

THE CHRISTIAN AWARENESS OF DEATH IN THE SECULARIZED SOCIETY

Abstract. This paper discusses the awareness of death in contemporary society, dominated by secularism, and in the Christian message. Despite the great cultural changes throughout the history of the West, which led to the so-called „forbidden death” in our society, the awareness of death in a secular viewpoint keeps its main features since the birth of Christianity until today. But the understanding of the Christian message about death, in different cultural contexts, depends on an adequate view of what are the Christian faith and the relationship between faith, reason and human experience.

Olivier Clément, one of the great French thinkers converted to the Catholicism in the twentieth century, says that in the family of his paternal grandparents, socialists and atheists, the moribund were taken to die at home and were accompanied in a vigil *almost unbearable before the nothingness*¹. This funeral rite apparently meaningless, without the consolation of hope for eternal life, according Clément, kept the conviction that the dead was a single individual, that his life had been unique.

In the same work, Clément also noted that, as a child he asked his father – an atheist teacher – why does one live and die. To which his father replied: *When one dies, it is nothingness. But even so we must try to be good and righteous*².

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¹ O. Clément, *L'autre soleil*. Paris: Editions Stock, 1975. Italian translation *L'altro sole* (Milan: Jaca Book, 1977), p. 71.

² O. Clément, *Op. cit.*, p. 31,

Death is a great mirror of life. Before it, we intuit the grandeur and misery of our being, the power and the futility of our ethical claims. But in the same way, life is a great mirror of death. Looking at our lives, we intuit – rightly or not – what shall be our own death. From the death we understand better the meaning of life, but it is from life experience that we are driven toward the challenge of understanding death.

From the Enlightenment on, in Western society, religious and secularized worldviews³ struggle, trying to explain the meaning and proper place of death in the life of each human being. At stake in this confrontation are the human heart and the deepest foundations of all mechanisms of legitimacy in our society.

Time of *fanum*

The time of death cannot be avoided. It accompanies every living thing, lurking in the shadows of each affection, of each bond with reality. The more we try to reduce it or get away from it, the more it returns and grows, transmuted in a time of nothingness, of emptiness and meaninglessness.

It is not wise to get obsessed by the idea of death, leaving life to be consumed in fear of the ultimate end. One cannot fail to live the present, with its beauty and wealth, misery and pain, on the basis of the expectation of an uncertain future. However the meaning, the goal, is an inherent part of present. I cannot have a proper relationship with my son today if I do not recognize that he is endowed with a future, a „becoming”. But this evident fact about the youngster is valid for all. The tomorrow of everything begins to present itself today. Therefore, the reflection that aims to find the rightful place of death in the whole of reality is indispensable, and voluntaristic efforts to cancel the future due to the present is vain – even if done with all knowledge and all the philosophical acumen⁴.

³ By secularism we mean here a vision „according to which the latter is self-explanatory, without any need for recourse to God, who thus becomes superfluous and an encumbrance” (cf. PAUL VI. Exortação Apostólica *Evangelii Nuntiandi* n° 55. Rome, 1975).

⁴ For a review of the various ways in which philosophy approached the theme of death, see CHORON, Jacques. *Death and Western Thought*. New York:

Everything that exists is destined to end. To prevent confronting this painful reality, we have – somehow – to forget the very nature of things. The alternative to living with the acceptance of the presence of death is the mutilation of reality, its transformation into an illusion that leads, ultimately, not to a brimful life, but to nothingness, like the adults around the small Olivier Clément claimed.

Our social life takes place in profane time, but the time of death is the time of *fanum*, manifestation of the mystery. Societies can create or censor the rituals and artistic expressions that bind it to the mystery present in reality. The hierophanies – as cultural phenomena – can be controlled by the power and the will. But the hierophany that happens in the time of death cannot be avoided, but only hidden or „forgotten” – to return mighty and merciless as time of nothingness, of emptiness and meaninglessness, that spreads everywhere, as a liquid oozing from a broken bottle.

For a moment, which can be a fleeting moment amid the inevitable tribulations surrounding the death of an acquaintance, or the long time of mourning following that loss considered irreparable, death opens our eyes to the mystery of life. The temple veil is torn and the mourner, even apparently among others, still apparently walking in the banality of the world, moves to the *fanum*, to the sacred space where the all the reality shows as it is.

But this show does not happen as revelation, but as mystery – with all the semantic wealth of the term. Originally, the word mystery was referred to Greek religious rituals. In Christianity the word is used to indicate the proper action of God in history through his Christ⁵. In our everyday language, the word is synonym of enigma, secret, does not refer to something revealed and manifest but to something hidden, asking to be discovered. What to the religious is the revelation of truth, the ultimate manifestation of the Godhead, for the secularized mentality is exactly the most enigmatic moment, the moment of doubt and confusion.

Collier-MacMillan Books, 1973. The text, though limited and simplistic in his analysis of Christian thought, brings a broad panel of the theme.

⁵ Cf. Casel, Odo. *Das Christiche Kulmysterium*. Regensburg: Friedrich Pustet, 1935. Brazilian translation *O mistério do culto no cristianismo* (São Paulo: Edições Loyola, 2009).

Death and Christianity in the history of the West

JRR Tolkien, in *The Silmarillion*⁶, presents death as the gift which God [Eru-Ilúvatar] has given to human beings. A greater gift even than immortality, since in death the creature may have eternal life in the company of the Creator. But it is an enigmatic gift since the creature cannot assimilate, in its earthly condition, the whole mystery of God. In the beginning of times, in the unavoidable uncertainty brought by this gift, the Tempter [Melkor] would have acted making the frightened human beings take the gift as a curse.

The aversion of death is an instinctive phenomenon, common to all animal species. A species in which individuals do not seek to avoid their own death is doomed to rapid extinction. Fear of death is – objectively – a behavior necessary to the perpetuation of the species, something that we carry from our animal being. However, the fear of death was perceived in different ways in different historical moments, as noted, for example, by Philippe Ariès⁷.

Luc Ferry, in *The Temptation of Christianity*, seeks to compare the Christian response and the Greek thought response to the drama of death⁸. Two answers seem to him very trivial or very inadequate and are soon discarded: immortality through offspring (which do not respond because we are not our children and because by this way we begin to be afraid not only of our death, but also of the death of our children) and immortality through glory and heroism, that will make us remembered in history – rejected, ultimately, with the caveat of Ecclesiastes (1, 1-2): *vanitasvanitatum*.

The third path, on which Ferry will look more carefully, is the philosophy⁹. For him, the major response of the Greek philosophers

⁶ Tolkien John R. R. *The Silmarillion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2001. Brazilian translation *O Silmarillion*. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 1999, p. 36.

⁷ All citations of the work of Ariès presented here are based on *Essais sur l'histoire de la mort en Occident* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1975, Brazilian translation *História da morte no Ocidente*, Rio de Janeiro: Ediouro, 2003).

⁸ Ferry, Luc & Jerphagnon, Lucien. *La tentation du Christianisme*. Paris: Grasset&Fasquelle, 2009. Brazilian translation *A tentação do cristianismo: da seita à civilização* (Rio de Janeiro: Objetiva, 2011).

⁹ The synthesis of Ferry, in this work, which was a lecture, may seem very faulty for the connoisseur of Greek thought. To try to summarize in a few words, such rich and so different authors as the Greek philosophers is a truly impossible

would be find harmony between the human being and the cosmic order, the understanding of our place in the universe. Finding her place in the cosmos, even in this lifetime, would prepare a person for her death. To Ferry, this position is associated with another which is to fully enjoy the present, getting rid of nostalgia and guilt of the past and of the uncertainties of the future¹⁰.

To Christianity, says Ferry, eternal life, in short, is a gift given to us by God in his love for the human being, through Christ. It is not a matter of looking to the future and live only the present or to live eternity as an anonymous part of the covenant of creation, but to live eternally immersed in an infinite love, maintaining the individuality that we have today. This alternative, the author concludes, is a great promise, a tempting answer – which may explain part of the transformation of Christianity in the great religion of the West.

However, two objections can be made to the reflection of Ferry. The first is that while recognizing the beauty and attraction of this proposal, he describes himself as a non-believer. The proposal is fully valid only for „those who have faith”, and the path to this faith remains unbeaten, even if exposed lucidly. The second objection has a historical character.

The references that have survived from the first millennium of Christianity, correspond to the picture drawn by Ferry. According to Philippe Ariès, in this period people die, apparently, in the certainty of a final redemption, which will be guaranteed by the participation in the Church, by the proximity – even if unmerited – to the communion of the saints. Death is seen as an inevitable and daily event, which accompanies people’s lives from childhood on and should be accepted with ease. Death is „tamed”. It is familiar to humans beings – even if not desired or requested¹¹.

task. However, his effort will help to highlight some major trends of Western thought about death - and was therefore used here.

¹⁰ Discussing the question of death, Ferry refers particularly to the Stoic philosophy, but also to the Epicureans the problem of death can be solved if we recognize that the fear of the death is not a sufficient reason to not live the present.

¹¹ Ariès refers to a collectivity awareness of death, a social construction of an idea, and not to the physical death of individuals. In the historical context of this „tamed death” life span was shorter, violent deaths or epidemic diseases were much more frequent than today. In effect, during the time of the awareness

But, according to Aries, between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, more and more the certainty of redemption and eternal life with God is replaced by the uncertainty in front of the Day of Judgment and doubt on the individual merits at the time of the trial of one's soul. The possibility of eternal damnation and fear, perhaps not of death but of eternal punishment, override the confident assurance and the consolation introduced by the early Christianity. The „tamed death” of the first millennium of Christianity will be replaced by a new view of death, where acceptance is replaced by tension and, later, by the modern angst.

These changes have led authors such as Jacques Choron¹² to talk about a „crisis of the Christian view of death” Paradoxically, this process takes place over one of the richest periods for Christianity: the era of the great cathedrals, of the development of scholastic theology, of great religious movements of renewal¹³. However, during this same period changes seem to happen in European culture making weaken the Christian experience's ability to communicate, to announce that promise that Luc Ferry identifies as its great advantage over Greek thought in the first centuries of Christianity. From the Renaissance on, and throughout modernity, a new paradigm will dominate the view over death.

Why has trust in the salvation brought by Christ lost ground for this fearful uncertainty of God's Judgments? Aries identify this new period of human being's perception of death as the period of „one's own death” The person becomes aware of her personal history and starts to understand death as an individual tragedy, the moment of loss of access to all the things she loved in life and the time of the trial that will grant the delights of salvation or the torments of eternal damnation. We are at the dawn of anthropocentrism. From now on, in the West, the human being recognizes himself more and more as the center and the master of his life and his destiny – and

of the death as „tamed death” was much wild than in later periods. For a critique, in these terms, of the ideas of Ariès, see Boyd, Kenneth. Attitudes to death: Some historical notes. *Journal of medical ethics*, 3: I24-I28;1977.

¹² Choron, Jacques. *Op. cit.*.

¹³ Cf. Daniel-Rops, Henri. *L'Église de la cathédrale et de la croisade*. Paris: Librairie Artheme Fayard , 1952. Brazilian translation *A Igreja das catedrais e das cruzadas* (São Paulo: Quadrante, 1993).

begins to bear the responsibilities and anxieties arising from this autonomy.

The rise of the individual at the center of his personal history happens, however, inside the Christian world and by direct influence of the Christian message. The Christian God is not concerned only with the universal order, and individual destiny is not merely to harmonize with a universal plan. Salvation is for every human being, each one has a proper and personal relationship with God and the plan of divine love comes to each one individually. Therefore, the discovery of *one's own death*, as well as the Renaissance anthropocentrism, is not strange to Christianity. On the contrary, it is closely associated with its Gospel.

Christianity has always proclaimed a salvation which is independent of human merit, because it was given as a grace, through the merits of Christ's sacrifice. But at the same time, has always stressed the importance of human freedom and the fact that adherence to Christ – condition for accessing this free salvation – is documented by a consistent ethical behavior. The surveillance due the timing of judgment is already present, for example, in the parables of the prudent virgins (Mt 25, 1-13) or the servants who await the return of their master (Łk 12, 33-48). Both aspects coexist harmonized in a mature Christian experience. In his analysis, Ariès associates the awareness of „one's own death” to the trial by which all human beings have to go through, also based in the dissemination of representations of the Judgments in the iconography of the time. But the theme of the Last Judgment, in different forms, is present in several non-Christian cultures. This is not a creation of the Renaissance, but a much broader matter, which returns strengthened this time.

The elements that have radically changed the perception of death in Western society have always been and will always be present in Christianity. The problem lies in the ability to develop fully and harmoniously Christian experience in different historical and cultural contexts. The Christian proposal is profoundly natural and corresponding to human desire. In the great expression of Vatican II, reveals to the human being his own face¹⁴, but is not instinctive

¹⁴ Cf. Second Vatican Council. Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, n° 22. Rome, 1965.

or mechanical. At a first glance, it may seem shocking and even unjust for us. We are ready to accept, at any time, the common-sense of the parables that speak of relapses or unfaithful servants (as in Mt 18, 23-35, 24, 45-51, Mk 12, 1-11, Łk 12, 33-48), but not the unmerited forgiveness given to the prodigal son (Łk 15, 11-32). The challenge, therefore, is to try to dive into the structure of the Christian promise, understanding how it presents itself in each historical moment to fully recover its strength and capacity to ensure peace.

The „forbidden death” in the society of scarcity

Advancing a few centuries, let's see how this problem is manifested in the awareness of death in contemporaneous society. In current times, according to Ariès, death tends to be concealed from people's perspective because there is an interdiction for its public recognition. We are in a time of what the author called the „forbidden death”. Ariès believes that in modern society happiness is seen as an obligation which would be hindered by the death and therefore cannot live with it.

In the 1970s, Ernest Becker wrote a paradigmatic book about the awareness of death in this context¹⁵. Starting from Freud's ideas, he argues that humans, being rational and self-aware, understand and cannot endure the idea of their own finiteness. The perception of death, which is essential for the survival of any animal, throws us in terror and anguish. Therefore, throughout our maturity, we create mechanisms of repression with which „deny death”, releasing our energies to invest them in life. Becker links this phenomenon to the heroism, trying to show that the heroic act represents the effort to overcome the awareness of our limitations, making us feel that we have a „primordial value”. This heroism has a broader meaning than the deeds that immortalize the heroes in the history

¹⁵ Becker Ernest. *The denial of death*. New York: Free Press, 1973. The work of Becker is subject to criticism. An author with another theoretical position may, for example, disagree with the Freudian basis of his analysis, or consider that he universalizes a world vision typical of our cultural context. However, one cannot deny that his analysis is emblematic of our times.

books. The subject – as seen by the author – needs to be heroic not to History, but to himself¹⁶.

This „denial of death”, an universal phenomenon, must not be confused with the „forbidden death” seen by Ariès in contemporary society. For Becker, the specific contours of our current drama arise when *in modern times, the heroic seems too big for us, or we too small for it*¹⁷. Instead, the person seeks to accumulate goods, distinguish herself from her neighbors, surrounding herself with symbols of social success. Material wealth and scientific knowledge have become substitutes for heroism and religiosity: *civilized society is a hopeful belief and protest that science, money and goods make count for more than any other animal*¹⁸.

Before we continue, it is necessary to review the role of consumerism in our society. Marshall Sahlins developed in his works¹⁹ the notion that tribal societies – despite the poverty of material goods – can be recognized as societies of „primitive abundance”, which are opposed to ours, where – despite the abundance of material goods – dominates a permanent feeling of lack, of material need, in a „modern scarcity”. The primitive abundance does not refer primarily to a wealth of spiritual goods, but a social and cultural organization that seeks to use what it already has. The society is not organized to have more, but to be satisfied with what it has. On the other hand our society is organized along an upward spiral

¹⁶ The heroism and the denial of death can be considered an universal phenomena, but Becker’s use of the term „heroism” attempting to explain the value of the „self” facing death shows its dependence to the imaginary of Western society, for its mode of recognizing the individuality of the person in front of the cosmos and its awareness of „one’s own death”. Of course, we are not denying the existence of heroes or the cult of heroism in other cultures, but considering that this particular reading of heroism is characteristic of our mentality marked by individualism. Marcel Mauss had already observed that the perception of one’s individuality is universal, but its recognition becomes aware and fully developed in modern Western society (Cf. „Une catégorie de l’esprit humain: la notion de personne, celle de moi”. Brazilian translation in *Sociologia e antropologia*. São Paulo: EDUSP, 1974: 207-242).

¹⁷ Becker Ernest. *Op. cit.*, p. 4.

¹⁸ Becker Ernest. *Op. cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁹ Among others: *Stone Age Economics* (Chicago: Aldine, 1972); *Culture and practical reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976) and „Cosmologies of capitalism: the trans-Pacific sector of the World System” (*Proceedings of the British Academy*, LXXIV: 1-51, 1998).

of production and consumption, so that one never has enough and the necessary to survive properly. We live permanently in shortage, even though surrounded by goods.

Sahlins's interpretation goes beyond consumerism thought of as an individual tendency or amoral deviation. We are facing an way of being inherent to our society, a system of attribution of meaning to every thing in particular and to human life as a whole. Even those who do not surrender to consumerism must always seek personal growth, identified with the search for a „plus” that is still lacking in the present moment.

Returning to Becker, the illusion of death denial by these mechanisms centered on consumerism and the affirmation of their own illusory power, numbs the person, makes her shy and having a life of mediocrity, always fearing a sudden revelation of her finitude. But refuse to accept the repression of the fear of death can lead to an inability to connect with reality and even psychotic episodes. In a psychoanalytic perspective the wisdom of life would be to *know how to use our strength, our power, aware of our capabilities and limitations*²⁰, thus being able to enjoy life. However, Becker believes that there is not the possibility of complete happiness. Death and suffering can never be avoided. In our society, the alternative to becoming overwhelmed by illusion and false hopes placed on science and consumption would be a realistic and stoic acceptance of the human condition, which does not relieve us from suffering, but frees us to live fully

What is the role of religion in this context? The „New Age” are the most recent return of the Eastern matrix religiousness in the West. They resume the idea of a dip of the individual in the Cosmic Whole, which will dissipate the anxieties and tensions of this world – which result of the attachment to our individuality and our possessions²¹. The fear of death would be resolved by the surrender, even in this world, to the cosmic totality. But the radical detachment cannot live together with the radical attachment and craving

²⁰ Cassorla Roosevelt M. S. Reflexões sobre a psicanálise e a morte. [in] Kovács Maria J. *Morte e desenvolvimento humano*. São Paulo: Casa do Psicólogo, 1992: 90-110.

²¹ For a comparison between Eastern and Western religiousness, see Balthasar Hans Urs Von. *Le christianisme et les religions du monde*. *Communio, Revue Catholique Internationale*, XXXII, 5-6, n°193-194.

experienced in our society dominated by „modern scarcity.” In the West, Eastern spiritualities tend to survive only as an oasis, as times and places of exception that bring comfort to souls disturbed by the way of life in contemporaneous society.

After twenty centuries of history, when it comes to death, the alternatives to Christianity have not changed much. The most common proposal is to fully live the present, which in our society leads to the dream of inconspicuous consumption or immoderate and intense emotions. One cannot stop, cannot keep silent, since the suspension of the activity is a dangerous opportunity, a time when past and future can penetrate the delicate tissue of our consciousness damped by pleasure or tension. The actual formula is not „bread and circus”, but „bread, circus and oblivion” The opposition to this mentality is made by a skeptical and stoic wisdom about the human situation – we know that this is the only time we were given, let us live it as fully as possible – or the immersion in a universal order, which may be more religious or more secular.

The Christian message remains unique in its intention to announce an afterlife that maintains the individuality of the person at the same time it sinks it in the infinite love of God. But to understand both its reception and its rejection in our times, we have to go deeper in its structure...

The death according to the awareness of old Simeon

Catholic tradition offers to the Christian every day a moment for him to realize and prepare himself for death. This is the prayer of the Compline, which concludes his day. We are particularly interested in its hymn, the Cantic of Simeon

The old Simeon, says the Gospel, knows that would not die until he contemplated the Messiah. Already old, lived in expectation of a wonderful and improbable event. When finally presented to the little Jesus, he recognizes the fulfillment of the promise. Now he is the one who saw the realization of the promise that God made not only for all humanity, but in a special way, to him, Simeon. Aware of this fact, declares being ready to die: *Now, Master, you are letting your servant go in peace as you promised; for my eyes have seen the salvation* (Łk 2, 29-30).

Every day, repeating the hymn, each believer, like Simeon, is invited to declare himself ready to die. Not by resignation or by a stoic wisdom, but because he saw the fulfillment of the promise made. The hope in the future and in eternity comes through the recognition of an event that already occurs in the present, a story that is unfolding before our eyes. Death - from the perspective of the Canticle of Simeon – is for the Christian who have discovered the beauty and joy of life, who witnessed the fulfillment of God's promise to him. This is also one of the main themes of the encyclical *Spe Salvi*: the confidence in salvation depends on faith, but this is not so much the affirmation of something that is not seen, but the recognition of a seed of salvation that is already present²².

Modern scarcity causes the need for „something more”, put us in an yearning for something that is not given – and death is the sad end which closes a match where victory is impossible. The promise renewed at Compline is not only that of a life after death, but to find what one seeks – even if not in a perfect finished form – already in this world. Those two experiences are mixed in the Christians daily life in modern society, but one of them must be determinant. Either the person is driven by the endless necessity of „getting more”, of a „having more”, a „being more”, self-centered, even when shared by friends, lovers, brothers-in-arms, or the person is oriented by the loving action of God, by the mystery of Christ, which dominates all relationships and redefines properly the „need for more”, the desire of „being more.”

Based on the analysis of the works of Kierkegaard, Becker apparently understands what the religious experience is in the Christian tradition. He realizes that, to one who has faith, trials and troubles of this world become a way to be awareness that *one's very creatureliness has some meaning to a Creator, that despite one's true insignificance, weakness, death, one's existence has meaning in some ultimate sense*²³. Faith launches the human being in a new heroism, *Man breaks through the limits of merely cultural heroism; he destroys the character lie that had him perform as a hero in the everyday social scheme of things, and by doing so he opens*

²² Cf. Benedict XVI. *Spe Salvi*. Rome, November 30, 2007, n° 1-12.

²³ Becker Ernest. *Op. cit.*, p. 90.

*himself up infinite, to the possibility of cosmic heroism, for the very service of God*²⁴.

However, to Becker, it is the psychological depth of Kierkegaard, his ability to enter the human soul, dissect and understand it, which allows him to propose this heroism. From the realistic coping of the existential angst, fear of death and the human condition, comes the strength of this heroism²⁵. The religious response is just an illusion more powerful, more efficient in the task of repressing the fear of death, *like all ideals, it is a creative illusion, meant to lead men on*²⁶. For Becker, Christianity isn't born from an experience of encounter, but from an illusion driven by the inner need.

Luc Ferry, through different paths, arrives at a similar point: *„It is too good to be true. It is so correspondent to what we want to hear that it must be a lie. We do not want to die, we want to meet again the people we love and, as if by a miracle, there is someone who comes in and promises us that*²⁷.

Finally we arrive at the heart of our reflection.

Christianity and death: experience or illusion

Over the centuries, there was a gnoseological turn that directly affected the reception of Christianity. In the past, the accordance between the Christian message and the desire for eternal life could be seen as an evidence of the truth of Christianity and of the existence of the Christian God. Today, this same line is interpreted as a sign of the illusory character of Christianity - as does Freud in *The Future of an Illusion*²⁸. But St. Augustine could interpret all the Freudian analysis of religion as an explanation of the famous phrase at the beginning of his *Confessions: You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in You*²⁹.

²⁴ Becker Ernest. *Op. cit.*, p. 91.

²⁵ Here we are not examining the content or the intentions of Kierkegaard's work, but as Becker read it.

²⁶ Becker Ernest. *Op. cit.*, p. 258.

²⁷ Ferry Luc & Jerphagnon, Lucien. *Op. cit.*

²⁸ Freud Sigmund. *The future of an illusion*. Blacksburg: Wilder Pub, 2010.

²⁹ Augustine Saint. *The Confessions of Saint Augustine*. New York: Doubleday, 1960, p. 43.

From a logical point of view, the question is insoluble. To show that a promise corresponds to a desire does not prove that it will or will not be realized. To know the psychological mechanism involved in the human desire for transcendence (assuming that there is a psychoanalytic theory which has really exhausted the subject) does not prove that the Transcendent does not exist – or that He exists. Neither can something be considered false only because it is very beautiful. We are facing a subjective awareness which is not based on pure logic, but in the complex experiences and reflections that form the basis of belief. We are facing the question of the relationship between faith and reason.

A belief is affirmed when it corresponds to ideas that are able to explain and give hope to the experiences of the believer. One idea that has not experiential support is not taken as credible. The Christian faith³⁰ is not an idea but a complex of ideas and experiences that are born from an event, the encounter with Christ³¹. The crisis of faith, either personally or socially, happen when its proposals are no longer supported by the experience lived by the believer and , therefore, is transmitted in a adulterated way, even though formally the content may be the same. The faith is based on testimony and evidence, because the testimony needs a set of evidence to present itself as credible. It is in some ways, the experience of the Samaritans who say to his fellow: *It is not because of your statement that we believe, but we ourselves have heard and know that this is indeed the Savior of the world* (Jn 4, 41)

The belief of the Samaritans involved the testimony of the Samaritan woman, but also the engagement of their liberty and their rationality in an experience that could prove or disprove that testimony. But the modern rationality is closed in itself; it lives a solipicism that blocks any experience that can transcend its own assumptions. It is not the reason that should suit the set of informations that come from the outside world, but it is herself to classify and judge

³⁰ The discussion about faith briefly outlined here is based on the works of Luigi GIUSSANI, „La fede” (in *Si può vivere così?* Milano: Rizzoli, 2007) and „È, se opera” (Journal *30 Giorni*, Supplement, February, 1994).

³¹ Here we understand the importance of the statement of Benedict XVI: „Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (*Deus caritas est*, n° 1. Rome, 2005).

– from her own criteria – what information will be considered appropriate and which will not³².

The Christian faith is based on the possibility of an unpredicted event, because – as a matter of fact – the idea that the contents of our deepest desire can be realized contradicts our everyday experience, always marked by major or minor frustrations. The most radical evidence that it is not an illusion is the experience of overcoming suffering. Not its elimination, since Christ repeats several times that his followers will face suffering and persecution, but to overcome it through the love and embrace of the Father (cf. Mk 10, 26-30). As seen previously, this is a „mysterious” action, not necessarily illogical or disconnected from the natural laws, but determined by an intention that only becomes known and understood when realized. So this experience cannot be made by those who are closed to this action, appearing for them as illusion dictated by an irrational hope.

Any solution to the mystery of death was more suited to the human heart than the Christian Gospel. But it only becomes credible from the evidence of a company that acts in the life of every believer, a company unimaginable *a priori* according to human logic, but which is understandable and even logical *a posteriori*. The modern rationality, closed in its solipcism, cannot understand what escapes its premises and identifies this company and this hope as illusory.

³² See Benedict XVI. *Faith, Reason and the University: Memories and Reflections*. Speech at the University of Regensburg, September 12, 2006.