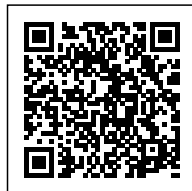


ANTOINE ARJAKOVSKY: AN ECUMENICAL METAPHYSICS

Posted on June 1, 2022 by Antoine Arjakovsky



Antoine Arjakovsky directs the Politics and Religion Department at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris. He is also Director Emeritus of the Institute of Ecumenical Studies at the Ukrainian Catholic University.

His research focuses in particular on Russian religious philosophy (Bulgakov, Berdyaev, Shestov), as well as on issues of the theology of politics, such as democracy, justice and fraternity ([Votez Fraternité ! Trente propositions pour une société plus juste](#)). He has just published [Éssai de métaphysique œcuménique](#), in which he analyzes our troubled times and, above all, proposes a new epistemology based on ecumenical science.

This conversation [comes through](#) the kind courtesy of PHILITT.

PHILITT (PL): In the introduction to your book, you begin by making an observation. Contrary to those who say that our world is going well, and that the impression of the contrary is only a distortion effect, proper to a Western consciousness that has always been haunted by the idea of decadence, you affirm that, on the contrary, our societies are facing a "poly-crisis."

Antoine Arjakovsky (AA): Yes, but it is not to be a great prophet to note this. You just have to look at the many reports of the United Nations or the IPCC on this subject. For example, the latest Oxfam report published in January 2022 explains that the health pandemic has considerably increased social inequalities in France and in the world. The top five wealthiest people in France have doubled their wealth since the beginning of the pandemic. They by themselves own as much as the poorest 40% in France. Since March 2020, the world counts a new billionaire every 26 hours, while at the same time 160 million people have fallen into poverty.



Antoine Arjakovsky - DR.

Everything that formed a coherent whole in the 1990s has disintegrated in less than twenty years. There is, of course, the climate crisis and the biodiversity crisis, with the dramatic consequences that we know about, with the coronavirus pandemic. But there is also the crisis of international relations, the rise of social violence, etc. Some consider that these crises have always existed, that there has always been war, violence and injustice. But the truth is that these inequalities and the devastation of forests and oceans have taken on proportions unknown in the past. Add to this the progression, at the speed of a galloping horse, of the postmodern paradigm within most political or media elites—that is to say, of a worldview according to which there is no truth but only interpretations—then you understand why this poly-crisis is deep, long-lasting and, to put it bluntly, quite worrying.

PL: One could use the come-back that this triple economic, ecological and philosophical crisis is purely conjunctural, linked to certain contemporary mutations of the market, of technology and of ways of thinking, and that the system will eventually resolve it.

AA: The current poly-crisis has deep causes, which have to do with the fact that postmodern thinking deprives man of the spiritual energy that would allow him to truly act on the world. Indeed, in such thinking, only the individual can have sufficient resources to survive and transform a world characterized by its power relations, its senselessness and its violence. But this obviously is not the case. On the contrary, we can see that this conception renders man completely powerless. It is time to

recover the elementary truth that budgets are moral documents. This is the guarantee that new public policies are possible in order to build not, according to the vision of the Moderns, a sovereign and all-powerful State, but, in a more spiritual way, a State at the service of fraternity.

PL: If I follow you, since the crisis originated in a worldview and epistemology that is both utilitarian and individualistic, its solution can only be to return to a more spiritual epistemology.

AA: Alongside the postmodern paradigm, there is another crystallization of consciousness, which can be called spiritual, that was carried into the 20th century by very different thinkers such as Nicholas Berdyaev and Kate Raworth, Victor Frankl and Karol Wojtyla (later John Paul II). This challenged not only the classical and modern worldview but also its postmodern conception.

I will take here only the example of the realization of the Austrian and Jewish psychiatrist Viktor Frankl. On October 19, 1944, he was deported to Auschwitz by the Nazis. On his return from deportation, he gave a famous lecture in Vienna in which he explained that modern psychoanalysis failed to understand the world because of a faulty epistemology:

"Having an atomistic, energetic and mechanistic concept of Man, psychoanalysis sees him in the last analysis as the automaton of a psychic apparatus. And it is precisely there that the existential analysis intervenes. It opposes a different concept of man to the psychoanalytical concept. It does not focus on the automaton of a psychic apparatus but rather on the autonomy of spiritual existence. 'Spiritual' is used here without any religious connotation, of course, but rather simply to indicate that we are dealing with a specifically human phenomenon, unlike the phenomena we share with other animals. In other words, the spiritual is what is human in man."

This shift in consciousness from a postmodern conception to a spiritual worldview has occurred in an often discrete way in just about every discipline in the 20th and 21st centuries. Today agnostic philosophers, such as Dany Robert Dufour for example, do not hesitate to trace manifestations of the spirit in the life of the world back to the metaphysical and theological figure of the Trinity. Here is the conclusion of one of his recent conferences at the Collège des Bernardins: "I am an atheist betting on a new ecumenism (convivialism) and invoking the Trinity to ward off the devil."

PL: This new spiritual worldview must, according to you, be developed in what you call an "ecumenical

metaphysics." However, this term seems at first sight to be difficult to understand. In fact, the term "metaphysics" does not have a very good press today, and since Kant it has been associated with the idea of an outdated or even misguided philosophy.

AA: It is urgent to get out of the current schizophrenia of the university which consists in separating the two spheres of belief and rationality. Kant himself, in *The Conflict of Faculties*, was opposed to such a division. He, the philosopher of pure reason, explained at the end of his life that he was also a Lutheran believer who would like to be able to converse with theologians. The misfortune was that in his time theological rationality was entirely dependent on political power. Today, we are no longer in that situation. On the contrary, we can see how much theological rationality and philosophical rationality have to say to each other in the same way that the Catholic faith has understood that it could be enriched by contact with the Protestant and Orthodox faith. Hence the interest for me to think today about the bases of an ecumenical metaphysics capable of thinking together the universal and the personal, but also the real world and the spiritual world.

In reality, ecumenical metaphysics is a global vision of the world that seeks to understand all reality and to participate in it. Here the term "ecumenical" is understood as the Kingdom of God that comes to earth whenever human beings actualize divine justice. This conception of universality becomes personal and communal. It also breaks down the ancient representation of space-time. History is neither cyclical nor a long empty corridor. It has a vertical meaning, one might say. The kingdom of God on earth is fullness in spirit and truth. This is why I explain in my book [*The Meaning of Ecumenical*](#) that there is a somewhat forgotten meaning to the term "ecumenical"—that of a universality that gives access to reality in a meta-confessional, meta-religious and meta-convictional way. From the Christian point of view, this can be perfectly justified by the fact that Christ himself announced to his disciples: "And when I am lifted up from the earth, I will draw all men to myself" (Jn 12:32). But, of course, this personal sense of universality must also be understood in its sapiential dimension, its dimension of wisdom.

PL: You have said on many occasions that this ecumenical metaphysics must be "sapiential," but also "personalist."

AA: For Aristotle, metaphysics had to be *katholou*; that is to say, it had to be capable of taking the whole thing. Metaphysics, when it rediscovers its spiritual sources, in a sapiential and personalist way, becomes fully ecumenical. It is a question of holding together in its entirety God, the world and the

human being as a thinker. This is why it is necessary to understand the individual in his infinite dignity as a person, both microcosm and macrocosm. It is also a question of rediscovering the intuitions of figures as different as the author of the Book of Proverbs, of Rumi, of Paracelsus or of Shankara in order to grasp the being in all its sapiential depth, which is at the same time unobjectifiable yet nonetheless describable. This leads to a non-dual understanding of the world, as in the Eastern religions but also in the great Western mystics.

This metaphysics, because it poses a tension between the created and the uncreated world, makes it possible to reconcile four major understandings of truth in the history of philosophy: truth as correspondence between the thing and the intellect (Aristotle); truth as fidelity to a promise (Augustine); truth as coherence between what one says and what one does (Rescher); and finally truth as consensus between the members of a community (Peirce). This existential and "in tension" conception of truth is opposed in this sense to the voluntarist vision of truth, dominant today, which conceives it only as that which functions in relation to what is (Bacon); that is to say in a technocentric way, which leads to the transhumanist utopia, as [Franck Damour](#) has shown well.

PL: This ecumenical metaphysics appears to be a culmination of your work, in particular that of Russian religious philosophers, such as Berdyaev, Bulgakov or Chestov, whom you quote extensively in your book.

AA: The Russian religious thinkers of the 20th century, such as Nicolai Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov or Lev Shestov were among the first to understand that it was possible to understand the universal as a personal and symbolic reality. These thinkers knew German thought very well, from Kant to Marx. They understood with Nietzsche that the modern metaphysics that separated the domain of "why" (which was reserved for special metaphysics) from the domain of "how" (which was reserved for general metaphysics) was absurd. They recognized with Heidegger that Western rationalist thought had enclosed being in objectifying concepts, and that it was henceforth a question of recovering all the depth and all the freedom of it.

For the Russian religious thinkers, although they did not always go to the end of their intuitions, it is appropriate to associate the logic of the subject as Person (Berdyaev), the logic of the verb as Wisdom (Bulgakov), and finally the logic of the predicate as self-consciousness (Shestov). This post-idealist and post-phenomenological worldview has the great merit of renewing metaphysics, as soon as one grasps the complementarity between these thoughts, as I try to show in my book.

Thus, for example, Shestov showed how rational thought was, since Aristotle, based on the principles of identity, non-contradiction and the excluded third. This meant that all reality was equal to itself, that one could not say one thing and its opposite and that there was no third term that was both A and non-A. Rational binary thought, based on these principles, relied on the adequacy between the thing and the intellect to understand the world. And it defined "proof" as the explanation of a phenomenon by its universalizable repetition.

But this is a vision of the world which the different religious traditions, from the East and the West, say is a form of naivety with respect to the non-dual organization of reality. Man, who has however an infinite dignity, must in this rationalist conception submit to the order and to the appearance that the phenomena want to give of themselves. It is, according to Shestov, a form of passivity which leads to fatalism or to war. This form of thinking leads to a priori judgments which force to understand all reality as an abstract and uniform thing. It consequently denies to think truth as the fruit of a personal experience.

Featured image: "The Last Supper," by the Master of the Amsterdam Death of the Virgin; painted ca. 1485-1500.

