

ECOLOGY AND GUILT: A POST-CHRISTIAN RECYCLING?

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Abstract

Several authors have suggested that militant environmentalism may have inherited Christianity and its denunciation of human pride. In a sometimes caricature way, it has been criticised for placing too much emphasis, as Christianity did, on the question of fault and guilt. This may seem paradoxical, since political ecology, at the time of its appearance in the 1970s, appeared to be very largely associated with left-libertarian currents that participated in the denunciation of what the historian Jean Delumeau has called the “Pastoral of fear”, within the framework of a “generalised cultural offensive against all forms of guilt and culpability” (Guillaume Cuchet). But the paradox is only apparent and results, as this article shows, from a still too frequent assimilation of morality, and with it of fault and guilt, to religion, whereas there is nothing specifically religious about them.

In the conclusion of his book on how to make religious history in a society that has left religion behind, Guillaume Cuchet observed, on the basis of a small survey of the psychology, personal development, esotericism, religion and philosophy sections of a large Parisian bookshop, that the quest for meaning has not disappeared from our societies and that we are far from the “age of emptiness” denounced by some thinkers¹. The opposite, he notes, would have been astonishing, unless one imagines a “radical and improbable anthropological mutation” (Cuchet, 2013, p. 227). “One even sometimes wonders”, he continued, “whether the cultural mutations of modernity have not, after all, been made with constant credulity” (Cuchet, 2013, p. 227). In any case, he saw “behind the spiritual demand of our contemporaries [...] a new psyche that is very largely post-Christian, but only partly post-religious, and of which it is not always clear whether it was born in our country from the decomposition of Catholicism, which was once in the majority, or whether it was simply brought to light by its ebb” (Cuchet, 2013, p. 228).

This last question could echo Marcel Gauchet’s reflections on the subject of ecology, especially since, while distrusting Gauchet’s “cavalier views” on universal history and without sharing the

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¹ Probably referring to Gilles Lipovetsky's book on contemporary individualism (Lipovetsky, 1983).

Jean-Michel LE BOT

philosopher's cautious thesis of an anthropological mutation, Guillaume Cuchet declares himself interested in the idea of an anthropological history, also defended by Gauchet, which aims to retrace "the evolution of self-references, implied by the exit from traditional religious experience, and that of its lived contents" (Cuchet, 2013, p. 63). In an article originally published in the journal *Le Débat* in 1990, Gauchet saw in ecology a manifestation in the spiritual world of the maxim attributed to Lavoisier that "nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed". The old leftism would have been transformed into environmentalism "under the pressure of an environment made uninhabitable by the irresistible victory of capitalist democracies" (Gauchet, 2002, p. 201). More importantly, according to Gauchet, the ecologist theme recycled "a theological baggage that is apparently quite forgotten, but that is still deeply present in the depths of a culture nourished by the Christian tradition and is only waiting to be reused. What could be more appropriate, after all, than the classic denunciation of the satanic pride of a creature wanting to exceed its limits and not knowing that it does not belong to itself, any more than creation belongs to it" (Gauchet, 2002, p. 202).

A few years later, Michel Lagrée provided some elements that could support this thesis of a "recycling". In a book on the attitudes of Catholics towards the technological innovations of the various industrial revolutions, he showed that, in the period from 1830 to 1960, in the French-speaking world at least, Catholicism was divided between a technophile and a technophobic current, without this division coinciding with that of liberalism and intransigence. While Louis Veuillot and his successors went to the very end of the intransigent logic by denouncing industrialisation, the majority of the intransigent current largely accepted the technological innovations that relieved people's suffering and provided new tools for evangelisation. Its outright condemnation of modernism largely spared technical progress. Although a minority, the technophobic current was not without influence, however, and the historian suggested that it may have played a role in the emergence of militant environmentalism in the 1970s. This might explain, for example, why the map of religious practice in the mid-twentieth century corresponded, in broad terms, to the map of the environmental vote two or three decades later. "The arguments against nuclear electricity", observed Michel Lagrée, "were already largely contained in the discourse of those who, in the nineteenth century, denounced the attack committed by industrialisation against Creation: disfigured landscapes, a dangerous claim for man to play the demiurge, the increasing technicisation of social control at the cost of freedom" (Lagrée, 1999, p. 381). Ecological commitments could therefore in some cases have taken over from religious commitments, including among activists who had abandoned all explicit references to Catholicism, but who had not totally broken with its teachings.

A decade later, it was in a completely different genre, that of the satirical novel, that the writer Iegor Gran, son of the Russian dissident Andrei Sinyavsky, underlined this religious dimension of environmentalist commitments (Gran, 2012). The story, which is largely autobiographical, begins one evening in May 2009, when the narrator, who, like the author, works as a writer, discovers a notice on the

information board, in the entrance hall of his apartment building, inviting the occupants not to miss the broadcast on the French public national television channel, France 2, of Yann Arthus-Bertrand's movie, *Home*, on the following June 5. The invitation was accompanied by an injunction: "We all have a responsibility towards the planet. Together, we can make a difference". The narrator, who, like the author, was born in the USSR², is immediately alarmed: "They want to impose something on me. [...] They would like to think for me". Despite his wife's warnings, he embarks on an investigation and a writing project on the subject, which leads him to fall out with his friend Vincent. The latter did not appreciate the first text, a column actually published by the author in the newspaper *Libération* on June 4, 2009, in which the narrator denounced *Home's* opportunism. From then on, the novel multiplies the assimilation of environmentalist discourse to religious discourse. The narrator particularly notes the omnipresence of the question of fault and guilt in the speeches and behavior of his friend Vincent. "Vincent feels at fault. He observes the countless aggressions of the human race against nature and he knows that part of the collective responsibility is on his shoulders. A bad conscience torments him" (Gran, 2012, p. 43). The narrator cannot help but notice a certain hypocrisy in his friend. "His bigotry stops where his real comfort, his real habits begin". But this does not prevent Vincent from multiplying signs of devotion: "He makes a point of doing his shopping on Sunday mornings at the Boulevard Raspail organic market. He goes to Biocoop. His coffee is fair trade [...]. His toilet paper looks like an Eastern European newspaper, it is grey and does not absorb" (Gran, 2012, pp. 44-45). And just as "Catholics, when they have sinned, can go to a priest and buy themselves a good conscience [...] Vincent's new religion [...] has invented 'carbon offsetting', a mechanism whereby one pays one's obolios each time one emits CO₂, with the onus on the NGO thus gratified to plant a tree or perform another sacrament ensuring 'carbon neutrality'. The demand for this remake of indulgences is said to be insatiable" (Gran, 2012, p. 47).

If we have cited this satirical novel, it is because it emphasizes, by employing the procedures of the genre, a dimension that was latent in the previous references. If environmentalism can be part of this "post-Christian, but only partly post-religious" psyche of which Cuchet speaks, if it can seem to recycle a whole Christian tradition denouncing Promethean pride, is it not first of all because of its axiological dimension, which questions the morality of contemporary lifestyles and consumption and can lead, as Iegor Gran satirically shows, to a multiplication of behaviors aiming to prevent a guilt or to repair a fault? The question may seem paradoxical because, as we will show in the first part of this article, political ecology, at the time of its appearance in the 1970s, appeared to be very largely associated with libertarian currents that participated in the denunciation of what the historian Jean Delumeau called at the same time the "pastoral of fear". It should be remembered, for example, that the first environmentalist columns in the

² The writer's father was sentenced to seven years in prison in 1966 by a Soviet court. Released in 1972, he was forced into exile by the KGB and settled in France in 1973. Iegor Gran himself was born in Moscow in 1964.

Jean-Michel LE BOT

French press of the late 1960s and early 1970s were those of the pacifist and libertarian activist Pierre Fournier, in the not very religious satirical magazine *Hara Kiri*, then *Charlie Hebdo*. But the paradox is only apparent and results, as we will show in the second part, from a still too frequent assimilation of morality, and with it of fault and guilt, to religion. It is an assimilation that Jean Gagnepain has constantly denounced⁴. But he was obviously not the first to do so: this distinction was at the heart of Jean Delumeau's work on fear and sin, which owed much to a Belgian priest and psychoanalyst, Antoine Vergote, professor at the Catholic University of Louvain and founder, with Jacques Schotte and Alphonse de Waelhens, of the Belgian School of Psychoanalysis.

1 A denunciation of the "Pastoral of fear"

In my introduction, I have quoted Pierre Fournier's ecologist columns in *Hara Kiri* and *Charlie Hebdo*. But there are many examples that show that the ecologist critique of what was already called the "consumer society" often went hand in hand with a rejection not only of the authority of the Church but also of the notions of sin and guilt associated with it. I will limit myself here to giving a few examples that are inseparable from the "Catholic crisis" (Pelletier, 2002) as it was experienced in Brittany in the 1970s. Without rewriting the whole history of Brittany in these years, which the journalist Daniel Yonnet, in association with the cartoonist Nono and the photographer Yves Quentel, called "Nos années de Breizh" (Yonnet, Quentel and Nono, 1998), we can recall, within the limits of an article, that the 1970s were the years of particularly intense environmentalist struggles, especially in the department of Finistère. They were motivated by the repeated oil spills, which began with the sinking of the *Torrey Canyon*, on March 18, 1967, at the western end of English Cornwall, but the most important of which was caused by the sinking of the *Amoco Cadiz* on the rocks of Portsall, on March 16, 1978. The other major reason for these struggles was the project to build a nuclear power station in the west of the region, announced in 1974, a few months before the list of potential sites was known. The Plogoff site was finally chosen in the autumn of 1978, and the environmentalist struggles then crystallized against this project, reaching their peak during the "public utility enquiry" (enquête d'utilité publique) from January 31 to March 14, 1980. These environmentalist struggles often converged with regionalist struggles, those of the third *Emsav*, particularly in its cultural

³ On Pierre Fournier, see in particular Gominet and Fournier, 2011.

⁴ See for example Gagnepain, 1991, pp. 193, 197, 201, 229, 234, 245.

⁵ Antoine Vergote was the supervisor of Thomas Ewens' thesis (Essay on the Ground of an Interrogation: The Theme of Schizophrenia in Freud, 1969, not published). The master and his former student remained friends thereafter, the former having been invited several times by the latter to give lectures in the United States, while the latter returned regularly to Belgium. It was through Vergote, who knew Gagnepain well, that Tom Ewens met Gagnepain in the second half of the 1980s (Tom Ewens and Jean-Claude Quentel: personal communications).

Ecology and guilt

dimension. A documentary film by Pierrick Guinard, in 1998, showed how the Breton and “Celtic” musical revival of the 1970s had benefited from the numerous *festoù-noz* and other anti-nuclear festivals before it went into a bit of a tailspin during the 1980s, after the victory of the left in the 1981 presidential and legislative elections and François Mitterrand’s decision to abandon the Plogoff nuclear power plant project. This was because opportunities for mobilisation were becoming rarer.

Published as a book in 1981, but distributed chapter by chapter by the magazine (*A Suivre*) from 1978 onward, a comic strip by Claude Auclair and Alain Deschamps, *Bran Ruz* (in Breton “Red Raven”), was inspired by the legend of the city of Ys, as the writer Jean Markale claimed to have reconstructed it in its entirety, in order to give an interpretation of the struggles underway (Markale, 1975; Auclair and Deschamps, 1981). According to Jean Markale and the authors of this comic strip, the struggle of the inhabitants of Plogoff against the nuclear power plant project was the same as that of all minority cultures and, at the same time, that of women, victims of “androcratic” power, as well as that of civilizations that have managed to preserve harmonious relations with the earth and the beings that inhabit it, unlike contemporary civilization, in which Brittany was “sold off, bludgeoned, irradiated, oil soiled”. In his last chapter, *Bran Ruz* particularly attacked the Church by presenting the monk Guénolé, founder, according to tradition, of the Landévennec abbey, as a fanatical evangelist, who, through fear, established the domination of the new masters of Armorica, after having himself killed Dahut and opened the dykes that protected the city of Ys from being submerged. To do this, the comic strip placed in the mouth of a 5th century monk the preaching of the 17th century Jesuit missionary Julien Maunoir, denounced by Morvan Lebesque in another major reference of 1970s Breton regionalism, the essay *Comment peut-on être breton?* Julien Maunoir, wrote Lebesque, “brings the cross and, from the outset, functions through terror. From one end of the Arcoat to the other, he sows his word of Apocalypse, plants his painted pictures, the *taolennoù*, where we see in screaming colors the damned struggling with the claws, the nails, the fangs, the impalement. [...] This sadism achieves the desired result, Brittany kneels in terror - in terror before the Monarch. For, as we have understood,

⁶ On the Breton movement or Emsav, see for example Favereau, 2005; Nicolas, 2007.

⁷ The quotation marks are justified by the largely mythical nature of the Celtic origin of these musics. The Pancelticism inseparable from the Emsav is a typical case of invention of a tradition (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983; Brunaux, 2014; Lecerf, 2017). This is not to say that there has not been a long-standing relationship between present-day Britain, Great Britain and Ireland (see e.g. Schulz Paulsson, 2019).

⁸ Pierrick Guinard, *Musik Breizh, un siècle de musique bretonne*, documentary film in five parts, 1h30, 1998. The film also shows that the desert crossing of the 1980s was not at all synonymous of a decline of Breton music. On the contrary: if there was less mediatic visibility than in the previous decade, a significant work of maturation and deepening was carried out, which prepared the new “Celtic” wave of the 1990s.

Father Maunoir's real mission was not the return to God of the Bretons, who were already believers, but the Gallicanisation of their faith" (Lebesque, 1970, pp. 63-64). Until then, nothing condemned Brittany, Lebesque continued, "to this vulgar and low form of religion. [...] This imported superstition was a horrible novelty in a country still steeped in Celtic spirituality. It corroded the two constants of the Breton soul, the love of nature and the notion that evil is not a crime but a weakness. [...] Caesarian Christianity uprooted this humanism. It decreed this world a valley of tears, a cesspool; it anchored contempt for the world, for the beauty of forms, submission to the distant Chief, to the anthropomorphised God; it imposed the monstrous notion of punishment, police in heaven and on earth" (Lebesque, 1970, pp. 65-66). As early as 1970, Lebesque very explicitly associated, as it is shown by this quote, the "ecologist" dimension of the "Breton soul" – its "love of nature" – with a rejection of guilt, or at least of over-guilt.

At the time when the chapters of *Bran Ruz* were published in (*A Suivre*), similar themes were developed in the genre of comedy form by Strollad ar Vro Bagan, a company of young comedians from the coastal communes of Léon, in the North of the department of Finistère. In 1977, the company performed for the first time a play of its own composition in Breton, *Ma c'helljen-me kanañ laouen* (If I could sing happily). The story was about a small Breton commune on the seaside that lives on tourism, while the traditional activities of fishing, harvesting seaweed and farming have almost disappeared. Brittany is being auctioned off. The departement of Loire-Atlantique has already been sold to the region of Pays-de-Loire, the Trégor to the Americans. Only bad land remains for sale, but on the coast. Mr. Capital is buying part of it to build nuclear power plants. His comrade, Mr Daougano, buys another part to build casinos and marinas. Pierre, an emigrant from Brittany, returns home, but after a conversation with two of his childhood friends, Marie and Jean, he no longer recognises its region and decides to leave. A party is organized to celebrate the new country. Mr Capital improvises a speech. But a Breton, found by one of the gentlemen in the heart of the Parc naturel régional d'Armorique (Armorica Regional Natural Park), refuses to become an attraction for tourists: *Me n'on ket un Indian, me. Me zo er gêr amañ hag ar vro mañ 'zo deomp abaoe pell a zo* ("I am not an Indian. I am at home here and this country has been ours for a long time"). The people revolt and the notables flee. All that remains on the stage are the locals who celebrate their recovered freedom: *Ne fell ket deomp soudarded en hor bro, met frankiz d'ar Vretoned...* ("We don't want soldiers in our country, but freedom for the Bretons...").

Ma c'helljen-me kanañ laouen largely took up the theme "Bretagne = Colonie", which was the theme of a regionalist political party, the Union Démocratique Bretonne (UDB), at the same time⁹. The following play highlighted the role of the Church in this subjugation. In 1977, the Catholic Church of the department of Finistère celebrated the 400th

⁹ See Strollad ar Vro Bagan, 1977.

¹⁰ On the claims of the UDB at that time see Nicolas, 2007, 261 ff. and on the specific subject of the play the interview between Yannik Bigouin and Goulc'han Kervella in Bigouin, 2019, p. 34.

Ecology and guilt

anniversary of the birth of Michel Le Nobletz. Born in Plouguerneau on September 29, 1577, he was one of the main architects of the Catholic Reformation of the 17th century in Lower Brittany. The diocese of Quimper and Léon could not fail to pay homage to the one it defined as the father of the Breton missions, at the origin of the third wave of evangelization of the region¹¹. Strollad ar Vro Bagan saw it as “a pretext to perform a play about religion and the Catholic Church in Brittany. [...] We immediately thought that it was necessary to have, next to the official life of Michel, written and directed by the Church, another, different story” (Strollad ar Vro Bagan, 1979, p. 5 – my translation from Breton language). This new play, *Buhez Mikael an Nobletz pe Mikael ar Seiz Pec'hed* (The life of Michel le Nobletz or Michel with the seven sins), whose first performances took place in the summer of 1978, “told the story of the exorbitant weight of religion and the Catholic Church, especially in the Léon region from which we came”¹². The company chose to distinguish between two Michel Le Nobletz, the challenger of the established order on the one hand and the predecessor of Julien Maunoir on the other. In this way, it was able to praise the former while denouncing the latter. Thus, it partially joined Morvan Lebesque who opposed the “reasonable and good priest, Michel Le Nobletz” and the “sadist” Julien Maunoir. The play by Strollad ar Vro Bagan ended with the words of Julien Maunoir (*an tad Maner*) preaching submission:

Maunoir - *Biken ken ne savin a-enep ar roue!* (“I will never rise against the King again!”)

The people - *Biken ken!* (“Never again!”)

Maunoir - *Biken ken ne savin a-enep d'an noblañsoù ha d'ar veleien !* (“I will never rise against the nobles and the priests again!”)

The people - *Biken ken!* (“Never again!”)

And the people ended up kneeling, crushed under the weight of the cross (*War al leurenn an dud war benn o daoulin, pounner ar groaz o pouezañ warno*).

The ecological and anticlerical themes were to return several times thereafter in several other pieces by Strollad ar Vro Bagan. They were combined in a play in French, *Ys la Maudite*, created in 1987 as a sound and light show and which returned to the company’s programme in 1993, in a new version, with greater technical resources. In this last version, the play was inspired by various versions of the legend, including that of *Bran Ruz*, but also that given by the writer Michel Le Bris in his book *Ys dans la rumeur des vagues* (Le Bris, 1985)¹³. It included the words that Le Bris attributed to Dahut in his controversy

¹¹ F. Elard, “Quatrième centenaire de la naissance de Dom Michel Le Nobletz”, Quimper et Léon. Bulletin diocésain, nouvelle série, n° 13, July 9, 1977, p. 299. The author, F. Elard, is probably Jean-François Élard, curate, from 1972 to 1978, of the parish of Rumengol.

¹² Author's interview with Goulc'han Kervella, December 16, 2019.

¹³ The book was originally the script for a 1983 television film made for France 3 by Renaud Saint-Pierre.

Jean-Michel LE BOT

with Guénolé: “Once Brittany was a land of heroism, of nobility, of courage! Of beauty... Today there is nothing but yellow-skinned deceivers, and all I hear around me are words of sin, submission, charity, humility” (Le Bris, 1985, pp. 64-65)¹⁴. Faced with Guénolé, Dahut defends a kind of pantheistic environmentalism. For her, God “is not only in the churches. He is in each of us, in everything that runs, flies, crawls. He is the wind, the rain, the sun and the sea. He is the desire in my loins” (Strollad ar Vro Bagan, 1994, p. 70). The play was performed many times, always with the same success.

In a similar vein, but with a more burlesque tone, we can also mention the film directed by Jean Kergrist, *Le Missionnaire, ou la vengeance de Dahut*. The film was premiered at the sixth edition of the Douarnenez National Minorities Film Festival, which took place from August 29 to September 4, 1983. The film was not a success, at least not immediately, and its distribution was ultimately very limited. The film tells the story of a missionary, played by Jean Kergrist himself, who is sent to Brittany by his superiors with the mission of converting the pagans. The reference to the legend of the town of Ys is minimal, but clear. Dahut is the temptress, who first visited the missionary in his dream, before leading him to his doom, like the siren of legends. The man who had taken a vow of celibacy did not resist the woman’s call, hence the subtitle of the film. On this basis, the film mocks the beliefs, rituals and symbols of popular Breton Catholicism, with its pardons, fountains and healing saints, by visiting a few emblematic places such as Minihy-Tréguier, Le Faouët and Tronoën. “It’s my life I’m playing here”, Jean Kergrist told me laughing, “that is to say the missionary who is sent to a place with a woman’s story, seduced by Dahut, who takes his revenge on Guénolé”¹⁵. The actor indeed, who was involved in all the anti-nuclear struggles between 1975 and the early 1980s with his character of the atomic clown, then in all the struggles for water quality within the association Eaux et Rivières de Bretagne, began his career with Robert Planchon and then with Marcel Maréchal, after having entered the Dominican order several years earlier, at the Tourette convent in L’Arbresle, near Lyon, after passing through the major seminary of Saint-Brieuc (Kergrist, 2008).

It would be possible to only retained from the foregoing the denunciation of the Church’s domination on Brittany. As we have seen, the architects of the Catholic Reformation of the 17th century, Julien Maunoir in the first place, but sometimes also his predecessor, Michel Le Nobletz, were particularly targeted. By preaching submission and installing the fear of sin and guilt in the minds of the Bretons, they were accused to have contributed to the subjugation of Brittany by France. This denunciation of the Church’s hold on Brittany, as such, was not new. Such a denunciation was already made, for instance, in Yves Le Febvre’s novel *La Terre des Prêtres*, published in 1924 (Dufief, 2006). But in the 1970s, it became associated with regionalist struggles, those of the third *Emsav*, and took on a clearly libertarian expression. In other

¹⁴ The character with whom Dahut argues in Michel Le Bris’ book is in fact Ronan. But Strollad ar Vro Bagan identifies him with Guénolé.

¹⁵ Author’s interview with Jean Kergrist, June 27, 2019.

words, it can be seen as a regional political manifestation of the “generalized cultural offensive against all forms of guilt and guilt-tripping, which was widely deployed in the 1960s and 1970s” (Cuchet, 2015, p. 426). This offensive, which was largely based on psychoanalysis before psychoanalysis itself became its victim (Cuchet, 2018, p. 240), manifested itself in the religious sphere through the crisis of what the Church calls the Sacrament of Penance. Confession, made compulsory in 1215 by the Fourth Lateran Council, “had profoundly shaped Catholic mentalities over the long term, as well as the cultural forms of individual and collective guilt” (Cuchet, 2015, p. 399). It entered into crisis in the 1960s and almost completely disappeared. Cuchet identifies several factors that led to this disappearance: the end of compulsory practice, the silence on the “Last Things”, the disconnection between confession and communion, and, on the part of the clergy, the weariness engendered by the duty of confessor. But it was more generally what Jean Delumeau called the “pastoral of fear” that have been rejected.

The historian used this expression as early as 1975 in his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France. But it was with the publication of his second book, *Le péché et la peur*, in 1983¹⁶, that the expression was adopted by the educated public, explaining its historiographical success “well beyond the field of the history of Western Christianity” (Cuchet, 2013, p. 142). After a first part on the development of the macabre and pessimism in the Renaissance, and a second part on the theology of sin, the third part, which fills the entire second half of the book, is devoted to this pastoral of fear, in both Catholic and Protestant countries. Guillaume Cuchet observes, however, that the concept takes on two different meanings in Delumeau himself: in a narrow sense, it designates a historically well-situated pastoral care, which took place from the end of the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century inclusive, with the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as its center of gravity; but it can designate, in a broader sense, any discourse that “majors the dimensions of sin in relation to forgiveness”, that is, what the historian also calls “overculpabilization”, manifestations of which can be found in a much longer period of time, from Saint Augustine to the middle of the twentieth century (Cuchet, 2013, pp. 144, citing Delumeau 1983, p. 10). One of Delumeau’s theses, defended at the end of *Sin and Fear*, is that “this pastoral care would have played an important role in the dechristianization of the West” (Cuchet, 2013, p. 149). The pastoral of fear, in other words, would have begun by being a factor of christianization – but of a bad christianization – before becoming a reason for rejecting religion (Cuchet, 2013, p. 149).

This thesis of a “pastoral of fear” or, more broadly, of rigorism as a factor of dechristianization met, as Cuchet says, with considerable success in public opinion, including Catholic opinion, at a time when it was no longer possible to have any illusions about the pastoral benefits of Vatican II (the abandonment of this pastoral care, encouraged by the Council, had not prevented dechristianization). Such a thesis was not

¹⁶ English translation: Jean Delumeau, *Sin and fear: the emergence of a Western guilt culture, 13th-18th centuries*, New York, Saint Martin’s Press, 1990, 677 p.

entirely new, however, since, as Cuchet observes, it is found in Abbé Bergier in the eighteenth century and the dechristianizing effect of “Jansenism” – in reality “rigorism”¹⁷ – is a commonplace of the nineteenth century (Cuchet, 2013, p. 152). But what interests us more particularly is the way in which ecological themes, during the 1970s, were grafted onto the denunciation of this pastoral approach (whether or not associated with regret for its dechristianizing effect). This is what we have seen in Morvan Lebesque’s work, albeit marginally, in the plays of Strollad ar Vro Bagan, in Jean Kergrist’s film and performances, and, in a way that was intended to be more substantiated, in the comic strip *Bran Ruz*.

2 Ecology, religion and guilt

The libertarian roots of political ecology, fully assumed in Brittany by Jean Kergrist, who claimed the influence of Pierre Fournier and *Charlie Hebdo*, made it an agent of choice in the process of dechristianization, beyond the simple statistical observation of the decline of the practice. Those libertarian roots can also be found quite clearly in numerous articles in the *Canard de Nantes à Brest*, a satirical weekly newspaper, whose period of publication, from January 1978 to April 1982, coincided with the intensification of environmentalist struggles in the department of Finistère. But political action, like religious preaching, often produces results that are very different from those initially intended¹⁸. In this case, ecology has never lost all connections with guilt, which does not necessarily mean that it has remained religious: for guilt, contrary to what libertarian ideology might suggest, is not specifically religious. This is what we will develop in this second part, relying in particular on the work of Delumeau.

In his book on the history of fear in the West, as well as in the following one on the history of sin and guilt, Delumeau observed that new fears have succeeded old ones. We are no longer afraid of Hell, nor of the Judgement, nor of the knotting of the “aiguillette”, but there are other fears, including that of nuclear war, of pollution, of the ecological threat¹⁹. “The ozone layer and the water table are part of contemporary metaphysics. They have replaced Heaven and Hell”, declared Jean Gagnepain, in a very Delumian way, in a lecture given in February 1993 at the Catholic University of Louvain (Gagnepain, 1993, p. 88). “Today, we have modern theologians who no longer believe in Heaven and Hell, but in the ozone layer or the water table”, he added a month later

¹⁷ Cuchet observes that “Jansenism” is very often used as a synonym for “rigorism”. “Jansenism” continued to be denounced long after the last Jansenist priests had disappeared in the 1820s and 1830s (Cuchet, 2018, pp. 218 and 265). “Meaning unknown, but it’s very smart to talk about it”: this is the definition Flaubert already gives of Jansenism in his *Dictionnaire des idées reçues*.

¹⁸ This is one of the great teachings of Max Weber’s sociology, whether in *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* or in the 1919 lecture on the profession (Beruf) of politics.

¹⁹ See Delumeau, 1978, p. 146, and Delumeau, 1983, pp. 109-110.

(Gagnepain, 1993, p. 244)²⁰. We have “changed our fear”, he said again in a seminar in March 1994²¹.

It could be objected, with good reason, that the new fears have not only changed their objects. They now relate to objectifiable phenomena, whereas many of the old fears related to phenomena that were entirely based on faith or belief. That may be so. But not all the old fears fell into this category. Plague, war and famine were also objectifiable. And what we would like to emphasize above all is that the anthropological processes that govern fear are the same, and among them the one that accounts for guilt. To show this, we will start from Delumeau’s analysis of the plague epidemics.

2.1 Facing fear: causality, responsibility, guilt

In the chapter on the plague in *La Peur en Occident*, Delumeau constructed a typology of collective behavior in the face of the epidemic. He observed that the populations hit by the plague sought – as one might expect – to explain the attack of which they were victims. “To find the causes of an evil”, wrote the historian, “is to recreate a reassuring framework, to reconstitute a coherence from which the indication of remedies will logically emerge. In the past, three explanations were formulated to account for plagues: one by scholars, another by the anonymous crowd, and the third by both the crowd and the Church” (Delumeau, 1978, p. 129). These three explanations were respectively: a corruption of the air, the action of human “plague-spreaders” and a divine punishment for the sins committed by the population. We propose here to extend the analysis beyond the point where Delumeau left it by showing that these explanations, which could be combined, are all rational, but refer to different domains. The first appeals to a “natural” cause. It is not different in principle from the explanations given by the current sciences. It is a “technical” explanation in a sense. Just as the action of fire explains cooking, the action of air, when vitiated by the action of the stars or malignant exhalations, explains disease. This explanation by the bad quality of the air – an environmental explanation already²² – is of course refuted by current science, which has identified the infectious agent causing the plague, the bacterium *Yersinia pestis*, and its vectors. But the type of explanation does not change: in both cases it is a question of establishing a link between an agent and its action. The second explanation consists in placing the responsibility on some other person or group, who can become a scapegoat. Delumeau adds that scapegoats are unconsciously charged with the sins of the community. But what

²⁰ These two lectures took place on February 16 and March 22, 1993 respectively. They were part of a set of sixteen lectures transcribed in the volume cited.

²¹ La vraie trahison des clercs, unpublished seminar, Rennes, March 17, 1994.

²² Air quality is part of what the French promoter of hygiene education, Jean-Noël Hallé (1754-1822), called the *circumfusa*, those “surrounding things” that influence health alongside *ingesta*, *percepta*, etc. See on this subject Fressoz, 2009.

characterizes this explanation is the imputation to others, the search for those responsible: foreigners, travelers, outsiders, etc. In the period studied by Delumeau, the Jews were particularly targeted. But they were not the only ones to be attributed the role of “plague-spreaders”. Whatever the perpetrators that contemporaries believed having identified, according to place and circumstance, we are here dealing with a “sociological” type of explanation, in the sense that it engages and redefines the relationships that link some to others. Finally, the third explanation involved collective guilt. Everyone, in this case, was supposed to be guilty and not just a few scapegoats (Delumeau, 1978, p. 136). The plague in this case was seen as a punishment for sins. One should accept it meekly as such, but also repent and do penance. This third explanation is “axiological”. It connects a claim – to happiness, to health, etc. – with a fault, expressed in the religious vocabulary of sin. If the claim was disappointed, it is because there was a fault and therefore a guilt.

Delumeau, relying on archives, can show that these three explanations were used to account for the plague epidemics that struck Europe particularly brutally and frequently for nearly four centuries, from 1348 to 1720. He observes that different social categories tend to distinguish themselves by the preference they give to one or other of these explanations, although all three were often used in a complementary manner. But these three types of explanation are not linked to one era more than another, nor to one social category more than another. They are constants of human reason. Jean-Claude Quentel has shown, for example, how they can be found in the reactions of parents faced with the birth of a disabled child. The scientific explanations provided by doctors are generally not enough for them. It is very common for these parents to look for another type of cause in terms of a fault they might have committed, which can result in an intense feeling of guilt. This guilt is not without consequences for the exercise of their responsibility towards the child or for the relationship they have with professionals, but it should not be confused with them (Quentel, 1994, 1997). And these three types of explanation can of course be found in environmental controversies. Take, for instance, the production of electricity from nuclear energy. Tudi Kernalegenn observes that the slogan “Oil soiled today, radioactive tomorrow”, launched in Brest, after the sinking of the *Amoco Cadiz*, by the Comité anti-marée noire (Anti-Oil Spill Committee), some of the founders were members of the Comité Local d'Information sur le Nucléaire (CLIN), is particularly emblematic of the way in which Breton ecological struggles combined the fight against oil spills and the anti-nuclear struggle (Kernalegenn, 2006, p. 109). The slogan was noticed by the press during a demonstration, on March 27, 1978, which saw between 15,000 and 20,000 demonstrators marching through the streets of Brest (Kernalegenn, 2006, pp. 103 and 109). Like the slogan “Tomorrow we will be the penguins of nuclear power”, it referred to the fact that the two problems were linked to political choices in the field of energy and invited to do without oil as well as nuclear power, within the framework of another society, more energy efficient and using “small production

units, based on renewable and controllable energy”²³. But Kernalegenn insists above all on the fact that “the initial, immediate stake is to directly reinforce the anti-nuclear struggle, by promoting anxiety about a possible accident. [...] The scope of the slogan is therefore to express fear, but it is also a powerful argument in anti-nuclear propaganda, illustrating by example the ineffectiveness of disaster prevention plans” (Kernalegenn, 2006, p. 110-111). In other words, just as the Polmar plan, which was supposed to protect against oil spills, proved ineffective, the Orsec-Rad plan for nuclear accidents was supposed in advance to be ineffective. In this situation of concern about nuclear energy, which the oil spill had reinforced, we therefore see a search for responsibilities (first and foremost that of the State and of the power generation company “Electricité de France” or “EDF”), but also a call, if not for penance, at least for the choice of a more frugal, less energy-consuming way of life, which was already present in the conclusion of an otherwise very technical article on the risks of civil nuclear power published in issue 75 of *Penn ar Bed*, the scientific bulletin of the Society for the Study and the Protection of Nature in Brittany²⁴. The two tendencies could be opposed or combined. Thus, while the unitary leaflet for the demonstration of March 27, 1978, in Brest stated that the government “bears full responsibility for what is happening” (Kernalegenn, 2006, n. 495, p. 107), the leaflet of the Amoco Cadiz Collective, which called for a previous demonstration on March 24, recognized that “we are all more or less responsible” (Kernalegenn, 2006, p. 107). Yet responsibility, in the current political vocabulary, is difficult to distinguish from guilt. This is perhaps the specificity of political ecology in relation to the traditional left, which gives it a religious appearance: it does not only call for fighting an adversary, it also invites to a form of conversion, which goes through the recognition of one’s own guilt. Let’s take another example: global warming. The scientific (“technical”) explanation emphasizes the role of greenhouse gases, including carbon dioxide. But environmental activists are not content with this “technical” explanation. They also look for those responsible, sometimes reduced to large, imprecise entities (“capitalism”, “neo-liberalism”, etc.), but which it is also possible to try to identify much more precisely: this is very explicitly what Bonneuil and Fressoz do, for example, when they seek to specify who is the anthropos of the Anthropocene (Bonneuil and Fressoz, 2016). And there is no possibility, here again, to escape the question of guilt and fault. Although the reference is not necessarily religious – there is rarely any mention of a divine punishment here –, we are regularly invited to amend our behavior, by multiplying precautions (which presupposes acting methodically and in a preventing way). It is the frequent presence

²³ Extract from an announcement from a group of associations (Evit Buhez ar C’hap, CLIN de Porsmoguer, Comité régional d’information sur le nucléaire (CRIN), Écologie 44, Morlaix Écologie, Guingamp Écologie), published in the second issue of *Penn ar Bed*, which was entirely devoted to the Amoco Cadiz oil spill (*Penn ar Bed*, No. 94, 3rd quarter 1978, p. 404, quoted in Kernalegenn, 2006, p. 110)

²⁴ Philippe Lebreton, « L’énergie nucléaire pacifique. Âge d’or ou impasse biologique ? », *Penn ar Bed*, n° 75, 4e trimestre 1973, p. 206-218.

Jean-Michel LE BOT

in environmental activism of the themes of fault, guilt and their redemption through a form of repent and conversion that leads some people, often in a caricatural way, to speak of ecology as a substitute religion. But those who do so show that they do not understand much about either guilt or religion. For there is nothing specifically religious about fault and guilt, as Delumeau clearly put it. This will be our last point.

2.2 Fault is not necessarily religious

Towards the middle of his book on sin and guilt in the West from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century, Delumeau interrupted the accumulation of observations to note that these observations allowed to speak of a “Christian neurosis”, an expression he took from a psychiatrist, Pierre Solignac (Solignac, 1976). Does this mean that Christianity, with its notion of sin, is necessarily neurotic? Delumeau’s answer was negative and involved distinguishing between two types of guilt: the “normal” one and the “abnormal” one. In order to establish this distinction, he relied in particular on two works that were published a few years before his own. The first one was a collection of papers from a colloquium on obsessional neurosis held on May 3 and 4, 1975 (Pélicier, 1976). The second, *Dette et désir. Deux axes chrétiens et la dérive pathologique*, was a book written by the Belgian psychoanalyst, philosopher and theologian Antoine Vergote (Vergote, 1978). Delumeau expressed his “gratitude towards this beautiful and pacifying book which integrates and goes beyond Freudian analyses and takes a Christian look at Christian neurosis” (Delumeau, 1983, p. 331). He saw this as a further proof of “the convergence between historiography and psychiatry, which [he had] already insisted on in the first chapter of *La Peur en Occident*” (Delumeau, 1983, p. 331).

What did he retain from these two books, and more particularly, as he specified in a note, from the second? The first thing is that “the pathology of fault is not specific to believers and that religious obsession obeys psychological laws that are universal” (Delumeau, 1983, p. 331). The second is that it is not possible to make the feeling of guilt disappear. This feeling, religion or not, is inseparable from moral conscience, a conscience which, as Freud put it, “exhibits a peculiarity which [...] is no longer easy to account for. For the more virtuous a man is, the more severe and distrustful is its behaviour, so that ultimately it is precisely those people who have carried saintliness the furthest who reproach themselves with the worst sinfulness” (Freud, 1930, p. 125-126). This link between guilt and moral conscience led Delumeau to reject Angelo Hesnard’s book on “the morbid universe of fault” as too simplistic (Hesnard, 1949). Hesnard argued that all feelings of guilt are morbid. If this is not the case, as Delumeau rightly argued, then the notion of sin cannot be reduced to a pathological guilt either.

It is not morbid in itself, in other words, to feel guilt, just as it is not morbid in itself, if one adopts a religious vocabulary, to recognize oneself as a sinner. “I believe that sin exists [and] I note its presence in me”, Delumeau himself acknowledged in the introduction to his book (Delumeau, 1983, p. 10). The fact that the guilt felt is particularly strong or that one can accuse oneself of the most serious sins is not sufficient

Ecology and guilt

to speak of morbidity either. This difference in the intensity of guilt or this scale of severity in the definition of sins only testifies to the fact that human beings are capable of evaluating their behavior in accordance with their ethical requirements. However, it is also true that the very existence of psychological processes that allow for an ethical measure, the transgression of which constitutes the fault, can give rise to morbid exacerbations. This is precisely what happens in neuroses²⁵. If Delumeau spoke of a “Christian neurosis”, it was because he noted that the period under study, from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century, had been characterized by “excessive guilt”, which increased, he wrote, “the dimensions of sin in relation to forgiveness” (Delumeau, 1983, p. 10) and which above all had all the characteristics of a “collective guilt neurosis” (Delumeau, 1983, p. 331). From the historian’s point of view, the question was therefore to describe and explain the installation, in the countries of Western Europe, from the thirteenth century onward, of such a neurosis, defined, in Vergote’s terms, as “the religious and pathological deviation of a Christianity which focuses its message on the reminder of sin and which narrows itself into a device for fighting against it” (Vergote, 1978, p. 97, quoted by Delumeau, 1983, p. 332). For the study of this deviation, we can only refer to the impressive historical dossier compiled by Delumeau.

The latter did not venture to draw a clear-cut border between normal and morbid guilt. He only observed “that Christianity carries with it the risk of imposing on its followers a distrustful and repressive guilt. [...] By making the confession of sin a fundamental requirement, in solidarity with the message of liberation, [it] exposes man to a morbid guilt” (Delumeau, 1983, p. 332). Guillaume Cuchet observes that Delumeau was thus rediscovering “the traditional distinction, of Augustinian origin, between ‘filial fear’ and ‘servile fear’ of God” (Cuchet, 2013, p. 144)²⁶. No doubt, but the most important thing for our purposes is to stress once again with Delumeau that these two types of guilt, normal and morbid, even if we remain cautious about what distinguishes them, have nothing specifically religious about them. However, what the historian also observed was that, at the time when he was working on fear and sin, there was a tendency to “reduce the history of guilt to that of clerical power” (Delumeau, 1983, p. 9). As a result, many contemporaries believed that they could reject clerical power and guilt as a whole, as if the former was the cause of the latter. As Guillaume Cuchet argues, guilt tended to be reduced to its religious expressions, and especially to the notion of sin and confession (Cuchet,

²⁵ It is not my intention here to explain how neuroses can be explained by the pathological exacerbation of a normal psychological process of ethical measurement of behavior. I only specify that I refer to Jean Gagnepain’s model of mediation theory, and more precisely to its axiological aspect, which has profoundly renewed what psychoanalysis, to which Delumeau referred, via Antoine Vergote in particular, could formulate on the subject. A detailed clinical presentation of this axiological model was given in 1994 in issue 9 of the journal *Tétralogiques*, devoted to ethical issues. See in particular Guyard and Guyard, 1994, as well as the present issue of the journal.

²⁶ On this distinction, see in particular Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, 2a 2ae, Q. 19.

Jean-Michel LE BOT

2018, p. 240). By getting rid of religion, it was therefore thought that guilt could also be got rid of. This was, of course, quite illusory, and Delumeau urged modesty on this point: “our era”, he wrote, “constantly speaks of ‘deculpabilization’ without realizing that never in history has the guilt-tripping of the other been as strong as today” (Delumeau, 1983, p. 11). As proof of this, he pointed to the way in which, in France, the right and the left accused each other of “the heaviest political sins”, while in totalitarian countries the accusation of the adversary resulted in the torture and killing of millions of human beings (Delumeau, 1983, p. 11). In other words, Westerners of the twentieth century may not have spoken the religious language of their predecessors from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century²⁷, but they nevertheless competed with them in terms of over-accusation.

Since the time of Delumeau’s writing, political ecology has confirmed that the very clear decline in Europe, if not of religions as a whole, at least of Christianity and clerical power, does not mean that we are done with guilt. This is precisely what led Gagnepain, in a lecture we quoted above, to observe that the ozone layer or the water table had replaced Heaven and Hell. A “Little Green Book for the Earth” written around 2005 by the Nicolas Hulot Foundation with the technical and scientific support of the French Agency for the Environment and Energy Management (ADEME) gave a whole series of recommendations that looked very much like new commandments. Unlike the commandments of God and the commandments of the Church in the catechism manuals of the past, these environmentalist commandments were not presented in versified form. But one could well imagine that they were. “I turn off the light, I turn off the standby of electrical appliances, I turn down the heating when I am away, I avoid disposable items, I prefer showers to baths, I control the flow of water from the taps, etc.” would then become something like:

You shall turn off the light and not let the TV on standby overnight.

You shall turn the heating down when you are away.

You shall prefer the shower to the bath and renewable energy as well.

Etc.

on the model of :

You shall attend Mass on Sundays and holy days of obligation.

You shall confess your sins at least once a year.

You shall humbly receive your Creator in Holy Communion at least during the Easter season.

Etc.

The analogy does not end there, as psychiatrists, psychologists and other psychotherapists have observed the appearance in some people of an anxiety with ecological or climatic motives, sometimes called “eco-

²⁷ Although Eric Voegelin and Raymond Aron, in reference to the totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century, spoke of “political religions” and “secular religions” respectively. But an examination of these concepts would take us too far.

Ecology and guilt

anxiety”, “ecological burn-out” or “solastalgia”. A mobile phone engineer, for example, says that he became anxious after reading a book about how everything could collapse²⁸. He can only hold on with antidepressants or anxiolytics, a good “shrink” and the presence of his daughter. Some adults prefer not to have children²⁹. It is unlikely that these anxieties constitute a new pathology. The word “solastalgia”, coined by an Australian philosopher, Glenn Albrecht (Albrecht et al., 2007), may at best refer to a new set of symptoms, certainly not a new syndrome. In other words, it can be hypothesized that predisposed people who would have developed religiously themed neuroses in the past are now developing ecologically themed neuroses. It is quite conceivable, for example, that recommendations such as those of the Nicolas Hulot Foundation mentioned above, associated with concerns about climate and ecological prospects, could result, in obsessive-type personalities, in scruples whose content only changes in relation to those described by Jacques-Joseph Du Guet in 1717 in his *Traité des Scrupules* (Pélicier, 1976). These hypotheses invite a history and sociology of symptoms that would be entirely in line with Delumeau’s work on fear and sin.

But these analogies between religious and ecological fears and commandments do not mean, again, that political ecology is a new religion. They mean even less that political ecology and religion are both necessarily morbid. They only mean that the human being, whatever the place and time, is always a moral being, who cannot help but evaluate his behavior in terms of good and evil, in terms of merit and fault, in terms of precautions and claims, at the risk, in some cases, of exacerbation and neurosis. This can expose man to many miseries, but they are, as Pascal put it, the “miseries of a great lord”. Christianity, said Gagnepain, simply converts this ethical capacity, without which there is no freedom (Gagnepain, 1993, p. 262; Gagnepain, 2005, p. 235). Man pays tribute to God, in other words, for this freedom: *O felix culpa*, “happy fault”³⁰. It is certain that catechisms have not yet encouraged confessing sins against nature, the earth or creation. *Non abbiamo ancora coscienza di questo peccato* (“we do not yet have awareness of this sin”), observed Pope Francis in February 2019³¹. But it

²⁸ It was a book written by Pablo Servigne and Raphaël Stevens, *Comment tout peut s'effondrer. Petit manuel de collapsologie à l'usage des générations présentes* [How everything can collapse. Small handbook of collapsology for the use of present generations], Paris, Seuil, 2015, 304 p.

²⁹ I am basing this paragraph on a dossier published by the newspaper *La Croix* (July 2, 2019).

³⁰ The expression, which owes its fame to the *Exsultet*, an hymn of the Catholic Paschal Vigil Mass, is often attributed to St Augustine. But it is not found in his works. It could be from St. Ambrose, to whom Dom Bernard Capelle attributed the *Exsultet* (see e.g. Jakoniuk, 2012, p. 189).

³¹ Address to teachers and students of the Alphonsian Academy – Higher Institute of Theology (February 9, 2019). Online:

Jean-Michel LE BOT

is not contrary to reason to imagine that we can declare ourselves guilty of it. This is precisely the role of moral theology, which, the Pope added, “must take on board the urgency of participating in a convinced manner to the common effort towards the care of our common home through practicable ways of integral development”.

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Jean-Michel LE BOT

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