

To: Fr. Louis Ha

“Understanding the Sacred”: the profane and the sacred

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Convergence in the Desert

I once watched several episodes of a drama series titled “Nothing Sacred.”¹ Set in an urban parish in a U.S. inner city neighbourhood, the series followed the everyday life of a young pastor, assisted and sometimes distracted by his pastoral team, as they seek to minister to the material, corporeal, social and spiritual needs of their parishioners, all the while being challenged, sometimes in what amounts to crises of faith. The brief series remains for me one of the most memorable depictions of what it might mean to live faith honestly in the messiness of contemporary times, indeed, the messiness of faith itself. Faith is daily worship and practice; faith interrupts; faith can lead one to question the status quo; faith can feel powerless, overwhelmed. The title “Nothing Sacred” seems to suggest the opposite of transcendence – the characters, religious men and women, smack in the middle of poverty, disease, addiction, loneliness Yet sometimes it is in the tearing down, in the crevices of social and personal ruins that one catches a glimpse of the sacred. If one lives and dies only for, and by oneself, that would be absolute horror. The sacred does not magically wipe away problems or offer answers. But the presence of religious men and women who know suffering, alongside those who suffer – and sometimes even their silent testimony of care -- evokes a possible root of “religion” (in Latin *religare* "to bind fast"), signifying "bonds between humans and gods."

¹ Nothing Sacred, created by Bill Cain, David Manson, Sarabande Productions, September 1997 - March 1998. Selected episodes available at <https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLE5FAD7955A1F6286&si=c3NB1CWh5D3g5yow>

I feel privileged to take this course in the company of dedicated Catholics – to learn about the historical development and contexts of ideas of the sacred and the profane. Faith is important to me, but to study it as a subject of philosophical and cultural inquiry (from the vantage point of an observer, per Professor Lai Chi Tim) is new, actually quite foreign to me. This being the first exercise, it may take me a while to form the relevant questions. But I can share what motivates me, what questions are currently on my mind.

If the time is out of joint, what can mere Christians do?

In years of abundance and years of hunger, what is our experience of the sacred that we could share with those who have turned away “from the sacrality that transcended their immediate and daily needs,” who invest instead in “vital hierophanies,” the easily appeasable strong gods of prosperity and fertility, or the household / territorial gods that one could carry or dispose of, as referenced in the Hebrew Bible and in the Acts of the Apostles?² Conversely in the age of the pandemic, eruptions of conflicts, dwindling economic opportunities, and forced migration ..., we note a high percentage of children, youth, adults and the old -- across continents and cultures – who despair; who suffer mental illness. Are we **confirmed** to share the good news? That “what has come into being in him was life, life that was the light of men; and light shines in darkness, and darkness could not overpower it.” (John 1: 4-5)

² Cf. “The discovery of agriculture basically transforms not only primitive man's economy but also and especially his economy of the sacred. Other religious forces come into play--sexuality, fertility, the mythology of woman and of the earth, and so on. Religious experience becomes more concrete, that is, more intimately connected with life. The great mother-goddesses and the strong gods or the spirits of fertility are markedly more dynamic and more accessible to men than was the Creator God”; “In discovering the sacredness of life, man let himself be increasingly carried away by his own discovery; he gave himself up to vital hierophanies and turned from the sacrality that transcended his immediate and daily needs.” (Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion*. New York: Harvest, 126, 128)

In the following, I wish to briefly reflect on two ideas from the reading materials and the class: Incarnation and Emptying (kenosis)

Fr. Joseph Wong (黃克鏞) gave a succinct and illuminating account of the Incarnation in *Theological Dictionary* (神學辭典: 降生 <https://www.cccn.org/book/html/131/7444.html>).

Thanks to him, I now know the Prologue in the Gospel according to John has origins in older songs. The editors of John's text made the adaptation to pinpoint a particular person, a historical person: Jesus of Nazareth. According to Fr. Wong's entry, "The Word became flesh" punctures previous illusions about the descent of a resplendent and triumphant God, or a God who "entered" a human body. Rather, God became flesh that is by nature corruptible and vulnerable to sin and temptation. After John's Gospel, Christology during the period of the Church Fathers focused almost exclusively on the Incarnation, compared with the early Church's focus on Christ's Passion and resurrection. As we learned in the first and second class, the Magisterium of the Church established the nature of Christ (on pain of excommunication and sometimes death) through the decrees of various ecumenical councils.³

Yet what is most striking and suggestive for me is the reference to Karl Rahner's understanding of Incarnation. I do not presume to translate the paragraph under the heading

³ 若望以后，教父时期的基督论差不多完全集中在降生的反省上。从尼西亚第一届大公会议(参 127)到君士坦丁堡第三届大公会议(参216)，训导的教会在信理上的定断使降生的含义愈来愈明朗化：「降生」意含降生的基督是神，祂与圣父同一性体(DS 125)；祂又是人，有人的灵魂(DS 159)；既是神又是人的基督，只有一个位格(厄弗所大公会议，431，DS 250)；即两种性体在一个位格之内结合为一(加采东大公会议451，DS 300-302)；圣言的位格与提升的人性结合(君士坦丁堡第二届大公会议，553，DS 423-431)；因而，基督不仅有神的意志，亦有人的意志(君士坦丁堡第三届大公会议，680-681) (DS 553-559)。

“Theological meaning of Incarnation,” for I do not have the theological background, so I quote the text in Chinese:

古时候，加采东会议曾经以「二性一位的结合」(hypostatic union)来界定降生，而成为古典解说的典范；今日的神学家拉内却尝试更注意人的内在特性，并从动态的先验神学(参 161)途径来诠释这种结合。按照拉内的看法，降生便是深藏于人和神两者之间的相互倾向，圆满而颠峰地结合的时刻。拉内解释人为有限者对无限者无止境的开放，因为人性本身蕴藏着不断地自我超越的特质，这种超越只有在无限的绝对之中才能找到安顿。换言之，人的「自我超越」指向天主对人的「自我通传」，而后者正是前者的补充。由于天主是爱，所以天主本身也蕴含着把自己给人的特质。那末，当人的自我超越与天主的自我通传两相会合达到绝对而无可逾越的巅峰时，便是俗称「位格结合」的降生奥迹了。因为在基督身上，人对天主的开放达到了极点，而天主的自我通传也能随心所欲，毫无阻碍地传达给人，故此可以说，在这里，人和神其实已经结合为一了。

Rahner describes Incarnation as the mutual tending toward each other between human and God. The human as a limited being is infinitely open to the One without limit, for it is human nature to restlessly seek transcendence. Human “self-transcendence” encounters God’s “self-communication” which fulfils or supplements the former. Because God is love, it is God’s nature to give Oneself to human beings. When the mutual reaching out converges and reaches the fullest state, we can think in terms of a “hypostatic union.” But perhaps we can also borrow the more familiar image of the “matrimonial union,” a metaphor that runs through the Old Testament and the New, from the Song of Songs to Hosea, and St Paul’s letters likening the relationship between Christ and the Church to that between husband and wife.

The Incarnation initiates with love the possible convergence of the profane and the sacred. The profane, while outside the sanctuary (in Latin, *pro-fanum*) is nevertheless made to desire. It may be recalcitrant or desire wrong; but there is the possibility of conversion, at least from the perspective of the divine Lover. The two categories of the profane and the sacred are no longer distinct and in strict opposition. In this sense the marriage metaphor is apt because the relationship is built in with a mixture of love, marital strife and tensions (“I never promised you a rose garden”). Perhaps there is nothing sacred because the sacred has already emptied itself to become flesh, finite, historical and messy – in the hope of reconciliation. This act of kenosis opens the possibility of conversion of the profane. Disease, despair, destruction, displacement ... need not be the last word. Eliade noted in the chapter, “The Sacredness of Nature and Cosmic Religion” that “the celestially structured supreme being preserves his preponderant place only among pastoral peoples.” (p. 122) Sometimes maybe it is wandering in the wilderness that can bring the human, the profane back face to face with the divine?