

Lesson 1: "Profane and Sacred" (1a) "Man and God"

(These notes were taken after watching the online lecture video by Fr. Louis Ha Keloon.)

Sacred:

- **God** (Existence? How to understand and express?)
- **Holy** (Experience, realm)

Profane:

- **Secular** (Material, reality, world)
- **Ordinary** (Human, social, norms)

"Pro" means "before" (outside) and "fanum" refers to "sanctuary".

Revisiting Human History:

- The universe appeared around 13.7 billion years ago (Big Bang theory).
- The Earth appeared about 4.5 billion years ago. Mesopotamian cuneiform script emerged over 5,000 years ago.

Revisiting the History of Civilization:

- In the 13th century (Western Middle Ages), about 800 years ago, the Gothic cathedral era began.
- This era witnessed ethnic invasions and cultural exchanges, prompting spiritual development amidst material difficulties, also fostering intellectual enlightenment. It could be said that before the 18th century, the Middle Ages in the West experienced the Renaissance, the Enlightenment movement, and Romanticism.

The Mongol Empire's third Western expedition in 1252, led by Genghis Khan, established a vast empire spanning Eurasia. Despite Genghis Khan not intending for cultural exchange, it effectively happened. The overland and maritime Silk Roads facilitated East-West communication. Due to the vastness of his empire, there were no barriers to travel, fostering significant cultural exchange between the East and West.

In 1257, Mongol forces marched on the Arab Empire's capital, Baghdad, leading to the downfall of the Abbasid dynasty. Due to the wife of the Mongol commander adhering to Nestorian Christianity, Christians in Baghdad were granted the caliph's palace as a church. In 1259, the Mongol army besieged Damascus, forcing the Ayyubid dynasty in Syria to surrender. The Byzantine Empire and Western European countries sent envoys with the intention to ally with the Mongols.

In 1279, the Yuan Dynasty defeated the Song Dynasty's army, leading to the fall of the Song Dynasty and the unification of China under the Yuan Dynasty.

In 1275, Italian explorer Marco Polo met the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan, and his travelogue "The Travels of Marco Polo" intrigued Europeans to journey to China.

Persian astronomy and medicine from the West were introduced to China during this time, while Chinese printing and gunpowder were transmitted to Europe through Mongol conquests.

The Crusades (1095-1271) saw conflicts between Christianity and Islam due to the latter's occupation of Jerusalem, preventing Christians from pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

The Crusades facilitated contact between Europe and the Arab world, reintroducing Greek culture preserved by Arabs to Western Europe in the 13th century, known as the "Renaissance", reviving ancient Greek and Roman culture. Works by Plato and Aristotle were reintroduced. Thomas Aquinas, influenced by Aristotle's philosophy, wrote the "Summa Theologica", significantly impacting Catholic thought.

Rumi, a Persian Sufi mystic poet, founded the Whirling Dervishes, engaging in continuous spinning during prayers to liberate the soul from worldly constraints and commune freely with God. "Dervish" literally means "threshold", symbolizing the transition from the material world to the spiritual realm.

Saint Francis of Assisi, a Western ascetic, lived a humble life dedicated to prayer, manual labor, and preaching the Gospel, elevating medieval Church life from material to spiritual.

From the 18th to the 21st century, the West transitioned from the sacred to the profane.

The First Industrial Revolution (1750-1850) harnessed water and steam power.

The Second Industrial Revolution (1870-1914) utilized electricity for mass production.

The Third Industrial Revolution (1970-2010) employed electronics and information technology for precision and automation.

The Fourth Industrial Revolution (2011-) emphasizes smart integrated sensing systems and high automation, gradually relinquishing control over the environment and world to intelligent machines.

Revisiting the journey of human civilization aims to prompt reflection on fundamental existential questions: Why do we exist? Why eliminate others? What is life? What is death? What is the meaning of life?

Modern profane individuals:

Cloud computing centralizes data storage, encouraging uniformity of thought, potentially leading individuals to feel controlled, immersing them into a virtual world.

Cognitive computing learns, reasons, and communicates like the human brain, potentially substituting human intelligence.

Artificial intelligence mimics human thought and behavior to achieve goals, potentially questioning human autonomy and the existence of the soul.

Modern profane individuals often pride themselves on rejecting a transcendent god, asserting autonomy and godlike capabilities.

Eliminating the Sacred

In modern times, amidst such a privileged environment, people feel the need to ensure that they are in control rather than being controlled. However, this process is contradictory because while they avoid being controlled, they create things to control themselves, which they perceive as unproblematic. Conversely, if someone or something sacred surpasses them, they cannot accept it. They view the sacred as the main obstacle to freedom. Since the 13th century, there has been a continuous effort to eliminate the sacred. This involves gradually removing the centrality of the sacred in life, including religious institutions that control politics, military, economy, and culture. The aim is to eliminate them until they cease to exist, thus achieving freedom. Then, individuals can shape themselves as they wish.

Non-religious individuals seek to exclude the sacred. After excluding the sacred, there is no longer a source of nourishment and guidance for life, so they replace it with "unconscious" impulses. These unconscious impulses could be idol worship or fantasies of alternative worlds.

After "eliminating the sacred," many modern individuals feel anxious, lost, and pessimistic. Because dreams belong only to oneself, fantasies are individualized, and one can never transcend the personal. Transcending oneself means adhering to what religious individuals consider sacred. Since they do not believe in a transcendent origin, they cannot resolve crises in their lives or open themselves to a spiritual universe. Consequently, they develop a material world full of tools and environments, which they prefer to the spiritual universe described by religious people. They would rather accept a knowingly virtual world and immerse themselves in it. Without an ultimate perfect reliance, they enclose themselves in their own imaginations.

In reality, even after eliminating the sacred, individuals still face issues such as suffering, evil, and the ultimate destination of humanity. Even though modern medicine can alleviate physical pain, suffering is not merely physical. Questions about why evil exists and why people destroy others or entire races remain unresolved even after eliminating the sacred.

Looking at other modern individuals who immerse themselves in spirituality and concentrate on experiencing the sacred.

1. The Taize Community: Ordinary people who, at specific times, visit Taize to immerse themselves in the sacred. They express themselves through singing, rituals, and various activities.
2. Whirling Dervishes: These individuals completely merge their bodies into the sacred. They use spinning to forget their bodies and their existence, entering a sacred state.
3. Chartreuse Green: A type of green liqueur with 40-55% alcohol content, made from a blend of 132 herbal extracts. The recipe is owned by Carthusian monks in France. These monks lead solitary lives within the community, devoting their entire existence to silent contemplation and merging with the sacred. Their lifestyle is a form of immersion in the sacred.

Monasticism - Infecting the Sacred

Evangelists not only experience the sacred themselves but also aim to infect others with it.

1. Albert Schweitzer, 2. Mother Teresa, 3. Fr. Giovanni Giampietro (恩保德神父): They have become the intermediaries between the sacred and the profane.

Comparing the sacred and the profane: Faith systems and the sacred

Throughout history, various belief systems have emerged, including myths, polytheism, monotheism, dualism, and ideologies like liberalism, communism, capitalism, nationalism, and Nazism. Recent developments in life sciences, DNA, and artificial intelligence may evoke worship-like sentiments.

Émile Durkheim, a sociologist, defines religion as a system comprising myths, fellowships, rituals, and ceremonies, integral to human life.

Mircea Eliade describes religious individuals as those transitioning from secular existence to divine existence through a journey of enlightenment, reconnecting with the source of all beings or the divine world.

Shen Qingsong (沈青松) suggests that while humanism and nihilism are respectable beliefs if they do not infringe on others, excluding religion is both irrational and unethical. Likewise, devout adherence to a particular faith is commendable as long as it does not involve the persecution of other religions.

Fr. Gabriel Chen-Ying Ly (李震神父) argues that despite human limitations, our aspirations are infinite, leading us on a journey from the finite to the infinite. Religion should encompass transcendence, sacredness, and institutionalism, fulfilling human needs and actualizing our potential, enabling us to approach transcendence and experience the sacred, necessitating institutional church organization.

Disclaimer:

This is an unofficial translation of the study note prepared for helping the students who do not understand the Chinese writing. The accuracy of all content shall be subject to the original lecture in Cantonese by Fr. Louis Ha Keloon.