

## The Promotion of Personhood in France

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### Abstract

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The author argues that one of the greatest tasks of the Church today is the development and defence of a robust Christian anthropology against the depersonalization taking place under the onslaught of a secularism which, ironically, seeks to deny God and elevate man, but actually ends up denigrating man and his dignity. The author, the founder of the French community Points-Cœur (Heart's Home) whose charisms include fatherhood, mission, and compassion, demonstrates how the defence of human dignity can take place in and by such communities as his, one of the so-called new ecclesial movements which contribute not merely to the renewal of the Church but also to the renewal and even reconstruction of the human personality.



### *Introduction*

In studying the movement of Radical Orthodoxy as a Christian response to postmodern culture, I want to argue that the solution given to us by Christ is based today, as well as yesterday, on His love for the human person and His attention to each person in particular. For instance, when everyone follows the coffin of the widow's son in Nain (Luke 7:12), Christ approaches it and says: "Woman, do not cry!" He approaches the Samaritan woman (John 4:7), Zacchaeus (Luke 19:5), the adulterous woman (John 8:10), and Matthew (Luke 5:27).

Jesus approaches each person with a loving embrace of the whole destiny of the person.

This interest in the person is at the heart of Christian revelation and is the answer offered constantly by Christ to the person at the crossroads. In the light of the experience of the work of the organization Points-Cœur (Heart's Home) and the experience of new movements, particularly Radical Orthodoxy (henceforth: RO), I would like to reflect on the way in which Christ approaches the modern person in order to care for his wounds, particularly in the French context. Obviously we will be able to undertake only a modest review of such a broad topic, proceeding in three parts. First, we will stress the post-modern context of de-personification, which concerns first of all our Western cultures. Then we will consider the way in which Christ offers today a concrete answer in this context, particularly in France, through the experience of ecclesial movements which have been developing for a few decades now. In conclusion, we will illustrate this report with a brief presentation of the charism of compassion we have received and of the movement produced, despite ourselves, by this gift of God.

### *The Secular Character of Postmodernism*

If there is a dogma of the prevailing modern culture in France at which the movement of RO is aimed, it is secularism. At the International Peace Congress in Lyon in 2005, our Minister of the Interior, Nicolas Sarkozy, made a long commendation of this secularism:

France celebrates this year the hundredth anniversary of its law of separation of church and state, also called the law of 1905.... Contrary to the image which it inherited from its animated history, secularism in the French manner is not the enemy of religions. It is a political, legal and human construction which endeavors to reconcile the right of each individual to practice religion and prohibits disrespect for a thing as valuable as freedom of conscience. It organizes the

peaceful coexistence of all religions.... Secularism is unanimously recognized as one of the pillars of French democracy, a condition of its balance, a factor of peace among citizens. Secularism is not the only model for the peaceful coexistence of several religions and atheism in a democratic country. But, in our country, where internal conflicts are often passionate and leave deep marks, it constitutes a point of consensual balance today. All the religions of our country are deeply attached to it; their representatives who are here can testify to this.<sup>1</sup>

Sarkozy's argument is that the secular character is necessary to maintain peace.<sup>2</sup> Cornelio Fabro briefly formulates this cultural position by the aphorism: "If God exists, he does not matter."

Luigi Giussani, by sharp contrast, argues that

the real enemy of true religiosity is not atheism as such but secularism: in fact, if the holy is not intertwined with the concrete concerns of a person's daily life, that connection with God is felt only in a very subjective manner. But human reality remains at the mercy of human criteria. In practice this means that it can easily be determined by the civil authorities.<sup>3</sup>

This is a perspective also shared by the Bohemian theologian Joseph Zverina:

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolas Sarkozy, Address at the 19<sup>th</sup> Congress "Men and Religions," organized in Lyon by the Community of Sant'Egidio in France, 11–13 September 2005 on the theme "The Courage of a Humanism of Peace." More information is available in the archives at [www.zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org).

<sup>2</sup> William Cavanaugh analyzes this position, describing the source of the myth of the state as the rescuer of the "peaceful co-existence of religions." See W. Cavanaugh, *Eucharistie et mondialisation* (Genève: Ad Solem, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> L. Giussani, *La conscience religieuse de l'homme moderne* (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 39–40.