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**THE FUTURE OF LEBANON**  
**PHILOSOPHICAL REFLECTIONS ON ‘HOPE’ WITH**  
**REFERENCES TO PIERRE TIELHARD DE CHARDIN**  
**AND GIORGIO LA PIRA**

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**Abstract**

The writings of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Gorgio La Pira go a long way in helping to define the enigmatic categories of *progress* and *hope*. By reflecting on how these two great intellectuals would have applied their insights to the situation in a country like modern Lebanon, the complex relationship between progress and hope emerges in an eschatological context set from the outset by the work of Immanuel Kant. The results of these reflections show both a complementary and oppositional relation with both La Pira and Teilhard de Chardin agreeing on the importance of the connection between the theological virtues of hope and love, but disagreeing radically on what it is that constitutes hope and progress.

*Keywords:* evolution, progress, *espoir*, *espérance*, theological virtue, collective thinking, Cosmic Christ, history as freedom, eschatological possibilities

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Precisely two hundred and fifteen years ago, in one of his lesser know treatises, one of modern Europe’s greatest philosophers took up the question concerning the ultimate future of our human race. He reduced the possibilities to three: first, a more or less constant progression and ascent; second, a more or less constant regression and decline; and finally, a more or less unvarying persistence on a plane reached after a certain development had gone as far as it could. While admitting the theoretical possibility of the second scenario, that is, a continual descent, or as he calls it, ‘a regression to the worse’, he surprisingly argues that such an ever-increasing decay is not ‘actually’ possible. He confidently and unequivocally argues that continual retrogression is impossible in the concrete because this would mean that the race would eventually destroy itself. As far as I can tell, this is the only premise in his argument. In this case, his argument is not only weak, but seriously flawed as the conclusion is already present in the premise. And what makes the whole matter even more surprising is that this informal fallacy is a mistake in reasoning made by one known for his

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otherwise great ability to reason. I am speaking of none other than the great Immanuel Kant. I first came across this treatise in Josef Pieper's books 'Hope and History' [1].

In spite of this glaring error, however, or perhaps because of what such an error on such a topic might reveal, the treatise is still well worth reading. Not only does it raise a number of perennial questions that the thoughtful person shall always find stimulating and important, but it touches upon, and brings some unity to, all the major themes that are present in my title: evolution, the future, the social nature of mankind, love of country, and last but not least, hope. Thus, I shall use Kant's treatise as a springboard and jump right into the heart of my topic: *The Future of Lebanon: Philosophical Reflections on 'Hope'* with references to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Giorgio La Pira.

It is hard to imagine what kind of sustained, condensed suffering Lebanon has endured over the last 33 years. One neighbor has launched six wars in Lebanon, and still occupies a small portion of the country. The other neighbor, with the blessing of the international community, occupied most of the country for decades, continues to meddle in Lebanon's affairs, and refuses to recognize Lebanon diplomatically. Many of the Lebanese authorities from all of Lebanon's religious sects have participated at various levels in the destruction and rape of their own country. Today, the country is plagued with what seems to be an insurmountable debt, due to both internal and external corruption; its people are profoundly divided primarily over which neighboring power or superpower they ought to be aligned with, and a vast majority of its youth have either left, plan to leave, or desire to leave. Perhaps only the words of Job in Sacred Scripture can come close to describing such prolonged misery: "Oh that my vexation were weighed, and all my calamity laid in the balances, then, I declare, it would be heavier, yes heavier and more numerous than all the sand of the sea" (Job 6.2-4). Lebanese intellectuals over a decade ago coined the phrase 'the normality of abnormality'. Both the Lebanese and the international community had gotten so used to Lebanon's abnormal reality, that it finally came to be accepted as normal. For many Lebanese today, the phrase the 'future of Lebanon' has a hollow ring to it, and many more would probably wonder why on Earth Immanuel Kant excluded the possibility of continual retrogression, as they have witnessed first hand, at least in their own country, what seems to be an inevitable and ever-increasing decay. But there are dissenting voices. One such voice is the voice of the prophet Isaiah who proclaimed over twenty-five hundred years ago: "In a very short time, will not Lebanon be turned into a fertile field and the fertile field seem like a forest? In that day the deaf will hear the words of the scroll, and out of the gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind will see." (Isaiah 29.17, 18).

Much has been written about Lebanon's historical role as a cultural, scientific, philosophical, and religious bridge between East and West. At times, the dialogue of cultures, so much talked about these days, has been a reality in Lebanon. To some extent, this dialogue still exists in Lebanon. And whereas Lebanon's vocation to be a place where Europe, Asia, and Africa all meet

contributed to a development that produced a highly complex culture, it is also the case that this vocation is one for which Lebanon has had to suffer. With each destruction, however, I believe that Lebanon is purified and renewed. And so the prophet, speaking of Lebanon's death and resurrection so long ago, says "[i]n a very short time, will not Lebanon be turned into a fertile field. . .?" Whether in ancient, medieval, or modern times, the words of the prophet seem always to apply. In its most recent history as a modern state, Lebanon's famed vitality emerged once again. With the exception of a brief period of tension in 1958, Lebanon flourished in a remarkable way from the date of its establishment in 1943 until the beginning of the war in 1975. What is most astonishing is that through so many years of war, chaos and continued foreign occupation, Lebanon did not only not collapse, but managed somehow to grow, though slowly and painfully. The beginning of the new millennia brought new hope with the partial withdrawals of Israel and Syria in 2000 and 2005 respectively, but just when a new dawn seemed to be rising, a string of brutal assassinations horrified the country from 2004-2006, and another brutal war, devastated the country for 34 days in the summer of 2006, undermining the little progress that Lebanon had been able to achieve. Today, no one knows when or where the next ghastly atrocity aimed at killing and maiming innocent people will take place.

Let's imagine for a moment that Giorgio La Pira and Pierre Teilhard de Chardin were the key-note speakers at a high profile international conference on the future of Lebanon. What would they have to say? Would their messages be commensurate? Would what they say make any difference? Such a state of affairs, in fact, is not too far fetched, since La Pira devoted great effort to a movement that he called the 'path of Isaiah', which was dedicated to the quest for peace and understanding among all the nations of the Earth. So committed to achieving this goal, he went on a war-ending mission to North Vietnam in 1965. If he were alive today, he would most likely be ardently involved in efforts to bring peace to the Middle East. Teilhard de Chardin, too, although a geologist by training, had been fascinated with the Middle East ever since he had spent three years teaching chemistry and physics in a Catholic college in Egypt. And although there is nothing in his biography that compares to the kind of national and international social and political activity that we find in a Giorgio La Pira, we do know from his involvement in peace conferences and the like that he was passionate about, and felt a great responsibility for, the future of mankind as a whole. And since he stated over and over that "the broadest, deepest, and most unassailable meaning of the idea of Evolution," (an idea of course that guided his every thought) was that "everything in the world appears and exists as a function of the whole" [2], we can assume that he was also passionate about, and felt responsible for, the future of mankind's parts. In other words, we may well imagine that if Teilhard de Chardin were present at our imaginary conference, he might well begin his address by saying that since the future of Lebanon cannot be separated either empirically or ontologically from the future of mankind, we are all responsible for working toward a solution in Lebanon, which necessarily means, a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict and to the whole region.

So far so good. At this level, La Pira and Teilhard de Chardin agree; those listening would at least say that they were both men of good will, and hopeful optimists. But if we proceed a little further and probe a little deeper certain inconsistencies and complexities would probably emerge that would be as equally perplexing as the conflicts we are imagining them to be addressing. To begin with, it is worth noting that La Pira's mission to Vietnam was a complete failure. This is not a criticism of La Pira, but it may prove that if all human beings are created in the image and likeness of God, as La Pira's strongly believed, this doesn't necessarily mean that all human beings continue to reflect this image and likeness equally. One could say that perhaps he did not take the reality of cultural difference seriously enough and that maybe he needed to be more profound when it came to questions concerning the relation between man's culture and man's essence. In fact, if La Pira weren't a saint, I myself might be tempted to say that he was somehow naïve, and not only when it came to Vietnam and world politics, but even when it came to his interventions in the labor disputes in his own native Italy. But he was indeed a saint, who in the words of John Paul II, was also a man of "great intellectual and moral energies, empowered and refined in the daily exercise of study, reflection, asceticism and prayer" [3]. And so we must look deeper at the source of La Pira's hope. It is not enough to say that he was an optimist or a hopeful man; this is too superficial. We must probe the depths of his hope and look for its philosophical and theological underpinnings, and to do this, we must look at his asceticism, which was grounded in the spirituality of the Dominican Order to which he belonged. Once La Pira is canonized, I am sure that many dissertations will address this topic, and it certainly will take many dissertations to address such a profound topic. For our present purposes, I will speculate only on a few points related to what kind of hope was present in a man like Giorgio La Pira, and I would like to begin with his death. This may sound like a strange place to begin speaking about hope in a man whose life is full of significant social, cultural, and political achievements, but in reality it is the only place to begin, as we cannot judge the quality of one's life until it is over. And the quality of one's life is directly related to depth of one's hope. The '*La Nazione*' newspaper in Florence simply stated "Giorgio La Pira is dead. His body, already deteriorated due to cerebral damage, could not resist a malfunctioning kidney coupled with fever complications. . . outside the 'Little companions of Mary' hospital, there were only a few persons, mainly simple unknown people. . ." [4] The immediate picture is not pretty: a decaying body, a disfigured, blood-spilling brain, a lonely evening, a few unknown, simpletons outside a humble little hospital, with a humble, little name. But within hours, as the news spread, the light began to shine, and Giorgio La Pira's ultimate hope was finally realized: union with that Sacred Heart of Christ, of which he had apparently had a mystical vision, or intuition of, on two occasions as a young boy; throughout his life, this vision of what he had described as something supernatural that marvelously transcended his own cognition and his own little world, sustained him in both his achievements and failures. When he saved the Pignone manufacturing plant by

compelling the Italian state energy corporation to buy it, he later claimed that the plan had come from the Holy Spirit in a dream [3, p.323]. But in his disappointments also, which were especially numerous on the international scene, his hope was not diminished. In a letter to a friend in misery and utter disappointment, we are able to catch a glimpse of his own way of dealing with wretched discouragement when he says that “the misery [my friend] that is darkening your world [day after day is gradually forming in your soul the evangelical counsel of holy] *poverty*; and your pain will become sweet because it is [united to the profound suffering] of Calvary. The roads of darkness and misery that you now walk are [not meaningless]; they are preparing you for new life.” [4] Or in 1958, at the end of his first term as Mayor of Florence, when the government imposed new and heavy taxes on the already over-burdened poor people of the region, he encouraged many of them by appealing to their faith in these words: “The Government puts taxes on everything, including on the Mayor, [but it can’t tax that which is most precious]: it can’t tax the grace of God that comes to us in the holy sacraments. Do you pay any money for Holy Communion or for Holy Confession? No. God’s grace [which cultivates genuine hope] is given to us freely and generously in the sacraments.” [4] It is easy to detect here La Pira’s reverence for religious tradition, but he makes it clear that the solution to what he calls a ‘crisis of tradition’ must take place at all levels, and must not fall into any kind of stifling traditionalism. Commenting upon some aspects of certain futuristic ideologies, he says “The actual global crisis is in its immediate and remote origins, a crisis of tradition, but a crisis of tradition in all spheres, in the economical, the political, the religious, and the cultural.” [4] With respect to the cultural domain, he emphasizes a love of place and land, which is refreshingly free of any kind of nationalism. As early as 1924, while writing an academic review of an influential three-volume work on dialectics by Giovanni Di Giacomo and Luciano Nicastro, La Pira, while clearly distancing himself from the futuristic ideology contained in the work, nevertheless appreciated the way it promoted, perhaps unwittingly, as it was written in a traditional Sicilian dialect, the very tradition of which it was skeptical. La Pira writes, “Through this original work, I found myself in direct contact with my land, with my people, and with the entire spirit of our past. . . I found my people there in their faith, in their work, in their smile, and in their chants! I thought: how can we not love our very own land, and how can we fail to find hope for the future in all that traditions teaches us? Since when we truly grasp our tradition, we see that it brings new and important possibilities for facing the challenges of the future. Oh, if we could but appreciate what has already been done and recognize it as belonging to us, our present actions would be so much more important and meaningful. Let us, then, direct our people to the master street of tradition, let us stand up again on our own natural land and everything else will fall back into place and work spontaneously.” [4]

In the light of all this, then, I think it is safe to say that La Pira's message to Lebanon and to the Lebanese, and especially to the Lebanese Christians, would be commensurate with what John Paul II did in fact say to the Lebanese in an official Apostolic Exhortation exactly ten years ago entitled appropriately enough, 'A New Hope for Lebanon' [5]. A careful reading of this exhortation reveals that its major presupposition is this: Lebanon's future depends on returning to what is most noble in its past; it's a call to return to tradition, to the living faith of the dead, but with a warning about the danger of traditionalism — the dead faith of the living. It points out that what is most noble in Lebanon's tradition is the emphasis on the supreme dignity of the human person regardless of race or religion, expressed in its unique custom of hospitality. It goes on to say that such dignity is closely connected to the loving cultivation of the land and cultural traditions, which turns our attention to the great mystery of death and resurrection that is evident in all the natural cycles and rhythms of life, and which points us toward a genuine and ultimately transcendent hope that is nonetheless not disconnected from the here and now. Umberto Eco's point about what great literature, as part of our cultural tradition, is ultimately all about comes to mind in this context. Quite simply, Eco says that the purpose of great literature is to teach us how to die [6]. Moreover, unless it is pointed out, we are apt to miss the significance of which word the Holy Father chooses to use for 'hope' in the exhortation, which he wrote in French. For in French, there are two words for hope, *espoir* and *espérance*. The former tends towards plural objects, while the latter tends to preclude plurality altogether. In choosing the latter, the Holy Father was directing attention to that concept of hope in the western philosophical tradition, wherein hope is understood primarily as a quality of the soul, along with the cardinal virtues of prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance. As the exhortation unfolds, he then invites his listeners to an even higher, though complementary level, when he draws attention to hope as a theological virtue, a gift of grace, which assures us of three fundamental truths: (1) that God can bring good out of evil, (2) that the future does not have to be like the past, and (3) that God can work miracles and surprises in our life that we can't begin to imagine. At any rate, as I've mentioned, this is the kind of hope that was present in Giorgio La Pira, and I'm sure this is the kind of hope he would try to convey to Lebanon.

So let us continue to imagine ourselves at this high-profile international conference on Lebanon. And let us visualize Giorgio La Pira sitting down after his key-note address and Father Pierre Teilhard de Chardin taking the podium to begin his. As already mentioned, Teilhard would probably begin his address by stressing both the empirical and ontological connection between Lebanon, the region, and the world since in addition to his conviction that "everything in the world appears and exists as a function of the whole," he also held that "the material of the Universe, in its ever-increasing complexity and consciousness, [was] becoming more and more intensely concentrated into itself, with man being the extreme forefront of this process, including man as a social entity." [1, p. 66] To be sure, Teilhard would have been disappointed and perhaps even

confused at the inability of the super and local powers to engage in 'collective thinking' since he was convinced that man as a social unit, as a communal body, was "finally growing capable of a collective thinking whose essential goal, the Omega Point of reason, [was] to become identical with the universal Cosmic Christ, in whom ultimately the whole of evolution [would finally] show itself to be a process of becoming one with God." [1, p. 66] In this, one can detect the spirit of Immanuel Kant's too easy dismissal of the possibility of continual regression wherein the race would finally wipe itself out. But because Kant was writing at a time when the possibility of an atomic destruction of the planet was inconceivable, we can partially excuse his error. But Teilhard lived through Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and probably knew some of those who perished in the horror, as both cities were heavily populated with Catholics, who were served by European religious orders, including the Jesuits, to which Teilhard always remained loyal as a Jesuit priest. If challenged on this point during the question/answer period, Teilhard would probably respond by saying that the universal Cosmic Christ was the "mystical Christ, who had not yet attained his full growth." [1, p. 67] And if the questioner pressed him further, he might introduce his account of the world's final stage, which suggests two possibilities. The first, which again, in one essential way at least, is very Kantian, has evil, hunger, sickness, and war all fading away, as the warm rays of the Omega Point of reason appear brighter and brighter with each passing day. Scientific progress continues its upward ascent and constantly discovers new frontiers for the good of the human race and the Earth. Although a vast and extreme tension underlies the evolutionary process, such tension is less and less seen and felt as it approaches the ultimate manifestation of its purpose in becoming one with God. In other words, as the ultimate convergence gets closer and closer, peace on Earth gets stronger and stronger. Now in the second theory, and quite surprisingly, and very much unlike Kant, Teilhard admits the actual concrete possibility of a steady increase of evil, and even speaks convincingly about what he calls an "ecstasy of discord" [1, p. 70] in mankind's final stage. In fact, the more one investigates this second theory, which is far less known and studied than is the first, the more one sees it necessarily excludes the first. Although this quandary in his thought is profoundly related to my topic, I do not intend to explore it here except to say that it may be associated with what I believe is a very subtle confusion in Teilhard's thought between evolution and history, which in turn, produces a rather myopic account of hope. What I mean is this: as a paleontologist, speaking in terms of evolution, Teilhard was convinced that mankind, still so very young, had only just begun to tap its evolutionary potential. This means the future is bursting with unimaginable promise, and that mankind therefore, should have immense hope. Perhaps Teilhard is correct here, but I want to suggest here, following the lead of Josef Pieper and others, that there is a world of difference between what can happen and what does happen: the former concerns evolution; the latter, history. And although Teilhard does say in his major work, *The Phenomenon of Man* [7], that "[i]f mankind makes use of the enormous span of time still available to it, then it has immense

possibilities before it,” [1, p. 39] he does not, as far as I can tell, even attempt to spell out the way in which the “if” in this statement is associated with history as distinct from evolution. The former is the realm of freedom and decision, as distinct from evolutionary laws and more or less deterministic principles. At any rate, what is most significant here, with respect to his philosophy of hope, is that he ends up associating hope only with the first of his eschatological possibilities, the possibility that he believes best conforms to scientific theory. In this, he excludes a justification for hope from the second eschatological possibility, or more precisely, from the arena wherein mankind seems to need it most: from the realm of history, with its all too real possibility of total destruction. Scholars may argue about whether and to what degree Teilhard himself was aware of this intense paradox in his own thought, but for the young Lebanese listening to Teilhard at our imaginary conference, I’m afraid there would be a general confusion, especially when it came to how Teilhard’s message related to what they ought to be hoping in, and to what they ought to be doing for their country’s future now, and to how their ‘hopes’ (tending toward the many) now were related to ‘hope’ itself (tending towards unity) in the future — and not just in this world, but also in the next. Be this as it may, what we can all learn from the great Teilhard is that the concrete reality of historical man himself here and now points at least to the dawn of what kind of future awaits us [1, p. 70].

I shall conclude now with a reference to the same Kantian treatise with which I began, but not directly with the material of the treatise itself, but with a reference to the period in which he wrote it, namely, to the last decade of the eighteenth century. If we look back at Lebanon in that decade, we find there an interesting political event taking place that is relevant to our topic. In those days, the ancient biblical city of Tyre was still an important center of power, as the silk exports to Europe from Mount Lebanon had not yet triggered the kind of intense activity that would make Beirut the most important port of the entire region. The most important port for centuries, in fact, had been the coastal city of Acre in Palestine, about twenty-five miles south of Tyre. And this is why Napoleon attacked it in the last decade of the eighteenth century. But he found its governor, Al Jassar, a much more formidable opponent than he had anticipated. Exasperated, Napoleon himself called upon the Lebanese governor of Tyre, Bashir Shihab II, for support. Ironically, Al Jassar, Bashir’s only real rival in the region, also called upon him for help. After a careful study of the political and military history of the region, he decided strategically to support neither. His gamble paid off: Napoleon retreated to Egypt, and Al Jassar never really recovered from the onslaught, dying a few years later, and leaving Prince Bashir the sole power in the region. Bashir, like his hero, the great Lebanese Druze leader, Fakhr ad Din II, before him, spent a lot of time thinking about Lebanon’s future, but also like his hero, speculation on the future was necessarily rooted in meditation on Lebanon’s past, and not just in terms of knowing its political and military past, but in terms also of its cultural and spiritual past. Bashir was inspired by, and had great hope in, Fakhr ad Din’s vision of Lebanon’s future, in fact, wherein its diverse religious sects could all



unite into one Lebanese community, a vision stemming ultimately from what he had seen in Lebanon's past — stretching back even into biblical times. It was this vision that the great John Paul II also caught sight of, when in the exhortation, referred to above, highlighting the new 'hope' for Lebanon, he wrote, "Lebanon is not just a country, it is a mission of love" [5, p. 1]. If Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and Giorgio La Pira were alive today, I am sure they would at least agree on the profound connection between genuine hope and genuine love, and I am sure they would each tell us that without love there is no hope, and without hope, there is no future.

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