

The Church in the Midst of the Enduring Pandemic¹

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As many of you know, France is one of the most secularized democracies in the Western world, and this has had significant repercussions in the way the French population has responded to the challenges of the coronavirus pandemic. The general cultural climate is characterized by a humanist world and life view implying atheism or agnosticism. At best, theism is considered irrelevant to the human plight and disconnected from life issues and crises within civil society.

I. *World and Life View and Laïcité*

This stance is well expressed by Luc Ferry, a contemporary philosopher, in a monograph presenting the debate he had with Cardinal Gianfranco Ravasi. Very much aware of the significant contribution Christianity has made to the development of Western civilization, he nevertheless argues forcefully in favor of an essentially horizontal perspective of the world and the human condition. Since the Enlightenment and especially Friedrich Nietzsche, the notion of a transcendent God is no longer considered necessary when dealing with issues related to the city. In other words, “we think

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¹ Cf. also my brief comments on the pandemic: Pierre Berthoud, “Au jour du malheur réfléchis!” Faculté Jean Calvin, April 27, 2020, <https://www.facultejeancalvin.com/au-jour-du-malheur-reflechis/>; translation, “In the Day of Adversity Consider!” The Huguenot Fellowship, May 20, 2020, <https://www.huguenotfellowship.org/blog/2020/5/20/in-the-day-of-adversity-consider>.

we can and even must resolve the question of life in society and the good decisions affecting its wellbeing by ourselves, without taking orders from above.”² Such a philosophy underlies the specific understanding of the separation of state and church, as expressed in the key French concept of *laïcité*.³ For Ferry “laicism means that norms and common values are no longer rooted in a theological understanding of reality.”⁴

In fact, the philosophical aspects of the question are more complex. As Marcel Gauchet argues, there are two principles of legitimacy of power: either “the right of God” (legitimacy comes from above) or human rights (legitimacy emanates from society). He then goes on to say that “these two principles were put into action by the American and the French revolutions at the end of the eighteenth century.”⁵ In other words, God is at the center of the American Revolution and democracy. Such a vertical approach is no doubt due to the influence of the Protestant reformations. In fact, the countries that were influenced by Protestantism, especially Calvinism, had an understanding of the separation of church and state that made it possible for the Christian world and life view to have a significant impact on civil society.

Within the French context, *laïcité* (laicity) is considered a legal and political system that provides for the common good. It implies the separation of church and state.⁶ As an “agnostic institution,”⁷ the state (its officials and its civil servants) guarantees in principle the freedom of conscience and of religion as well as the public expression of one’s beliefs and convictions. It also ensures the equality of all citizens before the law and public services.

On the other hand, as mentioned above by Ferry, because of the emancipation of French culture, the law has become progressively the exclusive emanation of the people without the input of divine transcendence. This is all the more the case as we have witnessed over the last decades a spectacular erosion of the Christian influence (especially of Roman Catholicism) on French society as a whole.⁸ Within such a philosophical climate, to what

² Luc Ferry and Gianfranco Ravasi, *Le Cardinal et le philosophe* (Paris: Plon, 2013), 96–98.

³ Often wrongly translated “secularism”; it is better to refer even in English to “laicism.”

⁴ Ferry and Ravasi, *Le Cardinal et le philosophe*, 97.

⁵ Marcel Gauchet, “Les médias menacent-ils la démocratie?,” *Médias* 1.6 (2004), <http://gauchet.blogspot.com/2007/05/les-mdias-menacent-ils-la-dmocratie.html>.

⁶ That is, the church is not involved in the administration of the state and the state does not interfere in the inner organization of the religious communities.

⁷ This expression is to be preferred to “the neutrality of the state”; see Daniel Verba, “La laïcité, oui, mais laquelle?,” *Actualités sociales hebdomadaires* 3183 (November 6, 2020): 34–35. Such a posture does not mean indifference; the Minister of the Interior is expected to maintain relationships with the representatives of the religious communities.

⁸ Guillaume Cuchet, *Comment notre monde a cessé d’être chrétien* (Paris: Seuil, 2018).

extent does the state remain an “agnostic institution,” especially since the anticlerical trends of thought remain very strong in France? This explains why, since the adoption of the law on the separation of Church and State in 1905, there has been, within the political elites and the citizens, a recurring tension between the partisans of a more coercive and those of a more liberal interpretation of the law, the former limiting the freedom of religion to the private sphere, the latter seeking to protect both the private and public expressions of the faith. But many are those who think that such a public expression of one’s faith should remain discreet! These considerations will help us to better appreciate the present circumstances and challenges that COVID-19 represents within the present cultural climate in France.

II. *The Christian Faith, the Church, and the Pandemic*

Apart from those who have a Christian perspective, the mainstream media have largely ignored or given an erroneous appreciation⁹ of the contribution of the Christian faith and the church to the challenge of COVID-19. Edgar Morin, a stimulating author and well-known sociologist, argues that the coronavirus requires a radical and worldwide change in the direction of our societies. He thus says, for example, that if we have been slow in arriving at an ecological awareness it is because we live in a culture “where the Bible, the Gospels, philosophy and the human sciences have dramatically separated nature from culture, the human being from the animal.”¹⁰ There is some truth to this analysis emphasizing such a dichotomy, but Morin seems unaware that the Bible’s doctrine of creation includes the protection and preservation of the environment. Likewise, the distinguished philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, in denouncing the political and religious gurus who see in COVID-19 a bad omen for our civilization, mentions some Christian leaders who are hardly representative of the historic Christian faith.¹¹

⁹ An exception was the interview of Samuel Peterschmitt, pastor of a large charismatic church in Mulhouse, which held a major meeting in February 2020 and subsequently became the center of one of the first outbreaks of the epidemic. It was severely criticized—unjustly, however, since it had clearly respected the government’s instructions—and became a scapegoat in public opinion. Cf. Malo Tresca, “A Mulhouse la Porte ouverte chrétienne se relève douloureusement du Covid-19,” *LaCroix*, October 20, 2020. See also the interesting sociological study of the National Council of the Evangelicals of France (CNEF): “Églises évangéliques et Covid-19: Enquête,” Conseil national des évangéliques de France, May 13, 2020, <https://www.lecnef.org/articles/55361-eglises-evangeliques-et-covid-19-enquete>.

¹⁰ Edgar Morin, *Changeons de voie: Les leçons du coronavirus* (Paris: Denoël, 2020), 21. In dealing with the human condition he also quotes a passage from Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées*, but he makes no mention of the latter’s Christian faith, treating it as irrelevant (30–33).

¹¹ Bernard-Henri Lévy, *Ce virus qui rend fou* (Paris: Grasset, 2020), 43–44.

Nothing is said on the way “Christianity has been handling epidemics for 2000 years.”¹² To be fair, Lévy speaks highly of Judaism and especially of the prophets of the Bible, who, far from being confined, “were exposed to the wisdom of another, a radically other, even God.”¹³

One of the striking aspects of the two lockdowns we have thus far experienced is the docility with which the population has accepted and submitted to the sanitary regulations decreed by the medical and political authorities, especially with regard to the mandatory first confinement last spring.¹⁴ Likewise, the churches in general expressed the same compliance to the guidelines and instructions imposed by the confinements. They were quick to adapt and adopt social networks and digital media to keep in touch with the members of the local communities. As Lévy says so well in the name of the health imperative, “the guiding markers of our civilization, such as the churches, the synagogues, as well as the cultural centers, museums,” and diverse places of conviviality, “where people usually quench their non-quantifiable and non-mercantile spiritual thirst,” became virtually inaccessible.¹⁵

Let us be clear: we do not mean that transmission precautions of the coronavirus should not have been taken, but did our sanitary and political authorities take the time to evaluate not only the political turmoil and the economic hardships but also the spiritual, human,¹⁶ and cultural consequences of such radical measures and their impact on the freedom of conscience, religion, enterprise, and movement? If we take the example of the church, it is evident that the French authorities considered and thus treated it just as any other fellowship or institution. It declared its lockdown, and the churches accepted it, raising hardly objections and remaining disturbingly silent.¹⁷ The church, however, is more than a human institution; it

¹² Title of an article mentioned by John Lennox in his excellent book, *Where Is God in a Coronavirus World?* (Epsom, UK: The Good Book Company, 2020), 65, 82. French title: *Coronavirus, où est Dieu ?* (Marpent: BLF Editions, 2020). See also, Philippe Martin, *Les religions face aux épidémies, de la peste au Covid-19* (Paris: Cerf, 2020).

¹³ Lévy, *Ce virus qui rend fou*, 61–65.

¹⁴ The second lockdown in the fall was partial; businesses and schools remained open and continued their activities in situ.

¹⁵ Lévy, *Ce virus qui rend fou*, 74.

¹⁶ The anxiety, the fears, and the isolation triggered by the pandemic have been the cause of suffering and pain ranging from loneliness to depression in large parts of society, especially among the elderly and youth. The first lockdown was dramatic for the elderly as they were totally isolated, even from their families. Fortunately, things improved considerably for them during the second confinement.

¹⁷ During the first lockdown, the French Constitutional court, at the request of lay Catholics, ruled that the government must lift a blanket ban on meetings at places of worship imposed as part of the measures to combat the coronavirus. During the second lockdown, the Conference

is the body of Christ on earth, the pillar of truth. As it takes care of the flock, resilient in the midst of hardships, and seeks to alleviate human needs and sufferings, we could also expect it to pronounce a prophetic word as Christians face, in their pilgrimage through such troubled and uncertain times, so many disruptive changes and challenges. In such times of crisis, it is necessary to be vigilant over the church-state boundaries, for it is tempting for the government to encroach on the freedom and rights of the church recognized by the law. This is all the truer within a secular and post-Christian cultural environment where our medical and political authorities are unable or unwilling to recognize the covenant community's unique calling! Could it be that the Christian church is presently in a modern Babylonian captivity with all the limitations and the intimidations that that implies? If such is the case, then it is essential to clarify one's priorities, to seek and abide by the will of our Lord whatever the costs (Acts 4:18–20), and to take heed to the words Jeremiah wrote to the captives, that they would be for a while in Babylonia: "Seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the LORD on its behalf, for in its welfare will you find your welfare" (Jer 29:7).

As we face this pandemic it is crucial for us, the body of Christ, to delve into the Word so as to deepen our knowledge of God, for it is his wisdom that will help us to understand our times and find the words and gestures to respond to the French population's spiritual thirst and search for meaning.¹⁸ With this in mind, let us consider how André Comte-Sponville, a well-known philosopher, responds to the fear, panic, and anguish our contemporaries experience as they face the illness, the sufferings, and even the death produced by the pandemic. In recent articles, he begins by emphasizing that this panic and especially the reality of death have been considerably amplified by the media. It is as if our contemporaries suddenly discovered that they were mortal! COVID-19 has brought them face to face with a reality they desperately wanted to ignore because they see death as a

of Bishops was more outspoken and able to obtain an increase in numbers of people allowed to attend Mass. This action benefited Protestants and other religious groups. Objections were also raised with regards to the restrictions on funerals. On the silence of the churches, see Anne-Sylvie Sprenger, "Covid-19: 'Le silence des Églises face à ce qui se passe, est inquiétant,' dit François Dermange," *Journal Chrétien*, November 17, 2020, <https://www.chretiens.info/eglises/covid-19-le-silence-des-eglises-face-a-ce-qui-se-passe-est-inquietant-dit-francois-dermange/2020/11/17/10/35/>. Dermange teaches ethics in the Department of Theology, University of Geneva, Switzerland.

¹⁸ Lennox's short book *Where Is God in a Coronavirus World?* is a remarkable example of such an approach. John Piper's book, with a more Puritan perspective, is another good example: *Coronavirus and Christ* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020); French translation: *Le Coronavirus et Christ* (Trois-Rivières, Québec: Édition Impact, 2020).

failure! In a desire to reassure people, Comte-Sponville says, “I have good and bad news for you. The bad news is that we are all going to die. The good news is that most of us will die from something other than COVID-19.” He goes on to say that “finitude, failure and obstacles are fundamental to our human condition. We will continue to panic over every epidemic until we accept death.” Admitting the reality of death gives us the means to appreciate life. Thus, “we love life all the more, as we become aware of its brevity, its fragility and its value.” In other words, we must make the best of human existence because there is nothing after death! This awareness requires us to live a more intensive life while recognizing that health is only a “means of achieving happiness” and not an end in itself. Good health merely adds to the quality of life and cannot in any way take the place of core values such as justice, love, generosity, courage, and freedom.¹⁹

There is wisdom in Comte-Sponville’s approach, with its emphasis on the precious character of life on earth, the importance of rejecting the idolatry of health, recognizing our finiteness, the limits of our human condition and of the ethical standards and values that bring meaning and depth to our existence.

However, we get the impression that he has drawn on the Judeo-Christian heritage but left out its world and life view and biblical roots. He clearly rejects the existence of a sovereign, personal God to whom we are accountable and with whom we can enjoy an intimate relationship. We are the only actors in this world, and there is nothing beyond the horizon! As to his acceptance of the limits of human life, especially of death, it is more akin to a form of stoic resignation.

In contrast, the Scriptures emphasize the scandalous nature of death in a broken world. It is the ultimate enemy (cf. 1 Cor 15:26), whose power is rooted in sin (cf. Rom 5:12), which is rebellion against our ultimate Vis-à-vis and his wisdom. It is precisely because the Bible distinguishes between the origin of being and the origin of evil that sin, suffering, illness, and death are a tragedy, a tragedy we can face with confidence in the midst of alarm and anguish because the Triune God has reversed the course of history, of our history, in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As we accept his atoning work and trust in him, we pass from death to life, a life that transcends this earthly horizon.

¹⁹ André Comte-Sponville, “Laissez-nous mourir comme nous le voulons,” *Le Temps*, April 21, <https://www.letemps.ch/societe/andre-comtesponville-laisseznous-mourir-voulons>; “Ne tombons pas dans le sanitaire correct,” *Le Point* 2487, April 23, 2020, https://www.lepoint.fr/economie/andre-comte-sponville-ne-tombons-pas-dans-le-sanitairem-correct-16-04-2020-2371708_28.php.

May the Holy Spirit give the church the wisdom to be ambassadors of good news in the midst of a troubled, faltering, and weeping world, speaking peace, comfort, and lasting hope that seeks to alleviate fears and anxieties! Since the “steadfast love of the Lord is better than life,” it awakens within us trust, appeasement, hope, and praise (Ps 63:4).