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**BEYOND THE REDUCTIVISM OF POSTMODERN REASON.
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**OLTRE IL RIDUTTIVISMO
DELLA RAGIONE POSTMODERNA.
DALLA VERITÀ SENZA SIGNIFICATO
ALLA VERITÀ COME SIGNIFICATO**

Antonio Sabetta*

Abstract

We live in a time in which we are dealing with the paradox of reason: the dichotomy between a very powerful “instrumental reason” and the marginality of reason in things that really matter in life, i.e., in seeking and defining truth (cf. the “post-truth”). In this way, a “truth without reason” (the truth of things is found in the world of instincts, etc.) and a “reason without truth” (as something irrelevant for concrete life) have been generated. The historical reasons for this process are manifold and the analyses of Benedict XVI in the Regensburg Lecture help us to understand it correctly.

The postmodern human being has learned to live without reason. In post-modernism all the non-rational dimensions of life, deeply censored by modernity, have strongly taken up the role previously denied to them by an almighty reason; the only *forma veri* according to which only what was rational was true and meaningful in life (cf. M. Maffesoli’s lucid analysis of the eternal instant and the primacy of the belly over the head).

However, a prevalently instrumental reason that is either defining the age of the technique, or configuring, “calculating” thought without the “meditating thought” (cf. Heidegger) raises questions about tools, but not about aims (cf. Horkeimer-Adorno). In so doing, reason gives up wondering about meaning, i.e., about the aims, because a purely instrumental reason is interested in how to achieve something, not for what aim.

Hence the emergence of the crisis of meaning not just as a denial that reality has meaning, but as a proclamation of the nonsense of the quest for meaning. Here we find a singular convergence between *Fides et ratio* 81 and the analyses of, for example, U. Galimberti. To rediscover reason in its nature and accept

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the challenge of following its greatness with the realism of those who have known the tragedies of an ideological reason, but also with the awareness that the solution to the epochal crisis that the West (and Christianity in it) is going through, cannot be the renouncement to reason. Instead, it ultimately means giving back to reason the task of understanding truth as meaning. The category of meaning becomes a “preamble to the faith” as suggested by Benedict XVI. In this way, the search for truth intended as meaning is the possibility to build again a fruitful relationship between reason and faith.

To widen reason, then, means to re-educate it about the truth of meaning, because without meaning humankind can no longer live according to its identity and at the same time faith becomes meaningless and useless in life.

* * *

Viviamo in un’epoca in cui ci confrontiamo con il paradosso della ragione ovvero la dicotomia tra una ragione strumentale particolarmente potente e la marginalità della ragione nelle cose che realmente contano nella vita come, ad esempio, il cercare e dare forma alla verità (cf la “post-verità”). In questo modo si è generata una “verità senza ragione” (la verità delle cose trovata nel mondo degli istinti ecc.) e una “ragione senza verità” (come qualcosa di irrilevante per la vita concreta).

L’uomo postmoderno ha imparato a vivere senza la ragione. Nella postmodernità tutte le dimensioni non razionali della vita, profondamente censurate nella modernità, si sono fortemente riprese il ruolo precedentemente negato loro da una ragione onnipotente, la sola *forma veri* in base alla quale ciò che era razionale era vero e significativo nella vita (cf. la lucida analisi di M. Maffesoli dell’istante eterno e del primato della pancia sulla testa).

Tuttavia, una ragione prevalentemente strumentale che sia definisce l’età della tecnica o configura il pensiero “calcolante” senza il “pensiero meditante” (cf. Heidegger), solleva domande sui mezzi ma non sui fini (cf Horkeimer-Adorno); così facendo la ragione rinuncia ad interrogarsi sul senso, ovvero sui fini, poiché una ragione meramente strumentale è interessata a come portare a termine qualcosa non a quale scopo farla.

Di qui l’emergere della crisi del senso non solo come negazione che la realtà abbia un senso ma come la proclamazione dell’insignificanza della domanda sul senso. Qui incontriamo una singolare convergenza tra *Fides et ratio* 81 e le analisi, ad esempio, di U. Galimberti. Riscoprire la ragione nella sua natura e accettare la sfida di seguire la sua grandezza con il realismo di coloro che hanno conosciuto le tragedie di una ragione ideologica, ma anche con la consapevolezza che la soluzione alla crisi epocale che l’Occidente (e il cristianesimo in esso) sta attraversando, non può essere la rinuncia alla ragione. Invece in definitiva significa ridare alla ragione il compito di comprendere la verità come senso. La categoria di “senso” diventa un “preambolo della fede”

come suggerito da Benedetto XVI. In questo modo, la ricerca della verità intesa come senso costituisce la possibilità di costruire nuovamente una fruttuosa relazione tra ragione e fede.

Allargare la ragione, allora, significa ri-educarla circa la verità come senso, perché senza il senso l'umanità non può più vivere secondo la sua identità e allo stesso tempo la fede diventa insignificante e inutile nella vita.

1. Postmodernity as Horizon¹

For several years now the term “postmodernity” has been imposed in philosophy as a term that is able to objectify and summarise the multiplicity of characteristics of a time as fragmented and complex as our time. Despite the deep conflict of interpretations about the meaning and relevance of postmodernity – which reproduces the conflict about the meaning of modernity – and despite the fact that we are beginning to talk about the “neo-modern condition”² as the overcoming of postmodernity itself, we can still consider ourselves as living in the postmodern context that has also been defined as the time of post-truth. The philosopher who most directly contributed to the thematization of the concept of post-modernity is Jean François Lyotard who, in 1979, published the work *The Post-Modern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (La condition postmoderne)*³. Meaningfully, Lyotard uses the term “condition,” which “evokes mentality, disposition, tendency, attitude, atmosphere, sensibility, context-specificity”⁴. It defines a climate, an *air du temps*, of a time that is chaotic⁵, where chaos is often determined by a generalized tendency towards the contamination, the presence at the same time of heterogeneous genres, styles and materials, which is especially clear in the fields of art and literature. The idea of the *collage* or *pastiche* exemplifies and translates well that characteristic of fragmentation, typical of a culture that, having renounced the meaning of the whole – the system, the foundation – celebrates the detail as the only meaningful reality. As a good *bricoleur*, “that abstract entity that is post-

¹ Speech given at the International Congress: “Enciklika *Fides et ratio* – Vjera i razum. Aktualizirano čitanje 20 godina poslije” (The Encyclical *Fides et ratio*. An actualized reading twenty years later) organized by the Faculty of Catholic Theology of The University of Zagreb (14st September 2018).

² Cf. R. MORDACCI, *La condizione neomoderna*, Einaudi, Torino 2017.

³ Cf. J-F. LYOTARD, *The Postmodern Condition*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis (MN) 1999.

⁴ Cf. A. MOLINARO, *Filosofare-secolarizzare. Modernità e postmodernità*, in «Filosofia e Teologia» 8 (1995), pp. 501-511.

⁵ Cf. M. NACCI, *Postmoderno*, in *La filosofia*, diretta da P. Rossi. Vol. IV: Stili e modelli teorici del Novecento, Utet, Torino 1995, p. 362.

modern human being struggles to join heterogeneous materials, to juxtapose contrasting genres, to build unions that at first sight are impossible”⁶.

Lyotard himself has defined postmodernity as “incredulity towards metanarratives [*grand récits*]”⁷, which corresponds with the crisis of classical metaphysics. Furthermore, beyond the differentiations of various positions, it is not disputed that the trait of modernity that post-modernists reject the most is rationalistic optimism, the idea of a reason that produces totalising macro-knowledge, an optimism that is expressed through the myth of progress⁸. At the roots of post-modernity, there is a crisis of this prevailing aspect of modernity that, historically, broke out because of the following reasons: the tragic experience of the world wars, the growing human uneasiness in a “rationalised” society that has become more alienating than liberating, the failure of the universalistic cosmopolitan ideal due to the explosion of the rights of minorities and “particularities”.

Above all, the tragedies that accompanied the era of unfolded reason have dissolved the idea of future as redemption, leaving us to think of the future not as “better” or “more” of happiness, but as insecurity, anxieties, catastrophes and disorientation, or even as the extreme possibility of the loss of all meaning and of self-destruction of humanity⁹. Hence, a “desertification of the future” that dismisses the modern myth of a reason that brings progress regardless.

The crisis of reason is configured as extinction or overcoming of classical rationality incapable of reaching its foundation and therefore questioned in its legitimacy: “once faith has fallen into a transcendent (being, the spirit of history or God) or completely immanent (reason as the organism of judgment) foundation, rational knowledge suddenly finds itself deprived of its legitimacy”¹⁰. Consequently, a philosophy that arises from the ruins of the classical rationality that produces metaphysics – I mean a postmodern philosophy – presents itself “not as a *destruction* of the metaphysical tradition, but as a *deconstruction* of those concepts, projects, proposals that, animating modern metaphysics, have brought it to its nihilistic ‘peak’ and, finally, to its dissolution”¹¹, even though deconstruction assumes ambiguous features.

⁶ G. FILORAMO, *Il risveglio della gnosi ovvero diventare Dio*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1990, p. 9.

⁷ Cf. J.-F. LYOTARD, *La condizione postmoderna*. Rapporto sul sapere, ed. it. Feltrinelli, Milano 1981, p. 7.

⁸ Cf. G. SASSO, *Tramonto di un mito*. L’idea di “progresso” tra Ottocento e Novecento, Bologna, Il Mulino, 1984. About the critique of modern myth of progress cf. J. BOUVERESSE, *Il mito moderno del progresso filosoficamente considerato*, Vicenza Neri Pozza 2018.

⁹ Cf. D. FUSARO, *Essere senza tempo. Accelerazione della storia e della vita*, Bompiani, Milano 2010, pp. 316-318.

¹⁰ M. FERRARIS, *Tracce. Nichilismo Moderno Postmoderno*, Mimesis, Milano 2006, pp. 9-40.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

Post-modernity, then, presents itself as a radical re-questioning not only of the Enlightenment faith in progress (related to human capacity to guide history towards the goal of good), but of the idea of progress itself: it embodies “the refusal to understand temporal sequence in terms of ‘overcoming’ and the argument of the completed ‘dissolution of the category of new’ (Vattimo). This dissolution implies a break with the idea of break and coincides with the experience of the ‘end of history’, that is, with the fall of the historicist way of thinking about reality and with the emergence of the so-called *post-histoire*” (Gehlen)¹².

The end of history brings with itself the end of utopia and of the conflict between being and having to be: all is consummated in the moment, because nothing else must happen that entails something “more” in terms of progress, goodness, happiness. The post-modern human beings no longer get enthusiastic about tradition or revolution, because the past and the future converge in the perspective of the “here and now”. From modern “become what you are” we move to postmodern “be what you are”: “I am what I am and I am nothing more than what I am, on the contrary I am what I feel I am now, what I experience now, according to the authenticity that I attribute to myself with the naturalness of the present hour”¹³. In this regard, M. Maffesoli comments: “‘Carpe diem, no future’ – what really matters is taking note of the mother impulse that enlightens the scene: the fact of rejoicing, as best and as much as possible, at the world that gives itself to seeing and living. The projection into the future no longer has much meaning, it no longer has appeal”¹⁴. For that reason, subjectivity, weakened and deconstructed, reduces its planning to the enjoyment of the present: “On the dead ashes of utopia, intelligence appears, today, incapable of producing symbolic experiences that can generate agreement, and runs the risk of being reduced to a cynical intelligence that, in order to erase the uneasiness deriving from the loss of the centres of gravity, is satisfied and gratified by the here and now, by the present in its most point-like and ephemeral actuality, by meaning in its most immediate consummation”¹⁵. On the absolute celebration

¹² G. FORNERO, *Postmoderno e filosofia*, in N. ABBAGNANO, *Storia della filosofia*, vol. IV/2: *La filosofia contemporanea*, edited by Giovanni Fornero, Franco Restaino, Dario Antiseri, Utet, Torino 1994, pp. 395-396. The reference to Vattimo is taken from G. VATTIMO, *La fine della modernità*, Garzanti, Milano 1985, p. 11. On post-history see: A. GEHLEN, *Über kulturelle Kristallisation*, in Id., *Studien zur Anthropologie und Soziologie*, Luchterhand, Neuwied-Berlin 1963, pp. 311-328. The connection or the opposition to modernity is crucial to understand postmodernity, since there are as many interpretations of postmodernity as there are interpretation of modernity. About this see the interesting book of E. FRANZINI, *Moderno e postmoderno. Un bilancio*, Raffaello Cortina, Milano 2018.

¹³ *Per un'idea di educazione*, in Comitato per il progetto culturale della Conferenza Episcopale Italiana (a cura di), *La sfida educativa. Rapporto-proposta sull'educazione*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 2009, p. 15.

¹⁴ M. MAFFESOLI, *Note sulla postmodernità*, ed. it. Lupetti, Roma 2005, p. 99.

¹⁵ F. VOLPI, *Il nichilismo*, Laterza, Roma-Bari 1996, p. 97.

of the present (a present without any link with what precedes and follows it, therefore absolute), the following words of M. Augé ring true: “The problem is that today on the planet reigns an ideology of the present and of the evidence that paralyzes the effort to think about the present as history, an ideology engaged in making obsolete the teachings of the past, but also the desire to imagine the future. For one or two decades, the present has become hegemonic. In the eyes of the today human being, the present no longer derives from the slow maturation of the past and no longer allows the features of possible futures to emerge, but imposes itself as an accomplished, overwhelming fact, whose sudden appearance overshadows the past and saturates the imagination of the future”¹⁶. While modernity – to paraphrase Baudelaire – was the age of eternity in the moment, post-modernity has become a prisoner of the moment, dragged into the increasingly total erasure of meaning¹⁷.

I think that these words by Maffesoli sum up the point in question well:

Time contracts in space. It progressively tends to dominate the *present* that I live with others in a particular place. Whatever one may call it, this “presentism” is contaminating social representations and practices, especially those of young people. It is the *carpe diem* of ancient memory, which translates well the widespread hedonism of our contemporaneity. The *jouissance* is no longer connected to some hypothetical “singing tomorrow”, it is no longer experienced in a paradise to be reached, but it is experienced, both for better and for worse, in the present. The postmodern present in this sense is linked to the philosophy of *kairós*, which places the emphasis on opportunities and good opportunities. Existence, on the other hand, is nothing more than a series of eternal instants that should be lived at its best here and now [...]. In the different forms in which they can manifest themselves, *the saturation of each project and the diffidence towards the finalised History, lead to the rediscovery of the meaning of life in the very act of its experience and no longer in a distant and ideal result*. Postmodernity, therefore, for the same reason, will no longer give any credit to any kind of progressivism, nor to what such orientation postulates as inescapable, while it will give more importance and centrality to a “progressive wisdom” that leads to the realization of the self and to the achievement of joy in the instant and in the present lived in the totality of their intensity¹⁸.

¹⁶ M. AUGÉ, *Che fine ha fatto il futuro?* Dai non luoghi al nontempo, it. ed. Elèuthera, Milano 2009, 88. This ideology of the present, according to Augé, manifests itself in different ways and follows three concomitant phenomena: the end of the metanarratives based on future (Lyotard), the end of history with the normative advent of liberal democracy, the affirmation of the reign of images (cf. *ibid.*, pp. 88-93 e 11).

¹⁷ Cf A. TOURAINE, *Critica della modernità*, Il Saggiatore, Milano 1993, p. 222.

¹⁸ M. MAFFESOLI, *Note sulla postmodernità*, cit., pp. 56-57 (italics in the text). About the idea of art as eternity in the moment see Ch. BAUDELAIRE, *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (1863).

2. The Crisis of Reason in the Post-Modern Time

Therefore, the real accused of post-modernity and the real repudiated is reason. One cannot deny that today we are facing a crisis of reason that certainly has historical motivations and that has set an interesting paradox; namely, the irrelevance of reason in the crucial questions of existence (the meaning of things) and its extraordinary, never before witnessed power from the point of view of technical-instrumental thought. In Heidegger's words, it is the triumph of calculating thought that not only prevaricates, but cancels meditating thought. In *Gelassenheit* he highlighted the situation of poverty, even the absence of thought, the true "troubling guest" that infiltrates everywhere. The human being who has lost his/her thought, but of course not his/her ability to think (in fact he/she is like an uncultivated but cultivable land), is running away from thought¹⁹; a runaway that is more evident, an absence that is more certain when we consider thought only as calculating thought. Calculating thought is the instrumental and scientific reason that calculates, reducing reality to measurable and to what one can control, that does not take into account and never considers meditation (*Besinnung*).

In different categories we find the same warning in *Fides et ratio* (= FeR) on the poverty of reason and philosophy, a poverty from which a great concern arises, since the crisis or the reductionism of reason inevitably leads to a crisis or to a reductionism of the faith. FeR takes note of this crisis, highlighting how philosophy is often reduced to "metascience" and deprived of its vocation to bring up the problem of meaning (cf. 81). This leads to philosophy being characterized by what the encyclical calls "a sense of being adrift" (cf. 5), which means that philosophical reflection tends "to pursue issues – existential, hermeneutical or linguistic – which ignore the radical question of the truth about personal existence, about being and about God. Hence, we see among the men and women of our time, and not just in some philosophers, attitudes of widespread distrust of the human being's great capacity for knowledge. With a false modesty, people rest content with partial and provisional truths, no longer seeking to ask radical questions about the meaning and ultimate foundation of human, personal and social existence" (5).

The reduction of reason to instrumental reason, which is the reason why we are witnessing a hypertrophy of the means and a giving up of the search for the goal towards which the means must be oriented, is perceived as a great

¹⁹ See Heidegger's thoughts on this in *Einleitung in die Philosophie. Denken und Dichten* (winter semester 1944-1945); here he states that the human being is the only reality that thinks (*das denkende Seiende*) and due to this ability to think, he/she can experience a lack of thought (*Gedankenlosigkeit*) that comes from a lack of meditation (*Besinnungslosigkeit*): "Der Mensch ist unter allem Seienden dasjenige Seiende, das denkt. [...] Deshalb aber und lediglich deshalb gibt es auch nur unter Menschen die Gedankenlosigkeit, die stets in einer Besinnungslosigkeit ihre Wurzel hat" (§ 1).

problem of our time. We read in n. 47: “these forms of rationality are directed not towards the contemplation of truth and the search for the ultimate goal and meaning of life; instead, as ‘instrumental reason’, they are directed – actually or potentially – towards the promotion of utilitarian ends, towards enjoyment or power”. As indicated above, this reduction of reason has changed the role of philosophy. Philosophy is no longer perceived as all-encompassing and universal knowledge, but one of the many fields of human knowing (cf. 47) that assigns to itself modest tasks such as the mere interpretation of empirical data (cf. 55 and 56), and limits itself to particular, usually formal, problems (cf. 61).

The question becomes, then, how could we have reached such a point, such a reason that is so eager to renounce what belongs to it the most: the search for truth and the meaning of reality? J. Ratzinger reflected on the paths and transformations of reason in modernity, highlighting – first in *Introduction to Christianity* and then in the *Regensburg Lecture*²⁰ – the characteristics of the radical transformation of the meaning of reason in modernity.

In the *Regensburg lectio* the concern and disappointment expressed in the Pontiff’s words refer to the crisis of reason. It is a crisis that is clear to everyone and that, in today’s times, consists in a kind of self-reduction of reason; a crisis that seems paradoxical, because it is built on the undeniable successes of reason itself²¹.

What happens to reason in the modern time? In this age, reason goes through a radical transformation of its meaning. In the classical tradition, the term *logos* indicated the intrinsic rationality and intelligibility of reality in its multiple dimensions, an intelligibility that human beings, with their reason, as part

²⁰ About the *Regensburg Lecture* cf. Aa. Vv., *Dio salvi la ragione*, Cantagalli, Siena 2007; G. ANGELINI, *Fede e ragione secondo la lectio magistralis di Ratisbona*, in *Teologia* 32 (2007), 3-10; R. FISICHELLA, *Verità fede e ragione in J. Ratzinger*, in *PATH* 6 (2007), 27-43; G. EMERY, *Le discours du pape Benoît XVI à l’université de Ratisbonne*, in *Nova & Vetera* 82 (2007), 45-56; F.-X. PUTALAZ, *Élargir l’horizon de la raison humaine*, in *ibid.*, 57-66; J.V. SCHALL, *The Regensburg Lecture*, St. Augustine’s Press, South Bend (IN) 2007 (an exhaustive commentary to the Pope’s speech); see also the issue 1/2007 of *Rivista Teologica di Lugano*, particularly: H.C. SCHMIDBAUR, *Das Verhältnis von Glaube, Vernunft und Wissenschaft in der Lehre und Verkündigung Papst Benedikt XVI* (7-37), G. Cottini, *Deellenazione e inculturazione della fede* (39-55), E. MALNATI, *Ragione e fede. Necessaria sinergia per un incontro proficuo tra le culture* (101-114). On the lecture cf. K. WENZEL (ed.), *Le religioni e la ragione. Il dibattito sul discorso del Papa a Ratisbona*, Queriniana, Brescia 2008; L. SAVARINO (ed.), *Laicità della ragione, razionalità della fede? La lezione di Ratisbona e repliche*, Claudiana, Torino 2008; S. GRYGEL-S.M. KAMPOWSKI (edd.), *Fede e ragione, libertà e tolleranza. Riflessioni a partire dal discorso di Benedetto XVI all’Università di Ratisbona*, Cantagalli, Siena 2009; L. MAZAS-G. PALASCANO (eds), *La provocazione del Logos cristiano. Il Discorso di Ratisbona di Benedetto XVI e le sfide interculturali*, Rubbettino (Soveria Mannelli (CZ) 2017; P. CODA, *Rileggendo la lectio magistralis di Benedetto XVI a Regensburg*, in «Rassegna di Teologia» 50 (2009), pp. 425-454.

²¹ Cf J. RATZINGER, *Fede, verità, tolleranza. Il cristianesimo e le religioni del mondo*, Cantagalli, Siena 2005, p. 164.

of the *logos*, could grasp, thus attaining the knowledge of truth understood as the correspondence between thought and being. This correspondence was guaranteed, on the one hand, by the fact that there was intelligibility in reality and, on the other, by the fact that human beings, through reason, could objectively grasp it.

In the modern age, particularly with the scientific revolution and the birth of the experimental sciences, a new type of rationality emerges, based on two fundamental assumptions²². The first can ultimately be traced back to Plato; experimental sciences, based on the experimental method, on the possibility to know natural phenomena and to articulate them through mathematical laws, presume a mathematical and intelligible structuring of reality. This is somewhat similar to Plato, who saw in the physical world the reflection, imperfect but real, of the accomplished intelligibility that existed in the world of ideas. Indeed, if the natural phenomena that science believes it knows in an exact way, did not obey laws and did not have a structure in turn ordered according to laws, science would not be able to exist. The *logos*, then, remains the insuperable foundation of human thinking; yet, within the sciences of the modern age, this *logos* or wisdom “of which, on the one hand, the Greek spoke, and Israel on the other, has been absorbed into the material world; beyond it, it is no longer accessible”²³.

This leads us to the second assumption on which the modern idea of reason is based; it is the assumption of empiricism that, when configuring the status of reason, takes inspiration from Kant’s philosophy²⁴. In Kant, we witness the reduction of scientific knowledge to the exclusive realm of the sensible.

To be honest, what takes place in modernity, then, appears quite different from what was foreshadowed by Kant because, in a sense, the distinction between the different ways of knowing within reason is not maintained, while a tendency towards cognitive reductionism emerges, which identifies scientific knowledge with knowledge *tout court*. What, at the beginning, was only a se-

²² Benedict XVI summarizes these two assumptions as follows: “This modern concept of reason is based, to put it briefly, on a synthesis between Platonism (Cartesianism) and empiricism, a synthesis confirmed by the success of technology. On the one hand it presupposes the mathematical structure of matter, its intrinsic rationality, which makes it possible to understand how matter works and use it efficiently: this basic premise is, so to speak, the Platonic element in the modern understanding of nature. On the other hand, there is nature’s capacity to be exploited for our purposes, and here only the possibility of verification or falsification through experimentation can yield decisive certainty. The weight between the two poles can, depending on the circumstances, shift from one side to the other. As strongly positivistic a thinker as J. Monod has declared himself a convinced Platonist/Cartesian” (*Meeting with the Representatives of Sciences* [Regensburg, September 12th, 2006]).

²³ J. RATZINGER, *Fede, verità, tolleranza*, cit. 165.

²⁴ The “turn” to rationalism and the turn to empiricism characterize the arrival of the modern world. See an interesting and very useful book: J.A. KIRK, *The Future of Reason, Science and Faith*. Following Modernity and Post-modernity, Ashgate, Hampshire 2007, 27-71.

paration of competence becomes a kind of elimination, from reason, of a whole series of regions of being that, no longer viewed as rational, become part of the irrational and, as such, subjective and no longer universal or objective and objects of knowledge. The successes of a reason that we will call “instrumental” have limited its reach, *de facto* determining its impoverishment and its reduction. Consequently, “the specifically human questions, those ‘from where’ and ‘towards where,’ the questions of religion and of ethos, cannot find a place in the realm of common reason described by ‘science,’ intended in this way and must be moved to the realm of subjectivity”. Thus, “the human subject then decides, on the basis of his/her experiences, what he/she considers tenable in matters of religion, and the subjective ‘conscience’ becomes the sole arbiter of what is ethical. In this way, though, ethics and religion lose their power to create a community and become a completely personal matter”²⁵.

It is the “mutilation” of reason, whereby “human beings can no longer enquire rationally on the essential realities of their lives, their origin and goal, their moral duty, what is permitted to them, life and death, but must leave these decisive problems to a sentiment separate from reason, that does not elevate it but rather deprives it of its dignity”²⁶. What we have here, is that, on the one hand, reason becomes confined to the sensible realm and abandons all those domains that cannot be described quantitatively or cannot be included in the empirical sciences; on the other hand, it loses meaning in relation to the decisive questions of life²⁷. It is a fact that, in the concrete life, we cannot trust the indications of technical-instrumental reason, which has nothing to say on the meaning of things, the meaning of action, the good to be done, on feelings, etc. As a consequence, those realms of experience, which are decisive in real and daily existence, are ruled and defined by criteria and norms that exceed reason and, as such, can be assimilated to irrationality and sentiment, so that the norm that human beings follow in their lives, instead of being reason, becomes what is different from reason. A double reduction of reason is thus performed: on the one hand, we have a reason with no truth (because meaning is foreclosed to reason, which only “works” at the level of empirical experience and objects). On the other, we have a truth without reason, because what we consider true,

²⁵ BENEDICT XVI, *Meeting with the Representatives of Sciences*.

²⁶ J. RATZINGER, *Fede, verità, tolleranza*, cit., 165.

²⁷ “Current understandings reduce reason to a faculty of the universal; hence to a faculty that, for the love of universality, makes conclusions out of ‘nowhere’. In this sense, [reason] puts itself in the hands of ‘science’ that, in order to give exclusive value to a claimed experimental evidence, is forced to ignore the most radical human questions, those relating to the meaning of things. [...] A reductionist understanding of reason feeds into the systemic aversion of today’s public thought towards engaging with the fundamental questions of life. In such a way reason is greatly damaged; it indeed renounces the task of promoting dialogue among people and, even more, the task of promoting dialogue between different cultures and religions” (G. ANGELINI, *Fede e ragione secondo la lectio magistralis di Ratisbona*, in «Teologia» 32 [2007], 9-10).

on the basis of which we make decisions and choices, act in one way rather than another, is no longer derived from considerations of a rational character, insofar as reason no longer has any say in what does not belong to the empirical realm. A reason thus reduced cannot anymore be the guide for human beings in their concrete life; a guide to which all other dimensions of human beings should be subordinated, as it has always been argued in the Western philosophical tradition. It is not by chance that today we see the passage from the dominance of reason to the “tyranny” of feelings and, above all, of instincts²⁸.

This exile of reason allows those areas of reality it has abandoned to be occupied by other “criteria” such as feelings, usefulness, instincts, etc., a wholly different thing from the perspective outlined by Kant, for whom any dimension of existence, including religion, was given within (*innerhalb*) the boundaries of reason alone. In this sense, Kant saw reason as the ultimate norm on which every domain of reality should be based: knowledge, ethics, religion, hence the whole of human’s being²⁹. Therefore, today’s understanding of reason represents a reductionism that can be rightly considered a pathology of reason; “specialized reason is hugely strong and capable, [but] it does not allow, for the most part, because of the standardization of only one type of certainty and rationality, a broader look at fundamental human problems. What follows is a hypertrophy in the domain of technical-pragmatic knowledge whose counterpart is a contraction in the field of the fundamentals: from this derives an upsetting of the equilibrium that can become mortal for the *humanum*”³⁰. Ultimately, to use the words of A. Glucksmann, the suicidal renunciation of reason, which is manifested in the post-modern hatred for thought in the abandonment of its apophantic virtues, marks the affirmation of nihilism, which proclaims “not only the relativity of goods and values but, more radically, the relativity of evil. Hence the irreducibly historicist and biased choice of our definition of inhuman. To rape, why not? To ethnically cleanse, why not? Genocide, why not? To kill father and mother, brother and sister, why not? The suicide of Socratic reason creates monsters”³¹.

A reason reduced to mere instrumental reason easily leads to an ethical relativism that relativizes not only values but also faults. On the one hand, we are

²⁸ As Maffesoli wrote that the decline of the modern individualist ideal based on the centrality of sovereign reason, makes room in the postmodern time for an era “made up of affections, feelings, excesses, which manage to direct us more than we can direct them. The brain gives way to the belly and its multiple appetites” (M. Maffesoli, *Note sulla postmodernità*, p. 97 [italic in the text]).

²⁹ See the questions asked by Kant in the original part of the *Critique of Pure Reason* in answering which he formulates his philosophy: “All interests of my reason, speculative as well as practical, combine in the three following questions: What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?” (I. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A 805 [B 833]).

³⁰ J. RATZINGER, *Fede, verità, tolleranza*, p. 150.

³¹ A. GLUCKSMANN, *Lo spettro di Tifone*, in AA. VV. *Dio salvi la ragione*, pp. 110-111.

witnessing a “relativization of guilt”, whereby the situations in which we live, the complexity of the phenomena in which we are immersed and which we do not succeed to control – indeed, they are deeply conditioning us – make it more difficult to achieve goodness and the ethical imperative. Instead, it “reduces” the feeling of responsibility, while lowering the ethical tension and the desire for a life that is increasingly tense and devoted to good (everything becomes a mitigating factor). On the other hand, and I would say more problematically, relativism means that the ethical sphere has become less imperative and “its ability to have a regulatory influence on subjects is conditioned in intensity according to the areas of life, interests, contexts, circumstances and decisions to be taken”³². Consequently, what is imperative today may no longer be so tomorrow, according to a mobility of ethical paradigms which are considered “liquid”. We no longer have a reason to determine where good is and where evil is and so the normativity of the irrational deprives us of reliable criteria that would allow us to judge and denounce. The first consequence of the crisis is the tyranny of the market, the inability to escape the excessive power of capital that determines lives far more than we are aware³³.

In the light of this, then, our priority task today, which postmodernity suggests and faith recommends, no matter how we choose to articulate it, is to broaden reason through the recovery of the modern Enlightenment ideal that emerged within and is based on the biblical-Christian tradition. We read in *Regensburg Lecture*:

This attempt, painted with broad strokes, at a critique of modern reason from within has nothing to do with putting the clock back to the time before the Enlightenment and rejecting the insights of the modern age [...]. The intention here is not one of retrenchment or negative criticism, but of broadening our concept of reason and its application. While we rejoice in the new possibilities open to humanity, we also see the dangers arising from these possibilities and we must ask ourselves how we can overcome them. We will succeed in doing so only if reason and faith come together in a new way, if we overcome the self-imposed limitation of reason to the empirically falsifiable, and if we once more disclose its vast horizons.

Does this, however, not risk bringing new totalitarian deliriums of a systemic reason to life, those in which the tragedies of the 20th century, the holocaust, totalitarianism and genocides have their origin? The real challenge is to be able to find reason again, preserving it from its drifts that always lay

³² C. COSTA, *La società post-razionale*, Armando, Roma 2012, p. 93.

³³ See the denunciation of Pope Francis in *Evangelii gaudium* (53-60) against the economy of exclusion and inequity, the invisible tyranny of money that rejects any ethical order that claims control.

as possibilities, drifts that concern every dimension of the human being. We cannot renounce something that is decisive for us only because of the errors of history, forgetting what the “rulership of reason” has meant for the human being. It is not, then, a matter of rejecting reason (at most its reductionism) but rather of re-discovering reason. Against the backdrop of modernity, such re-discovery aims at giving reason back the capacity to know the truth and at letting it re-discover the greatness of the questions that originally and constitutively define reason. These questions concern meaning of the origin of things and the destiny of human being and reality; they are inescapable questions that we need in order to live, whatever the answer we give them: “The West has long been endangered by this aversion to the questions which underlie its rationality, and can only suffer great harm thereby. The courage to engage the whole breadth of reason, and not the denial of its grandeur – this is the programme with which a theology grounded in Biblical faith enters into the debates of our time”³⁴. The failure of some answers given during history will never erase the status of a reality of reason that exists as the enquiry on meaning and as the search for the truth³⁵.

3. Starting again from the Question of “Meaning” to Overcome the Crisis

To rediscover reason in its nature and accept the challenge of following its greatness with the realism of those who have known the tragedies of an ideological reason, but also with the awareness that the solution to the epochal crisis that the West (and Christianity in it)³⁶ is going through cannot be the renouncement to reason, ultimately means giving back to reason the task of understanding truth as meaning. It is not by chance that the “crisis of meaning” dramatically marks the poverty of the present day. When the possibility of questioning the meaning of things with reason is denied, it proclaims the end of meaning, not because of the disenchanting acknowledgement that “meaning does not exist” but because of the refusal to think that the problem of meaning

³⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Meeting with the Representatives of Sciences*.

³⁵ After all, this was the idea expressed in Socrates’s words, briefly quoted by Benedict XVI in the Regensburg *lectio magistralis* and that is, in *Phaedrus*, formulated in the following way: “[It is] very melancholy too, if there be such a thing as truth or certainty or power of knowing at all, that a man should have lighted upon some argument or other which at first seemed true and then turned out to be false, and instead of blaming himself and his own want of wit, because he is annoyed, should at last be too glad to transfer the blame from himself to arguments in general; and forever afterwards should hate and revile them, and lose the truth and knowledge of existence” (90d).

³⁶ As Pope Francis said in the address during the Meeting with the participants in the fifth convention of the Italian Church (Florence, 10th November 2015: «One could say that today we are not living an epoch of change so much as an epochal change».

“has meaning”³⁷. The philosopher U. Galimberti sees in this the consequence of technique. The technical-scientific paradigm has abolished the goals and, in so doing, has eliminated the grounds for “every possible search for meaning for that type of human being, the Western, grown in the ‘culture of meaning’ according to which life is liveable only if it is set in a horizon of meaning. Technique does not answer this type of question, because the category of meaning does not belong to its competences. But since today technology has become the form of the world, the last horizon beyond all horizons, the questions about meaning wander anxiously and unanswered in a land now abandoned by its sky that hosts the human event like any other event”³⁸.

Very interesting is the final chapter of the work *Psyche and Techne* where the question of technique³⁹ is analysed from the perspective of the abolition of the significance of the question of meaning. According to Galimberti, the elimination of meaning comes from technique as the unique and last absolute in our time; the absolute that is total self-referentiality, free from any horizon of goals, or production of meaning, where the only goal is the effects of technique that intend to improve technique itself. The realm of the ends of Kantian morality has collapsed because of the technical rationality that concerns only the means and proclaims that “everything that can be done must be done”, thereby eclipsing the goals and replacing finalized actions with mere functional making.

Once the goal has been removed, and the world has become indifferent, the absence of meaning must also be removed, and so the unavailability of meaning becomes the main driving force of actions. Unlike the traditional thematization of meaninglessness – life has no meaning and knows only pain because God or destiny prevent people from realizing their plan – in the age of technology, life and the world are meaningless because no goal is proposed in an absolute universe of means. Those who oppose this situation and “go on denouncing the absolute lack of meaning of an existence forced to express itself in a mere universe of means, are invited by several parties to take care of their demotivation, their feeling of unreachability of a meaning. And so what is a sign of awareness [...] is considered a disease. They then come to the aid of those cures through the word (religious, psychoanalytic), or through drugs

³⁷ Or we acknowledge that search for meaning belongs to human beings, but we look for a meaning that fits feelings, emotions, instincts, but not reason. See, for example, E. LECALDANO, *Sul senso della vita*, Il Mulino, Bologna 2016, pp. 66-75.

³⁸ U. GALIMBERTI, *L'ospite inquietante*. Il nichilismo e i giovani, Feltrinelli, Milano 2007, p. 18.

³⁹ The responsibility of technique as the objectification of instrumental reason and the essence of metaphysical rationality towards the senseless drift, the elimination of the ends and the decline of the human being's projectual tension, are themes initiated and radically discussed by Heidegger. See for example *Die Frage nach der Technik, Die Zeit des Weltbildes, Wissenschaft und Besinnung*. About the technical instrumental rationality see chapter 39 of U. GALIMBERTI, *Psyche e techne. L'uomo nell'età della tecnica*, Feltrinelli, Milano 1999, pp. 370-383.

(anxiolytics, antidepressants), whose function is not to combat the nonsense of existence, but the feeling that has clearly felt the nonsense of existence”⁴⁰.

This lack of meaning – that is, the lack of answer to the why – is, as Nietzsche says, nihilism, the devaluation of supreme values, and so “in the lack of meaning, which follows from the disappearance of any order of purpose, it is possible to identify the nihilistic atmosphere that the technique [...] has spread”⁴¹.

These considerations express unexpected convergence and bring us back to what we read in FeR 81 which points to the “crisis of meaning” as one of the most problematic and challenging aspects of the present condition. This crisis should not be understood only as a difficulty of finding meaning but also, and perhaps more radically, as a questioning of the meaningfulness of the question of meaning itself; one of the most relevant and challenging aspect of our time. John Paul II connects the crisis of meaning to the fragmentation of knowledge that not only makes the search for meaning difficult, but also prompts many to inquire “if it still makes sense to ask oneself a question about meaning”. The life reduced to different areas that do not communicate with each other, are incapable of a unified vision and of a reference to meaning, shifts towards scepticism and indifference. But a reason without the question of meaning, i.e., without an authentic passion for the search for truth, tends to be self-reduced to merely instrumental functions.

The negation of meaning, not referring to the (im)possibility of reaching it but to the importance of it being understood as a fundamental question, represents a problematic (perhaps the most problematic) aspect for Christianity in the post-modern age. On this aspect, concerning the crisis of meaning as a negation of the relevance of the question on meaning, not everyone agrees. For some interpreters, the denial of meaning has not weakened the question of the meaning of life that belongs to the “ontological debt” that characterizes the human being; the fragmentation of meaning has not expelled its relevance since it constitutes the horizon of comprehensibility of things. Of course, it is recognized that “postmodern reality interprets the original question of meaning in a different way”, and that “the change of perspective that postmodernity has introduced into the question of meaning and religious experience lies in

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 690.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 704. “In a universe of means where no goal is on the horizon any more, moral laws are no longer given, nor imperatives that are not inscribed in that rule of conduct that technology announces when it prescribes that ‘everything that *can* be done *must* be done’, and then, consequently: ‘everything that is *available* must be *used*’. These imperatives reverse the benchmarks for action. No longer the *needs of human being*, his/her needs, his/her expression, but the *availability of instruments*, their possibilities, their potential. [...] But an imperative that foresees the realization of what is possible and the use of what is realized generates an ethic in which *the principles of action are no longer dictated by human beings but by things*” (*ibid.*, p. 707).

having downgraded them from the great stories of history, and assigning them a place that is important, but not unifying”⁴². But, the reduction of meaning to something that does not unify and its transformation to a question that is just like any other, but no longer an existentially decisive question, how cannot be considered the end of meaning?

B. Welte writes about the “postulate of meaning”: «the presupposition of meaning can be considered as the dynamism that commands the realization of existence. As such, it is both consequence and presupposition of our existence: consequence because, if we strive for an existence rich in meaning, it is for the very fact of existing; presupposition because, if we did not presuppose meaning, we could not realize our existence through living and concrete action»⁴³.

If there is something absolute in life, this actually is meaning. “Meaning” – wrote Ratzinger in *Introduction to Christianity* – “is the bread on which man, in the intrinsically human part of his being, subsists. Without the word, without meaning, without love he falls into the situation of no longer being able to live, even when earthly comfort is present in abundance. Everyone knows how sharply this situation of ‘not being able to go on any more’ can arise in the midst of outward abundance”⁴⁴. Not only a fragmentary, partial meaning, but a final, absolute sense, which demands the highest commitment of spiritual reason and of human being’s freedom; certainly, as Rahner wrote, we can escape the question about meaning, “we can feel it is too challenging. We can say that we are not able to formulate clearly the question, and much less the answer, and that consequently we are better off being silent on topics like this”⁴⁵. However, in reality, the human being, especially in his/her practical, concrete life, cannot avoid dealing with the question of ultimate meaning. The affirmation of such absolute meaning, which governs our practical experience, is not idle specu-

⁴² C. DOTOLO, *Un cristianesimo possibile. Tra postmodernità e ricerca religiosa*, Queriniana, Brescia 2007, pp. 376-377. In his book *Dio, sorpresa per la storia. Per una teologia post-secolare*, Queriniana, Brescia 2020, Dotolo insists on shifting from “God of meaning” to “meaning of God” (Cf pp. 182-184), as if thinking God as ultimate meaning makes us unable to respect his otherness. But seeking meaning does not imply that God is just an answer to our questions (it would become an idol), but it expresses the necessary link between human being and God that allows us to embrace his possible appearance or revelation. I do not either think that a post-theistic way to think God requests to abandon the question of meaning. Cf P. GAMBERINI, *Deus due punto zero. Ripensare la fede nel post-teismo*, Gabrielli, San Pietro in Cariano (VE) 2022, pp. 31-101.

⁴³ B. WELTE, *Dal nulla al mistero assoluto*. Trattato di filosofia della religione, Marietti 1820, Genova 1985, p. 51.

⁴⁴ J. RATZINGER, *Introduzione al cristianesimo* (1968), Italian edition, Queriniana, Brescia 2003¹², p. 42 (the English translation is from the Ignatius Press edition).

⁴⁵ K. RAHNER, *La questione del senso come questione di Dio*, in Id., *Scienza e fede cristiana*. Nuovi saggi IX, Paoline, Roma 1984, p. 277. See also another interesting text of Rahner: *Il problema umano del senso di fronte al mistero assoluto di Dio*, in Id., *Dio e rivelazione*. Nuovi saggi VII, Paoline, Roma 1981, pp. 133-154.

lation, but has truly visible consequences. Thus, if someone asserts that “even the one who does not affirm and does not hope for such an absolute fulfilment of the meaning of life knows how to face his/her life in an equally valid, courageous, objective and serene way, just like the one who aims at this absolute realisation of meaning”, we should answer that “if he/she believes he/she can cope with the demands of life without worrying about its ultimate meaning, it is because he/she has probably not yet been confronted with the very depths and despair of human existence”⁴⁶.

Conclusion

To rediscover reason as the faculty we have to seek truth intended as meaning is crucial also for faith, since Christian faith understands itself essentially in relation to the event of happening and gift of meaning. Granted that from the answer to the question of meaning derives the only way to reach the knowledge of God – since the question of God and the question of meaning are identical⁴⁷ – “the fulfilment of the human question of meaning is not only guaranteed and creatively implemented by God, but consists in a free self-communication of God in his most proper reality”⁴⁸. Faith, in fact, is the “bestowal of meaning without which the totality of human being would remain homeless, on which human being’s calculations and actions are based, and without which in the last resort he/she could not calculate and act, because he/she can only do this in the context of a meaning that bears him/her up”⁴⁹.

It seems to me very interesting and innovative that in his letter *Porta fidei* Benedict XVI defined the sincere search for the ultimate meaning and the definitive truth about existence and the world as an authentic “preamble to the faith” (n. 10), because it moves people along the path that leads them to the mystery of God⁵⁰, especially in our time in which Christian faith is no more a self-evident presupposition for life in society and, truth to be told, it is often truly denied (cf n. 2). In this way, the *quaestio de veritate*, declined and declinable only as a question of meaning, becomes a necessary “presup-

⁴⁶ K. RAHNER, *La questione del senso come questione di Dio*, pp. 280-281.

⁴⁷ Cf *ibid.*, p. 284.

⁴⁸ *Id.*, *Il problema umano del senso di fronte al mistero assoluto di Dio*, p. 152.

⁴⁹ J. RATZINGER, *Introduzione al cristianesimo*, p. 65.

⁵⁰ «We must not forget that in our cultural context, very many people, while not claiming to have the gift of faith, are nevertheless sincerely searching for the ultimate meaning and definitive truth of their lives and of the world. This search is an authentic “preamble” to the faith, because it guides people onto the path that leads to the mystery of God. Human reason, in fact, bears within itself a demand for “what is perennially valid and lasting”. This demand constitutes a permanent summons, indelibly written into the human heart, to set out to find the One whom we would not be seeking had he not already set out to meet us» (*Porta fidei*, n. 10).

position” to the discourse on revelation and faith. To deny the meaning and its significance that is decisive for the life of the human being means to make faith meaningless, insofar as it would no longer have something to refer to and would no longer be able to justify itself, thus becoming implausible. In short, to paraphrase Niebuhr, faith would become the answer to a question that does not interest anyone⁵¹.

Once we have established the original and unquestionable importance of meaning for human beings (whatever the answer we give it), denying that reason is constitutively defined by the question of meaning entails denying that reason is turned towards the truth, towards being as the content of its knowledge. Therein lies the reason why it is so popular to talk about “post-truth” today. We start, then, from the assumption that “a meaning that is not, at the same time, truth, would be a non-sense”⁵². This reveals an unbreakable connection between meaning, foundation and truth, whatever the perspective from which we interpret foundation and truth. Thus, the challenge raised by the post-modern negation of reason as the faculty of truth is to restate what John Paul II calls, in *Fides et ratio*, the “metaphysical capacity” of reason, that is, its capacity to know what is beyond phenomena in terms of their meaning and truth as foundation (see FeR 83). If we do not acknowledge that reason has this capacity, a nihilistic outcome is inevitable, which seems to be the common horizon of many philosophies that have abandoned the meaning of being, that have lost touch with the objective truth and given up on the foundation.

In today’s context, where the need for the dialogue between different cultures and religions within a pluralistic articulation of truth is a priority task, there is a pressing need to rebuild the alliance between faith and reason by recognizing that reason is necessary in order to affirm God’s truth in us. Furthermore, there is a need to rediscover in the *logos*, to which both God and human beings are normatively linked, the “objective” instrument of debate beyond what G. Angelini has defined the “confused rhetoric of post-modernism”⁵³. I think that this is the path rightfully indicated by Benedict XVI in Regensburg, a path that still has to be walked as well as built.

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⁵¹ Cf. R. NIEBUHR, *The Nature and Destiny of Man. A Christian Interpretation*, II, Nisbet & Co Ltd-Scribner’s, London-New York 1964³, p. 6.

⁵² J. ALFARO, *Dal problema di Dio al problema dell’uomo*, Queriniana, Brescia 1991, p. 69.

⁵³ Cf. G. ANGELINI, *Fede e ragione secondo la lectio magistralis di Ratisbona*, p. 6.