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# SECULARIZATION AND RELIGIOUS PLURALISM

## TOWARDS A GENEALOGY OF PUBLIC SPACE

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents the situation of postmodern religion as an important consequence of secularization process that marked the appearance and the development of modernity. The problem is that postmodern religion is in fact the name given to the 'return of the Gods' and the re-entering of religion in the public space, after the exhaustion of the theoretical and political resources of the *laicite*. Thus, postmodern religion means in fact the post-secular form of religion, the dialectical form of the latter. The consequences drawn from that concern the constitution of the new public arena, that in which religion gets to play an important role: secularization is seen as a double-sided process, which: (1) prepares religion for the dialogical, communicative form of rationality, specific to public space and (2) opens the public space to the recognition of the need for religion as a resource of significations and link to the life-world. The conclusion of the present paper is that the process of secularization – on the one side – and the constitution of the public space – on the other – find a common point in the pluralization of religious traditions and practices, the main element defining the postmodern religion.

*Keywords:* public space, secularization, tolerance, postmodern religion

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### **1. The case: religion within postmodernity**

I will start my essay by referring to a number of facts already clarified by H. Cox, among others, in his two known works: *The Secular City: Secularization and Urbanization in Theological Perspective* [1] and *Religion in the Secular City: Toward a Postmodern Theology* [2]. Only two decades later, the religion's situation is radically changed and that determines the author to revise his first writing. In 1965 H. Cox sees secularization as an obvious and incontestable process of the contemporary world and tries to show that it does not represent an intrinsic 'evil' of history. It leads to pluralism or to putting aside the theocratic claims of the religious institutions [3]. The second book, however, revises this situation as well. It proves that in fact postmodernism brings along a forceful comeback of the religious representations when considered as a language alternative and of the sacred as reference for life. Also, this situation is not necessarily a favourable moment from the religious person's point of view:

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nurturing the religious conflicts, on the one hand, or mistrusting the radicalism and the singularity of the theological truth on the other, are both signs of an altered function of the religion and of a different attitude towards tradition. Hence modern Theology takes the secularization process as reference point. Postmodern Theology, on the other hand, is essentially relating to another phenomenon, and that is the revitalization of the religious and the abundance of its syncretic forms. Yet the two theological types are not immeasurable as approaches. H. Cox shows that the postmodern Theology implicitly embodies a critique of the modern Theology, as the postmodern Theology, through its revelatory effects such as fundamentalism or the extreme eclecticism is in fact a retort to all forms of secularization in modernity.

In a simplified historical scheme, secularization seems to have reached the same ending to which the religious was brought by secularization centuries ago. A new form of religiosity, which could conventionally be called 'postmodern', is now occupying the scene. But, as I was saying, this historical scheme is simplistic and unilateral, it does not take account of the fact that it is the secularization what determines this new occurrence of the religious. Postmodern religiosity being one in its syncretic essence is actually determined by the fact that the secularization process 'weakens' the strong languages of the traditions and makes them permeable to dialogue and external influences, and this I will exemplify later.

As for the forms of religious manifestation in postmodernity, R.L.M. Lee and S.E. Ackerman's work, *The Challenge of Religion after Modernity. Beyond disenchantment* [4], is an exemplary approach, sufficient for the economy of our text. There is a vast spectrum of these forms: it includes the New-Age 'revolution', the techno-mythology or the scientology, the search for the ecstatic experiences within the alternative communities, such as the Hippy in the '70's, the eclecticism that combines oriental beliefs, not entirely known, with Christian myths and teachings, the resurrection in original forms of shamanism, divinatory behaviours lacking their metaphysical base. All these coexist, they are all an exemplary way of gathering the 'adherents' into communities and develop forms of public manifestation, which sometimes are – as in the Hippy movement – filled with political meanings. An example is that of the *lucid dream* in which the essential model of the shamanic dream is being called back, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The ways and techniques of maintaining the self conscience and of actively and voluntarily participating at the dream scenery during the dream state have as a purpose the evolution of the self, the accumulation of new strengths and the gain of ecstatic abilities to compensate the every day's life rhythm and not the connection with the cosmic rhythms and with the different ontological levels as in the case of traditional shamanism.

Two elements are here to be held in what the conclusions of the book are concerned: first, the fact that the postmodern 're-enchantment' of the world is possible in the absence of a true religious affiliation, meaning in the absence of an institutional form of the religion. And second, the fact that this type of experience resumes, in a different regime, an acknowledged and metaphysically sustained experience, that of the shamanism for example. This difference is explained

through the tensed relation between the *sign* and the *symbol*. The sign represents the form of expression characteristic to postmodernism, it corresponds to a sensitivity that implies “a type of celebration of the senses that promotes bricolage, depthlessness and homogenization” [4, p. vii]. Religion, in its postmodern manifestation, enters the ‘stage of the spiritual experiences’ beside art, for instance, and so it lies under the logic of consumption and competition. It adapts, it loses its metaphysical ‘depth’ and becomes intelligible in terms of efficiency: it builds a path for the self to intensely, rapidly and easily edify itself. The symbol, on the contrary, it assumes a breakage in the reality level, a transcendence that bursts into the world and it can not be reduced to its logic. Within the traditional cultures, the symbol’s role was to unite the different ontological levels; but in postmodernity it comes to separate the communities, it presumes an exclusive and unilateral form of confession. Examples of behaviours in the symbol’s power are the trust in a unique interpretation of the sacred texts or in the providential mission of the community that separates itself this way by the rest of the social corpus and sees it as being away from the truth. We can formulate the dilemma of the religious postmodernity as follows: either the religion takes the shape of the sign, becomes a kind of merchandise and plays the role of an existential alternative or it preserves, in certain occasions, its symbolic attribute by paying the enclavisation price, enters a reactive logic of contradiction and hence gives rise to those phenomena perceived as fundamentalist. In the posterity of the modern secularization, religion lies between a superficial and a violent confession of the truth.

This essay will focus especially on the first type of religiosity, the one placed under the sign’s regime. The relation between fundamentalism and secularization needs to be discussed separately and together with this discussion the question whether fundamentalism is not in fact a political formula of the religiosity, rather than a cultural one. The relation between modernity and the violent form of confessing the religious truth, the religious enclavisation and hence the impossibility of getting out of the conflicting logic of the temporal power, they all need extra historical and social explanations, that I will not offer here.

## **2. The issue: the secularization’s postmodernity**

One of the problems which this postmodern religiosity raises is that of its relation with the secularization. Here we have a double stake: on the one hand, postmodernism determines a tensed relation with what precedes it, with modernity in one of its most pregnant gestures; on the other hand, the resources of the ‘secularization’ process are they themselves more numerous as possibilities, once this process’ reference is no longer, as in most cases, the modernity, but just what comes to ‘replace’ it on the historical scene, namely postmodernity.

Besides, the important issue is the relation between religion and the public space. Modernity seemed to have solved the problem once and for all by restricting the religious’ action to the private sphere of the individual. Yet

postmodernity is, surprisingly, experiencing an extension of the public relevance for the religious position. Not just as a determining factor in the political conflicts (the Middle East situation, for example), but also as an element of social congealment. An example can be mentioned here again: the discussion J. Habermas and Cardinal Ratzinger (at the present Pope Benedict XVI) had in München in 2004. The conclusion of that discussion could be formulated as follows: secularization is a process that paves the way for its own posterity [5]. The secularization is a 'double and complementary learning process' through which the political and the religious allow the reciprocal translation of each one's categories, so that they allow, only when in conjunction, the formulating of a value system to sustain the citizens' democratic behaviour. The secularized legitimacy in its strict sense (non-metaphysical, non-religious) is insufficient for the functioning of the positive law. Here lies the necessity of involving the religious actors in establishing a democratic solidarity and hence the necessity of speaking about a 'post-secularization' of the public space.

This essay tries to reformulate this issue and, implicitly, to argue a thesis that could lead to an answer. *How come religion reappears on the historical scene in the posterity of the secularization, and more than that, how does it get such an important role in the public space?* – is the question I will try to answer.

### **3. The stated thesis: secularization and communicative rationality**

The thesis stated here could be formulated like this: it is the secularization what 'prepares' religion for its postmodern public performance. The secularization's first stake is to adjust the religion's relations with the state and to ensure for the latter the leading role in the Earthly City. But surprisingly, it is religion the one that redefines itself as a result of this conflict; it reaffirms an identity that will place it, in postmodernity, among the leading actors of the public space. The secularization phenomenon's relevance is this way measured from the perspective of its postmodern (and not modern) effects; secondly, it is measured considering the way it is intercepted and accepted by the religious traditions, and not for legitimizing the laic institutions. From the postmodern perspective, secularization is both a mutation and an interior stake of the religion. It no longer adjusts the relation between the religion and the state, but the religion's relation with itself, defining its dialogal nature; it is precisely this dialogal nature what determines the religious traditions to be 'permeable' to the communicative rationality's criteria and prepares them for their public performance. This is not the only thesis that pays attention to this phenomenon. There are several studies [6] that refer to a fact I've already mentioned, namely the fact that religious representations get, in postmodernity, the aspect of market products: they 'offer' an easy and quick spiritual improvement. Other theories [7] are suspicious about the secularization process as it is and its presumably necessary relation with modernity.

The one particular aspect of the thesis I am sustaining, as against other concurrent thesis, can be specified through several elements: (a) starting from H. Cox, it points out the conceptual and genealogical relation between secularization and postmodernity; (b) its goal is to rewrite the history of secularization starting from the conceptual resources given by H. Blumenberg in his *Legitimität der Neuzeit* [8] and the theoretical positioning specific to Death of God Theology [9, 10] – both these theoretical contexts representing discursive resources that are specific to postmodernism; (c) it emphasizes the fact that it is precisely the secularization what ‘adjusts’ the religious tradition so it can pass the communicative rationality’s criteria.

#### 4. Argument

Coming up with a definition for the term ‘postmodern’ (or ‘postmodernity’) would require a too long discussion. For the economy of our text, just enumerating those symptoms of modernism that could be related to the religious problematic, would be enough. S.E. Ackerman’s text does offer such an enumeration. What is to be done next, however, is to establish a theological structure for these symptoms. In other words, postmodern Theology should be brought up whenever these religious phenomena are being referred to as something else but just social or psychological phenomena. Admitting that, in essence, the religious forms are in fact talking about forms of the sacred and existential situations that are unique [11], and not common cultural facts, makes the theological perspective inevitable. Here we can mention J.D. Caputo: “things take a postmodern turn in theology when the meditation upon theos or theios, God or the divine, is shifted to events, when the location of God or what is divine is shifted from what happens, from constituted words and things to the plane of events” [12]. In this context, event means something else than the historical moment. It is not about what happens, in the concrete sense, but it is about what ‘moves’ within a thing when that thing happens, it is about the happening itself when concretized in a thing or another. The Heideggerian *Ereignis* or the *event* from Deleuze’s transcendental empirism is of use here for Caputo’s reflection. From this essay’s perspective, more relevant are the consequences of such a postmodern philosophy of the event. It is about moving the theological thought from the ‘strong’ authorities (Being, Absolute, Spirit) and focusing on the ‘weak’ ones, namely S. Zizek’s *fragile absolute* [13] (that Caputo is also mentioning) that, from the Death of God Theology, it brings justice for the scripturistical message focused on kenosis and on the passions of The Most High. Correlatively, the concern for the weak, poor and strangers is about the same capitalization of the ‘absolute fragile’ – *locus* in the theology of the event. By this token, postmodern Theology is actually trying to think the religious leaving aside the language and the western metaphysics’ presuppositions. From the postmodern Theology point of view, Christianity ‘gets rid’ of both ontotheology’s limits and the ideological, dominating and reificational form of discourse. In brief words, after the Metaphysics’ modern ‘parenthesis’, Christianity regains its

eschatological vocation and is basing again on the personal, irreducible relation that manifests as love (*charitas*). What Christianity loses this way is the scientific objectivity pretention and so it can not give an adequate description of the world; but it regains the Christic message, in the form that frightens Dostoyevsky's Great Inquisitor so much. The 'postmodern' multiplicity of the religious traditions and the way their dialogue is sometimes uncontrollably proliferating or the radicalization of the primary message and the literal reading of the founding texts can be theorized through this theological 'critique' of Metaphysics.

The secularization problem and the postmodern relevance of its process can now be discussed from a different perspective. H. Blumenberg is an important guide mark in this matter. The German author questions the classical theories on secularization that explained the phenomenon through an *A is B secularized* type formula. Behind this formula lies on the one hand a substantialist supposition on history that determines the impossibility for the modernity to 'legitimate' itself in its relation with the previous historical periods [14]. It is only outside this 'substantialist' understanding where the concept starts to have a meaning, not as an interpretive scheme for the whole history, but just as a contingent reconfiguration of forces, for assigning terms new significations and giving spontaneous answers to the Middle Ages local crises. The third chapter from Part I of the book *Legitimität der Neuzeit* [8, p. 35] talks about this aspect, referring to the idea of historical progress. Blumenberg thinks that, in the end, modernity can not be understood outside the reference to Christianity. This thing, however, does not imply an 'indebting' or a 'betraying' relation. It is not the secularization as a necessity throughout history the one to decide this reference. It is the Christian universe the one that organizes as a universe of possibilities that are afterwards presented as meaning resources in different worlds, such as those of modernity. The classic concept of secularization develops by denying precisely what it was meant to protect, namely the autonomy and the absolute novelty of the modernity. In other words, a modernity that understands itself with the aid of the classic concept of secularization is contradictory or, at best, non-critical. Blumenberg rehabilitates the modernity's project through the attempt of thinking the present in its freedom and irreducibility; meaning, concisely: through the attempt to rethink "le present considere dans sa secularite sans au-dela" [15]. From this perspective, the historical substantialism is inefficient, as well as the scenario the secularization theories offer.

Blumenberg's approach 'prepares' the secularization concept for its modern re-evaluation: he frees it from the unilateral understanding of the modern approach, from the sociological origin and of the laity's restraining assumptions at the same time. Secularization is no longer a story with an ending to be awaited, but it opens its field of possibilities that allow, in the end, its postmodern reading. Once the secularization concept is freed from the historical substantialism presupposition, also from the unequivocal relation in which the religious tradition is placed, it can be, as I was saying, re-evaluated. This re-evaluation could start right from one of its modern authorities. We're talking about the place where secularization becomes an important source for the concept of tolerance.

J. Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689) [16] is exemplary. The English philosopher has several stakes: the letter talks about the firm affirmation of the secularization's principle, and it is at the same time an important pleading in favour of the idea of tolerance. On the one hand, the separation of Church and state leads to the affirmation of the freedom of belief: "whencesoever their (of the clergy, n. n.) authority be sprung, since it is ecclesiastical, it ought to be confined within the limits of the Church, nor can it in any manner be extended to civil affairs, because the Church itself is a thing absolutely separate and distinct to the Commonwealth" [16, p. 21]. Once the separation of the two 'kingdoms' is declared fixed and incontestable, the consequences can be positively formulated. This separation means that the state will no longer intervene in the faith matters, in the theological disputes or in the clergy's relation with the believers. At the opposite pole, the Church can no longer use the state's means of coercion in order to impose its truth upon those with other beliefs. Moreover, as a successor of the apostolic community, it has to look towards the Other, whoever he might be, with peace and good faith. The definition of the Church as "free and voluntary society" [16, p. 13], having as purpose "the public worship of God and, by means thereof, the acquisition of eternal life" [16, p. 15] is an important aspect and it opens, in fact, the modern discussion on the public role of the Church. It can provide, through its teachings, the public *peace* and a founding for the civic virtues, even though its primary function is the salvation of the soul. But it is revelatory the fact that, in Locke's opinion, the state can not intervene and limit any belief, yet it has the right not to tolerate atheism; and this is because "Promises, covenants and oaths, which are the bounds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist" [16, p. 47].

For J. Locke, the inter-religious tolerance, the commandment itself of love and peaceful coexisting of the ecclesiastic and laic institutions need the two 'kingdoms' to separate in order to exist. The salvation of the soul and the public worship of God can happen only in a space of absolute freedom, inside a Church that doesn't know about the state's means of coercion. More than that, the principle of secularization is associated in Locke's opinion with the discussion on the ideal of peace and communication that guides the concept of public (space) as background for the coexisting with the Other. The modern freedom of religion leads, for now just through analogies, to the proliferation of the postmodern religious syncretism. In the second case, however, secularization plays a different role: if for J. Locke secularization had essentially the meaning of a separation of Church and state (this is in fact the primary sense of the secularization), in postmodernity it comes to regulate the religion's report with itself. Going out of the temporal powers' logic, the religious tradition finds it is imperative to rethink itself and to redefine its stakes and it is the secularization what determines this rethinking. At this point, going back to G. Vattimo and J.D. Caputo's considerations is a must. As I was saying, the two authors consider religion in the light of the *Metaphysics*' ending moment. And this ending is seen as a confirmation, on a theoretical level, for the ending of terrestrial domination

exerted by the ecclesiastical institutions. Nietzsche and Heidegger offer the necessary concepts for thinking this situation.

The dissolution of the ideal of objectivity and of the trust in it is for Nietzsche the nihilist moment of European culture, moment which, in the economy of the theological-political discourse, can be assimilated to secularization. Just as Christianity loses its institutional role through political secularization, the same is its truth now coming out of the concept's power, at the end of Metaphysics, and gets this way the chance to affirm itself as a personal, real relation. Through its original gesture of reducing the 'tradition's commandment' to the 'law of the heart', Christianity causes in fact its own secularization, this time not as a history's accident, but as a destiny of its own message. This way secularization is a positive and controlled gesture, limited from within Christianity: "...if Christianity sets the secularization process going, then we can find in Scriptures also a limiting for the secularization, that is a guide for desacralization – namely the charity one" [16, p. 61]. Augustin's commandment 'love, and do what thou wilt' answers for the authentic freedom of the Christian, not as infinite, undetermined option, but as decisive orientation towards Heavens.

So, the political secularization paradoxically leads to a rebirth of the religion as a religion of the event, of interiority and, most important, of charity free from any reason's objectifying constraint. Beyond the different accentuations of the two authors in what the connection between postmodernism and Christianity is concerned, what matters is the reiteration, in an obvious ironical and weak manner, of a Kantian gesture: that of limiting the claim of knowing the religion, in order to set its loving power free. In this formula, secularization proves to be tensed despite its dual structure. It represents the way in which the metaphysical violence is replaced by the unobjectifying commandment to love, and losing the political stake means reassuming the apostolic gesture of coming and meeting the other with just the power of Word. Reversing, God's isolation in a separate, radical-transcendental world (and this is included in the classic concept of secularization) is actually translating through an irreducible immanence of the divine. Losing the bet with the world, the Church wins the one with the Heavens. And from this moment on, not even the initial loss has any significance.

An interesting notation on the secularization matter is to be found at the Romanian theologian, A. Scrima. In several writings and interviews, he grasps an alternative for the consecrated understanding of the phenomenon: he sees secularization as a *chance* for the Church to leave the temporal logic, where it loses right from the beginning the uneven fight with the public institutions. The Church can be determined to forget about the world in which it exists. This is why getting out of its limits reorients it towards the original clerical ground from where Heavens can be looked at straight in the eye. In *Orthodoxy and Communism's Attempt*, A. Scrima writes: "The Orthodox Church shows (has always shown) a certain mistrust against history, it neglected the history's temporal meaning. For the Church, time was truly filled by Embodiment; the

sacramental and liturgical structures established by the embodied God are essentially meant to prepare us for the great joy of eternity (...) The Orthodox Church found again its way to independence only now, due to the obvious incompatibility with the communist ideology” [17]. The concrete, organic reality of the Tradition as spiritual life based on divine economy is the religion’s own ground; history’s goal, in its wandering, is the returning to this ground. And as consequence, the love rediscovered through this kind of secularization is not a ‘man tailored’ one, but it is the love from the original message, from ‘catacombs’.

The post-secularized Christianity is hence a Christianity that acknowledges itself in the commandment to love and allows for itself, at least ideally, the access to a community like the one existing in the first centuries after Christ. Listening to the others, hospitality, peacefully confessing the truth – are all gestures that come to replace the zeal in building the walls of the Heavenly City. The truth of faith lies now under the criteria of a communicative rationality, and not of the founding rationality ones. It is precisely this opening towards the other, specific to the postmodern religiosity, what ‘prepares’ this religiosity for its entering into the public sphere. As long as religion learns J. Locke’s postmodern lesson and rewrites it in a modern manner as a law of listening to the dialogue partner (*letting the other speak*, the Gadamerian request when talking about the hermeneutics exercise), it can act as a dialogue partner and even influence the actors of the public space. The postmodern religious syncretism, emphasizing the revaluation of the religious fundamental experiences outside their initial ‘epistemology’ (as in the *lucid dream* example), accentuating, within religion, on the inter-religious dialogue and constantly invoking ecumenism – they are all explained through religion leaving the uneven fight with the world and through Theology getting out of the Metaphysics’ and its strong instances sphere. From its public performance perspective, religion becomes, in R. Porty’s opinion, a vocabulary that only claims to be valid. It does not describe the world, but a particular experience – that of charity – and can not make judgments on other vocabularies. It can only communicate with them and suggest more or less convincing, expression alternatives.

## **5. Conclusions**

Several studies, some of them mentioned here [7], connect the contemporary religious forms to other phenomena than the secularization’s. Secularization’s scheme can not function as a real explanation because of factors that depend on historical conditions, on mentality or genealogy of the American cultural space, for example. But in this essay I considered the secularization phenomenon as an event indissolubly connected to the modern world’s configuration and I tried to draw some consequences. The religion’s situation is now changed and the moment these changes occurred is the place I started my argument. The contemporary Theology’s scenarios (I’ve mentioned especially Death of God Theology) try to explain these changes. This is the point where the secularization phenomenon, with its tensed nature, is being brought up. Having

effects first on state's relations with the ecclesiastic institutions, secularization gets to actually nominate the religion's relation with itself. The religion's nature changes as a result of the secularization process, so it constitutes itself around the interior commandment to love and around the unobjectifying relation with the Other. This way religion enters the public sphere as an actor that follows the scenario; the worldly role of the ecclesiastic institutions, lost by modernity, is regained in postmodernity: religion becomes an influential discussion partner, as a result of the dialogal rationality that delimitates it. The religious' come back is hence taking place under the sign of communication and continuous orientation towards the radical imperative of love.

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