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# **Re-imagining Human Person: From Autonomy to Theonomy A fundamental key to understanding Christian Humanism**

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## **Introduction**

Today we live in a plural world. The ease provided by the means of communication and the process of globalisation allows different ideas and conceptions of the world to appear and spread. In the current context of individuality and plurality, rethinking the meaning and mission of Christian humanism is urgently needed. Facing a changing world, it is worth asking: What does the confessional identity of the Catholic vision consist of? How do dialogues with different cultures and points of view emerge and define anthropological, ethical and moral issues? Moreover, the technological instruments which we experience as challenging many dimensions of our life, have been forcing us to be more profound in faith. However, at the same time it pushes us to renew our paradigm, our way of life and how we find ourselves to be a creature before God.

These are open questions we need to discuss for the sake of the formation of identity that is coherent with its mission and open to the world that surrounds it. Therefore, to redefine this autonomy, I will reread based on the hermeneutic of Romano Guardini, a Roman Catholic Priest who lived in the second-half of nineteenth century and first-half of twenty century.

## Modern Man and Contemporary New Humanism

Modern times are inaugurated by two human movements: the impulse to know reality by oneself, autonomously, from one's own intelligence, and the desire to free oneself from previous models, conceived as limiting or imprisoning thought. Man is understood as an individual who is becoming important by himself, without any external or transcendent reference, opposing the Middle Ages, for which the divine was the first element, which founded the conception that man had of himself and of the world. It means that the birth of modern times radically changes the vision of man. While medieval anthropology interprets man as a creature of God, modern anthropology tries to free human beings from their bond with the Creator. We are now in a contemporary context that has its own paradigm of rationalisation which also brings some fundamental consequences.

Facing the destruction and chaos caused by the elimination of God from the public sphere and its consequent 'death of man', post-modernism offers a kind of medicine in the form of new 'beliefs', new 'hope', and new ideals, which in our view, because of its special effects, can be defined as posthumanism. These beliefs are divided into two main forms, namely those that are technological and those that are ecological (*ambient list, climatic*). However, these observations lead us to be able to distinguish and define five new forms of humanism, including: secular humanism at the cultural level, which wants to believe in the human image at the axiological level, values, rights, being able to create a civilization that promotes justice, dignity, equality, peace and co-existence of various nations, cultures, traditions, religions, philosophical systems, through social, economic, political commitments, etc. Then a humanism that is dehumanized on an existential level that provokes a nihilism of the will and the self-destruction of the chosen; a humanism that denies the definitive meaning of man. Furthermore, posthuman, scientific and ecological humanism at the empirical level believe in self-progress, self-perfection, human-self generation, capable of becoming more and more complete. The ecological humanism perceives the human world as elements of nature through which it is embodied and in its function of existence, that is, man is ontologically not distinguished from the world in which he lives, but only emerges from it, nature is mother and parent. Finally, transhumanism emerged, that is, at the self-soteric level, which proclaimed belief in the idea of techno-transcendence, which would open up the possibility for humans to become beings who were no longer human. If the first two proposals of secular humanism have been adequately treated in the philosophical and theological fields, the next three present themselves as current challenges which should not be neglected as such.

## Critique on Modern Autonomism

In the essay of *The end of modernity world*, Romano Guardini declared that the modern era has come to an end, determined by the crisis of the triple autonomy or trinomes. This crisis therefore greatly influenced the conception of the world and of man. Based on this reasoning, the modern view of man is strongly characterized by the category of autonomy, that is, the absolute rational capacity of man, conceived as a factor capable of justifying the break with the religious dimension, to reach a definitive knowledge of reality. Man, then, becomes the center of himself without a relationship with the Other. This autonomy, which arrives in its extreme form, can be defined as 'autonomism'.

In other words, we can say that the search for autonomy revealed independence from any restriction to their freedom – and mainly from the connection with God. Medieval man recognized his work as a service rendered to the Creator; modern man attributes to himself the role of craftsman and creator of everything that falls within his sphere of action. Guardini, however, demonstrates that the modern era breaks the link with Revelation, with its desire for ever greater autonomy. The world is no longer open to transcendence, man wants to be independent of God and increasingly self-sufficient. Guardini writes: "The world to be creation and becomes 'nature'; human work is no longer a service rendered in obedience to God, but his 'creation'; the man who was a worshiper and servant becomes a creator". All of this seems to be a distortion of the true and authentic Christian understanding of the world and of man, the consequences of which I work in depth. For Guardini, the transition from the Middle Ages to the modern era is marked by a change in the attitude of large areas of culture towards Christianity.

For this reason, according to Guardini, contemporary anthropology, which initially wanted to free itself from the link with the Absolute, moves the characteristics of that Absolute to the social structure, which is identified with the State. Thus, the way is opened for the indiscriminate exercise of power, including cultural power, jointly with those who hold political power. So, man is alone, without a foothold that he can guarantee: from indiscriminate self-assertion, modern consciousness has passed into radical skepticism and tragic nihilism and has become one of the cells of impersonal society. We can say that the autonomy of reason has not led to illuminating the future, but to having the "fear of the unknown" that it hides.

Guardini points out in detail the elements of this profound cultural transformation: 1) The advent of modern science proposing a new attitude of man towards the knowledge of the truth. 2) The affirmation of the capitalist economic system that defines itself by its own laws and criteria in an autonomous way in relation to other instances of judgment. 3) A new conception of political power taken as independent of transcendent authorities. 4) The overcoming of the cosmological conception of a finite universe in favor of the existence of an “infinite number of worlds”, according to the philosophical expression formulated by Giordano Bruno (1992).

The author argues that, on the one hand, autonomy leads man to progress. On the other hand, however, there is a negative side, that is, the crisis of the three fundamental ideals of modern times: nature, the self (subjectivity) and the culture. Thus, the general image of the modernity must be understood by Guardini in the triad: nature-subjectivity-culture. These three dimensions of the world image of modernity are interconnected: “they are related to each other, they are complementary, they are structured internally and develop by themselves, rejecting any foundation or external norm that would suggest a natural order”.

These elements together outline a perspective of radical worldly autonomy that no longer needs justification or theological foundations and does not tolerate norms above itself. This trinomial – in the wake of secularization – leaves a previous trinomial in the shadows, composed of God, creation and adoration, a trinomial characterized by a marked propensity for relationship: if God is known and remembered, the world is understood as placed in relationship with Him, as His creation, and man in the world conceives of himself as one who renders an account of God to God, to God, bringing him back, to God offering him, in the name of God, guarding him. Man as an autonomous subject, judge of himself and attributing sovereignty to culture, to the different branches of knowledge. The danger of such a conception lies in founding in the subject all the capacity for knowledge, for a moral judge, betting on his capacity and his work – in particular culture and science.

### **Redefining Human Autonomy**

The key concept of the modern view of man is the concept of autonomy. In response to this tension, Romano Guardini based autonomy decisively on the truth of creation. As a quality of the world, autonomy indicates to it a consistency and fullness of being and value that make the world a space of good and truth, bringing God as its spiritual origin. As a quality of the person, autonomy designates the self-

control and self-realization of a personal being, inseparable from his dialogic reference to God and incomprehensible outside himself. As a sign of cultural work, autonomy signals that the dialogue with God in which this work is carried out is not direct, but this novelty of modern consciousness indicates the maturity of man in his relationship with the world and with himself, which also has a positive impact on faith.

From this point of view, Guardini criticizes Immanuel Kant's position. According to Guardini in the end, abstract ethics remains in Kant, which lacks ultimate evidence and a living force of obligation. That the philosopher from Königsberg, in fact, finds in man's autonomy the ultimate foundation of the dignity of the person, but Guardini goes further and affirms that only God can be the guarantor of man's dignity and freedom. He also emphasizes that man's truth is not *autonomy*, much less *heteronomy*: the name of man's truth is *theonomy*. In the author's thinking, autonomy cannot exist as such without a transcendent foundation. For him, the same difficult dialectic of modernity witnesses self-destruction, the interior of autonomy that tries to assert itself as absolute, as free from any dependence, collapses. This is what scepticism in the knowledge of the world manifests, nihilism in the face of human existence and, in terms of action, totalitarianism in society and the destructive consequences of technical power over the world. The dividing line is therefore defined in recognition of God as the foundation, origin and ultimate meaning of autonomy.

### Jesus Christ as the paradigm of human autonomy

Romano Guardini's fundamental thesis is that the cognitive act of the *Weltanschauung*. He argues and demonstrates that the existence of every Christian must be exemplified in the guidelines of Revelation. In his *Katholische Weltanschauung*, Guardini warned from the beginning that religious faith allows us to see clearly the meaning of human existence, and this, in turn, gives light to the depth here to assume the revealed message. With the *Katolische Weltanschauung*, Guardini goes beyond the vision of man according to the natural and social sciences and tries to determine the possibility and the Christian meaning of existence in our difficult times. At the heart of his work is the analysis of the modern spirit's heritage and the hard battle with the pretense of autonomy underlying modernity. As we will see, in fact, Guardini wanted to resolve the original truth of man found in God, the Creator. For Guardini: "Only those who know God know man".

For Guardini, God could only be understood by Jesus Christ. Through Christ we know who is our God and who is the man. Only from Revelation (which reached its climax in Christ) does this vision come. It is Christ who has the vision of proper completion of the world, the total and specific perspective of human life, and the authentic aspect of the *Weltanschauung*. In other words, Christ is the epistemological or epistemological principle of the intuition/vision of the world.

Based on this *Weltanschauung*, Guardini states five points about the relationship between man as an image created by God: *First*, knowledge of the nature of man is founded on knowledge of the nature of God. This approach is opposed to that of modernity, that is, of detachment from God. On this topic, he enters into research and dialogue with man's abstract concepts of *materialism* and *idealism*, *collectivism* and *individualism*, and *determinism* and *existentialism* of the mechanistic sciences and social sciences. The consequence of these ideologies is to separate man from God, and God becomes a pure and truly 'Other' concept. *Second*, man's exact knowledge depends on particular conditions. A man remains unaware of himself when he disregards his relationship with God because his relationship with God is different from any other possible relationship and is inscribed in the very nature of man. *Third*, biblical revelation affirms that man was created in the image of God. Firstly, the relationship between God and man is formulated in terms of man's ontological dependence on God. Thought, this also tells us something about the nature of God himself: He placed the world and man as others by himself, in their ontological consistency, with a sovereignly free and voluntary act, the fruit of love. Furthermore, God does not create man like any other entity but translates the infinite fullness and perfect simplicity of His Essence into man's contingency. In other words, God creates man in His own image. The fullness of man as the image of God reaches its fulfilment in the incarnation of the eternal Son of God in the human condition: in the eternal Son, likeness to God permeates the whole being of man. *Fourth*, man is understood not as an abstract concept but as a living and concrete reality.. Modern attempts to accentuate man's autonomy have given contradictory results. *Fifth*, man's modern world falsely conceives of God and his relationship with him: man feels and sees God as an 'Other', a 'Stranger', an 'Antagonist' who prevents him from being free and rebels. Man who fell into original sin lost his image of God. God's self-communication, realized in Jesus Christ, enlightened man, giving him a new opportunity to understand himself; this possibility is open and available by virtue of the grace of Christ, and many men have accepted and embraced it.

In Guardini, the central presence of Jesus Christ as a definitive paradigm and full fulfilment of autonomy is undeniable. Indeed, Guardini discovers in the figure of the Incarnate Word the foundation that leads creation from its beginning to its final realization of its autonomy. He is the *Logos* that sustains the autonomy in being and acting precisely of the created, and as for creation, he is the final fulfilment of that same autonomy. Thus, man's freedom in the world is definitively realized when it is connoted as the freedom of children, sharing the divine filiation of Jesus Christ. As for the autonomy of the world, it finds its full meaning in the man-made son and enters the space of God's existence in Christ. Our Guardini's reflection allows us to affirm that Christ is the paradigm of contemporary culture.

### Christian existence in a secularized world

By affirming the autonomy proper to human life – inspired by Guardini's anthropological vision – the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et spes* reminds us of the importance of our relationship with God in Jesus Christ. The constitution observes that the central problems of life, such as suffering and evil, have the ultimate solution in the relationship with Jesus Christ. More profoundly, it notes that men and women realize their personal freedom only when they cooperate with God's grace. Jesus Christ is presented as the "New Adam". In this sense, the constitution holds that personal autonomy is attainable when the human community comes into union with Jesus Christ.

In Guardini's opinion, the new awareness of the dignity of the human being as a person can serve as a point where the Christian faith can contribute to late modernity. The Judeo-Christian tradition has a wealth of wisdom of personal existence; this treasure includes the intuition that a person is an "incommunicable being", "that uniqueness that comes to life, not by a special talent and the advantage of social circumstances, but because he or she has been awakened by God".

The pastoral constitution *Gaudium et spes* represents the Second Vatican Council's attempt to dialogue with the world today, sharing its joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties. It deals with the dignity, vocation and activity of man in the light of Christ and applies these ideas to the family, culture and public life. One of the most famous passages of the *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 36, in the analysis of the autonomy of earthly affairs, offers an analysis of the problem and a possible solution. It addresses theocracy, or at least the loss of balance between things that belong to Caesar and those of God, and points out that this fear is unfounded. This passage is fundamental, as we seek to achieve a balanced unity between what we see as the

legitimate autonomy of the God-given creation (culture, science, humanity) and its dependence on God.

The anthropological vision of the theologian Romano Guardini tries to provide insight into the new discourse of modern autonomy. His *Katolische Weltanschauung* fulfils the still primordial mission of Christian thought, namely, that of demonstrating that man is not ontologically self-sufficient and that man and his history can only be realized in something and in someone who surpasses them.

Guardini often asserted that the entire modern view of the autonomy of the world and of man [...] seems to rest, in the last analysis, on the notion that made God the 'other'. He believes that when it comes to God, heteronomy is just an error as autonomy, for God is not 'the other', but He is God. The idea of autonomy, for Guardini, is a mistake and misuse of this status; he takes creation very seriously and thus turns it into an idol.

Thus, in carrying out Christian existence as a task, Guardini firmly exhorts us not to distance ourselves from the concrete form that the world has assumed at all stages of history. *Weltanschauung* is always an open and personal task. The centrality of autonomy is a necessary condition of secularism. According to God's design, man's worldly existence must invent us from freedom as a risk and personal responsibility exercised in the dynamics of the world given to him. Only in this way does his existence become a response of love to God's creative love, which is expressed in the dialogic offer of being. Over time – and not only –but God also placed creation in the hands of men.

## Conclusion

Romano Guardini has elaborated a critical vision of modern autonomism, which has been the fundamental problem of the crisis of today's man. Guardini reevaluates modern autonomism through the understanding that autonomy must be kept in balance with theonomy, that is, with dependence on the transcendent God. Therefore, for Guardini, Christian Revelation is the source of his conceptual elaboration.

Again according to Guardini, the human person was created in the image and likeness of God by means of the Logos. Therefore, man is a person insofar as he represents and belongs to God. God loves him and calls him to be in a relationship with Him and with others. Man is the you of God. In other words, the concrete existence of the human person is rooted and encountered in the Trinitarian relation; it is *imago Trinitatis*. Therefore, the human person is not a Heideggerian



*Dasein*, the Kantian autonomous self, but a creation and a given. Man is structurally open to the Other from himself, from which his ontological consistency is constituted. With the *Katolische Weltanschauung*, Guardini places Christ, the incarnate Logos, at the centre as the gnoseological or epistemological principle.

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