

WHICH FOUNDATION? INTRODUCTORY NOTES¹

• Angelo Scola •

“Fundamentalism . . . fails to see that . . . each man, and only he, decides about his humanity, because the foundation itself chooses the act of human freedom as the locus of its donation.”

1. *The Foundation: A Given?*

“For no one can lay a foundation [*themelion*] other than the one that is *already in place* [*ton keimenon*], which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor 3:11).

It behooves us to bring out the full theoretical density of Paul’s expression *ton keimenon*, which we have translated as “already in place.” This is in order to free ourselves at the outset of an illusion that is characteristic of a good deal of modern thought: the illusion that the *foundation* can be “placed,” or “posited,” by the transcendental activity of the subject, whatever the name under which it appears. Would not Husserl’s “reduction,” together with the critique of constituting intentionality, rise up in protest against such a notion of “foundation”?

¹The title was proposed to me by the editors of *Communio*. I limit myself to offering a few fragmentary notes, which cannot but leave certain aspects, even important ones, untreated. I am emboldened to do so by the solidarity of friends with whom I have been endeavoring to reflect on these issues for a number of years now: Ignacio Carbajosa, Gilfredo Marengo, Paolo Martinelli, Javier Prades, Nicola Reali, and Gabriel Richi.

On the other hand, to say that the foundation is “already in place” is not to reduce it to a “supreme being” that can be *adequate*, as an *object*, to the conceptual representation of a *subject*, as a “naive realism” would have it.² Could the foundation, so conceived, stand up to Heidegger’s well-known critique of onto-theo-logy?

In a word: Is it still possible to ask the question about the foundation today?

But even if it is, what are we to make of Paul’s “claim” to name the foundation: *Jesus Christ*? Even supposing that this claim hasn’t already been thoroughly undermined by Lessing’s objection that an “ugly ditch” separates us from Jesus in his historical contingency;³ even supposing that at least some fragment of this claim has managed to withstand Nietzsche’s will to power that goes so far as to murder the God of the Christians himself⁴—isn’t it about to be ruthlessly swept away by the absolute dominion of the algorithm imposed by science and technology, which has atheistically replaced the God of Jesus Christ in the nihilistic attempt to “bring things out of nothing and then push them back into it”?⁵

Even if “only a god can save us,” he won’t be “a God of morality, but a God hidden in the laboratories of cybernetics” to whom an age-old humanist-Christian culture must finally, after so many centuries, give up the field. “Man is no longer a ‘subject, but a project.’”⁶ As the *scientific universalism* of the reigning mentality never tires of reminding us, the only real knowledge is knowledge *ex-post*. Knowledge is an ever-advancing process that marches ahead

²This warning is already found in Gregory of Nazianzen’s assertion that “it is impossible to express [what God is], but even more impossible to comprehend it.” *Discourse 28*, 4. It is echoed in Augustine’s well-known dictum: “*Si comprehendis, non est Deus*” [if you comprehend it, it is not God], *Sermo 52*, 16.

³G.E. Lessing, *Sopra la prova dello Spirito e della forza*, in M. F. Sciacca—M. Schiavone, eds., *Grande antologia filosofica*, vol. 15 (Milan: Mazarati, 1968), 1557–1559.

⁴For a penetrating interpretation of Nietzsche, who said of himself “Man wird mich etwa gegen das Jahr 2000 lesen dürfen” [It will be permissible to read me say around the year 2000], see the invaluable volume of D. Franck, *Nietzsche et l’ombre de Dieu* (PUF: Paris, 1998).

⁵E. Severino, *Pensieri sul cristianesimo* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1995), 284.

⁶Such statements are becoming more and more common. The citations are from M. Jorgen, “Der Mensch ist sein eigenes Experiment,” in *Die Zeit* (“Feuilleton” section), 9 August 2001: 31.

through successive falsifications that are *de facto*—even before being *de jure*—opposed to any idea of a foundation in the strict sense.

If this is the prevailing judgment in terms of which so-called post-modern thought interprets the destiny of the West, isn't talk of a foundation, especially when the foundation is identified with Jesus Christ, by that very fact already itself fundamentalism? Or, if we would rather put it the other way around, aren't fundamentalist positions precisely the crude versions to which a philosophy and theology that claim to deal with the question of the foundation inevitably gives rise?

Riding high the crest of sensational discoveries in biogenetics, more and more commentators assert a “technological imperative” that necessitates a “de-regulation” of morality and seems to reduce the issues that have been raised to the level of mere rhetorical questions.

Given this context, how ought we to read *Fides et Ratio*'s invitation to “pass from the phenomenon to the foundation” (FR, 83)? Can this invitation be anything more than the pathetic defense of a philosophy—forced to watch helplessly its own decline—that is nostalgically called back from the past to serve as a fragile crutch for a Christianity that is too feeble to maintain its claim to truth?

It would be much more opportune, even many Christians now openly insist, to aim at a *universal religion* that finally respects religious pluralism and acknowledges the freedom of atheism or, at least, of agnosticism. Such a religion, they say, would at least provide an ethical glue to hold together today's troubled humanity that, despite the era of globalization, seems as unable as ever to avoid new and bloody conflicts.⁷

It is no accident that John Paul II's formula has had a paradoxical success among commentators of *Fides et Ratio*. It is universally cited for its synthetic power, but it is also almost universally criticized. The philosophers, forgetful of the sound hermeneutics of the manualist tradition which understood the distinction of registers between papal pronouncements and scholarly treatises, are particularly dissatisfied with the formula. We have already given the reason for the dissatisfaction of the “innovators.” What is more surprising is that not a few “classical” thinkers fear

⁷Cf. S.P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997).

what they think is its possible ambiguity. Why, they ask, should it be necessary to *pass* from the phenomenon to the foundation if the foundation is always already in place and, if in order to affirm the truth, all that remains is to form an adequate concept of it that can then be applied to practical life?

Our initial question inevitably returns: The foundation—a given? And, if so, which one?

2. *Foundation and Transcendence*

(a) *The Irrepressible Given*

Perhaps it is not all too rash to start from a given that, whatever else one says, is undeniably stubborn: *Something gives itself to someone*.

This statement is meant to be understood in its immediacy. Nevertheless, it is necessary to qualify: The “something”—without being reducible to the “ontic” (whether as object or as entity)⁸—is, in a certain sense, totally absorbed by the “gives itself,” just as the “someone” is not the transcendental “I” (in any of its forms) with its claim to constitute the “something” that gives itself.

However this given may have been called throughout the history of Western thought, one cannot deny it without ending up in the position of Aristotle’s “trunk.” In every one of its acts, the empirical I—in its own “flesh,” which roots it in the world and, at the same time, opens it, through language, to the other—is involved in this given. And whoever would undertake the (at once theoretical and practical) task of rigorously reducing it will find that it always finishes by reasserting itself, like the phoenix that continually arises from its own ashes.

Let us begin our consideration of this given by leaving—at least for reasons of economy—to the necessary scrutiny of the critics all the more or less well-known *Destruktionen* of Western thought that have succeeded one another down to our own day, not to

⁸In this sense it becomes necessary to go beyond both Husserl’s “object” (E. Husserl, *L’idea di fenomenologia II* [Turin: Einaudi, 1965]), 68 and Heidegger’s entity (M. Heidegger, *Essere e tempo* [Milan: Longanesi, 1976], 128; idem, “Protocollo di un seminario sulla conferenza ‘Tempo ed essere,’” in idem, *Tempo ed essere* [Naples: Guida Editore, 1980], 135, 154).

mention the manifold variations of the “*case dismissed*” or the “*off limits*” with which today’s “weak thought” greets the issues at hand. Such maneuvers may obscure the full extent of the irrepressible given, but they cannot do away entirely with its elementary impact.

(b) “*In-com-prehensibiliter com-prehendere in-comprehensibile*”⁹

This paradoxical expression, whose elements are gathered from a passage of Augustine’s *De Trinitate*¹⁰ echoed by Anselm in the *Monologion*¹¹ and by Aquinas in the *Summa*,¹² offers a way to highlight two important characteristics of the irrepressible elementary given (*something gives itself to someone*).

In the first place, to speak of the *in-com-prehensibile* means to safeguard radically the unpredictable donation of every given that manifests itself from and through itself *in person* (“*in flesh and blood*”). The *in-com-prehensibiliter* expresses the fact that, by its very structure, this donation eludes man’s grasp. The *com-prehendere*, on the other hand, gives due place to the irreducible role of subjectivity.

In the second place, this Augustinian expression offers a way to think through the *polar nature of the unity* that constitutes the irrepressible given which (Western) thought, in all its varieties, has tried, and can never cease to try, to account for.¹³ While the polarity between the “something [that] gives itself” and the “someone” can never be overcome, unity attests itself with the force of an *event* that is absolutely irreducible to this polarity.

⁹The expression comes from J.-L. Marion in idem, “A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion,” in J.D. Caputo—M.J. Scanlon, eds., *God, Gift, and Post-Modernity* (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1999), 75.

¹⁰“Incomprehensibly comprehend the incomprehensible.” Cf. Augustine, *De Trinitate*, XV, II, 2.

¹¹“*Rationabiliter comprehendit incomprehensibile esse*,” [comprehends by reason that it is incomprehensible], *Monologion*, 64; cited in *Fides et Ratio*, 42.

¹²Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, I, 12, 7.

¹³Cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *Theologica.I* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1989), 65–80 [For an English translation, see H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-logic. Theological Logical Theory.I: The Truth of the World* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000)]. In philosophical matters Balthasar often refers to the thought of Siewerth, Bruaire, and Ulrich.

Thanks to this double character, the irrepressible given places human freedom before the claims of truth.

(c) *Witnesses of Donation*

Let us consider what is in play in every irreducible act of freedom. In every such act, we discover the call of truth. This truth, unveiling to the “subject”¹⁴ its “being-in-accord” with every donation of the given, enables it, the subject, to re-cognize this donation in re-cognizing itself. In a certain sense, it is precisely this donation that constitutes the subject as the adequate subjective pole of the event.

What happens when the freedom of human subjectivity re-cognizes itself as “subject” because surprised by another “subject”?

Let us state as a hypothesis that this experience offers a privileged entryway to the irrepressible elementary given.

In the various (ontic) circumstances in which the encounter with the other occurs—for example, in the mother’s smiling at her child—truth calls to freedom. In the mother’s smile, the child not only perceives the smile itself, but, through this same donation, re-cognizes the mother in re-cognizing himself as subject. Against every form of solipsism, which inevitably reifies the other, whom it then relegates to an indifferent, marginal status, the irrepressible given unveils the solidity that sets the other apart as a consistent identity in his own right, while at the same time withdrawing the other from the reifying claim of a domineering intentionality. The “subject” thereby discovers himself to be in accord with the donation of the quid, even as this donation always occurs in a being here that refers willy nilly to a beyond, to a dif-ference. For this reason, the donation calls for *testimony*.¹⁵

¹⁴The inverted commas are necessary to rule out absolutely the claim of the “subject” to “produce” the donation of the given.

¹⁵On the subject of testimony the reader may usefully consult M. Neri, *La testimonianza in H.U. von Balthasar. Evento originario di Dio e mediazione storica della fede* (Bologna: EDB, 2001). The collective volume entitled *La testimonianza* (Padua: Cedam, 1972), which contains essays by E. Castelli, P. Ricoeur, E. Lévinas, C. Bruaire, H.G. Gadamer, K. Rahner, M. Nédoncelle, J.L. Leuba, A. Vergote, X. Tilliette, I. de la Potterie, P. Rossano, R. Panikkar, and G. Marcel, remains of invaluable importance.

Testimony seems to be the most adequate word to express the act of freedom that, patiently passing through the ontic, re-cognizes, in re-cognizing itself, the donation of the given.¹⁶

The donation of the given thus sheds every vestige of mere formalism and, within the strict and liberating horizon of the Augustinian formula cited above, convincingly evidences the positivity of the real. The I, the others, my life-story, history itself carry the weight of existence. The consequence of this positivity must be a rigorous loyalty that *makes room for every kind of given*. Such loyalty not only excludes nothing, it lets itself be engaged according to the level of goodness, beauty, and truth that gives itself, shows itself, and speaks itself in the given.

Each single act of my freedom is given the possibility of access to the truth. The truth, of course, is not some thing to be possessed, much less to be possessed once and for all; nevertheless, the truth is received in a paradoxical “possession in detachment.”¹⁷

(d) *In Testimony to the Absolute, the Transcendent Attests Itself*

The foregoing remarks raise the question of the truth of testimony. Only, indeed, if testimony is true does it allow its receiver to go beyond a formal recognition of the foundation—the foundation is always assured in any case and, therefore, has universal theoretical value. Only if testimony is true does it convince the receiver of the truth of the real and of the “I” itself.

It may be illuminating to consider a kind of testimony that is in some sense paradigmatic for all the others. We are referring to the form of testimony connected with the problem of evil, especially

¹⁶We can usefully cite the most trustworthy etymology of the word—also in order to remove from it any hint of moralism. According to this etymology, the Latin *testis* descends, through the intermediate form *testis*, from *tristis*. *Tristis*, composed of *tri-* and *sto*, signifies “he who stands in the three.” The witness is the third who stands between two and, as the juridical use of the word nicely illustrates, calls the freedom of the two to a bond in the truth.

¹⁷This penetrating expression comes from Luigi Giussani. Cf. L. Giussani, *Affezione e dimora* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2001), 250–251.

when evil appears with a high degree of *malheur*.¹⁸ For, on this level, evil seems to withdraw below the norm.¹⁹ It makes itself unjustifiable, because it “contains a depth of iniquity that is no longer measured by any norm.”²⁰ In this case, evil becomes the supreme expression of the finitude of the “I.”

Let us begin by affirming that, strictly speaking, evil as such occurs in the relation between the victim and the guilty perpetrator. It is no accident that theodicy itself, especially from Leibniz on, has busied itself with the grotesque enterprise of defending God.²¹

Let us examine the case of the *kamikaze* who voluntarily uses his own suicide for the cause in which he believes in order to kill innocent bystanders. He performs a fully deliberate act, which for him is an act of martyrdom, and he does so with the support of family members, friends, co-religionists, and, in many cases, of a large sector of the people. By what criterion can we discern the truth or falsity of this testimony?

If we would respect the distinctive nature of the foundation, we must recognize that we cannot fix this criterion through some argument that would establish *a priori* the truth—or falsity—of all testimony. Much less can this truth be the product of the act of testimony itself. It is impossible to construct, either *a priori* or *a posteriori*, an abstract system of values to which we could submit the various forms of testimony for judgment. The radical helplessness that everyone feels in the face of these sorts of suicide attacks with their harvest of innocent victims nicely illustrates how structurally impracticable such methods are. Their impracticability has to do, in fact, with the ungraspability of what we have called the foundation.

Does this mean that we must resign ourselves to the indefinite fragmentation of the acts of witnessing freedom? Must we ultimately lose the unity of truth in a relativistic dispersion? On the

¹⁸Interesting observations on the dimension of *malheur* in evil may be found in X. Tilliette, “Del male,” in G. Riconda—X. Tilliette, eds., *Del male e del bene* (Rome: Città Nuova, 2001), 11–34.

¹⁹Cf. J. Nabert, *Saggio sul male* (Naples: Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane, 2001), 3–37.

²⁰Cf. P. Ricoeur, *Le désir de Dieu* (Paris: Cerf, 1996), 9.

²¹Whatever one thinks of his proposed solution, A. Kreiner has presented a useful analysis and bibliography in *Sulla validità degli argomenti della teodicea* (Brescia: Queriniana, 2000).

contrary! Of course, we must correctly acknowledge, in the inevitable, patient hermeneutic of the plurality of the acts of freedom, that such unity in fact exists and that it is irreducible to this plurality. In a certain sense, the unity shines forth in the very donation of the given. How are we to recognize this fact? Michel Henry, speaking of *life* (which is his way of talking about the foundation—of what the monotheistic religions call God), observes that “*la question est déjà résolue: il se trouve que la connais déjà: comment? Par la vie elle-même*” [the question is already answered: it turns out that I know it already: how? By means of life itself].²²

If evil is evil within the relation between victim and perpetrator, who, in the case of the suicide attacker, is the victim and who is the perpetrator? What do we say about their relationship?

The innocent civilians who are deliberately killed by the suicide bomber are obviously the *victims*. And they would remain victims even if they belonged to an enemy people with whom one’s own were at war. Nor do they cease to be victims because they simply happen to be at the wrong place at the wrong time; after all, that place has been more or less carefully targeted for attack. Indeed, the fact that there is no direct relation between the victims and the attacker highlights the unjustifiability of the latter’s act and, therefore, only radicalizes the victim-status of those whom he kills.

Moreover, the fact that the attacker sacrifices his own life in carrying out the attack does not make him any less guilty of the death of the innocent civilians who perish as a result of it. Perhaps one might acknowledge in the attacker a certain courage or willingness to make sacrifices (others might speak of infatuation or fanaticism), but that, if anything, only radicalizes the degree to which the evil he performs is something unjustifiable.

We stand face to face with an offence that can no longer be repaired. Must we then acknowledge it as the radical expression of an evil that is impossible to justify? The only possible response to an irreparable offence is that the victim share the suffering of the guilty party.²³ In that case, the I whose finitude has identified itself with evil can open itself to justification by the power of the testimony of

²²Cf. M. Henry, “Entretien sur le panthéisme” (Montpellier: May 17, 1998). The text can be found on the internet at www.philagora.net/philofac/henrypan.htm.

²³Cf. J. Nabert, *Saggio sul male*, 103–143.

the victim who, in a certain sense, robs evil of its unjustifiability. In the case of an irreparable offence, then, the truth or falsity of a testimony has to do with the suffering of the victim. If we go back to the example from which we started, the suicide bomber cannot be a true witness, because he makes a positive decision to abstract from the suffering of the victim, thereby revealing a radical contempt for his person in the shrine that constitutes his freedom.

This consideration opens for us a path towards the identification of true testimony. A shining example is the still little known case of the monks of Thibirine, who were murdered in Algeria just a few years ago. The true witness of the authentic martyr emerges clearly when we read the moving testament that the Prior, Christian-Marie de Chergé, composed a few years before the massacre. De Chergé offers forgiveness to the perpetrators in advance, thus ratifying his conscious choice not to abandon a place and a situation in which he was exposed to the real possibility of martyrdom.

In the name of the common Father, De Chergé expresses his curiosity to know how his brotherly bond with his Muslim killer might look in God. He is concerned to know the love of God—and the possibility of loving his murderer forever in Him—more than he is to save his own life. This concern urges him to offer, in advance, forgiveness to those who would be guilty of his death.²⁴

²⁴“If one day I should become the victim of the terrorism that threatens every foreigner living in Algeria (and it might happen today), I would like for my community, my Church, my family to remember that my life was given to God and to that country. I would like them to accept that the one and only Master of every life cannot be alienated from this brutal death . . . [I] have lived long enough to consider myself an accomplice in the evil that, alas, seems to prevail in the world and, indeed, in the evil that might strike me at random. If the moment should come, I would like to have that flash of lucidity that would allow me to beg forgiveness of God and of my brothers in humanity and, at the same time, to forgive with my whole heart whoever had injured me. I cannot wish that sort of death. It seems to me important to say so clearly. In fact, I don’t see how I could rejoice over the fact that a people whom I love should be indiscriminately blamed for my murder . . . Evidently, my death will seem to prove right those who have rashly considered me a naïve idealist: ‘Now tell us what you think!’ But these people should know that my most piercing curiosity will finally be satisfied. This death is what may, if God wills, immerse my gaze in that of the Father, so that I may contemplate with him his children of Islam as he sees them, totally illuminated by the glory of Christ, the fruit of his Passion, clothed with the gift of the Spirit, whose secret joy will always be to establish communion, to reestablish likeness,

The necessary hermeneutic of the two acts that we have analyzed leads to two other considerations. The first can be expressed in the form of a question: “Is the irreparable offence of the suicide bomber an evil that can never be justified?” The second, which in some sense undertakes to answer this question, concerns De Chergé’s choice. By forgiving the perpetrator in advance, he involves the perpetrator, in spite of himself, in his, De Chergé’s, act of witness, in some sense robbing the evil performed by his murderer of its unjustifiability.

De Chergé’s testimony—even apart from its explicit reference to God—clearly has an absolute character. The Absolute that is present in it makes accessible the very act of testimony itself. It is precisely this absolute character of the act that proves its so to say saving power, that is, its capacity to hold evil back from crossing the threshold of the unjustifiable.

In the case of De Chergé, testimony proves itself to be true testimony. In the manifestation of the absolute that shines in it—if we are rigorously loyal to the totality of the data as they are given—the Transcendent attests itself, even as this attestation remains within the framework of the Augustinian formula that was the starting-point of our reflection.²⁵

playing with differences. This life lost, totally mine and totally theirs, I offer with thanks to God who seems to have intended it entirely for such joy, in spite of everything, against everything. In this Thanks, in which the whole of my life is expressed, I also, of course, include you, my friends of today and yesterday, along with my mother and my father, my sisters and brothers, the hundredfold granted according to the promise. And you, too, my friend of the last minute, who didn’t know what you were doing. Yes, I want this Thanks and this Goodbye to include you, too. If it should please God, our common Father, may we meet, two penitent thieves, in Paradise. Amen! Inshallah,” Ch.-M. de Chergé, “Testamento,” in *L’Osservatore Romano* (1 June 1996).

²⁵Within the neo-classical perspective—which “considers both idealism and neo-scholasticism to be true once they are brought to their authentic expression, which results from the fulfillment of their original intention, or of their speculative foundation” (G. Bontadini, “Per una filosofia neoclassica,” in idem, *Conversazioni di metafisica*, 1, 2nd ed. [Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1995], 260–289; here 269). G. Bontadini offers what remains a stimulating demonstration of the existence of God. Bontadini makes much of the category of inference (cf., idem, “Sull’aspetto dialettico della dimostrazione dell’esistenza di Dio,” in idem, *Conversazioni di metafisica*, 2, 2nd ed. [Milan: Vita e Pensiero, 1995], 189–194). Even before Bontadini, Newman had already helpfully broadened the category. Cf. J.H. Newman, *Grammatica dell’assenso* (Milan—Brescia: Jaca Book—Morcelliana, 1980),

(e) The Event of the Foundation

The hermeneutic of acts of testimony, which requires the phenomenological acknowledgment of a unity that remains irreducible to the plurality of these acts, attests their (at once theoretical and practical) ability to bring home the nexus between truth and freedom. Keeping in mind the necessary distinctions, we recognize that the act of bearing witness—which we have just sketched in terms of the singular encounter between “subjects” face to face with evil—“identifies” every donation of the given (from the most elementary to the most intense, which we have just highlighted), whose intrinsic dynamism always involves the “subject.”

The transcendent Absolute gives itself in every donation of the given. In so doing, it already includes the call to each single act of freedom, whose intrinsically witness-bearing nature it thus brings to light. This means that every act of freedom is, at one and the same time, necessary, yet irreducible to itself alone: In order to complete itself, it must go out of itself. It is witness-bearing, then, because it necessarily involves the “I,” while with equal necessity referring it to the donation of the transcendent Absolute that allows the act of freedom to be performed in the first place.

We may, without fear of redundancy, register once more the qualification that the testimonial act of freedom, so understood, is an act that is at one and the same time theoretical and practical, that it is, in other words, an act of knowledge-action correlative to truth-goodness.

This sheds greater light on the irrepressible given that was our starting-point—*something gives itself to someone*. In every donation of any given, the transcendent Absolute “accords” the “subject” to itself—thereby constituting the subject *as subject*—because it calls every single act of the subject’s freedom to testimony. To testimony, which is to say, to a *possession in detachment*. This possession in detachment, moreover, is irreducible to any theory, inasmuch as it preserves the full savor of the Augustinian formula: *Incomprehensibile incomprehensibiliter comprehendere*.

On what grounds, then—other than unjustified prohibitions imposed by party loyalty—can we refuse to give to the internally differentiated event that we have described with the name of “*foundation*”?

Fides et Ratio’s call to “pass from phenomenon to foundation” thus not only proves to be plausible, but turns out to be downright indispensable.

3. *The Foundation that is “Already in Place, that is, Jesus Christ”*

The perspective of testimony as a response to the call that truth issues to every act of freedom (in its indeducibility) calls for an examination of every donation of the given *without discrimination*.

Rigorous respect for the methodological differences between philosophy and theology²⁶ clears the ground of every prohibition that would refuse us the right to consider the givens coming from revelation. Authentic thought has never imposed on itself the duty to observe such prohibitions or to practice *epoché* with respect to Christian revelation.²⁷ A choice that, at least for a Christian, would be like sawing off the branch upon which one sits.²⁸

Consequently, a return to the thought that preceded the Greek *arché*, to the search of the religious monotheisms, is much more urgent, from a theoretical point of view, than Heidegger’s return to the Pre-Socratics.

Who in history claimed to be the witness to the Absolute more than Jesus Christ?

²⁶Cf. *FR*, 64–74.

²⁷Let one example suffice: The weight given by Descartes and Leibniz to certain questions concerning the Eucharist. Evidence of a profound dialogue between philosophy and theology in terms of the theology of the Eucharist can be found in N. Reali, ed., *Il mondo del sacramento* (Milan: Paoline, 2001).

²⁸Still stimulating in this sense are Balthasar’s reflections on the “twofold art” of an authentic Catholic philosophy, reflections that hearken back to the French debate of the 1930’s on the possibility of a Christian philosophy: H.U. von Balthasar, *Von den Aufgaben der katholischen Philosophie in der Zeit* (Einsiedeln: Johannes Verlag, 1998), 23–38.

Given the proper relation between nature and the supernatural, then,²⁹ the event of Jesus Christ enters full force into the question of the foundation Which is precisely what Saint Paul had in mind when he was writing to the Corinthians the passage that we cited at the beginning.

The life of Jesus Christ, which displays a singular coincidence between person and mission (cf. Heb 3:1), unfolds completely within the logic of testimony. Jesus presents himself as the One who, before the singular act of freedom of every man whom he meets, bears witness to the Father as the in-comprehensible manifestation of the truth in a perennial donation-action. For this reason, he can assert: “I am the way, the truth, and the life” (Jn 14:6). These three terms are densely pregnant, especially if they are read in unity, and they furnish the key to an adequate hermeneutic of the testimony of Jesus Christ. His contemporaries, hearing the words that flowed from his deeds, went so far as to exclaim: “What is this? A new teaching! With authority . . .” (Mc 1:27). They felt him to be totally and freely involved, with the whole of his person, in what he proposed to them: “You call me Teacher and Lord: and you are right, for so I am” (Jn 13:13).

If we consider Jesus’ *hour* (Jn 12:23), the acme of His existence and his singular Person, we see how, in his extreme enactment of the *pro nobis*, he corresponds perfectly to the Father’s will and, in so doing, brings to pass the encounter between divine and human freedom. When Jesus prays, “Father, if it be possible, let this cup pass from me, nevertheless, not what *as I will, but as thou wilt*” (Mt 26:39), afterwards adding “Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do” (Lk 23:34), he lays bare the logic of true testimony, whose fullest form is testimony to the Absolute.

In the singular and unrepeatable event of the Cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ, testimony defeats evil. Evidence of this is Christ’s resurrection from the dead. The resurrection bespeaks the absolute singularity of the death of the One who, although able to avoid death, nonetheless accepted the radical *kenosis* of the incarnation even unto death on the cross and, in doing so, won the

²⁹The obligatory references on the subject are H. de Lubac, K. Rahner, H.U. von Balthasar, J. Alfaro, and G. Colombo. For a brief synthesis of the debate see A. Scola—G. Marengo—J. Prades eds., *La persona umana. Manuale di Antropologia Teologica* (Milan: Jaca Book, 2000), 195–201.

single combat with death. In this way, Christ freely (*sponte*)³⁰ manifests the total correspondence (*Entsprechung*) with the Father³¹ behind which thought cannot go (Jesus holds back nothing for himself; in him, person and mission are one!).³² He thus becomes the way to the truth, that is, the life; in the gift of his Spirit, the witness-bearing character of Christ's work unfolds its permanent saving power for every single act of freedom performed by every human being in every time.

In this sense, the event of Jesus Christ concerns the fundamental exigency of human freedom. Man's freedom stoutly resists deduction from anything prior because it is always historically determined. Where its own fulfillment is at stake, then, freedom recognizes that it must be for another, even as it also recognizes its inability to do so. It needs an event, which itself is indeducible, to actuate this potentiality. Jesus Christ is this absolutely gratuitous event. Christ, through the gift of the Eucharist on Holy Thursday and his glorious Cross (blood and water), corresponds perfectly, by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the will of the Father through total offering of himself. He thereby gives to every act of human freedom the possibility of corresponding to the Father's will in its turn.

In this perspective, every free act by means of which the individual decides about his humanity is the locus of the communication of the foundation itself. Truth is not simply the actual result of man's decision. Indeed, it is pure donation. It manifests itself from itself and through itself (the phenomenological moment)—even as this same truth, in its absolute transcendence, requires this act of decision in order to attest itself.

Jesus Christ, true God and true man, resolves the enigma of man by bearing witness in the Spirit to a perfect correspondence

³⁰“*Ipse sponte sua mortem sustinuit, ut homines salvaret*” [He himself underwent death of his own volition, that he might save men], Anselm, *Cur Deus homo?* 1, 8.

³¹“Groping our way into the mystery, we can make bold to think that the profound reason for the victory over death lies in the *kenosis* of the Son of God . . . Jesus Christ is really the Innocent One in a radical sense, who suffers *sponte* a death he does not at all deserve because he is the Son of God who let himself be sent in the flesh to conquer death,” A. Scola, “*Se vuoi, puoi guarirmi.*” *La salute tra speranza e utopia* (Siena: Cantagalli, 2001), 21–22.

³²Cf. H.U. von Balthasar, *Teodrammatica* III (Milan: Jaca Book, 1983), 222–229 [For an English translation, see H.U. von Balthasar, *Theo-drama. Theological Dramatic Theory. III* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press).

with the Father. It does not follow, however, that he decides man's drama in advance.³³ Indeed, he accentuates this drama because he calls upon every act of human freedom to be a decision for him, which is to say, for the event that brings to pass in history the (symbolic) evidence of the foundation.

This evidence is *symbolic* precisely on account of the *incomprehensibiliter* with which the *incomprehensibile* gives itself. This is decisive inasmuch as every donation of the given, no matter what its nature, occurs in the space of the symbolic—whose paradigmatic form is the liturgical rite of the sacrament.³⁴

This gives us a satisfactory explanation of the Pauline statement with which the article opened: The foundation (*themelion*) “is already in place” (*ton keimenon*), and it is Jesus Christ.

4. *Two Corollaries*

Two brief corollaries will help us to put in context the fragmentary suggestions offered here without any claim to completeness. The first has to do with the foundation and fundamentalism; the second with the theology of religions and interreligious dialogue.

(a) *Fundamentalism, or concerning False Witness*

What we have said about *testimony* clarifies how we can and must speak of the “foundation.” At the same time, it immediately locates the error of every form of fundamentalism. Condensing matters drastically, we could say that fundamentalism always sacrifices difference and, therefore, ultimately utterly misses the point of the dual unity of freedom and truth.

Thus, for example, the original testimony of Jesus Christ cannot ceaselessly re-occur, as an ever-new event, in the testimony of the believer, unless it remains irreducibly different from this

³³Cf., *ibid.*, 25–53.

³⁴Cf. S. Ubbiali, “Il simbolo rituale e il pensiero critico. Per una teoria del segno sacramentale,” in A.N. Terrin, ed., *Liturgia e incarnazione* (Padua: Messaggero-Abbazia di Santa Giustina, 1997), 251–284.

testimony. Christ's perfect correspondence with the Father rests upon the difference between the will of the Father and the freedom of Jesus—a difference that reaches its apex precisely in the maximum diastasis between the Father and the Crucified within the abiding unity that is guaranteed by the Spirit. In the same way, testimony is possible only thanks to the difference between the freedom of Christ and that of the believer.

In his act of dying on the Cross, Jesus corresponds to the Trinitarian foundation. At the same time, he founds the singularity-in-testimony (difference) that he then makes available to the act whereby the believer adequates himself to this same foundation.

The Truth did not choose an idea, but a historical form, for its manifestation. This underlies the experience that the bearing of testimony is fragmented into a manifold of acts on the optic level—a fragmentation that makes hermeneutics a necessity that simply cannot be gotten around. And yet this fragmentation demands a hermeneutic precisely because it, in its turn, cannot dispense with the unity that in fact attests itself in the manifestation of the truth itself (the phenomenological moment).

As we have seen, this character pertains to all donations of the given as such, beyond their difference, which, of course, always remains significant.

Fundamentalism proceeds with a self-referential coherence. It thus reduces testimony to the extrinsic attestation of *veritates*, especially of those that are not attainable first hand, and/or to a personal obstinacy that can reach the point of putting its own and others' lives at risk. For this very reason, fundamentalism ultimately empties of meaning the truth for which it risks itself. It fails to see the difference that is carried in the very structure of the ever-elusive act of freedom. It fails to see that, in this act, each man, and only he, decides about his humanity, because the foundation itself chooses the act of human freedom as the locus of its donation. In this sense, fundamentalism is always objectively a bearer of false witness.

(b) Interreligious Dialogue: The Decisive Testimony

The foregoing also explains the need to detach interreligious dialogue from the mere comparison of doctrines, which, of course,

remains necessary.³⁵ Only the exposing of oneself as a witness, only the possession in detachment that, at its apex, becomes martyrdom, enables interreligious dialogue to be fully what it is meant to be. Only in this horizon can there be a proper comparison of doctrines that makes use of the dogmatic formulations of magisterial authority. Indeed, only in this horizon can there be any act of believing testimony. And yet, testimony—which can include the radical offering of one’s own life, albeit only as a grace given to the weak³⁶—is the normal response to the foundation that is *per se* required of every act of human freedom. In the single act of testimony, freedom irrevocably decides about itself and therein uses, so to speak, every circumstance and every relation, without any reservation (*sine glossa*), to manifest its adherence to the foundation.

The evidence that pertains to faith is symbolic. Faith, after all, is at once a theoretical and practical decision in freedom for the call of the foundation. It follows that the symbolic evidence that characterizes faith cannot abstract from the religions—especially from their enrooting in popular rites—precisely because it is free and, therefore, historically situated. The religions, for their part, tend inexorably towards the transcendent truth and, therefore, are impelled towards a critical dialogue with faith.³⁷ The nature of both faith and the religions thus intrinsically requires a transcendence of the mere fact of plurality towards a single, absolute foundation.

Interreligious dialogue, then, is an intrinsic and essential aspect of Christian faith itself, an aspect rooted in its irrepressible missionary exigency: To bear witness in every circumstance and relation to what Christ does for man.

All of this means entrustment of the act of one’s own freedom to the freedom of the other within the loving embrace of the foundation. For this reason, the Christian—but, in the end, the same thing must be said of man who stands before the call of the foundation that gives itself in every donation of the given—cannot,

³⁵Cf. A. Scola, “Libertà, fede, e religioni. I principi del dialogo interreligioso nella teologia cattolica,” in idem, *Questioni di Antropologia Teologica* (Rome: PUL—Mursia, 1997), 155–173; idem, “Dio tra guerra e pace,” in *Nuntium* 8 (1999): 10–18.

³⁶Preface of the Martyrs.

³⁷Cf. A. Scola, “Libertà, verità, salvezza,” in M. Serretti, ed. *Unicità e universalità di Gesù Cristo. In dialogo con le religioni* (Cinisello Balsamo: San Paolo, 2001), 11–16.

in spite of his limits,³⁸ avoid exposing himself, thus plunging his identity, in fear and trembling, into the earth-shattering statement of Christ: “I am the truth” (cf. Jn 14:6).

—*Translated by Adrian J. Walker.* □

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³⁸Cf. E.L. Fackenheim, *La presenza di Dio nella storia* (Brescia: Queriniana, 1977), 68–71.