

# “Multi-tasking” and Christian Teaching: Taking “multi-tasking” to task on the basis of Christian doctrine

By Mark Bonadio

If ever there was a “catch-phrase” which epitomizes the modern workplace — and indeed the very *modus vivendi* of modern humanity as such — it is the almost sacrosanct idea of “multi-tasking,” which has come to be regarded as a “cutting-edge” key to “getting ahead” in business and in life. Whether in the workplace or on the street, this phrase has become closely linked with the ubiquitous dogmas of “progress,” “technology,” “productivity” and — let us never forget! — “evolution”. Indeed, it is the norm nowadays for people to use a cell phone while driving, walking or eating; or to work on a computer while on the phone or eating; or to watch television while studying, eating or working; the list could go on indefinitely. Workplace managers are taught to “multi-task” and to demand the same of their employees; in fact, the writer of this essay recently heard a staunch Christian proudly proclaim that he “thrives on multi-tasking,” and additionally observed a manager (again a zealous Christian) simultaneously working at a computer, talking on the phone, and programming an electronic “palm pilot,” while a radio talk show blared in the background — a comical scene, no doubt, but one which certainly is not unusual in today’s world.

These last-mentioned incidents prompt a crucial question: is “multi-tasking” conformable to Christian living? Such a query will doubtless seem irrelevant to those who, in embracing modern ideologies, have consequentially rejected religion; however, the majority of North Americans and Western Europeans still identify themselves as Christian, so the question remains quite pertinent despite the profanation of the modern West. Even so, few modern Christians would deem such an investigation to have any merit; “multi-tasking,” they believe, is in itself

a neutral and thus harmless idea, if not a positive one, since most have come to somehow wed the ideologies of “progress,” “evolution” and “technology” with Christianity, however belied such an alliance is by the Bible itself, not to mention Apostolic Tradition.

Be that as it may, the question deserves to be raised, if only because Christ taught, “Be ye perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect” (*Matt.* 5:48) — which implies that our actions, no less than our very souls, must reflect the perfection of God. Perhaps, then, it is relevant to ask whether God’s perfection includes “multi-tasking,” and in several respects it certainly does: God simultaneously brings into being, sustains, and brings out of being a vast multitude of different living things; moreover, He can hear and answer an indefinite number of prayers at once; and He is intimately involved in every destiny and at every point of the universe, all at the same time. Thus the Divine archetype for all “multi-tasking” would seem to be God’s infinite and omnipresent activity, and the perfection of man would seem to lie precisely in his ability to do several things at once.

Yet herein, precisely, lies the problem. Infinitude, far from constituting a sort of spatial endlessness, is itself *beyond* space: it is that Divine principle (or omnipresent yet unique “point”) from which space itself derives, just as God’s Eternity, far from being a temporal endlessness (which would necessarily grow tedious for the Elect in Heaven), is rather that perfection by which God “has the whole of His existence at once (*simul*),” as St. Thomas Aquinas asserts (*Summa Contra Gentiles*, I.14)<sup>1</sup>; just as Dante describes Eternity or the “Eternal Now” as “the point whereto all times are present” (*Paradiso* XVII.17), so he says of the Divine Center, or Infinity, “On that point Heaven and all nature are dependent” (*Paradiso* XXVIII. 40). Now, a point — even if Infinite — is necessarily simple; it is no accident that, in diverse traditional symbolisms, the universe is conceived as a wheel with a multitude of spokes emanating from and rotating around a simple, motionless center (the “motionless Mover” of St. Thomas) — “where every *where* and every *when* is focused” (*Paradiso* XXIX.12) — or again, as the

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<sup>1</sup> St. Augustine, in discussing the question, “When did God create the world?,” points out that the question itself is inappropriate, since time itself is created; there was no time “before” God created the world, and thus to say “before” the creation is just a manner of speaking, akin to treating “nothing” in “creation out of nothing” (*creatio ex nihilo*) as a “something”.

coagulated reflection of an all-encompassing circle.<sup>2</sup> Again, St. Thomas: “Since God is the universal cause of all Being, in whatever region Being can be found, there must be the Divine Presence.”

A “point,” a “where,” a “Presence” — each term is singular, each implies uniqueness and hence simplicity. From the point of view of *our* world — from the vantage point of the outer rim of the wheel (or the congealed finitude of the inward-radiating circle) — God’s actions seem diverse and His attention divided, but that is no more true than to think that the sun’s light is diverse and divided because it has multiple rays and breaks up into different colors; ultimately there is *one* light and *one act* of lighting. Whereas God’s simplicity comprises in fact a multiplicity within it and “radiates” that multiplicity while never compromising the simplicity, man, being an “*imago Dei*” — and thus a Divine mirror — must, from his initial multiplicity, become a simple unity; thus he is counseled to “enter through the narrow gate... (*Matt.* 7:13). “Now (here-below, in contingency, in space and time) I know in part; but then (in the state of union with God, in the Divine Center and the Eternal Now) I shall know even as I am known” (*Cor.* I 13:12) — that is, with God’s own Knowledge, which is unique, unifying and simple.<sup>3</sup> All

<sup>2</sup> The feathered sun of the American Indian tradition represents both points of view, which, of course, are different ways of viewing the same reality, or in fact Reality as such.

<sup>3</sup> Here we approach the Thomist notion of there being “no real relation” from man to God; in other words, the relationship as conceived from God’s “side” is real, but as conceived from man’s “side” is unreal, since man considers himself an interlocutor with God, as a self-subsisting being in this apparent relationship between two poles. In fact, God alone is absolutely Real, and man’s relative reality derives from God just as the rays from the sun or the spokes from the hub; one “pole” is Source, and the other is only the emanation of that Source; St. Thomas uses the precisely the term *emanatio* in one daring line of the *Summa*, saying that all being is an emanation from God’s Being. “Man in himself *is not*, for he is changed and altered if he does not participate in Him ‘Who is the same’ (‘Thou art always the same’ — *Psalms* 101.27). He *is* when he sees God, he *is* when he sees HIM WHO IS...” — St. Augustine. Here-below all knowledge, indeed everything positive or all qualities, are only found “in part”; insofar as they *are not*, they are *unreal*. Absolute knowledge is God’s alone, hence as Frithjof Schuon often wrote, “To be objective is to die a little,” objectivity corresponding to God’s Knowledge. When man knows or loves God, we could say that that which is God in man is knowing or loving Itself; the Heaven-willed vocation of the human being, then, is to “become God” (St. Irenaeus: “God became man so that man might become God”), that is, to purge ourselves of the darkness which negates His presence in our souls. It is in this notion of “no real relation” that Christian doctrine intersects with the Hindu notion of *Maya* (indicating that creation is in some way “illusory”), so crucial in the understanding of esoteric spirituality and metaphysics.

of which implies, of course, that the scattering of the human will among a variety of different tasks at one and the same time is anything but a reflection of the Divine Perfection; and if “without Me ye can do nothing” (*John* 15:15), then the best way to allow God to “work in you both to will and to accomplish” (*Phil.* 2:13) is to cultivate the virtue of simplicity, that is, simplicity of intention and oneness of mind — intending towards and seeking God alone. “Seek ye first the Kingdom of God and His righteousness ...” (*Matt.* 6:33).

What we have said above explains the many references to the virtue of simplicity in the Bible. “And Jesus called unto Himself a little child, and set him in the midst of them. ‘Unless ye be converted, and become as little children, ye shall not enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child<sup>4</sup>, he is the greater in the Kingdom of Heaven” (*Matt.* 18:26). “The light of thy body is thy eye. If thy eye be single, thy whole body shall be filled with light” (*Matt.* 6:22)<sup>5</sup>. “Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things; but one thing is needful. Mary hast chosen the better part, which shall not be taken from her” (*Luke* 10:41, 42) — the “one thing needful” referring to imperturbable and calm concentration on

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<sup>4</sup> Tradition says that this “little child” was one Ignatius, who later became St. Ignatius of Antioch, who died a glorious martyrdom when he refused to renounce Jesus as he was thrown to the lions. In the midst of his tortures, Ignatius continued to invoke the Name of Jesus and was asked by his executioners why he repeated this Name so often. “Because it is written on my heart!,” he replied. After his death it is said that those who had heard him say this were driven by curiosity to find out if it was literally true; so they removed his heart and found the Name of Jesus inscribed within it in golden letters, at which point they embraced Christianity. Cf. *The Golden Legend*, Jacobus de Voragine (trans. William Granger Ryan), Princeton University Press, 1993. As St. Paul wrote, “Pray without ceasing” (*1 Thess.* 5:17), which, in all traditional religions, is viewed as the primary way to realize spiritual simplicity.

<sup>5</sup> This passage, like so many others, illustrates why the Bible cannot be read in a simply literalistic fashion as fundamentalists attempt to do, ignoring the nonsensical meanings that derive therefrom. Of course Jesus did not mean to imply that one should have just one eye, but rather that the “eye of the heart” — the center of the soul — should be directed towards God alone; and if this occurs, then the “body” — signifying here the person’s entire being, his very existence which includes spirit, soul and body — will be filled with the light of God’s Presence. Thus this passage explains how “to the pure all things are pure” (*Titus* 1:15), for he who is filled with God will then “see God everywhere”, realizing that “in Him we live, and move and have our being” (*Acts* 17:28).

God, according to the traditional commentators. “Think of the Lord in goodness, and seek Him in simplicity of heart” (*Wis.* 1:1). “...that being enriched in all things, you may abound unto all simplicity...” (*II Cor.* 9:11). “I know, my God, that Thou provest hearts, and lovest simplicity ...” (*I Paral.* 29:17). “The Lord is the keeper of little ones: I was humbled, and He delivered me” (*Ps.* 104:6) <sup>6</sup>. It is also in relation to this simplicity that we recall the fact that the creation account in *Genesis*, rather than showing us a “multi-tasking” Divinity, recounts that God devoted an entire “day” to creating the different types of things.

A particularly relevant passage to our subject is the following: “He that is mocked by his friends as I, shall call upon God, and He will hear him: for the simplicity of the just man is laughed to scorn” (*Job* 13:4). The person who refuses to get caught up in the frantic pace of the modern world, who thus refuses to “multi-task” and enter into the world of cell phones and other “cutting edge” technology, is “mocked” — whether literally or in a manner of speaking — by this very world; the truly spiritual person finds no place in modernity, he does not “fit” into the fabric of a society which has banished and scorned that which constitutes his (and humanity’s) *raison d’etre*; forced into such a lifestyle, the contemplative person invariably feels like a god on a treadmill, grappling to survive in a world that denies everything precious to him. This is one reason why such souls in the modern world are often traumatized to some extent, and why one can sometimes encounter in one and the same person the most profound spiritual gifts alongside incongruous psychic fissures.

Not only is the spiritual man’s simplicity at odds with the pace of modern life and work, but the very nature of technology — the veritable lifeblood of modernity and its claim to glory — is essentially in opposition to everything spiritual and transcendent, since modern machines have been created by mankind with entirely worldly, even

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<sup>6</sup> It is interesting to note that the same virtue of simplicity is taught in the Scriptures of the other traditional religions. The Qur’an, for instance, says, “We (God) leave those who rest not their hope on the meeting with Us in their trespasses, wandering in distraction to and fro” (*Sura “Jonab”*, verse 11, Yusuf ‘Ali trans.) The Arabic verb which is used at the end of this verse is “*amiba*,” meaning “to wander about, stray, rove.” The effect of “multi-tasking” could not be more accurately described.

utopian ends in view, thus without any relation to the “one thing needful.”<sup>7</sup> As one critic writes,

... if there is a coincidence, in some traditional arts, between conformity to a practical end and conformity to a spiritual end, this is because the first does not contradict the second, something that cannot be said of the machine, which is inconceivable outside the context of a desacralized world. In fact, the form of the machine expresses exactly what it is, namely a sort of challenge offered to the cosmic and divine order; it may well be composed of “objective” elements such as circles and squares, but in its relationship — or rather its non-relationship — with the cosmic ambience, it translates, not a “Platonic idea,” but a “mental coagulation,” or indeed an agitation or a trick.<sup>8</sup>

It is a fact that “multi-tasking” thrives on technology, and this should come as no surprise. In his masterful and even prophetic work entitled *The Reign of Quantity and the Signs of the Times*<sup>9</sup>, René Guénon — as long ago as 1945 — shows that the machine, far from serving its creators to make life more qualitative and enjoyable, will inevitably effect an inversion of the original relationship, i.e. machines will become masters of man, who in his turn will become “mechanized” by his dependence upon the machine. That this process has already largely run its course is undeniable<sup>10</sup>, and the very phenomenon of “multi-tasking” — almost always involving the use of one or more machines — is ample proof thereof. The domination of machines, of the quantitative — not to mention the rapidity of change (also termed “progress”) in the technological arena — then has the effect of accelerating the pace of life: like an angry god to whom human sacrifice is due, man must constantly give up more and more of the “quality” of life for

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<sup>7</sup> “For what profiteth a man if he should gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” — *Mk.* 8:36). We could likewise speak of “a humanity” as a whole instead of “a man,” much to the chagrin of modern humanity.

<sup>8</sup> “Riding the Tiger,” in *Mirror of the Intellect: Essays on Traditional Science and Sacred Art*, by Titus Burckhardt (trans. W. Stoddart), Quinta Essentia, 1987, p. 71.

<sup>9</sup> Trans. from French by Lord Northbourne, Luzac & Co., 1953; second ed. by Penguin Books, 1972.

<sup>10</sup> It is quite common nowadays to hear a service representative say, “Our computer won’t let me do that,” or, “Our computers are down — we can’t help you right now” — which illustrates our point all too well.

the sake of “quantity”<sup>11</sup>, of producing more and more “widgets” or (in service professions) “units of service” or the like, since the newest technologies and work-paradigms are meant to make workers increasingly “productive.”<sup>12</sup> In this view, man is no more than a glorified machine, yet no one notices the blatant hypocrisy in the supposition that we are somehow more “advanced” than our ancestors, who had the common sense to live a balanced and slower-paced life (somehow without television computers, telephones and automobiles!), close to nature and family, and — not least of all — in the awareness of their final ends.<sup>13</sup>

The machine requires usage: the computer requires one to daily purge away “spam” and check emails; the cell phone allows for more frequent calls; cable television gives more stations which lead to more viewing time. Thus besides the constant acceleration of life and heightened stress brought about by modern machines, more and more time is consumed by the necessity of “serving” them; mesmerized and gradually hypnotized, the owner is eventually completely dependent upon and preoccupied with these technologies which, in earlier times, would

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<sup>11</sup> In fact, the very notion of “quality” is now confused with, or rather reduced to, that of quantity: one defines “quality of life” by the amount of creature comforts a society has, as if nothing more existed. As Guénon puts it, “Among the features characteristic of the modern mentality is the tendency to bring everything down to an exclusively quantitative point of view ... our period could almost be defined as being essentially and primarily the ‘reign of quantity’ ... reduction to the quantitative is strictly in conformity with the conditions of the cyclic phase at which humanity has now arrived.” *ibid.*, pp. 9-10, second ed. Notably, one tiny South Asian nation has to some extent resisted the charade of “quality of life,” namely Bhutan. “We do not measure GNP,” said Bhutanese King Jigme Sigmé Wangchuck. “GNH — gross national happiness — is our yardstick for success.” Bhutan, perhaps more than any other country, has preserved its traditional heritage.

<sup>12</sup> Is it not ironic that this very technology and approach to the idea of work — once thought to be the beacon of a new age of leisure and freedom — has put such great stress on workers that they are often dependent on antidepressants to get through life? A scientific study has in fact concluded that “chronic multi-tasking can lead to anxiety and depression,” as well as — quite ironically — lost time. Cf. *Prevention Magazine*, June 2002, p.38: “Should You Multi-Task?”

<sup>13</sup> In his book *Fez: City of Islam*, Titus Burckhardt recalls that “when Europeans introduced electric lighting into newly occupied Tangier, a Shaykh remarked, ‘If those people were obliged to pray five times a day, they would have no time for such childishness!’” Cf. *Fez: City of Islam*, Titus Burckhardt (trans. W. Stoddart), Islamic Texts Society, 1992, p. 49.

have been deemed as completely unnecessary.<sup>14</sup> One comes to be dissociated from the natural world<sup>15</sup>, from God’s direct creation (and, even more, from anything related to the sacred)<sup>16</sup>, and life takes on the artificiality and rapidity of the machine; time itself now has a different quality, or rather it loses its quality as events unfold with ever-increasing rapidity<sup>17</sup>, in parallel with modern technological breakthroughs; this subservience to machines crushes the authentic human being, replacing him with a caricature that even self-styled “religious” people mistake for “normal.” “... then shall they show signs and wonders, insomuch that, if it were possible, they shall deceive even the elect” (*Matt. 24:24*).

But let us return to our initial premise, namely that Christians are obliged to strive to “be perfect” as their “Heavenly Father” is perfect. One savant states that the integration of work into spirituality depends on three fundamental conditions, one of which is, precisely, the perfection of the work. He writes,

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<sup>14</sup> Albert Einstein, for all his contributions to modern science, recognized the problems inherent in it. “Technological progress,” he said, “is like an axe in the hands of a pathological criminal.” He also mused, “Only two things are infinite, the universe and human stupidity. I’m not sure about the first one.” Quoted from “*Little Gems*” newsletter, Lawrence and Orange County, Indiana Edition, October 2003.

<sup>15</sup> “Technology is a way of organizing the universe so that man doesn’t have to experience it.” — Max Frisch, in “*Little Gems*”, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> Guenon speaks of the modern illusion of “ordinary” (also “real” or “everyday”) life: “this is in fact understood to mean above all a life in which nothing that is not purely human can intervene in any way, owing to the elimination from it of any sacred, ritual or symbolical character ... the very words ‘ordinary’ or ‘everyday’ moreover imply that everything that surpasses conceptions of that order is, even when it has not yet been expressly denied, at least relegated to an ‘extra-ordinary’ domain, regarded as exceptional, strange and unaccustomed. This is strictly speaking a reversal of the normal order, as it is represented by integrally traditional civilizations in which the profane point of view does not exist in any way ...” *ibid.* p. 126.

<sup>17</sup> “... according to the different phases of the cycle (the different “ages” — Golden, Silver, Bronze and Iron, in Christian parlance), sequences of events comparable one to another do not occupy quantitatively equal durations ... events are being unfolded nowadays with a speed unexampled in earlier ages, and this speed goes on increasing and will continue to increase up to the end of the cycle; there is thus something like a progressive ‘contraction’ of duration ... the increase in the speed of events, as the end of the cycle draws near, can be compared to the acceleration which takes place in the fall of heavy bodies: the course of the development of the present humanity closely resembles the movement of a mobile body running down a slope and going faster as it approaches the bottom ...” — *ibid.*, pp. 54-55.



... it is evident that one cannot offer an imperfect thing to God, nor consecrate a base object to Him; moreover, the perfection of the act is as self-evident as the that of existence itself, in the sense that every act is supposed to retrace the Divine Act and at the same time be a modality of it ... Work poorly done will always be an impediment to the (spiritual) Path, because it does not correspond to any Divine Possibility; God is Perfection, and man — in order to approach God — must be perfect in action as well as in non-active contemplation.<sup>18</sup>

It is undeniable that in “multi-tasking”, full attention cannot be given to any of the tasks being performed, resulting in work poorly done. Doubtless, a greater *quantity* of things may be accomplished, but the work itself — the *quality* both of the act of execution and the end result — is done poorly, hence it cannot be offered to God and is even an impediment to the agent’s relationship with Him; in fact, “multi-tasking” is an offense towards God, Who commands us to “be perfect” and to strive to remember Him in all that we do (“pray without ceasing,” admonishes St. Paul – *Thess. 5:17*) — an impossibility when one is “multi-tasking”. Let us close with this poem by Frithjof Schuon (translated from the German):

Do not do two things at the same time;  
Do one after the other, as the dignity  
Of things and of thyself demand.  
God too allowed each day to bear its burden,  
When He created all the countless things.

Different things thou canst not sow together;  
For every sowing wants to be entirely itself.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> “The Spiritual Meaning of Work,” in *The Transfiguration of Man*, Frithjof Schuon, trans. from French, World Wisdom Books, 1995.

<sup>19</sup> *Songs without Names*, Third Collection, XIX. In publication. In German:

Verschiedne Dinge tue nicht aufs Mal;  
Tu eines nach dem andern, wie die Würde  
Der Dinge, und auch deiner selbst, erheischt –  
So sei gemessen, treffe deine Wahl.  
Auch Gott lie jedem Tage seine Burde,  
Als Er erschuf die Dinge ohne Zahl.  
Verschiednes kannst du nicht zusammenstreun;  
Denn jede Saat will ganz ihr Eignes sein.