



*Ludmiła Zofia Szczecina*

The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (Poland)

ORCID: 0000-0003-4586-6580

**Modernism, Mysticism and the Pursuit of Freedom –  
Bringing the initial instinct of the Modernists  
to its fulfilment in the model of the Christian mystic**

**Modernizm, mistycyzm i dążenie do wolności – przywołanie  
początkowego instynktu modernisty do jego spełnienia  
w modelu chrześcijańskiego mistyka**

**Abstract**

While one can certainly debate about the forms Modernism (in the artistic sense) manifested itself in and what actually qualified as Modernism, one cannot deny that the desire for freedom was one of its underlying tenets. In the 21<sup>st</sup> century it would seem however that the desire for freedom has not been satiated. In the following essay I will explore whether emancipating art from a moral authority achieved the freedom modernist artists so deeply desired and I will question whether severing himself from objective truth the artist was allowed to fully thrive. Comparing Modernist concept's (Stream of consciousness, that art should reflect reality and the emphasis on subjectivity etc.) with the fundamentals of Christian mysticism (i.e. the interior life) and by reconciling subjective experience with objective truth through the use of St John Paul II's philosophical anthropology – I hope to pose an alternative path to satiate, truly satiate, the Modernist's thirst for freedom.

**Key words:** *Modernism, Mysticism, Art, Freedom, Christianity, Anthropology, Beauty.*

### Abstrakt

O ile można dyskutować nad formami, które modernizm wprowadził i które w zasadzie zostały uznane za modernizm (w sensie artystycznym), o tyle nie można zaprzeczyć, że pragnienie wolności leżało u jego podstaw. Jednakże wystarczy spojrzeć na aktualny stan sztuki, aby stwierdzić, że artyści w XXI wieku nadal pragną wolności. W tym artykule rozważam, czy wyzwolenie sztuki od moralnej odpowiedzialności naprawdę przyniosło jej tak bardzo pożądaną wolność, jak również analizuję zerwanie więzi z prawdą obiektywną, z której artysta miał przecież prawo w pełni korzystać, aby kontynuować swój rozwój. Poprzez porównanie wybranych modernistycznych koncepcji (strumień świadomości, sztuka powinna odzwierciedlać rzeczywistość i podkreślać subiektywność etc.) z zasadniczymi elementami chrześcijańskiego mistycyzmu (np. życie wewnętrzne), jak również poprzez pojednanie osobistego doświadczenia z prawdą obiektywną przy pomocy antropologii filozoficznej św. Jana Pawła II, liczę na ustanowienie innej możliwej drogi do prawdziwego zaspokojenia modernistycznego pragnienia wolności.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Modernizm, Mistycyzm, Sztuka, Wolność, Chrześcijaństwo, Antropologia, Piękno.*

### Introduction

When Oscar Wilde professed the doctrine “Art for Art’s sake” in his novel *The Picture of Dorian Grey* (Buzwell, 2014) it would seem that art had finally been liberated. No more would she be hampered by the suffocating dogma of tradition, no more would she be held back by the stagnant past, no more would unrealistic moral ideals restrict her right to self-expression. The famed modernist novelist Virginia Woolfe (as noted by the author of the article *Modernism*) declared that, “On or about December 1910 human nature changed...All human relations shifted...and when human relations change there is at the same time a change in religion, conduct, politics, and literature.” Although there is much discussion over when the period classified as Modernism actually began, the author states that “few scholars identify its genesis as being before 1860 and World War II is generally considered to mark an end of the movement’s height”. Modern man was grappling with an identity crisis in the wake of rapid technological progress and in the midst of two world wars. While a variety of groups sprung up with different motivations, one can observe a definite “change, whether in art, technology, philosophy or human behaviour”. (Khlentzos, 2021)

While one can certainly debate about the forms Modernism manifested itself in and what actually qualified as Modernism, one cannot deny, specifically in the area of the arts, that the desire for freedom was one of its underlying tenets. Christopher L. C. E Witcombe writes that, “As the 19<sup>th</sup> century progressed, the exercise of artistic freedom became fundamental to progressive modernism”. Not only did the Modernists seek freedom from “the rules of academic art” but also the restrictive “demands of the public”. The rallying cry “Art for Art’s Sake”, Witcombe further states, was for the artist to finally be relinquished from “the tyranny of meaning and purpose.” (Witcombe, 2000) Seen as the enemy of freedom, religion had to be dethroned, “Indeed Christianity passes. Passes-it has gone! It has littered the beaches of life with churches, cathedrals, shrines and crucifixes, prejudices and intolerances, like the sea urchin and starfish and empty shells and lumps of stinging jelly upon the sands here after a tide.” (Wells, 1934) The time for change was palpable; it was the dawn of a new era and it was imperative for artists to reflect the reality of the time, as well as help steer her in a new direction.

At this very moment art and politics became one. As Matthew Flisfeder notes, “The modern quest to “make it new” (made) art inherently political...by positing the very boundaries that it sought to break modernism identified a political and cultural antagonism...modernism was politics in disguise”. (Flisfeder, 2017, p. 25) Ironically, a century later, it would seem that the Modernists’ initial thirst for freedom has not been satiated. In the era of “post-truth” identity politics<sup>1</sup> is at its peak and artists have taken on the role of social activists who will go to any lengths to make a political statement; Depicting the severed head of the leader of the free world as in the case of the comedian Kathy Griffin, self-inducing abortions as in the case of the art project conducted by Yale senior art major Aliza Shvarts and allowing a dog to be tied up in an art gallery while completely emaciated to make a point as in the case of Costa Rican artist Guillermo “Habacuc” Vargas – are among just a few examples. It seems that artists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are still motivated by the need to abolish societal constructs, “The purveyors

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<sup>1</sup>As I wrote in my paper entitled *Identity Politics, Apartheid and the Great Polish Divide*, While identity has always been a part of politics, it has now become the sole foundation upon which a political group is formed. According to the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, it has recently come to signify: “A wide range of political activity founded on the shared experiences of injustice of members of certain social groups. Therefore, rather than organizing solely around belief systems, programmatic manifestos, or party affiliation, identity political formations typically aim to secure the political freedom of a specific constituency marginalized within its larger context.” (Cressida Heyes 2016, n.p) (Szczecina, *Matematyka* 2021, p. 6)

of present day painting and sculpture and even architecture have purposefully eschewed beauty as the legitimate end of art. They have an agenda. Art has become, simply said, an ideological tool". (Armstrong, 2008)

The motive of this paper is not to condemn the legacy of the early Modernist's but to highlight the fact that the Modernist artistic ideal has clearly not been realised. Is this due to the fact that tradition or cultural constructs have so embedded themselves in the human psyche that it will take time to remedy the conservatism/intolerance of the past? Is it due to the fact that Modernist's were naive in pursuing freedom in the first place? Or does the answer lie somewhere deeper? In the following essay I will explore whether emancipating art from a moral authority really achieved the freedom art so deeply desired and I will question whether by severing itself from objective truth the artist was allowed to fully thrive. Through comparing certain Modernist concept's (Stream of consciousness, that art should reflect reality and the emphasis on subjectivity etc.) with the fundamentals of the Christian (Orthodox) mystic (i.e. the interior life) and by reconciling subjective experience with objective truth through the use of St John Paul II's (née Karol Wojtyła's) philosophical anthropology – I hope to pose an alternative path to satiate, truly satiate, the Modernist's thirst for freedom.

## Truth and Freedom

In an essay on the founder of Modernist theatre Henrik Ibsen's play *The Pillars of Society*, George Bernard Shaw writes that the lead (Karsten Bernick) recognises that the "spirits of Truth and Freedom are the True Pillars of society". (Shaw, 2015) For Cardinal Ratzinger in a paper entitled *Truth and Freedom* these concepts are so inextricably bound that they cannot exist without each other, "Freedom without truth is no freedom at all" (Ratzinger 1996, n.p). At first it seems as though Shaw (an avowed atheist) and Ratzinger (who was to be the future leader of the Catholic Church i.e. Pope Benedict XVI) are in complete agreement, but if we dig a little deeper we see that Shaw's means to discovering truth and attaining freedom are slightly different from the Catholic approach.

For centuries Christians had held the belief that truth ("unhiddenness", "revelation", "rightness or righteousness of thought or deed") was found in God: God is the source of all truth. His word is truth. His Law is truth – CCC 2465. (Kreeft, 2001) Truth, for the faithful, had always been an objective reality as God Himself was, as Vic Biorseth OWM states, "an unchangeable objective reality". (Biorseth, 2014) Freedom was therefore rooted in and at

the service of Truth, “Freedom – consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.” (St John Paul II, 1995, p. 7) It would therefore follow that as soon as Christianity was ousted as a central moral authority, truth was relegated to the realm of subjectivity and as a result freedom became uncontrollable and in fact superseded it. Following the aftermath of Modernism Cardinal Ratzinger remarked that, “In the mind of contemporary man, freedom appears to a large extent as the absolutely highest good, to which all other goods are subordinate”. (Ratzinger, 1996) It is not that the early Modernists did not believe in truth but they felt that in order to preserve the self and in order for “an individual to feel whole and a contributor to the revitalization of the social process” art and society needed to be released from “the encumbering baggage of hundreds of years of hypocrisy” (Wolfson, n.p). As Shaw suggests, what Ibsen truly meant by “The pillars of Truth and Reason” was the liberation from counterfeit ideals. For Ibsen, even the “truth-teller who cannot hold his tongue” could create as much havoc as a “universityful of trained liars”. (Shaw, 2015). Because the Church was seen as a harbourer of counterfeit ideals truth needed to be severed from it too and as a result became solely subject to human reason. This incidentally gave rise to relativism, materialism and scepticism or as Chesterton called it; the “suicide of thought”. (Chesterton, 1908, p. 18)

### **The Age of Ideology**

Peter Seewald in an interview with Pope Benedict XVI observed that already in 1932 Aldous Huxley foretold, in his futurist novel 'Brave New World', that “falsification would be the decisive element of modernity”. (Seewald, 2010) This falsification manifested in a “series of great political projects of emancipation” and consequently brought with it (as David Rovinsky cites John Schwarzmantel) “The Age of Ideology”. (Rovinsky, 1999) It is no wonder that many Modernists were both supporters of and authors of various manifestos; Futurism, Dadaism and Vorticism etc. that very often used revolutionary language to dismantle cultural constructs “I am against systems, the most acceptable system is on principle to have none”. (Tzara, 1918) Ironically the role the Catholic Church had in preserving truth had not been destroyed but merely replaced; not by one but by many factions. These factions didn't lead to a freedom of self but, as Stephen Eric Bronner notes, “Subjectivity was unleashed with ever growing vehemence until, finally, the object itself, vanished”. (Bronner 2012, p. 17) The Modernists had liberated themselves from religious idealism but had paradoxically en-

chained themselves in nihilism. In comparing the materialist with the insane man Chesterton writes that “The man who cannot believe his senses, and the man who cannot believe anything else, are both insane...” They have both, he continues, voluntarily imprisoned themselves, “locked themselves up in two boxes, painted inside with the sun and stars; they are both unable to get out, the one into the health and happiness of heaven, the other even into the health and happiness of the earth”. (Chesterton, 1908, p. 16) While I fully agree with Eliot in his essay *Tradition and the Individual Talent* that “if the only form of tradition, of handing down, consisted in following the ways of the immediate generation before us in a blind or timid adherence to its successes” then ‘tradition’ should “positively be discouraged” (Eliot, 1982, p. 37) in the same breath I want to propose that the Modernist aesthetic revolution may not have been necessary.

### **An Artistic *Aggiornamento*?**

In the wake of the two world wars and as a response to the crisis of modernity Pope St John XXIII opened the Second Vatican Council in 1962, “He saw that the Church needed to make the message of faith more relevant to people in the twentieth century (so) he called for an *Aggiornamento*, a freshening of thinking and practices”. (*Vatican II Voice of the Church*, 2016) As Bishop Butler writes, St John XXIII wanted “to let some fresh air into the Church” to renew (not alter) its teachings. (*Vatican II Voice of the Church*, 2016). Allowing the “fresh air” (a pseudonym for the Holy Spirit) to once again flow through the dusty cathedrals meant that the Church was given new life by returning to its foundations, its roots, its origins. Pope John Paul II, a son of the council and dedicated to its “faithful interpretation and implementation”, recognised that the main message of Vatican II was “the universal call to holiness”. Renewal would only take place if both religious and the laity began to truly live out the faith, “[T]his call to holiness is precisely the basic charge entrusted to all the sons and daughters of the Church by a Council which intended to bring a renewal of Christian life based on the Gospel.” (Christifideles Laici, 16), Pope John Paul II. (Bushman, 2014)

If the church, which was once inseparable from art, had seemingly become irrelevant it would make sense that art had too. The desire the Modernists had to break free so that fresh air would flow once again through the annals of art is therefore to a degree understandable. Yet I believe that a renewal and not a revolution would have been a better solution. If Art had become stagnant, stuffy and suffocating it is my belief (following Vatican II) that

it was due to a pharisaic preoccupation with the law, with tradition and technique. Artists felt their freedom threatened by the church's 'thou shalt nots' and as a result threw out the baby with the bathwater. Limits were now seen as an obstacle instead of being the very thing that allowed art to flourish. Chesterton exemplifies this paradox when he writes that, "Art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame". Artists (rather than being anarchists) must in fact revel in limits i.e. "The artist loves his limitations: they constitute the THING he is doing. The painter is glad that the canvas is flat. The sculptor is glad that the clay is colourless." (Chesterton, 1908, p. 25)

It is my belief then that, coupled with the chaos of modernity, artists who according to Pope Paul VI are "guardians of beauty" who make "the invisible world palpable" (Pope Paul VI, 1965) had forgotten their call to holiness. They had forgotten their call to become mystics – to have a living relationship with the unending depth of freedom and creativity Himself. The desires the Modernists had; to seek truth, to pursue freedom, to realise the self could have found its fulfilment in the life of a mystic (a Christian mystic) who was not bound to the law but found freedom because of the law. Following this line of thinking, by applying the fundamentals of the Christian mystic to concepts of the Modernists – true freedom should theoretically be achieved.

### **New Age versus Christian Mysticism**

Before I resume with this line of thought it is necessary to state that I believe that New Age mysticism does not provide a satisfactory solution to the freedom the early modernists wanted to achieve. The Vatican document *Jesus Christ: The Bearer of the Water of Life* notes that while initially it seems in line with Modernist thinking by emphasising the person's "self-fulfilment, self-realisation and self-redemption" and in line with the Nietzschean concept that "Christianity has prevented the full manifestation of genuine humanity" it ironically (as in the case with ideologies and relativism) eliminates the self. The document continues to say that the New Age mystic sees everything as one, "Every part is in itself an image of the totality; the whole is in everything and everything is in the whole". (*Pontifical Council for Culture and Interreligious Dialogue*, 2003) This is due to the fact that, as Paul Oliver recounts in his book *Mysticism: A Guide for the Perplexed*, a central tenet to Buddhist philosophy (of which many New Age practices are aligned with) is the concept of "no-self" i.e. a complete renunciation of the ego. (Oliver, 2009, p. 85) Christian mysticism is essentially different by virtue of the fact that the motivation of the Christian mystic is not to

become one with the universe but with a person (Jesus Christ). Christian mystical contemplation therefore becomes a communion not with “nothing” but with Christ Himself. As in a relationship, two whole persons are mysteriously bound up as one, not losing anything of themselves. As George M. Sauvage states, “In this act, there is no annihilation or absorption of the creature into God, but God becomes intimately present to the created mind.” (*Sauvage*,...)

Intrinsic to the life of the Christian mystic is as, Rich Heffern notes, the interior or “inner life” which has always played a vital role in “Catholic spirituality”. (Heffern, 2010) Heffern cites Dominican Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange as defining the interior life as “The life of the soul with God, the intimate conversation one has within oneself all through life.” (Heffern, 2010) The Modernist preoccupation with the inner thoughts of man and the resulting technique of modernist writers i.e. “the stream of consciousness”<sup>2</sup> can be seen as modern man’s attempt to foster an interior life, or to place importance on the inner life of man. Fernihough in “consciousness as a stream” recognises James Joyce’s use of the technique in *Ulysses* to “render as closely as possible the chaos of the inner life, and the raw, and unfinished quality, of our thoughts and impressions...”. (*Shiach*, p. 66)

While the instinct to explore the inner life is imperative to the mystic (any human in fact) without a transcendental dimension and without Grace, the self becomes caught up in its own inner reality and is unable to escape. At the end of *Nightwood*, D. Barnes very evidently pushes the nihilism of modernism to its limits. The femme fatale “Robin Vote” lands up in an old church barking like a dog. Although this act can be read in many ways one cannot deny that her desire for self-enlightenment or freedom has resulted in her become something other than human, other than the classical Boethian concept of man i.e. individual substance of a rational nature. By indulging all her passions Vote has not found herself but in fact lost her “self” completely which has subsequently resulted in her insanity. The mystic however is kept sane because he is able to see his desire for the inner life as a sign, not an end in itself. Contrary to Nietzsche’s Superman – “All beings till now have created beyond themselves something greater than themselves. What is the ape to man? It’s just what man must be to the Superman” (Tim, 2012) – the mystic desires not

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<sup>2</sup>The technique is based on the psychology posited by William James in 1892 that “Consciousness... does not appear to itself chopped up in bits. Such words as ‘chain’ or ‘train’ do not describe it fitly as it presents itself in the first instance. It is nothing jointed; it flows. A ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described. In talking of it hereafter, let us call it the stream of thought, of consciousness, or of subjective life” (William James 1892, n.p)

to *be* God but to be *like* God. This deceptively subtle, yet vital difference prevents the ego from self-destruction by relying on Grace. The Christian mystic recognises that while the desire for divinisation is not wrong, it can only be fulfilled by God himself, “The Christian understanding of divinisation, comes about not through our own efforts alone, but with the assistance of God’s grace working in and through us.” (*Pontifical Council for Culture and Interreligious Dialogue*, 2003, p. 3, 5) This means that unlike the modernist who is ironically bound by sin by not acknowledging it as a reality, the mystic (who does acknowledge his sins) is able to experience full freedom from his own ego “(mysticism) involves an initial awareness of incompleteness and even sinfulness” and therefore is “in no way an exaltation of the self.” (*Pontifical Council for Culture and Interreligious Dialogue*, 2003, p. 3, 4)

If we really want to reconcile modernism and mysticism though, it seems that the fundamental problem is trying to reconcile the paradox of objective truth and subjective experience. It is necessary therefore to go to the philosophical level and briefly include here a note on “The Breakdown of Beauty” which is concretised by modern philosophy’s separation of the subject from the object when the *philosophy of being* is usurped by the *philosophy of consciousness* (I will expand on this in more detail later). The relegation of the Church to the backburner when it came to the area of art can in fact be said to have been caused by this change in philosophy. While it is a long history and cannot be covered in its fullest depth, for the purposes of this paper, it must be addressed.

### **The Breakdown of Beauty**

In his documentary *Why Beauty Matters* Sir Roger Scruton gives voice to the modern trend which has placed beauty solely in the realm of the subjective and the subsequent *cult of ugliness* that has dominated the artistic scene. He very convincingly tries to move the audience towards an objective understanding of beauty whose aim is to make us feel more “at home in the world”. (Lockwood & Lockyer, 2009) Scruton shows the way art has lost her purpose and how artists are now predominantly motivated to produce a reaction in the observers by shocking them i.e. in the example of the can of excrement entitled *Artists Shit* produced by Piero Manzoni in 1961 or the rather hopelessly meaningless installation of lights going on and off by Martin Creed produced in 2000 and entitled *Work no. 227 The Lights Going On and Off*. (Lockwood & Lockyer, 2009) Ugliness combined with a perversion of the sacred seems to be the *modus operandi*.

According to Scruton, up until the scientific revolution, artists and philosophers were inspired predominantly by Plato's approach to beauty "So long as the belief in a transcendental God was firmly anchored in the heart of our civilization, artists and philosophers continued to think of beauty in Plato's way." (Lockwood & Lockyer, 2009) Lucy Beckett echoes Scruton's sentiment that the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries were major turning points with regard to reverence for Platonic thought and his ideas on beauty. Although Plato was still highly regarded as "The founder of disciplined and rational enquiry into the nature of thought, of the soul and of man", the atheism that was emerging amongst the great thinkers caused them to perceive Plato as fundamentally wrong when it came to beauty and, "his inescapable emphasis on transcendent truth, goodness and beauty as real and one". (Beckett, 2006)

Plato was an idealist, says Scruton. He held to the belief that what occurred in the physical realm were just signs of another ideal eternal world to which man can aspire to but not reach on earth. Beauty was fundamentally for Plato of divine origin; a vessel if you will by which the ordinary could come into contact with the extraordinary. Beauty was a revelation of God, a glimpse into the eternal vision, a transcendent vision that lifted man out of the everyday chaos and into the world where harmony reigned, "(for Plato) we are pilgrims aspiring to the divine where we will be united with God. God exists in an ideal world that we can only aspire too. One way to glimpse this world is through the experience of beauty." (Lockwood & Lockyer, 2009) Scruton further states that this beauty was not meant to be used however but rather meditated upon, "Plato believed that beauty is a visitor from another world, we can do nothing with it save contemplate its pure radiance. Anything else pollutes and desecrates it, destroying its sacred aura." (Lockwood & Lockyer, 2009)

This understanding of Beauty is deeply linked to it being part of a triad of objective values "Truth, Beauty, Goodness", each feeding into each other and without which they do not respectively exist. Scruton hearkens back to the transcendentals to help return to beauty as the force behind art,

There is an appealing idea about beauty which goes back to Plato and Plotinus, and which became incorporated by various routes into Christian theological thinking. According to this idea beauty is an ultimate value-something that we pursue for its own sake, and for the pursuit of which no further reason need be given. Beauty should therefore be compared to truth and goodness, one member of a trio of ultimate values which justify our rational inclinations. (Scruton, 2009, p. 2)

While this documentary by Scruton is a noble enterprise, the practical question is; how can a society that professes to be “post-truth” ever return to beauty as an objective or ultimate value? The problem that we now face is trying to convince artists that their art is not just physical but *Metaphysical*. The authors of *Iconoclasm and Iconoclasm* cite Mariano Cordavani’s reason for the deterioration in the relationship between modern art and faith i.e. “(their) mutual adultery” as being a natural result of the “moral ‘deterioration’ of modern man” and the fundamental reason for this is a lack of interest in the Divine, “in the mystery that supersedes nature”. (Asselt, Geest, Müller, Saleminck, 2007, p. 457)

As I have said before, perhaps the key is not to eliminate the subjective aspect that modernist artists hold so dear and only focus on the objective for fear of returning to a *dictatorship of relativism*<sup>3</sup>. Firstly this would prove almost impossible in this age of the “I” and secondly subjectivity seems to be a vital part of the artistic experience. As man creates art or is active in bringing it about, it would seem duplicitous to ignore the personal aspect.

### Wojtyla and St John of the Cross

Christopher West (a well-known theologian and speaker on John Paul II’s teaching on sexuality and morality i.e. *The Theology of the Body*) explains that the Holy Father produced a “phenomenology” that would help build a bridge between modern philosophy and Church teaching. (West 2003, p. 42) As an artist (actor and poet/playwright), one of the main figures in Vatican II and said to be a mystic himself, I think it is vital to look at St JPII’s teachings to try and wed the counterparts of modernism and mysticism. This solution I propose comes partly from the understanding of the impact St John of the Cross (the great Spanish mystic and a doctor of the church) had on the thought of Wojtyla’s philosophical development – a development that did not end with his doctoral thesis entitled “The Doctrine of Faith According to St. John of the Cross.” The Spanish mystic’s continued influence is evident when (as Pope) John Paul II refers to St John of the Cross as a “master in the faith” on the IV centenary of his death; “I myself have been especially attracted by the experience and teachings of the Saint of Fontiveros. From the first years of my priestly formation,

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<sup>3</sup>A term coined by Pope Benedict XVI when, in a homily he gave as cardinal, spoke about the fact that the only doctrine that seems to be allowed in “modern times” is one that doesn’t allow for an objective truth, “We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires” (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger 2005, n.p.).

I found in him a sure guide in the ways of faith.” (Pope JP II, 1990, p. 2) Buttiglione notes that the Spanish mystic pre-empted the modernist problem by, already in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (partly as a response to naturalism), emphasising the interiority of man and creating “a phenomenology of mystical experience”. (Buttiglione, 1997, p. 53) Almost three centuries before, St John of the Cross, intuits the inner life of man and the vital role it has to play in the field of faith.

Wojtyla’s dissertation, Buttiglione further expounds, attempted to reconcile the thought of St Thomas Aquinas and St John of the Cross with regards to their conceptions of faith; the former being seen as being more intellectual and the latter more vitalistic, “according to St. Thomas, faith is a virtue of the intellect which does not involve the will, whereas for St. John, the faith which establishes a ‘proporcion de semejanza’ between God and the human being is an obscure faith in which the intellect knows that, in the “night of faith,” it has to give up attempting to know. (Buttiglione, 1997, p. 54) Instead of seeing dogmatic and mystical faith in opposition Wojtyla aimed for a unitive vision. While I cannot go into detail in this particular paper, it is important to note that one of the ways Wojtyla attempts to resolve this issue is by highlighting the fact that not just intellect and will but persons are implicit in the act of faith, “Wojtyla observes quite rightly that unitive faith, a faith enriched by the gift of the Spirit, and in particular by a gift of the intellect, and by being an organic part of the intentional tendency of the *person* toward God, involves all his faculties and virtues.” (emphasis added) God is not “known” exclusively as an object either in this encounter but also comes to be “known” as a person. This further explains why Christian mysticism is not the annihilation of self but in fact affirms the self and brings it to its fullest realisation,

As a person, he (*God*) can be known only in a reciprocal relation of self-giving. In this way a human being dwells within God’s personal interior and God within him, without the two being merged and without the difference between God and the human person being obscured. (Buttiglione, 1997, p. 54, 55)

If the modernists were looking for what truly defines man and what lies at his deepest core and what actually enables him to fully experience his subjectivity they need look no further than the thought of the man (as I said earlier) who pre-empted the “fundamental problem of modernity” (Buttiglione, 1997, p. 57);

St. John’s phenomenology of mystical experience takes man towards the irreducible core of the person, and shows the necessity

of transcending this core toward that truth who is God himself, by responding to the initiative of God toward human beings. This divine initiative... makes the irreducible core of the human person experienceable...If...faith is the key to the comprehension of human beings, because it permits an experience deeper than the human truth, mysticism is the experience which faith brings to the most acute level of subjective perception. For this reason, if one wants to understand the human condition, one has to begin from mystical experience. (Buttiglionem 1997, p. 55, 56)

For St John of the Cross and so too Wojtyła, Christian (orthodox) mysticism reveals the truth of man. The issue arises, in a secularised culture (as I have said before) in trying to connect subjective experience with objective truth so that man can once again connect the finite with the infinite. A division which Buttiglione notes (and which I alluded to earlier) is a result of modernity, “The modern project has been to secularize the great Christian affirmation of the meeting of the finite and the infinite in Christ, presenting this reconciliation as having been brought about by the autonomous forces of nature, history, and humanity – not as the gratuitous presence of God through grace.” (Buttiglione, 1997, p. 56) Wojtyła’s philosophical anthropology aims to bring man back to the fullness of truth about his being.

### **Wojtyła’s Philosophical Anthropology**

Again much more time is needed to properly expand on the Pope’s philosophical thought. That which I offer here should be seen merely as a starting point in trying to use it to reconcile modernism with orthodox mysticism. West cites Rocco Buttiglione who was responding to criticism of the Pope’s teachings by those who fear that he had conceded to relativism that, “John Paul II could repeat the words of his predecessor, Pius X, who refused to accept the errors of modern times. But the rejection of the errors of modern times does not mean that we should not correct the one-sidedness of the exposition of sound doctrine, which furnished the occasion for the rise of these errors”. (West, 2003, p. 42) Pope John Paul II obviously felt that the church could not remain indifferent to the role it had to play in allowing modernism to arise. As I cited in my paper *The “explosion” of St John Paul II’s Theology of the Body in the Catholic Church in America and its global implications for the New Evangelisation*; Christopher West notes “How often is the Church’s doctrine rejected because it is thought to be hopelessly removed from ‘real life’ experience?” (West, 2003, p. 42) (Szczecina, 2021)

As I continued “He (*St John Paul II*) therefore took it upon himself to make the faith more human” (Szczecina, 2021) and subsequently engaged with one of the greatest tenets of the Modernists: that art should reflect reality. Wojtyła has not succumbed to modern secular thinking which seemingly exalts the individual’s uniqueness to such a degree that it actually subsumes objective reality by altering it in whatever way the individual sees fit; thereby subsequently nullifying the individual in the process. If there is no truth, if it’s all relative, then there is no standard by which one could even compare and therefore define something as unique.

Wojtyła has found a way to not only raise the subjective aspect of man to greater heights than those who purport the *philosophy of consciousness*<sup>4</sup> but simultaneously he has found a way to root man firmly in objective reality by bringing him out of the confines of his mind through the experience of action. Through his philosophy of action and his deep understanding of the person, Wojtyła has proven that the only illusion man is currently experiencing is the division between the *philosophy of consciousness* and the *philosophy of being*<sup>5</sup>.

Wojtyła poses a solution to this unity not through an elimination of the self but through an expanding of the limited vision secular culture has adopted. For Wojtyła a subject does not exist in a causal vacuum blessed with unfettered freedom and the ability to think and do whatever he/she imagines. Man is both a subject and an object truly existing in the world. At the very start of *Love & Responsibility* Wojtyła clarifies that beginning with the subject does not mean losing its objective nature. There is a natural relationship between the two, “for properly speaking an ‘object’ signifies what is posited in relation to some ‘subject’” (Wojtyła, 2013, p. 25) and therefore we can say that “every subject is at the same time an objective being, that is an objective something or somebody”. (Wojtyła, 2013, p. 26) Wojtyła doesn’t root the person in the cognitive process like Descartes but in the experience of his own I. Due to the fact that I experience myself not only as a subject

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<sup>4</sup>By reducing consciousness to a purely cognitive function, philosophers (which Wojtyła says in his essay *The Person: Subject and Community*) absolutized it, “After Descartes, on the other hand, the aspect of consciousness eventually assumed a kind of absolutization, which in the contemporary era entered phenomenology by way of Husserl”. (Wojtyła, 1994). This subsequently created an extreme scepticism where man cannot trust anything – his knowledge of the world and himself can only be interpreted through the subjective lens. He is the one who cognises therefore there is no difference for him between reality and what he perceives it to be.

<sup>5</sup>The philosophy of being Wojtyła adopted was based on realistic metaphysics, which holds that the objects in the world are real and truly existing, “According to metaphysical realism, the world is as it is independent of how humans or other inquiring agents take it to be.” (Khlemtzos, 2021)

but also as an object whose actions (which I choose to undertake) determine the person I become proves that man is not a subject divorced from reality but also deeply part of it. Man is both a subject and an object because the actions he chooses to undertake impact him not just in the external aspect but shape his interior life. This is a key factor that distinguishes him from other beings. The fact that man can choose to act, “His nature includes the power of self-determination based on reflection and manifested in the fact that, while acting, man chooses what he wants to do. This power is called free will.” (Wojtyła, 2013, p. 29) Spinello in his book *The Encyclicals of John Paul II: Introduction and Commentary* affirms this sentiment, “We experience man as a person, and we are persuaded of this because he performs actions”. (Spinello, 2016, p. 27) Spinello goes further to explain that, for Wojtyła, this subjectivity is what differs him from the animals, not just from what we read about in Genesis but from the fact that, “Everyone recognises that human action is far different from the acts of animals for at least two reasons. Humans are aware of what they are doing, and a human act is deliberate and purposeful (AP 25)”. (Spinello, 2016. p. 27, 28)

As Wojtyła writes, the fact that man has the propensity for self-determination means that there is clear indication that his I is revealed in action. In actions that he chooses to enact by virtue of a conscious engagement of the will. If man chooses a good action, he will mould his nature to be more orientated towards the good i.e. he will increase his ability to be more virtuous and he will disclose this virtuous inner life to others through his actions, “The interior life is the spiritual life. It focuses on truth and the good. It also deals with a multitude of problems; it seems that the most central of these are the following two: what is the final cause of everything, and how to be good and possess the fullness of the good.” (Wojtyła, 2013, p. 28)

This is where a metaphysical framework becomes necessary. It is one thing to experience one’s own I and to know that one can determine oneself through one’s choices that become enacted – to know you have the ability to possess yourself and determine yourself with the engagement of your will – it is quite another to understand what should guide your choices, what direction you should cultivate yourself to grow in, what will lead to your true happiness and fulfilment. If there is no *philosophy of being* behind the ethics adopted by man the values and their hierarchy again become vulnerable to being relativised. What is considered morally wrong or morally good, cannot be determined by the mind or consciousness but “in the objectivity of moral knowledge, which is constructed upon the foundation of the *bonum honestum (good in itself)* known to reason (PC 70).” (Spinello, 2016. p. 51) This means that the fre-

edom we experience from the will is inherently bound by a deep responsibility. It is bound by the development of man for his good and the good of others, it is bound by the desire to reach perfection, it is “the spiritual power of responding to the good presented by reason”. (Spinello, 2016, p. 51)

Being bound however does not eradicate our freedom but brings it to its fulfilment. If we were made in the image of the Good, if our being is good then our freedom needs to be used to bring about our ultimate being, our ultimate goodness. For freedom and subjective expression to be truly realised we need to orientate our subjectiveness to the Objective Truth that will fully satisfy us, “The powers of the soul, naturally united to the body, are the source of self-possession and self-governance, the true mark of personhood. Self-possession makes transcendence possible. The integrated human self, achieves full freedom and authenticity through vertical transcendence, whereby it passes beyond its structural boundaries to attain the *bonum honestum*.” (Spinello, 2016, p. 51, 52)

## Conclusion

As I wrote in the paper I referred to earlier,

Pope John Paul was firmly convinced that that, on a fundamental level, “The Church’s message is in harmony with the most secret desires of the human heart” (Christopher West 2003, p. 40) – Henceforth he was able to declare in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, “On her part, the Church addresses people with full respect for their freedom. Her mission does not restrict freedom but rather promotes it. The Church proposes; she imposes nothing” (RM 39). (Szczecina, 2021)

The ultimate reality for Saint John Paul II as with the Christian mystic is found in the person of Jesus Christ who is Himself “the marriage of objectivity and subjectivity”, “the union of God and man”. (West, 2003, p. 44) The reason why the Modernist disintegrated into relativism and failed to obtain freedom was due to the fact that when he turned to himself he failed to see that “his own humanity points him beyond himself”. (West, 2003, p. 44)

If we take the Pope’s philosophical anthropology on board we discover that the Modernist instinct for freedom was not wrong. It was good, “very good” in fact. This instinct bore the mark of being “made in the Image and likeness of God”, it bore the mark of Jesus Christ the *Logos* and source of freedom itself. Without the divine the Modernist limited his artistic freedom

to the natural world and subsequently became imprisoned by a false sense of freedom. If the Modernist had the eyes of the Mystic he would see that his freedom is not removed by a moral authority, his subjectivity is not removed by an objective truth. The Modernist would be able to see into the reality of things by recognising that life is not “either or” but “both and”. He would see that life is filled with paradoxes and it is precisely in those paradoxes that the truth lies. As Chesterton writes the mystic is able to take two truths and the contradiction along with them... He is able to see “two different pictures at once and yet sees all the better for that”. (Chesterton, 1908, p. 16, 17) The mystics like St John of the Cross had this clarity of vision. They cleaved to the Cross – the Paradox par excellence – where life and death, humanity and divinity, sin and redemption meet – to discover that true freedom is found in the complete abandonment (yet likewise retainment and fulfilment) of the self to God. This true freedom would subsequently fulfil the modernist artists’ vision at its deepest level, truly satiate his desire and enable him to create not bound by the limits of the world but by that which would bring him and others to their fullest realisation.

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*Correspondence concerning this paper should be addressed to Ludmiła Zofia Szczecina – South African journalist and actress; M.A. in the Liberal Arts; at present a research fellow and Ph.D. student at The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland.*

*E-mail: milasactress@gmail.com*