

The Texts of the Convivium

**DOES RELIGIOUS FAITH
DEPRESS HUMAN KNOWLEDGE?**

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1. Faith-obscurantism is a false binomial

To make my point better, I thought it useful to take my cue from some thoughts to be found in what spiritually is a truly golden book, namely *The imitation of Christ*. In many of its passages it expresses, and very efficiently so, what is a very widely held mentality. A mentality that I propose to criticize. With the intention, in the end, of saving whatever there remains that is truly valid and acceptable.

To avoid any misunderstandings, let me say right away that the *Imitatio Christi* is a work of meditation that I read and re-read and love very dearly. Just in case I should at times take liberties in a spirit of sincere and unprejudiced search, let it not be thought that I am doing so with any polemical intention and, even less so, for lack of respect. I am merely giving voice to problems that I have almost always set myself and ideas that I have matured in the course of many years and not without considerable suffering.

But let us open the volume at the second chapter of its four parts or “books”.

“All men naturally desire knowledge; but what avails knowledge without the fear of God?”

“Surely, a humble husbandman that serves God, is better than a proud philosopher who, neglecting himself, is occupied in studying the course of the heavens.

“If I understood all things in the world, and had not charity, what would it avail me in the sight of God, who will judge me according to my deeds?”

“Cease from an inordinate desire of knowledge, for therein is much distraction and deceit.

“The more you know, and the better you understand, the more strictly shall you be judged, unless your life be also the more holy.

“Be not therefore elated in your own mind because of any art or science, but rather let the knowledge given you make you afraid” (from the first three paragraphs of the chapter).

These and other words of the Imitation of Christ appear suggestive and in their substance also very right and proper, but I would say that they should not be taken too literally. For there is a danger: to end up by exalting ignorance as a necessary complement of faith and religious devotion.

Such an interpretation undoubtedly contents many of the devout, but could also greatly upset those who love knowledge and have dedicated their existence to it, could discourage and embitter scientists who want to take this interpretation seriously, and similarly with men of culture and humanists.

The scientist concentrates attention on the material and objective aspects of things and at times may even indulge in materialism.

The humanist, for his part, may see a certain traditional image of God as a kind of mysterious phantasm, somewhat like a scarecrow, that inhibits the liberty of humanism and sets limits and prohibitions and columns of Hercules more or less everywhere, threatening infernos and purgatories and getting everything and everybody to fall into line by holy terror.

2. Faith and humanism

But does this mean that the scientist and the humanist must necessarily be irreligious and that science and humanism must necessarily oppose the faith?

I don't think that is so. The scientist, if he wants to be so to the very full, must maintain an attitude of absolute and unlimited aperture for what is given, for the facts: sensorial facts and also the facts that emerge from the various forms of spiritual sensitivity. For this reason it is often said that little science makes an atheist, lots of science make a believer: a well motivated believer.

As far as humanism is concerned, let us imagine that God dwells in man and that in a certain way he constitutes his true and profound essence. Rather, let us think of God as being more intimately part of man than anything else that man may have deep within him. Lastly, let us suppose that the God who inspires man from deep within also urges him to realize himself fully, at every level, in all his ways of being, in a manner in keeping with his moral nature and also in a horizon of full freedom.

All this is simply proposed as a hypothesis. Let us now ask ourselves the following question: if all this were true, would there still be any reason for a humanist to refuse religion? Would not humanism, rather, be the true implementation of religion?

Let us try to further develop this rather different perspective, with the help of a little intuition and a little imagination.

God creates the world and also men, upon whom he calls to cooperate in the completion of his creative work. This is what we do with our humanism. Here we are in the selfsame perspective of Genesis, the first book of the Bible.

The earth had been created, but there was nobody to till the ground. And thus God formed man and constituted him administrator of the creation. Among others, he delegated to him the function of giving a name to each animal. Our sensitivity tells us that we here have the symbol of an important power of knowledge and dominion.

There is thus consecrated what we might call the humanism of the Jewish people. It is undoubtedly still a rather rough and crude humanism that limits man's collaboration to tilling the soil and a cultural creativity taking its very first steps.

Only much later did it fall to the new people of God, the Christian Church, gradually to arrive at more sophisticated concepts of humanism, from that of ancient Greece to that of the modern civilization of the West. And eventually also to integrate them with the humanisms of the Orient (hopefully avoiding those theosophical botch-ups that would only confuse ideas and retard the new syntheses).

And it is thanks to this historical series of integrations that the Church will be able to impress an immense development upon the idea of humanism, including in it the many different forms of human creativity, including in it the many different forms of human creativity and all the sciences and technologies, political and social activities and every form of culture, civilization and progress.

3. Humanism collaborates with God and imitates Him

At a certain point humanism can be conceived not only as a collaboration offered to God, but also as an imitation of God by man. Artistic creation can thus be defined as an imitation of the divine Artificer of the universe. Likewise, one could say that science imitates divine knowledge and, in the limit, pursues omniscience. And in just the same way we could say that, again in the limit, technology pursues omnipotence. This inasmuch as it, too, imitates God in its own peculiar manner, in its transformation of the creation in accordance with the divine plan as yet incomplete and in process of implementation.

The Imitation of Christ concentrates all its attention on the religious moment. And it is perfectly clear that a religious life in the strict sense, an ascetic and mystic life pursued to the full calls for all of a man's energies and therefore excludes the pursuit of scientific knowledge, excludes artistic creation, excludes technological invention, excludes both the practice and the concern inherent in active life.

It either excludes it, or implies that minimum of humanism that can be placed in the service of religion: sacred art, application of science and technology and even politics in support of religious life, philosophy as the handmaiden of theology, and so on.

In the alternative vision that I have sketched above, humanism undoubtedly has a value of its own and founds it precisely on its imitation of God and cooperating in the creation of the universe.

In the vision of the author of the Imitation of Christ, on the other hand, as also of innumerable other Christians, the religious commitment in the strict sense not only occupies the centre of the picture, but fills its entire space.

This diversity gives rise to two possible interpretations. That of the author of the Imitation of Christ obviously tends to render humanism vain. The alternative interpretation recognizes all the space peculiar of humanism and limits itself to excluding it from the more strictly religious moment.

4. The peculiar space of religious commitment

Why should there be a distinct religious moment? I have already suggested the reason: the religious commitment calls for fullness of attention and of the energies to be dedicated to it.

And, in its turn, can there be a humanist moment distinct from the religious moment? Certainly, if it is true that any form of humanist commitment – in scientific research, in artistic creation, in technological invention, in economic enterprise, in political initiative, and so on – in its turn calls for a very high degree of concentration if it is not to remain something extemporized, superficial and weak.

The two moments must therefore alternate. In the ancient traditions of Israel this alternation was conceived in a very rigid manner. Six days of the week were dedicated to work (which we can identify with humanism) and the Sabbath to rest, i.e. to prayer, to meditation, to the relationship with God, to be cared for while absolutely free of other commitments. The ancient Hebrews dedicated to the Creator not a cult of fifty minutes, sufficient to stick to the rules and then to pass on to other things. But an entire day without distractions, thus placing themselves in an optimal condition for thinking seriously about God and the things of the soul.

Jesus thus dedicated long hours to prayer, and this excellent habit was continued by the early Christians, and then by the more committed of the anchorites, the monks, the friars and the religious throughout the ages.

Ora et labora. Certainly, work offered to the Divinity and even rest, lunch and dinner, the festive and joyous moment, all these can be lived religiously as a prayer in the wider sense. But there is also a prayer in the stricter and more intense sense and calls for a space of its own.

At this point there arises the problem of how one should organize the space of prayer and religious cult; and, even before that, there is the problem of how one should formulate this commitment, i.e. establish the spirit by which it should be underlain.

Here we can get some help from the other thoughts of the Imitation. Those I cited at the beginning belittle a certain type of knowledge. But we shall now see some others that propose and valorize an alternative knowledge. It is a question of taking lessons from the divine Verb incarnated in Jesus Christ.

Here we have twofold fount of inspiration. The Gospels tell us about the earthly existence of Jesus, so that we may “imitate His life and manners”. And this is something essential for us “if we would be truly enlightened, and be delivered from all blindness of heart” (1, 1, 1).

Hence the need that we should “meditate upon the life of Jesus Christ” (ibidem). But the Verb also and above all speaks to us from deep within us. To obtain this internal illumination we have to fall silent and concentrate.

Indeed, “the more a man is at one within himself, and becomes of simple heart, so much the more and higher things does he understand without labour; for that he receives the light of wisdom from above” (1, 3, 3).

Human knowledge, nevertheless, is always imperfect. Hence “a humble knowledge of yourself is a surer way to God than a deep search after learning” (1, 3, 4).

In another part of the Imitation there is a passage that epitomizes the substance of all this with particular efficacy and concision: “God walks with the simple, reveals himself to the humble, gives understanding to the little ones, opens the sense to pure minds, and hides grace from the curious and proud” (4, 18, 4).

5. Religious faith and science

The author is not by any means against science as such, which is rather “good in itself, and ordained by God” (1, 3, 4). Nevertheless, he limits its importance in the sense that science can at the most have a ministerial function vis-à-vis religion: its true value is measured only in terms of the benefit it can procure for religion. Here we may think of the use of science in a theological ambit and, even before that, in the ambit of a *philosophia theologiae ancilla*.

But science assumes a very different collocation in the alternative Christian perspective, which accepts humanism in the fullness of its value. Here we see in a very different light both the contribution of man to the creation of the world and the human capacity of imitating God. And even the “imitation of Christ”, or imitation of the God incarnate, becomes situated in a very different horizon and assume much vaster dimensions.

In the alternative vision “the philosopher who speculates the course of the heavens”, or the astronomer if you prefer to call him such, absolves a function that is important also from a religious point of view.

Let me here recall another passage: “How many perish by reason of vain learning of this world, who take little care of the serving of God!” (1, 3, 6).

Now, it would not be altogether idle to recall that in the vision of Christian humanism “secular science” is far less “vain” than one might think, for it, too, is no less intended for the “service of God”.

No matter how important their search may be, both the philosopher and the scientist will do well not to become “haughty”. Let the “husbandman” continue to be “humble”, and so even the philosopher. Why should a scientist be “proud” at all costs?

Humility is of the great. And, when a great man is proud, it may be that his exterior fortune, falling upon him like manna from the sky, has spoilt and overwhelmed him: and that he therefore lacks something very essential for being truly great. Quite apart from the fact that one can be great also in small things.

All of us have to be humble; and, according to his particular vocation, each one must humbly serve, must humbly cooperate in an initiative that is not ours, but of the Creator.

And is it truly necessary to keep dwelling on these confrontations between the humble husbandman and the proud doctor, the road sweeper who does his work well and the haughty and vacuous university professor, the minister who maladministers the state and the housewife who cleans and orders the pots and pans after the poor man’s dinner?

On the one hand we have the ignorant devoted to the Lord, on the other irreligious erudite. Would it not be better if both were to be erudite and religious?

The last two centuries have seen a great battle against illiteracy. At a certain moment it became established that secondary school-level, eight years of schooling, was needed even to a street cleaner. Now the eight years are about to become ten, road sweepers have been elevated into ecological operators and are to be provided with ever more sophisticated technical equipment. Magnificent!

Even though present-day schools are nothing very special, ten years of it will surely help to render all of us a little less ignorant, in expectation of a future, hopefully not very far off, when we shall all be doctors, with lots of science and conscience and without either pride or boorishness.

Let’s not indulge excessively in those sterile comparison between the one-eyed and the lame, or similar problems of the kind whether it is better to have a glass eye or a wooden leg. Let’s all try to have perfect eyesight and both legs, preferably strong and slender into the bargain.

Let us aim at integration: even in the religious field, for a religion ever more open to appreciating everything that is positive in the manifestation of life and the activities of man, to greater glory of God.

Let us not therefore ignore, but rather study. And read many good books, knowing how they have to be read, which is an art and calls for an apprenticeship. And, even more important, let us learn to read in the great book of life, namely to look at things with our own eyes: to observe, without missing anything at all.

6. Vulgar ignorance and spiritual or “learned” ignorance

There is the unhealthy and gossipy curiosity of the little women (or the little men, which is almost worse), and there is the healthy and respectable (or, rather desirable) curiosity of the man of science and culture that each one of us should to some extent endeavour to be.

And thus there is the ignorance of those who are steeped in ignorance and there is the ignorance of Socrates, which is only the starting point for arriving at the true knowledge for which he longs.

The Socratic concept can be seen at work in the *learned ignorance* of Saint Augustine, of Saint Bonaventura, of Nicholas of Cusa: there we have awareness of the human limits, but together with an aperture and a content of spiritual experience. For Kant, again, *learned ignorance* is awareness of the limits of human knowledge and has likewise to be distinguished from *common ignorance*.

Indeed, side by side with an idea that can be traced back to common ignorance, this selfsame limitation also proposes the concept of ignorance as humility that foregoes coming to grips with the truths of the spirit, but rather opens itself to receiving them, to letting itself be illumined by them.

Here we have a concept that I propose to discuss further a little later on. For the moment I still have some shots to fire in the direction of vulgar ignorance. Because we have to clear the ground of this very blatant concept of ignorance as laziness and cowardice of the spirit before going on to develop the concept of the noble ignorance of the true sage.

The poet Robert Browning wrote that ignorance is not innocence, but sin.

An even worse sin, I take the liberty of adding, is that of a person who knows and wants to keep the others ignorant, either to pursue his own interests better or to conserve and increase his power.

The many people who, in the endeavour of better selling their merchandise, caress our ignorance and insipience and sprinkle it with a daily dose of stupidities. The many people who hypnotize, full us, feed us with childish inanities, embark us for a kind of dream country far removed from all sense of reality in blissful wonderland... Is it clear who I am talking about?

Ignorance is a blessing, says Edgar Allan Poe, but if the blessing is to be complete, the ignorance must be so profound as not even to suspect itself.

The writer is fine and subtle; and the thought, strongly ironical and critical, is very worthy of him. However, we might note that even convinced and satisfied ignorance has a ready humour of its own that helps it to defend the *status quo*.

Every human category has its peculiar humour. Even butchers and gravediggers, it helps them to keep up their spirits. There is even the black humour of the watchdogs and torturers of the extermination camps, where there is little to laugh about. And, rather milder, there is the obtuse humour of the ignorant.

And often ignorance erects some pseudo ethics of its own: and so we have the moralism of the ignorant as yet another padlock on a door that is already well secured.

And the men of little culture, those of little worth and importance, strike up alliances in a kind of league in defence of small-scale property.

The trouble is that small cultural property tends to overvalue itself. In a humorous weekly of half a century ago (it may have been "Marc' Aurelio", or possibly "Bertoldo") there was a column entitled "All the things known to a ticket collector on a tram" or "a porter" or "an office manager", and so on, for fifty-two weeks a year. But it happens, unfortunately, that these ten or so things are confused with more or less the totality of knowledge worthy of being known.

Here is a little sketch. Find a person who knows ten things in all, and try to ask him the tenth, or the ninth, or the eighth, it doesn't really matter. And he, spreading his wings and giving himself airs of great importance, will reply: "Good heavens you don't know X and Y?" Then try to ask him an eleventh, something right next to the tenth, and he will hum and puff: "Mmm, how should I know?". And his mien seems to add: "Would you believe it, the kind of fool thing this idiot can come out with".

Ignorance is indeed very convenient: as is only right and proper for a life that one wants to plan as a kind of somnolent digestion without shocks, happily cradled in the commonplaces of the most narrow-minded certainty. Leopardi wrote: "*Ah, voluttà dell'ignoranza: il naufragar mi è dolce in questo mare!*" (Ah, the delight of ignorance: how sweet it is to be shipwrecked in its sea!).

Hear no evil, see no evil, and speak no evil, like the famous three monkeys with their eyes, ears and mouths firmly shut. Three, because each of them has an insufficient number of hands, but the three want to be just one.

Here we have Dante's sloth. In the poet's eyes it is surely not the gravest of sins, but the most base and contemptible. It is, par excellence, the anti-religious attitude that blocks us in spiritual and human terms and makes us move backwards.

7. Inquiring into the universe Is religiously commendable

But enough of this pinpricking critique. At this point I should like to talk about knowledge. Not yet knowledge at the spiritual-religious level, but – for a start – knowledge based on sensorial experience: in other words, knowledge of the realities of this world, which includes science.

Even this type of knowledge can be considered under its religious aspect. We can call the sum total of this knowledge, taken all together, knowledge of the creation. And what is the creation if not the work of God? Surely, our relationship with God can also include a knowledge of His creation. And therefore our knowledge of the creation also assumes a religious importance.

The Imitation of Christ does not look kindly upon this knowledge and our reasoning about it: “...What have we to do with *genera* and *species*?” (1, 3, 2). These are the distinctions that medieval philosophy applied to the multiplicity of created things, seeking to classify them better.

The author does not find the “moving of questions” (1, 3, 5) to be something very positive, and with this he puts an end to every cultural and scientific debate. He confesses that “to read and hear many things” often “wearies” him (1, 3, 2). In this way he demolishes the two pilasters of that kind of knowledge.

But can one suppose that not wanting to know the creation, considering it base to concentrate attention on God, is something that pleases God?

Human examples are always abysmally insufficient. Nevertheless, theologians and even the sacred texts make use of them with a certain frequency. This makes one think that at times they can be useful. After all, to say that man is made in the image and likeness of God must mean something.

Forgive me if I, a vile little worm of the earth, for a moment or two try not exactly to take the place of God, but at least to see things through his eyes.

As man I have created some little things: more specifically, I have published some writings, like the one you are reading. Now, I confess that it would not please me if my friends and many other people paid attention, as it were, only to my humanity, intelligence, beauty, good character and goodness knows what else, but not to my works.

I love my works so much that, forgetful of myself, if I were to be obliged to publish them anonymously with the guarantee of a wider diffusion, I would gladly accept to publish them in this form, if only to make them better known and, with them, the ideas they express. To be personally known is far less important to me.

Is there something that a loving father would not do for his children? And for these paper children of mine I should willingly annul myself, forget myself completely. And therefore, how could I possibly be pleased to see other people concentrate attention exclusively on myself and let my writings fall into complete oblivion?

Moving from the experience and intimate feelings of myself, a humble creator of books, essays, articles and so on, let me now on to making a clumsy attempt, abysmally laughable and improper, of imagining what could be the intimate feelings of a God creator of the universe. All the same, let’s try and see where it leads us.

A God who looked at the creation as it effectively is at this moment would surely find it very imperfect and full of ills. Ills certainly not created by God or wanted by Him, but nevertheless such as to render the picture of the creation full of more or less gloomy shadows. However, the work is still in the making, and God makes it advance with the help of men and all the forces of good at all levels, so that some day it may be freed of evils and death, completed, perfect and happy.

God loves this creation so much that He incarnates himself in it in order not just to liberate it, but to deify it, in a certain way to make it like a new God. The creation, still in the making, is a new God about to be born, is a new collective absolute in germ that is gradually taking shape. And thus the kingdom of God, which at the beginning is mustard seed, will in the end become an immense and omnipresent tree of new life!

In the Christian vision God creates not as a game, but for infinite love. And he does not create innumerable worlds, like a gigantic schoolboy of cosmic proportion who, with a straw of appropriately astronomic size, amuses himself by blowing into existence a large number of beautifully iridescent soap bubbles, but all destined to burst and vanish into thin air, as if they had never existed.

The Christian conception is that of a God who creates just one universe, but to render it perfect and irreversible; and who loves his creation so greatly that, for its sake, he incarnates himself in it and has himself crucified.

If the saints are the “friends of God”, can one truly say that a God who loves his creation to such an extent would be content to see his most intimate friends despise the creation, not deigning to give it even a single look, to concentrate all their attention on Him and Him alone?

It almost seems to me that deep within me a mysterious, feeble but august voice is saying: “If you love me so much, why don’t you take a look at my creation, to love it as I do!”

To love as God loves is a humanly impossible undertaking, but – who knows! – His grace may help me to take a few steps in that direction. If I really love somebody, I want to know everything about him, so that I may better share his toils, anxieties, hopes and joys.

And therefore, if I were to succeed in loving God just a little more adequately, I should certainly also love his creation. And what does loving it mean? It means, first of all, that I should be interested in the creation and aspire to knowing more about it, so that I may penetrate, always with divine help, some of the secrets of things and begin to glimpse some outlines of the divine Project.

I shall thus end up by espousing the cause of the creation, because in it – and its completion – I shall also see the utmost good for me.

8. Spiritual knowledge and “learned ignorance”

Earlier on I spoke in somewhat harsh terms about *vulgar ignorance*, because, vile as it is, it does not seek to nobilitate itself in any way.

Then, second point, I spoke very approvingly about *knowledge of the things of this world*, namely *knowledge of the creation*, assuming, as all the evidence suggests, that it would be welcomed by the Divinity and also constitutes a way of imitating God, serving him and helping him in his creative work.

At this point, as third step, I should like to talk about *spiritual knowledge* and, inevitably, cannot but praise and recommend it.

But when I talk about religious knowledge, I cannot avoid associating it with a form of “ignorance”, this time very different from the vulgar variety, about as different as economic poverty differs from the poverty of the “poor in spirit”, whom the Gospel very rightly calls “blessed” (Mt 5, 3).

We are, as I said, at the third step. Our reflection about spiritual knowledge can, once again, take its cue from the Imitation of Christ.

Let us re-read a passage I already cited earlier on: “The more a man is at one within himself, and becomes of simple heart, so much the more and higher things does he understand without labour; for that he receives the light of wisdom from above” (1, 3, 3).

Not in the humanist ambit (where it is very necessary), but certainly in the field of religious search (where it would be counter-productive), we have to avoid the “deep search after learning” (1, 3, 4). Science objectivates its data: it analyses and manipulates them. But if it were to do the same with the data of religious experience, it would risk dissolving them.

In religious search, on the other hand, it is appropriate to be open to receiving the inspirations of a God who manifests himself on his own initiative. Here the individual only has to endeavour to become a channel of that inspiration.

This channel must be as pure and transparent as possible, like the glass of a window that has to let the sunlight pass. If the shutters are closed, no light will pass at all. And if the glass is dirty, it will enter only very weakly. If it is coloured, the light will alter.

Coloured glass could symbolize our preconceived opinions. The dirt on the window panes is our impurity, which closes us and roots us more firmly in the rut of old habits, especially mental habits, inhibits and numbs us, makes us lazy and less open and prepared.

Hence the need for an interior cleansing, an ascesis and a despoliation. Whoever wants to understand the things of God and eventually become God's in everything, must first evict his own self, every sufficiency.

Hence the need for the "humble knowledge" of oneself (1, 3, 4). It is this recognition of our own insufficiency that predisposes us for receiving the illumination of the divine Verb. It is the true spiritual sapience that illuminates us about everything that is needed for the religious search, for the pursuit of the union with God.

"Happy is he whom truth by itself does teach", says the Imitation, "not by figures and words that pass away, but as it is in itself" (1, 3, 1).

"He to whom the Eternal Word speaks, is delivered from many an opinion". Indeed, "from one Word are all things, and all things utter one Word; and this is the Beginning, which also speaks unto us". Therefore "no man without that Word understands or judges rightly".

And the Imitation continues as follows: "He to whom all things are one, he who reduces all things to one, and sees all things in one; may enjoy a quiet mind, and remain at peace in God".

With the final invocation: "O God, who are the truth, make me one with You in everlasting love" (1, 3, 2).

Here we have "everything" not only about religion, but also about the particular cognitive road that leads to it. But that does not mean that here we have everything about knowledge in general.

There are also other forms of knowledge that are very different. And these other forms are also very valid and appreciable from the point of view of humanism. They can also be traced back to religion, but in a more roundabout way. We have already seen this when talking about the very close relationship that exists between humanism and religion.

Science interests religion only indirectly: only inasmuch as it is connected with humanism, which is related to it. But religious knowledge in the strict sense has little or no need of science. It is more convenient to take refuge in ignorance. But what kind of ignorance? It is a different ignorance, a *spiritual ignorance*, and has to be distinguished with the utmost clarity from *vulgar ignorance*, which I have already condemned in no uncertain terms.

9. Intuition, true and fundamental intelligence

How can one motivate the fact that the Christian mystics of medieval times, and also those of more recent periods, took refuge in spiritual ignorance, keeping well away from science? The science they had in front of them seemed objectivating and analyzing, particularly discouraging and insidious for spirituality. And was not in any way founded on spiritual experience. Rather, every time it found itself faced with an experience of such a subtle nature, it examined it from outside, sought to dissect it brutally and crudely, with the final result of dissolving it.

Certainly, what the author of the Imitation had to contend with could not yet be Galilean science, but was the abstract science of Greek logics. And in all cases constituted more of an obstacle than a help for the comprehension of spirituality.

Aristotelian logic science later gave rise to the Galilean science of modern times, markedly anti-spiritual in its way of privileging material facts, which are the only ones that can be objectivated and lend themselves to calculation and forecasting.

Material phenomena are the ones that are most readily controlled by the intellect. The phenomena of matter are the ones that can be most readily checked by the intellect, because they are

closes to our cognitive level. Grasping the phenomena of the human spirit already calls for a particular intuition, in the absence of which one risks remaining aloof from comprehension of a particular phenomenon or situation or person.

The more one rises in the scale of beings, the more our comprehension becomes entrusted to the intuitive faculties. To me it seems that this is what constitutes true intelligence, namely the intuition of which analysis seems to be nothing other than a simple servant.

There are persons who are intellectually brilliant: but are they all intelligent? What does being intelligent mean?

One of my father's friends kept saying of another friend: "He's very intelligent, who knows why". Concrete proof was lacking. But then, as I recall, even the intelligence of the first friend shone with a somewhat intermittent light.

And there are also my own personal friends to whom I give some article of mine to read and they transform the reading into a kind of hunt for errors. Be it clear, whoever finds a mistake of mine does me a favour, prevents me from cutting a poor figure on a larger scale. But it is not very gratifying if that friend, armed with his inexorable red and blue pencil, misses the underlying principle, the things I wanted to say.

So that his critique ends up by being: "I agree with you on this, but not on that, and this other, well, let's say that I approve it with reserves, *placet juxta modum*".

"That's fine, though I was familiar with your general opinions even before. But now I wanted to know your opinion on *my* article. To form such an opinion, you have to put aside your accustomed thoughts and try to enter just a little into mine".

Another, a professor whom I shall here refer to as Mario, would give a lecture on Marx, and then another on Freud, a third on Jung, and so on for lots of others, each of whom he treated exclusively for an entire lecture. Except that every time, as soon as five or six minutes of the lecture had passed, his subjects would lose their physiognomy and, with the impressive rapidity of a film on *Doctor Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, become transformed into Mario Marx, Mario Freud assuming in every respect all the features of our versatile friend, who was undoubtedly very open to sympathizing with the personality of his various subjects, but not equally capable of putting aside his own.

In any case, we shall do well to avoid the hunt for errors or, at least, to try to attenuate it. We should also endeavour to split as few hairs as possible. Lastly, let's not forget that any form of obtuseness for certain things does not by any means exclude the same person showing a ready and lively intelligence for other things.

Intelligence is also spiritual sensitivity. And every particular type of awareness or cognition is made possible by its own specific type of sensitivity. There is a religious sensitivity and, closely related with it, a metaphysical or, more generally, philosophic sensitivity.

There is an aesthetic sensitivity and even a specific and different sensitivity for each art, with variants that guide us to the comprehension of each epoch, each individual author or artist.

Similarly, there is a historic sensitivity, a political, juridical or social sensitivity, and so on. There is also a psychological sensitivity: can one be a good psychologist without being "psychological"?

One needs specific sensitivities for being a good detective (the so-called "flair"), for being a good teacher or for being a good speaker, suitable for a particular public and capable of making the meeting yield votes for himself and not for his opponent, for opening a shop without failing before the year is out or even earlier (the famous "bent for business"). But the list could be much longer.

So, what does being intelligent mean? There are those who are harnessed in intellectual armour, but many remain imprisoned in it.

True philosophy, as Pascal would have it, is the one that can make fun of philosophy.

A true philosopher is he who can put philosophy aside and then return to it whenever it can be useful.

True and profound philosophy proceeds in simplicity: and therefore it avoids excessively complicated and artificial reasonings, as also the cunning little tricks of the intellect and its deceptive shortcuts.

Of course, complications have to be accepted when they really exist, while oversimplification only serves to complicate things.

10. Intuition as knowledge in mystery and religious faith

We have passed from the phenomena of matter to those of the human spirit and saw how greatly intuition is needed there. This already lies outside our dominion: it is a spark that cannot be obtained at will.

And if we then pass on to things greater than ourselves, to the transcendent realities, to what is the specific dominion of religious experience, we shall come to realise more and more that we can do nothing other than open ourselves to the initiative of these realities, rendering ourselves transparent to a truth that illumines us from within, inasmuch as it comes to us from the profoundest depth of our spiritual being.

Knowledge of the transcendent is intuition of a mystery that is beyond us. We must not confound it with vulgar ignorance, for it is a knowledge, albeit in mystery, but always a form of knowledge. A savoury and palatable knowledge, and anything but a not knowing, anything but an impossibility of knowing.

Notwithstanding the confusions, sometimes even bearing authoritative signatures, I think that we are here very far removed from the agnosticism of a certain type of modern philosophy: far removed from Spencer, from Du Bois-Reymond (let us remember his *ignoramus et ignorabimus* referred to the “seven enigmas of the world”) and even from the Kant of *The Critique of Pure Reason* (ignoring his two other Critiques, which pull decidedly in the opposite direction). Assimilating agnosticism (which denies all experience of the absolute) with mysticism (which is an experience of the absolute) seems to me a complete misunderstanding.

At the very worst, one could consider mysticism a recovery, a return of knowledge of the absolute after the failure of agnosticism. An inevitable failure that was already implicit in the premises, which denied all cognitive value to any non-sensorial experience, to any spiritual and mystic experience.

Agnosticism is a closure of all windows to avoid looking outside, where there is a mystery that can tell us nothing. Mysticism is a looking at the mystery. It is an inquiring into it as it has to be inquired into. It is an eventual arriving at a very significant experience of the mystery. Investigated with appropriate fineness, the mystery will reveal many things to us, including the very sense of our existence.

11. The faith as entrusting oneself to the mystery of which the revelation is facilitated by the humility of spiritual ignorance

Now, what is the really profitable method for an inquiry of this kind? I would define it as follows: you have to open and entrust yourself to the mystery, so that it may reveal itself by means of an initiative of its own that nevertheless will not find us unprepared. This entrustment is the faith.

The faith has today become subject to lots of misunderstandings. There are many people for whom the faith is but intellectual adhesion to a list of “truths”: a kind of inventory that has to be re-read from time to time to make sure that everything is there and nothing is missing.

These people either do not know or have forgotten that in its original meaning “faith” was adhesion to a person, and adhesion not only of the intellect, but of the whole of our being.

If we are drowning and the lifeguard throws himself into the sea and, swimming strongly, is on the point of reaching us, the faith we can have in him does not reduce itself to a simple and cold intellectual conviction, but is a longing, an entrusting ourselves to him, a placing ourselves into his hands with all our soul and all our body.

Religious faith is entrusting oneself to the Person of God. The drawing up of a “profession of faith” with its list of “articles of faith” comes a long time after: it is the customary intellectual operation of reducing everything to concepts.

Many non-Christians, as also Christians passing through a crisis of identity, ask themselves: “But what sense is there in believing something that somebody else has given to us, rather than ascertaining it with our own eyes?”

That is a legitimate question. How can it be answered? I would say that one could distinguish two situations. First situation: the reality under consideration is close at hand. Second situation: The reality is out of our reach.

Let me give a very simple and commonplace example, but one that seems to me to be highly significant and fitting. We are in a house, on the ground floor, and on this floor, which belongs to us, we can move around as we like and go to see what happens to be in the various rooms. But there is also an upper floor that belongs to somebody else and where we have no right of entry.

Now, whenever we get curious about things that are to be found on our own floor, we can go and see ourselves: why therefore should we limit ourselves to believing? It will be as well if we check our property with our own eyes.

But if we should get similarly curious about something that happens to be on the upper floor, how can we satisfy this curiosity other than by the grace of its owner? He could, for example, reveal to us what the situation is, and in that case we would have to believe him. He might even grant us to give a look, at least a fleeting glance. But these are things that depend on him, no longer on us. And we can do nothing other than ask for information, or an invitation, and then wait with confidence if we happen to know that the owner in question is a forthcoming person.

I am well aware that human comparisons are always inadequate, but the one I have just mentioned certainly suggests that the attitude of faith is far less stupid than it might seem on the basis of an excessively summary judgement.

In other words, if I could see a splendid panorama by doing nothing other than standing by the window of my own home, why should I deprive myself of the pleasure of contemplating it with my own eyes? I shall listen to my wife if she tells me about a quarrel between two drivers on the road, but if she were to tell me that on the other side of the road the view extends right to the sea in a limpid atmosphere and with breath-taking colour effects, I shall get up and, abandoning my work, go over to the window to see it with my own eyes.

In more general terms, we can thus conclude that “faith” is an instrument for knowing things that are to be found on a different floor, outside our possibility of control. This reality becomes accessible only when it reveals itself to us of its own accord, by its free and gratuitous initiative.

The revelation of God is such that we can only render ourselves receptive by entrusting ourselves to Him, Person, with all our own person.

And thus, opening ourselves to God, we shall eventually become his vehicles, and He will reveal himself through the transparency that each one of us will have acquired by purifying himself.

Here the sole “ignorance” compatible with making ourselves receptive, rather, the sole useful and necessary ignorance is no longer the vulgar one, but what I like to call “spiritual” and “noble” ignorance.

Only the sense of our inadequacy, accompanied by the continuous desire of exceeding ourselves, can induce us to entrust our persons wholly to God: to the God who will eventually elevate us unto Himself and in Himself will transform us by totally donating his person to us.