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**Book review**

**The four masters**

**By Vito Mancuso. Ed. by Garzanti, 2020**

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The theologian and philosopher Mancuso (2020) wrote a text entitled *The four masters*, p. 509, published by Garzanti, in which he presents the lives and teachings of the four most influential figures in human history: Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus.

His book is presented as a journey in search of the human in man, which the author takes from the novel by Vasilij Grossman, *Life and Destiny* (Vasilij, 2008). Starting from the question of what is the human in man, Mancuso proposes that it is an *empty space* that allows us to always go beyond our tendencies. This space, characterized by indeterminacy, creates the conditions for freedom, and the human in man emerges when one chooses to direct one's freedom towards goodness and justice. Throughout the centuries and in the attempt to activate the human in man, the author shows that it was necessary to rely on a guide, someone able to accompany each individual on the path of his existence. And just like Jaspers (1973), who presented the evolution of human thought, the author identified four decisive figures, namely Socrates, Buddha, Confucius and Jesus, in whom Mancuso also identifies the most suitable personalities to position themselves as masters in the history of humanity. When asked what a true teacher makes of someone, the author says that "*a true teacher is the one who generates freedom in his students, even from the teacher himself. He has students, but he does not want to hold them back, nor does he want to be*

*held back, because he does not aim to have people next to him who see themselves as eternal students. The true teacher loves his own independence as much as others, and for this reason he prefers conscious independence to the state of discipleship. This is precisely the case with Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, and Jesus”* (p. 25). Thus, penetrating into the thinking of the four masters, the author immediately explains that it is possible to see in them distinctive features that make Socrates an educator, Buddha a physician, Confucius a politician, and Jesus a prophet. And these differences show that everyone in his own existence must take into account all four teachings, which are respectively promoters of intellectual formation, healing, prosociality and motivation to fight for a better world.

From Socrates' contribution it is clear how important it is to nourish the soul (*psyché*), even at the expense of life, by virtue. Socrates asks to become good because only by becoming good does one know what the good is: *“the essential point is to understand what it means to know when it comes to the reality of the good. The good is not an object, but a holistic experience: two individuals can do exactly the same thing, the first does the good and the second does not, because the good concerns not only the externality of what is done, but also the internality of those who act. This means that a person only really knows the good when he is good. The knowledge of which Socrates speaks [...] is not the usual intellectual knowledge that distinguishes subject and object; it is rather a transforming knowledge that transforms those who possess it, and which for this reason is such that it makes it possible to do the good”* (pp. 108-109). His relationship with the divine was unconventional. For Socrates, the divine relationship grew thanks to the exercise of thinking, and the awareness of not being able to face the problems of life, that is, he knew that he knew nothing, gave him the opportunity to begin an authentic journey along the paths of knowledge. Knowledge understood as the ability to guide and control the self (*eghemonikón*) to always recognize and choose the good. It was this wisdom that made him appear dangerous: *“to undermine traditional religion, to deprive the power of sanctity, to dismantle the knowledge exhibited by most, to instill in minds the woodworm of doubt, to provoke the taste for research, to always ask for the meaning of words, even if he is a powerful orator, to never be satisfied with the principle of authority, to instill the need to think. It was enough to be a very dangerous corrupter of young and old”* (p. 72). The radicality of Socratic thought and the complete symbiosis between the theory of doctrine and the practice of daily life made him one of the greatest teachers in the world. Appealing to inwardness, educating, Socrates acted to push the right buttons for effective conversion: *“for him there was no greater treasure than inwardness and its righteousness, for the preservation of which one can even drink the poison and die. He was so convinced of the primacy of justice that he declared that one must do everything possible not to commit injustice, for when we wrong others, we actually defile ourselves”* (p. 80). The central point in Socrates' thought lies in the focus he places on consciousness, and this is why Socrates is considered the founder of moral philosophy, although his point was not to found a new discipline at all, but to show philosophy as morality and morality as philosophy. However, today's separation between the

intellectual and moral faculties undermines both the concept of the moral conscience and that of the soul. How can one heal oneself of this? When dealing with healing, one enters the field of Buddhism. The Buddha's main task was to enlighten the way (the name Buddha literally means 'enlightened', 'awakened'), to activate Buddhahood in everyone in order to heal from the sufferings of life: *"according to the Buddha, we know in order to heal, not for other purposes; and we heal only by knowing, that is, by curing the mind of ignorance"* (p. 127). With Buddhism, the primacy belongs to spirituality, not dogmatics. When the wheel of truth (*Dharmachakra*), characterized by the logic of *Dharma*, is set in motion alongside the wheel of existence (*bhavachakra*), characterized instead by the logic of *karma*, it is possible to take a leap that allows one to get out of the ordinary circularity, to enter into the interior of another reality characterized by an ascending spiral movement, at the top of which is *nirvana*, which, according to an interesting reflection by Mancuso, can be brought into conformity with the idea of the divine. The concepts of karma, Dharma and nirvana constitute the presuppositions through which it is possible to grasp the implications of the *Four Noble Truths*: *"the Buddha's teaching revolves around the knowledge of pain (first and second truths), around the therapy that constitutes its overcoming (third and fourth truths), around the overall logic inherent in being (karma + dharma) and which makes possible the effective and final fulfillment of the cure beyond being (nirvana)"* (p. 132). In Buddhism, we are dealing with a worldview characterized by an interdependent genesis, which is why, in comparison to the great monotheisms, ontologically the relationship prevails over the substance: *"Things, including ourselves, come into being and pass away through reciprocal action [...]. From this follows an ethics in terms of reciprocity, according to which to care for the other is to care for oneself, and vice versa"* (p. 148). For Buddhism, the healing of one's own suffering has to do with the possibility of attaining full awareness of oneself and of life through meditation, the etymological meaning of which lies precisely in the concept of medication. Another kind of meditation aimed at discerning the meaning of the *common good*, however, was that pursued by Confucius, who is defined by Mancuso not only as a politician but also as a scientist, since for Confucius study, as well as moral ability, are among the essential prerogatives for the exercise of politics: *"to study is to devote oneself to the root, to devote oneself to the root is to attain the Way, to attain the Way is to fit oneself into the authentic way of life, to fit oneself into the authentic way of life is to engage in politics; indeed, to be political is to live in harmonious union with society. Indeed, human life is inherently political because of man's social nature, which organically tends to connect with other human beings"* (p. 221). For Confucius, then, it is a matter of striving for a study that aims to grasp the meaning of humanity: *"unlike Socrates, who felt the divine voice within him, unlike Jesus, who saw himself united with the heavenly Father, unlike the Buddha, who presented the goal of his teaching as the exit from the human and from the world, Confucius grasps in being human and only in being human, in being human and in becoming more and more so, the goal of existence and thus of his teaching"* (p. 261).

With reference to the teachings of Jesus, Mancuso begins his chapter by arguing that talk of Christianity and Jesus are not equivalent. Although there are numerous images that revolve around the figure of Jesus, the author chooses to recognise him essentially as the face of a prophet: *“Jesus lived his mission as the at once joyful and terrifying announcement of the end of one time (“the time is fulfilled”) and the imminent beginning of another time (“the kingdom of God is at hand”). In this perspective, he placed himself and his actions between the times: between the time of the world or of injustice, which was about to end, and the time of God or of righteousness, which was about to begin”* (p. 409). When asked how one manages to be a disciple of Jesus today, the author suggests that this happens *“when one relives his troubled relationship with time and the world by declaring his innermost belonging not to this time and this world, but to another more just dimension, which he called the kingdom of God”* (p. 426). Finally, the concluding chapter of the book is devoted to what, more than anything else, can bring out the *human in man*, namely, the constant need to cultivate one's inwardness *“by letting the most important teacher of all emerge from within oneself: the inner teacher, the fifth teacher”* (p. 440).

## References

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