



## Self-Awareness, Ethics and Political Society in the Cultural Tradition of the Early Modern Age

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### Abstract

Exploring the value of images as documents that reveal the culture of the world that produces them, this paper reflects on the relations that were established between the Christian tradition and the development of modernity in Western Europe, particularly in the Catholic area. With reference to the themes of self-awareness, ethics and political society, it criticizes the idea that there was an early divorce and a purely conflictual relationship between religion and the modern world, showing how the construction of the early modern age accommodated a dialogue that long remained fertile between the two parts. What the modern world was, at least in its beginnings, including its affirmation of the value of the human person, of material and cultural progress, is inseparable from the way it embraced and developed the content of the Christian vision of man and reality.

**Keywords:** self-awareness; ethics; political society; Early Modern Age

Even more than the spoken word and texts, images are the revelatory mirror of the consciousness that creates them. Into them is projected at least a shadow of the culture and vision of the world that nurtured them. As signs they are often charged with a potent attraction, which evokes with more vivid immediacy a whole concealed world of ideals and values behind them (1).

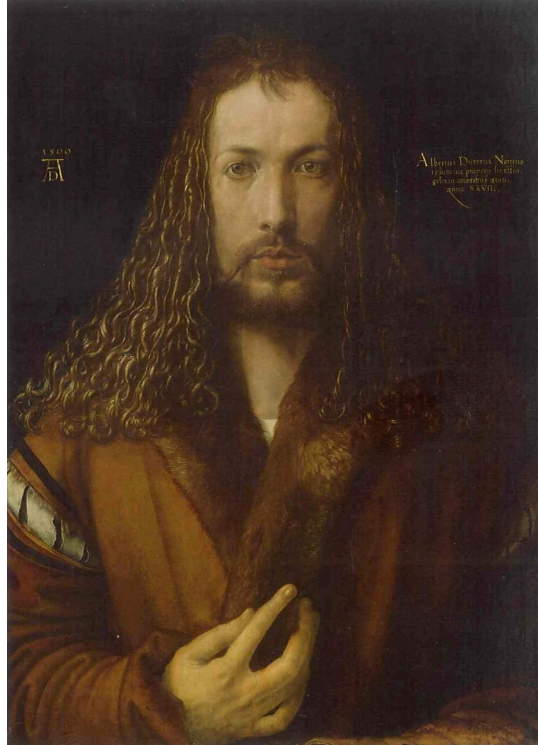
### The identity of the self

Let's try, for example, to place ourselves before one of the most splendid self-portraits of Renaissance art. This is the one that Albrecht Dürer left us precisely at the start of the century of the great religious Reformations of the modern world. He signed it in Latin with the date of the year 1500, when the celebrated painter had turned twenty-eight.

The painting is found reproduced in the recent edition of the challenging book by Hans Belting, *Das echte Bild* (It. trans. *La vera immagine di Cristo*, 2007) (2). What does the portrait of Dürer have to do with the representation of the face of Christ in the tradition of Western art? Look at it carefully (Ill. 1): one immediately notices the extreme quest for realism, and admires the fineness of the lines which enhance the athletic beauty of the subject represented. But at the same time, the long hair hanging loose and framing the elegant face, the short, carefully trimmed beard, the almost solemn pose, the right arm folded with composure on the heart – all reveal the urge, which must have been deliberate, to bring out the similarities with the classic icon of Christ the Redeemer, consecrated by many centuries of religious art. One's eyes instinctively turn to the hands in the foreground seeking the wounds of the Passion. But the painter's seal and the garments that cover the body relentlessly guide us towards a different interpretation. Belting remarks on the underlying theological reason for this decision to represent himself not simply as himself, but *in forma Christi*. The Christian conscience knew full well that man existed and had a value only as created "in the image and likeness of God". Hence the summit of the human ideal towards which one should strive could only adopt as its supreme paradigm that utmost degree of "likeness" with God inscribed in the "image" he assumed, through the Son, through descent into the incarnation. The physical body of Christ was the resplendent figure of the beauty and harmony of God the Creator, who called on mankind to walk in his footsteps and identify themselves with the victorious reality of the new Adam, to let themselves be incorporated in the world



renewed by the sacrifice of the cross and by the miracle of the Resurrection. Jesus-man was the sign of the ultimate truth that fulfilled the destiny of the human person, of every man: the foundation and the emblem of a new creation. Whether he was fully aware of it or not – this we will never know – the fact remains that Dürer embedded himself in the material profile of God made flesh to give the utmost of value and rationality to the reproduction of his physiognomy as an individual in flesh and blood (3).



(III. 1)

In the heart of the phenomenal artistic and cultural flowering that saw the triumph of the genius of Michelangelo and Raphael, at the same time as the energies were being accumulated which eventually flowed into the stormy waves of the re-Christianization of Europe in early modern times, it was not considered scandalous that at the vertices of the social elite in which the supreme artists and leading intellectuals moved the awareness of a personal identity was constructed by anchoring it to the sturdy pillar of Christian faith. If we look at the fifteenth- and sixteenth-century treatises which explore the value of the human being, we are submerged by a sea of confirmations that are perfectly compatible with what the art of Dürer teaches. We need only turn to the outstanding manifesto of what has been described as the optimistic anthropology of the Renaissance, namely Pico of the Mirandola's *De hominis dignitate* (1486), to admire the youthful enthusiasm of a thought that saw the grandeur of man in the sole perspective then possible: that of religious wisdom, which celebrated the freedom and responsibility of man, who was placed, in a precise divine design, at the top of the scale of being, attributing to him the function of linking earth and heaven, "only one step below the angels" (4).

Yet the Psalms of the Old Testament, whose *oratio* Pico draws on in his exordium, calling on King David as a witness (5), had already played on the register of a vertiginously elevated status combined with the humble realism of a state of existence subject to the limitations of evil and dependence on God. The Fathers of the Church had likewise emphasized the idea of the living man as the visible sign of divine glory. And already for some time now, Father O'Malley's studies of the great culture of Erasmus and Christian humanism, in the wake of De Lubac, have made it clear that theses in every way similar to those of Pico appear in the most elevated preaching in ecclesiastical circles during the



Renaissance, starting from sermons on the texts of Genesis or those in the important periods of Lent and Easter offered to the supreme pontiff in Rome, the capital and center of government of Christendom. In some cases, when they came to discourse on the "dignity of man", the pontifical preachers might even paraphrase Pico's text to the letter, without even needing to declare the source of the citation, because the culture of the time was based, physiologically, on the continuous recycling of an established legacy of formulas and ready-made quotations (6).

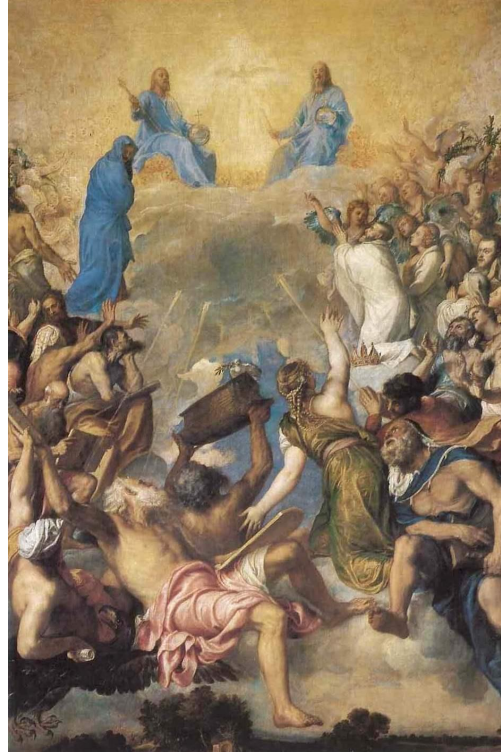
### **Ethics and politics**

All through the long phase of early modernity, at least down to the crisis in European consciousness which developed with the eighteenth-century rupture and after the sudden collapse of many of the foundations of the *ancien régime*, the fertile union between the legacy of the Christian tradition and the system of community life continued to affect the whole of Europe, often from resolutely hegemonic positions. Naturally it was a tradition reformulated according to the new confessional schemes which emerged from the grievous breakups of the sixteenth century. Much of the artistic and literary production of the subsequent age, the history of music, the ferments in scientific research which revolutionized the image of the cosmos and opened up completely new horizons to knowledge would be inexplicable outside the incessant dialogue with the legacy of a faith which may have been distorted and betrayed but was always placed at the center of the stage. Metaphysics long continued to be drawn on Aristotle and the reinterpretation of his works by the medieval Scholastics. And even in Protestant countries (as Lewalter has clarified) they profoundly influenced the systematic thinking and the teachings of philosophers, which were the culminating phase of the training in the humanities, as a preliminary to the practice of the professions and fulfillment of the most elevated roles in society. The birth of a second Christian Scholasticism, the heir to Aquinas and the mediaeval *universitas studiorum*, was another substantial fruit of this modernity, still widely practising and almost completely orthodox. The divorces and betrayals were the tragic outcome of a history of conflicts; but it did not immediately become predominant when European mass Christianity began to develop into its modern guise, but at a much later date. There developed a distinctly independent philosophical reason, engaged in a dialectic with theological knowledge founded on divine revelation. (Benedict XVI spoke positively of this in his speech to the Collège des Bernardins in Paris in September 2008). The Jesuits' *Ratio studiorum*, the "Christian Enlightenment", growing from the roots of two religious Reformations, united with the development of a more advanced organization of political and social life (to borrow another powerful suggestion of the present pontiff's): these were all impressive signals of a tendency that saw the men and institutions of the Church to the fore in the process of transformation, not in the rearguard and not confined to mounting the barricades of contestation (7).

To clarify this concept, we can return to the illuminating language of images. Think of another famous portrait, this time not of an isolated individual but of a group, which brings us directly into contact with the chambers of power, where the destinies of humanity in the early modern age were shaped. The protagonist this time is Charles V, the Habsburg king of Spain and Holy Roman Emperor, the energetic dominator of the European political scene in the first half of the sixteenth century. In a great painting by Titian, today preserved in the Prado, the sovereign of the *monarquía universal* of the Catholic faith is represented with the members of his immediate family (Ill. 2): his deceased wife Isabella of Portugal, his son Philip II, his successor on the Spanish throne, his sister Maria, Queen of Hungary, and the infanta Joanna. But none of them wears the signs of regal power. Instead they are clad in the long white garments of penitence. They are barefooted, their hands clasped in prayer. The imperial crown is placed at the feet of the supreme sovereign. All are represented in adoration of the Trinity, which rises above them, set in the paradisiacal heavens. A cloud of angels surrounds the imperial family, exhorting them to prostrate themselves in devotion, at the fore of a crowd of the blessed, prophets and Old Testament figures, who throw themselves forward with hands raised in the desire to touch the manifestation of the divine mystery, which radiates the



luminous splendor of eternal and invincible Glory. Prominent in the first row is the figure of Maria. In one corner we can make out an image that has been identified as the face of Titian himself, next to another portrait which some people have interpreted as representing one of the outstanding men of letters in sixteenth-century Italy, Pietro Aretino (8).



(III. 2)

Sterile formalism? Pure hypocritical flattery by one accustomed to use the symbols of faith to extol the mighty of the earth and an effective *instrumentum regni*? The sense of Titian's *Triumph of the Trinity* seems, rather, of quite a different kind. With all the emphasis of commemorative art, it declares that even the highest power in the world could only be conceived as a service subordinated to a higher reality, which dictated the final ideal end of the whole life of the human community. Here emerges a constant which has been seriously underestimated in the policies of the European States at the beginning of the modern world. It is reflected above all in the mirror of the legal theories and the ethical schemes in which the men who were to wield power were educated and on which their concrete action based its legitimacy (9). The political thought of the *ancien régime* was not completely crushed under the aegis of Machiavelli and Hobbes. On the contrary, it was expressed everywhere, above all on the Catholic side, in the resolute language of anti-Machiavellianism. The model it embodied was that of the prince: a "politician", true, but also, inseparably, "Christian" (Ribadeneyra, Saavedra Fajardo, Contzen, etc.). Politics was not autonomous and *ab-soluta* (as claimed by the champions of the monopolist absolutism of the secularized state, which arose as a myth centuries later, but one that failed to correspond to the authentic history of the cultural facts). Politics, which at that time was far from being reduced to power managed by the state, was itself subject to the ties of moral virtue, ultimately bearing an Aristotelian stamp. From medieval Thomism on, this was the only sane way one could imagine engaging in the search for the "common good". Besides, it is significant that the first builders of the political theory of the *raison d'État* (or "national interest"), which only later slid towards the unilateral and unbalanced exaltation of its primacy as a guiding principle, were not implacable enemies of the worldly power of the Church, like Paolo Sarpi. Even earlier, and more effectively than Sarpi, they were devoutly religious figures such as Botero and



the Jesuit champions of moral philosophy, a strand of thought which was later absorbed by Bossuet in the France of the "Catholic king" Louis XIV and which Muratori eventually developed, with even more modern accents, at the opening of the Enlightenment century (10).

### **The two sides of the modern system**

So starting with the vertices of culture and the governance of politics, it appears that on the terrain of concrete history, in the laborious process of the construction of modernity, there has been an unbroken series of links with the content embodied in the great Christian tradition. This continuity was especially strong in the early phases of the historical parabola of the modern world. The crises, lacerations and conflicts touched some aspects and created blocks or dysfunctions which in certain periods became intolerable. There is clearly a dialectic within modernity between different outlooks and between spheres of power (civil and religious), which were besides necessarily conducted by the logic of Christian political dualism ("Render unto Caesar the things which are Caesar's", in the name of the possibility of rendering to "God the things that are God's"). They interacted with and counterbalanced each other, without ever seeking to stifle or completely absorb the rival power system.

The attacks that the world of religion and the universe of its institutions suffered after the end of the unified Christianity of the medieval West (though there were also protests and heresies in the Christian Middle Ages!) should not lead us to overlook the fact that there were also alliances, forms of osmosis, with a whole rich contribution that Christian faith and its immense historical-institutional apparatus made to the development of the modern world, precisely in the form in which we know it. Modernity should be seen as a complex whole, with many facets. It was not fashioned only by combating the religious universe of a shared faith. "Modern" man (to be clear: those who laid the foundations of that extraordinary reality eventually destined to be transformed into our contemporary world) also conceived themselves as *within* and not outside the global horizon of Christianity. And what our modernity became, we owe to a great extent to how the world of organized religion reacted to it, or rather within it.

This is clearly brought out in the *Conclusion* to Rodney Stark's successful pamphlet, *The Victory of Reason: How Christianity Led to Freedom, Capitalism, and Western Success* (11). (It offers a readable synthesis, and readers can ignore the objective limits of a certain one-sided emphasis adopted in the attempt to get across his arguments against the more traditional contrary thesis). "Christianity created Western civilization... The modern world arose only in Christian societies. Not in Islam. Not in Asia. Not in a secular society - there having been none. And all the modernization that has since occurred outside Christianity was imported from the West, often brought by colonists and missionaries". Our modernity with an ancient heart does not enshrine only the fiendish lineaments of antihuman tyranny and secularization. Modernity was also the maternal womb that bred the discovery of the value of the person, the affirmation of the freedom of conscience and the desacralization of power. We can feel proud of the fifteenth-century invention of the prayer of the Rosary as well as the Declaration of the Rights of Man; of Baroque polyphony, of Bach and Mozart, just as we can appreciate payment by promissory note, the Stock Exchange and modern work, which have expanded the well-being and improved living conditions for the vast majority of people. It is Christian faith, sedimented in the deepest layers of culture and social reality, which leavens them from within, pouring itself into a passionate love for life, attachment to the material reality of things, an increasingly passionate desire for knowledge, the intelligent and creative use of resources made available by nature as precious talents. Galileo's telescope and the steam engine were prodigious factors in enhancing the quality of our modern human experience. But similar effects were produced by the spread of printing, the practice of searching our consciences, and the use of mnemonic formulas in the catechism to teach even the illiterate.

Without the widespread dissemination and continuous absorption of the Christian *humus*, our European continent would never have been capable of the effort that enabled it to



take a different path from that of other human worlds, until recently crushed by the dominion of "despots, astrologers and alchemists", and precisely for this reason "lacking universities, banks, factories, eyeglasses, chimneys, and pianos", where "most children did not reach the age of five and many women died in childbirth" (12). A world without true progress and without the possibility of independent development, sunk in the precariousness of what, however, we cannot dismiss, ethnocentrically and arrogantly, as the "Dark Ages".

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## Notes

- (1) This is the reissue, with alterations, additions and an original documentary apparatus, of a text which formerly appeared, divided into three parts, in the online bulletin "Il sussidiario" (<http://www.ilsussidiario.net/news.aspx>), which I wish to thank for consenting to publication of its unified parts. The three installments were presented with the editor's titles: *If Michelangelo and Raphael were not scandalized by Christianity...; The harmony once possible between religion and politics; A secular society that is free, a legacy of the Christian tradition* (29-31 January 2009). Trans. by Richard Sadleir.
- (2) Belting, 2005; It. trans., p. 127.
- (3) On the figure and work of Dürer the classic reference text, I believe, remains Panofsky, 1945 (1955<sup>2</sup>). It could be objected that Dürer, precociously attentive to the modern emphasis on the individual characterization of the person, projected towards the ostentation of his recognizable identity as an individual (with the signature that becomes, in his period, a recurrent declaration of the ownership of the marketable art object), painted several self-portraits which survive from successive phases of his career and they adopt iconographic forms quite distinct from the 1500 portrait. But the religious background to his self-representation reappears eloquently, for example, in one of his most celebrated paintings, the *Feast of the Rosary* painted in 1506 for the German "nation" in Venice, where he was then staying. The "monumental altarpiece" celebrated the new form of Marian devotion then spreading from the north through the whole of Christian Europe. The crowd of the faithful, both lay and religious, who receive the gift of the crowns of roses, a symbol of the prayer offered to the Virgin, included "for the first time a true self-portrait", combined with the proud superscription: "Exegit quinquemestri spatio Albertus Dürer Germanus" (all quotations from Panofsky, 1955, p. 113).
- (4) The *De dignitate* is conveniently accessible in an appendix to Bori, 2000. Critical discussion, however, of Bori's interpretation in the introductory study would be desirable.
- (5) For the phrase quoted see Psalm 8, 6.



(6) See: J. W. O'Malley, *Man's Dignity, God's Love and the Destiny of Rome. A Text of Giles of Viterbo [1972] and An Ash Wednesday Sermon on the Dignity of Man for Pope Julius II, 1513 [1978]*, reprinted in O'Malley, 1981, nos. IV and VIII; more fully O'Malley, 1979. On the cultural roots of this tradition, compare Garin, 1938 (reprinted in Garin, 2009, vol. I, pp. 1-32; it is a youthful work, related to the first approach to a research activity which later developed in different directions); and above all Kristeller, 1972, in particular Ch. I, *The Dignity of Man* (originally the Arensberg lectures, 1965). In even more general terms: de Lubac, 1974. I have here briefly summarized the argument developed more fully in Zardin, 2007.

(7) The basic historiographic thesis on which I have sought to insist, that of the Christian axis of the dominant culture in the civilization of Europe in the early modern age, evocatively documented for the Renaissance by Kristeller and even earlier on the more strictly historical side by Febvre, 1942, led to a broad superseding of the dualistic scheme with its Enlightenment and nineteenth-century matrix (the early Burckhardt), which stressed unilaterally the break between the Middle Ages (distorted for controversial purposes) and the modern age. This hindered recognition of the forces of continuity, elaboration and the development of tradition in an original direction, without which the transition to full modernity, even in its terms of knowledge and philosophical-scientific representation of the world, would be in turn ideologically mutilated and incomprehensible. The thesis of the retrieval of elements of continuity, put in tension by the forces of change and disruption, was progressively affirmed in twentieth-century historical-cultural research starting from the convergence between complex points of observation and combining different lines of inquiry. Their unified approach proved a very eloquent factor in verifying the fertility of a method which I feel able to embrace wholeheartedly, also with reference to the religious vicissitudes of Christianity in the Latin West (which has to be understood and studied in depth, before applying readymade labels to it for rapid consumption). Its acceptance as the general key to interpretation involves pushing forward the widespread crisis that destabilized the solidity of the political-cultural system of modern Europe, entwining it with the inner crisis of the cycle of the *ancien régime* and the eighteenth-century fracture, dominated by the radical and utopian strain within the Enlightenment and the Revolution. As the essential terms of reference we cite, on the side of cultural history, Hazard, 1935, which was taken up in its political-philosophical implications by Koselleck (see Koselleck, 1959); while on the side of social-"constitutional" history, Otto Brunner made a fundamental contribution (see Schiera, 2000). A master of Romance philology such as Leo Spitzer rests his interpretation on the material fabric of linguistic facts and the conceptual instruments which they are seen as reflecting (see e.g. Spitzer, 1963), while an equally authoritative openness towards the history of the religious facts are found in the synthesis by Jedin, 1946 (and subsequent editions). The fact that the path traced out leads us to measure ourselves with some of the leading scholars in the history and the humanities in our time is in itself further encouragement to aim in this direction, moving beyond other outlooks related to a now concluded phase of research into the cultural archeology of the European identity. Note that the reference to Ernst Lewalter cited above in the text refers to Lewalter, 1997 (original edition: 1935), It. trans. with a note of presentation by Roberto Righi (Righi, 1997).

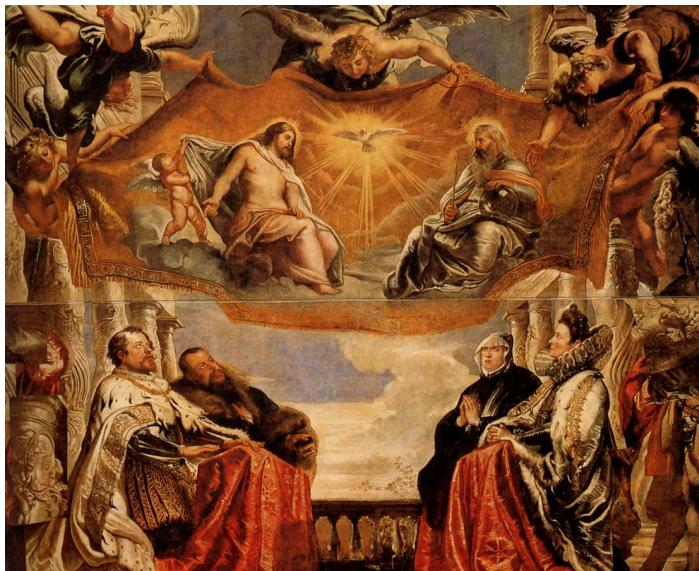
(8) A precise description of the complex iconographic composition of this huge painting (over three meters by two, it dates from 1551-1554) is found in Panofsky, 1969. This also clears up the recurrent issue in the artistic literature of the variety of titles attributed to Titian's work. It is more generally known as *The Glory*, while we know that Titian also called it the *Paradise* and Charles V in his will refers to it as the *Last Judgment*. These are only different nuances that emerge from the center of the mystery of faith it celebrates.

(9) The pregnancy of the cultural background implied by this type of "political" iconography has been condensed until it is crystallized in the universality of a *topos* widely used in the language of artistic images of the early modern age. The adoration of the Trinity recurs as the representative pivot in another portrait of a dynastic family seen as the embodiment of the figure of the "Christian prince": the canvas by Peter Paul





Rubens representing *The Gonzaga in Adoration of the Trinity*, placed with the *Baptism* and the *Transfiguration of Jesus* in the new church of the Jesuits in Mantua in 1605 (Ill. 3).



(III 3)

(10) For the start of an full understanding of the history of political thought, the reader is referred to: Bireley, 1990; Terni, 1995; Muratori, 1996 (edited and with an important introduction by Cesare Mozzarelli, pp. VII-XXXIX).

(11) Stark, 2005; It. trans. (note the attenuation of the original title), 2006.

(12) *Work cited above*, p. 233.

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