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# REVERSIBILITY OF SECULARIZATION

## A THESIS CONFIRMED IN POST-MODERNITY

Gurie Georgiu \*

*'1 Decembrie 1918' University of Alba Iulia, 5 Gabriel Bethlen Str., 510009, Alba Iulia, Romania*

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### Abstract

This paper is a brief analysis of the possibility of reversibility of secularization in the future times based on the paradigm of 'alternative religious movements' which are emerging in some European countries in now days.

So, the paper analysis the thesis – more and more confirmed nowadays – that secularization is not an irreversible phenomenon as modernity 'dogmatized'. The post-modern society reverses its interest on religion again, viewing it as an integral part of the social and public everyday life. Even analysts acknowledge the balanced psychotherapeutic resources that religion has for the collective unconscious. Secularization has been the source and the promoter of the 'equivalence' of all religions and confessions, and our age has inherited the 'conclusions' of the secularization: the interest in religion is widely spread, yet not in an institutionalized religion. The interest is in a stress-relief and mentally comforting spirituality. Therefore, in the public space, the individuals are not interested in their final destiny, but in their immediate comfort. Thus, the religious-social-logical and post-modern individual is a hyper-sensitive personality, passionate for intense spiritual 'feelings'.

*Keywords:* secularization irreversibility, collective unconscious, post-modern paradigm, economic totalitarianism

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### 1. The balanced psychotherapeutic resources of religion for the collective unconscious

Certain religious and cultural realities of our times and the late modernity or post-modernity have imposed on the public debate the concept of secularization 'reversibility'. There is no difficulty in noticing the "voluptuous surviving" [1] of the religious feeling in the self-sufficient and immanent culture of the post-Illuminist ages. If the characterisation of the present society is done objectively, we may state that *secularism does not represent a debatable paradigm in lecturing the meaning of the post-modern life*. Troeltsch's view on the genesis of the modern world may be called the 'transposition thesis' or the transformation of the Christian values into secular values, a thesis which has been adopted by many representatives of the liberal theology and which subsequently turned into a cultural trend. The success of such a thesis is due to

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\*E-mail: [episcop@episcopiadevei.ro](mailto:episcop@episcopiadevei.ro)

the clergy's exigency towards understanding the genesis of the modern society and the recent transformations in an omni-comprehensive environment, in which there is the need to take action, either pastorally, socially or politically [2].

The unshakeable collective psychic comfort that is present in the pre-industrialised era has entered an irreversible disintegration state and it obviously stands in contrast with the collective psychic vulnerability specific to post-modernity. In Sartorio's view, "modernity constitutes the most grandiose tentative to construct the human existence, and especially the coexistence of the humankind, based on profane, rational principles, isolating in the private sphere the religious dimension, conceptually and practically seen as an inferior, infantile perspective about life. However, even by refusing the religious images, modernity absorbed from Christianity its created values, especially the conscience of the dignity of man and the enthusiastic trust in a better future. However, there is the difference that, instead of placing God at the basis and the faith in His Kingdom as a source of the human elevation, everything was refunded on the human capacity of self-accomplishment. A historic, telluric space was chosen in order to fully accomplish the human desires. Thus, the Biblical text referring to Genesis was substituted by the Illuminist-profane and Marxist-dialectical philosophy of man's self-creation due to the scientific and dialectical reasoning, which was in fact a self-redemption form from the historical evils such as ignorance and misery: here is the path to an indefinite and irreversible perfection..." [3] The collective psychic vulnerability, as Yanaras observed [4] constitutes an invitation to proselytism for the new religious movements, which come with a specific offer of "emotional balance" [5]. Several sociologic researches and analyses of cultural philosophy consider that this psychic vulnerability characteristic of the industrial age is nothing but the result of the expulsion of religion from the public space, the expulsion being also a characteristic of modernity [5, p.159-169; 6-9]. The *sociologic autopsy of secularization* in the international bibliographic and interpretative panorama can be summarised as follows: the 'indecipherable' constellation of theoretical models created by secularization constitutes an inventory of landmark perspectives of some sociologists of religion and of their visions regarding secularization: Emil Durkheim and the secularization as a form of refuge of religious in subtle forms; Karl Marx and the assertion of secularization as 'therapy' against economic alienation; Max Weber and the perishable 'construction' of reality; R. Girard and the inevitable victim-sacrifice mechanism as a terminal point of secularization; Sabino Acquaviva and the disjunction 'secularization'-'desacralization'; Peter Berger and the temporary decredibility of the religious; Bryan R. Wilson and the 'soteriological' function of religion; Thomas Luckmann and the invisible religion; J.A. Beckford and the indecipherable constellation of theoretical models created by secularization; R. Bellah and the 'planetary ecumenism'; secularization and top cancellation of the religious life: the psychological religiosity and the trans-religious future.

However, are we nowadays entitled to promote the secularization thesis as a pseudo-science, as an irreversible decline of religion, as postulated by Marx, Durkheim, Weber, Beckford etc.? Alongside with Anthony, Robbins and Schwartz, our answer is “Yes!” [10]. Secularization has abandoned the world to the terror of a furious and totalitarian rationalization [5, p. 159-169], the emotional remaining a space of neglect and insignificance. The reason is that the researchers put forth a series of ambiguities and reductionisms in using the concept of ‘secularization’. The furious and totalitarian reasoning has determined a complete loss of control of the collective emotion [11], left at the disposal of the new religious movements, which were the only ones to act at this existential level (with the exception of the traditional, official, historical churches that themselves lay emphasis on the doctrine, in the detriment of the inner feelings, of the mystical life or of the mystical experience).

If we take as paradigm for our research ‘the alternative religious movements’, namely those in competition (and even in contrast) with our traditional and historically consecrated churches, we can state that their existence and dynamism is a firm clue of the reversibility of the secularization. Our thesis is also known in the research context as ‘*the theory of the cyclic re-sacralisation*’ (Francis Westley, Steven Tipton, Dick Anthony, Thomas Robbins, Robert Beckford, Martine Levasseur) [12]. This concept highlights the fact that throughout the history, there have always been increase or decrease of the emphasis put on the religious life by the society [13]. The relevance of the sacred for the society throughout the history was not uniform, monotone or without fluctuations.

From the theological point of view, the secularization has been considered an unsuccessful attempt to cut off the metaphysical depths of the existence. According to Max Seckler, the relationship with God has to be one “profoundly influenced by the interest in redemption, which does not presuppose the idea that man should autonomously achieve it. For the man *in puris naturalibus* this relationship could be possible, in the most likely hypothesis, only if *the desperate desire overcomes the ontological difference between the human being and the Creator*. Not only from a theological, but also from an anthropological point of view, the redeeming relation with God can be conceived only in the theo-soteric sense; it is true that man is essentially *capax infiniti*, but the infinite self-accomplishment is not in his power. For the theological concept of ‘religion’, it is not enough to have a simple, neutral or negative relationship with God, but a *healing* relationship.” [14] Therefore, the post-modern and post-Illuminist society is forced by the nature of things to return to Religion, being in need of its therapeutic potential for the collective psychic, awareness and subconscious, more than of its proposed eschatological offer [14, p. 204]. In other words, the reference to the sacred part of the society is always in the interest and within the boundaries of the immanent plan. Secularization was extremely totalitarian, accepting the survival in the strictly philosophical, rational interest in religion.

Nowadays, the religious is 'devoured', 'consumed' as far as this fact is, in one way or another 'useful'. In contrast with the descriptive research of the religious phenomena and with the functional definitions of religion (as proposed especially in the sociology of religion), a more rigorous religious phenomenology would unquestionably provide the best background for a more objective manifestation of the religious phenomenon, just like in the historical religions. Instead of turning the religious consciousness into an abstract philosophical interpretation, ignoring its self-understanding mode, Richard Schaeffler tends to interpret religion starting from its self-perception, in a phenomenological manner, that is by means of a *structural analysis of specific acts and of specific linguistic texts*. The specificity of the concept 'religion' is completely related to the religious phenomenon and it seeks to understand its essence within religion. This concept is both empiric and philosophic. Thus, it may have competence in *religion sciences*, even though it conceptualizes the concrete object of a possible research on religions, starting from the object itself. It is simultaneously viewed as a normative concept of 'religion', which defers a critic vision and interpretation of the phenomena, from the logic and the meaning of the linguistic acts of a more religious type and of the system that characterizes it [15]. We take part in a temporal (yet also periodical) confiscation of Theology by Anthropology. However, religion is, in its most profound identity, a 'science of faith', and the 'relation with God' representing its 'vocation' by excellence.

The post-modern society is more convinced that *religion has balanced resources for the individual psychic and for the collective subconscious*, resources that have been insufficiently investigated by the researchers so far. This opening towards the explicit or hidden potential of religion represents a new chance for the Church: it has to come out in the public space with a religious offer that would promptly satisfy the current needs: a religion with a balancing force, fulfilling and psychically reassuring. It should lay emphasis on the spiritual, internal and mystic dimension of religion. The Orthodoxy works with an unseen, supernatural, therapeutic energy, the energy of the charisma, completely ignored by modernity. We live in an era where there is a great opening towards experiencing this energy. Yet, we should pay attention to the reference made to religion, since this could turn religion in a reality 'of consumption'.

The informational society and the television are the new 'model' for conscience manipulators. Unfortunately, these become privileged instruments for the propagation of nihilism and 'nihilist culture'. This is the arrival point of postmodern mutation of man; the 'post-human' future, invoking hyper-information and 'history end'. What is the reparatory solution? Living with God in the Orthodox divine cult! *The Orthodox Liturgy is the scale between anthropology and charismatology*. In order to achieve this, we need to adopt the participation degrees of Christians to the divine service: (1) their understanding, (2) participation, (3) communitarian celebration [16]; in other words, we understand and coagulate the ecclesiastical community, we integrate in an

ecclesiastic community in which the spiritual energy is active (1), and then we serve ourselves by participating and practically proclaiming the communitarian dimension of the 'relationship' with God. Finally the ritualization is man's recognition of the supreme sense that fulfills the existence. The liturgical-communitarian celebration of our convictions represents a constitutive-liturgical dimension of faith itself. The Orthodoxy proposes to the social a transfiguration from within.

## **2. Secularization, creator and promoter of the 'equivalence of all religions and confessions' thesis**

*The 'spearhead' of secularization is represented by eroding the absolute superiority attitude of Christianity towards the other religions. Thus, secularization in the Christian space led to the ideology breakdown of 'dying paganism'. The surprising vitality of the new religious movements (including those of non-Christian inspiration) goes in the same direction: is Christianity of an authentic universal vocation? Taking into consideration this situation, the Orthodoxy is interpellated by the recovery urgency of all the valuable elements outside its borders, including those belonging to the new religious movements. Moreover, the Orthodoxy has to proclaim all the time the fact that it defines itself as the moment of 'maximal intensity' of God's revelation, thus being vulnerable when facing the invasion of new religious movements that pretend to preach the truth.*

The secularizing thesis of the religion and confession equivalence and its consequences led to the *annihilation of any missionary dynamism and imposed indifferent mentalities*. It asserts that the true Christianity means the conscious proclamation of Christ, not 'anonymity' and the fact that there is a gradability of Church affiliation. The inter-religious dialog recognized as a consecrated expression form of mission in a secularized society. We should not forget that the Orthodoxy is able to transcend the secularized culture, in order to transfigure it from within; that is why *exclusivism represents the fundamentalists' background* (whose claim is that redemption exclusively comes from the self-confession, a thesis that is present in almost all the confessions. Contrary to this, many researchers consider inclusivism as an alternation between ecclesiology and Christology. It is certain that only by accepting theocentrism, namely by *lecturing the reality of the religious plurality from God's perspective, we can draw a correct conclusion* regarding the postmodern religious phenomenon. Only the Trinitarian model offers the chance to escape the blind angle of exclusivism.

## **3. Secularization – a totalitarian, aggressive phenomenon, of perpetual ignorance of the ultimate man's destination in the public sphere**

*According to some researchers, secularization is originally a 'religious' act, but consequently an anti-religious one, in the sense that it is religious*

because it constituted a crazed application of the divine command, yet with a religious fervour that was completely wrongly understood: “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the Earth and subdue it!” Any divine, biblical precedence, taken out of the ecclesiastical context produces sideslips and generates collective alienation of the inner self. Only in the light of the Holy Spirit and in the ecclesiastical ambience could the biblical prescriptions be understood in their essence, avoiding the misinterpretation. Ecology, for which many new religious movements militate, does not constitute a premise of these movements. On the contrary, it has always been a pursuit of the traditional Churches. The persistent lack of focalization on it allowed for its loss in favour of the new religious movements, especially of the New Age [17].

Other two mutilating characteristics of secularization should be accentuated: secularization as promoter of an autonomous culture and the transcendent horizon dissolution and the reductionist vision of secularization: Religion seen as a mere anthropomorphic cultural product. *Secularization should also be viewed from the point of view of its monopole over the social, institutional and historic order.*

There are other analyses and significant aspects: the strictly phenomenological, empirical-descriptive perspective on religion, promoted by secularization and the aggressive substitution of theocentrism with anthropomorphism through secularization. Nowadays, in the post-illuminist, slowly but firmly, the religion erodes this monopole conception over the social order and expresses its conviction that, only by participating at the construction of the social order, or by cooptation, harmony, peace and collective psychic comfort can be reached. This implicitly comes with an axiological recentralisation through theocentrism: placing God in the centre in existence, the only thing that can give meaning to the human existence. Truncating the transcendent level of mankind led to de-sensualisation, to axiological confusion, to collective psychic discomfort and to a continuous vulnerability of the individuals and of the society at all the existential levels.

Then, we came to a different, yet very important conclusion for the religious world: Secularization is the promoter of a hidden militantism, of an intolerance carved from the pathologic religious world: it has its own ‘absolutisms’. The ‘absolutisms’, intolerances and limited/limiting visions must be exposed, because these are sources of collective anxiety and origins of destructuralization. Secularization criticized the ‘absolutism’ of religion, but with the purpose of replacing it, furtively, with others, all ‘generators of rottenness’.

Only religion that deals with the celestial ‘Absolute’, with the firm values and an incorruptible axiological universe can spread incorruptible concepts. We metaphorically assert that secularization ‘melts’ in Anthropology; but religion does not dissolve in ‘Theology’. Secularization represents an attempt of continuous passing-by man’s final destination. The ambition of never taking into consideration this eternal meaning-generating perspective is also an absolutism of modernity.

New Age represents the postmodern response to secularization. The New Age religion asserts itself as the 'religious at superlative', a new manner to live, 'to consume' and proclaim religion. From the perspective of the secularization phenomenon, we can observe that in the Western society *New Age represents a new, seductive manner of thinking which spreads widely* [18]. This demonstrates that secularization is a reversible phenomenon. In the religious sphere, New Age reveals the existence of a 'dictatorship' of utilitarianism specific to the profane living world: it has a powerful force of attraction of all that is, in one way or another, useful. It promotes syncretic individualism [19]: everyone selects from its own available 'reservoir' of doctrines what he wishes; however, man is 'the measure of all things', the decisional factor, and religion is at his disposal, not being a contingent factor anymore. The 'new man' proposed by New Age is profoundly 'spiritual', religious, 'mystic' even, reaching the depths of the religiosity [20]; namely non-secular. His existence is, again, a 'thorn' for secularization and its irreversibility pretension. Moreover, through New Age the secularising process shall continue to attenuate the credibility of the official Churches. In addition to this, New Age adopted and assumed the paradigm mutation in the contemporary science, explicitly proclaiming itself a promoter of quantum physics principles in opposition to Newton's physics. It is demonstrated that the religious movement New Age is tributary to secularization, being perceived as 'actual'.

'The subjectivity of faith' specific to New Age represents the option at the religious level of the post-modern phenomenon of universal relativization; in the contemporary age there is a uniform public 'concept' of 'faith/religion'. In Diez's opinion, this cultural context has repercussions on the private life of the people that feel more disoriented and unsecured than ever facing the most profound and ultimate questions of their existence. They live a fragmentary life, reduced to functionalism and imprisoned by immanence, affected by the frenetic rhythms of work and superficial entertainment. The world feels anonymous and socially isolated, especially because of the weakened family bonds and the incapacity to establish profound and durative personal relationships. This situation creates an intense quest: many people are in search of the meaning of life, of new horizons and new hopes so that to overcome the fragmentation, banality and obtuse visions of modern life. Thus, old metaphysical questions reappear, as well as worries on the meaning of life, of history and of the cosmos. A new, more ambiguous, significance of the sacred invades the city and defies the secularized culture. So many questions are asked at the ethical, social, political and scientific level, that all the fundamental convictions of modernity are in crisis. It is both a *krisis* situation and a *kairòs* situation for the modern culture in its entirety [20, p. 30].

In our world, a new utopic-charismatic vision has been imposed on religion and a new type of religiosity, centred on the meaning of life, not on the religious truth. The world accept the religious life to the extent that it deciphers the meaning of the personal existence and it is much less attracted to it as an existential ontological truth that proclaims a over-earthly and post-mortem order

of things. From the pastoral-missionary point of view, this focus and interest mutation is not anti-religious. On the contrary, it can be viewed as the step of man taken towards God: *a search for the meaning of life leads the one who is interested, inevitably, to discover the eschatological purpose of existence*, if man's research and pursuit are sincere and profound.

Specific to the post-modern age is also the loss of legitimacy and plausibility of the ecclesiastical institution and the option for psychological, individual religiosity in the secularized space and the confessional's crisis in postmodern public space. The pastoral-missionary conclusion is that, at their turn, the traditional churches do not have to militate for rigid, inflexible confessionalism, because this could hardly be attractive for believers and cannot be considered as a social link. It will be, however, breakable. The intelligent missionary strategy is to make believers become aware that *religion constitutes an element that offers firm identity in a world of dissolutions and precarious affiliations*. This is done not by balancing it with other identities, but by internal motivation [21]. The effect will be the increase of public plausibility of the ecclesiastical institution and not its dilution. Therefore, the reversibility of secularization will be an obvious fact.

#### **4. 'Homo religio-socio-logicus', both a 'product' and a 'producer' of secularization**

It is not very hard to acknowledge the disappearance of the traditional forms of actually living and embracing faith and the fact that the traditional Church is (still) the beneficiary of consistent public consideration, despite the erosion of credibility determined by secularization. However, this is more easily observed in the East-European sphere than in the Western one. How does the Church react to these new realities? The golden pastoral strategy is *the interior differentiation in community vs. homogeneity* and a new architectural construction acting as a link with the social life: the Parish as the 'forte' resource of community integration [22] and attenuation of faith subjective tendencies.

The idea proposed by the missiologist and ecumenist Ion Bria is that the New Religious Movements (NMR) are an attempt to revitalize the religion [23], failed in the triviality of the religious in general. This thesis demonstrated its truth at the end of modernity. Certain extremist sects compromised, at the end of modernity, the idea of 'religion' in general, derived from the collective mental. The New Religious Movements put forward the claim that they are a direct spiritual experience, through meditative techniques and an expression of self-search, experiment and checking.

Many new religious movements have become very attractive since the basic idea is lay emphasis on the interior feelings, on the emotional experiences, on the individual's feelings and not on the doctrine or intellectual reflection. *The hyper-rationalist extremism brought along another type of extremism, hyper-emotional and sentimentalized*. In an editorial of *Civiltà Cattolica* journal, it has been asserted that the New Age considers that the contemporary human

being feels the need to have a healthy body and psychic, to live in a fraternal world, to live in harmony with its fellow creatures, with the nature and the entire cosmos, to feel in communion with Everything, needs strong mystical experience of fusion with the Divine; to experiment his union with God, in order to exceed the tight environment of his own ego and to open up to the infinite of the absolute and universal consciousness and thus, to be really himself and to become happy [24]. Thus, the response to an excess was with another excess. Extremism created extremism. The Church has the exquisite task of promoting balance between sense and sensibility, between mind and heart, between psychic and spirit, between intellectual life and spiritual life, and it does this by proposing to us all the hesychasm way embodied in urbanity. The New Religious Movements are so attractive, simultaneously realizing a theological evaluation of the new religious movements: these are authentic brotherly communities that lay emphasis on faith internal dimension discovery. However, we have to state the fact that these represent a disputed and ambiguous search for God [25], constitute depersonalizing and exclusivist communities and practice an authoritarian and exciting figure of a founder. The New Religious Movements are so attractive, simultaneously realizing a theological evaluation of the new religious movements: these are authentic brotherly communities that lay emphasis on faith internal dimension discovery. However, we have to state the fact that these represent a disputed and ambiguous search for God, constitute depersonalizing and exclusivist communities and practice an authoritarian and exciting figure of a founder.

There is a wide range of references to the phenomenon of the New Religious Movements. We only propose some *key visions regarding the New Religious Movements*: the philosopher Jacob Needleman and the ‘return to mystics’, the interpretative line: Richard Bergeron, Harold Wilson, Ion Bria [26] who consider them as forms of trivializing the religious [27]; Richard Bergeron and the ‘incompatibility’ of the New Religious Movements with Christianity; Harold Wilson: the Neo-Oriental Cults – preparing for Christianity? In order to understand the complex system of the New Religious Movements, it is necessary to make a distinction between them, noting that a certain group separated from the new movements is represented by the Neo-protestant groups, which are not exactly recent as the ‘psy’ groups, the gnosis and the orientation movements New Age. The starting point of the Gnostic experience is represented by the ascertainment of the human existence alienation and of the suffering that accompanies it. The Gnostic feels trapped in the world and in the explanations for the alienation feeling of belonging to a superior order; the fundamental reality of man, the last, constitutive ‘ego’ of his personality is a transcended and divine reality [28].

The New Religious Movements had clear consequences and effects on the perception of the religious in post-modern culture: at first these were movements that led to secularization, then to post-Illuminist approaches and to the achievement of the existential purpose from an Orthodox perspective. This is accomplished by focusing on globalization as a favouring reality for the New

Religious Movements' extension: it encourages radical mutations in relating the man to his religion, to his tradition and current historical conditions. Multiculturalism that accompanies it represents a subtle invitation to multi-confessionalism and even to a religious pulverization. Moreover, *the economic totalitarianism specific to post-modernity has many resources to transform into a form of pressure for changing the confession* [29] ('*Homo economicus*' becomes a dominant model [30] and the hyper-competition becomes a way of life). Logic dominates in the contemporary public space war. Competitiveness ideology is transferred in the religious plan: all conjugates so that to proclaim the death of love.

The European Christian culture has been often considered as being opposed to modernity. It is true that certain aspects of modernity were in opposition to Christianity and this fact has left deep wounds in its history. The crisis generated by the modernity and aggravated by the collapse of the systems that became a 'speaking trumpet' against God and Church, may have nowadays serious consequences for the humankind. Modernity has confiscated and deformed many Evangelical values, many Christian ideas that were opposed to the Church: the technical and scientific creativity, the individual human rights, the liberty spirit, the respect of privacy, solidarity etc. These values were created in the Christian humus, even though these were subsequently claimed against Christianity. The cultural occidental patrimony, if it finds its Christian roots, is capable to offer to its citizens a new alliance between individuals, communities and nations [30].

The view according to which the New Religious Movements represent a preface to total de-Christianity should not be ignored. De-christianization is a phenomenon specific to the 'the end of history', becoming possible due to the 'universal man' – the agent of this movement. The Orthodoxy can make the most competent radiography of the postmodern mutant man, since the transcendental perspective seems very clear. The distinction between the 'consumer man' and 'consumed man' – can be defended as long as we keep unaltered our critic sense. There is a form of 'consumption' [31] in religion, too, which can only be identified as such.

It is certain that the reversibility of secularization represents a thesis confirmed by the existence of the dynamism of the new religious movements; this does not mean that we do not take part in all the existential drifts of the human and of the religious. From an Orthodox perspective, fulfilling the existential purpose is done by renewing ourselves from within through a profoundly mystical life.

## **5. Conclusion**

The concept of 'secularization reversibility' explicitly proclaims the thesis, more and more confirmed by our modern times, that secularization is not an irreversible phenomenon as modernity 'dogmatized'. The post-modern society turns to religion with a greater interest, metaphorically interpreting it as

the spine of the public life. Acknowledging the psycho-therapeutic and balancing resources that religion has for the collective unconsciousness, we cannot deny the more and more focused interest in the religious manifestation in society. Secularization has been the source and the promoter of the 'equivalence' of all religions and confessions, and our age has inherited the 'conclusions' of the secularization: the interest in religion is widely spread, yet not in an institutionalized religion. The interest is in a stress-relief and mentally comforting spirituality. Therefore, in the public space, the individuals are not interested in their final destiny, but in their immediate comfort. Thus, the religious-social-logical and post-modern individual is a hyper-sensitive personality, passionate for intense spiritual 'feelings'.

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