

Hope and the Hopeless: The Contemporary Addressee of *Gaudium et spes*

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Abstract

Henri de Lubac argues that Christians today lack an appreciation of the centrality of the Gospel to human meaning. This apologetically disastrous deficiency is related, for him, to Cajetan's "corruption" of Thomas's understanding of nature and grace. After presenting this issue, this article examines the reception of ideas akin to Cajetan's conception by Christians and popular culture, which latter has accordingly adopted an indifferentist mentality toward religion. Other impediments to thinking through the *Gottesproblem* today are taken up next, specifically the legacy of critical atheism and the distraction that shields persons from this problem's relevance. Distraction, although aimed at saving persons from the thought of death and from anxiety, actually produces a deadening and banalization of human hope. The hope of *Gaudium et spes*, which is addressed last, is not the eviscerated hope of contemporary persons. The language barrier centering on "hope" between the Council fathers and contemporary persons can only be bridged by addressing the formative causes of the hope of those indifferent to the Gospel.

Keywords

Grace, Hope, Indifferentism, Lubac, Vatican II.

When chapters 19–21 of the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et spes*, were written, the world addressed was different in ways that are relevant to the ongoing reception—or lack of reception—of this document. The aim of this paper is to examine a profound cultural shift where belief is concerned with a view toward focusing the insight of the Council fathers on a problem that is today "*plus actuel*". The cultures that *Gaudium et spes* sought to address have changed, but the constitution is not less relevant for this fact; indeed, an audience dimly envisioned

during the Council has moved squarely into the document's sights—that of the culture of religious indifferentism.

With the following comments I mean to address (only) a few of the cultural and psychological phenomena associated with the problem of religious indifferentism. In the present context, “indifferentism” is intended to designate an insensitivity to the question of God in its urgency. I mean neither to address the relativism that puts itself above the plurality of religious systems¹ nor to construct a kind of artificial person, who is truly oblivious to the idea of God. Instead, the indifferentist will be treated as a polar type, toward which many contemporaries gravitate in unequal measure. Finally, some of the particular problems that contribute to the culture of indifference today will be our focus rather than the originating causes of widespread indifference. We must allow that the support for indifference to religion is itself shifting; even if we were successful in identifying the causes that have precipitated the last decades' crisis in interest in religion, we would not be justified simply in transposing these to our own time. The origination and sustenance of religious indifferentism are possibly overlapping but ultimately different issues.

In particular, we will consider that which is perhaps one of the most significant apologetic shortcomings of Christian self-presentation today, a lack of appreciation of the centrality of the Gospel to the meaning of the human. The immanence to man of the Christian message will first be examined with reference to Henri de Lubac's insistence on the single and supernatural character of the human vocation over against the so-called two-tiered model of Cajetan. Next, we will look at notions parallel to the “two-tiered” system of nature and grace that are held by Christians and in culture at large. In the third place, we will investigate one of the most important impediments to thinking through the *Gottesproblem* today, the legacy of critical atheism, and one of the key mechanisms by which persons shield themselves from this problem's relevance, distraction. Distraction is aimed at shielding persons from anxiety, which is concentrated in the thought of death, but the unintended outcome of distraction is less than positive: it produces a deadening and banalization of human hope. This hope is the subject of the Second Vatican Council's *Gaudium et spes*, which document is treated last in this essay. In its chapters devoted to atheism (co-authored by de Lubac),² the Council intends to impart hope

¹ Miano has adopted a distinction from the *Dictionnaire de Théologie Catholique* between “negative indifference”, which refuses to decide the question of God, and “positive indifference”, which decides that religions are all equal. Vincenzo Miano, ‘L’Indifferenza religiosa: Studio teologico’, in Segretariato per i non credenti, ed., *L’Indifferenza religiosa* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1978), p. 10, including note 7.

² Cf. Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Mémoire sur l'occasion de mes écrits* (Namur: Culture et Vérité, 1989), p. 363. He says that his role in the Council was not considerable and that he had “pas de rôle important dans la rédaction même des textes (sauf pour certains détails).”

to persons of its day, but its understanding of hope has begun to be heard in an increasingly equivocal sense. A gap in the language of hope must be acknowledged and overcome for *Gaudium et spes* to make its voice heard; the sustaining causes of contemporary man's despairing hope will be examined as a step toward this end.

Nature, Grace, and Apologetics in de Lubac

Henri de Lubac has received much attention for his treatment of the classical problem of nature and grace. A rehearsal of this problem and of the arguments and controversies surrounding it fall outside of the scope of the present discussion. I would like to indicate, however, one of the practical implications at stake for de Lubac in defending that which he regarded as the more classical Christian teaching. Cajetan's interpretation of St. Thomas on the subject of nature and grace—which maintained the reality of a natural, human end realized along with an additional, supernatural end—served the purpose of defending the faith against tendencies to conflate nature and grace, from those of Baius to those of Modernism. As with any other oversimplification of Christian faith, however, the good this conception obtained was purchased at an exorbitant price.

[I]l est arrivé que ce qui aurait dû stimuler la pensée comme un problème, l'a fait reculer comme un scandale. On a couru au plus pressé, à ce qui paraissait d'emblée le plus "sûr", et la vérité dogmatique a pu paraître possédée bien en paix. Mais, pour ne rien dire de plus, on n'a point aperçu que, par cette manière trop facile de maintenir la gratuité de l'ordre surnaturel, on reculait dans son intelligence. On en faisait, non pas simplement un "accident"—ce qui peut parfaitement s'entendre—mais quelque chose de tout accidentel, au sens français du mot, et par là, disons-le, quelque chose de superficiel. On se condamnait à n'y plus voir qu'une sorte de superstructure. Il s'ensuivait, qu'on le voulût ou non, non seulement que l'homme aurait fort bien pu s'en passer, mais qu'il pourrait fort bien aujourd'hui même, sans inconvénient majeur, le dédaigner. On lui enlevait tout prise sur la pensée comme sur l'existence humaine. La pensée chrétienne s'est trouvée de la sorte enfermée dans un cercle étroit, dans "un canton retiré de l'univers" intellectuel, où elle ne pouvait guère que s'étioler. Par les soins mêmes de quelques-uns de ses représentants, qui s'imaginaient préserver ainsi sa transcendance, elle ne fut plus qu'une "exilée" . . .³

This declaration likely reflects modesty more than historical fact. Ratzinger remembers matters otherwise: Joseph Ratzinger, 'The Dignity of the Human Person', in Herbert Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II* (New York and London: Herder and Herder and Burns & Oates Limited, 1969), p. 145.

³ Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Le Mystère du Surnaturel* (Paris: Aubier, 1965), p. 222. The denotation of theology as an exile is taken by de Lubac from M.-D. Chenu, *Introduction à l'étude de saint Thomas d'Aquin*, p. 6. On the overly facile separation of grace from nature

Cajetan's *Corruptorium* of Thomas' thought,⁴ which was more or less uncritically accepted by "traditional" theology for several centuries, entailed an alienation of those persons from Christianity who would come to see Christian promise as extrinsic to the human condition. The Cajetanian tradition's simplistic way of explaining the relationship of nature to grace eventually resulted in the latter's being regarded as superficial. The end belonging to and (in principle) achievable by pure human nature was seen to stand distinct from end proffered by grace. These ends were only understood as coincident by virtue of the *Potentia obedientialis*—the capacity human nature to be lifted up to a supernatural end by grace or, seen even more narrowly, nature's mere non-repugnance to the offer of grace. Christian thought itself, for its part, came to share the fate of grace and was seen as separated from real life.

A rising chorus, beginning in the early part of the twentieth-century and taking as a significant point of departure Maurice Blondel's 1893 *L'Action*, insisted that human nature has a single, supernatural vocation and voiced dissatisfaction with the two-tiered approach and its consequences.⁵ The sectarianism to which the distancing of grace from nature and concrete life leads could only contribute to a disinterest in and repudiation of the supernatural.⁶ Grace, under this

cf. de Lubac, *Le Mystère du Surnaturel*, p. 210. Cf. also p. 233: In maintaining both that God is necessary and intrinsic to human persons and that he gives himself freely, de Lubac says, "A-t-on le droit de lâcher l'une, fût-ce dans l'intention de mieux tenir l'autre?" In Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Athéisme et sens de l'homme: Une double requête de Gaudium et spes* (Paris: Les Éditions du Cerf, 1968), p. 98 de Lubac quotes Norbert Luyten's appraisal: "N'avons-nous pas encore compris combien nous avons dû payer cher l'erreur de maintenir le surnaturel bien à l'abri du naturel? L'intention fut sans doute excellente: sauvegarder la pureté du surnaturel. Mais le résultat n'en a pas moins été catastrophique: nous nous étions isolés, retirés du monde dans des ghettos où nous nous étions enfermés nous-mêmes." Norbert Luyten, 'L'Église et la culture', *Civitas August* (1967), p. 917. In *Athéisme et sens de l'homme* de Lubac is rather taciturn about his own role in unseating the Cajetanian understanding of nature and grace.

⁴ The word is Gilson's. De Lubac, *Mémoire*, p. 126.

⁵ For a different judgment on Cajetan's interpretation of Thomas on this point see Juan Alfaro, S.J., 'Lo natural y lo sobrenatural segun el Card. De Vio, Cayetano: Contenido, Fuentes, Originalidad' (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1950), p. 69. Referring to de Lubac he says: "...Cayetano es en este problema un verdadero continuador del pensamiento del Doctor Angélico y de los teólogos tomistas de los siglos XIV y XV. La teoría de la posibilidad del estado de naturaleza pura no es un concepto extraño al tomismo e introducido en él por Cayetano, como se ha afirmado recientemente."

⁶ "La solution est simple, en effet. Mais elle fait bon marché, dans l'esprit du chrétien, de l'unité qui doit, englobant les distinctions et même les oppositions intimes, marquer de son sceau toute pensée comme toute existence digne de ce nom. Elle est facile. Mais, en excluant l'Évangile de la vie, elle favorise tous les abandons. Elle est déjà un abandon. Dans l'absolu de son séparatisme, elle force le chrétien à une véritable schizophrénie, dont il ne se guérira que par un reniement." De Lubac, *Le Mystère du Surnaturel*, 103. See also Henri de Lubac, S.J., 'Apologétique et théologie', *Nouvelle Revue Théologique* 57, no. 5 (1930). Already in 1930 de Lubac indicates that the consequences of a stark separation of grace from nature on the part of theology are significant for Christian apologetics. This

aspect, only stands to lose ground if the nature that it purports to complement is taken to be realizable on its own terms. De Lubac says, paraphrasing an atheist in the making:

Si ma propre nature d'homme a naturellement sa fin en elle-même, qu'est-ce qui m'obligerait ou seulement m'inciterait à scruter l'histoire pour y chercher si d'aventure un autre appel se serait fait entendre? Pourquoi devrais-je prêter l'oreille à cette Eglise, porteuse d'un message dépourvu de tout rapport aux aspirations de mon être?⁷

The wedge driven between nature and grace, by Christian theology itself, created the prongs of a decision for the Christian: since he could not manage to reconcile supernature, on the one hand, and his own thoughts, awarenesses and activities in the world, on the other, he would opt for the one or the other. He would retreat from the world, closed in on himself, or else actively pursue a very secular and worldly cultivation.⁸

From the starting point of a real separation between nature and grace it is difficult to understand how Christ could be said to reveal man to himself. Fundamentally, the Gospel would not touch human nature and so appeal to it; it would only offer something additional and not radically compelling.⁹ A self-sufficient human nature as to its end does not, in a certain respect, need God as its ultimate explanation. By contrast, human nature, does not make sense on its own in the conception of nature and grace argued by de Lubac. He says:

Rappeler à l'homme quelle est sa fin dernière, ce n'est pas lui dire quelque chose qui, substantiellement, ne l'intéresse pas, quels que soient les obstacles, ceux de la vie courante et ceux de l'idéologie régnante, qui l'empêchent de s'en rendre compte. C'est lui découvrir le sens total de son être en l'aidant à trouver, puis à déchiffrer l'inscription gravée en lui par son Créateur. C'est l'arracher à l'angoisse, au

makes Christian truth seem, for the most part, to be arbitrary and disconnected from man's nature. "Pas plus qu'il n'avait à s'enquérir d'abord de ce que l'homme, peut-être, attendait, il n'a ensuite à se préoccuper de ce que Dieu a dit." p. 364. This presupposition seriously compromises apologetics. Apologetics must set up a contrary global outlook to those that oppose the Faith. It is not that people really leave the Faith because of questions about particular points of Catholic dogma (though sometimes objections to these can be the outward effects of a more profound divergence) but because they have a different general outlook on life. "Il importe donc extrêmement, nous installant à l'intérieur de la théologie, d'y travailler à nous faire, selon les principes de la foi, une conception du monde plus haute, plus riche, plus cohérente, de tirer de ces principes une doctrine de vie plus totale et plus féconde, que toutes celles qu'on pourrait nous opposer..." p. 370. This outlook, in the form of a clear and coherent supernatural doctrine, will answer the aspirations of man's nature. Apologetics cannot afford to fall back on a defensive and superficial tack.

⁷ De Lubac, *Athéisme*, p. 99. Cf. de Lubac, *Mémoire*, p. 33, where de Lubac notes the centrality of the separation of grace from nature to unbelief and calls the relationship between the two the "nud du problème de l'humanisme chrétien".

⁸ De Lubac, *Athéisme*, p. 99.

⁹ De Lubac, *Athéisme*, p. 103 et passim.

désespoir, ou à l'apathie, ou à l'acceptation d'une condition basse,—en même temps que le délivrer des illusions néfastes.¹⁰

Only this outlook, which reveals to man the ground of sense that stands at the center of his being, renders effective testimony to the disbelieving world of today. A vision that puts Christ at the heart of the human bears more effective witness than does the timid and defensive conception of a two-fold human destiny, according to de Lubac. The ultimate truth of man's destiny and likewise that of the world is beyond both in the Christ that stands at the centers of both. Of Christ, who is the sense of the world that he has concretely entered, de Lubac quotes Jules Monchanin, saying "L'homme universel, vers lequel se tend l'humanisme des nos jours n'est qu'un mythe en dehors de cet homme."¹¹

Nature, Grace and Apologetics in the Concrete

The apologetic consequence of the two-tiered understanding of nature and grace may strike us as a theoretical, rather than real, problem. Supposing that de Lubac had in mind a direct, rather than trickle-down, influence here, we may wonder whether anyone who has read Matthias Scheeben, for example, has understood the natural and the supernatural to occupy two relatively discrete strata in the Christian imagination, and has opted for an unchristian humanism as a result. Such a person would be a strange sort of indifferentist—since coming to terms with the grace question requires anything but indifference—or atheist—since the Christian's proposition is accepted as true in order to reject Christianity.¹² For all of the difficulties in accepting de Lubac's point, however, we do not have to be credulous to think that at least implicitly Christianity has in fact been presented as an extra in popular culture and even in ecclesial circles. This is true without prejudice to the fact that Christianity is also presented as a requirement. Christianity appears today as a kind of mandatory hobby.¹³

¹⁰ De Lubac, *Athéisme*, p. 110.

¹¹ Jules Monchanin, 'Le temps selon l'hindouisme et le christianisme', *Dieu vivant* 14 (1949), p. 118, as quoted in de Lubac, *Athéisme*, p. 112.

¹² De Lubac's concern here with atheists applies to indifferentists, *mutatis mutandis*, without conflating these designations.

¹³ See Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Christianity in a Secularized World*, John Bowden, trans. (New York: Crossroad, 1989), esp. pp. 27, 32–33; here Pannenberg draws attention to the risk of Christianity's becoming one more thing on the shelves of consumer society and no longer as universally binding. See also Gianfranco Morra, 'Indifferenza e ateismo', in Segretariato per i non credenti, ed., *L'Indifferenza religiosa* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1978), pp. 152, 161. It will have been noticed that Pannenberg's book is cited here in its English translation and an explanation is due: English citations are used throughout for whatever works these exist, with the exceptions of magisterial and classical texts and

The Cultural Side of the Problem

The marginalization of Christianity emerges in part as a by-product of the practice, acceptable in itself, of considering most people of whatever professed religion as basically good. If, as popular culture suspects, people are good regardless of their adhesion or not to Christ—and being good is popularly considered to be the ultimate goal of Christianity—then what does Christ offer, even to Christians? Adherence to Christianity, in this light, becomes simply a matter of duty, the obligation correlative to a positive command that is often seen voluntaristically in the conceptual framework that Western culture has inherited from the Reformers.¹⁴ Yet this adherence may only be perceived as a duty by those who believe in the reality of the command and the command-duty dynamic as a stand-alone sells short the attractiveness of God's self-revelation. If being good is flatly perceived as the goal of Christianity, one may more easily be attracted to a figure that elicits a kind of natural goodness without purely heteronomous commands. Adherence to supernatural revelation in faith and pursuit of supernatural goodness in sacramental worship, for example, become simply add-in components, extrinsically commanded and covered in nebulous, mythical, even childish conceptions that are removed from the originally purposed and otherwise realizable goal of "being good". This fact continues to apply even when the *Schwerpunkt* of Christianity is phrased differently as "flourishing", "living a meaningful life", etc. Supernatural love is no longer conceived of as the form of the virtues and the notion of love itself has already been dramatically attenuated and banalized. By the popular conception Christianity is reduced; it holds a clear position on only one (natural) level, however this be understood and even if it certainly no longer involves any notion of the contemplation of the *Causa causarum* in natural beatitude.

The reduction of Christianity to the natural has as its complement an etherealizing of the supernatural. The natural world is receding from the supernatural and the mystical apace with an increase in the misconception and trivialization of these latter terms. "Supernatural" today means paranormal, while the banalizing of Christian mysticism is catalyzed by a banalizing of mysticism in general. Relegation of mysticism to the esoteric, to self-help books, and to generic gurus of whatever variety have served to soften and undercut the seriousness

those of this essay's principal subject, de Lubac. The aim is to improve readability without sacrificing clarity.

¹⁴ On Nominalism and Protestant extrinsicism, see René Virgoulay, 'La création humaine des valeurs', *Revue des sciences religieuses* (1967), p. 220. Virgoulay also makes the point on p. 197 that voluntarist freedom applied to God is a notion of freedom easily appropriated by man, as in Sartre.

with which many people take any mystical claims at all. In this conception of the mystical there is both the recognition and the effecting of strangeness and, with this, unreality. Man is distanced from the object of mystical focus by pseudo-mysticism. He feels at a certain level that he betrays himself in attempting to believe the unbelievable, no matter how earnestly he may try to do so. Thus, the distance between man and an artificial- or constructed-sounding mysticism grows to the increasing preclusion of the possibility of identifying, in any concrete way, with the object of any (even the true) mysticism. The estrangement of the natural and the supernatural, which secular culture has in large measure on loan from Christians, impedes access to the heart of the Christian message.

The Christian Side of the Problem

The fault for widespread indifferentism lies no doubt with well-intentioned Christians in some measure.¹⁵ Believers seem very often to share their secular counterparts' conviction that the "being good" of Christianity is little different from that of secular culture(s). Gérard Defois, among others, has drawn attention to the consequence of today's dull line between Christian proclamation and secular aspirations.

Ils nous interrogent aussi dans la mesure où nous avons «banalisé» l'espérance chrétienne en des formules, des valeurs et des projets peu différents de ceux qui circulent dans la société. Comme tels ils ne disent plus rien neuf du christianisme.¹⁶

The rapid decline in the Gospel's ability to awaken interest coincides in some measure with the recrudescence of domesticated Christianity. Christianity withers wherever it would leech life from an alien body.

The gravity of this naturalized conception of Christianity has pulled its adherents down from an increasingly unnatural supernatural. There is among Christians a tendency analogous to that of wider culture to

¹⁵ See *Gaudium et spes*, cc. 19, 21.

¹⁶ Gérard Defois, 'Quand la foi chrétienne laisse indifférent... Que faire?', in *Secrétariat pour les non-croyants*, ed., *L'indifférence religieuse* (Paris: Beauchesne Editeur, 1983), p. 245. See also p. 228: "Leur foi leur devient indifférente parce qu'elle ne leur paraît pas apporter quelque chose de neuf, de *différent* à côté des théories politiques, culturelles ou économiques qui légitiment une transformation de l'humanité." See Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'How to Think About Secularism', *First Things* June/July, no. 64 (1996), p. 31. "The Absolutely worst way to respond to the challenge of secularism is to adapt to the secular standards in language, thought, and way of life. If members of a secularist society turn to religion at all, they do so because they are looking for something other than what that culture already provides... Religion that is 'more of the same' is not likely to be very interesting".

see the supernatural as the province of pixies. To this mystifying realm they pay an increasingly vague piety if they perceive this as owed at all. Many Christians see their religion as something that either highlights values proper to secular culture or as something removed from human life. Most often, perhaps, they see Christianity as some ungainly combination of both of these and find themselves concretely implicated in the dichotomy between the two worlds and struggling vainly to mediate between them. Where Christianity is not merely the ape of worldly culture, i.e., where a supernatural reality is also (mis)perceived, believers in the main imagine the need to divide themselves between the world and the “otherworldly” as if these occupied discrete compartments to which relative quantities of time and energy were due. Some of life, it seems, should be dedicated to God—the measure differs according to the degree to which one’s Christianity has assimilated worldly values—and some time and energy should be reserved to enjoyment, work, family, etc. Supernatural life is distanced from “real” life by sealing the former within an apportioned time. The immanence of charity to all spheres of action is overlooked with the result that something like cultic exercise is presented and perceived as a series of acts disjoined from other acts and not as determinative of them in any way. When supernatural life is so understood, it becomes unclear how one’s ordinary life is substantially different because of the supernatural or would suffer without the supernatural and the Christian proves incapable of giving an alluring account of his happy hope.¹⁷ The Christian’s foray into the nebulous noumenal is accomplished because it is commanded and because he knows that it pertains to his religion, but he cannot make clear to himself or to anyone else what this has to do with the natural goodness to which his religion seems commend him. He has traded supernatural hope for a natural hope.

A final word may be said about the self-presentation of believers and their faith today in connection with indifferentism. There has been a significant distancing from the notions of sin and punishment on part of pastoral ministry and speculative theology.¹⁸ The notion of being good mentioned above, flatly interpreted and applied nearly universally, is of great consequence again here. An exclusionary emphasis by Christians on the mercy of God and a minimization of the number of situations in which one is willing to conceive of oneself as truly sinful have trivialized for non-Christians the importance of a response to the question of God. The indifferentist feels no real need to decide for or against God when even Christians seem to hold that he is merciful in a such a way that Hell is no longer a real

¹⁷ 1 Pet 3:15.

¹⁸ I intentionally leave to the side here any discussion of these themes in themselves, including whether and to what degree such revisions have been justified.

possibility. Not only does the idea of God seem to fail to make one a different person, but the degree to which one must change to avoid punishment appears as negligible. The indifferentist feels little need to pass beyond a simple, implicit thought: “If God does not exist, he will not punish me; if he does exist, he will not punish me.”

Doubt and Diversion

Few if any of the considerations so far outlined are entertained in a fully deliberate way by indifferentists; refusal to decide the question of God—even to ask oneself seriously whether this is an important question—is, once again, the defining feature of the indifferentist. How does one accomplish an offhand and relatively unconsidered dismissal of such an important question? It is worth enquiring into the mechanism by which one may shield oneself, more or less consciously, from asking whether or not there is a God who requires a relationship that includes certain moral obligations. By way of preparing an answer to this, we must first ask if there is anything, other than the perceptions of Christianity’s content just mentioned, that deflates one’s interest in the question of God from the outset.

Critical Doubt as an Occasion for Indifference

It is often said today that the problem of critical atheism is somewhat passé and that the real crisis in belief is that of indifference.¹⁹ True though this be, these two moments in the rejection of God are closely linked. Indifference rests on the uncertainty into which atheism has thrown the question of God in the popular mind.²⁰ The question of God is hardly asked in part because it seems to be unanswerable; contemporary man breathes in the “atmosphere of uncertainty”.²¹ The fact of the plurality of theistic religions as contributing to uncertainty should not be underestimated.²² The very number of versions of

¹⁹ See, for example, Joseph de Finance, S.J., ‘L’athéisme, problème majeur de l’évangélisation dans le monde d’aujourd’hui’, in Mariasuai Dhavamony, S.J., ed., *Évangélisation*, (Rome: Università Gregoriana Editrice, 1975), p. 362.

²⁰ Augustine saw that the pressing presence of falsehood often outweighs dimly perceived truth: “cur non beati sunt? quia fortius occupantur in aliis, quae potius eos faciunt miseros quam illud beatos, quod tenuiter meminerunt.” *Confessions*, 10, 23, 33.

²¹ The phrase belongs to Luigi Mezzadri, ‘L’Indifferenza religiosa nei suoi fattori storici’, in Segretariato per i non credenti, ed., *L’Indifferenza religiosa* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1978), p. 116.

²² Pannenberg, *Christianity in a Secularized World*, esp. p. 58 argues that the Christian confessional divide is an ongoing scandal. See also Wolfhart Pannenberg, ‘Die Zukünftige Rolle Von “Glauben Und Kirchenverfassung” in Einer Säkularisierten Welt’, *Una Sancta* 44, no. 4 (1989), pp. 334–336. This theme is also treated as part of a general discussion

theism is potentially upsetting to someone undecided as to whether or not to seek involvement in a religion. However, the various atheisms and agnosticisms, often posthumously, perhaps exert a greater influence in creating a general mistrust in any affirmative answer to the question of God. In view of so many possible answers to the question about God—and so many of these are versions of the outright denial of God's existence—a clear and singular opting for belief in a particular religion can leave the impression of an irrational commitment. Interest in the pursuit of religion as absolute truth is frozen in the bud by despair in the possibility of rising above the cacophony of voices. Despite the prevalence of indifferentism, it must be said that being relatively indifferent does not mean that one has always been so and is so naturally. Indifferentism bears a connection to more systematic atheisms because it is built on glances, however fleeting and unreflective, at the tumultuous state of the question of God. The solid footing on which Christianity once stood has been shaken in the public eye. That which once was considered a certainty is now reckoned to be nothing more than a chance and in the shortsighted mathematics of contemporary culture, so different from the consciousness of eternity that eggs on Pascal's wager, a chance is not something for which a person should change his life.²³

Doubt holds sway, even if indifference itself entails at least one concrete and certain implication regarding the question of God, namely, that the risk of foregoing a God worth involving oneself with is tolerable. That momentous assumptions could be lightly hazarded owes something to a despairing resignation in the face of conflicting claims about the divine.

Divertissement and Death

Divertissement. Le hommes, n'ayant pu guérir la mort, la misère, l'ignorance, ils se sont avisés, pour se rendre heureux, de n'y point

of Christianity and modern culture in Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Christianity and the West: Ambiguous Past, Uncertain Future', *First Things* December, no. 48 (1994).

²³ Evelyn Waugh's summary of modern man in the person of the protagonist of his *Brideshead Revisited* is to the point: "The view implicit in my education was that the basic narrative of Christianity had long been exposed as a myth, and that opinion was now divided as to whether its ethical teaching was of present value, a division in which the main weight went against it; religion was a hobby which some people professed and others did not; at the best it was slightly ornamental, at the worst it was the province of 'complexes' and 'inhibitions' . . . and of the intolerance, hypocrisy, and sheer stupidity attributed to it for centuries. No one had ever suggested to me that these quaint observances expressed a coherent philosophic system and intransigent historical claims; nor, had they done so, would I have been much interested." Evelyn Waugh, *Brideshead Revisited: The Sacred and Profane Memories of Captain Charles Ryder* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1945), pp. 85–86.

penser... Il faudrait, pour bien faire, qu'il se rendît immortel; mais ne le pouvant, il s'est avisé de s'empêcher d'y penser.²⁴

It scarcely needs pointing out that today, if one wants to eschew confrontation with the problem of God, there is plenty of sand to bury one's head in. Consumer culture distracts man from considering ultimate questions²⁵ and, what is perhaps more, it is born of and in turn nurtures a lateralizing of desire and élan. Today horizontal transcendence replaces vertical transcendence.²⁶ Western culture, like any other, is the expression of that which persons value; shopping-mall cathedrals represent the exteriorizing of inner life and the search for transcendent value in the mundane order.²⁷ Seeking the infinite cannot be extricated from the human condition; only poor substitutions can be made.²⁸ De Lubac says:

Horreur d'un monde sans Dieu, sans stabilité ni mystère, qui se croit clair à lui-même, et qui va s'abîmant dans un devenir sans signification et sans issue, *dum nil perenne cogitat*.
Désespoir atroce d'une société que les idoles temporelles ont séduite, et où meurt étouffée la *mens avida aeternitatis*.²⁹

²⁴ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées sur la Religion et sur quelques autres sujets* (Club des Libraires de France, 1961), p. 114.

²⁵ See Filippo Liverziani, Facoltà di Filosofia Pontificia Università Salesiana, ed., 'Ateismo e risveglio religioso', in *Religione, ateismo e filosofia: Scritti in onore del Prof. Vincenzo Miano nel suo 70° compleanno* (Rome: Libreria Ataneo Salesiano, 1980), p. 95: "Sembra che nella testa dell'uomo non ci possa albergare che un'idea per volta! Nel concentrarsi su certi obiettivi e su certi problemi... l'uomo moderno ha perduto di vista i problemi dello scopo e del significato della vita nel suo insieme." De Rosa describes how consumerism has placed an accent on the value of *Homo faber*, to the detriment of religious values, Giuseppe De Rosa, 'Indifferenza religiosa e secolarizzazione', in Segretariato per i non credenti, ed., *L'Indifferenza religiosa* (Rome: Città Nuova Editrice, 1978), p. 142.

²⁶ De Finance, 'L'athéisme, problème majeur', p. 370: "On peut dire que pour l'homme contemporain la transcendence «verticale», propre au divin, tend à être remplacée par une transcendence «horizontale», soit en «longueur», selon la ligne du temps (vers des «lendemain qui chantent», comme dans le marxisme), soit en «largeur», vers des domaines nouveaux, déconcertants, bouleversants, de l'univers, qui «élargissent» en effet immensément notre vision des choses mais — pour le pensée métaphysique et religieuse — restent sur le plan de la facticité, de la contingence — sur le plan «créaturel»."

²⁷ De Rosa, 'Secolarizzazione', p. 145: "L'ulteriore scomparsa della religiosità tradizionale non porterà alla scomparsa della religione, ma alla sua «degradazione» e «mondanizzazione»: da una parte, questa porterà alla nascita delle «religioni secolari» con la sacralizzazione di realtà «secolari», come la politica, la scienza, la razza, la nazione, la libertà, il sesso, il progresso, il benessere, la produttività, la socialità; dall'altra, porterà a cercare la risposta ai problemi «ultimi» nella magia, nello spiritismo, nell'astrologia, nella divinazione. La degradazione del sacro porterà inoltre a dare carattere sacrale ad oggetti, come la macchina, il vestito, la casa, ed a riti, come i cerimoniali sportivi, politici, consumistici: i luoghi in cui questi riti «sacri» si compiranno saranno lo stadio, il parlamento, l'aula congressuale d'un partito, la piazza in cui si tiene un comizio, la *boutique* in cui si fa lo *shopping*. La religione, in tal modo, non scomparirà, ma cambierà radicalmente nelle forme e nei contenuti, mondanizzandosi totalmente."

²⁸ De Lubac argues this point forcefully; see, for example, his treatment of Auguste Comte in *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*.

²⁹ Henri de Lubac, S.J., *Sur les Chemins de Dieu* (Paris: Aubier, 1956), p. 207.

Transcendence of the finite in the absence of God is sought through an absolutizing, which means idolizing, of the finite itself. One seeks to attain to all potential loves through one love as a kind of concretion of the universal beloved; the immediate love is made to stand as a kind of mediator—one may say, a sacrament—of the universal. However, no finite thing can really hold the seeker of the infinite or, put differently, one cannot continue to prop up any particular finite object by sheer force forever. Practically, then, this substitution of the finite for the infinite amounts to a serial search for transcendence in successive idols. Today there is a high turnover in careers, hobbies, spouses, and gadgets and not simply because all of the above, as renewable resources, are in plentiful quantity.

There is a hidden danger in relating to the world in this way. Man cuts himself off from the possibility of real transcendence with his every mockery of transcendence. When everything is but an experience, a particular and immanent fake for transcendence, the object even of true religion is dealt with in the same way, as a hobby.³⁰ The contemporary propensity to relate in the way of experiencing dovetails with the suspicion that that which one experiences is not universally true. No person gives himself to a fad diet except with half-hearted commitment; no person gives himself to a religion that he suspects except in a way that betrays the intention of the religion itself. Such an arm's-length commitment becomes yet another diversion from the authentic pursuit of religion in which one can immerse oneself in the self-gratifying but impersonal way of a spectator. When man has damned himself to be only a spectator, moments of wonder or nascent piety drift in sentimentalism. The experience is enjoyed, though it is unsettling in some respects; it is exploited and parlayed against an authentic verve for action ("I am not religious, although I am spiritual").

The more that persons seek the serial enjoyment of fictitious absolutes the more that they sense themselves to drift in senselessness.³¹

³⁰ Von Balthasar's admonition bears repeating: "God remains the centre and man is related to something outside himself, to the absolute. Man only 'has' this love in so far as it 'possesses' him, that is to say he does not have it as a possession over which he has control, or which he can point to as one of his powers." Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Love Alone: The Way of Revelation* (London: Sheed & Ward, 1968), p. 108.

³¹ Pannenberg draws attention to the contemporary crisis in meaning in reference to V. Frankl and P. Berger in the second chapter of Pannenberg, *Christianity in a Secularized World*. On the consumerist approach to religion and the related absence of an perception of meaning see Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'The Absence of God in Theological Perspective', in *Christian Spirituality* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1983), pp. 89–90. Cf. Pannenberg's discussion of meaning for persons as enabled by reference to God in Wolfhart Pannenberg, 'Sinnerfahrung, Religion und Gottesfrage', *Theologie und Philosophie* 59, no. 2 (1984). In commenting on *Gaudium et spes*' treatment of atheism, Ratzinger expresses in harsh understatement a negative judgment on "l'homme absurde" of modernity. "[T]he joyful meaningfulness which Camus ascribed to

Boredom is not alleviated by distraction (*divertissement*) but has this as its greatest ally. Spiritual restlessness seeks an expenditure of energy; yet this can be diffused in distraction. The failure of spiritual élan to find its proper outlet is a debilitating frustration, however, notwithstanding the temporary relief afforded by this diffusion of vigor. One seeks to imbed oneself in the particular, to the best of one's abilities (*this* beloved, *this* pass-time, *this* car) and the particular is something which requires a faint heroism to achieve.³² The effort required flows from and returns to an absolutizing or idolizing of the particular and the effort so spent is always finally in vain. On the far side of the sham optimism and dull giddiness that go with this worship stand the specters of deflation and depression.

Moreover, in distraction from the infinite by the finite persons seek to quantify, manage, or control the thought that is the source of anxiety—the thought of God. This is especially true where the idea of God itself has been practically rendered finite.³³ Inadvertently, however, there is in this a truncation of hope as well, since hope and anxiety share a common source. Hope is lateralized in one case and buried along with anxiety in the other—the word of hope spoken by *Gaudium et spes* can only resonate as a faint and idyllic intonation in the world today.

Death is a special motivator for the obsession with distraction as Pascal saw or, better said, the subject of death and contemporary culture's avoidance of it cast into particular relief the motivation behind distraction in general.

We think of death today as something that comes toward us. This is often to personify it. The most vivid, if childish, representation of this is the figure of the Grim Reaper. We are reluctant or unable, however, to see death, not in more or less vividly personified terms, but as the term and concretion of our personification. Death is for us today a glitch, a mishap that happens to happen to all, an unpleasant best put out of sight. There is, though, something more important in death. Rahner, in creatively following Heidegger, is correct to see death as the very focal point of human existence. In circumstances

his Sisyphus" he writes, "is not convincing". Ratzinger, 'Dignity of the Human Person', p. 156.

³² "Ce n'est . . . pas l'amusement seul qu'il recherche; un amusement languissant et sans passion l'ennuiera; il faut qu'il s'y échauffe, et qu'il se pipe lui-même, en s'imaginant qu'il serait heureux de gagner ce qu'il ne voudrait pas qu'on lui donnât à condition de ne point jouer, afin qu'il se forme un sujet de passion et qu'il excite sur cela son désir, sa colère, sa crainte pour cet objet qu'il s'est formé, comme les enfants qui s'effraient du visage qu'ils ont barbouillé." Pascal, *Pensées*, p. 112.

³³ Martin Buber teaches the valuable lesson that God will not be found at the other end of a managing, controlling relationship, i.e., as an It. See Martin Buber, *Eclipse of God: Studies in the Relation Between Religion and Philosophy*, Norbert Guterman Maurice Friedman, Eugene Kamenka and I. M. Lask, trans. (New York and Evanston: Harper & Row Publishers, 1957).

as they are, as part of the drama of sin and redemption, there is no confrontation of man with himself that is definitive, all revealing, and consummating of personhood that is not death. Avoidance of death is avoidance of the essential existential question.

Many have pointed out that death is avoided in the main today and indicated the strange trappings by which modern man seeks to insulate himself from mortality. Rarely does one see (real) death—it is a private tragedy played out on hospital sheets and “arrangements are made”. Rarely does one speak about death at all and virtually no one talks about a “good death”; few wish that Catholics wish of being conscious in the final moments of one’s life to collect oneself before God—such sentiments have passed out of vogue in favor of softer expressions such as the “passing” of a loved one and the comically circumlocutory Italian designation, *la scomparsa*, “the disappearance”, of the bereaved. Death is dealt with in an obsessively sanitized way or it is robed in mawkish parody. While cinematographic violence and the costumed posturings of “Goths” appear to treat of death, both fail to reckon with it in a forthright way. In spite of their failure, we should not be surprised by cultural-underground movements such as the “Goths” or obsession with death in film. Failure to deal with almost any issue in a healthy way forces aberrant outlets. It cannot be argued that every other time and culture had a better way of dealing with death than we do today—we should not, for example, harbor nostalgia for the *dance macabre*. It is worth noting nonetheless that our culture suffers from a strange nervousness that avoids the eye of death.

The relatively successful avoidance of the subject of death has allowed a large number of people today to love themselves, although mortal, as if they were immortal³⁴ and this is always to love in a self-veiling way. Man loves a projection of himself; an ideal self is loved for whom immortality is substituted for a virtual interminability. No end colors the course of human life with significance; one loves oneself as frivolous. Therefore, even when a person cannot avoid a kind of introspective depth, reflection on mortality centers on the cessation of life and not on a *rendre compte* with one’s life in a mediation between hope and anxiety. Avoidance of death is, here again, avoidance of the thought of God.

The Relevance of *Gaudium et spes*

Hope is naturalized by Christians and culture, abandoned because of doubt, lateralized by commerce, and ignored with anxiety. The true

³⁴ Augustine points out this misjudgment in general: “. . . fuderam in harenam animam meam, diligendo moriturum ac si non moriturum . . .” *Confessions*, 4, 8, 13.

voice of hope is in a language foreign to contemporary man and it should not come as a surprise that he remains indifferent to its beckoning.

It is perhaps curious to us today that modern indifferentism is hardly mentioned in *Gaudium et spes* 19's catalogue of modern crises in belief. Alongside enumeration of atheist humanism, atheism for the sake of science, atheism motivated by the theodicy problem, and others is a brief mention: "Alii quaestiones de Deo ne aggrediuntur quidem, quippe qui inquietudinem religiosam non experiri videantur nec percipiant quare de religione iam sibi curandum sit." The judicious use of "videantur" here forestalls the impression that there are real people who never think about God, as does the document's insistence that atheism is not the natural human condition.³⁵ In spite of the fact that no one can never think of the divine, indifferentism has encroached significantly in the past decades such that that which was but one trend alongside other, more important, "atheisms" now dominates the field. The generation gap between the council fathers and the sons of the contemporary world is evident in the relatively small importance it attributed to indifferentism as well as in the hope by which it sought to redress the problem. Hope for the Council was neither a nebulous and disconnected mystification nor something purely natural, akin to some ephemeral yet absolutized entertainment.

The fact that contemporary persons seem to have discounted questions concerning God owes something to a diminution and flattening of a sense of wonder that corresponds to the betrayal of hope outlined above. Wonder is reserved almost exclusively today for that which seeks to predict and determine and for that which is predictable and determinate—science monopolizes wonder. Wonder is unmoored from the unknowable, from mystery—the sense of which atrophies quickly and quietly in true wonder's absence—and is affixed to that which happens to be unknown and to its discovery. Openness to mystery is an ever more restricted aperture.

As wonder is cornered by science, only specifically intense experiences seem to demand concentrated attention on the idea of God. At the most dramatic moments of life, questions that lead to God cannot fail to arise.³⁶ As argued above, however, the attempt to live one's life out of the way of *all* unpleasantly momentous situations and conditions, specifically anxiety and the awareness of death, has the untoward consequence of enclosing one in resigned and despairing security. Here, precisely, the question of God is not perceived in

³⁵ *Gaudium et spes*, c. 19, "Atheismus enim, integre consideratus, non est quid originarium..." Miano makes this point well with reference to *Gaudium et spes* cc. 19, 21 and 42; see Miano, 'L'Indifferenza religiosa', pp. 21–22.

³⁶ *Gaudium et spes*, c. 21: "Nemo enim quibusdam momentis, praecipue in maioribus vitae eventibus, praefatam interrogationem omnino effugere valet."

its urgency and every such Godless limbo is Hell. If de Lubac (and Blondel before him) are correct about the singularity of the human vocation, then this blindness to the supernatural spells the defeat of the very meaning of human nature and this not merely by the accidental reason that supernatural grace would fail to heal fallen nature; persons would fail to attain the gratuitous gift of communion with God in supernatural love for which very reason they were created—*Fecisti nos ad Te . . .*

Persons are not insulated from the thought of God simply by avoiding the intensity of life most of the time. More than in 1965, the allure of engulfing distraction threatens today. The Council rightly saw that the hope it sought to inculcate would meet resistance along these lines. It saw the increasingly accessible palliative of distraction as debilitating and deafening the world. “*Ipsa civilizatio hodierna, non ex se, sed utpote nimis rebus terrestribus intricata accessum ad Deum saepe difficiliorem reddere potest.*”³⁷ Headphones do not make hearers of the word. Distraction follows on an alienation from hope and this alienation seeks further distraction in an ever tightening vicious circle.

While it is perhaps difficult to see atheists or indifferentists as directly motivated in their rejection of God by Cajetan’s two-tiered understanding of nature and grace, it remains true that hope has become a lateral élan for which a transcendent aspect can only appear as unreal and as anything but immanent to man.³⁸ Even when expectation is lifted above the pursuit of a purely animalistic beatitude,³⁹ it often does not reach an understanding of the supernatural that is at once something clearly delineated from sentimentalized naturalism—in perception of its transcendence—and faithfully rescued from the mists of mystification—in appreciation of its immanence. Yet this seldom heard hope is the only hope audible.

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³⁷ *Gaudium et spes*, c. 19. This is far from a categorical rejection of technology and the relative ease of modern civilization; indeed, the social-encyclical tradition—paralleled here, curiously, by Abraham Maslow’s theory of self-actualization—suggests that lower needs’ being provided for by modern technology is an occasion, rather than an impediment, for seeking God.

³⁸ Although Vatican II’s message concerning the immanence of Christ to man is easier to conceive in terms of a single (supernatural) end, this point may be taken to stand generally even if Vatican II does not specifically endorse de Lubac’s conception of nature and grace.

³⁹ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, 4, 54, 3.