

Reading the signs of our times

Life in a complex world

Jesús Morán

This reflection was given during a November 2018 international meeting of 37 bishops from different Christian churches, in Sigtuna, Sweden. We have chosen to publish it in this Focus section because it provides an important overview of the human and cultural aspects contained in a communitarian spirituality, a spirituality that is blossoming throughout Christianity in recent decades.

The noted French thinker Edgar Morin¹ speaks of our times as resembling a matryoshka doll, where there are always new replicas concealed inside: you face a challenge today and while you're working on it, you run into another; while dealing with that one, you find yourself in front of a third... Thus, it's almost impossible to speak of this modern era in any kind of unequivocal or definitive terms. But, while conscious of the provisional nature of any attempt at analysis, I'll attempt to focus here on three, modern day phenomena that I consider to be signs of the times. While not the only ones, I believe they are particularly relevant today and need to be interpreted with the light of the Gospel.

Fifty years after '68

Consider the fact that we just commemorated the fiftieth anniversary of a turning point defined by the protests of 1968. A number of books and commentaries have tried to comprehend events from that period.² It was much more of a worldwide phenomenon than was originally understood. Before the March to June events in Paris that year, there was the hippie movement in California, and the 'Prague Spring.' Martin Luther King was assassinated in 1968, and there was the Tlatelolco student massacre in Mexico just a few days before the Olympic games that same year.

Although hard to define, 1968 turned out to be a kind of worldwide earthquake. But, one that's not simply an event of the past. Rather, its impact still remains and will continue into the future. It was a movement towards liberation, an overarching questioning of all forms of authoritarianism and even of authority itself. Traditional structures governing social and ecclesial life were badly shaken and partially torn down.

For some intellectuals, it marked the beginning of the *postmodern* era. Major points of reference and powerful ideologies became less important. Emphasis was on the subject in a multitude of changing forms and without adherence to any rigid structure, be it political party or Church. This also appears to lie at the root of today's current rejection of any kind of political or religious institutionalization.

¹ Edgar Morin is a French sociologist, philosopher, and writer, of Jewish origin. By studying and developing the notion of 'complex thought,' he's focused on how knowledge should go beyond specializations and into teaching the teachers an awareness of complexity by which, everything is related to everything else through reciprocal interactions.

² See M. Capanna, *Noi tutti* (Milan: Garzanti, 2018); J. Carabante, *Mayo del '68: Claves filosóficas de una revuelta postmoderna* (Madrid: Rialp, 2018); R. Gobbi, *Maggio '68: Cronaca di una rivolta immaginaria* (Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 2018); E. Morin, *Maggio '68: La breccia* (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2018).

In this context, three present-day characteristics will be considered from a sociological perspective, but also from a theological perspective as signs of our times, in that God is speaking to us through them. Rather than independent developments, each is an aspect of the same, ongoing evolution. And although not without risk, I attempt to interpret them in a positive light, as opportunities for Christianity today.

The complexity of reality

A first phenomenon is the *complexity of reality*, as it's often described. Various authors, among them the aforementioned Edgar Morin and Italian philosopher, Mauro Ceruti³, have spoken on this.

Knowledge of the complexity of things isn't something negative, but rather represents one of contemporary culture's greatest acquisitions. Although a clear challenge, it's also filled with promise and new possibilities for the faith, in an era where knowledge of this complexity requires interdisciplinarity. With today's fragmentation into countless academic disciplines, knowledge has lost some of its impact and attraction. This is true in the Anglo-Saxon world where some of the most cited and sought-after business professionals are those capable of bridging diverse disciplines, such as a philosopher with expertise and training in mathematics or informatics.

Every kind of reality today seems complex. If we take human migration, for example, we're now faced with the single greatest movement of peoples since early Medieval times. It's extremely difficult to narrow it down to a single cause and there are a multitude of opinions on how to deal with it.

It's also true in other fields. Think of the crisis of political polarization. Here, in Italy, two parties that are almost completely opposed to one another on many issues are in power, with the usual divisions between right and left no longer prevailing. This is also true for ethical questions: they are complex, even in their relation to faith, teachings, and practice among different Churches. Likewise, there are also complexities in balancing technological progress with care for the environment.

While there is an increasingly wealthy sector of civilization, countless groups of others at the local and global level are at the same time being left behind. We shouldn't stop progress, but we also can't ignore these growing numbers of impoverished persons that now exist, even within boundaries of more developed countries. Emerging, anarchic populist groups together with the rise of insular, national identities have resulted in the erection of walls as well.

Needed: new categories of thought

Theologically and ecclesially, what sign of the times can we grasp from all this?

From an economic perspective, it can be understood as a quest for a more prophetic economy. In fact, an international conference in Rome last November, jointly organized by several organizations, including the Focolare Movement, was entitled *Prophetic Economy*. It was an innovative initiative aimed at finding new ways of distributing resources. At the conference, well-known economists and other speakers mingled with participants, including many teenagers.

Another answer is in the *search for synergy* [different factors able to produce more together than individually]. In education and curriculum development, increasing emphasis is being placed on interdisciplinarity and transdisciplinarity.

³ See M. Ceruti & G. Bocchi, eds., *La sfida della complessità* (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2018); M. Ceruti, *La crisi della cultura, tempo della complessità*, Preface by E. Morin (Milan: Raffaello Cortina, 2018); E. Morin, 'La crisi della cultura,' in C. Simonigh, ed., *Pensare la complessità per un umanesimo planetario: Con interventi di Edgar Morin, Gianni Vattimo e Gustavo Zagrebelky* (Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis, 2012).

Even from a more basic perspective as Morin writes, we need to *rethink thinking*. We're not prepared to think through complexity and lack adequate categories for doing so. We've been formed to think in specialized, fragmentary ways instead of along paths that search for unifying principles without falling into naïve reasoning or oversimplification and confusion.

This is the first big challenge of our time and a first great opportunity for Christianity. Morin has often emphasized in different contexts and on multiple occasions that humanity is constitutively incomplete, meaning we are always in an ongoing process of becoming more humanity, yet never fully and completely achieving this goal. The complexity of reality is a strong stimulus pushing us forward, one that obliges us to go beyond our barriers and fixed ideas in order to open ourselves to what lies before us. It can signify opening ourselves onto that which arrives from the other, and from *the Other*, in enriching, fulfilling, and life-giving ways.

Religious pluralism and the fourth secularization

The second phenomenon, closely connected to the first, is religious pluralism and what has been called the 'fourth secularization.'⁴ These days, there is a widespread attitude of inclusivity – everything that's plural is accepted. This is particularly evident among young people, where it is inconceivable for them to exclude anyone. They are naturally inclusive. They don't have moral principles that are too rigid. They don't understand a moral principle that excludes. Such a non-reflective attitude, though positive in many ways, lacks an orienting framework and often falls into complete relativism. While seemingly open, it's really a way of protecting myself: I'm locked into myself, in my truth. I don't tie myself to anyone... In reality, seeking the truth – as one discovers – is a much more demanding and uncertain task.

The fact is that tradition no longer offers a sense of security. What is new is fluid and passing away. And so, sociologists of religion particularly in the Western world, are calling this the 'fourth secularization'. What does this mean?

The first secularization came about in classic Greek culture during the time of change from *mythos* to *logos*, from mythology and polytheism to the *logos* that comprehends God in his cosmic dimension and considers humans as rational beings.

A second secularization came about with Christianity, with the passage from the abstract *logos* to the *Logos* as Person who becomes man – the man-God, the humanization of God. The cosmos as the basic principle is replaced by God the Father, and good consists in living the teachings of Jesus.

The third secularization emerges from within Christianity itself. Through the understanding of God as Father and the incarnation of the Son, humanity attains a dignity hitherto unknown. Human realities flourish in the sciences, philosophy, and politics – and they attain their own autonomy.

The fourth secularization, instead, is found in post-secular or secular societies of our epoch. After the third secularization – which can be said to begin with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment and includes the 1968 liberation movement – it could seem to some that religion was fated to disappear. But according to sociological studies this disappearance is by no means obvious or clear.

Although after the third secularization there was a revival of religious practice, it didn't necessarily signify a return to identifying oneself with historical religion nor should we imagine that it means our churches will return to being full again. Certainly, in the Southern hemisphere we find full churches, but we don't know how long it will continue. In most of the West, instead, significant declines in religious practice have been noted.

⁴ See L. Berzano, *Quarta secolarizzazione: Autonomia degli stili* (Sesto San Giovanni: Mimesis, 2017).

Like-minded groups and communities

Although we can still speak of religious practice, it's more appropriate to talk about 'spirituality.' And this is what sociologists are calling the 'fourth secularization.' It has three characteristics: a *de-institutionalization* in which non-institutional religion is lived; a *personalization* of religious life that emphasizes the subjective dimension of religion in which I'm interested in what is good for me; and thirdly, *new forms of socialization* not connected to religion, but rather to a variety of personal lifestyle choices leading me to connect with others sharing my same lifestyle.

People speak of *à la carte* religion, where each one gathers together various components of his or her religious experience – some traditional practices, a few elements from the patrimony of a Church, perhaps something from Asian or other cultural traditions, a bit of yoga . . . In other words, it's the creation of one's own religious life insofar as I share it, for example, with those I meet at the gym. In this way a common lifestyle develops.

The *fourth secularization*, according to authors cited here, means a common lifestyle based on traditional religion no longer exists. Rather, a number of different practices are present. There are now varied ways of being Lutheran, Orthodox, Catholic, and so on.

What sign of the times is present here? It seems to me that religious pluralism speaks to a search for a personal religious experience. From this perspective, one can find something very positive: the need for a meaningful encounter with God and one that can be shared with others. This brings us back to the experience of the first Christian communities. From its beginnings, the Church gathered together – *ekklesia* (*assembly*) – as persons who found in Jesus an unheard way of living in the world of their time. Although in comparison to this fourth secularization, clear differences obviously exist because in the early Christian community it was the person of Jesus, who was God, the life of the Word, and the Eucharist bringing persons together and forming the basis of their shared lives.

Crisis in the Church

A third phenomenon is the Church crisis that is accompanied by a crisis in the experience of God. I'm thinking especially of the serious *problem of paedophilia* occurring in the Catholic Church, and which we know occurs in other Churches and religions. We are living through a catastrophic fall in the prestige of these religious institutions which no longer offer security, but rather have become for many a symbol of corruption and worldliness.

We also see a *deculturation* of Christianity: not only is the Church itself seemingly no longer credible, but neither are its fruits, ~~such as those of a Christian humanism~~. Along with a weakening institution, the Church's cultural impact is shrinking as well.

So *neopaganism* has increased. Recently, for example, groups in Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia, have requested that 'pagan religions' – citing pre-Christian religions and their rituals – be counted as religions by the State. And we find this even today in Ireland, where attempts are being made to return to Celtic rites.

Joseph Ratzinger - a theological text

Joseph Ratzinger's well-known intuition, already back in 1969, seems especially relevant here:

From the contemporary crisis, a Church will emerge which will have lost much. The Church will become small and for many it will have to go back to the beginnings. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. Since the number of faithful will lessen, she will lose many of her social privileges . . .

But despite all these changes that can be expected, the Church will discover anew,

with renewed vitality, what has always been central to her – faith in the triune God, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, in the presence of the Spirit until the end of the world . . . It will be a more spiritual Church . . . a Church of the little ones . . . Then they will discover the little flock of believers as something wholly new. They will discover it as a hope meant for them, an answer for which they have always been secretly searching.⁵

A new departure point?

In light of Ratzinger's words, even the Church's present institutional crisis can be read as a sign of our times. God is calling us to start anew from the essence of Christianity no matter how small it may be: from the life of community wherever Jesus is alive and mutual love is the rule, and wherever there are not imposing structures that risk reducing the Church to a mere dispenser of sacraments or graces. Rather, what is needed is something more alive and more similar, as we've said, to that of the earliest Christian communities.

We must go beyond clericalism to a personal experience of God, and as a people. And, thus, towards a new appreciation of the laity. We need to overcome the enduring divisions among Churches in order to give full and credible witness to our faith in Jesus Christ.

What counts today is an experience of God. In this era of the fourth secularization, defined by aesthetic and emotional experiences, we need to present the beauty and the human-divine value of an encounter with Jesus Christ. We cannot allow this call for a true cultural revolution to pass us by. True post-secularism is a civilization that springs forth from the life of the Gospel.

Jesús Morán Cepedano, originally from Spain, is a philosopher and theologian. He was elected co-president of the Focolare Movement in 2014 and currently resides in Rome.

⁵ See J. Ratzinger, 'Conclusion of the conversational radio broadcast series on Hessischer Rundfunk,' 24 December, 1969, our translation from the original, published in J. Ratzinger, *Glaube und Zukunft* (Munich: Kösel, 1970, 2005); in English in *Faith and the Future* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009).