

The Crisis of the Modern Man between Rights and Obligations

Miron Erdei¹

The state of tension which characterizes the world society of the 21st century is more and more visible. We see every day on TV political dissensions, street fights, terrorist attacks, military conflicts, actions which result in deaths and injuries, widows and orphans, tears and blood. We have to ask the indispensable question of this modern calamity: haven't we had enough of this state of global pain? Hasn't the society we live in learnt anything from the events of Ypres, Somme and Verdun? Or from those in Dresda, Kursk and Hiroshima?! Someone said that the one who didn't know history was condemned to relive it. Unfortunately this precept has come true with the attacks of September 11, 2001 in the United States and those from Europe, March 2004 in Madrid, January 7, 2015 in Paris and all the other ones to follow and that don't seem to end. More than ever we witness an anthropological crisis, a dehumanization, in spite of the rights and the obligations the man himself has established to avoid a universal existential failure. This study aims to identify and analyze the causes that lead this rational being - man - to an irrational behaviour, this masterpiece of sensitivity to insensate attitudes, this little creator to self-destruction.

1. Modern man between his civil rights and obligations

History shows us that the archaic humans fought hard to survive against cataclysms and wild animals. Trying to overcome the obstacles, man associated with others, forming a tribe, that he organized in order to conquer and enslave other people and other tribes. The coward became brave; the slave of dangers became an enslaver of his fellows. Thousands of years of pain and fights were necessary for mankind to understand that we are all equal, that we have rights in this world, as well as obligations.

The principles of democracy were established in Athens (5th century B.C.), perfected by Christ the Saviour and enshrined in the "Declaration of Independence" (1776), which states that "all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, among which we mention Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness". Even so, we needed another 200 years to make these principles become valid for all people, irrespective of the race and culture. Although the benefits of democracy are multiple, the novelist E.M. Forster states the following: "So Two Cheers for Democracy: one because it admits variety and two because it permits criticism. Two cheers are quite enough: there is no occasion to give it three. Maybe a third cheer should be given to constitutional democracy, a form of government that combines popular participation to decision-making with the respect for the rule of law and of rights".²

We must remember the fact that since the beginning of his creation, man has received from God a series of rights, but also of obligations, some meant to make him happy, the others meant to protect him; man's mission is the moral responsibility of his own life, proving that he is the only rational being of the divine creation: „ You are free to eat from any tree in the garden; but you must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat from it you will certainly die.” (Genesis 2, 16-17). The divine care for man can be found in all the commandments of civil, political and religious nature given to the men of the Old Testament, which culminate with the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments which sum up man's obligations to God, to his fellow and implicitly to himself.

¹ Fr. Senior Lecturer in Homiletic, Catechetical and Methods in teaching, The Faculty of Orthodox Theology "Bishop Dr. Vasile Coman", University of Oradea, Romania

² Enciclopedie ilustrată de istorie universală: nume, date, evenimente (Illustrated encyclopedia of universal history: names, dates, events), Reader's Digest Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006, p. 207.

The condition to man's happiness was the observation of God's commandments: "If you are willing and obedient, you will eat the good things of the land" (Isaiah, 1, 19). Despite all these, man disregarded God's commandments, giving rise to moments of deep moral, social and economic crisis. Christ's arrival in the world was crucial for man's physical and spiritual salvation from death. His fundamental precept "Do to others as you would have them do to you" (Luke 6, 31), also called the "golden rule" balanced the relations between all the categories of the society and underpinned the whole moral axiology of humankind, being unanimously accepted by all the major religions of the world: Jews, Christians and Muslims. This is the reason why the philosopher Petre Țuțea underlined the importance of Christianity for the progress of mankind; in his opinion, nothing can replace Christianity "not even the whole pre-Christian ancient culture. I think that the apogee of Europe was not in Athens, but in the Middle Ages, when God walked from door to door".³ Man's transformation and moral perfection are achievable only through faith, through Jesus Christ: "The French Revolution was not a revolution; the Russian revolution was not a revolution either. There is no such thing as revolutions, only insurrectional techniques in the fight for power" (Curzio Malaparte). If we speak about a "restructuring" of man, this has happened only once in time, when Christ arrived.⁴

Despite these valuable spiritual legacy and the countless civil rights that the modern man has gained, the human society is facing a severe existential crisis and it is desperately seeking its resolution. After more than three centuries during which the modern principles based exclusively on reason have been applied, when the human society has experienced two world wars, the red plague of Communism, man-made natural disasters (Cernobîl, 1986), followed by the ecological disasters caused by pollution, culminating nowadays with financial collapses and social crises, the recourse to religion and to its moral principles is the only chance of recovery for the contemporary society: "The necessity of dialogic relation, thus overcoming the trenches practice and mindset between society and religion, generally speaking, is verified precisely in those domains that lie at the crossroads of secular and religious values".⁵ The solution of the recovery of the society by means of Christian values was recommended by Pope John Paul II, who underlined that "The old continent needs Jesus Christ in order to avoid losing its soul and wasting those things that elevated it in the past and that continue to raise admiration among the peoples." In other words, the historical reality is an irrefutable evidence that we, men, as well as peoples, live in peace and prosperity, without moments of crisis and we have the chance of freedom only when we are the "slaves" of laws, that is, when we take advantage of our rights up to the limit allowed by our fellow's rights.

2. Modern man between his political rights and obligations

After the introduction of the democratic government, in the 18th century, the Americans used to deny the voting rights of women and slaves. Similarly, the French used to grant this right only to men. Only in 1893, the New Zealand granted voting rights to women. In 1918, women obtain the right to vote in the United States as well; in 1928, Great Britain, grants this right only to women over the age of 21. In France, women obtain this right in 1945, in Romania in 1948 and in Switzerland, women have taken part in the elections only since 1971.⁶

One of the major assets of the modern man is the right to vote in order to choose a series of policy makers, that will have an imminent impact on the whole spectrum of his life as a citizen. This implies a great political responsibility on both parts. Unfortunately, the reality is often worrying: the citizen, whose voting right has been enshrined in the blood of his predecessors, shows a gross indolence to the moral and political integrity of the one that he elects, as well as to his electoral program. Either he elects unknowingly – uninformed and uninvolved – or he elects in a subjective manner, driven by his immediate interests, not by the long-term public interest.

As for the elected people, things can get even more serious: the temptation to obtain a political mandate with considerable financial benefits determines many candidates to practice an exacerbated demagoguism; it also leads to the involvement in the political life of certain incompetent people, lacking a robust political preparation and having a questionable personal life.

³ 322 de vorbe memorabile ale lui Petre Țuțea (322 memorable words of Petre Țuțea), Humanitas Publishing House, Bucharest, 1997, p. 34.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 92-93.

⁵ Radu Preda, *Revenirea lui Dumnezeu. Studii social-teologice* (God's Return. Social-theological studies) Eikon Publishing House, Cluj-Napoca, 2010, p. 15.

⁶ Enciclopedie ilustrată de istorie universală: nume, date, evenimente (Illustrated encyclopedia of universal history: names, dates, events), Reader's Digest Publishing House, Bucharest, 2006, p. 207.

This situation can be seen on a sporadic basis in the western countries, but it is very frequent in the former Communist countries, as well. "Not knowing whether they come from a historical and doctrinal perspective, he sees the future only in personal terms. He doesn't have the political sense to make history. He doesn't understand what is at stake and he is astonished by the chaos created by his political act. There are always other people who are responsible for this failure... What is reprehensible is not the childhood of democracy, but the childlike behaviour of the democrats who believe they are mature".⁷

In order to avoid such compromising situations, a thorough prior informing of the voter is necessary; with regard to the political candidate, the legalisation of the political responsibility for all his uncontrolled decisions, having serious consequences upon the society is crucial. A relevant example is the strange political evolution of Hitler who, although a stranger (born in Austria), having no political experience, money or political relations, managed to get at the head of one of the most important powers of the world and caused the greatest war ever witnessed by humankind. Which were the causes that led to the horrifying world genocide? The first cause lies in the economic crisis, followed by the political one that affected Germany between 1919-1933; the second cause was the vote of confidence received by Hitler from the German people and the third cause was his oratory charisma, never met before, about which we can state the following: "Judging by his capacity to move the masses, Hitler may have been the most effective orator in the history of mankind".⁸ In fact, he kept the promise he made to the German people before being elected Chancellor: "Give me 10 years and you will not recognize Germany again!"

These sad examples confirm the idea that during the periods of political crises and social instability, the scums of the society assert themselves, people who, under normal circumstances, are left in political impotence and in social anonymity. It would be inappropriate not to mention the fourth cause that generates social crises and contributes to the radical changes in the history of mankind: human meanness, often shown by the lack of compassion for the oppressed. Some of the problems that our society faces increasingly are injustice and poverty. Since time immemorial, they formed the background of dissatisfaction, followed by uprisings and wars. In this regard, here are three examples which should function as a perpetual reminder for posterity:

a. On the 14th of July 1789, in the morning, the Bastille prison was frantically attacked by around 1000 people, dissatisfied with the fiscal conditions imposed by the government in the context of the economic crisis. This was added to the famine experienced by the French people as a result of poor harvest and harsh winter of the previous year. Whole neighbourhoods of Paris took part in the revolution, rejecting the attacks of the royalist troops. Helpless and passive in front of the crisis that had reached its peak, king Louis XVI noted in his personal diary "Rien" (nothing), which was a "disgusted reference to the fact that the uprising had prevented him from hunting, leaving his bag empty"⁹. In the afternoon of that day, the guns and cannons were silent, allowing the bells of Paris to announce the great victory: the rebelling people had inaugurated a new era and had written the first day of freedom in the history of France.

b. Unhappy with the miserable conditions in which they were living in Russia in 1905, 200 000 men, women and children headed toward the palace of the Tzar Nicholas II, carrying religious flags and the portrait of the Tzar, wearing festive clothes and singing religious songs; they "trusted the Tzar, their « Father » and believed him able to solve the injustices"¹⁰. Unfortunately, their peaceful manifestation turned into a massacre with over 500 victims and thousands of injured fallen under the unmerciful swords of the riding Cossacks and under the rhythmical rounds of cannon of the infantry. Starting with that moment, Russia has never been the same again. The Tzar did not show compassion towards his own people, and the people lost confidence in him. This was the beginning of the Bolshevik revolution in Russia.

⁷ Michael H. Hart, 100 de personalități din toate timpurile care au influențat evoluția omenirii (100 personalities of all times who influenced the evolution of mankind), Lider Publishing House, Bucharest, 1992, p. 338.

⁸ Când unde & cum s-a întâmplat (When, where & how did it happen?), Reader's Digest Publishing House, Bucharest, 2005, p. 198.

⁹ Când unde & cum s-a întâmplat (When, where & how did it happen?), Reader's Digest Publishing House, Bucharest, 2005, p. 198.

¹⁰ Când unde & cum s-a întâmplat (When, where & how did it happen?), Reader's Digest Publishing House, Bucharest, 2005, p. 294.

c. After tens of years of deprivations, of injustices, of Security-Communist persecutions, the Romanian people faced the difficult years when the apartments were cold, electricity was cut off, water did not run on the tap, all these culminating with the restriction of basic foodstuffs.¹¹ The latter drove the people in the street in 1989, asking for “Freedom! Freedom!”, shouting “We are the people” and “Down with Communism!”.¹² Ceaușescu had lost the confidence of the Romanians, while the Romanian people had lost the last gleam of hope in a better future. This was the beginning of the fall of communism in Romania.

These three major events that changed the history of mankind drive us to the conclusion that any political system can create moments of crisis, by means of abuse, injustice and the lack of compassion for the needy; the Romanian saying “The satiated don’t believe the hungry” is valid on all Earth’s meridians. I am wondering today: how many of our fellows must still suffer because of our indifference? How many children must still die of starvation in the poor countries while we bear with indifference, the pitiless cyclical nature of the economic and political crises, out of which we don’t seem to have learnt anything?

3. Modern man between his religious rights and obligations

The Spanish conquistadors were horrified when they saw the piles of skulls of people sacrificed during the bloody rituals of the Aztecs. Today we are horrified when we hear about the way the conquistadors mercilessly massacred the Aztecs, although these people received Cortez as a saving god.¹³ What will the future generations say about us? About us, who should take pride in the 3 500 years of Mosaic culture; 2 000 years of Christian morality and 1 400 years of Muslim strictness? Then, S. Mehedinți’s statement will be true, more than ever: “A people’s value, just like any man’s equals the amount of his comprehension of the Gospel”.¹⁴

Unfortunately, we witness a series of events having a religious nature that are gaining a worrying momentum obliging us to identify the causes that have led to these dissensions. Especially since the religions must not be set in an ideological antagonism, as they have the same initial starting point and the same final meeting point: God. Then which is the source of these unjustified asperities between the three major religions which aim for the same eternal purpose?! The cause lies in the mistaken perception of religion, by its association with the civilisation formed behind the religion. What kind of civilisation can we meet in Europe nowadays? A civilisation which craved for freedom and paid for it the high price of blood – as the three mentioned revolutions showed us. Once obtained, freedom was driven away from the religious moral and canons and turned into libertinism, whose fruits were soon visible: poverty, sex marriage, racism, sexual slavery, immigration, persecution, abortion, divorce, orphans, paedophilia, pornography,¹⁵ the freedom to write anything about anyone, without assuming any responsibility in this regard.

Is this the world that God asks us to create here on Earth? Will this way of living allow us to gain the Kingdom of Heaven promised by Jesus Christ? Just as well, the Muslim civilisation has witnessed a new religious orientation, by the biased interpretation of certain texts of the Islamic teaching, which resulted in a new way of living, different from the traditional Islam, whose characteristic is the religious fundamentalism.

One concrete and current example in this regard is the Charlie Hebdo case in Paris. Until this event, in which several people died or were injured and whose only fault was that they were in the wrong place at the wrong time (and any of us could have been there), nobody could imagine the drastic consequences of the unlimited freedom of press, which has no connexion to the human rights, or the pain caused by the religious fundamentalism, which has no connexion to the sacred texts of the Torah or of the Holy Scriptures or of the Coran, but rather to the macabre art of killing. All the religions promote life and its valences: the right to life and the protection of life. This is the reason why nobody has the right to take another life and no murder can be religiously motivated.

¹¹ Grigore Cartianu, *Sfârșitul ceaușeștilor. Să mori împușcat ca un animal sălbatic* (The End of the Ceaușescus, To die shot like a wild animal) Editura Adevărul Holding, București, 2010, p. 225.

¹² Idem, *Crimele revoluției. Sângeroasa diversiune a KGB – iștilor din FSN* (The Crimes of the Revolution. The Bloody Diversion of the KGB of the NSF), Adevărul Holding Publishing House, Bucharest, 2010, p. 84.

¹³ Alfred Bertholet, *Dicționarul religiilor* (Dictionary of Religions), “Alexandru Ioan Cuza” University Publishing House, Iași, 1995, p. 376.

¹⁴ Simion Mehedinți, *Creștinismul românesc* (Romanian Christianity), Anastasia Foundation, Bucharest, 1995, p. 23.

¹⁵ See details in David Platt, *Împotriva culturii. O chemare plină de compasiune să ne împotrivim culturii...* (Against Culture. A Compassionate Call to Fight against Culture) Imago Dei Publishing House, Oradea, 2016, 269 p.

Only God has the full right upon life; He is the only one who can suppress it, because he created life and gave it to us. If someone does this, he replaces God, he cannot be considered a man, but a criminal, he does not belong to the community of the faithful, but to a terrorist group.

We ask ourselves the following question: if these three eternal coordinates – God, Life and Faith – are the expression of the universal sacredness, can legislation, an institution or a man discredit, stain or ridicule them? Obviously not! This would be a blasphemy, since they are universal values and their mocking of produces pain, offence and revolt.

Here is what we can find out from the confession of university professor dr. Nicu Gavriluță: "In several issues of the magazine Charlie Hebdo there are countless caricatures showing the Prophet Muhammad, the Coran, the Muslim world in general. There are very few caricatures addressed to Judaism. The birth of Jesus Christ our Saviour is vulgarized and ridiculed. The Holy Trinity is shown as a masculine sexual orgy; in my opinion, only a sick mind could conceive such a thing. The Catholic Church, with its famous sexual scandals is presented in an indecent situation, to put it euphemistically".¹⁶ To conclude, he underlines that he must support the freedom of expression, but not its turning into fetish. It must not be a little "God" of this world, as argued, unfortunately, by some journalists. On the contrary, we must remember that "nobody is entitled to be called a man if he feels good when laughing at his brother's deepest and the most humane inner states".¹⁷

In the European area, there are values that cannot be flouted: the national flag, the Jewish people's suffering during the last World War, the humiliation of all those who suffered in the Nazi labour camps, the memory of the victims of Communism; they all benefit from a special protection from all of us¹⁸. It is high time that the religious values enjoy the same treatment and that we all meditate on the statement of the writer Ernest Bernea: "Why are people lying in wait and hunting each other? Why do they think that there is enough space in the world for them only when another one disappears? Nobody can take your place, the place of your own gifts; they come together with life".¹⁹

Hasn't the sum of our rights driven us away from the aim of our own life: that of being righteous, that of keeping the verticality proper for the rational being of God's creation? Hasn't this wrath of terror upon Christianity been allowed by God because of our deviation from the values He had settled? Maybe we should meditate more on this issue and we could find the necessary solutions for solving the crisis of the modern society.

¹⁶ Nicu Gavriluță, Nicolae Dima, Sorin Mihalache, *Religie și violență în Europa seculară, Dialoguri Trinitas (Religion and Violence in secular Europe, Dialogues, Trinitas)*, "Alexandru Ioan Cuza" University Publishing House, Iași, Bucharest, 2016, p. 276-277.

¹⁷ Ernest Bernea, *Îndemn la simplitate (Call to simplicity)*, Anastasia Publishing House, Bucharest, 1995, p. 20.

¹⁸ Nicu Gavriluță, Nicolae Dima, Sorin Mihalache *op. cit.*, p. 277.

¹⁹ Ernest Bernea, *op. cit.*,