Pensive Religion

A Reflection on Faith, Truth and Criticism

Lecture at the Symposium ‘Pensive Religion / Religion pensante’
Saint-Paul University, Ottawa, Canada, September 18, 2015

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1.

Is religion pensive? Does it think?

And if it does, does it ever think without fear for the very act of thinking? Does it think critically, auto-critically?

And even if this is the case, is religion’s criticism and auto-criticism basic for religion? Does it belong to its core? Can religion leave criticism behind without losing its identity?

It is not what we commonly think. Real thought, thought that imposes itself no limit, is not the hallmark of genuine religiosity. Religious thinking has at least one limit, a crucial limit: God. Once we do no longer except this God, thinking leaves the realm of religion. This is why, basically, religion is not thinking but believing, not thought but faith. Religion starts with a jump. Leaving rationality’s certainty behind us, abandoning the grip of logic, we deliver ourselves to what is thoroughly uncertain and in which we cannot have but faith, faith that has not even faith in itself: groundless, abysmal faith. At its origin, religion is not pensive; it is a matter of faith.

Is it?

When we listen to the common sense, it is. And that common sense is not without excellent credentials. It has the support of the most outstanding thinkers of modernity.
You only have to read, for instance, a few pages of Søren Kierkegaard. He and almost all other modern advocates of ‘religion defined as faith’ in fact all go back to Immanuel Kant. It was he who delivered religion from its rational and ontological pretentions. No, we cannot think God the same way as we think the reality our science deals with; no, we cannot consider God to be the apex stone in the architecture of our rationality, to be the ground that we have in common with the reality that our science explores and that anchors our knowledge in being itself. And neither is modern science able to pronounce upon things as the sense of life and of all that is. But, Kant continues, this does not imply the death of religion. On the contrary, it is an opportunity to discover its real character, which is not knowledge but faith – faith to be defined precisely as the opposite of knowledge, i.e. the act of supporting something that is beyond any possible science. And, so Kant adds, is it not precisely because of that impossibility of knowing God that our relation to Him – our religion – is free? Kant has freed religion and made it compatible with the paradigm of modernity, which is freedom. Which is why religion has survived in modernity’s young history: as faith, not as knowledge; as believing, not as pensive. Of course, modern religion is pensive as well, of course it thinks, but it is not pensive in its core and origin: that core is beyond thinking, that origin is faith.

Is it?

Is religion beyond thinking? Is it, in its core, unpensive? Is it able to leave critical thinking behind and remain what it is?

2.

It might seem strange, but if we listen to its tradition, the answer disagrees with the common sense idea. To this question, tradition’s answer is no. Our religious tradition forbids being not pensive. It owes this prohibition to its monotheistic character. For monotheism is never simply a religion or has at least a complex relation to religiosity and religion. If monotheism is a religion, than it is a ‘secondary’ one, in the sense that it is ‘second’ with respect to the religions in the time of its origin. Those religions were ‘primary’, and dated from times immemorial. Monotheistic religion is younger and is the result of a criticism with respect to the ruling religions it emancipated itself from.

You read it in fact on every page of the Bible: to believe in God is first of all not to believe in the gods people use to worship. It is to belief in the true God, the God who is One precisely because He is true – undividable, unshakable, unchangeable as truth is.
Believing in such a God cannot be but pensive, for again and again you have to criticize the idea you form of that God. Tirelessly, you have to distrust your present trust in God, fearing you put your trust in a false god, in an idol. Even your most ‘monotheistic’ idea of God can function as an idol. And God is there to compel you to criticize – to break and destroy – your idols. How could such relation to God even for one moment not be ‘pensive’, how could it allow itself one second to leave its critical and auto-critical reflex and reflection behind? How could it rest in God, without suspicion about that rest? How could it trust in God without distrusting its own trust?

Monotheistic religion is pensive. It is part of what I would call the ‘Regime of Truth’ that was introduced in the West from the sixth century BC onwards.

On the Greek Islands, some restless individuals started to think that everything is a matter of ‘thinking’, or ‘logic’ and ‘logos’. With quickly growing success, they introduced the idea that all must be considered in relation to the distinction between truth and false – a distinction that was supposed to cover the one between being and non-being. What myths and sacred stories about gods and other immortals say is not a genuine guidance to the real divine. Real guidance can only come from critical thinking about those myths and stories, distinguishing truth from untruth in what they tell. More important than the gods, is the Truth they may hide or reveal.

In the same sixth century, in a radically other historical context, a small people, almost on the verge of disappearing, reshaped its cultural and (what amounts to the same thing) ‘religious’ narratives in line with that what individuals from its recent past had called ‘truth’. By “the rivers of Babylon” (as they sang in Psalm 137), the few who rested from the once glorious Hebrew kingdom (i.e. the “rest of Israel”) remembered the ‘prophets’ from the 8th and 7th century who proclaimed that God is the one and only true God – that, in other words, gods and the domain of the divine has to be submitted to the criterion of truth, which at that time was a radically new idea. And, what is more, those prophets had linked that idea with the thesis that serving the one and only true God is not so much a matter of ‘religion’ – i.e. of sacrifices, processions and other sacred practices – but of obeying the Law that says that only God is God and that this means that one should do justice to those who lack justice – to the “widow and the orphan”, to the “pour and the outcast”. Jewish monotheism did not break with religion, but changed it thoroughly from within, and gave it a profoundly new orientation. Being in line with God is not a matter of taking care of the sacred commerce with the domain of the
immortal or the divine (by means of sacrifices, rituals, feasts, and so on); to be in line with God is to respect his truth, a truth expressed in a way of life that serves not so much God but the most marginal ones of his people and thus installs a kingdom of justice among humans.

In order to be in line with God, a pensive, critical and auto-critical attitude is indispensable. Not what you think to be God is God, only God is God. And this implies (and read this as addressed to a man of power): not what you consider to be justice is justice, justice is a matter of truth. And truth is what you cannot simply appropriate, it is an unreachable, ultimate point of reference putting under critique all what you realise as justice. A tool permitting you to distinguish true from false, right from wrong, but never allowing you to appropriate truth as such – for ‘only God is God’, only the truth is true.’

In that perspective, the monotheistic paradigm does not differ basically from the paradigm introduced in the same century by the emergence of “philosophy” (read “science” or, more generally, “western thought”). In both ways, a criterion is introduced that reshapes the fundamentals of the way humans consider and organise their existence, including their relation to the sacred, i.e. their religion. Truth becomes the basic point of reference for the way in which man looks at both his world and himself. Both philosophy and monotheism take part in what I have called the Regime of Truth that since then dominates our history.

3.
This history, however, shows first of all the vicissitudes – and, even, the vices – of that Regime. For saying that truth is a kind of regulative idea that no one can appropriate for himself – that, consequently no one can speak in the name of truth – is one thing. Another thing is that speaking in the name of truth, if avoidable at all, is at least avoided only very rarely. From Plato’s ‘phylakoi’ to the ‘waiters’ of the Soviet socialist society, truth has been the authority in the name of which absolute power has been legitimized. The same goes for the monotheist God: in his name absolute power has been installed and defended. Yet, the resistance against that kind of power has as often been inspired by the same God, just like, similarly, the criticism against the soviet socialism is often inspired by the same Marxist truth.

Apparently, the Regime of Truth is characterized by the fate of a double bind: at the one hand, truth is the tool by which every existing situation can be put under
critique and, on the other hand, it is the tool par excellence to neutralize any criticism. Truth allows you, at the same time, a limitless criticism and a victory over any possible criticism. The way in which both philosophy and (monotheistic, in case, Christian) religion have functioned in the course of our history, illustrates this tellingly. Religion, too, has functioned as a truth, both in the service of power and of the critique of power.

Kant’s new definition of religion seems to have changed things profoundly, for the enlightened philosopher intervened directly in the truth character of religion. Did he not deliver religion from the dominance of its reference to truth and, consequently, from its pretention to be able to speak in the name of truth? Religion was no longer defined after its presumption to be the only possessor of the truth. Truth, in so far as it can function within the realm of knowledge, became a matter of science – a science that has been screened by Kant’s critical project and is now perfectly aware that it can only lay bare local ‘truths’, but is unable to speak in the name of the truth. Since Kant, religion renounces any kind of scientific truth claim.

But does it renounce any truth claim? Not exactly. It keeps on claiming that God is truth. He is an unknowable truth, but a truth anyway. Yet, and this is the core of Kant’s intervention, that truth is not an object of knowledge, but of faith. But what is faith? Is it not, as I defined above, “supporting something that is beyond any possible science”? So, is faith really the opposite of knowledge? It is the opposite of scientific knowledge, so it cannot be proven scientifically. But does this mean that it is beyond knowledge as such? Not at all. Believing in God, I know that God is God, that he is the solely One and true God. Only, this knowledge cannot be proven scientifically. This is to say that it is beyond science. But it is still knowledge – unscientific knowledge, it is true, but knowledge anyway. Religion is knowledge based in the thing science, too, is based in: freedom. Faith is a freedom based knowledge.

4.
Here one can detect the ruse of reason operating within Kant’s argument – and certainly within the immense reception of that argument. How does faith function? Although it is said to be the opposite of knowledge, it cannot but operate as knowledge. Believing in God implies I know that he exists and that he really is like I believe he is. I might not completely be sure about it and I might be even convinced I cannot prove it scientifically, but still I do know. At least, for myself, I cannot but admit that I do know.
After all, what else would I be able to do? I cannot but believe that the God I believe in is the one and only true God – and consequently, that anyone who is concerned about the truth, should believe in that God. But I keep that pretention for myself, leaving everyone the freedom to accept that or not – or, more exactly – inviting everyone to take (as I did) the freedom to know God beyond the limits of scientific knowledge.

Faith is the free way to consider something as true; it is free knowledge, knowledge freed from scientific checking; hence, knowledge based on free acceptation, free endorsing. And while having no ground in scientifically falsifiable facts, this free acceptation has its base in the free decision others make to believe in the same truth. Faith is knowledge that is based on the fact that others share it on the same free level as I do.

Does this kind of knowledge, which is faith, situate itself beyond critique? Can it be what it is without criticism? Unlike one might think at first sight, it cannot. Even without the support of scientifically proven standards, it cannot leave criticism behind. Why not? Simply because of the truth it claims. If truth is basically that which I freely believe it is, and what others who as freely as I do confirm, then, a non-criticized truth easily loses all of its strength and value. Truth then is quickly reduced to what I and other kindred spirits believe. It becomes literally just what we believe. Rather than in truth, we then believe in our belief. We believe merely a belief.

Is this not what is at stake in ‘fideism’, the idea that Christian faith does not need any ‘ratio’, any ontological foundation or logical thinking and can stick to its belief solely? Does one who only believes his belief, still belief in God? ‘Not what one thinks of God is God, only God is God’: this monotheist axiom goes for Christianity as well. Like a Muslim or a Jew, a Christian should not confuse his ideas about God with God.

And this is precisely what the Christian tradition, in its reaction to Modernity, has done. From Modernity, that promoted freedom, it learned to take the freedom to keep on believing in God and in the Christian doctrine. Supported by Kantian philosophy, it left behind the definition of religion as based in the rational and ontological ground of reality and followed its new definition, considering religion as based it in ‘faith’ (outlined as the opposite of ‘knowledge’). Christianity embraced modern freedom to the extent it legitimizes its right to believe in God.

But it did not take up the criticism and auto-criticism inherent to modern free thought. And for those among Christian thinkers who nevertheless did dare to do it, the
ruling powers of their religion all too often blew the whistle on them. The more it lost its hegemonic position in Western culture and became only a substantial minority group among others, Christianity turned in general to a conservative reflex, neglecting the critical and above all the auto-critical dimension of its own tradition. In this, it feels recently supported by the multi-culturist mentality that dictates the common sensibility since the last decades. Everyone has the right to live his own culture, including religious culture. So there is nothing wrong with faith and with believing in what always has been believed. The vivid critical culture that by times had characterized Christianity’s history extinguished, for those Christians who were critical with respect to the dominating doctrine, were easily advised to leave Christianity. ‘No one forces you to believe, you are free, but if you do, you have to be really faithful to the doctrine’. The effect of this was the expulsion of the critical potential that substantially had marked Christian tradition in the past. This was once again an element that reduced the core of Christian religion to belief – a belief that now had become practically unquestionable. The Christian has to believe his belief; it is as simple as that. That this was, even to his own tradition, the mistake – the sin – of ‘fideism’ became something he could no longer grasp.

5.
What Christianity has lost is not its reference to truth but to ‘thinking truth’, i.e. to the use of truth as an ultimate point of reference in a critical and auto-critical attitude with respect to the very pretention of knowing and possessing the truth. Thinking is an active word, it does not mean having thoughts but examining and exploring them. Once I have thoughts, I have thought, i.e. I have stopped thinking. Thinking is what I do before having thought, before possessing thoughts, and afterwards, when I allow myself a distance with respect to them. A reference to truth that does neglect thinking in the active sense of the word, denies a basic aspect of that truth, for truth only functions when accompanied by such ‘active’ praxis of thinking. Christianity – as well as Judaism and Islam – is fully rooted in the ‘Regime of Truth’ as it has been introduced in the sixth century BC. And their traditions are not without a variety of ways in which that kind of active ‘thinking’ has been practiced. So, it is because of their traditions that none of the monotheistic religions has the privilege to suppose itself beyond ‘thinking’. None of them can allow itself to be not ‘pensive’.
Modernity is the name for the historical project that bases man and world in that most difficult thing called freedom. That freedom has the pretentions of ‘truth’, but it turns almost immediately into non-freedom from the moment this truth is not accompanied by a critical and auto-critical attitude. Truth only functions as a point of reference in an unceasing culture of criticism and auto-criticism. This insight goes back to the origins of our civilisation, to the ‘thinking’ the Greek invented and to the truth monotheism introduced into religion. The Greek invented free thought; monotheism invented free religion, religion liberating itself from gods and other idols thanks to the reference to the one true God. Philosophy and monotheism share this freedom, and this freedom is directly connected with the freedom modernity has taken as its base and paradigm.

Religions in our days have to take their responsibility with respect to the freedom based world modernity tries to realize. Whether they like it are not, they are part of the modern project, and have to ‘take care of our world’ within the paradigms of modernity. They share modernity’s difficult truth claim and have to share the attitude indispensable for that claim: they have to ‘think’. They have no choice than being ‘pensive religions’.

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