The Impotence of the Word: The God Who Has Said It *All*

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1. The Power, or the Word

The power of the word should be at its height when the spoken word is deemed authoritative, when speech is the master of discourse. This authority can be no greater than when the word derives from what the Greeks called "the more powerful (than us)," (*hoi kreittones*) or even, in monotheistic religions, from He who can be called – to use a term that avoids confusion – "the Almighty." The mighty word is the divine word. The power of this word is a result of its divine origin.

It can, however, be wondered whether the contemporary world is capable of acknowledging the power of this divine word. Can we still experience a word of this kind? Or rather does this word not belong to a period now definitively over, and is not the attempt to revive it the result of a nostalgic dream that is regressive if not reactionary? Does not the word as we know it present itself in a completely different form? For example, in open discussion, within the context of democratic discourse? The first condition for such a discourse is the rejection of any and all authority based outside the space of this discourse. But this space is, so to speak, flat, without stratification. In such a context the power of the word is derived from argument alone, and its power is in no sense a result of its origins. Nothing, of course, precludes the possibility of a supposedly "divine" word entering the space of a discussion. However, it would have to be stripped of all the pretensions derived from its supposed origin: its value would

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have to reside in its content and in its content alone. As for the power exercised by the *logos*, it concerns only one side of the word; not the spoken word but the "power of the rational",[1] that is to say the capacity of the formulated word to plan and require. The *logos* is powerful; but only as technical reason, not as a word addressed to a listener.

The era in which we are living is therefore not one marked by the power of the word but rather by its radical powerlessness. Power and word are mutually exclusive. Indeed, where we find power, such as in technical mastery that dictates and orders, and which can do so because it has first calculated on what it can rely, we no longer find the word: and inversely, where we find the word, such as in democratic dialogue, power is excluded before the game begins: the value of a given argument will be based on the extent to which it is believed, not on the way it is worded. A word that would claim authority for itself by its origin alone would be immediately distrusted and therefore disqualified on the spot. The divine word, as divine, has no place in the modern world.

Our era can be characterized as a period of the silence of God or the gods. The process of secularization, by which the world is "modernized" (in the purest sense of the term), leaves no room for divine speech. This transition to modernity has been defined in various ways and on various levels. In humanity's relationship to nature, the process of modernization has been defined as the conquest and technical exploitation of nature. In the relation of humanity to itself, modernization has been characterized as a process leading to the democratization of society. As for the relationship of humanity to what is above it, that is to say the divine, a variety of terms has been suggested: for example "secularization,"[2] and the "disenchantment of the world" (*Entzauberung der Welt*). This latter term, coined by Max Weber, was later developed and expanded by others, such as Martin Buber in his formulation the "eclipse of God," [3] or the "dedivinization" and flight of the Gods (*Entgötterung)* as Heidegger wrote, [4] and it also includes Nietzsche's idea of the "death of God." I have listed these terms in no particular order and without any claim to exhaustiveness; nor do I seek to distinguish the precise nuances of each of them. Finally, I will not here make any judgments concerning the legitimacy of the

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interpretation made by the various thinkers. I will simply point to a common thread, or at least a common emphasis shared by all these theoreticians of modernity: the retreat of the sacred.

It is within this context that I now propose to examine a text that is older than any of the ones I mentioned above. This text was written at the beginning of the period that has generally come to be accepted as "modern." The text in question was written in the second half of the sixteenth century by Saint John of the Cross (1542-1591). It is part of *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, Book II, chapter 22,[5] "one of the most grandiose chapters" of this work.[6] Part of my justification for analyzing it separately derives from the authority of the Saint himself, who opens this chapter by describing it as a useful but not wholly indispensable digression from the overall work.[7]

2. A Stingy Grace

The central focus of John's inquiry is none other than what constitutes the correct way to experience God. The relationship between words and the Word is, not surprisingly, addressed. The former are impugned to the profit of the latter. Saint John of the Cross begins with a startling assertion: "2. It is not God's will that the soul desire to receive by supernatural agency things caused by visions or words ..."

What he condemns here is nothing less than what is commonly called "mystical" experience. The man in the street thinks of the mystic as someone who sees or discerns the divine presence when others cannot, who senses new and "un-heard" of things. In this sense John of the Cross is not a mystic, and does not want to be taken as one.[8]

There then follows an objection, a *sed contra*, which itself produces an aporia: this practice was previously sanctioned by what John calls the "old Law." Moreover, it was not only legitimate to ask God to speak, but, when He demanded it, it was wrong not to ask him to speak. It is this last point, and this alone, that John illustrates. He quotes in Latin and then translates into Castilian two passages. Then he refers – without an exact textual citation –

to Moses and King David before finally evoking the "ancient priests and prophets." All the examples show how the people of the Old Testament did not hesitate to ask God to speak; and even how God himself demanded it of them.

> § 2. We have seen elsewhere ... and concluded from the testimony of the Holy Scripture ... that it was part of the practice of the old law, and that it was permitted, sometimes even commanded by God. And when it was not done, God reproved them. [...] We have also seen in the Holy Scripture how Moses always consulted God, which David and the other Kings of Israel did ... , and the priests and ancient prophets, and God answered them and spoke to them without growing angry, since they were right in so doing; indeed only if they had failed to speak to Him would there have been evil – and this is the truth. So why then should it not be so today, under the new law and grace, as it was back then?

It can be seen here that John limits himself to one of the two modes of knowing that he enumerated at the beginning of his discourse. It is no longer a matter of merely asking for words, and it is no longer enough to ask for things to see. Why? Perhaps it is because it would have been more difficult to find examples in which God desired to be asked that he produce something to see. King Hezekiah does ask for a sign, which he in fact receives, but it is from his own chief (2 Kings 20, 8-11, Isaiah, 38, 22). In any case, "seeing God" is at the very least less difficult and dangerous (Exodus 33:20). However, in all likelihood the most important reason for John's shift is that it sets the stage for his inquiry into the Word of God.

Whatever else that can be said about it, the old alliance, as presented by John, is characterized by a greater familiarity between God and human beings. To speak to God, and to hear him speak, has nothing extraordinary about it. Humanity and God are on the same footing. The divine seems permanently available. In fact he has a powerful influence on the entire human sphere. He stands firm in order to show himself and intervene.

As John's final examples constitute something of a vague list, I will allow myself the following generalization: in the old alliance, God seemed closer to man than he does in the new one. In the Old Testament God intervenes through acts that are more immediately perceptible as "divine" than are those recounted in the New Testament. His feats are more obviously spectacular, and Jewish apolo-

getics was able to use them to their best advantage: the liberation from Egypt, the plagues that affected Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, manna falling from the heavens for forty years, even miracles that, in some cases, were witnessed by as many as six hundred thousand people; little of that can be contested.[9] In any case, such events are certainly more grandiose than anything that the New Testament can offer: cures of private individuals, or miracles carried out in the presence of small groups or even without witnesses, such as the resurrection of Jesus, which no one saw take place although there were witnesses who claimed to have seen the Resurrected One reappear. The Old Testament contains more "marvels" than The New Testament; indeed the New Testament appears flat in comparison. And in fact this observation has often been made, beginning with the Fathers of the church themselves, who spoke of the *sermo humilis* of sacred Scripture.[10]

In making note of this, Saint John of the Cross points to a situation that is similar or perhaps analogous to one that characterizes the modern age. Indeed he implicitly – since he does not generalize the phenomenon – reveals something that might be called the "modernity" of the new alliance. This modernity, it should be noted, has none of the positive connotations it has for the man in the street, who associates "modern" with the ideas of "progress" and "improvement." Rather the opposite obtains. The new alliance has something more sober, even gray, about it than does the old alliance. Inversely, it can be observed that the distance separating the old alliance from what is best about "paganism" is smaller than habitually assumed, that is to say the presence of free and equal, or perhaps even "relaxed" relations between the divine and the human.

Saint John of the Cross asserts a paradox: the new Law seems to be anything but an advance over the old Law: indeed it appears to be a regression. The divine has not come closer to us but moved farther away. The plenitude of the Revelation represents a disillusioning. To top it off, what was permitted is now forbidden. Yet, as John himself emphasizes, it is this "law of grace" (§ 2, p. 200/208) that inaugurates an "era of grace" (§ 3, p. 200/209). Grace thus seems to be more severe than a Law that is only law. This gift (*kharis*), rather than giving superabundantly, takes away.

3. The Definitive Religion

> To which one should answer that the principle reason why the law of the Scripture permitted men to make requests of God, and why it was proper for prophets and priests to desire visions and revelations from Him, was because at that time faith was not so well established nor the gospel law secure. Consequently it was necessary for them to inquire of God, and God answered, sometimes in words, sometimes in visions and revelations, sometimes in figures and symbols and in various other forms of likeness. All his words, his answers and revelations, concerned the mysteries of our faith and the things related to our faith ... But now that faith is established in the Christ, and the gospel law made manifest in this era of grace, there is no longer any call to inquire of him in this manner, nor for him to speak or answer as he did then. Having given us – as he did – his Son, who is his only Word (because he possesses no other), he has told and revealed to us everything at once, in a single Word, and he has nothing more to say.

John's answer is that the era of direct contact between God and Man represented a provisional stage in the history of the Revelation; a stage in which everything remained uncertain and insecure. This is the classic response that a Christian should give. And Saint John of the Cross was, of course, a perfectly orthodox, even cannon Christian – a doctor of the Church. There is thus nothing surprising in seeing him summarize a doctrine enunciated by the Fathers of the Church on the relationship between the old and new Alliances: The old was but a prefiguration of the new, and was directed (*enderezada*) by it. It is this idea that underpins his insistence on the importance of the vocabulary of sign, type, and symbol (*figuras y semejanzas*) in the Old Testament. Now, by contrast, God has clearly stated what he wants and therefore has nothing more to say.

Thus it is Christianity itself that is responsible for what must be called the flight of the sacred. Saint John of the Cross is not the only one to express this idea. Ideas similar to this one will come up later in the works of authors who probably did not read him. In some it will be implicit, in others quite explicit, such as in Nietzsche. However, with Nietzsche its meaning is reversed: what for John was a positive sign is negative for Nietzsche. The confession of faith becomes an accusation. It is also worth noting that more neutral observers have detected a relationship between Christianity and the "secularization of the world," as well as in the criticism of the deification of the powers of nature, carried out earlier

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by some of the Hebrew prophets. These observers seek to explain the retreat of the sacred not on the basis of a series of facts exterior to religion – such as the values of the Enlightenment or in rationalization – but on the logic of religion itself. In this regard I have in mind Max Weber and Marcel Gauchet.[11]In any event, it should be pointed out that in Saint John of the Cross we see this same point of view emanating not only from the religious sphere as such but from within Christianity itself.

At this point in his analysis John of the Cross says: the Revelation is over, and there will be no other. Although this answer is clearly consistent with Christianity, it is also no different from the answer given by many other religions, all of which claim to have established the final, most perfect, definitive religion. To mention only the most obvious examples, the three religions that trace their descent to Abraham all claim to be the ultimate one. Although each justifies this claim differently, all make the claim on the basis of their view of what a religion should be. Probably the clearest example of this type of attitude – in the Christian sphere – comes from Hegel, who identified Christianity as the "absolute religion" by showing that in Christianity religion corresponds most closely to its idea.[12] Those who study the concrete history of those phenomena called "religious" have had no difficulty in showing that Hegel's concept of religion was derived, more or less consciously, directly from Christianity.

All the religions descended from Abraham have tried to present themselves as ultimate and definitive. This is especially true of Islam, whose prophet seems to have been particularly conscious of his historical role, and of the problem that his coming posed in a world where Judaism and Christianity were already well-established. His job was to present a prophetic message that was authentic but not bereft of continuity with the message of the prophets who had preceded him. This at least is the way in which Islam most often interprets the Koranic characterization of Mohammed as "the Seal of the Prophets" (*hatam al-nabiyyîn*) (Koran, 33:40).[13] It is possible, although not certain, that this expression, and thus the claim it conveys of representing the final stage of the revelation, is older than Islam itself: al-Biruni quotes it in a text of Mani, the founder of Manicheanism.[14] In any case, the

commentators of the dominant school have adopted the reading *hatam* (seal) instead of *hatim* (he who seals and confirms), and interpret it to mean that Mohammed is the last (*ahir*) prophet.[15] In order to support what is far from clear-cut in the Koran, these commentators rely on certain sayings of the Prophet (*hadith*) which they interpret in such a way as to prove unambiguously that Mohammed said no prophet would come after him. Among these statements is the parable of the house: a man has a house built which is beautiful and perfect in all respects but one: it lacks a single brick. Mohammed is thus similar to this brick that completes the construction.[16]

Although Biblical and Talmudic Judaism affirmed the eternal nature of the Mosaic Law, it was not always clear on this point. Judaism seems to have been little concerned with proving the eternal nature of its Law until confronted with the challenges of Christianity and Islam.[17] It then presented a series of arguments, both extrinsic and intrinsic. Thus Maimonides writes that the eternal nature of the Law can be deduced from the eternity that is promised to Israel, since it is the carrying out of the commandments that prevents the disappearance of the Hebrew people. [18] This is an extrinsic argument. It is the intrinsic argument that is more powerful, although it requires a bit of logical maneuvering. This argument consists in showing that the Law, according to the word used in Psalm 19, is "perfect" (*torath YHWH temimah*). Perfection is here understood to be a state to which it is impossible to add or subtract. Anything imperfect, inside the group to which it belongs, is in a situation of excess or lack in relation to this perfection.[19] The perfection of the law rises above its source, the perfect prophet whose powers of soul are at their maximum state of purity; and it rises above its results, that is to say its social and speculative usefulness.

According to Saint John of the Cross, most of Christianity's apologetic effort is focused on demonstrating the ways in which Christianity realizes the goals of the old alliance. Although he adds nothing new to this effort, Saint John does have the merit of clearly formulating the problem that the end of the revelation poses, since it is a fact that religion is, in large measure, a revelation. He states this fundamental assumption without being overly insistent, since for

him it is obvious. It is only we who cast doubt on it: "matters of faith are not up to man, they come directly from the mouth of God." (§ 3, p. 200 / 209). What he expresses here is the basic conception that a religion must have of the divinity; it is almost a definition, or at the very least it characterizes what God should be. It is in the nature of the divine that it be the only one who can say what itself is. Only the divine is capable of speaking the divine. Pascal writes: "God speaks of God."[20] One must go further: only God can say, "I am God." If this is the case then religion is in no sense a human creation, and if the word must be divine, it is God who must speak it, which he can only do at a particular moment in the history of humanity.

4. A God Reduced to Silence

> 4. And this is the meaning of that passage in which Saint Paul tries to persuade the Hebrews to abandon their former ways of dealing with God, based on the Mosaic law, and instead to fix their eyes only on Christ, saying: *What God in the past told our forefathers in varied and fragmentary fashion, in this final age he has told once and for all through his Son.*" (201 / 209.)

John here supports his argument with a biblical quote (up until this point he had made his argument without resorting to such authority). He quotes and analyzes the first sentence of the *Letter to the Hebrews*. He does not so much add something to the text as make explicit an idea that is formulated only implicitly in this passage: "once and for all" (*de una vez*). In so doing he simply allows the text to comment on itself, since in the *Letter* it is repeated on several occasions that Christ's coming represents, "once and for all," (*happax, ephapax*) the advent of salvation (9: 26-28, and also cf. 7:27, 9:12, and 10:10).

The texts cited by John had already been abundantly utilized by other commentators in order to contrast two types of temporality, cyclical and linear. John, however, injects an idea that can be found neither in the text he uses for support of his idea, nor anywhere else – to my knowledge – in the New Testament:

> § 4. In which the Apostle gives us to understand that God remained as if mute, with nothing more to say, since what he had earlier revealed to the prophets in bits and pieces he revealed in total and in him, by giving us All, through his Son. (201/209.)

The novelty of the idea explains the circumspection of the formulation: the Apostle (Saint Paul, who at the time was believed to be the author of the *Letter to the Hebrews*) "gives us to understand" something that John expresses in an extraordinary, even shocking, manner: God "remained as if mute" (*ha quedado como mudo*). The idea he has added is the silence of God. This is an ancient idea, and it is also an idea that has remained current: it is often hurled as an accusation at the heavens, which remain silent in the face of human suffering. It can be found in several places in the Old Testament: in the *Psalms* (28, 1:35; 22:83; 2:109, 1), among the prophets (*Isaiah*, 64, 11; *Habakkuk*, 1, 13), and in the book of *Job* (30, 20). In *Isaiah* God is portrayed as himself acknowledging his own silence (57:19). Indeed this dialogue has in fact never been stilled, although in the modern period we can see the development of a new attitude toward it: in the face of God's haughty silence man seeks to enclose himself in his own silence. There is the well known stanza that Alfred de Vigny added to his poem "The Mount of Olives": "If it is true that in the Sacred Garden of Scripture / The Son of Man said what it is reported that he said / Deaf, dumb, and blind to the cries of creatures / If the heavens have abandoned us like an aborted world / The just will counter disdain with absence / And will answer only with cold silence / To the eternal silence of the divinity."[21]

For Saint John of the Cross, God's silence, his muteness, is a consequence of his having said Everything. In the paragraph quoted above John has gone a step further than he had earlier, and even further than in what he called his free translation of the biblical passage. The basic message of the *Letter to the Hebrews* is that God said through the Son everything he had said partially through the prophets. This may mean that God decided to deliver a message to us. Surely this message might contain everything he wanted to tell us; but it is not necessarily *everything*, in an absolute sense. In the past God's message had been revealed to us in bits and pieces, now it has been given in complete form. It is perhaps in this sense that the Bible distinguishes – in a passage that is in fact not very clear – between the "hidden things" (*nistaroth*) that are God's, and the "revealed things" (*nigloth)* that are given to Israel in order that the Hebrews practice them (*Deuteronomy*

29:28). John, however, goes farther. He states quite clearly that God gave us, purely and simply, All, with a capital A (*dandonos al Todo*). God saved nothing for Himself, he gave all that he had. God is poor, he has nothing left.

God has therefore nothing more to say, since he has said it all. How is that possible? The answer given by Saint John of the Cross is not totally unique. There are other places where we can find the idea that God has spoken so definitively and completely that he has virtually become a prisoner of his own words. God, as they say, "delivered" himself. I have in mind, for example, a well known passage in the Talmud where an assembly of wise men make a decision based on the opinion of the majority in spite of the fact that one of their opponents has produced undeniable miracles in support of his position. Particular mention is made of the fact that no voice coming from heaven, and therefore no intervention by God, can have any bearing on the opinion of the wisemen. This is because the Law is no longer in heaven (according to *Deuteronomy*, 30:12). The law has instead descended definitively to earth, where it has been turned over to the discussions and decisions of the wisemen.[22] This text has already been quoted by Gershom Scholem.[23]

5. The Discourse of the Silent God

The originality of John's answer, of the Christian answer, is that what is given is not a law but a person, and that moreover this person is God. It is in fact *through Christ* that God has said it all, and therefore he has nothing more to say. John's answer says nothing about Christianity itself; for example, he does not try to prove that it is the definitive religion. He speaks of something altogether different, that is, the *object* of Christian faith. And it is in this that we see that he is a Christian. We can tell a non-Christian by the kind of interest he has in Christianity – he wants to refute it, or recount its history, sometimes ultimately in order to demonstrate its civilizing influence. The Christian, on the other hand, is interested in Christ; just as the Jew is not interested in Judaism but the Mosaic Law.

§ 5. This is why to ask something of God now, to desire a vision or revelation, would not only be foolish but an insult, an offense, to God. All atten-

> tion should now be focused on Christ, without wanting or desiring anything else.

If God, against all possibility, were to speak again, he would do so only in order to repeat himself. And this is precisely what Saint John of the Cross has him do. Using a well known figure of speech, prosopopoeia (personification), he has God himself speak: "God could answer him in the following manner, saying ... "(§ 5, p. 201 /209). Moreover, in this case it is not the Trinity but God the Father who speaks. This is a rather unusual and audacious strategy; in the plastic arts for example, the Father is rarely depicted apart from the Son, as if the one were not fully visible without the other, the form in which the Father allowed himself to be viewed fully.

> § 5. 201 -210. If I have told you everything through my Word, who is my Son, what further answer or revelation can I now give that would surpass this? Look only to Him since I revealed and said everything through Him.

What John has God say here only reiterates what John himself has said earlier. The Father's discourse is an illustration and confirmation of a doctrine that has already been set forth. The content of this doctrine is that the discourse that John puts in the mouth of God is impossible. God speaks. And he speaks in order to say that he can not or can no longer speak. The content of the divine word is the impossibility of this word. Here we come close to falling into certain well known logical paradoxes, such as the phrase: "I have nothing to say for now." In any event, the Father's discourse does contain several new elements, which will allow us to gain a more precise picture of the teaching of Saint John of the Cross.

6. Who Wants the Most Wants the Least

In the first paragraph of God's discourse John offers a learned counterpoint on the word and idea of "more" (*mas*):

> just look at it [...] and you will find more than you asked for and more than you could ever wish. (201 / 210)

This kind of reversal will be present throughout the prosopopoeia of the Father. According to John, God can say no *more* than he has already said, he has nothing *more* to give:

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> § 3. God said and revealed to us everything once and for all in a single Word, he has nothing more to say. (201 / 209) § 5. With what can I now answer you or reveal to you which would be more than that? (201 / 209) § 7. God has no more faith to reveal and will never have any more.

But in what he has already given, that is to say in Christ, one can find more than one could ask for or desire:

> § 5. There is nothing more for you to ask of me, no revelations or visions to desire from me. Look carefully at him and you will find everything there, already made and given, and more. (202 / 210) § 6. If you want me to tell you about hidden things or events, just look at him and you will find there many secret truths and the wisdom and marvels of God that are enclosed in him [...] The gifts of wisdom will be for you far more sublime, agreeable, and useful than what you want to know. [...] And if you still want other visions, and divine or corporeal revelations, look at them humanized, and you will find more there than you think, because the Apostle said that *all the plenitude of the divine resides corporeally in Christ*. (202 / 210)

At the risk of overstatement we might summarize John's words in the following way: there is *more* in what is already given than in what could be added to it. To add something to what is there would in fact be to take something away. This kind of thinking can be found in the works of other authors as well. In Plotinus, for example, who asserts that the measure of perfection is in its degree of simplicity; to add to one of these levels would in fact be to subtract from it, as if one were adding ballast that might cause the entire structure to list.[24] We might therefore now risk an initial response to the paradox, mentioned above, concerning the kind of grace which, rather than adding, subtracts. In order to do so we will make use of a lesson learned in aesthetic experience, employing an idea of "grace" that is certainly more than a pun: the graceful is that which would be disturbed even by a minimal addition.

There is therefore more in what is given than in what is desired. Desire (*eros*) is customarily thought of – at least since the time of Plato – as that which transcends what is already there, as an eternal dissatisfaction with what is perhaps too hastily called "the given."[25] Here, on the contrary, when talking about a true gift, desire is immediately transcended. It is incapable of attaining the level of that which is offered to it. Desire leaves something to be desired. We are now in a position to clarify certain evangelical paradoxes, such as Matthew's "he who asks receives, he who seeks finds" (Matthew 7:8). Clearly this does not mean, as some have

been tempted to interpret it, something like, "he who searches arduously will find, *labor omnia vincit improbus*." Instead the text needs to be taken literally, with all the power inherent in the present tense of the verb: not "he who searches *will* find," but "finds." If the object of desire is already there, one need only to search in order to have already found it, or rather to realize that one has always been inside it.

Inversely, to ask for more faith, to act as if the faith given to us were insufficient, is already to show oneself lacking in faith:

> § 5. But to ask me now in the same way, to want me to answer or reveal something to them, would be in some sense to ask me for Christ once more, as if there were a lack of faith (*ser falto en ella*), which was already given in Christ: and, this would be a terrible insult to my Son; because [...] they would be lacking in faith (*le faltaria en la fea*). (201 / 210)

7. The Irreversible

And now the error is compounded:

> § 5 ... . and thus, this would be a great insult to my beloved Son; because not only would faith have failed him, but he would be obliged to become incarnate and undergo His life and death again. (201 / 210)

What John is conceiving of here is a kind of eternal recurrence. The example that the Stoics sometimes gave was the trial and death of Socrates, who would again be accused by Antyos and who would again drink the hemlock.[26] What seems to be going on here is that John is extending the parallel between Socrates and Jesus in order to apply the idea of eternal recurrence to Jesus. However, he applies the idea only in order to reject it implicitly: to state it is enough to demonstrate its absurdity. It could be pointed out here that there is a far deeper agreement on this point between Saint John of the Cross and Nietzsche than might have been expected, especially if we assume that the "eternal recurrence of the identical" (*ewige Wiederkehr des Gleichen*) obliges us to accept the absolute irreversibility of life: the fact that each instant, coinciding in every way with an infinity of instants, – and for this reason we can not even speak of an infinity of "other" instants – has an infinite weight, etc.

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Saint John of the Cross engages in a brutal reduction here, the purpose of which is to expose the logic underlying the attitude he is seeking to criticize. To ask for a special revelation from God is tantamount to asking God to submit his Son to another incarnation and another passion. To ask for more from God would be tantamount to asking him to give what he has already given. To ask for something else would be to ask for the same, once again. This is an inevitable consequence of God's having nothing more to give, since he already gave it once and for all. There is no exit from what is all. To want to escape from it leads right back into it. To add to totality is to repeat it. And God is incapable of giving anything less than all. To ask anything of him is equivalent to asking for that thing, or rather for Him, the one in whom all was given. All possible gifts, according to John, lead back to Christ. If "all of God's treasures" are included in Jesus, as is written in the quote John uses (*Colossians* 2:3), then by necessity all that God has to give must be found in Christ.

What is given, however, is a totality. It is like an organism in which the part cannot exist without the whole, not a collection of parts independent one from another. God's gift is concentrated, unified, and singularized in the unsubstitutable individuality that is each human life and death. This life and death is characterized by an irreversible unfolding. This is perhaps what John means when he uses the expression "passing through life" (*pasar por la vida*). (§ 5, p. 202 / 210). It is this "passage" that makes human life something different from merely "being alive," raising it to the status of *bios*, which is composed of a story – the contents of a biography.

The process by which God's gift is singularized, that is to say its concentration in an individual human life, helps us to avoid a problem that would otherwise have arisen: the very practical problem posed by the end of communication, the one resolved in radiophonic dialogues among aviators by the word "over," which signals the end of discourse. How do we know whether God has said it all? If God must say that he has finished speaking, he must speak in order to say it, and on and on *ad infinitum*. Logically speaking, can the definitive character of the Revelation be part of the revealed message? Can a revealed message say: "the present message is the final one"? However, if the information revealed is

a person, the problem no longer exists. There is no need whatsoever for anything inside the message to indicate that it is the last and nothing will follow it: the end of the message coincides with the death of the speaker.

John of the Cross draws a conclusion here that was already implicit in the way the New Testament dealt with a question vital to any historical religion; that is, its definitive nature. We have seen above how Islam, for example, had its Prophet say that no one would come after him. For Islam as, *mutatis mutandis*, for Judaism, the divine Law must be protected from abrogation or supposed "correction" by addition or subtraction. At the same time its adherents must be permitted to challenge false prophets. The New Testament attributes to Jesus several warnings about false prophets. In them he says that the ones who must be distrusted will say nothing other than "I am Christ" (*Matthew*, 24:5). They will not claim to add to or replace Christ: they will claim to be Christ, returned. There is no one left to come. Christianity cannot conceive of anyone returning except Christ. History is closed, or curved: the only thing left to happen is the return of He who has already come, once and for all. The one who must come has already come. This is because, according to Christianity, Christ is the only one to have come: only he truly came from elsewhere. No others, real or possible, past or future, could, strictly speaking, *come*. At the very most they could have arisen out of what was already there. As a matter of principal they are already here.

8. The Incarnate Word

Because John of the Cross assumes that his reader is acquainted with certain central points of Christian dogma, he feels no need to develop them explicitly. However, since in § 5 he presents this dogma in a fully- developed form, we must now present it. In § 3 (p. 201) John mentions "his [God's] Son, who is his own word – and he has no other." Later, it is the Father who mentions "my word, who is my Son" (§ 4, p. 201). The identification of Jesus Christ with the Word of God and thus to the eternal Son, the second person of the Trinity, is clearly crucial to Christianity. It is the

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theological expression of certain declarations in the New Testament, especially the prologue of *The Gospel According to John*, where it is a matter of "the Word become flesh." This Word is not any word, even a divine one. Rather it is, as the obvious parallel to the beginning of Genesis shows ("In the beginning ..."), the word with which God created everything, and which itself cannot therefore be a creature.

This assimilation of word to flesh has a vital consequence for the status of Jesus. At times John of the Cross speaks of what Jesus taught, thus of what he said (cf. § 7, p. 202 / 211). But this is only a provisional formulation, which does not get to the heart of the matter. For John, Christ is not he who speaks, but he who is spoken. He is not someone who bears a message, a kind of prophet. He is the message itself. He *is* everything that God has said and has to say. There is no distance between message and messenger: there is absolute identity. What is said is not merely a collection of words; it is a life and a personality that clarify each other: a life that reveals the personality's initial choice and manifests it; a personality providing the hermeneutic key allowing us correctly to grasp the meaning of its acts and even of its words. The word is no longer something purely verbal: it is simultaneously act and word. And even what Christ says must be taken more as an act than as a description of what is, less a collection of teachings than a clarification of acts or the totality of an attitude and a life. Each word of Christ should be a way of saying *who* he is, should lead to the "I am" so often attributed to him in *The Gospel According to John* and which is a conscious echo of the divine name made manifest in *Exodus* (3:14).

The words of Christ are often referred to: the Gospels, of course, are full of them, and the collections of *logia agrapha* overflow with them. However, in the excerpt we're concerned with, Saint John of the Cross chooses to quote only one verb phrase:

> § 7. Because when Christ said these words from the +: *Consummatum est*, as he died, not only did the old ways end, but also all the rituals and customs of the old law. (202 / 211)

In choosing to quote these words Juan de Yepes so to speak countersigned them with the name he chose upon entering the religious life. *Consummatum est* is a quote taken from the author of

the fourth Gospel, who is himself known by the name John. In the Apostle John's account these are the last words of Jesus and therefore spoken from the cross. Juan de Yepes does not write the word "cross" but instead draws a small cross, the cross whose name he made part of his own. This unintelligible signature, the signature of the illiterate, is not here merely a sign of humility. Rather it is perfectly suited to the source toward which it points, the "word of the cross" (cf. 1 *Corinthians*, 1:18). This word is: "*Consummatum est*" (*tetelestai*) (John 19:30). Strange words: not even a full sentence but an isolated verb, its person undetermined, a declaration without content. It is, in all likelihood, the Johanic interpretation of the account in the synoptic Gospels.

According to these Gospels, Christ's last word from the cross was nothing more than a "loud cry" or "shout" (*phone megale*), inarticulate in any case, followed by a last breath or death itself (*Matthew* 27:50, *Mark*, 15:37). The last word of the Word is without meaning. This word is nothing more than a voice, mere sound produced by the respiratory organs of an animal[27] at the moment that the lungs are emptied. The sound is produced by flesh, it is nothing more than flesh rubbing against itself. There is nothing in it that transcends the flesh, nothing that rises toward the spiritual dimension of man. Rather it is the irrevocable and final disappearance of that dimension. It is the sign of the abolition of the distance that permits signification. The Word and the flesh are now one. In the most simple, least "theological" sense, the word has become flesh.

The last word of the Word is that of a powerless Word, reduced to silence. The power of speech is now expressed in the silence of the Word, stripped of all power. And now everything is reversed: what would have been considered a defeat for a speaker who had been forced into silence is no longer a defeat, since the speaker identifies himself with what he has to say, since he *is* the word that someone other than he pronounces. It is not the word that speaks, it is the speaking subject, the speaker. The word is not that which speaks, but which is spoken, uttered. If man therefore is the Word, then he should be silent. More precisely, that which in him would be the most "revelatory" or, as is also said, the most "expressive," would not be in what he says but in what he *does*.

It is therefore senseless to bemoan the silence of the divine. This silence is the inevitable consequence of a word offered without reserve. The Christ on the Mount of Olives in Vigny's above-mentioned poem expects no answer. He *is* God's answer. Similarly – although in another, thoroughly "pagan" context – the main character in one of C.S. Lewis's most interesting novels comes to realize: "*I know now, Lord, why you utter no answer: you yourself are the answer.*"[28] God's silence provokes anger and complaint against Him: He is indicted. Yet all that can be desired now is to inflict upon him a punishment that has already been fully satisfied before:

> ... if our God were the God of the pagans or the philosophers (to me, they are one and the same), he could very well take refuge in the highest heaven; our misery would drive him there. But our God, you know, has come directly down to us. You can shake your fist at him, spit in his face, cane and beat him before hammering him to a cross. What does it matter? *It has already been done before* ... [29]

9. The Trinity

The identification of the Word with the Son, in the way it is presented by Saint John of the Cross, obviously presupposes the doctrine of the Trinity. It is in § 5 that the names of the three persons – God, Son, and Holy Spirit – are brought together.

> § 5. Because ever since I descended onto him with my Spirit on Mount Tabor, and said, *This is my Son, my Beloved, on whom my favor rests; listen to him*, I ceased giving these kinds of answers and instructions and conferred it all on him. (201 / 210)

The Gospel passage that is quoted concerns the Transfiguration (*Matthew* 17:5). However, John adds several things that are not included in this passage ("I descended with my Spirit onto him"), which suggests an overlay of another biblical reading, that of Jesus's baptism (*Matthew* 3:16). This passage has often been interpreted – in art as much as in exegesis – as constituting the presentation of the three persons of the Trinity.

John does not in any way elaborate upon the theology of the Trinity. Rather he assumes a knowledge of the truth (of faith) that this doctrine serves to explain. For the Father, the act of giving All,

giving his Word, his Son, means nothing less than giving himself while remaining an external witness to this gift. It is because this situation is so clear to Saint John of the Cross that he can allow himself a somewhat approximate description of the situation; and it comes in the midst of a passage that, as we have seen, presents an extremely complex state of affairs. Here it is that John has God say "I have abandoned" – literally "I have raised my hands" (*alce yo la mano*) – "all these ways of answering and teaching" (§ 5, p. 201 / 210). This phrase leaves the impression – if I can permit myself a bit of disrespect – that God the Father has so to speak "thrown in the towel, "retired" in favor of his son who will now fill his shoes – a caricature that many have gladly accepted ...

However, if there is anything that the doctrine of the Trinity makes impossible, it is precisely this way of viewing the matter. To begin with, the doctrine in question is not simply a more or less arbitrary theory designed to account for the number of hypostases of which the divine substance is composed. It is above all a tool to help us conceptualize God's personal involvement in the history of salvation, God's adventure with humanity. This involvement can be summarized thus: God does not subcontract. The doctrine of the trinity attempts to express both the identity and difference between God and his incarnation, between the Father and the Son. If God has entered human history, then 1.) in a certain sense the Father and Son must be identical. Otherwise, the history of salvation would not involve God personally. Like the Homeric Gods who watch men battle, he would so to speak remain on the sidelines, making note of what is happening although involved only through an intermediary: the destiny of the incarnated Son would not be his own. In particular, the sending of his Son to suffer the Passion would be a way of seeking shelter for himself. On the other hand, 2.) it is also necessary that the Father and Son not be purely and simply identical. Otherwise, once again, it would not be God who has been incarnated. By becoming man he would have ceased to be God. Or rather, he would not have become man but would have been so eternally, by his nature, rather than having entered the human sphere by his free choice, with all that this entry implies. Without this act the story of Christ would not have had its special significance.

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Saint John of the Cross gives limited treatment to the third person of the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. He acknowledges for it the particular place that is objectively its own: the Spirit given after Christ adds nothing to what has been given once and for all. It is not a new object to be revealed, as if the Revelation had not been completed with the mission of the Son. On the contrary, the role of the Spirit is to remind us that everything has been given (cf. *John* 14:26). The Spirit is not so much that which gives but that which is given. It is not a revealed object but a revealing subject. The economies of the Word and Spirit are not separate.

10. What to do when Everything has been said?

Let us suppose that everything has been said. What to do? It should first be pointed out that this is not a totally idle question. The saying, "Everything has been said, since there have been men who think" (La Bruyère) is a classic. And, spicing up an old Hegelian dish with a bit of Strauss's sauce, we have recently been hearing about the "end of history." But the fact that everything has been said need not reduce us to silence. We might even say: on the contrary. Aristotle, writing in the context of a cyclical idea of the progress of knowledge, writes that "almost everything has been discovered."[30] What remains to be done is to gather and use this knowledge correctly. Later, al-Farabi dispassionately observed that since the time of Aristotle philosophy has had nothing more for which to search, since Aristotle had brought it to a close.[31] What remains is to teach it, like any fully-formed science. Thus, even if *everything* has been said, there remains a thousand things to do: for example, one can reproduce the stages that led to the definitive word; one can deconstruct it, with or without the hope of reaching an original anterior to the deconstructed discourse (the presence or absence of this hope corresponding to the differing versions of deconstruction presented by Heidegger and Derrida); one could seek another mode of expression altogether, closer to silence; and finally, one could answer in full knowledge of one's limitations.

Generally speaking, when in a situation where everything has been said, we seek nothing more than something to do: but what to

do when it is God who has said everything he had to say, that is – depending on the case – , he has said all that is (the Creation) or all that He is? When it is asserted that a definitive revelation has taken place, several possible responses can be made. For example, in the Jewish tradition it is affirmed that the Mosaic law is perfect. But Judaism takes this perfection to mean that it also encompasses, in advance, all the new interpretations that the wisemen of future generations are destined to propose. Moreover, it also means that all the innovations of the scribes were revealed at Mount Sinai.[32] This perfection may also assume that prophecy, which is no longer the property of the prophets, has been transferred to the wisemen.[33] Indeed the *halakhah* – which means something akin to the "course to follow" – was so completely given over to the wisemen that by their agreement they could correct the written Revelation, even when some of these doctrines bordered on idolatry.[34]

Islam too seems to have felt a pang when faced with the idea that revelation had come to an end.[35] Various responses have been proposed. In some texts the Prophet is quoted as saying that prophecy has indeed come to an end, but that there remains the realm of "pronouncements" (*mubashshirat*), an ambiguous word that the Prophet immediately explains as meaning the dream (premonitory?) of Muslims, which he says is part of prophecy. Other answers, which do not disclaim the first, assert that following the prophetic cycle comes the saintly cycle. For its part, Shi'ite Islam has a tendency to see a continuation of prophecy in the tradition of the imams, the descendants of Ali, of Mohammed's light. Out of this grows the polemic between Shi'ites and the majority Sunnis, who accuse the Shi'ites of diluting the exclusivity of prophecy, although the Shi'ites deny it.

As for Christianity, I propose here to summarize its response – with all the risks inherent in such an enterprise – in the following two points:[36]

a) All has been given but not everything has been revealed. Gift and its acknowledgment are two distinct moments. We must reject the pun on *geoffenbart* (revealed) and *offenbar* (manifest) that the German idealists relied on. Hegel employs it massively:

> revealed (*geoffenbarte*) religion is manifest religion manifested (*offenbare*), because in it God is totally manifest (*offenbar*). […] God has no more secrets (*Es ist nichts geheimes mehr an Gott*).[37]

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I would answer: God gives himself completely. But if he gives himself completely, he gives himself as he is and thus mysteriously. God "disclosed to you everything," (cf. *John*, 15:15), he has kept nothing for himself to refuse us. But he *is* mysterious to the extent that he is a person. It could even be that gift and mystery, far from excluding each other, grow together. As the Pseudo-Dionysius wrote:

> He is mysterious even after his manifestation or, to use a more divine expression, he is mysterious in his manifestation. This aspect of Jesus is hidden, the mystery that is part of him is not exhausted by any discourse or analysis. On the contrary, speaking it remains unspoken, analyzed it remains unknown.[38]

Pascal writes in a similar vein:

> God remained hidden behind the veil of nature, concealed from us until the Incarnation, when it was necessary for him to appear. He became even more hidden when he took on human form. He was more recognizable when he was invisible, not when he became visible.[39]

The paradox is clear: the withdrawal of the sacred is not a result of God's refusing to appear by remaining firm in his transcendence, as the negative theologies sketched by the neo-Platonic philosophies conceive it. On the contrary, it is a result of his being fully given: it is in showing himself that God is hidden, *phainomenos kryptetai*.

b.) After the Son comes the Holy Spirit. This Spirit, as have seen (§ 9), adds nothing to what, or rather through Whom, [it] has been said. It says nothing more than what the Son says – not only in its "message" but in being itself. But it is the Holy Spirit who makes us speak, wakens the answering word in us. This is the idea that *The Letter to the Romans* (8:26) expresses: "The Holy Spirit comes to our aid." This spirit should limit itself to "inarticulate groans" or the child's word *Abba* (papa), the root of human language.[40] All the rest is the discourse that we humans must compose through our lives. He who says it all, who has shown all his cards, gives full freedom to those who face him. In *Genesis* it is explained how God, after having created and named the principal elements of the world, lets Adam name the animals (*Genesis* 2:19). Similarly, having said through Christ all that he is, God hands the word over to Christianity. In a certain sense God at bottom has not said much.

Indeed perhaps he has said only one thing. But it is something that he alone had the power to say: his name, which is "love," *agapè*. Man has to say the rest. And salvation consists in the fact that he can.

Notes

1. Janicaud, D. *La Puissance du rationnel*, Paris, 1985.
2. Cf. the recent synthesis of C. Marramao, in the article, "Säkularisation." *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, vol. 8, 1992, col. 1133–1161.
3. *Gottesfinsternis* (1952), in *Werke*, Munich-Heidelberg, 1963, vol. 1, pp. 505–603.
4. Heidegger, M. "Die Zeit des Weltbildes," in *Holzwege*, Frankfurt, 1950, p. 70.
5. San Juan de La Cruz. *Obras Completas*, (ed) Licinio Ruano de la Iglesia, 12th edition, Madrid, 1989.
6. H.U. von Balthasar, *La gloire et la croix*. Les aspects esthétiques de la Révélation. II. Styles. *de Jean de la Croix à Péguy*, Paris, 1972, p. 60.
7. I was unable to locate very much secondary literature to help me in an area that I am just beginning to explore. G. Morel, *Le sens de l'existence selon Saint Jean de la Croix*, Paris, 1965, vol. 2, p. 186 passes over it very rapidly. Some very accurate observations are made in J. Baruzi, *Saint Jean de la Croix et le problème de l'expérience mystique*, Paris, 1924, p. 526.
8. Cf. Z. Werblowski, "On the mystical rejection of mystical illuminations. A note on the non-cognitive mysticism of St John of the Cross," *Iyyun* 14 (1963), 205–212.
9. Cf. Jehuda Halevi, *Kuzari*, 1, p. 86
10. E. Auerbach, "*Sacrae scripturae sermo humilis*" in *Gesammelte Aufsätze zur romanischen Philologie*. Berne Munich, 1967, pp. 21–26.
11. *Le Désenchantment du monde. Une histoire politique de la religion*, Paris, 1985.
12. *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, in *Sämtliche Werke*, Jubiläumsausgabe. H. Glockner (ed.) Stuttgart, 1928, vol. 15, p. 99.
13. On this expression, cf. C. Colpe, *Das Siegel der Propheten: historische Bexiehungen zwischen Judentum, Judenchristentum, Heidentum und frühem Islam*, Berlin, 1990. Also, G. Stroumsa. "Le sceau des prophètes: la nature d'une metaphore manichéenne," in *Savoir et salut*, Paris, 1992, pp. 275–288.
14. Cf. al-Biruni, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, trans. and edited by C. Edward Sachau, Frankfurt, 1969, p. 190.
15. Cf. Y. Friedmann, "Finality of Prophethood in Sunni Islam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 7 (1986), 177–215.
16. References in A.J. Wensinck, et. al. *Concordance et indices de la tradition musulmane*. Leyden, vol. VI (1967), pp. 88b–89a, and notably Muslim. Livre 43 (fada'il, Bab 7. §§ 20–23) Cairo, 1955, p. 1790.
17. Cf. W.Z. Harvey, "Torah [Eternity (or Non-Abrogability)]," in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, col. 1244–1246.
18. *Guide des égarés*, II, 29, Paris, 1960, p. 230.
19. *Ibid.*, 39, p. 303.

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20. *Pensées*, Br. 799.
21. *Les Destinées*, 1862 edition.
22. Talmud de Babylone, treatise of *bBaba Metsiah*, 59 b.
23. *Über einige Grundbegriffe des Judentums*. Frankfurt, 1970. p. 104.
24. *Énnéades*. III, 8 [30], 11, 13; V, 5 [32], 13, 10; VI, 7 [38], 41, 16.
25. *Banquet*, 200 e.
26. Origéne, *Contre Celeste*, IV, § 67.
27. Aristote, *Histoire des animaux*, IV, 9: 535 b 4.
28. C.S. Lewis, *Till we have faces. A myth retold*, Grand Rapids, 1966, p. 308.
29. Bernanos, *Journal d'un curé de campagne*, Paris, p. 1162.
30. *Politique*, II, 5, 1264a 3.
31. *Kitab al-Huruf*, II, § 143,Beirut, 1962, pp. 151ff.
32. Talmud de Babylone, treatise *Megillah*, II, 13, p. 19 b.
33. *Ibid.* treatise *Baba Bathra*, I, 6, p. 12 b.
34. Cf. the texts quoted in J. Leibowitz, *Israel et judaisme. Ma part de verité*, Paris, 1993, and his commentary: "The law says that what the human intellect decides about the law is the divine law itself." (p. 100); and especially: "The spoken law is, on the one hand, a human fabrication; on the other hand we receive it as if it were divine law – this very law that we ourselves have constructed." (p. 99). Compare this with *Isaiah* 2:8.
35. Cf. Friedmann (*op. cit.* n. 15), pp. 199–205.
36. The ideas presented here have already been developed in my *Europe, la voie romaine*, Paris, 1993 (2nd ed.).
37. *Philosophie der Religion*, p. 100. The same game is played by Schelling in *Philosophie der Offenbarung*, lesson XXIV, p. 11 and XXV, p. 31.
38. Ps.-Denys L'Aréopagite, *Lettre 3*, PG 3. 1069A. And also cf. Maxime le Confesseur *ad. loc. Ambigua*, PG 91, 1048 d – 1049 b.
39. Pascal, *4e Lettre à Mademoisell de Roannez*, (ca. 29 Oct. 1656) in *Oeuvres Complètes*, J. Mesnard, (ed.), vol. III, Paris, 1991, p. 1035.
40. Cf. Roman Jakobson, "Why 'Mama' and 'Papa'", *Selected Writings*, I, Phonological Studies, Paris, 1971, pp. 538–543.