

Sexuality as Transcendence: An Interview with Fabrice Hadjadj

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Christianitas: You are known in Poland as the author of *The Faith of the Demons*, a book that in France earned the *Prix de littérature religieuse* for 2010. However, earlier you penned an excellent book on sexuality whose title might be translated as *The Depths of Sexuality: An Essay on the Mysticism of the Body*. Let's begin with the book on demons: Where did you get the idea for it?

Fabrice Hadjadj: The idea for writing *The Faith of the Demons* came to me before my reflections on sexuality, but I took up the topic of the demonic later. Before writing *The Depths of Sexuality* I delivered a lecture on atheism. The topic of the book [*The Faith of the Demons*] is evil, radical evil. It was not my aim to write about demons, but rather an attempt at answering for myself the question: What is evil in its pure state? And also: What is faith? Therefore the most important word in the title *The Faith of the Demons* is “faith.”

In writing about this I asked myself the following question: It is true that atheism is considered to be a great evil, but is it really the greatest evil? I came to the conclusion that “no, it is not,” since it is obvious that demons are not unbelievers: The demons believe and tremble (James 2:19). The Devil knows that God exists and is certain about the veracity of all the articles of faith. This means that our foe—and he is the greatest—is not an atheist. Certainly he fuels atheism, he himself exists in a certain form of atheism, which consists in living without God, but he is not an atheist on the theoretical level.

Such was my first conclusion. This is why I attempted to extend my reflection by going beyond unbelief. This approach seemed interesting to me, because when we stop treating atheism as the only figure of evil, then we begin to realize that there are others, for example, deism, fundamentalism, including Phariseism. The second conclusion of the book is connected with the topic of *The Depths of Sexuality*. Well, our enemy not only is not an atheist, but he also has no body. A demon is an angel, “a pure impure spirit.” Thus evil is not first located in the body, but is instead connected to the spirit.

¹ Editor's note: This interview was conducted by Monika Grądzka-Holvoote and originally published in the print edition of [Christianitas 53 \(2013\)](#). It is translated here for the first time into English by Artur Rosman from the published Polish and the original French manuscript, with permission. Fabrice Hadjadj (b. 1971) is a French philosopher, dramatist, writer, and convert. He is the director of Philanthropos: The Institute of Christian Anthropology in Fribourg. In 2014 he became a member of the Pontifical Council for the Laity.

If there is sin, then that is because there is intelligence, and because the will exists. Here is what I wanted to say with this: Do you think that your foe is an atheist or that the body is something dangerous? No, because spiritualism perhaps is the greatest evil and the root of all evil. The Catholic conclusion that it is the spirit that is on the side of evil is really something truly amazing.

So you started by delving into the issue of demonism until you reached Phariseeism?

Yes, Phariseeism is the human equivalent of demonism. One can find such a line of thinking in the statements Pope Francis made right after his election. This pope notes the great danger in what he calls “self-referentiality.” He criticizes a Church that falls into theological narcissism. Such a turn toward oneself is precisely what happens in Phariseeism and in the faith of the demons.

Your reminder that dangers to the faith are connected to the spirit is very much on target. In *The Depths of Sexuality* you attack spiritualistic conceptions of sexuality, and simultaneously you give the body back its proper place, whereas today’s Catholicism seems to deny it ...

It is not Catholicism that denies the body but some sort of misunderstanding that has emerged in the bosom of Catholicism, something that you observe in certain types of Catholics. The mystery of the Catholic faith is the mystery of the Incarnation—it is impossible to think of rejecting corporeality here.

Moreover, the pagans described the faith of the first Christians as a “religion of the body” because of the Eucharistic Body. Christianity is not a spiritualism. It is a spirituality of the Incarnation. The Incarnation in turn is not an idea, or concept, but a fact that depends upon God’s Word—upon the principle of an analogy with marriage—forming one body with humanity.

But after all the waves of iconoclasm that we have gone through, our feeling for the proportions between what is bodily and what is spiritual is strongly shaken. For example, when the erotic is taken up from religious positions it frequently colors itself with a suspect mysticism. Our culture professes the cult of the body, but in matters of loving real embodiment there is very little. You are right in saying that sex should be considered as a lost cause.

Yes, this is a matter of a certain form of Puritanism. I think that for many centuries sexuality was not properly understood. There were always spiritualistic tendencies. Even the Fathers of the Church, including St. Augustine, did not accept thinking about the family as an image of God. Finally, John Paul II did a lot in the direction of thinking about the body with what he called the “theology of the body” or even the “theology of sexuality.” Some of the fragments from his audiences during the 1980s are incredible. We owe him a great deal because he gave us the possibility of comprehending sexuality as an opening to transcendence, or even thinking of it as something that has a Trinitarian structure.

In my own book [*The Depths of Sexuality*] I do not refer to the pope because it seems to me that his thinking has its own coherence. Besides, it has a different starting point. John Paul II starts with Genesis and from the revealed text while developing his own theology. Instead, I start with natural and cultural premises and from there I go toward the direction of mystery. My take is therefore more philosophical than theological. I did not want to mix the two takes because they would remain mixed up. However, I do not think I would have written this book if John Paul II had not inaugurated a new climate in the Church. Some say that his audiences are a theological bomb with a delayed fuse and for me they are a complete change of the Christian awareness of what the body and sexuality are.

You surely must be familiar with his theatrical piece on marriage, right?

Of course, *The Jeweller's Shop* is a good thing. It is not a work of genius, while the theology of the body is ingenious.

I would like to inquire about the rank and then the definition of sexuality. Since sex is something so important for humans then one wonders: How important? Plato associated the desire for happiness with *eros*. If we consider the relation between the sexes, then Christ revealed its sacramental character. Is sexuality the highest sphere in which humanity realizes itself?

We must first note that Plato is not talking about marriage at all. On the contrary, Plato's *eros* is, in a certain sense, an exit out of sexuality. He speaks of *eros*, which has, to be honest, a physical dimension, but not above all sexual. Besides this Plato is not a dualist: His polarization does not lead to a distinction between male and female. He only wants to show that the body in itself refers to the spirit. *Eros* does not signify for him sexuality, but rather the tie between the body and spirit.

On the other hand, as we get closer to Christianity we can see the growth in emphasis upon the absolutely fundamental character of sexuality. The first chapter of Genesis says: *Elohim* created Adam in his image and then: Man and woman he created them (Genesis 1:27). But this is not "man" and "woman" as we now understand it. The Hebrew terminology speaks of "male" and "female," it points to sexuality in its bodily, and even animal, aspect. We see here a kind of irony from the venerable author by which he wants to tell us that the human being, endowed with sex, is created in the likeness of God. While reading the verse we get the impression that we will elevate ourselves to the heights of the spiritual, but we suddenly get "male and female" ... [laughs]—we suddenly tumble down.

Since sexuality has an "absolutely fundamental character," then is it not some kind of determinism?

Understanding sexuality as deterministic is a very recent way of thinking. On the one hand, you have freedom of choice, on the other, pure determinism. In this understanding freedom is what is opposed to determinism. Determinism is supposed to be something that conditions us to something that belongs to the order of necessity. Freedom, on the contrary, is something open to randomness, therefore a choice of this or that. In precisely this way modern thinking perpetuated schemas and in effect fell into dualism. Determinism makes us think of the body as something that stands on the side of biology, while humanity is supposed to be placed on the side of consciousness. Let us note that there is no talk here of the spirit, because as a determinist you can be a materialist. For example, Sartre is completely not a spiritualist, but he professes it. The Sartrean freedom is conceived as a power of making choices, which for this reason is radically opposed to necessity. In Sartre you can clearly see the conflict between being-for-itself, that is, consciousness and the body.

However, understanding sexuality in deterministic categories leads to two errors. The first concerns freedom and the second the body. If freedom is described as a pure power of choice that is opposed to determination, then one commits an error because freedom is not first a choice. For example, if I faced someone with the choice of ripping out his eyes, or ripping out his nails, then this person would ask whether I might not pick something else [laughs] ... Thus you can see that something is flawed in such thinking. If I were only to give someone the choice between only horrible things then his freedom would be paralyzed. But this means that freedom is not a mere power to choose. Freedom is connected with something that is perceived as a good.

Therefore, before the power to choose there is an orientation toward the good. We are not dealing here with an opposition between the power to choose and determination, because there is this striving toward the good. This striving is connected to the will: In

order to choose we must perceive a thing as a good better than another; otherwise we would not choose. Even if we have the power to choose, this power only functions when there is a striving toward the good, which in itself, is not chosen. Behind freedom there stands something that the Greeks called “nature.” In every being there is a way of being, which presupposed a dynamism of development that is typical for it.

The second error connected to the deterministic conception of sexuality is based upon reducing nature to the biological. If we reduce the body to physiology, to the processes of the body’s functioning, then they are conceived functionally, and as a result, as something that is the passive tool of determinism. In our contemporary world we are dealing with the universal biologization of our relationship to the world: Instead of teaching the history of people we teach the prehistory of hominids, instead of developing the ability to love in young people we talk about love as being a matter of chemistry. Such an anonymous and cold objectification makes the contemporary person unaware that his desire is love beyond death and that reality is something extremely intense. When it comes to the human body biological phenomena have nothing in common with what distinguishes man—and he is distinguished by speech in particular. The reality of our body is something qualitatively different. When a man looks at a woman her body tells him something; it communicates to him the existence of beauty. Even his desire goes far beyond a simple instinct for reproduction since it can be the expression, for example, of anxiety before death. In man corporeality is simultaneously spirituality and that which is spiritual is always already corporeal.

If sexuality does not determine us then what should we do with all our problems? In *The Depths of Sexuality* you list, among others: hedonism, adultery, polygamy, and frigidity. Is there no way to somehow master sexuality?

An attempt to master sexuality is the mistake that is probably most frequently committed by Christians. It depends upon the presupposition that sexuality is some neutral, amoral energy, which needs something added in order to channel it, make it moral. It is believed that there is a suspect power in man—in earlier times it was seen even as unambiguously evil—which must be unconditionally trained. Meanwhile, this way of thinking is derived from a technologizing understanding of the body. According to it the body is something like a machine equipped with drives that must be humanized. Such a model can also be found in Freud who thought that there is a sexual drive in man—a morally indifferent libido—and in order to achieve equilibrium it must pass through the reality principle, through a process of sublimation. And many so-called Christians say: It’s true, there’s that sex, but you also need love. As if human sexuality in itself did not have anything to do with love! Or also: Sexuality is nothing bad, the body is animality, but you also must be spiritual. As if for man intercourse itself were not already something spiritual! In moral theology such thinking is called extrinsicism. In it morality is something added to man from the outside like a corset. Meanwhile, the morality of the Church is not like that. All that it requires can be boiled down to: If you do something do it to the end. Thus, in married life: If you love, love totally—love fruitfully, fight for the relationship, love until death. But why does the Bible say: He created them as male and female beings?

After all, it’s clear that the image of God is also to be found in this dimension. The image of God is not something superadded to man. This image is written into sex and plays itself out in sexuality. This is why I strongly oppose the thinking of various movements that moralize sexuality. Nietzsche, who criticized morality, called sexuality “the great reason of the body.” He understood this to mean that in our relation to the body we ought not apply moralism to it, because there is something in the body that points toward a mystery. I believe that sexuality in its deepest nature is not neutral, but good, and in the final instance it leads us to God, who is a God of unification. It is a good dynamism of human nature

that we only must let develop.

Is there something that distinguishes it from other properties of the human person? What would it be? What is sexuality?

First one must answer the question of what it is not, because its nature is frequently misunderstood. Obviously the great majority of people think that the basic hallmark of sexuality is pleasure. In fact pleasure is not something specific even if the sensitivity of the sexual members is one of a kind. It seems that pleasure is stronger in a man than in a woman. Sexuality is thereby defined from the male perspective: Orgasm is something more masculine than feminine, in the man sexuality is concentrated upon the sexual members, while the erogenous zones of the woman are widely distributed. I think our mistakes in understanding sexuality come from “phallic domination,” or even, as Jacques Derrida called it, phallogocentrism, that is, one where the *logos* is dominated by the *phallus*. Understanding sexuality through the prism of pleasure—its apogee and short duration—is masculine. For the woman the carnal act is not the end of something, but the beginning. The woman understands it less in categories of pleasure than in categories of fertility, in long-lasting categories. The feminine perspective has a completely different spatial and temporal dimension. Her engagement in this sphere depends upon taking into consideration the results brought about by the act; her attention shifts onto the fruit of the relation. Therefore femininity brings in completely different view of things.

It is also interesting that when we take pleasure as a foundation then we come to homosexuality. However, I believe in all seriousness that the concept “homosexuality” is a contradiction. Why? Because sexuality presupposes a difference between the sexes. When we are dealing with “homo,” in other words “the same,” then we go outside of sexuality. The Greeks were well aware of this. Pederasty was a way of avoiding sexuality for them and not one of their sexual practices. Homosexuality is a non-sexual use of the sexual members and is not sexuality in its most proper meaning. It is similar with all the other abnormalities of the variety that involve giving oneself pleasure through the help of one’s sexual organs.

Please note how when we speak of sexuality we do not think of one of the sexes, but about two; I’m thinking of the relation that obtains between the two sexes. This is not about some abstract relation between I don’t know what, but a relation between a man and a woman. And also a relation between a woman and a man. After all, these two relations are not symmetrical: The relation of a man to a woman is not the same thing as a relation of a woman to a man. Furthermore, when we take the child into consideration—because that is the result of the relation between the sexes—we will be dealing with the relation of parents to a child and with a relation of the child to the parents. Then there will also be a relation of the father to the child and the relation of the child to the father. There will also be the relation of the mother to the child. These relations will be different depending upon whether the child is a girl or boy. And if things develop even further to relations between siblings, cousins, and further relatives we can note that the relation between the sexes lies, perhaps, at the foundations of political relations. This is truly a big question. When we consider sexuality in its proper development—with its proper direction and consequences—it appears to be something much richer and more complex than we usually judge. Aristotle develops a conception of politics that leans upon the idea of the family; social relations are for him an extension of family relations. Ever since Christianity brought into thinking the fundamental relation between the sexes, society can accept all differences; in the nation-state there can be people who are marginally different. To speak of sexuality as pleasure you overlook what is the most substantial matter in it.

Can sexuality then be taken as the starting point of a certain type of anthropology?

Sex is the starting point of two types of relations both of which depend upon

difference. There is a double difference: The difference between the sexes and the difference between generations. The first is concerned with relations between spouses, while the second is concerned with relations between parents and children. This double difference is the first difference experienced by every human being. In the relation man-woman or the relation parent-child every one of us experiences a relation to an Other, meaning, toward a person who will never be me, who is irreducible. It is impossible to fuse with the opposite sex, because the person belonging to the other sex is an Other *par excellence*. Men see women as belonging to a world that they will never penetrate. It is similar in the case of parenthood: Children see their parents as those who belong to a wholly different world and the parents see the world of their children as wholly Other. The propagation of the model of father-buddy or mother-friend does not work. Therefore if such a science [of the sexes] would be possible then it would be based upon relations with the Other, where this Other is a spouse or parent.

This relation to the Other is not entirely serene ...

Not only is it not serene, but it is problematic, dramatic, and unresolvable. If in sexuality we seek only good self-esteem or fulfillment then we go beyond it. A woman does not desire a man because she has the same interests, but only because she is a woman. However, when you choose a person of the same sex—of course excluding the instance of a supernatural friendship in Christ—then it is largely because you have a lot in common with him or her. If, for example, I wanted to expand my sphere and feel self-fulfilled in it, then I would become “homo.” That is, as I describe it, “homophilic,” and not “homosexual.” I remember a film about Truman Capote in which the writer spends a vacation with his “friend.” Both of them write before noon, then in the evening they read to each other what they have written, and then you can see each of them mutually developing their spheres. I as a writer could use something like this, but at the same time the reality of family is completely different. My wife, kids, and I—we all live in different spheres. Sexuality makes it so that my sphere is disturbed, the Other breaks into it. The natural result of sexuality is precisely the intrusion of the most real reality—if I may put it thus—because reality is something that I do not expect, that which resists me, and which, in the end, I cannot fully master.

Does the “homo” relation have something unreal about it?

A whole layer of romantic images has grown around those in love. Tristan and Isolde is one of the exemplary pairs. At one point in time people believe that this is a model of the relationship between man and woman, while this is actually a model of “homo” relations. In these romantic images there is always something that originates beyond nature, for example, the love potion, or the enchanted forest. These mysterious things cause the two to become one and the pair is set off from the rest of the world. Meanwhile, this strong image of self-sufficiency of two people is a homosexual fantasy.

Or, for example, gay marriage. You can see an undeniable fascination with authentic marriage, that is, a relationship between a man and a woman, but also of a pair with children. When I say “father and mother” I have a full relationship set. But when I say “father and father” why shouldn’t I also add “father #3” or “father #4”? In this logic nothing justifies stopping at two persons. Why then do we stop at two? Because two is a fullness, a foundation. But those who advance such claims do not want to admit it. The obviousness of it is as clear as day, but many things are not visible, because sexuality is something hidden.

And finally: Is the relationship between a man and woman a relationship face to face or is it shoulder to shoulder. The expression “face to face” points to, among other things, an opposition, a confrontation. The expression “shoulder to shoulder” points more toward an order of assistance, friendship. Now, the relationship between man and woman always

moves from a relation of “face to face” into a “shoulder to shoulder” relation. When it is complemented by a third then we are dealing with true communion. I think that for those whom I call “homo” the “face to face” model predominates, which is a variety of fascination and rivalization. Marcel Proust, who was deeply marked by such an experience, demonstrates in his writings that the relationship with the other person in such an arrangement always carries the stigma of covetousness. But his genius depends upon pointing out that possession is impossible, that covetousness always ends in crisis.

What then is the essence of sexuality?

It is the opening to the Other as Other. As you can see, in accepting such a definition we totally reject the romantic conception of sexuality, which depends upon understanding the relationship as a melting into unity. Here sexuality is the tearing apart the sphere of one’s own “I.” Emmanuel Levinas, to whom I owe a great deal, was on the right trail here, but he did not dare to take his intuition to the end, that is, into the sphere of sexuality. What does it mean to say “an opening on the Other as Other?” It is an opening onto drama in which we are engaged by the body. This drama assumes a relationship to what is radically Other, however, not “external.” For example, femininity is for the man something that does not give him peace, it is otherness *par excellence*. Yet, a woman is not Other in the sense of something “foreign” and “external.” It does not belong to pure exteriority; it is simultaneously something internal to man. I cannot reduce a woman to my “I,” I cannot have her as I have myself. However, in a relation to the one whom I cannot possess entirely I become myself. This is the model of sexuality. I truly become a man only when I am turned toward a woman, but I fulfill myself only by not being ever fulfilled. This is paradoxical. Something like this is called transcendence. Transcendence is not exteriority, it is something that is radically Other, but simultaneously “is here.” It is an otherness, but not one that is non-present and it is not foreign. My deepest thesis is the claim that in the sexually endowed human body there comes about an opening onto transcendence.

Is this opening onto transcendence what you call “the mysticism of the body?”

The Depths of Sexuality was an essay in which I investigated this topic and I did not know then what I know now. In the introduction I wrote that it is not a book on mysticism in the strict sense, but about something as mysterious as mysticism. Shortly after that I came to the conclusion that in sexuality we are dealing with an opening onto transcendence. I am a man and I am not fulfilled as a man. Due to my sexuality I am turned toward a woman. However, this opening is not something that slips away because the other person remains outside the mastery of my will. Therefore, sexuality is more like a mystery. It is a mystery on the existential level, but also a mystery on the epistemological level. Because if you love somebody, then come the following questions: Where does pleasure come from, where does beauty come from, and what sort of good can I sacrifice for someone? And if there are children: For what reason ought one give life? Sexuality inclines me to give life and it is what pushes my reason to ask the question: But why should I? Frequently people who have never dealt with metaphysics when they first have children go through difficult moments because they understand nothing. It is sex that calls us to metaphysics and to existence. It forces us to concern ourselves with what is most important, what breaks our self-sufficiency, our spiritual pride—if I may make a connection to *The Faith of the Demons*.

The second important question that I would like to ask you is about celibacy. The book *The Depths of Sexuality* opens with a quotation from Proverbs about “the way of a man with a young woman” and closes with a mysterious chapter on the Virgin Mary. Are celibacy and sexuality mutually exclusive?

In order to answer this question you must first become aware of the ties between married life and the religious life. The religious—even when they conduct a very deep

spiritual life—cannot go beyond the model that includes sex. The relationship with God is realized on the pattern of sonship or on the spousal pattern. In the greatest mystics we find spousal analogies. This is especially apparent in St. Teresa of Avila and in St. John of the Cross. But of course it was there already in the Song of Songs, where a dialogue between spouses is the model of mystical life. The religious therefore base themselves upon the reality of sex in order to lead a religious life.

But we can go further and state that the life of the religious does not negate the sexual difference. We know that in convents the relationship to Christ is the most substantial, while for monks the quality of religious life greatly depends upon Marian devotion. If you take away the cult of the Mother of God then monastery life dies; Protestantism is proof of this. Extremely radical monastic life, for example the rule of the Carthusians, requires an unusually lively relationship with Mary. The Carthusians have a room called an “Ave Maria” and whenever they pass through it they say a Hail Mary. They also have a double service, of which one is dedicated to Mary.

Also, when looking at the priesthood we can ask why women do not have access to the priesthood in the strict sense. This is because the structure of the priesthood is a masculine structure. The priest fulfills mediating functions, he transmits grace. This is how it is for the masculine sex: The man begets something outside of himself. This later creates the need for a place where the granted grace can grow, and it is precisely the woman who in the Church fulfills the role of reception. Women are entrusted with the service of persisting in prayer, expressing sympathy, and granting hospitality. Thus, just as the supernatural does not cancel out the natural, so the spiritual does not negate the sexual. This is especially visible in Catholicism.

When we explore these matters from the side of marriage we can see that the married life needs celibacy. The religious are simply indispensable for married people. This is because sexuality implies two virtues: purity and hope. If a man comes closer to a woman he must respect her otherness and cannot act upon the principle of pure impulse. Sexuality in itself is an opening onto another person and always presupposes some form of purity. And if this is so, then it requires persons who through their celibacy confirm purity for people who live in marriage. The monk who lives in complete abstinence is a living witness to the fact that there is no sexual fatalism that would require people to satisfy drives in an animal manner. When it comes to the virtue of hope, it is tied with the matter of faithfulness. Faithfulness is something difficult because it is not easy to live with one person until death. It is difficult to bear old age and it is difficult not to fall into routine or not to give into the temptation to run away. I think that faithfulness presupposes faith in the resurrection of the body, in the belief that life really fulfills itself in something concrete. In relation to children there comes the question: Why give them life when we know they are going to die? I have six myself and frequently tell myself that I have them with monks [laughs]. It's true, because the monks are a living witness to hope since it is as if they already live in eternity. It is the monk who makes sexual liberation possible. For example, where does circumcision come from? So that a man can take sexuality to its end, including his fertility. He wears upon his body a sign of God's promise, that family life is for something, that it is not given up to nothingness.

Then, is the virginity of Mary the ultimate depth of human sexuality?

Yes, Mary's virginity is not a rejection of sexuality as is frequently thought, but, on the contrary, its most perfect fulfillment. Mary is not asexual, but a woman made of blood and bone. As I was saying, sexuality is above all an opening onto transcendence. It is, which is especially important here, a fertile opening. It enters into a drama and this drama is connected with being fruitful. In Mary this opening is radical. She reveals that the essence of sexuality is not a passing pleasure, but being open to the Other as Other. This

Other for her is God himself. Therefore in the case of Mary we are dealing with the revelation of the very essence of sexuality. This revelation can only be given after sin, because if sin did not exist the sexual relation between a man and a woman would be sufficient for the opening onto transcendence to be direct. After sin everything is unclear and we are limited by lust. Mary entered into transcendence in an extreme manner and through her virginity she reminds us of the supernatural essence of sexuality.

The last issue that I would like to bring up is the *topos* of drama present in your work. You say that marriage, as the search for communion through the body, is a fundamental drama and that both the consecrated life and the lives of the dissolute are common dramas. The whole human condition—not only the married and family paths—is therefore dramatic. What do you understand by drama?

I understand drama as it was understood by the great philosopher, unfortunately now mostly forgotten, Henri Gouhier. In his book entitled *Le Théâtre et l'Existence* [*The Theater and Existence*] he attempts to nail down the specifics of dramatic categories. When talking about the tragic he concludes that its essence is not unhappiness—even if it is frequently an element in it—but the fact that man is exposed to the mercy of the gods, that he finds himself at the disposal of a transcendence that infinitely exceeds him and over which he does not have control. I believe that such is the reality of faith. Faith is the commitment to giving oneself to being possessed by the mystery. In this sense it is deeply tragic. When we take a closer look at the lives of the great saints then it becomes obvious that they do not at all understand what is happening to them, but they remain in this state, they give themselves up totally to grace. The tragic sense of life is something obvious.

There is a certain error committed by believers that is based upon saying to themselves that “everything will somehow be alright,” because “I have faith.” In matters pertaining to the defense of the family those whom I call “Catholics” think that they should secure prosperity for their children, above all, in order for them to achieve fulfillment in this life, and so on. But the family is something that never works properly, there are always failures. Life does not depend upon going through it without losses. It is not a question of prosperity, but a question of the good. And the good emerges out of drama. Christ himself said that the family will be divided and it will not bring peace, only the sword.

In your writing you frequently use paradoxes; it seems you are close to the rhetoric of contradiction or even rebellion. In one interview you said: As a left-leaning Jew fascinated by Nietzsche I was triply, vehemently, and aggressively anti-Christian. The word “God” acted upon me like a red cape does on a bull. What ideals did you confess before your conversion? What were your biggest influences?

I come from a Jewish family and in such a family you can't just simply become a Christian—it is a total betrayal. From the Jewish point of view Christians took something from Judaism and adapted it to their own fashions; one must hold these things at a distance. Second, my family is, it's true, Jewish, but not especially religious; instead it professed the ideals of the revolutionary left. My father was first a Maoist, then he went onto socialism with a strong anti-military and anti-clerical coloring; he occupied positions totally opposed to the Church. Furthermore, I completed French secular school, totally cleansed of all reference to religion, and thus I absorbed a whole mass of un-Christian or even anti-Catholic references. With such baggage I quickly found myself in the orbit of a certain variety of radicalism, which I read in Nietzsche, Georges Bataille, Antonin Artaud, and Celine. After my conversion I rejected all of these authors, but today I can calmly return to them.

Thus, I lived by the ideals of radicalism. I was convinced that humanity is coming to an end, my worldview was eschatological, but it was an apocalypse without the Kingdom.

One can say that it was a form of nihilism, but—note—when one says “nihilism” one thinks that of a person that does not believe in anything. I, for example, believed in the infallibility of Nietzsche [laughs]. Also, obviously, in the correctness of my judgments. There is a certain type of oversensitive nihilism: A person who is so weak and so vulnerable about being wounded that he creates a protective armor for himself. It was so with Cioran who was exceptionally over-sensitive and so to go along with this he had an incredibly sharpened sense of happiness. Death, which for the majority of people is something to be accepted, was for Cioran the highest scandal. His despair came from a childishly naïve love for life. We frequently deal with such a mechanism: A nihilist is capable of passionately expounding on the extermination of humanity, but turns away his eyes when he hurts his finger. Such a nihilism of weaklings was my spiritual state.

In another interview you reminisced about praying for your father as an overwhelming moment. Since you are a writer one can speculate that your conversion had an intellectual dimension, that it had a place for the word to do its work. You say that your change in thinking occurred through decadent exercises—a literary exercise of ridiculing religious beliefs. How does one go from the word to the Word?

I always had the impression that someday I will occupy myself with writing. When one writes one runs into the foundations of his culture, with the Book—that is with the Holy Writ. There is always such a moment when one must wrestle with it. When Nietzsche writes his *Zarathustra* he wants to write an anti-Bible: He takes Luther’s Bible as an example and wants to turn it upside down. When Bataille write his *Inner Experience*, which is part of his a/theological *summa*, it is obvious he wants to overthrow St. Thomas Aquinas and adopt mystical experience to the atheist perspective. In all these great authors you can see this kind of confrontation. I also decided to read the Bible in order to mock it, in order to overthrow it. So I started reading, a little bit at first, without any great interest. Then I read the Prophet Isaiah. I suddenly saw that in the Book of Isaiah there is an extremely venomous critique of religiosity, which in a lot of ways could remind one of Nietzsche’s critiques. Then I said to myself: How strange this is! The critique of religion is not something external to religion, but can be found inside religion itself! This completely stunned me!

Then I had a more literary encounter, my discovery of Leon Bloy. I owe him a great deal. His writing is one of the highest achievements of French literature due the extraordinary power of the word. It is writing of anger. In Bloy we encounter an extreme fierceness: No other later Catholic author was as brutal and as radical. Some, it’s true, tried to go further but went beyond orthodoxy; Bloy always remained within it. He had a famous saying: My anger is only the boiling of my sympathy. Bloy’s writing therefore has a strong dimension of mercy and an urgent need to call people to the truth.

Then I was surprised to notice that everything I liked in Antonin Artaud or Nietzsche can also be found in the Catholic context, including in Bloy. It is possible that this was deeply justified because the critique of idolatry is a core of revelation. At the center of revelation there is the Cleansing of the Temple, the acknowledgment that in life there are things over which we have no control, that existence is an abyss. After all, revelation does not give you ready answers, it is not an answer—on the contrary. This moment was decisive for me.

After Isaiah and Bloy came the time to read St. Thomas Aquinas whom I got to know through the writings of Jacques Maritain and Charles Journet. Even before that I read a lot of Hans Urs von Balthasar. My education was filled out by my philosophy professor at the Sorbonne at the time, Jean-Louis Chretien, a late convert like me. During those days I was fascinated by Nietzsche and when I read Chretien’s text “Gloire du corps”

I could not believe how on-target Nietzsche's thoughts on the body were. You could see in them the heritage of Catholic theology! Today I think that if Nietzsche were more aware of the Resurrection and of the Incarnation he would have never written his works the way he did. He was writing under the influence of Christianity reduced to morality professed by Protestant Puritanism. This is visible when he talks about Christianity within the frame of the genealogy of morality. But Christ never practiced moralism: The reduction of faith to morality is a total misunderstanding.

For many years you have been an oblate of the Abbey of Solesmes. Do you agree with the opinion that authentic conversion is a conversion to the Church?

Of course, I could not say otherwise. The Church is the Body of God.