

## **REASONS FOR THEISM OF THE PERSON: SIDE NOTES TO POUIVET'S: AGAINST THEISTIC PERSONALISM**

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Elizabeth Anscombe used to claim that to understand an act the useful question to ask is: “why?” To understand an action it is necessary to go back to its reasons. Where do we start? From observation. Therefore the way Roger Pouivet argues against theistic personalism is unusual. He states:

When saying the Lord's Prayer, a Christian addresses a prayer to God which is a succession of requests ... who other than a person would we make such requests to? When talking to an animal (“Heel!”) or a machine (“Are you going to work now or what?”), we act *as if* these were people but we know that isn't the case ... Thus a prayer addressed to God by a Christian seems to imply something regarding the nature of God, namely that He is a person. And this seems also to mean that relations between God and His creatures are interpersonal.<sup>1</sup>

Though the observational approach does not seem to deny the relational character proper of the person, because the “being-in-relation”, it also seems to leave out an element that has made the history of the concept of “person”: that at the very moment a Christian turns to God reciting a prayer like the one the Author cites, and not simply a generic praise to God, then he does so being aware of the encounter and being certain of his interlocutor. Were it any different, it would mean that the verification of the faith of this *homo orans* has not yet reached awareness, has not yet awoken from a dogmatic slumber, to use a known Kantian expression.

Firstly in this essay I would like to indicate the origin of what I will call “*theism of the person*”, different from theistic personalism, entwined in history precisely with the very definition of the term “person”.

### **I. THE GOD-PERSON**

In the life of faith of a Christian there is a period of spontaneity. Romano Guardini in fact opens along this line one of his most intense texts which remains still crucial for the Church, *Das Wesen des Christentums*:

In the unrolling of Christian life there is a time during which the believer is spontaneously Christian. To be (a) Christian means to him the same thing as to believe.<sup>2</sup>

In this crucial paper, Guardini frees the Christian from that cover of false faith that one usually endows him with, as if all he believes and therefore “considers true” was the result of tradition and education, as if the conscience may remain dormant in action and no commitment nor sacrifice of a believer could be wished for, wanted, or to sum it up, have his awareness. Guardini in fact goes on saying that there is then a moment

1 Roger Pouivet, “Against Theistic Personalism: What Modern Epistemology does to Classical Theism”, *European Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 10, no. 1 (2018), 1. This essay is a shortened and revised version of the paper given by Pouivet at the conference “Esperienze religiosa e questione di Dio”, at Urbino, on 9-10/09/2016, which was published as “Contro il personalismo teistico”, in *Hermeneutica: Esperienza religiosa e questione di Dio*, ed. Marco Cangioti, Piergiorgio Grassi and Andrea Aguti (Morcelliana, 2017).

2 Romano Guardini, *Das Wesen des Christentums* (Werkbund-Verlag, 1938), 11, my translation.

when the Christian feels that, next to his, there are also other religions and consequently starts asking himself where the truth is and asks if what he is “considering as true” is actually true.

In the attempt to define the true essence of Christianity, he postulated that individual personality occupies the centre of religious consciousness or still that God-father and Son are in immediate relationship, that love of one another is decisive. Or again Christianity was set as the perfect religion, greatly conformed to reason because it would contain pure morality and on the same wavelength of nature’s requirements. All these proposals that seem to be held in the often used terminology of theistic personalism are defined by Guardini as erroneous.

Christianity in fact — affirms Guardini — is not resolved in natural categories of personality, religion, ethics, love, reason, nature, etc. He writes:

That which Christ preaches as “love”, what Paul and John intend when they speak of love under the light of their Christian conscience, is not that universal human phenomenon that is usually described by this word and is not even its purification or sublimation, but something else. It presupposes the filiality of God. This in turn is distinguished clearly from what is intended with the common concept of history of religions, when, for example we say that the religious man is close to the divine under the form of a relationship Father-Son. This rather means the rebirth of he who has faith in the living God, that is realized through the Spirit of Christ.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore Guardini does not mean the “interiority” of Christianity, like a phenomenon in the history of general psychology, but rather like

that peculiar sphere where the believer is finally taken away from a meaning based on the world and history; he is above them or rather inside them or however differently you may wish to express it.<sup>4</sup>

Guardini invites then to go beyond a granted banalization of Christian religion, beyond any easy cataloguing of it in respect of norms and values. He continues:

What is Christian cannot be derived from worldly premises and its essence cannot be determined in natural categories, because in such a manner its peculiarity is eliminated.<sup>5</sup>

Christianity is therefore a fact. Solid, real, temporal. Identifiable. I will define here what I mean with *theism of the person*, the faith in God from a person to (another) person. The belief i.e. the “real truth to hold as true” has its grounding in the person. Also, the categories to which Christianity refers to do not find their consistency other than in its essence, the Word Incarnate. Finally, Guardini reminds us that the centre of Christianity is not a “truth theory” or an “interpretation of life”. Like in the I–Thou relationship, the centre is a person:

[N]ot “humanity” or “humans” become important in that case, but the very person. The person determines all the rest, and all the more deeply and universally, as the more intense is the relationship. This may occur so strongly that all, world, destiny, task is realized through the beloved person; he/she is like contained in everything, everything recalls him/her, the beloved gives meaning to everything. In the great love experience the whole world is contained in the relationship I–Thou, all that happens, happens in its field. The personal element to which in last instance loves tends and that represents the highest reality the world holds, penetrates and determines any other form: space and landscape, rocks, trees, animals... All is real, but it resonates only between this You and this I.<sup>6</sup>

If this correspondence with the beloved is already in itself totalizing, Guardini proceeds observing how in Christianity things are even different. In fact Christianity is not made to „depend on the presentation of a love encounter that the unique person of Jesus become for man the decisive religious reality, but it is so unconditionally by itself”<sup>7</sup>. The historical reality coincides with the being. The necessity of a single man to seize this reality is not determined by the awakening of the conscience, but is the requirement (of the very conscience).

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3 Ibid., 12.

4 Ibid., 13.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 14.

7 Ibid.

Joseph Ratzinger affirms that the meaning of “person” is a result of Christian Theology. He writes:

[T]he term “person” arose out of two questions that Christian thought was forced to face from the beginning as centrally important: the questions “What is God?” (the God whom we meet in the Bible) and “Who is Christ?”<sup>8</sup>

If we want to understand well the meaning of “person”, it is not possible to turn away from these two questions. He evokes Tertullian, who imposed in the Western world his formula for the representation of the Christian idea of God, *una substantia-tres personae*. It is here that the notion of “person” enters strongly in the history of thought. The term “person” is therefore used to get closer to the comprehension of the Mystery of God. But how did Tertullian choose this term? The origin of the concept of person resides in the word *prosopon* (the corresponding Greek name), for which the great poets of ancient times introduced on the stage persons who spoke, creating literary artifices, *roles*, actually the actor’s masks. Thereafter Christian writers always use the term in dialogues, where God often speaks using the plural subjects. Though there is a big change in the use of the term “person”. For the sacred writer in fact roles are reality, dialoguing entities. I.e. *the role exists, it is prosopon, reality, person of the Logos*. Ratzinger writes in this respect:

First, the term “person” developed out of acquaintance with Scripture, as a requirement for interpreting it. It is a product of familiarity with the Bible. And, second, it developed out of the idea of dialogue, in other words, as an explanation of the phenomenon of the God who speaks dialogically. To put it yet another way: the Bible with its phenomenon of the speaking God, with its phenomenon of the God who is in dialogue, called forth the concept of person.<sup>9</sup>

Following Augustin and the patristics we may furthermore affirm that the three persons in God are relationships. The person must therefore be intended as relation. It is not a substance next to another, but relation and *the relation is the very person*. In this respect Ratzinger makes an interesting reference to modern physics, he writes:

We know that in our century scientists have attempted to reduce matter to waves, to the pure actuality of flowing. What may be a dubious idea in that context was declared by theology in the fourth and fifth centuries to be true about the Persons in God: that they are nothing other than the act of relating to one another. “Person” in God is the pure relativity of being turned toward each other; it is situated, not on the level of substance — the substance is one — but rather on the level of dialogue, of being related to one another. In this way, Augustine could then try to make the interplay of Trinity and Unity at least intuitively comprehensible, when he says, for instance: “In Deo nihil secundum accidens dicitur, sed secundum substantiam aut secundum relationem.”<sup>10</sup>

Only entering in union with that to which there is relationship is it possible to be totally ourselves. Think for example of a football player on the bench waiting to be called at last on the field to “give himself”. He is a football player and without playing, though maintaining his *role*, say he’s a forward player, cannot give himself.

Here is the contribution that faith has brought to the role. *Its topical presentation*. The person without relational topicality is not a person, while in the tragedies of Ancient Greece the person continued to embody human tragedy.

Furthermore the term “person” reemerges in Christology. Christ has two natures, divine and human, and one person. Ratzinger specifies how this affirmation was wrongly interpreted wherever Christ’s humanity was diminished or the concept of person was set in some area of the psychic patrimony. Ratzinger observes that the unleashing of all these criticisms tending to mark erroneously a diminishment of humanity, actually shows that the concept of person utilized herein is not thought in substantial terms, according to the Greek spirit, but from the existential perspective. For this reason Ratzinger criticizes the concept of person used by Boethius, *naturae rationalis individua substantia*, again according to the Greek

8 Joseph Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching* (Franciscan Press, 1985), 181.

9 Ibid., 185.

10 Ibid., 186–87.

spirit, and exalts instead the expression given by Richard of Saint Victor: *spiritualis naturae incommunicabilis existentia*. The plane is not that of essence but that of existence.

These references to Guardini and Ratzinger throw the base of the essence of the term “person”, far from the use that Pouivet employs in his essay, that seems to ignore precisely the analogical function. But now let us study in depth the Author’s reasons.

Pouivet in the first part of his essay analyses the thesis of theistic personalism. In such exam though he seems to set aside the content just mentioned by Guardini and now by Ratzinger, i.e. that the fact of the coming of Christ, as historical fact, dictates the method of the relating of man with the Christian God. Pouivet states:

Recently I heard a priest finish his sermon by saying: “During Lent, let us live intensely our relationship with God through our daily prayers and let us hear His addresses to us which he asks for us to listen to”. The actual possibility of the religious experience thus seems to involve such a relationship and therefore that God *should be a person*, and even a person who would ask me to listen to Him.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, as I observed choosing in short extracts from Ratzinger’s thought, the history of the concept of “person” is not duly mentioned, which generates a certain confusion in treating this term, a thing maybe due to the broad use by Swinburne. As recalled with Ratzinger, Christian theology has implemented and in a certain way overturned — as demonstrated much before the trial of Biddle in front of the Court<sup>12</sup> — the concept of person with respect to the Greek sense.

## II. IN FAVOUR OF SIMPLICITAS

After having analysed the perspective of theistic personalism, Pouivet is still not at all convinced that God is a person. He affirms:

If we can expect a little sympathy from our fellow creatures, because they are persons, does it make sense to wait for the same from God because He is also a person like them? Are we, I mean we human beings, in an ontological and above all *psychological continuum* with God’s sympathy for us? Does God display the characteristics of benevolence and love at the highest levels while these are present in human beings to a much lesser degree? No, because there is no *common standard* between God and ourselves. God is Goodness itself. He is not a good person and not even a *super-person*. In the same way He is not a being or *the Supreme Being* either, but HE just IS (“He Who Is”, as He himself said, *Exodus* 3: 14), without any qualifiers.<sup>13</sup>

Following the footsteps of Swinburne, Pouivet asks himself if speaking of God as a person does not turn into theological confusion. He inserts at the *consecutio* between the human person, the person of Christ with two natures, human and divine, and the persons of the Trinity<sup>14</sup>. It is necessary though to ask if such research is possible, following the Augustinian conception of temporality with respect to the Eternity of God, unfathomable mystery. It therefore appears unusual to be able to affirm that *God is personal but is not a person*, because he refers to two different temporal orders, that cannot be investigated by man, but are perfectly comprehensible to the divine mind, eternal creator of the eternity of time. It is in the dimension of eternity that the meaning of person has acquired its form and has included in its sense that transcendence, that appears to the Author to be unusually traceable in front of the characteristics of human psychology.

The person is an *unicum*, expression of infinite love, incommensurable and eternal. The eternal in time, such is the coming of Christ in history.

11 Pouivet, “Against Theistic Personalism”, 2, and similarly in Pouivet, “Contro il personalismo teistico”, 61.

12 Brian Davies, *The Reality of God and the Problem of Evil* (Continuum, 2006), 59.

13 Pouivet, “Against Theistic Personalism”, 11.

14 A passage on the issue of the Trinity is included in Pouivet, “Contro il personalismo teistico”, 64.

But now that the first level of the argument is clear, let us go back to ontology. Pouivet, who has numerous works in epistemology and specifically on religious faith<sup>15</sup>, affirms that theistic personalism is a consequence of the epistemology of the knowing subject that appeared in the XVII<sup>th</sup> century after the slow decline of scholastic philosophy.

Here the problem of evil arises. I.e. in front of an omniscient, omnipotent and infinitely good God how is evil possible for a theist? How is it possible to save the divine person, the super-person, if evil exists in the world? And here we find that trait of anger of the believer with respect to the theme of evil and the existence of a good God. To speak of a hidden God, affirms Pouivet quoting Schellenberg, is like speaking of a non-existent God. We therefore ask if the anthropomorphism of theistic personalism may not be linked to the need that God has to be comprehensible. Finally, we think of God as a person because otherwise we would not know who He is. Following this line of thought Pouivet reaches the following logical and anti-historical conclusion: „no one doubts that we do not have an experience and knowledge of God which could be compared to those we have of the world around us“. And here we are back to that reduction — proper to the methodical argumentation in the analytical field — of the human analysis that excludes man in his opening to transcendence, i.e. of an analysis of the subject X that excludes *what is person*. Why? Because of the fact that the incapacity to speak of God leads to renouncing to get closer to understanding him, or even to affirm that to meet Him is impossible. The “experience” is considered zero. It is a revival of the immobile God of Aristotle, as if perfection could be contaminated in (any) action. I like to remember here a known paragraph of Plato’s dialogues where Simmias (and Cebes) reflects with Socrates on the big questions on what is life and death, with reference to the last song of the swan:

I think, Socrates, as perhaps you do yourself, that it is either impossible or very difficult to acquire clear knowledge about these matters in this life. And yet he is a weakling who does not test in every way what is said about them and persevere until he is worn out by studying them on every side. For he must do one of two things; either he must learn or discover the truth about these matters, or if that is impossible, he must take whatever human doctrine is best and hardest to disprove and, embarking upon it as upon a raft, sail upon it through life in the midst of dangers, unless he can sail upon some stronger vessel, some divine revelation, and make his voyage more safely and securely.<sup>16</sup>

Consequently this is an hypothesis that has to be taken into consideration and postulated at the beginning of a possible discussion on the concept of person.

Pouivet also affirms, recalling the *Treatise of Divine Names* of Saint Dionysius the Areopagite for whom no name seems to be able to be attributed to God to understand Him totally, to identify God as person means

giving too much importance and value to the epistemology of the conscious subject in our understanding of God, this leads us to claim a kind of clarity that is not the right one. It must be clear that God is mysterious, and not that he is a person without our defects. This epistemology and philosophy of the mind, which appeared in the XVII<sup>th</sup> century — with the philosophical success we know about — is not at all the norm for intelligibility of the nature of God.<sup>17</sup>

We should underline the verb *to make*: to attribute “person” to God is a titanic effort by the subject to make ends meet. In reading Pouivet it is the subject who identifies God in the person. Thus we ignore what Guardini puts forward initially, sustaining it strongly as the *given* reality of Christianity next to the history of the concept of person, its genesis and its change in the theological horizon: the historical fact of the Incarnation of God. It is necessary to be predisposed to recognize God and ready to welcome the transformation that such meeting implies. Otherwise it means to reduce the power that reality takes with it and makes fruitless the question of God proper of every man and woman.

15 Cf. Roger Pouivet, *Qu'est-ce que croire?* (Vrin, 2006) and Dariusz Łukasiewicz and Roger Pouivet, eds., *The Right to Believe: Perspectives in Religious Epistemology* (Ontos Verlag, 2012).

16 Plato, *Phaedo*, 85c, Plato, *Euthyphro, Apology, Crito, Phaedo, Phaedrus*, ed. Harold N. Fowler, The Loeb classical library 36 (1966); The passage is one of the most controversial and debated: see Giovanni Reale, *Storia della filosofia antica* (Vita e Pensiero, 1975-1980), 701 vol. IV.

17 Pouivet, “Against Theistic Personalism”, 15.

The bad use of the epistemology that Pouivet lets transpire to be based on the theistic personalism front, is disregarded by the author of realistic phenomenology, Dietrich von Hildebrand, pure and true lover of *experience*. He finds exactly in epistemology, and therefore in the human structure of knowledge, the coherence of the encounter with beauty. This is the starting point from which he can speak of love as a super-value.

### III. PERSONAL DIMENSIONS

In the essay studied up to now we find the surprising claim by Pouivet: “Our knowledge of God remains shrouded in profound mystery”.<sup>18</sup> The Author is conscious that he is in front of a big question that leads to the definition both of God and himself as a human person.

So the last chapter is dedicated to the subject of prayer. In it, except for the consequences and critical views already mentioned regarding theistic personalism, emerges the intensity of the mystery of the relationship of man with God that is specific to prayer, and that the Author underlines pointedly.

Unusual though is the beginning of the argumentation, where Pouivet writes: “... if we pray, ask things from God above all, and if those prayers are petitions, God indeed *must* be a person.”<sup>19</sup> The movement of prayer from man to God underlines the fact, for how the invocation is structured, that God is a person. That means: the description of the statement designates the factual reality. Now the epistemology in this respect should be the other way around! Our way of praying is implied by the fact that God is a person and as such calls, invites, expects. In fact, there would not be stranger thing of an answer to a question that is not posed, as if looking at the blackboard and reading a mathematical operation, I started instead to recite a poem: the mistake would not be so much on the signs on the blackboard as much as in my interpretation. Maybe a simplistic example, but in talking of the prayer it is clear that in the middle is our concept of God, like in reading the signs on the blackboard. Now the concept of God is dictated by its reality: God *made* man. Pouivet continues: “If our prayers do have a meaning, we surely are addressing a loving and personal being. But it does not mean that God is a person.”<sup>20</sup> A personal being who though escapes comprehension: of what are we talking about exactly? An intimate relationship with the mystery of reality? With beauty, joy, happiness, evil, pain? With what is *perceived* as good or bad?

Prayer for the Author would be this turning in a *personal* way to a *personal* being. Power though empty of hope. Because hope is *real* when, based on the present, it looks up to a renewal of the present, transformed, according to unknown times and means, but absolutely certain. In the Author’s conception though, this dimension of the unknown seems to be excluded inasmuch as it generates disorder. It is possible to pray for the world’s order, for peace, for a whole lifetime and continue to live at war? If God, why evil? If on one side there is this lacking, the Author though underlines strongly the character of the relationship between man and God. Therefore prayer would not be the expression of a request to God, an interlocution with someone, but it would already contain God. Prayer so interpreted would already contain God, exactly like an actual dialogue with a person at the table, a dialogue that contains the other party at the very moment it is expressed. This is why in the reading that the Author gives of the concept of prayer I feel that we may affirm strictly that prayer be read precisely in its highest expression, that only mysticism, the contemplation of Gods *countenance* may follow.

Interestingly and partly disarming for the fierce criticism of theistic personalism the conclusions summed up by the Author as we quote: “My prayer is what God does in me: He makes my question.”<sup>21</sup> And here comes up again the verb “to make”

18 Ibid.

19 Pouivet, “Against Theistic Personalism”, 15–6.

20 Ibid., 16.

21 Pouivet, “Contro il personalismo teistico”, 71. This expression is present only in the extended version published in *Hermeneutica*. Anyway the force of the verb “to make” is also present in Pouivet, “Against Theistic Personalism”, 17–18: “Our prayers do not alter God, they do not make him do something that he would probably not have done otherwise, or change his mind”

The point of criticism though is the following. The Author sustains that God is not a person, that the theological field of prayer is not that of interpersonal relationship because prayer is a *divine act*. In this sense the conclusion is that when we pray we are already fulfilled, that a relationship is not started because there is an act. So the question raised is: *Who is Christ* for the Author and *What is Christianity* because the encounter with God does not seem to be identifiable in any person.

Now it is important for me to recall briefly one of the most important works of von Hildebrand, i.e. *Das Wesen der Liebe*, written at the age of 82 and published in a German magazine in 1971. Here he defines love as “super-value response”<sup>22</sup>. To develop broadly the meaning of such definition would take more space than available. It will be enough to give a brief synthesis. Von Hildebrand, after having distinguished psychic states from intentional acts, separates within intentional experiences receptive acts from the stands taken by an individual in respect to a certain issue. Such stands generate *answers*, that may be intellectual, volitional or emotional. Further von Hildebrand introduces the term value in an analysis on the categories of importance, i.e. on the dimensions of reality that are capable of motivating a person, particularly his/her will and affectivity. The fundamental categories of importance are what is satisfactory for the subject and what is satisfactory in itself. *Value* is what is important in itself, capable of appealing to anyone, independently from subjective preferences. Next to these categories of importance there is a third one, i.e. the man motivated by a good important in itself, that has a value capable of motivating action. An example of this is a present. Furthermore values are divided in ontological, that concern being or non being of something, and quantitative, that consist in possessing (a) perfection and are in turn distinguished in vital, aesthetic and moral. Between value and response there is always a relationship of having to be. In *Das Wesen der Liebe* love is thus defined as *the affective response to another person, in the comprehensive set of his/her values*<sup>23</sup>. Love therefore for Von Hildebrand is the reply to a personal being, and not to impersonal good(s), nor to the values of this personal being, but always *to the person as such*.

Thus love is the answer to value in the most authentic sense but at the same time it cannot be totally reduced to this (response) because it implies many perfections that transcend the other responses to value, in this sense, it is a “super-response to value”. Von Hildebrand conceives person with a great opening towards transcendence. As Paola Premoli De Marchi recalls in her introduction to the Italian edition of *Das Wesen der Liebe* the starting point of the philosophical analysis of von Hildebrand in the relationship between man and God does not consist in the rational demonstration of the existence of God (object of theology), but in the living relationship lived by man with God, i.e. by his religious experience. Saint Irenaeus dared to say that Christ does not bring anything new, but brings everything *as new*<sup>24</sup>. It would be then very useful to take up again Ratzinger’s exhortation to philosophical-theological unity of thought. Very unique is this paragraph referred to Saint Thomas’ theology:

[Aquinas] proceeds in theology on the existential level with Richard of Saint Victor but treats the whole matter as if it were a theological exception, whereas in his philosophy he remains to a great extent faithful to the other approach of pre-Christian philosophy with Boethius’ concept of person. The contribution of the Christian faith to the totality of human thought is not fully realized; it remains divorced from it as a theological exception, although the *sense* of this novelty is precisely to call the *totality* of human thought into question and to set it on new paths.<sup>25</sup>

Thought springs from life, intentions are nourished by action, and not by an unusual temporal moment (almost a kind of undefined limbo) that comes before it.

Pouivet in his criticism to theistic personalism does not consider the history of the concept of person and does not underline the metaphysical potentials that this concept triggers, also simply for the way it was elaborated and transformed in the history of thought. Therefore if it is not clear what he intends by Christianity, we must highlight the intensity with which it indicates the drama of man’s turning to God in

22 Dietrich v. Hildebrand, *Das Wesen der Liebe* (Habel, 1971); Dietrich v. Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love* (St. Augustine’s Press, 2009), ch. 1 on “Love as Value-Response”, ch. 7 on “Intentio Benevolentiae, Value-Response, and Super Value-Response”.

23 Hildebrand, *The Nature of Love*, ch. 1.

24 Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses*, IV, 34, 1.

25 Ratzinger, *Dogma and Preaching*, 191.

the act of prayer, of a time and space, where God *makes* man. It is not by chance that Pouivet's reflection often moves in the aesthetics field, and his text *Qu'est-ce qu'une oeuvre d'art?*<sup>26</sup> deserves to be referred to in this instance. The Author individualizes and makes himself spokesman in his production of metaphysical character that transpires in the expression of beauty. Art is an expression of that relationship with things that otherwise could not be mentioned, it "is always in minor or major measure an improvised prayer"<sup>27</sup>. In beauty, in the dimensions of art like in that of prayer in fact transpires the tension towards a God that one wishes to affirm, describe, narrate.

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26 Pouivet, *Qu'est-ce que croire?*.

27 Andrej Sinjavskij, *Una voce dal coro* (Garzanti, 1975), 12, my translation.