

“Yes” – A Remarkable Response to Cultural Change

“Sì” – Una notable respuesta al cambio cultural

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Abstract: The article analyzes six reasons why Guardini says yes to the phenomenon of cultural change in spite of his evident reluctance regarding the particular direction of contemporary changes. The analysis focuses on his *attitude* insofar as it contrasts with widespread mind-sets of his time: isolation, romanticism, conservatism, fundamentalism, formalism and idealism. In the first section, the article shows that Guardini’s yes is moved by the will to *engage* in the culture rather than isolate from it. Second, this engagement necessarily regards the real culture such as it surrounds him without romantic projection. Third, Guardini maintains an open attitude regarding change instead of seeking to preserve culture at all costs. In the fourth section, the article shows how Guardini *distinguishes between culture and religion*, thus avoiding falling into fundamentalism. As a fifth characteristic of his attitude, the study elaborates on Guardini’s acknowledgement of the *diverse potential* of cultures, which allowed him to steer clear of the formalism in radical humanism. Lastly, the sixth section, describes how Guardini bases his attitude more than anything on the conviction that the ultimate fulfilment of human existence (in stark contrast to an idealist vision of culture) is not to be found in culture, which is why the specific cultural form plays no more than a *relative* role in human happiness.

Keywords: Romano Guardini, Culture, Worldview, Polar Oppositions, Encounter.

Resumen: El artículo analiza seis razones por las cuales Romano Guardini dice *sì* al fenómeno del cambio cultural, a pesar de su evidente reserva frente a la dirección de los cambios contemporáneos. El análisis se enfoca primariamente en su *actitud* que contrastaba con las mentalidades frecuentemente adoptadas en su época: aislamiento, romanticismo, conservatismo, fundamentalismo, formalismo e idealismo. En primer lugar, el *sì* de Guardini es motivado por la voluntad de

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compromiso con la cultura, en vez del aislamiento. Segundo, este compromiso necesariamente considera la cultura que le envuelve *realmente*, en vez de darse a proyecciones románticas. En tercer lugar, se ve que Guardini mantiene una actitud *abierto* acerca del cambio, en vez de buscar conservar la cultura a toda costa. En la cuarta sección, se verá cómo Guardini *distingue entre cultura y religión*, evitando caer en el fundamentalismo. Como quinto elemento, se muestra que Guardini reconoce el *potencial presente en la diversidad* de las diversas culturas, esquivando el formalismo de un humanismo radical. Finalmente, en la sexta sección se muestra que el autor basa su actitud en la convicción de que la perfección última de la existencia humana –a diferencia de una visión idealista de la cultura– no se alcanza solamente gracias a la cultura y que, por ello, la forma cultural específica no tiene sino un papel relativo para la felicidad del hombre.

Palabras clave: Romano Guardini, cultura, cosmovisión, oposición polar, encuentro.

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1. Introduction

The year 2018 is not only the fiftieth anniversary of Romano Guardini's death, but also the centenary of the event which made of the young priest a well-known thinker: the publication of *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. The title reflects the decisively theological topics which occupied the young Guardini. However, one hundred years ago the world had many things in common with our time – perhaps most notably, cultural unrest. On November 11, 1918, the First World War ended, and the young theologian began his promising future in a decade of utter turmoil. His spirit was not occupied simply with the Divine Science and the eternal truths, but at least as much with the existential realities of man and the culture which surrounded him. His youth ministry, his encounters with thinkers of different schools, and his personal struggles to engage in the troubled society challenged his thought as much as the widely spread questions which roamed Europe at large. For the order of Europe –social, religious, political, philosophical, existential– had changed.

By facing the mixture of personal, pastoral and speculative challenges, Guardini discovered his vocation to be a scholar who offered interpretation and orientation of the existential reality from the standpoint of the Catholic worldview. The “roaring twenties”, which Guardini witnessed in

Berlin from 1923 on, were an especially noisy version of reality to contemplate at from that standpoint. They embody well the strange nostalgia which had resulted from the combination of disenchantment and excitement of the generation that had experienced the horror of the Great War. This nostalgia was the soil which brought forth a vast variety of cultural options and interpretations. Often, the superficial worldviews upon which they were built provoked staggering results. Rather than providing a reassuring cultural handrail, the interwar period was surrounded by a void which triggered more vehemently the powerful questions regarding the meaning of life. The lack of a binding *ethos* made this yearning for answers even stronger.

An entire generation of culturally sensible authors felt compelled by this situation to analyze human existence and its meaning. Their respective answers translated into worldviews which were as many as they were eccentric, but, fundamentally, they breathed the same air: the feeling that human life was changing radically and it was time to propose cultural formats that could manifest that imminent change for the masses.

The main theme of the age was, therefore, cultural change. Consequently, it seems helpful to listen to the words of that time and seek their analogous application today. Examining the ethical orientation which our author offers in the literary oeuvre which he began a century ago falls within that endeavor. For we can certainly benefit in our own days from Guardini's position regarding culture and cultural changes of his time. In my opinion, such benefit would consist above all in gaining an orientation regarding the *attitude* towards cultural change. Therefore, Guardini's attitude is what we will focus on in this article above all: How did he perceive the cultural transformation he witnessed? His perspective becomes all the more valuable if we consider how severely he struggled with the aforementioned changes, both due to the social drama they released during his lifetime and due to the ordeal, which they meant for him personally.

The best representation of Guardini's attitude towards the cultural processes that surrounded him is a simple word: *Yes*.

"Are the processes only variations on a common theme, or is something historically new irrupting in them? If it is –and I am convinced this is so– then we must say yes to it. I know what this yes costs. Those who are already naively saying it, and those who are able to make rapid switches, will see in the deliberations of these letters only a romantic looking back, a tie to what is past. This may give them a feeling of com-

placency. Yet there is a yes to what is happening historically that is decision because it springs from a knowing heart. Such a yes has weight”¹.

How is it possible that someone who sees the fundamental problems of a culture so acutely as Guardini did, consciously calls us to embrace it by saying *yes* to it? How can someone who foresaw the catastrophic potential of a cultural development not entrench himself against it? How can someone who clearly makes out the brokenness of a culture’s ethos challenge people not to hide in isolation? How can someone who deplores the inhumane climate of a time embrace it himself as *his* time? How can –generally speaking– a Christian who faces an ever less Christian culture call us to say *yes* to it?

2. Dismissing Isolation: Culture and Encounter

A common first behavior opposing saying *yes* to a culture is to isolate oneself from it. There are numerous examples of attempts of organized isolation. Throughout all times, people have rejected their immediate culture and, thus, sought a more or less strict separation. Reasons for this attitude are as multiple as they seem logical. The ultimate reason to consciously free oneself from the influence of the surrounding culture seems to be a certain vision of human wholesomeness and happiness. Hence, this rejection is often philosophically motivated. Whether it be based on the concept of what man *is*, or on the conviction of what man *should be*, the isolationist is concerned that the surrounding culture will prevent him from reaching that ideal. In this logic, a specific definition of man –a “truth about man”– dictates a specific definition of how culture should be a “truth about culture”. If these “true definitions” are not met, the surrounding reality would threaten the development of the people, especially in the case of children. Generally speaking, the *truth about man* is the criteria here for the *truth about culture*.

We will get back to the definition of ideal humanity and ideal culture later. For they can trigger not only a reaction of isolation, but –on the other side of the same coin– call also for the action of implementing a presumably perfect type of culture. Before looking at this –literally– *utopian* project, we halt and consider the attitude that precedes the action. For it is in attitude, above all, where the contrast is to be found between Guardini’s *yes* to the contemporary culture and the rejection of it by isolation.

¹ R. GUARDINI, *Letters from Lake Como. Explorations in Technology and the Human Race*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, Michigan/Cambridge (UK) 1994, Letter IX, p. 80.

Guardini witnessed the isolationist attitude quite early and quite closely himself. Growing up in a family of Italian immigrants in Germany (his parents had come there in 1886, when Romano was one year old), he often felt that his mother rejected the German way of being. She "would never engage with anybody socially" and, in her passionate love for her children, sought to hoard them around her in their secluded home. Hence, "we practically did not meet anybody and nobody came to see us either. In consequence, I hardly knew anything about the affairs of life which a young person usually learns simply by dealing with them"².

The fact that his parents had sought to "preserve their own world"³ during Guardini's childhood, would certainly play into the later struggle to find his own approach to the surrounding culture and to muster the courage to encounter it⁴. On a higher level, this struggle can be found as a theme within the *Letters from Lake Como* (1923-1925). In them, he confronts the question whether human fulfilment as such will be possible in the upcoming culture. Even though Guardini is looking at culture at large by then, it is no accident that the case which illustrates his endeavor is the contrast between the still visible harmony of the old culture in Italy and the already fully industrialized world in the North. Thus, his view on cultural change in history resembles the experience of his own migratory biography. In fact, that experience would never stop having an impact on Guardini throughout his life. On some occasions, he explicitly mentions how his two cultural roots have challenged and enriched him⁵. Mainly though, they became an implicit feature of his personality and drove him to always seek reconciliation between contrasts. As we will elaborate on later, the experience of being divided between extremes in his own life can be a storyline to explain just how much the Catholic Church meant to him from a human standpoint. As early as 1908, he writes in a letter to his friend Josef Weiger:

"I am thinking about the metaphysical foundation of Catholicism. I believe that 'Catholicism' is inherent to the essence of being, as 'harmonious unity of opposites', that is, as universality; it is the law of being (the ontological category of 'unity'). Therefore, Catholicism is *the* religion par

² Cfr. R. GUARDINI, *Berichte über mein Leben. Autobiographische Aufzeichnungen* (3^a ed.), Patmos, Düsseldorf 1985, p. 58; my translation.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

⁴ Guardini goes on explaining how in school he was tormented by a sense of foreignness and fear (Cfr. *ibid.*, p. 59).

⁵ See, above all, how he explains his vision of Europe in the light of his experience in *Europa: Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe* (1962).

excellence, that is, the only one to unite the whole, universal being with the universal God in a universal relation (*religatio*)”⁶.

This intuition, which he would specify later by means of the theology of Bonaventure and in response to Harnarck’s criticism of Catholicism as “*complexio oppositorum*”⁷, shows just how deeply runs Guardini’s concern of uniting the opposites. More than simply turning him into a devout Catholic, this insight prompted a mindset and attitude for his inclusive pastoral, pedagogical, and theological style. Philosophically, the existential drive to embrace the opposites leads us into the core of his thought, the *polar oppositions*. We will have a chance later to consider their importance for thought on culture. In the current context, however, they can help to fathom how Guardini conceptualized the struggle for harmony between two different cultural realities⁸.

The isolationist attitude seems profoundly coherent when combined with the standpoint that one is defending an objectively better culture. This claim for the *truth about culture* becomes weak, however, when this conviction is undermined by the insight that there is *truth* to other cultures too. The fact that Guardini did not wallow in the initial pessimism of Como⁹ is due to his intuition that there is a truly good side to the wellspring of a new culture. Similar to the changes in a person’s life, a specific culture represents a living tension on the spectrum of human realization. Therefore, a cultural crisis can be seen not only as decadence from an objective truth, but also as a conversion to an aspect of life that has been neglected or overruled. In the same way as a person’s crisis in

⁶ H.-B. GERL-FALKOVITZ (ED.), “*Ich fühle, daß Großes im Kommen ist*“. *Romano Guardinis Briefe an Josef Weiger 1908-1962*, Grünewald/Schöningh, Ostfildern-Paderborn, 2008, p. 42.

⁷ Cfr. A. KNOLL, *Glaube und Kultur bei Romano Guardini*, Schöningh, Paderborn 1993, pp. 136-141.

⁸ In synthesis, the system of polar oppositions describes human reality as a constant tension between rivaling aspects of life. In their variety, these aspects create the complicated reality of human existence but, fundamentally, they fall into two patterns: the formal will for stability on the one hand, and the colorful drive for fullness on the other. Both tendencies –form and fullness– are characteristic of humanity and, to some degree, present in every part of human existence. Guardini analyzes how these rivaling poles behave in the reality of the concrete human life. As a fundamental rule, he states that life becomes impossible once a side completely outrules the other; one pole, by means of its polar nature, needs the other pole. While it is normal that existence will favor one side in certain cases or moments, the other one needs to remain present at least minimally. In fact, life proves to oscillate rhythmically between the opposites and, while approaching one, feels the need for the other over and over again. The typical crises of life –in growing up, in relationships, in education: in *all* endeavors– are those moments when one pole becomes so dominant that a “conversion” to the other is needed.

⁹ Cfr. R. GUARDINI, *Letters from Lake Como*, cit., Letter I, pp. 3-8.

life calls for steps of maturation, a cultural crisis can lead to necessary change¹⁰.

Far from abandoning the possibility for an objective ethical assessment of a person's deeds or the character of a specific culture, this view first of all allows one to *see* a specific person or culture *as it is*. Such a benevolent outlook is based on the conviction that the assessment is not carried out as a comparison with perfection, but first as a recognition of the existential situation. That recognition leads to his teachings about the *encounter*. "In the truest sense, 'encounter' happens when a human meets reality"¹¹. Only man, whose freedom enables him to take distance from reality, can truly *look* at it, fathom its peculiarity and then behave in regard to it¹². Thus, in an encounter a person opens up to another. That opening has, in Guardini's understanding, an existential effect: Man is created in a way that he "finds" his true self only by encountering others¹³. Ultimately, the fulfilling role of the encounter is owed to the fact that man's existence is ruled by the polar oppositions. For due to the ongoing oscillation, a person seldom finds himself in a state of complete satisfaction; there are always aspects of life which he misses. This constitutes his *openness* to the reality around him. He is essentially *not* self-sufficient.

Thus, the polarity in a person results in the multilayered intersubjective correlations in which he engages. For example, two persons form a couple to complement each other. Together they constitute a new system of polar opposites which, while satisfying the personal imbalance to a certain degree, is in turn imperfect itself. The couple requires further encounters to balance its living polar tension. In this way, the multi-relational complex of a society can be explained¹⁴. But no matter how long the chain of further encounters continues to search for balance, the ever-shifting polar oscillation of human existence –in each person and in each relationship as such– will never allow for a state of final satisfaction. Each system of opposites is inherently *open*.

By applying this theory to the reality of culture, the mind-set regarding the encounter with other cultures is necessarily one of *openness*.

¹⁰ Cfr. R. GUARDINI, *Die Lebensalter. Ihre ethische und pädagogische Bedeutung*, Werkbund, Würzburg 1953.

¹¹ R. GUARDINI, "Die Begegnung. Ein Beitrag zur Struktur des Daseins", in *Wurzeln eines großen Lebenswerks*, IV, Grünewald/Schöningh, Mainz-Paderborn 2002, p. 232.

¹² Cfr. *ibid.*, p. 232.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

¹⁴ Cfr. R. GUARDINI, *Der Gegensatz. Versuche zu einer Philosophie des Lebendig-Konkreten* (4th ed.), Grünewald/ Schöningh, Mainz-Paderborn 1998, pp. 111.126.

The attitude of encounter, on the one hand, benevolently seeks for the good in the other. Furthermore, the awareness of the imperfection of one's own culture allows one to regard that encounter an enrichment insofar as the differences have the potential for mutual empowerment. Like every encounter of opposites, the correlation with the other can actually form a stronger whole. In the same way as the encounter with a person who is "poled" differently can reveal what I am lacking –maybe to the point of triggering the sensation of crisis and the disenchantment of my own wholeness–, a cultural crisis can well set forth new aspects of life after exposing the respective deficiencies.

In the way of concrete cultural behavior, this mind-set leads Guardini to *affirm* his contemporary culture in the deepest of senses despite his reservations and differences with it. He encounters it and, thus, accepts it. "Our age is not just an external path that we tread; it is ourselves"¹⁵. Such an encounter does not ignore the defects of the other. In fact, it quite consciously takes them into account. "But we can do this [transform what is coming] only if we honestly say yes to it and yet with incorruptible hearts remain aware of all that is destructive and nonhuman in it"¹⁶. But, instead of turning the shoulder, this attitude embraces the "other" wholeheartedly as an act to form a new cultural reality in which, precisely in recognizing the importance of one's own values, the new and the old form a fresh reality. "We must first say yes to our age. We cannot solve the problem by retreating or simply seeking to alter or improve. Only a new initiative can bring a solution"¹⁷. Therefore, Guardini's *yes* is not naïve; it is not relativistic, and it is far from missing out on the challenges which the respective cultural changes mean for the society at large and for his existence in particular. Rather the power, one should say, the self-exposing love that drives the authentic encounter demanded of him allows him to step out into the world and assume his time.

So, in synthesis, Guardini's attitude dismisses isolation and opts for engagement. This vision of culture is based on his particular *truth about man*. As two essential elements for the latter we have found, first, the role of *encounter*; a theory which, second, features a vast significance for the *polar oppositions* as the specific dynamism of human existence. We will elaborate on both elements –and thus sharpen our take on what the *truth about man* is for Guardini– when considering not only the encounter with *another* culture, but also the change of *one's own culture* (Section 3).

¹⁵ R. GUARDINI, *Letters from Lake Como*, cit., Letter IX, p. 81.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

More than a definition of man, these components acknowledge a human way of existence which not only excludes *the need to be radically protected* from others through isolation but, on the contrary, affirms that man *needs* others.

3. Dismissing Romanticism: Culture and Freedom

We have stated earlier that behind the tendency for isolation lies the claim to possess the one and only definition of what man is and, consequently, the ideal model for what culture should look like. We will consider later how and why that makes it so compelling an attitude for Christians who, like other religions or worldviews, claim precisely that: to possess the *truth about man*. Before facing that "clash of worldviews" however, there is another source for such a claim to consider: nature. Does not nature itself make claims regarding what man is and, hence, how he should live?

Nature can be "questioned" in different ways to reveal the *truth about man*. When questioned philosophically, it has led some to what we can describe as romanticism. Others, in contrast, have been led to overcome the romantic loyalty to all things natural, finding the true destiny of man in dominating nature and putting it to technical use; thus, was formed the specific character of the Modern Age which –as Guardini frequently remarked– presents a significant risk to culture by taking it to further and further altitudes.

However, nature can also be "questioned" in a less sophisticated way. Feelings and common sense, tradition and aesthetics, these ways of sketching the *truth about man* also relate in some way to what is *natural*. Guardini himself certainly knew about the value of these accesses to the phenomena of human existence. In fact, his *Letters from Lake Como* are striking witnesses of his "romantic" sensibility.

Be it speculatively or emotionally, the claim of nature to possess the *truth about man* is certainly compelling. In fact, one of the most frequent motivations to replace Guardini's *yes* with a *no* is probably romanticism. What *is* man, what *should* man *be*? The *truth about man* which, as we saw on a more general note in the last section, can lead those who "own" it to evade and isolate from differing worldviews, in cases of romanticism often translates into a less protective but all the dreamier attitude. Instead of physically separating himself from society by isolation, the romantic flees into the realm of fantasy. Disenchantment with reality prompts him to project a harmonious parallel world. Whenever that enterprise is real enough to rule out the flight into actual fantasy –literature, poetry

or other types of arts– the field of projection is usually history¹⁸. Be it the speculative reach back to prehistorical times, when man supposedly lived in perfect harmony with nature (Rousseau); be it the glorification of the medieval times as completion of truly “humane culture” (as Guardini himself felt compelled to call it once¹⁹), romanticism sees the *truth about man* in the harmony with nature.

In this light, it is not surprising that Guardini dealt with the correlation between nature and culture in general and with the tendency for romantic cultural critique in particular²⁰. As for the latter, Guardini not only struggled personally to steer clear from romanticism, he also felt obliged to give orientation to a generation in which this tendency was awaking anew. In 1924, he gathered 400 young people to reflect about “The cultural crisis of our time and the pitch for new cultural engagement”²¹.

“During that week, Guardini worked for a continuation of the present considering the epochal risk he had faced in *The Letters from Lake Como*. [...] ‘We do not want to turn back, but rather want to say a firm yes for the today. Firmly stepping into our age. We must engage in industry and technology’. Guardini speaks with such decisiveness because he senses the danger that the youth movement might ‘flee’ [from the reality of the age]”²².

On the other hand, most of Guardini’s cultural analysis deals, as a matter of fact, with a certain questionable cultural change in the West after the Middle Ages and, above all, at the end of Modernity. He manages to describe the drama of that change masterfully by showing the growing distance of culture from nature.

“The more power man has, the further he wanders from the realm of nature into the realm of culture. That means, into a world and a situation which did not grow by themselves and therefore lack the guarantee of internal order. Rather, they were made by him and, therefore, have an arbitrary

¹⁸ The few examples of romantic projection into the *future* are the utopian oeuvres. Most futuristic projections, however, are not romantic in the sense of a natural truth about man. On the contrary –as we will see–they are in their majority quests to bust the restrictions imposed by nature.

¹⁹ Cfr. R. GUARDINI, “Kultur als Werk und Gefährdung”, in *Sorge um den Menschen*, Werkbund, Würzburg 1962, p. 20.

²⁰ Besides the aforementioned *Letters from Lake Como* and the collection *Sorge um den Menschen*, see also: *The End of the Modern World* (1950) and *Power and Responsibility* (1951).

²¹ “Kulturkrise unserer Tage und Ansatzpunkte neuer Kulturgestaltung” (cfr. H.-B. GERL-FALKOVITZ, *Romano Guardini. Konturen des Lebens und Spuren des Denkens*, Topos, Kevelaer 2010, p. 127).

²² *Ibid.*, p. 129.

and hazardous character. One recalls the myth of Atlas who is condemned to carry the firmament on his shoulders. He cannot walk freely below it but has to bear it as a burden: if he falters, everything will collapse"²³.

This is how he gets to the core of the romantic intuition, granting that the technical emancipation of culture from nature is, in fact, putting man's very existence at risk. The fact that, for the first time in history, man is not only able to cope with nature through culture but actually manipulating it to the point of almost total dominance –Guardini does not grow tired of pointing out the dramatic meaning of this newness– new not simply for the history books, but for the human existence as such. In his first reflections regarding the issue, Guardini asks whether "in all that is taking place, is a life supported by human nature and fully human work possible?"²⁴. While the romantic replies with a convinced *no*, it is precisely here that Guardini gives the surprising answer: *Yes*.

"It must be possible to tackle the task of mastering nature in a way that is appropriate, but also to find a new sphere of freedom for the soul, to give back true security to life, to achieve an attitude, a disposition, a new order of living, standards of what is excellent and what is despicable, of what is permissible and what is impermissible, of responsibility, of limits, etc., by which we can hold in check the danger of destruction presented by arbitrary natural forces"²⁵.

This "must" reflects well the attitude of Guardini's *yes*. Once again, it is neither naive nor blind to the challenge. It is a kind of duty rather, a duty to believe in man's tomorrow.

Although the major parts of his reflections on culture are dedicated to conveying an awareness in his reader about the drama of the cultural emancipation from nature, Guardini always adds a few strokes to the picture which seek to give a speculative justification *different from mere romanticism* for his "dutiful" *yes*. In *Kultur als Werk und Gefährdung* [*Culture as Deed and as Danger*] he makes a sketch of that picture. On the one hand, he depicts the epic culture changes as the drama of emancipation from nature culminating in the situation captured earlier in the image of Atlas. On the other hand, he also remarks:

"We cannot simply declare a specific period of history to be the most human, nor can we do that with a people or country. We cannot even de-

²³ R. GUARDINI, "Europa. Wirklichkeit und Aufgabe", in *Sorge um den Menschen*, cit., p. 259.

²⁴ R. GUARDINI, *Letters from Lake Como*, cit., Letter IX, p. 78.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

termine the human to be bound strictly to the earth, because man always stands in relation to the totality of the world, in difference to an animal and its determined environment. Certainly, each man has a specific environment too to which he is bound; but that bound is always relative. The individual as well as social groups or historical movements can break through them”²⁶.

Given his *spiritual* nature, man is not as strictly bound to the “*natural* nature” as the romantic –speculative or emotive– states. Freedom essentially consists in the possibility to distance oneself from the context of the immediately natural, from the *environment* (*Umwelt*). The human world is more than his biological *Umwelt*.

“The Modern mentality thought of culture as something ‘natural’. Not in the immediate sense because it relies on the capacity of the spirit to detach from the natural context and oppose it. But in the Modern mind nature and spirit were one [...] and, thus, Modernity was convinced about an optimistic progress of culture. But history has proved it wrong. The human spirit is free to do good and to do evil, to build and to destroy”²⁷.

This does not mean that nature is indifferent to the fate of culture. It does not undermine but highlights Guardini’s warnings once again of what will happen to a culture which neglects the natural bounds; yet it steers clear of interpreting the *truth about man* only by “asking” nature. By overcoming this essentially romantic take on man –applying the model of polar oppositions to the couple nature-culture– Guardini became a true champion for the positive role which nature can have for human existence. He was an advocate for nature, very much so. Nevertheless, he did not fall into the extreme of romanticism, an extreme which would not have allowed him to say his *yes* to an increasingly “*cultural* culture”.

What was said in this section gives another hint about what the *truth about man* would contain, or better: it highlights that, for Guardini, this truth is not to be found in nature alone but also in culture.

²⁶ R. GUARDINI, *Kultur als Werk und Gefährdung*, cit., p. 27; my translation.

²⁷ R. GUARDINI, *Das Ende der Neuzeit. Ein Versuch zur Orientierung* (5th ed.), Werkbund, Würzburg 1950, p. 85; my translation.

4. Dismissing Conservatism: Culture and Change

We have seen how the apparent possession of the *truth about man* can either lead to the practical reaction of isolation to protect oneself from a culture which does not reflect it, or to the more theoretical reaction of romanticism which seeks to coat a flawed reality with the projection of a nature-based harmony. Both cases represent scenarios in which the surrounding culture stands in contrast to a lost, ideal culture. They are reactions to a cultural change that has *already* taken place.

What about situations, however, when change is about to take place? While society commonly has its fair share of romantics and, even if fewer in number, of isolationists, another attitude appears far more frequently. Be it for speculative motives or out of an emotional intuition, many regard the *truth of man* to be that which tradition has passed on to them. Now culture, instead of nature, is considered the source for the *truth about man*. Not any culture but a specific and traditional culture. In such a mind-set, the new is –put simply– *per se* decadent. The old must be preserved, indeed, protected from the new.

Such conservatism can be found in every society and usually coincides with strong and powerful political groups of interest. The traditional conservatism of the religions, while too often interlaced with these kinds of political motives, is mostly owed to the character of wisdom that is essential to a community of faith and morals. Both the political and the religious veins of conservatism interest Guardini and, above all through an analysis of the latter, he reaches his understanding of that attitude when considering human existence as such, that is to say, when elaborating the *system of polar opposites*.

Referring to the explanation given above, the system of polar oppositions describes human reality as a constant tension between rivaling aspects of life. Contemplating culture and cultural change in this light, Guardini cannot limit himself simply to adapt a “conservative” attitude. In fact, the fascinating *yes* which we analyze defies strict conservatism. We will dedicate a few thoughts later to the fact that, at the same time and for analogous reasons, Guardini is far from being an anti-conservative. For he is at least as suspicious of progress as he is of continuity (see Section 6).

We have seen in Section 1 that the application of the polar oppositions to culture results in the recognition that cultures, in a similar way to individual temperaments, are in and of themselves works-in-progress; and that progress is no linear process of fulfilment and perfection, but

mainly a rhythmic shifting between the various aspects of human life. That explains, on the one hand, that one culture can objectively be richer or “better suited” to encompass certain areas of human realization. But, on the other hand, it will hardly be superior to every other culture regarding all the aspects of human life.

When it comes to adopting a view on what culture is, change itself –be it because of interaction with another culture or because of internal developments– is not only a normal but a necessary element in it. The very nature of life demands rhythmic movement in time; and human life, in as far as it embraces rivaling opposites, will oscillate between the extremes either by means of smooth transitions or, if necessary, by abrupt crisis. Vehemently maintaining a *status quo* when life and time call for recalibration will postpone the change; however, the more it is dragged out, the more violently the culture must eventually break free from that grip.

The model of the polar oppositions, applied to culture, sees it as a living reality. As such, it is to be encountered (as we have seen in Section 1). Once more, this open attitude begs for clarity regarding what we have called the *truth about man*. For, even if a certain openness for change is advisable, an attentive examination of the direction of that change seems still imperative. Precisely because culture is a living reality, cultural changes imply risks and crises. This suggests the need for orientation. This orientation –the *truth about man*– does not come from nature alone (as we have seen in Section 2), but it does not come from within the specific culture either because, in the concrete proportion of its position between the poles, culture is always partial. A comprehensive, perfect culture in which all poles are equally present does not exist and (as we will see in Section 5) neither is there one ideal version of being human which could be engineered by such a hypothetically perfect culture. Thus, culture can never evolve into paradise (Section 6). This brings us back (in the following Section 4) to the question of the role of religion in determining the *truth about man* and, thus, in providing the criteria to evaluate or orientate a specific culture.

Guardini’s *yes* to culture, therefore, owes a lot to the ordering strength of the polar oppositions. While deep changes in history –like the ones he witnessed– overwhelm the conservative attitude, they can be embraced confidently as shifts towards new shores despite objective losses –losses which can remain hurtful all the same–. Above all, this view does not allow for a certain time or culture to claim the monopoly of human realization. Instead, there is potential for humanization in each

cultural constellation, and every change is driven in part by talents of a new generation.

"We love the tremendous power of the age and its readiness for responsibility. We love the resoluteness with which it hazards itself and pushes things to extremes. Our soul is touched by something great that might well emerge. We love it, and our soul is touched, even though we see clearly its questionability relative to the value of the past age. We must be able to see very plainly what is at issue if with a fixed heart we are ready to sacrifice the inexpressible nobility of the past"²⁸.

Thus, "it must be possible" for man to embrace cultural change and still reach fulfilment because he is no mere toy in the hands of culture; instead, he is free and creative and morally able to fulfil the *truth about man* always. "Our age has been given to us as the soil on which to stand and the task to master"²⁹.

5. Dismissing Christian Fundamentalism: Culture and Responsibility

In the context of conservatism, yet another source for the *truth about man* arises: religion. The aforementioned difficulty to assume an attitude open to change while being certain about the *truth about man* is especially challenging when this conviction is based on religious belief. We have seen how the *truths about man* given by nature or by culture alone lead to a *truth about culture* which hardly allows the pronouncement of Guardini's *yes*. While Guardini, in fact, rejects those two to be the respectively exclusive sources for the *truth about man*, his worldview is expressively based on Revelation³⁰. How can this truth allow for a courageous *yes* to cultural change?

While we have already seen that Guardini's *yes* is neither unconditional nor relativistic, it can still be startling to think that he, a Catholic priest and theologian, would adopt any other attitude in the "roaring twenties" than radical cultural resistance. In effect, in the same way that his sensibility for the role of nature in culture did not turn him into a romantic, his faith likewise was not translated into a fundamentalism which sees the perfection of Christian life in the reactionary withdrawal from the world. As we will see, the main force driving forth that *yes* was precisely his *Catholic worldview*.

²⁸ R. GUARDINI, *Letters from Lake Como*, cit., Letter IX, p. 81.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ See, for example, *Nur wer Gott kennt, kennt den Menschen* [*Only he who knows God knows Man*] (1952).

On the first glance, radical opposition to worldliness seems like a coherent reaction for a Christian. Christ's message represents the opposition to the world after all (Cfr. John 1) and the *truth about man* which he revealed stands in stark contrast to the spirit of the world (Cfr. 1Cor 1). In this light, the history of Christianity could be read as a heroic opposition to that world (embodied in the age of great persecutions), a sacrifice which led to the conversion of the "world" (personified in the baptism of Constantine) and the subsequent reconstruction of human society in the Christian way (culminating in the Holy Roman Empire or, even more daringly, in the temporal power of the Popes). The simplification of such a reading is evident but, even more, it is a falsification of the character of the Christian message which neither claims nor wishes to establish the paradise on earth.

If in the first centuries there were tendencies to think like that, there was also a crucial experience for Christianity to make clarifying distinctions regarding the cultural role of the Church: the fall of the Roman Empire. In his *De civitate Dei*, Augustine sets out to explain the role of the Church independently of the worldly structure of Rome. In order to do so, he crafts one of the very first specifically Christian interpretations of history based on the assumption of two possible paths for man: one of the flesh, the other of the spirit³¹. Human history is thus embodied as the entwinement of the two cities which mankind built according to the flesh and the spirit, respectively. However, for Augustine, the two cities do not intend to represent the Church on the one hand and the state on the other; the "City of God" simply means the society in as far as it corresponds to God's will and order, as opposed to the society's simultaneous tendencies to act "according to the flesh", the latter resulting in injustice, chaos, and the mere pursuit of pleasure.

Thus, Augustine showed that the vision of a cultural continuity of the Roman Empire in the shape of the Catholic Church was only partially true. For, although she treasured its heritage, the Church was independent from the Roman Empire, and the Christians were supposed to strive for the heavenly rather than the temporal Kingdom. Using Augustine's nomenclature, the "City of God" will never *replace* the "City of the Flesh". The mission of the first is to *permeate* the world as much as possible. But the inherent character of history is the intertwined presence of both cities in *all* cultures. Thus, not only is this world not to become a "cultural

³¹ The division into two alternative paths of life was not new in Christian literature (see for example the *Didaché* from the first century), but to apply this spiritual paradigm to history itself was.

paradise," it really never *could* become one, and any attempts of Christian *utopiae* have no hope of prevailing.

Nevertheless, the tendency to identify the history of salvation with the history of the nations would persist and, during the medieval "Age of faith"³², even increase. Despite the repeated throwbacks of that tendency –namely that the temporal culture would often permeate the Church more than the other way around– the striving for a temporal establishment of a cultural "City of God" would resurface again and again. Due to the process of secularization in Modernity, the dream of a Christian empire became less and less realistic, resulting in the adoption of the more reactionary tendencies we have described earlier: If society at large could not adopt cultural perfection, Christians should consequently isolate themselves from it and form their own cultures.

The sobering reality of Modernity prompted more than defensive behavior. In the twentieth century, deeper reflection on the cultural role of the Church in society took place³³. It led to the awareness that Christian religion is, as such, not a culture. By definition, its claim to both a transcendent origin and a transcendent object surpass the boundaries of culture. On the other hand, Christianity does have cultural elements that it holds essential. How can that be?

In his early conferences *Vom Sinn der Kirche* (1922) [*On the meaning of the Church*]³⁴, Guardini looks at the meaning of the Church in human existence. Thereby, he specifically drafts a model of how the Church relates to culture. Culture, once again, is presented as an oscillating polar reality. Whatever the state of culture, it is never truly fit to provide ultimate fulfilment for man. Precisely since the *truth about man*, based on the Christian faith, implies the encounter with God, culture can never be truly perfect. On the other hand, the Christian *truth about man* also

³² C. DAWSON, *The Making of Europe*, Meridian, New York 1956, p. 17.

³³ We can name, for example, the Protestant Theologian and philosopher of religion Ernst Troeltsch (1865-1923) who believed "that Christianity and Western culture are so inextricably intertwined that a Christian can say little about his faith to members of other civilizations, and the latter in turn cannot encounter Christ save as a member of the Western world" (H. R. NIEBUHR, *Christ and Culture*, Harper, New York 1956, p. 29). Among Catholic authors Jean Daniélou (1905-1974) stands out who responds differently to the problem in *The Lord of History* (1958): "The fundamental reality of Christianity is 'to come', not just in relation to a particular moment of time, but in relation to all historical time, past, present and future. It is indeed novissimus, the last thing: with Christianity, the end is already achieved. But in the mystery of the being and working of the Christian Church, this thing which is beyond history exists now in historical fact". (J. DANIELOU, *The Lord of History. Reflections on the Inner Meaning of History*, Longmans, New York 1958, p. 20).

³⁴ Cfr. R. GUARDINI, *The Church and the Catholic*, Sheed & Ward, New York 1935, pp. 11-116.

acknowledges his rootedness in the world. Therefore, his fulfillment does not consist in a remote ethereal existence in the spirit.

“In what then does humanity in the deepest sense of the term consist? To be truly human is to be conscious of human weakness, but confident that it can be overcome. It is to be humble, but assured. It is to realize man’s transience, but aspire to the eternal. It is to be a prisoner of time, but a freeman of eternity. It is to be aware of one’s powers, of one’s limitations, but to be resolved to accomplish deeds of everlasting worth. [...] And a man is human in so far as he lives, consciously, willingly, and with a cheerful promptitude as a finite being in the midst of time, change, and the countless shapes of life –but at the same time strives to overcome all this flux and limitation in the eternity, and infinity, which transfigure them. [...] Well then –the Church is always confronting man with the Reality which creates in him the right attitude of mind: namely, the Absolute. She confronts him with the Unconditioned. In that encounter he realizes that he himself is dependent at every point, but there awakens in him the yearning for a life free from the countless dependencies of life on earth, an existence inwardly full”³⁵.

Thus, he neither reduces Christianity to a cultural force among others, nor does he remove it from culture. He attributes to Christianity the role, embodied by the Church, to engage in culture in order to orient it. While holding on to the *truth about man* provided by revelation, Guardini does not impose this truth as a criterion to *be* culture, but to imbue and guide culture which, in essence, will never be the place for man to reach his fulfillment. This completion instead takes place transculturally in the encounter with the absolute. The imperative given by the Christian *truth about man* is, therefore, for culture to allow that encounter but not to produce or, even less, to replace it. Culture as such is not the place for salvation; like nature, it constitutes the world in which man exists and from out of which he engages in the encounter that truly matters: the encounter with God. Culture and nature are essential parts of the *truth about man*; but they are not all by far.

In as far as this implies that a culture constantly shifts and changes, there is another, more horizontal role for Christianity. Embodied in the Church, Christianity’s “vertical” task is to provide for man that encounter with the absolute which culture by itself could never offer. “Horizontally”, Christianity offers a standpoint to look at the world and thus an orientation to judge the worldly affairs according to the ultimate *truth*

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 60-61.

about man. This "horizontal" task has a value not only for the individual Christian but for the world because it is one of the truest contributions that Christianity can make to culture: to give an orientation based on the –assumingly– purest *truth about man*: revelation. This value –both for the individual and for society at large– is what Guardini explores when assuming the endeavor of teaching the so-called *Catholic worldview*.

A worldview, as such, is the view of reality as a whole, the whole in which man lives: the world. As such, it is a way to interpret *man's* existence rather than the *world's* being. It regards the sense of life in this world more than the character of reality from the specific perspectives of physics, sociology, theology or other disciplines. It regards "the work which man is supposed to accomplish in this world"³⁶. A worldview includes, therefore, the subject who looks at the world. To study a worldview, as Guardini was invited to do at the University of Berlin, is to study not only its content but the act itself, its mode and manner. It is "a treatise of the world-viewing look, its specific structure, its conditions and criteria, its contents and their relation to the rest of the knowledge"³⁷. This treatise brings forth, once again, the spectrum of polar oppositions. The different worldviews respectively rely on a typology within that spectrum. Thus, every person has all typical possibilities of life within him, even if only as sidelined tones within the whole. Everyone is "potential totality". But the dominating tone is always a certain type which measures the capacity to view the world according to a particular mode and measure. The individual is only able to fulfil this potential up to the limits of his type³⁸.

In this sense, Guardini teaches that the Catholic worldview is *not* a type but

"contains within it all possible types, just as life itself. All of them can be discovered within its field. [...] What is properly Catholic is: that each one of these potentials flourish confidently [...] and, at the same time, that each one of them remains related to the whole. [...] Aware of their own limits, and put into the plain truth by means of the other types. Aware of the mission that is contained in the own particularity. Formally, the Catholic attitude consists in the embrace of the single psychological,

³⁶ R. GUARDINI, "Vom Wesen katholischer Weltanschauung", in *Unterscheidung des Christlichen. Gesammelte Studien 1923-1963* (2nd ed.), Grünewald, Mainz 1963, p. 18; my translation.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

³⁸ Cfr. *ibid.*, p. 28f.

ethnic or cultural types and their particularity which ultimately unites them”³⁹.

Applied to a specific culture, the Catholic worldview is able to see it in its particular richness and assist it in offering a broader horizon. By doing so, it can point out the potential within a culture and guide it through the oscillating changes to which the type is prone. Finally, it can facilitate the encounter with other types of culture, precisely because the Catholic worldview includes all types within its universal horizon. Therefore, the rich universality of the Catholic worldview, based on Revelation and acquired over centuries of inclusive cultural engagement, allows for an objective orientation even in the eyes of those who would not lean on Revelation as a source of the *truth about man*.

Both the sense that Guardini attributes to the Church in the vertical fulfilment of man and the empowering assistance which the Catholic worldview can contribute to the horizontal realization of persons and of culture flesh out the motives of his *yes* more and more. He sees in Revelation a *truth about man* which points towards a wholesomeness which no culture can provide: so, man is *not* saved by culture⁴⁰. Consequently, that truth does not dictate a specific cultural shape or ideal. Instead, it provides an orientation to guide every concrete culture.

Dismissing Christian fundamentalism, Guardini calls for an affirmative attitude precisely because he feels the mission of the Church to evangelize culture, that is, to provide a responsible orientation within the inevitable changes which every culture undergoes.

6. Dismissing Formalism: Culture and Existence

We have considered so far three main sources for determining the *truth about man*: nature, culture and religion. As such, the claim for each respective truth is, however, philosophical. In fact, those who vocally deplore the decadence of Western culture are –and were throughout Guardini’s life– not solely the religiously motivated. Several philosophical definitions of man would make it difficult to pronounce the *yes* that Guardini has given. This incompatibility actually led to a particular problem for these definitions. The changing culture paid no mind to the fact that it contradicted them. By establishing a new way of human life, the culture caused a crisis for the respective definitions of man instead, so that man

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

⁴⁰ That is not to say that man could live detached from the temporal reality. We will address the consequence of this in Section 6.

was never so much a problem for himself as during the early twentieth century⁴¹.

The specific cultural changes which Guardini addressed in those years led him to question the very possibility of defining man. This attitude challenged one of the most solid vehicles for philosophical thought: form. In the broadest of sense, form –in thought or in being– is the basic element that constitutes the kind of knowledge that aims at defining things. Formal thinking about man was challenged by a philosophy which no longer asked for his definition but inquired into his existence. It is undeniable that the various philosophical definitions of man differ greatly among one other. They vary from “ζῶον λογικόν”⁴² to “*res cogitans*”⁴³ to “*der Mensch is, was er isst*”⁴⁴. At the same time, they all imply, to a certain degree, a common root: the conviction that man *can* be defined and, therefore, that there is one way of being man that is the truest, the most perfect, or the most real. In this sense, each anthropological definition is based on the fact that there is a human *form* which carries and explains his being, and that this form is grasped by reason in the same way as all other knowledge. We may call this *human formalism*. What we usually refer to as humanism –the strive to consider the uniqueness and nobleness of man– can manifest itself in all times and cultures. It ultimately states that the source for the *truth about man* is man himself, or more precisely, a certain formal idea of man, an ideal man⁴⁵. When “dismissing formalism”, we therefore refer to the tendency to make this human form or idea the exclusive source of *truth about man*.

It seems appropriate at this point to ask what Guardini thought to be the *truth about man*. In addition to the components of encounter and polar oppositions, we have at this point also considered the significance of Revelation. Furthermore, it is necessary to remember that Guardini values metaphysics and therefore accepts, for example, a Thomistic approach to the nature of man⁴⁶ as much as he cherishes the humanis-

⁴¹ Cfr. M. SCHELER, *Die Stellung des Menschen im Kosmos* (18th ed.), Bouvier, Bonn 2010, p. 7.

⁴² Cfr. ARISTOTLE, *Metaphysics*, Z,12, 1037b13-14.

⁴³ Cfr. R. DESCARTES, *Meditations*, II, 28, 2.

⁴⁴ Cfr. L. FEUERBACH, “Das Geheimnis des Opfers oder Der Mensch ist, was er ißt”, in *Gesammelte Werke*, XI, Akademie, Berlin 1990, pp. 25-26.

⁴⁵ While Hellenism and Renaissance identify the part of man from which to gain this truth to be reason, a more degenerate form of making reference to man alone is, for example, racism.

⁴⁶ Cfr. R. GUARDINI, *Der Gegensatz*, cit., p. 30; “Jean-Pierre de Caussade. Ewigkeit im Augenblick. Einführung”, in *Wurzeln eines großen Lebenswerks*. IV., cit., p. 61.

tic traditions regarding pedagogy⁴⁷. But his anthropological approach is phenomenological because he wants to know *more* about man than a simple definition; he considers the concrete man. “For the concrete, living [man] as such cannot be captured by concepts. A concept regards essentially the purely universal, the abstract, the formal [...] It cannot gain access to the living being itself”⁴⁸. But that access, that kind of *truth about man*, is precisely what matters most when seeking the criteria to accept –or not accept– the surrounding culture.

The way Guardini fathoms the concrete reality of man is based on the phenomenological observation. His experience taught him that the human existence is too colorful to reduce it to one “perfect setting”. Therefore, he opposes the idea of one formal ideal of humanity which, in consequence, could be culturally engineered. Guardini was no cultural relativist⁴⁹. Nor was he opposed to the importance of formal ideals of humanity in order to grow and mature⁵⁰. But his *truth about man* was based on a vision which, as we have seen, does not only consider nature alone, nor freedom alone, nor reason alone. Instead, for Guardini, human existence is a process of *becoming-oneself* and contains the tension of freedom and destiny, of encounter between the inside and the outside, of a natural sameness and a constant development⁵¹. In this sense, Guardini does not altogether dismiss the role of the form for an understanding of man: both being and knowledge cannot do without form. However, he adds a second register to the *truth about man* which is ultimately based on the polar opposite of form: fullness (*Fülle*). As we have seen, this *truth* leads to the conviction that man can reach his ultimate fulfilment even in circumstances where certain areas are less likely to develop perfectly. And it envisions a human fulfilment that is far richer and more diverse than could be expressed in a unifying definition.

⁴⁷ See, for example, his essay *Thule or Hellas?* (1920), where he analyzes old Scandinavian epos in order to compare their cultural ideals with the humanistic ideals of classical education (in R. GUARDINI, *Wurzeln eines großen Lebens*. I., Grünewald, Mainz 2000, pp. 320-371).

⁴⁸ R. GUARDINI, *Der Gegensatz*, cit., p. 17.

⁴⁹ See how vehemently he defends the classical education in the aforementioned essay *Thule or Hellas*.

⁵⁰ See the extraordinary book on pedagogy *Grundlegung der Bildungslehre* (1928) where Guardini argues that this formation according to an ideal serve as polar opposite to the free impulse of self-realization (R. GUARDINI, *Grundlegung der Bildungslehre. Versuch einer Bestimmung des Pädagogisch-Eigentlichen* (8th ed.), Grünewald, Mainz 2000).

⁵¹ Cfr. G. V. WENDT, *Existenz und Bestimmung. Das Werden des Menschen im Denken Romano Guardinis*, Bautz, Nordhausen 2016.

Thus, Guardini can give his *yes* to a culture although he senses clearly that it will produce a different kind of man than the "classical" one. At the same time, he recognizes the responsibility entailed in the *becoming* of man. His *yes*, therefore, comes with the task to *humanize* the new culture, just like the Hellenistic or the Modern humanism did in their ages: "In appropriate activity we now have to penetrate the new thing so as to gain mastery over it. We have to become lords of the unleashed forces and shape them into a new order that relates to humanity"⁵².

7. Dismissing Idealism: Culture and Salvation

Ultimately, it is this humanization which drives each cultural engagement. We have seen how humanization depends completely on the pattern that is considered to be the *truth about man*. We now have to face one last type of such patterns and overcome it to be fully equipped to understand, with Guardini, the *yes* to culture.

When analyzing the Catholic worldview on culture, we stated that no culture is able to provide the complete fulfilment of man and that salvation thus lies beyond the reach of the temporal world. This conviction enabled Guardini to give his *yes* even when he felt that, under certain aspects, cultural change meant the loss of cultural goods owned by past generations. His vision of cultural change as oscillating shifts between the opposing values of life allowed for a strong and sober realism thanks to which the cognizance of historical regression does not cause despair.

This realism stands in complete contrast to another interpretation of history whose perspective is based on a *truth about man* which states that his fulfilment consists in cultural changes on an advancing scale. This conviction is at the core of the Modern belief in progress, a belief which Guardini has criticized repeatedly and paraphrased as follows:

"A continuous progress for the better is not merely possible, it is necessary. It constitutes the –ultimately indeclinable– sense of history. The history of mankind is nothing else but constant, universal and necessary progress to the better. And at the end history will have reached the condition of a perfect existence"⁵³.

Guardini contests this idea vehemently. Not only does he see in history a model of rhythmic shifts (in line with the phenomenon of polar

⁵² R. GUARDINI, *Letters from Lake Como*, cit., Letter IX, p. 82.

⁵³ R. GUARDINI, *Die Existenz des Christen*, Grünewald/Schöningh, Mainz-Paderborn, p. 235; my translation.

oppositions in all human affairs) rather than a linear process, but above all, he rejects the idea that such a progress would explain the events of history independently of human performance. He –and not only he– illustrates the role of freedom in objective historical deteriorations with the example of totalitarianism, namely the Nazi regime and its crimes. From there he goes on and says:

“The idea of history being a process which occurs with the certainty of a law is itself a tool to destroy the humane [...]. For by means of this idea, the absolutistic state is given a metaphysical license. [...] There is no process of history which neutralizes freedom. There are only changes of the objective conditions that frame the field in which to exercise freedom; however, freedom is there, it is always able to choose”⁵⁴.

The belief in linear process has led to several forms of cultural idealism. At their core is a specific version of the aforementioned opinion that the *truth about man* lies in man himself. While the tendencies which we have summarized as human formalism in the broadest of senses are concerned mainly in bringing forth the ideal *man*, we can describe another broad spectrum of tendencies as cultural idealism in as far as they seek to bring forth the ideal *culture*. Both opt for a rational engineering of culture, but the former group is concerned with the perfection of the individual, the latter with the perfection of the species. The former wants culture to serve for the completion of the true man, the latter wants man to serve for the realization of culture.

Speculatively and historically, idealism can be regarded as the comprehensive result of the five tendencies we have discussed earlier. In fact, we find that certain patterns repeat themselves in cultural idealism: The conviction that only certain selected cultural surroundings allow for true fulfilment (Section 1); the intuition that reality as we find it around us is not good enough for this humanization (Section 2); the fear that certain shifts might deteriorate the cultural accomplishments to dramatic effect (Section 3); the hope for a cultural effect of salvation (Section 4); the self-referential attitude that man is able to engineer his own perfection (Section 5). Maybe it is that comprehensive character which makes this way of thinking so attractive to our days.

From Guardini’s standpoint, such as we have sought to outline it here, cultural idealism must appear especially naïve. First of all, it openly contradicts the fundamental *truth about man* which he embraces from

⁵⁴ R. GUARDINI, *Verantwortung. Gedanken zur jüdischen Frage*, Kösel, München 1954, p. 29; my translation.

Revelation: that salvation does not consist in an inner-worldly accomplishment of cultural achievement. Secondly, Guardini holds it completely impossible that there may ever exist a culture which could englobe all human potential not only virtually but actually. Such a system would have to reach a total balance of the rivaling oppositions which characterize human life, a thought which is not only unrealistic but outright impossible because such a balance would mean a lifeless culture, which is to say no culture at all. And thirdly, history clearly shows that culture does not improve invariably. As we have seen earlier when dismissing radical conservatism, Guardini does not indulge in the impression that things are only deteriorating with time either.

Thus, Guardini's vision, his *truth about culture* is that it evolves in ups and downs akin to the human person. One can speak of progress in the sense of emancipation, as we have done when dismissing romanticism. And one can speak of decadence in the sense of losing certain cultural good of the past, as we have done just now when dismissing the idea of absolute progress. But there is not an absolute deterioration, nor an absolute improvement. Instead, there are relative shifts throughout time causing culture to be more or less equipped to fulfil one human element or another. The ultimate humanization, however, takes place only in the encounter with the absolute, an encounter which is possible –if not always promoted– in every possible state of human culture.

The tendencies of progressive idealism and its natural opposite, conservatism, illustrate the most basic patterns of attitudes regarding culture. Both of them –and also the other four tendencies we have analyzed– disable man to fully encounter the surrounding reality and engage in culture. Guardini not only said *yes*, he did so out of a profound sense of responsibility. This sense grew in him in conformity to the *truth about man* which he holds on to, namely, that man is constantly *becoming-man* as he exists within the spectrum of *polar oppositions* and by an act based on *encounter*. Culture as such is important in as far as it constitutes the concrete world in which this existence takes place. Therefore, there is really no way for true humanization, that is, to *become more human* unless embracing the concrete cultural reality of one's age. Guardini has done that much by speaking his *yes* and, as we have exhaustively analyzed, this *yes* truly was a "decision because it springs from a knowing heart. Such a *yes* has weight"⁵⁵.

⁵⁵ R. GUARDINI, *Letters from Lake Como*, cit., Letter IX, p. 80.