>

### Roger Lenaers and his non-religious Christianity

Roger Lenaers (1925-2021, Belgian Jesuit priest, later Catholic parish priest in the Austrian Tyrol)<sup>(12)</sup> believes that

Christianity in its essence is not a religion, that is, a theism (religion and theism are for him, and in general for post-theists, the same thing), but rather "the community of those who allow themselves to be guided by faith in Jesus of Nazareth, who recognize in him the immortal revelation of the absolute Mystery or, in pre-modern terms, recognize Jesus Christ as the eternal Son of God."<sup>(13)</sup>

Consequently, in his opinion, it is possible to abandon all the religious elements with which this faith has historically been cloaked, such as dogmas, laws, priests, sacraments, holy books, temples, vows, and prayers, and try to reconcile it with modernity. This, in his view, is possible if the new post-theistic image of God, as that mysterious 'something' that 'lies behind all things' and is the key element of religiosity, manages to include 'the two classic elements of the Christian image of God, those of Creator and Father' ('Are Christianity and modernity compatible?', 136).

As for *creation*, this is possible if it is understood not as "producing" but as "expressing one's inner self in matter" (*ibid.*, 135). The cosmos would therefore be understood as "the self-expression of an absolute Spirit that evolves slowly," with no longer any opposition between "God" and the cosmos, but "only distinction" (*ibid.*, 136), which is essential in order not to compromise our freedom and autonomy.

As for the term *Father*, it refers to Jesus' experience of the ultimate Reality as absolute love towards him, therefore not literally as his father, but for him as a father, who encouraged him to always love. And he adds: "This absolute love does not dwell in heaven, but in the heart of all that exists and constantly leads all things to evolve, pushing human beings to be more human, to be more love. This Something, therefore, is an absolute 'You' that says 'you' to us" (*ibid.*, 137).

For the rest, a *profound reformulation of Christian belief in non-theistic terms* is required. This implies "abandoning the creed formulated at Nicaea" (*ibid.*, 138), declaring the resurrection of bodies impossible, and understanding the resurrection of Christ and our own as the "final transition to absolute Love" (*ibid.*, 142), considering the Bible as a book of human words, with which the authors, gifted with mystical abilities, "sought to express their intense experience of the transcendent Marvelous" (*ibid.*, 147), etc.

In conclusion, he asks himself: "What remains of the millennial Catholic monument if one abandons *Theos* and becomes a faithful 'atheist'? There is no doubt: the essence remains. And this essence is not the formulation of the creed, it is not a book with the infallible words of God, it is not the Ten Commandments, it is not an autocratic hierarchy, it is not the sacraments and the priesthood or the Mass and the rituals of the liturgy, it is not prayer of petition or obedience to the rules of the Church. It is the awareness of

the fact that we are part of a cosmos that is the self-expression, in continuous evolutionary movement, of the creative Spirit, which is Love, together with the desire to let ourselves be moved by this Love, following Jesus, whom we know as someone who is eternally alive because he is totally full of love" (*ibid.*, 156).

Lena-ers' interpretation of Christianity can be summarized as being not only ethical, but also "mystical-cosmic."

### **José María Vigil and sacred cosmic history**

Much more radical is the position of José María Vigil (a Spanish Claretian priest, naturalized Nicaraguan, coordinator of EATWOT, and leading exponent of the so-called new post-religious or post-theistic paradigm), both in his criticism of the entire Christian theistic religious vision and in his alternative proposal. As for the deconstructive aspect, its "militant" character should be noted. The various theistic elements of Christianity are not discreetly abandoned, allowing them to fall into disuse; rather, they are "to be stated and fought against, both because of their obsolete nature and, above all, because of their harmful character."<sup>14</sup>

The alternative proposal completely abandons any reference to biblical stories, considered mythical in nature, to rely on the only authentic source of truth, even with regard to the meaning of life and the promotion of human depth, namely the story of science. These two quotes suffice: the first has an evident Comtean positivist flavor: "The questions of the meaning of our life, ancestrally controlled exclusively by religion and later also by philosophical speculation, have changed location, and are now examined in the laboratory of science (...) which for the first time also responds in a comprehensive and largely satisfactory manner to the question of *who we are and where we come from*" ("Refocusing the future role of religion," 169). The second quotation presupposes the consequent epistemological revolution that is proposed for theology, namely the replacement of the primacy of the Holy Scriptures as the book of God's revelation with the primacy of the book of nature, which only science interprets correctly and universally. The Scriptures would in fact be a simple "commentary" on the book of nature, written by men elaborating myths with the help of imagination to give meaning and orientation, in a pre-scientific era, to unknown Reality. This leads us to say, with regard to evolution versus creation: "The Christian Churches (...) are unable to understand how the true 'story', the fundamental one, is not that constituted by biblical myths, but that which science is showing us, the *new cosmological story*, the new scientific cosmic history. Our true sacred history is the sacred cosmic history, the birth of the Cosmos, its 13,730 million years of evolution..."<sup>15</sup>

In this new sacred history, there is no longer any place for theocentrism, Christocentrism, and even less for ecclesiocentrism, but only for *oikocentrism*, which becomes the key term of the new post-theistic religiosity. "There is no room," he writes, "for any other 'centering' than that of Reality, the total sacred cosmic Reality of which we are a part, to which we belong, since it is our *Oikos*, our great home. The only centrism that seems practicable at this moment in history is oikocentrism" ("It is no longer a matter of believing," 59s).

Hence the description of the *new oiko-centered spirituality* proposed for post-theism: "We are moving towards the redemption of a spirituality centered on the sacredness of cosmic Reality, of our sacred *Oikos*, no longer on an imagined heaven above the clouds or in the ontic background of metaphysics. In the religious sphere, we will therefore seek to live as what we are, as Earth that has come to think, to know, to worship, to rediscover itself as Gaia, a conscious and sacred cosmos in evolution" (*ibid.*, 68).

The post-theistic denial of a God separate from the world, dualistically outside and above the world, would therefore not entail the denial of the "Mystery of the world," the "divinity" present in this Universe. "From a scientific point of view," it is observed, "there is no 'outside' or 'above' the cosmos; there is nothing and no one outside the cosmos. This does not mean denying the Mystery, the 'divinity' present in this Universe, but it does mean denying that mythical categories should be used to refer to it" (*ibid.*, 64).

Hence the proposal for a *liturgical celebration* that no longer refers to the sacred history of the Bible, but to the new sacred history of the evolution of the Cosmos as discovered by science, that is, the proposal for a true celebration of the "cosmic Easter," in which "the Earth and the Cosmos come to contemplate and celebrate themselves in us."<sup>16</sup>

In the celebration outline proposed as an example, the stages of the evolution of the Cosmos up to man are retraced with a contemplative and adoring attitude, accompanied by the refrain: "And the Great Mystery is there," animating the ascending process from energy to matter and life, until, in man, "the Earth begins to see itself, to feel itself, to think, to reflect in the human being and in his science" ("Cosmic Easter," 216). To conclude, in an attitude of adoration: "The Great Mystery is here, on Earth and in the Cosmos, which, in us, become conscious of themselves, and venerate, adore, contemplate intoxicatedly, with gratitude, the Mystery that we are and that fills everything" (*ibid.*, 219). We wonder, in this post-theistic position, is some transcendence of God saved, or is God identified with the world, sacred nature, where the only transcendence is the continuous transcending of the Cosmos? The declared intention to recover the religiosity of the Paleolithic, centered on sa-

The sacredness of nature, the Great Mother who gives birth to us and nourishes us, from whom we come and to whom we return. That religiosity which, in his opinion, reigned before the turning point that the agricultural revolution would bring about in the Neolithic period, leading to theistic religion. A turning point that is considered to have been harmful to the planet and to the human species, from which we must distance ourselves by 'returning home' after "this unnecessary and already more than sufficient long self-exile."<sup>17</sup>

Other authors in these volumes are more vigilant on this point, such as José Arregi (from the Basque Country, a former Franciscan priest and Catholic theologian) and above all Leonardo Boff (a leading Catholic exponent of liberation theology), whom we would now like to mention.

### **José Arregi and the indeterminacy of the alternative**

José Arregi expressly declares his uncertainty about how to understand and express the alternative to theism. Against theism, he states that what we call "God" is not the explanation of the world, "but is the Mystery of the world, the inexplicable Mystery of beauty and love in which we exist, our ultimate essence and our supreme vocation."<sup>18</sup>

In order to understand this unique Mystery of the world, he calls for *collaboration between science and mysticism*, each using their respective methods: "Science is the art of measuring the parts of the whole. Mysticism is the art of contemplating the whole in every part" ("The Creed Before Science," 56). As for the limits of science and its possible contributions to the mystical gaze, he specifies: "With regard to this Ultimate or First Reality, the Mystery of the world, the sciences neither affirm nor deny anything, but they do impose on our language a certain framework of coherence and reasonableness, if we want to say something that does not diminish the Mystery" (*ibid.*, 65f).

As regards the relationship between God and the cosmos, there is clear criticism—in line with all post-theism—of

"theistic dualism" but also "pantheistic monism" or atheism associated with dogmatic positivism: "God or Ultimate Reality and the world," it is stated, "are not two, but neither are they one. God or the Depth of Reality is neither inside nor outside the world. God is neither describable nor localizable" (*ibid.*, 66).

"What then is God," he asks, "beyond his personal theistic image and beyond his mere atheistic denial associated with dogmatic positivism? We cannot say: we are left with only insufficient images: God is to the world as the Whole is to the sum of its parts, as the Source or Origin of all forms, the Being of beings, the Creativity of the universe (...) The Communion of all beings, (...) the I of every you and the You of every I, (...) universal Information, or the Soul of the world, or the Consciousness of the universe, or the tenderness of lovers" (*ibid.*, 67).

The alternative to "personalistic theism" therefore remains undefined or has many images or names. This seems to us to be in accordance with the tradition of mystical apophatism, which often recurs in post-theists.

### **Leonardo Boff and eco-spirituality**

Leonardo Boff undoubtedly appears to be more theologically and philosophically aware of the relationship between God and the cosmos, so much so that I would not consider him to be a post-theist in the strict sense, given his clear affirmation of God's distinction and transcendence with respect to the world.

Despite some terminological ambiguities, such as the title of his essay "The God Who Rises in the Process of Cosmogenesis."<sup>19</sup> In fact, he makes a clear distinction between what science can ascertain and what philosophy and theology can achieve, namely human intelligence animated by love; intelligence that even scientists, as human beings, can put into practice, beyond and independently of the results of their strictly scientific method.

Science, in fact, knows nothing and can say nothing about what existed before the Big Bang and the "background energy" or "pregnant vacuum" imagined by astrophysicists as the backdrop from which the initial point that would be at its origin arose. But the finalistic order of the cosmological process that leads to the emergence of human consciousness, according to the so-called "anthropic principle," not only arouses wonder and deep respect, but "refers to a supreme Order: consciousness and spirit indicate a higher and transcendent Consciousness" (*ibid.*, 110).

"Strictly speaking," it is pointed out, "Fundamental Energy belongs to the current order of things. But it refers to a Reality that is even more mysterious and indecipherable than the pregnant Void, far beyond what we can imagine. This pregnant Void is a metaphor for this original Reality, authentically mysterious and fascinating" (*ibid.*, 112).

In practice, it seems to us that Boff takes up the traditional argument in favor of the existence of God, which starts from the order and purpose of nature. If not as a scientifically rigorous demonstration, at least as an argument with a truth value similar to that which Kant attributed to the proofs of God's existence: that of being sufficient to convince in terms of ethical practice.<sup>20</sup> All the more so, as Boff argues, if reason is complemented by the intelligence of the heart or "cordial reason," as he calls it, not without similarities to Pascal's "reasons of the heart." In a non-immanentistic sense, therefore, some of Boff's ambiguous expressions, such as the following, which open up to 'ecospirituality' as the author understands and proposes it, should also be understood in our opinion: 'If everything is energy in networks of relationships, we are in a special way imbued with vital, spiritual, cosmic energy. It is through us that the Earth and the Universe itself acquire consciousness, turning in their own way to the sacred Source of all being and all energy. *This Energy, which*

*makes us alive, it is another name for God or the creative and life-giving Spirit.* This vision gives rise to a spirituality: embracing the world means embracing God, who hides and emerges in every being. (...) The co-smological principle of the self-organization of the Universe is operating in each of its parts and in the Whole. Without name and without image. God is the name that religions have found to free him from anonymity and insert him into our consciousness and our celebration" (*ibid.*, 114f).<sup>21</sup>

The spirituality proposed by Boff could be defined as "cosmic naturalism." It intertwines—in harmony with the entire post-theistic movement—scientific and mystical visions, not without a strange mixture of the two, and above all not without ambiguity on the theme of God's transcendence, which risks being reduced to the energy that pervades and moves the world, as observed or hypothesized by today's science.<sup>22</sup>

### **Paolo Gamberini and relative monism**

The intertwining of science and mysticism is also theorized as a method of theological work by Paolo Gamberini in his recent book, mentioned above, *Deus duepuntozero. Ripensare la fede nel post-teismo (Deus 2.0: Rethinking Faith in Post-Theism)*, published in 2022.<sup>23</sup> In my opinion, it is one of the most theologically engaging texts in an organic and constructive way among those I am familiar with in the post-theistic current.

The aim of the book, as indicated in the subtitle, is to rethink *Christianity in the post-theistic era*, which would constitute a real "paradigm shift" in the cultural-religious field, in the sense intended by Thomas Kuhn.

Within the Christian post-theistic movement, however, there is a desire to move from a *deconstructive phase*, which has clearly identified theism to be criticized but not the alternative to be proposed, to a *constructive, systematic phase* capable of organically connecting the results of historical-critical research on the Gospels, the most recent scientific discoveries—in particular those of quantum physics and neuroscience—the various mystical conceptions, and relational philosophy (cf. *Deus duepuntozero*, 24). The intention, therefore, is to proceed with an inter- and trans-disciplinary method.

But also, and this is in our opinion one of the original features of the work, "moving from within the same theistic tradition, in particular the philosophical and theological tradition of *Neoplatonism*" (*ibid.*, 18). In fact, as it continues, "the ancient elements present in this tradition of thought are a treasure for the Christian faith and represent openings for the *panentheistic* and post-theistic vision" (*ibid.*).

Panentheistic Neoplatonism, for example, was already present in St. Thomas Aquinas, according to the author, and greatly influenced Meister Eckhart, who is often referred to in the work. Panentheistic elements are also present in the New Testament, especially in Paul and the Gospel of John, which speak of the

pervasive presence of God throughout reality and of a profound unity between Jesus and God, to which we are all called and involved.<sup>24</sup>

As a starting point for his argument, Gamberini adopts both the post-theists' diagnosis of the crisis of theism and their definition of "theism" as a concept that imagines a supernatural God, "separate from the world and who, from time to time at his discretion and will, intervenes here and there" (*ibid.*, 14). "A personal being who acts in the world through miracles and specific actions: through prophetic inspiration, incarnation, providence, and final judgment" (*ibid.*, 33). This image is said to be constitutive of religions, including Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

Unlike atheism, however, post-theism does not reject all transcendence, but only the transcendence of this image of God (*ibid.*, 14). Although shortly afterwards, and throughout the book, the only transcendence that seems to be upheld is that of the world's own "self-transcendence," the source of which is the "common and mystical logos" that pervades everything and expresses the very nature of God (*ibid.*, 19).

Consequently, the author rejects the absolute distinction between God and the world, considered an expression of dualistic logic, and supports the thesis of the "relational identity" between God and the world, or so-called "relative monism" (cf. *ibid.*, 24 and *passim*), which converges with "panentheism" (*ibid.*, 18, 467f).<sup>25</sup> Relative or relational monism constitutes the cornerstone of his reinterpretation of the Christian faith: "The relative monism presented in this book is intended to be a proposal for a reinterpretation of the Christian faith" (*ibid.*, 24).

How is this "relative monism" understood? Gamberini describes it using the formula  $(x = x + y)$ , which he repeatedly endeavors to explain in the text. For example: "The transcendence and absoluteness of God ( $x = x$ ) are given in his relativity ( $x + y$ ). If God's identity is determined in relation to creation ( $x = x + y$ ), it means that what identifies the creature (*principium individuationis*) is also proper to God, not by absolute identity ( $x = y$ ) but by relative identity" (*ibid.*, 76).

What this "relative identity" actually is is clarified somewhat later on, where there is talk, for example, of "unity in difference" or "distinction, which is made possible by a unity that precedes it, embraces it, and constitutes it" (*ibid.*, 467-68).

More clearly, another text states: "In relative monism, the two aspects ( $x$ ) and ( $x + y$ ) are only *formally* distinct; in reality, they are identical. Like the two sides of a coin, which are not the same but are the same coin, God is identified with his relationship with creation, by virtue of his being original creativity."<sup>26</sup>

The distinguishing point with respect to traditional theism, as I understand it, is that while in traditional theism the world cannot exist without God, who is its creator and founder,

In relative monism, it is God who cannot exist without the world, since the world is his self-expression, the result of his essentially always being in action, in an immutable way, and therefore always expressing himself in creation.

The world therefore insists on God; God is essential to it, even if God adds nothing to it. As St. Thomas says—and this would be a key element of his Neoplatonism—God is the *Ipsum esse per se subsistens*, to which entities can add nothing. In fact, they have always been in God as his coessential ideas and also as the effect of his immanent action. God does not need to pass from potency to act either to create them or to know them because he has always had them in himself; they are part of his essence, they are "one" in him.<sup>27</sup>

As a consequence of this idea of "relative monism," the freedom of creation is expressly denied, with the argument that it would be an act of arbitrariness and would introduce something analogous to time into God (cf. *Deus 2.0*, e.g., 191, 376). In fact, there would be a state in which God is able to create or not create, do x or y, followed by a state in which God chooses x or y (cf. *ibid.*, 376).<sup>28</sup> This is followed by the denial of God's personality, as it would be connected to such freedom and linked to time. It also entails a profound revision of both Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity of God.

As stated in the opening lines of the work, "this idea of God as an essential relationship with creation and no longer separate implies a reinterpretation of the two fundamental mysteries of the Christian faith: the incarnation of God and the Trinity of God" (*ibid.*, 39).

*Incarnation*, stripped of Christian theistic myth, should be understood as the pinnacle of self-expression or gradual communication of God in the world (*ibid.*, 36 and *passim*).<sup>29</sup> Not, therefore, a singular event, but a cosmic event; not an event qualitatively different from others, but if anything only quantitatively so; or rather, offered by God to all men and received according to each person's capacity and freedom.

God always communicates himself equally to everyone and is equally present and active in everyone, without preference, in the process of self-transcendence of the world in which he expresses himself. But each person receives him according to his or her capacity.

"In the process of self-transcendence of all reality, Jesus of Nazareth is not an exception but represents the culmination of the reception and acceptance created by the mystery of God who communicates himself" (*ibid.*, 37).

*The Trinity?* "It is, so to speak, a metaphor for expressing the absolute relationality of the divine essence" (*ibid.*, 410). Where this absolute relationality is understood not as the intra-Trinitarian relationality between the persons of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, as understood in Christian belief, but as relationality with "creation" or "the world," which thus becomes part of the divine essence, in the sense of "relational identity" expressed by the formula already cited,  $x = x+y$  (cf.

*ivi*, 356s; 76s; cf. also 159, where he speaks of "God's real identity with his relationship to creation").

In summary, for Gamberini, "God is Trinity, not because he is three persons, but he is Trinity insofar as he is *substantially related* to creatures. Trinitarian language does not so much describe the intimate being of God apart from *our* creatureliness, as it intends to articulate the relationship of all things in God" (*ibid.*, 410).

In our opinion, while Gamberini's attempt to rethink fundamental Christian truths in the light of modern culture, now considered post-theistic, is certainly to be appreciated, the result, formulated in the thesis of "relative monism," raises serious questions due to the concrete risk of distorting the cornerstones of the Christian faith, such as the personality of God, the freedom of creation and the consistency of creation as a reality distinct from God, the unique originality of the incarnation of the Son of God, and the Trinitarian conception of God. Perhaps this is also due to an excessive uncritical flattening of post-theistic positions, on which we would now like to make some critical observations with reference to the numerous philosophical and theological problems they involve.

#### PHILOSOPHICAL AND THEOLOGICAL PROBLEMS IN POST-THEISM AND CRITICAL-EVALUATIVE OBSERVATIONS

There are many philosophical and theological problems involved in this movement of true deconstruction and radical restructuring of Christianity. I will mention some of them in the form of a summary assessment of the merits to be recognized in the movement and the points that I consider most debatable. Among the merits, the following three stand out in particular.

The merit of placing the *question of God* at the center of the global rethinking of Christianity in the current cultural phase, in which secularization is increasingly characterized by the globalization of the results of science and technology, which have brought us out of the "enchanted vision" of the world; by the growing maturation of an ethical conscience that is more respectful of individuality and personal freedom; and by the spread of religious pluralism, in which various visions of God meet and confront each other and no one can now claim an exclusive monopoly on the divine.

The merit of having, in this context, *highlighted and criticized certain archaic and distorted views of God* present in religious tradition, including Christian tradition: for example, the view of God as an entity separate from the world, male-dominated and warrior-like, who acts arbitrarily in the world as the cause among causes, imposing rules of behavior in a completely heteronomous manner, forcing people to observe them with rewards and punishments... In a word, that "sacred" view of God as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*, according to Rudolf Otto, which Jesus had already disambiguated in relation to the Old Testament, presenting the heavenly Father as all and only merciful love.<sup>30</sup>

The merit of having drawn attention to the need to place *spiritual and mystical experience at the center* of Christian life, avoiding reducing Christianity to ideology, legalism, or ritualism. This appeal is accompanied by the attempt, certainly more problematic but appreciable, to connect the unifying universality of scientific thought with the presumed unifying universality of cosmic-ecological mystical spirituality.

Among the *debatable* (or debatable) *points* in the wide-ranging issues that this Christian post-theism involves, I will point out here some of those that seem most relevant to me.

### On the definition of theism

First of all, it is debatable whether post-theists arbitrarily extend *their definition of "theism"* to the entire religious tradition, including the Judeo-Christian tradition: a God *separated* from the world who intervenes *from outside* with specific supernatural actions. The "theism" of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and not only that, is not characterized by the conception of God as an entity *separate* from the world, but rather because it understands God as a being *distinct* from the world and the free creator of the world and, in this sense, *transcendent* of the world; and, above all, because it considers God to be endowed, in an analogical sense, with intelligence and freedom and therefore with personality.<sup>31</sup>

Thus, for example, in the terminology established during the Enlightenment (as defined by Kant),<sup>32</sup> *theism* is defined in opposition to *deism*, precisely because while *deism* attributes only transcendental predicates to God, such as absoluteness, infinity, necessity, eternity, and the like, *theism* also attributes to God the non-transcendental predicates of intelligence and freedom, and therefore personality. But neither of them, in opposition to *atheism*, defined themselves by thinking of God as separate from the world; if anything, insofar as they thought of him as distinct from the world, they distinguished themselves from *pantheism*.

The entire Judeo-Christian tradition, from the Old and New Testaments to the most common catechetical tradition, has always understood God as present and active everywhere, in heaven, on earth, and in every place (as stated in the Catechism of Pius X),<sup>33</sup> never opposing transcendence and immanence, God's lordship over the world and his active presence in it. Heaven, where God is said to dwell, has always been an obvious cosmological metaphor! God, constantly understood as pure spirit, cannot in fact be located above or below, outside or inside the world!<sup>34</sup> Until we understand that God's absolute transcendence is characterized precisely by his supreme capacity to be everything in everyone, everything for everyone, capable of loving each person with his whole being, to the point of being the one who, in his sovereign freedom and love, is able to take on human nature as his own.<sup>35</sup>

Similarly, in classical theism, it is not essential to attribute to God specific supernatural interventions from the

outside the world, but only providential action in the world, especially through so-called "secondary causes."

The current questioning by some exponents of Catholic theology not only of the effectiveness but also of the theoretical possibility of specific interventions by God as a cause among the causes of the world, the so-called "miracles" as exceptions to the laws of nature, does not seem to me to affect the essential core of traditional Christian theism.<sup>36</sup> On the other hand, it is profoundly contradicted by post-theism when, in criticizing the vision of a God separate from the world, it expressly or implicitly questions both his distinction from the world and his freedom and personality.

### On the place assigned to science in theology

*The place that post-theism attributes to science in theology is highly problematic*—particularly in its most recent forms: quantum physics, modern cosmology, neuroscience, but also anthropological and historical-critical sciences—to the point of elevating it to the status of a unique or, in any case, decisive source of knowledge, even in the theological-religious field (cf. what was written above on the "new sacred history").

Science, for post-theism, would be decisive both in identifying what in Christian statements is no longer credible because, in light of new scientific discoveries, it has been revealed to be the result of pre-scientific mythical elaborations (as if, I observe, the fundamental object of theology were to tell us "how things are in the experiential cosmos"), and for offering truer concepts and images of God: for example, God or the divine understood as the energy that pervades the universe and causes it to evolve (as if, I observe, such cosmological qualifications did not apply to God, an incomprehensible and indescribable mystery, in an analogical or symbolic way only, like those of an anthropological nature).

Furthermore, in my opinion, it is problematic to believe that science as such, with its hypothetical-experimental method, can be *an ally in the mystical or sacred vision* of nature, or that it can grasp the world as a divine Mystery. It is another thing for scientists to do so, who, as human beings like everyone else, are capable of philosophical reflection and of intuiting reality with religious sense or the light of faith, far beyond the results obtained by the scientific method alone.

### On sacralization or resacralization of nature

The *sacralization or resacralization of nature*, as discussed in post-theism, also poses historical and theoretical problems: both in terms of how it contrasts with the so-called desacralization of nature carried out by theism with the doctrine of creation, and in terms of how it proposes it as a religious vision of nature to be recovered or returned to.

Certainly, both Judaism and Christianity have overcome all forms of idolatry of nature or the forces of nature, and in this sense they have effectively desacralized it or ceased to consider it "divine." But this does not mean that they have devalued nature, reducing it to mere inert and amorphous matter at the disposal of humankind.

Historically, however, following the scientific and technological revolution of the 16th and 17th centuries (remember in particular Francis Bacon, for whom science must ensure man's dominion over nature) and the rise of the capitalist economy. For Judeo-Christian theism, on the other hand, nature, far from being pure matter to be exploited, was created by God as good, speaks to us of God and praises God (cf. the Psalms), is a sign of his greatness, goodness, and providence, and man must take care of it (cf. Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si'*).

As for overcoming the mythical-sacred view of nature, we should not forget, in addition to the birth of theism, which is blamed for everything,<sup>37</sup> the philosophical/religious break that took place in the so-called "Axial Age" (between 800 and 200 BC), which freed man from mere subordination to the necessary rhythms of nature in which he lived immersed and indistinct, making him

become aware of themselves as free and conscious individuals. This historical process can hardly be disputed as progress in humanization.

### The place given to unitive or fusional mysticism

Very problematic is the preferential place that post-theists give to *unitive or fusional mysticism*, of a predominantly Eastern metaphysical-religious matrix, in which the human self disappears or is annihilated in the divine nature, rather than to *relational mysticism*, Christian-Western, which maintains distinction and autonomy even in the closest unitive relationship between God and man. This distinction and autonomy are based on the freedom of God and man, as clearly expressed in the biblical category of *covenant*.

It should be remembered that even in the Chalcedonian definition of the hypostatic union of Jesus with God (the greatest union of a man with God that has ever been conceived), the distinction between human and divine nature is reaffirmed (criticizing Monophysitism); while in the Trinitarian dogma, while affirming unity in "substance," the distinction between the three divine Persons is affirmed.

<sup>1</sup>The four volumes, all published by Gabrielli, San Pietro in Cariano (VR), are as follows: 1. J.S. SPONG, M.L. VIGIL, R. LENAERS, J.M. VIGIL, *Beyond Religions. Una nuova epoca per la spiritualità umana (Beyond Religions: A New Era for Human Spirituality)*, preface by M. BARROS, edited by C. FANTI and F. SUDATI, 2016. 2. J. ARREGI, L. BOFF, I. GEBARA, M. GONZALO, D. O'MURCHU, J.M.

VIGIL, *The Cosmos as Revelation. A New Sacred History for Humanity*, edited by C. Fanti and J.M. Vigil, preface by P. Benvenuti, 2018.

3. J.M. VIGIL, D. MOLINEAUX, M.J. RESS, F. SUDATI, S. VILLAMAYOR, M. FOX, *Spirituality Beyond Myth: From the Forbidden Fruit to the Revolution of Knowledge*, edited by C. FANTI and J.M. VIGIL, preface by F. COMINA, 2019. 4. J. ARREGI, C. MAGALLÓN, M.J. RESS, G.

SCUZZATO, J.M. VIGIL, S. VILLAMAYOR, *Beyond God. Listening to the Nameless Mystery*, edited by C. FANTI and J.M. VIGIL, preface by P. SCUZZATO, 2021. Also worth noting, alongside these four volumes, is the publication of the book by J.S. SPONG, *Eternal Life: A New Vision. Beyond Religion, Theism, Heaven and Hell*, Italian translation by F. Sudati, preface by F. Battistutta, Gabrielli, 2017 (original English edition 2009).

<sup>2</sup> In particular, also published by Gabrielli: P. SCUZZATO (ed.), *La goccia che fa traboccare il vaso. La preghiera nella grande prova* (The straw that breaks the camel's back. Prayer in times of great trial), 2020; P. ZAMBALDI, *Conversando con Baruch. Spinoza, un filosofo «oltre le religioni»* (Conversations with Baruch. Spinoza, a philosopher 'beyond religions'), preface by P. Gamberini, 2022; P. GAMBERINI, *Deus 2.0. Rethinking faith in post-theism*, preface by R. Battocchio, 2022; B. MORI, *For a Christianity without religion. Rediscovering the 'Way' of Jesus of Nazareth*, 2022; J. ARREGI, M. BUSSO, M.J. RESS, J.M. VIGIL, *Which God, Which Christianity. The Metamorphosis of Faith in the 21st Century*, edited by C. FANTI, preface by P. Scuizzato, 2022; P. SCUZZATO (ed.), *On Evil, God, and Our Love. Twenty-One Dialogues and an Essay*, 2023. The volume *Quale Dio, quale cristianesimo (Which God, Which Christianity)* brings together the contributions from the<sup>1st</sup>international meeting on the new post-theistic paradigm, organized by Gabrielli on April 2, 2022, in collaboration with *Adista*. C. FANTI's words, quoted in the book's introduction, are significant in terms of the tone of the discourse: "Faced with the choice between radical change—through an essential deconstruction of the existing order—and entrenchment in traditional positions, the former alternative is the only one that seems capable of a future" (Introduction, 11). In line with the fundamental theses of post-theism, F. BARBERO (cf. in par-

In particular, his *Confessione di fede di un eretico* (Confession of Faith of a Heretic), Edizioni Mille, Pinerolo-10 2017) and F. BATTISTUTTA (cf. in particular his *Misticopolitica. Orizzonti della spiritualità post-religiosa (Mysticopolitics. Horizons of Post-Religious Spirituality)*), Effigi, Arcidosso 2022).

<sup>3</sup>R. KEARNEY, *Anatheism. Returning to God After God*, Columbia University Press, New York 2010; Italian translation *Ana-teismo. Tornare a Dio dopo Dio*, Italian translation by M. ZURLO, introduction by G. VATTI-MO, Fazi, Rome 2012.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. J.M. VIGIL, "Refocusing the Future Role of Religion: Humanizing Humanity," in SPONG, VIGIL, LENAERS, VIGIL, *Beyond Religions*, 159.

<sup>5</sup>The subsequent speeches and debates, collected in the journal *Voices of the Third World*, 2012, no. 1, entitled *Towards a Post-Regional Paradigm?*, were translated and published in Italian in extensive excerpts in the journal *Adista*, 2012, no. 16 (Suppl. no. 1 to no. 6134), 3-7, edited by C. FANTI.

<sup>6</sup> It does not seem inappropriate to me to detect, in this assessment, echoes of Karl Marx's judgment as expressed in the Introduction to *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* and summarized in the famous lapidary expression: "Religion is the opium of the people."

<sup>7</sup>The essays contained therein had already been partially published in Italian by the magazine *Adista*, 2015, nos. 29, 31, 33 in the *Docu-ments* section. The magazine subsequently hosted and promoted a wide-ranging debate on the subject, relaunching and supporting post-theistic theology and emphasizing its usual highly critical editorial line towards so-called "institutional" Catholic Christianity, with its dogmas, rituals, ethical norms, and hierarchy, as is often repeated.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. ZAMBALDI, *Conversando con Baruch*.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J.S. SPONG, 'The 12 Theses: An Appeal for a New Reformation', in SPONG, VIGIL, LENAERS, VIGIL, *Beyond Religions*, 69-120.

<sup>10</sup>Many of Spong's works have now been translated into Italian. Cf. *A New Christianity for a New World. Why Traditional Faith is Dying and How a New Faith is Being Born*, edited by F. Sudati, Massari, Bolsena (VT) 2010; *The Birth of Jesus between Myth and Hypothesis*, edited by F. Sudati, Massari, Bolsena (VT) 2017; *Biblical Literalism: Heresy of the Gentiles. Journey into a new Christianity through the door of Matthew's Gospel*, edited by F. Sudati, Massari, Bolsena (VT) 2018; *Why Christianity must change or die. Reform of the faith and practice of the Church*, Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, Trapani 2019; *Incredible. Why the creed of the Christian Churches does not con-*

Is it truly desirable and foreseeable for the future of Christianity to take the path of unitive-fusional mysticism, in which the human ego disappears as such, rather than that of unitive-relational mysticism, in which the ego stands before God as a "you" in a free and dialogical relationship?

### On the project of demythologization

Theologically questionable, among radical post-theists, is the *project of demythologization as the elimination* of the myth that characterizes all the biblical stories that form the basis of Christian dogma. This demythologizing project, in fact, does not take into account the alternative project of *interpreting* myth, according to the reevaluation that has taken place in contemporary philosophy and theology. According to this re-evaluation, "myth" should not be demythologized but interpreted in order to grasp the human-religious truth it contains.

Radical post-theists still consider myth (as a religious narrative using symbols) to be a simple human construct aimed at giving meaning to things whose cause was not scientifically known, as Auguste Comte, founder of positivism, argued in the 19th century. They do not see it as an expression or revelation<sup>39</sup>

Vince più, edited by F. Sudati, Mimesis, Udine-Milan 2020; *I peccati della Bibbia*, edited by P. Casciola, Massari, Bolsena 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in F. SUDATI, "Un credente in esilio" (A believer in exile), in SPONG, VIGIL, LENAERS, VIGIL, *Oltre le religioni (Beyond religions)*, 58.

<sup>12</sup> Many of Lenaers' works have now been translated into Italian. Cf. *Il sogno di Nabucodonosor. Fine della chiesa cattolica medioevale (The Dream of Nebuchadnezzar. The End of the Medieval Catholic Church)*, edited by F. Sudati, Feltrinelli, Milan 2005; *Benché Dio non stia nell'alto dei cieli. Un seguito a Il sogno di Nabucodonosor (Although God is not in the heavens above. A sequel to The Dream of Nebuchadnezzar)*, edited by F. Sudati, Massari, Bolsena (VT) 2012; *Jesus of Nazareth. A man like us?*, edited by F. SUDATI, Gabrielli, San Pietro in Cariano (VR) 2017; *Christians in the 21st century? A radical reinterpretation of the Creed*, Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, Trapani 2018; *Atheists out of respect for God. Living the Faith After the Ruins of Religion*, Il Pozzo di Giacobbe, Trapani 2023.

<sup>13</sup> R. LENAERS, "Are Christianity and modernity compatible?", in SPONG, VIGIL, LENAERS, VIGIL, *Beyond religions*, 135.

<sup>14</sup> VIGIL, "Refocusing the Future Role of Religion," in SPONG, VIGIL, LENAERS, VIGIL, *Beyond Religions*, 188.

<sup>15</sup> J.M. VIGIL, "It is no longer a question of believing. Actualizing epistemology: the greatest challenge of religion," in VIGIL, MOLINEAUX, RESS, SUDATI, VILLAMAYOR, FOX, *A Spirituality Beyond Myth*, 56. In J.M. VIGIL, "Cosmic Easter. Celebration of the new universe," in ARREGI, BOFF, GEBARA, GONZALO, O'MURCHU, VIGIL, *The Cosmos As a revelation*, in note 198, regarding the meaning of the term "history" used for the new sacred history of the Cosmos, it is noted that this is not history in the strong sense of the term, human history. Human beings are included (in its finale), but they are not the protagonists, nor is this history truly human. For the "new history," see, among others, T. BERRY, *The New Story*, American Teilhard Association for The Future of Man, Anima Books, Chambersburg 1977, and also T. BERRY, B. SWIMME, *The Universe Story*, Bell Tower, New York 1999. As an example of the spread of this "new sacred story" among post-theists, cf. MORI, *Per un cristianesimo senza religione*, 128-142.

<sup>16</sup> VIGIL, "Cosmic Easter," in ARREGI, BOFF, GEBARA, GONZALO, O'MURCHU, VIGIL, *The Cosmos as Revelation*, 202.

<sup>17</sup> J.M. VIGIL, "In Praise of Oikocentric Spirituality," in ARREGI, BOFF, GEBARA, GONZALO, O'MURCHU, VIGIL, *The Cosmos as Revelation*, 128.

of transcendent truths that can only be expressed in symbolic, analogical, metaphorical terms.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, they believe that the "Christian myth" can, indeed must, be completely disregarded today, in the age of scientific knowledge; consequently, all traditional Christian dogma based on it should also be abandoned.

### On the intention to retain only the essence of Christianity

The resulting theological intent to "reconstruct" Christianity by preserving and promoting *only its essence*, identified in *the original experience of Jesus* as recounted by his first disciples and as scientifically accessible through today's historical-critical method, is also problematic. In short, this would be an experience of God as absolute Love to which one must conform in order to achieve complete humanization.

All subsequent theological reflection, as already present in the New Testament and then in the ecclesial elaboration sanctioned by the ecumenical councils, would be a *simple mythical covering*, of human creation, which not only *can* but *must* be discarded in order to make today cre-

<sup>18</sup> J. ARREGI, "Creed in the Face of Science. Notes for a Credible Theology," in ARREGI, BOFF, GEBARA, GONZALO, OMURCHU, VIGIL, *The Cosmos as Revelation*, 65.

<sup>19</sup> L. BOFF, "The God Who Rises in the Process of Cosmogenesis," in ARREGI, BOFF, GEBARA, GONZALO, O'MURCHU, VIGIL, *The Cosmos as Revelation*, 99-118.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. in this regard G. FERRETTI, *Ontology and Theology in Kant*, Rosenberg & Sellier, Turin<sup>2</sup> 2023.

<sup>21</sup> For the revival of this ecological spirituality, widely present in post-theism or among its sympathizers, in addition to the aforementioned J.M. Vigil, with his "ecocentric spirituality," cf., for example, B. MORI, *Per un cristianesimo senza religione (For a Christianity without religion)*, 162-164, with reference to

L. Boff; and above all some exponents of ecofeminist theology such as I. GEBARA, "A contribution of theological ecofeminism to a better planetary coexistence," in ARREGI, BOFF, GEBARA, GONZALO, OMURCHU, VIGIL, *The Cosmos as Revelation*, 137-162 and M.J. RESS, "The cry of ecofeminism. Let us remember who we are: daughters and sons of Mother Earth," in ARREGI, BUSSO, RESS, VIGIL, *Which God, which Christianity*, 93-109.

<sup>22</sup> The link between modern physics and mystical spirituality is emphasized, for example, by both the aforementioned Arregi and, above all, D. O'MURCHU, "Horizons of the Spirit in the 21st Century," in ARREGI, BOFF, GEBARA, GONZALO, O'MURCHU, VIGIL, *The Cosmos as Revelation*, 163-191, which refers to the now classic F. CAPRA, *The Tao of Physics*, Adelphi, Milan 1982 (original German edition 1975).

<sup>23</sup> An initial discussion of Gamberini's book, *Deus duepuntozero-ro*, appeared in *Rassegna di teologia* 62(2022) 3 with an essay by M. Nardello and a response by Gamberini, as well as a summary of the contributions by F. Bottaro, R. Battocchio, A. Corallo, P. Beltrame, and Gamberini himself, which were delivered at the presentation of the volume at the Auditorium del Gesù in Rome on June 20, 2022. A summary of the central theses of the work was also given by the author in P. GAMBERINI, "Relative Monism. Comprensione panenteistica di Dio e concezione trinitaria" (Relative Monism: A Panentheistic Understanding of God and the Trinitarian Concept), in *Filosofia e teologia* 36(2022) 3, 389-404, as well as in other essays such as ID., "Verso un'altra forma di cristianesimo" (Towards Another Form of Christianity), in ARREGI, BUSSO, RESS, VIGIL, *Quale Dio, quale cristianesimo*, 135-143.

the Christian faith and thus ensure its future in the service of humanity.

No consideration is given to the fact that this theological reflection may have been, as contemporary theology more keenly aware of this argues, *a progressive understanding of the truth/mystery of Christ*, necessarily expressed and communicated in the terms of the culture of the time. The result, among post-theists, is a *distortion of Christian theology*, which has always understood the New Testament and subsequent ecclesial tradition as essential points of reference, while feeling committed to the continuous reinterpretation of its truths in terms (concepts, images, languages...) specific to the evolving culture.

### On the lack of awareness of the analogical or symbolic significance of theological language

A final important point that poses problems is the lack of awareness, in the discourse of post-theists, of *the always and only analogical or symbolic nature of theological language*, given that we cannot speak of the mystery of God in any other way. This awareness is very present throughout the Christian theological and mystical tradition, both in terms of biblical language and that of subsequent theological elaboration.

<sup>24</sup> Cf., for example, the quotations from 1 Cor 15:28 (GAMBERINI, *Deus duepuntozero*, 24): "God is all in all" (actually, the text says that he will be at the end); Acts 17:28, Paul at the Areopagus: "God is the one in whom we live and move and have our being" (as translated there, 48);

John 10:30: "I and the Father are one" etc.<sup>25</sup> For panentheism, reference is made above all to the theologian K. MÜLLER, whose most recent work, *Gott jenseits von Gott. Plädoyer für einen kritischen Panentheismus*, Aschendorff, Münster, is cited, among others. 2021.

<sup>26</sup> GAMBERINI, "Towards another form of Christianity," in ARREGLI, BUSSO, RESS, VIGIL, *Quale Dio, quale cristianesimo* (Which God, Which Christianity), 139.

<sup>27</sup> The Thomist definition of God as "*ipsum esse per se subsistent*" has been criticized because it would lead back to a univocal and unitary view of being, of Neoplatonic origin, already contested by Aristotle, and which would be incompatible with the idea of the creation of beings distinct from God (cf. the criticism of E. Berti in this regard; for example

E. BERTI, "Aristotelianism and Neoplatonism in the Thomistic doctrine of God as 'Esse ipsum,'" in ID., *Aristotelian Studies*, Japadre, L'Aquila 1975, and several times thereafter). But rightly, in my opinion, Thomas was defended against such criticism because he had a clear analogical conception of being that allowed him to maintain the distinction between the being of God and that of creatures. Berti himself would eventually admit this, also with reference to the considerations of Thomist scholars such as S.L. BROCK, "Is *ipsum esse* Platonism?", in ID. (ed.), *Tommaso d'Aquino e l'oggetto della metafisica*, Armando, Rome 2004. Cf., in this regard, V. POSSENTI, "Il dibattito sull'auto on (*esse ipsum*) e la terza navigazione," in F. TOTARO (ed.), *Enrico Berti. A Precious Legacy*, monographic issue of *Humanitas* 78(2023) 1, 60-68, which includes, among other things, this clear quotation from *De potentia*, q. 7, a. 2, ad 4m: "*Esse divinum, quod est eius substantia, non est esse commune, sed est esse distinctum a quolibet alio esse. Unde per ipsum suum esse Deus differt a quolibet alio esse.*" As for the fact that creatures are inherent in the essence of God inasmuch as they have always been in God, Thomas clearly distinguishes two ways of being in God: inasmuch as he preserves them in their own being and inasmuch as God knows them, that is, as his ideas. In the first case, creatures are distinct from the Creator and are not inherent in his essence; in the second case, inasmuch as they are in the creative power and in the ideas

Christian theological and mystical tradition, both in biblical language and in subsequent theological elaboration.

If we forget this significance, as well as the more recent question of the literary genres in which biblical language is expressed, we inevitably end up reducing biblical-theological language to pure and simple "anthropomorphism" (as post-theists object to theists when they speak of God as a person) or even to "cosmomorphism" (as theists might do when post-theists speak of God as energy or cosmic void).

Theological language, conscious of the "mystery of God," does not and cannot claim to define the divine or exhaust it in its own formulations. But through the use of analogies, symbols, metaphors, and mythical-symbolic stories, it seeks to respond to the revelation of God that has been experienced, trying to indicate the direction in which to look and diverting attention from other wrong directions.

For example, by pointing in the direction of love and not hatred, forgiveness and not revenge, freedom and knowledge and not necessity and blindness.

divine, they are in God as his very essence. Cf. *De potentia*, q. 3. a.16, ad 24m: "*Ad vicesimumquartum dicendum, quod creatura dici-tur esse in Deo duplice. In one way, creatures exist in God as a governing and preserving cause; and thus it is presupposed that creatures are distinct from their creator in that creatures are said to exist in God. For creatures are not understood to be preserved in existence except insofar as they already have existence in their own nature, insofar as the existence of creatures is distinguished from God. Hence, a creature existing in this way in God is not a creative essence. In another way, it is said that a creature exists in God as in the power of an active cause, or as in a cognizant being; and thus a creature in God is the divine essence itself, as it is said in John 1:3: "That which was made in him was life."*" Along the same lines, in modern terms, P. SEQUERI expresses himself in *Il grembo di Dio* (The Womb of God), Città Nuova, Rome 2023, 58: "The creative act is nothing other than God's creative quality, and yet it is distinguished from his 'self-sufficiency', precisely as an 'addition' that cannot be conceived except in relation to the actual exteriority of worldly difference (even though it does not coincide with it)". As for the concept of "addition" evoked here, reference is made in a footnote to E. GUGLIELMINETTI, *La commozione del bene. Una teoria dell'aggiungere* (The Emotion of Goodness: A Theory of Adding), Jaca Book, Milan 2011.

<sup>28</sup>In this regard, it can be observed that in the classical theistic position, such as that of Thomas Aquinas, there is certainly no before and after in God. But this does not mean that God's actions are necessary. Even an eternal act can be a free act. The decision to create is a free eternal act in God, but its effects manifest themselves in time, as we can see. Unless we think, with Emanuele Severino, that the entire evolution of the world is also a set of eternals. Thomas precisely states that even if creation is *ab aeterno*, it is not necessary: cf., for example, *SThI*, q. 19, a.3, ad 1m: "*Ad primum ergo dicendum quod ex hoc quod Deus ab aeterno vult aliquid, non sequitur quod necesse est eum illud velle.*"

<sup>29</sup> To borrow a quote from LE NAERS, *Christians in the 21st Century?*, 50.

<sup>30</sup> This "disambiguation" was very well highlighted by P. SEQUERI, *The Reliable God. Essay on Fundamental Theology*, Querini, Brescia 1996.

<sup>31</sup> The term "separate" found in the biblical lexicon (such as *qadosh*, holy, that is, separated from every other reality), while on the one hand recognizing

etc. Knowing full well that God does not possess all these attributes in the human ways and limits we know, but in an eminent, incomparable way that is incomprehensible to us.

Thus, for example, in the emblematic case of the personality of God, contested by most post-theists to "personalistic theism," it should be remembered that traditional theism, attributing it to God in an analogical form, did not reduce God to a mere entity among entities, albeit a most perfect one, nor did it attribute to God personality with all the limitations and modes of functioning of human intelligence and freedom. Rather, it intended to attribute to him, in an analogical and eminent way, the highest human perfection, that which is at the root of freedom and dialogical relationship, possible only between persons (between an I and a You, as Martin Buber said) and not between impersonal beings or between persons and impersonal beings (between an I and an *It*, in Buber's terminology).

Thomas Aquinas, the greatest exponent of classical personalist theism, was well aware of this when he responded to objections that were raised even then to the attribution of the "name" of "person" to God: *"Respondeo dicendum quod persona significat id quod est perfectissimum in tota natura. Unde, cum omne illud quod est per-*

On the one hand, it rejects the unfathomable otherness and transcendence of God, while on the other hand it attests to his loving closeness, as befits one who makes himself known and recognized by giving himself to others in a free and gratuitous, faithful and merciful relationship.

<sup>32</sup>Cf. E. KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, in the section of *Transcendental Dialectic* entitled "Critique of all theology based on speculative principles of reason" (Italian translation by G. Colli, Einaudi, Turin 1957, 649f). But also, for example, in *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, Italian translation by C. Esposito, Bibliopolis, Naples 1988, 110-112).

<sup>33</sup>Cf. again Thomas, who in *STh I*, q. 8 (*De existentia dei in re-bus*) argues that God is in everything "intimately" (a. 1) and is everywhere "*secundum se totum*" (a. 4). This does not mean that He is contained in them as is the case with bodies. Spiritual realities, in fact, Thomas observes, contain that in which they are, as the soul contains the body. Therefore, by a certain analogy, it can be said that "*Deus est in rebus sicut continens res*" (a. 1, ad 2m). But this has nothing to do with that pantheism according to which the world is internal and essential to God and, consequently, God becomes part of the universe.

<sup>34</sup>Among the many examples that could be cited of this constant Christian theistic tradition of the intimate correlation between transcendence and immanence that characterizes God, I will limit myself to quoting Paul: "One God and Father of all, who is above all, works through all, and is present in all" (Eph 4:6); Augustine, for whom God is

"*intimior intimo meo et superior summo meo*" (*Conf. 3, 6, 11*); Pascal says: "Happiness is neither inside nor outside of us; it is in God, both outside and inside of us" (*Pensieri*, Paoline, Cinisello Balsamo [MI] 1987, n. 465).

<sup>35</sup>Cf. Karl Barth's "retraction" in his famous 1956 lecture *The Humanity of God*, in which he argues that God's "divinity," or his absolute transcendence as *totaliter aliter* (totally otherwise), includes his "humanity," that is, his freedom, put into action, not only to create the other from himself, but to assume human nature, to become man's partner in Jesus of Nazareth (cf. K. BARTH, *The Humanity of God*, Italian translation by S. MERLO, Claudiana, Turin 2021).

<sup>36</sup> This is strongly supported by Spanish theologian A. TORRES QUEIRUGA, for example in his work *Beyond Pre-Modern Christianity*

*fectionis, Deo sit attribuendum, eo quod eius essentia con-tinet in se omnem perfectionem; conveniens est ut hoc no-men persona de Deo dicatur. However, not in the same way as it is said of creatures, but in a more excellent way; just as other names which we impose on creatures are attributed to God" (STh I, q. 29, a. 3).*

We are aware that we have only touched upon the complexity of the philosophical and theological problems involved in post-theism, both in terms of method and content. However, we have attempted to identify the most relevant ones, with the critical reservations that post-theistic positions have aroused in us.

We too are convinced of the need for a rethinking, or rather a reinterpretation, of the Christian faith in the current modern and postmodern context.

However, it seems to us that the path taken by post-theists, albeit with the best of intentions, risks distorting the core elements of the Christian truth they intend to revive: the transcendence and personality of God, creation, revelation, incarnation, redemption, resurrection, Trinity, eschatology... This is also due to the limitations of the philosophical-theological approach we have indicated.

Giovanni Ferretti \*

, Elledici, Leumann (TO) 2013 (Spanish original from 2000), without in any way questioning the transcendence of God, creation out of love and therefore with freedom, and the originality of God's incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth.

<sup>37</sup> There is much to discuss about how post-theists describe the birth of "theism" in contrast to the supposed naturalistic and matriarchal religiosity that preceded it. Did theism really arise historically during the transition from nomadic Paleolithic to sedentary Neolithic agriculture? Was the invasion of the Kurgan civilization with its male gods and warriors really decisive? And above all, from a theoretical point of view, if theism arose at a given moment in human history, would it therefore be – as they deduce – a pure human invention? Could it not be, as theists believe, the result of greater intellect and/or revelation of divine truth?

<sup>38</sup>For an in-depth philosophical-theological analysis of the category of "covenant," elevated to a metaphysical principle as a relationship in difference and freedom, see P. CAPELLE-DUMONT, *Le principe alliance. Tome 1. Phénoménologie de l'alliance*, Hermann, Paris 2021.

<sup>39</sup>On the concept of revelation, which Christian theology has long understood not as the miraculous communication of propositions to be believed blindly—as post-theists generally think in order to criticize it—but as an event of openness to the truth that comes from God and that man receives in faith, translating it into his own analogical-symbolic language, cf. the illuminating texts by A. TORRES QUEIRUGA, *La rivelazione di Dio nella realizzazione dell'uomo* (The *Revelation of God in the Realization of Man*), Borla, Rome 1991 (which highlights its "historical maieutic" character) and by J.-L. MARION, *Da al-trove, la rivelazione. Contributo a una storia critica e a un concetto fenomenico di rivelazione*, Inschibboleth, Rome 2022 (which emphasizes its nature as a phenomenon irreducible to the immanent plane of human subjectivity).

<sup>40</sup>On the revelatory significance of mythical-symbolic narratives, see the insightful observations of L. PAREYSON, "Filosofia ed esperienza religiosa" [Philosophy and Religious Experience], in *Annuario filosofico* 1(1985), 19-27; now in id., *Ontologia della libertà* [Ontology of Freedom], Einaudi, Turin 1995, 104-106.

\* This study by Don Giovanni Ferretti will also be published in the quarterly journal *Filosofia e teologia*, in the third and final issue of 2024.