

GRIST

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from } *Do You Believe?: Conversations on God and Religion*, by Antonio Monda, Vintage, 2007
[Personal reflections, and interviews with writers, thinkers, artists and film directors]

Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen.

St. Paul, Letter to the Hebrews, 11:1

When Christ at a symbolic moment was establishing his great society, he chose for its corner-stone neither the brilliant Paul nor the mystic John, but a shuffler, a snob, a coward – in a word, a man. And upon this rock he has built his Church, and the gates of Hell have not prevailed against it. All the empires and the kingdoms have failed, because of this inherent and continual weakness, that they were founded by strong men and upon strong men. But this one thing, the historic Christian Church, was founded on a weak man, and for that reason it is indestructible.

G. K. Chesterton

I don't think that anyone, even those who consider religion a disaster, a lie, or "the opiate of the people," can help feeling a sense of mystery before the central place still occupied by this two-thousand-year-old institution constructed by weak men who have often cursed and betrayed its message. And the sense of mystery can only conceal a doubt: Is there something truly divine behind it? Chesterton's insight about the indestructible weak force goes along with the thesis of *l'Impur*, a book by the French writer Jean Guitton about the Catharist heresy, which has Gnostic origins and intersects the history of the Church. Guitton dares to prefer the impure over the pure, with the purpose of saving the true: in the knowledge that purity is the temptation of the man who believes himself an angel – who takes refuge from life lived, with all its compromises, and impatiently wants to separate the weeds from the good seed. To use Guitton's words: "The devil is the image of the angel. Catharism is the temptation of great souls, of elevated consciences, of disinterested beings. It's the analogue of the angelic sin."

The temptation of Catharism seems to me the other side of the New Age spiritual tendencies currently so fashionable. Against an unattainable purity is set a

religion constructed for the use of the individual worshipper, with elastic standards that contradict the sense of the etymon *religio* "bond." Orthodoxy paradoxically becomes the root of the problem precisely because of the daily abnegation it demands, which prides itself on its *aurea mediocritas*, its golden mean; and it also becomes the enemy to combat or deride on the part of those who have chosen the two extremes of Catharism and the vague New Age cult of the personal. Yet it becomes, dangerously, the fertile ground in which every type of fundamentalist aberration can proliferate.

Antonio Monda

We require higher tasks, because we do not recognize the height of those we have. Trying to be kind and honest seems an affair too simple and too inconsequential for gentlemen of our heroic mould; we had rather set ourselves to something bold, arduous, and conclusive; we had rather found a schism or suppress a heresy, cut off a hand or mortify an appetite. But the task before us, which is to co-endure with our existence, is rather one of microscopic fineness, and the heroism required is that of patience. There is no cutting of the Gordian knots of life.

Robert Louis Stevenson

The Church would be not the true people of God but a purely ideal reality, of almost mythical character, if one thought that the state of sin of its members determined it...If one realizes clearly that the earthly Church remains a church of sinners, one understands exactly how and why it is the holy Church.

Karl Rahner

[There are Bible scholars who maintain that atheists don't exist: there are only believers and idolaters.
A. M.]

[The principle of grace means] no one is beyond the reach of God...I pray, but I don't believe in petition prayers: My requirements are trivial. I don't bug God...I consider prayer above all an act of gratitude for existence.

Saul Bellow

The Bible is easily the most beautiful work ever written; whoever wrote it is God to me...[Do you believe in life after death?] It's a question that brings

me to a point of crisis. Yet again I would be tempted to say no, that it's an illusion and also perhaps a joke, but if you ask me where I think my grandfather is at this moment I would answer: in Paradise.

Nathan Englander

I don't think it's possible to imagine God, but perhaps only to hear him. I hear him every day. I try to avoid the temptation to seek him only in moments of need. [To hear God and feel his presence] is one of the very definitions of life. We didn't create ourselves alone...Freedom means being free not only *from* something but *for* something. So the relationship to God doesn't depend on man. Otherwise freedom would be simply subjection to others.

Daniel Libeskind

What is there for you after death? The true life. [And what is the life that we're living at this moment?] A passage and a gift.

Antonio Monda

[I would feel useless without faith, and even more useless without charity. A. M.] On charity, I am in total agreement. One of the most beautiful, gratifying, and enriching experiences of my life was my involvement with the Catholic Worker Movement. One can say what one likes about faith, but what I saw done by its members daily and by all who were the heirs of Dorothy Day is simply marvelous: an extraordinary lesson for us all on what it means to love and to work to make the world a better place with determination and a spirit of service. It was an experience that formed my social, political, and even artistic conscience.

Grace Paley

There is nothing more dangerous than a person in politics who is certain that he is acting in the name of God. I've always liked the definition of a fanatic given by Mr. Dooley, the character invented by Finley Peter Dunne: "A man that does what he thinks th' Lord wud do if He knew th' facts iv th' case."

Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.

You don't make up for your sins in church. You do it in the streets...Repentance and redemption require a constant daily effort. For a believer, the Church has to represent the departure and the point of reference.

Martin Scorsese

Religion is a fact one cannot escape. I've always been sure that it's an illusion to think that one can do without it, or has not been indelibly influenced by it...Exile is always painful, but in some ways it's the

most classic human condition. The sense of exile experienced by the victim of persecution, by a poor man who flees poverty, or even by someone who simply feels uneasy living where he was born is a metaphor of the exile of the human condition... I admit that I almost always pray when I'm in trouble. When I feel stronger and more serene, I express gratitude for life, the most wonderful gift there is...I think that each of us, leaving aside whatever our conviction may be, feels in his inmost self the sense of something infinitely greater. Faith offers us a key, or rather a way, opposed to mystery, and creates a new one – precisely what believers define as the "mystery of faith."

Derek Walcott

The Bible speaks of God who covers his face. And my interpretation – it's not only mine – is that God covers his face because he can't bear what he sees, what we men do...[Every image of God] represents a limitation, and that mystery is part of his infinite greatness... [Dostoevsky's assertion, "If God doesn't exist, everything is permitted,"] is a tragic declaration, which I feel I share. The world has had obvious recent experience of it. The horrors of the century just ended were perpetrated by the godless dictatorship of Nazism and the atheist dictatorship of Communism. This obviously doesn't mean that monstrosities haven't been committed in the name of God; the list of believers who are stained with infamy is long. Yet the programmatic absence of a God, or at least the illusion of opposing his presence, leads systematically to horror...[A world where suffering, injustice, and tyranny exist] is the greatest torment of my entire existence...But even in these terrible moments I see not an absence but, rather, an eclipse...No one can or will ever be able to demonstrate that a war is fought by the will of God. If it weren't such a tragic subject, one might ask jokingly every time for a notarized statement certifying that the war about to be unleashed has been willed expressly by the Omnipotent...My faith is wounded... Hasidism teaches that no heart is as whole as a broken heart, and I would say that no faith is as solid as a wounded faith...Prayer is a fundamental aspect [of spirituality], but I devote a large part of my existence to action: I believe it's a way of interpreting one's spirituality... Once, Francois Muriac dedicated a book to me and he wrote: "To Elie Wiesel, a Jewish child who was crucified." At first I took it badly, but then I understood that it was his way of letting me feel his love.

Elie Wiesel