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Between Secularisation and Loss of Faith

Abstract: We study the thesis that today we are faced with secularization in its true sense, and not so much with the loss of faith. At a summative and sentimental look, it would seem that faith in God is losing ground among the masses. The desecration of more and more religious edifices, or their simple depopulation, creates an image that confirms the thesis of contemporary society's distance from the Church. But we seek to evaluate how much of our behaviour today is actually deeply Christian in a secularized Europe.

Keywords: secularisation, desacralisation, modernization, Christianity, laicism,

Introduction

Obviously, our present effort circumscribes the objective assumed by The Institute of Political Science and Public Administration, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, within the conference dedicated to the memory of Benedict XVI. For this reason, through the very title chosen, we will seek to identify what exactly are the configurations of the “New World” in a dimension that was so close to Joseph Ratzinger – the place of the Church in the contemporary world.

Our short work is, for these reasons, an additional sign of appreciation for the way in which Benedict XVI knew how to diffuse Christian dogma in relation to the new configurations of humanity. In our effort of exegesis of J. Ratzinger's great work, we found an additional opportunity for continuous joy and surprise: the way in which, with the humility of one who understands everything from the height of great theories and dogmas, Benedict XVI conveyed to the world that without faith humanity has nothing but to lose.

The present article starts from the works of the most consistent Romanian exegete of the former pope, the Romanian professor and philosopher Andrei Marga. Together with the philosopher, we share his assessment of the entire work of

J. Ratzinger. “In the work of Joseph Ratzinger – who became Pope Benedict XVI in 2005 – we have the reflection of the greatest theologian among the pontiffs of the last three to four centuries, who is, at the same time, one of the reference philosophical awareness of the human condition in the transition to the third millennium” [Marga 2010: Introduction].

About the deep meaning of secularization

Depending on the arguments and beliefs of those who use it, the term “secularization” can have negative or less negative meanings and connotations. Seen as expressing “loss of faith”, the process of secularization means, for the representatives and supporters of religious dogma, rather the annulment of Christian behaviour through the removal due to ignorance or disregard of its precepts. We cannot, therefore, speak of a declared anti-Christianity, but of a rather agnostic behavioural attitude, unrelated to church concepts, dogmas or rules, even of any kind. For it remains to be seen what kind of dogmas or rules are observed by those who do not know or reject the divine commandments, for example.

In the second sense, which we assume and support, secularization represents another level of Christian life. A much more rationalized, internalized level, which far from rejecting Christian dogma, revalues and integrates it, even at a scientific level. Here, it seems to us, that lies the whole “elegance of contemporaneity”, that of preserving or respecting the mysteries of humanity under the conditions of current science. “Undoubtedly, the recognition of the ontological mystery, in which I see the hidden core of metaphysics, is in fact only possible through a kind of dexterous spreading of the revelation itself which, of course, can also occur in the depths of souls alien to any positive religion, whatever it is; (...) [Marcel 2018: 109].

Starting from the definition of secularization as “the process of removing the influence or power that religion has over something” [Oxford Dictionaries], we see this trend even more as not one of rejecting church rules or dogmas, but one of democratization of the daily life of individuals (we will dwell on this perspective in the next subsection). Moreover, resorting to the same type of definitions, we will easily find out that “secularization does not necessarily reduce the belief in a spiritual world, and religiosity need not preclude a belief in science” [Cambridge Dictionary]. We did not choose the two references by chance, they express exactly our opinion.

Rather, we see the relationship between secularization and the loss of faith emphasized and encouraged by another contemporary phenomenon, namely that of the

exponential multiplication of sources of information or influence, together with the generalized and easy access of individuals to them. Superimposed on a poor or incomplete education in many cases, they lead to the loss of the Church's influence in the lives of individuals, as well as in the life of society as a whole. It remains to be seen to what extent these realities lead contemporary European society towards a world far from religion, desacralized and despiritualized. And, indeed, if this world is an anti-Christian one or just a democratized one in the positive sense of secularization?

Democratization, secularization, desacralization

We intentionally start from the ideal presumption that the world today even if it has distanced itself from the Church lives a life "pleasing to God", as the Protestant reformers liked to promote it. Having demonstrated and evident the fewer and fewer reports of the contemporary individual to church dogmas, we will ask ourselves together with Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini what exactly are the final springs of these behaviours. "I would very much like all men and women in the world to have clear ethical foundations for their actions, and I am convinced that there are enough people who act rightly, at least in certain circumstances, without reference to a religious foundation of life. However, I fail to understand what ultimate justification they give for their own actions" [Martini, Eco 2011: 60]. And below, the same cardinal, in the wonderful letters exchanged with Umberto Eco, states in the same note: "I find it hard to believe that an existence inspired by these norms (altruism, sincerity, justice, solidarity, forgiveness) can last long even in any conditions if the absolute value of the moral norm is not based on metaphysical principles or a personal God" [ibid.: 77].

But humanity's answer in this case is rationality. The great discovery of the 17th century, which set out to prove that the world and human existence can be deciphered in terms of human intellectual understanding, Descartes and Newton being the founders of this trend. "A philosophy renouncing metaphysics to deliberately confine itself to what is immediately perceptible in the human heart. The idea of a nature to which the quality of being entirely good is contested for the time being, but which is strong, ordered, in accordance with reason: from this arises a natural religion, a natural right, a natural freedom, a natural equality" [Hazard 2007: 345]. Here are the benchmarks that humanity sets in its tendency to secularize and in this case, to democratize the entire human existence.

New entities, the individual-man and the nation-society become the fundamental benchmarks at the expense of the old entities giving existential, metaphysical

meaning. From now on everything becomes natural, and the measure of all things is the individual existence that can be valued. “We can discuss the meaning or importance of one phenomenon or another, but the overall movement is beyond any doubt: the reign of consent is expanding, the process of individualization is intensifying, therefore the authority of the communities of various orders within which human beings have until now found their meaning in life – the nation, the family, the Church – are declining day by day” [Manent 2017: 2013].

Here, therefore, is the explanation of desacralization as it can be observed today in everyday life. The image that terrifies today’s believers, that of churches not accessible to the public or desacralised, has easily identifiable explanations in the process of the secularization of society and the thinning of the bond between the Church and believers. Two processes are at the basis of this reality: secularization seen as “policy and principles opposing clericalism and restricting political influence and power to the laity” and scientific progress that brought explanations regarding the whole nature, the globe and even the Universe within the reach of people, through reason, positivism and Enlightenment.

The latter, however, benefited from consistent criticism from the Frankfurt School, through Horkheimer, Adorno and Habermas, later adding Cardinal Ratzinger. “The writing *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* (*Dialektik der Aufklärung*) shows how something fundamentally positive – the Enlightenment as a vision of the world, with vast ramifications in knowledge, politics, morals, works of art, was converted, to the extent of its application due to an inner deficit, to its opposite, that is, in a world opaque to reason and full of myths” [Marga 2014: 19-20].

A Christian world besieged by scientism

In such conditions, it remains to be evaluated, in addition to the obvious developments in contemporaneity, how religion will be positioned, what place will remain recognized for it, how much influence will it retain in the future? These are all questions that may sound apocalyptic, but only objective and assumed reporting on them will give us answers. Here, in this dimension, we will highlight the role of Cardinal Ratzinger, whose studies and releases truly leave consistent legacies in the field. We will start, for this, from a statement as simple as it is consistent by Cardinal Ratzinger: „Without faith in God, there will be no moral turn.”

We start from this statement because it represents both an answer to Cardinal Martini’s question and an exhaustive perspective on the future of humanity,

whose trust and responsibility seems to be left exclusively to human reason and science. For the philosopher Gabriel Marcel, things are quite clear, total science not being possible without the touch of Christianity. "I will say first of all that, in my opinion at least, a concrete philosophy cannot but bear, without its knowledge, the magnetism of the Christian given. (...) So that, the deeper we penetrate into human nature, the more we will place ourselves on the axis of the great Christian truths" [Marcel 2018: 108-109]. The concept is reinforced by another conviction of Cardinal Ratzinger: "For philosophy and, in another way, for theology, listening to the great experiences and teachings of the religious traditions of humanity, especially of the Christian religion, is a source of knowledge which, if denied, it would narrow our listening and our responses" [quote after Marga 2010: 300]. A rational, trenchant positioning of the representative of Christianity who cannot but observe the situation in which religion is today in contemporary society. Paraphrased by Andrei Marga, Niklas Luhmann also says it: "According to the penetrating analysis due to Niklas Luhmann, the differentiation process characteristic of modernity, conclusively observed by Max Weber, has gone to the end, so that the subsystems – including that of religion – operate with their own codes, without further promoting his vision in society as a whole. This means, in the case of religion, a few essential things: the cosmological vision offered by religion has collapsed; religion no longer induces a morality, but moral judgment is left; hell no longer scares or is invoked; the subsystems of modern society operate according to codes that ignore moral distinctions; transcendence is converted into a psychological theme; the believer's communication with God has ceased, and what remains is only communication on religious themes" [Marga 2005: 62-63].

And about the danger in which the "new world" has placed itself, described so well by Luhmann, Cardinal Ratzinger also wrote. The successive renunciations of metaphysics, of transcendence, of ontological mysteries, all do nothing but narrow the horizons of humanity in favor of the superficial or appearance. "The new religious will can easily be channelled in to the esoteric. She can melt into a simplistic romance" [quote after Marga 2010: 53]. Under these conditions, reason without religion or vice versa, all represent losses for both postures. The solution for contemporaneity lies precisely in the collaboration, the cooperation, the positive recovery of the two. "We can do this only if reason and faith find each other; if we go beyond the limitation of reason, disposed by it, to falsifiability in experiment, does it again open to reason its full breadth?" [ibid.: 300]. Ratzinger talks about the rationality of man who can capture the divine logos and its light. The two capacities and dimensions are not mutually exclusive, on the contrary, and the human

world remains comprehensive; this is the reconciliation and solution proposed by the prelate. “Man’s rationality loses nothing if it opens itself to the contents of faith; rather it asks for her free and conscious consent” [ibid.: 301].

About the place of the Church in the New World

At a superficial glance, we live on a continent where Christianity is generally widespread, with the vast majority of the population sharing and respecting its dogmas. The large number of Christian churches in any locality, their central positioning in relation to specific European urbanism, the pilgrimages and the queues at the great European cathedrals, would be evidence for this assessment. But this simplistic posture benefits from the attention of Cardinal Ratzinger according to whom the faith in people’s souls is the only proof of Christianity. “The actual temple is, for those who believe in Jesus, the community of people called by God” [ibid.: 71].

Let us therefore direct our attention to the community of faith! What more consistent proof of this could we offer than the magic of the two great Christian holidays? The birth and death of Christ, officially celebrated by all European countries, by declaring calendar days as non-working religious holidays? Or of many other holidays dedicated to the celebration of biblical moments that have become national holidays? Moreover, does not the decoration of all localities throughout the continent on the occasion of the Savior’s Birth give the impression of an assumed and conscious Christian community? And in this sense the cardinal recalled the original meanings of these traditions. “The decorated Christmas trees are nothing but an attempt to make this word visibly true: God is here – this is what our ancestors believed and knew; therefore the trees must welcome Him, bow before Him, become the glorification of their Lord” [Ratzinger 2007: 12]. How many Christians still know these meanings??

We want to emphasize the aspect that Cardinal Ratzinger mentions, and this because there is, in addition to the danger of not believing, of not internalizing the dogmas that we respect at least on the surface, another, equally great danger: that of leave trapped in traditions, in rituals, forgetting what are actually their original sources and their meanings. “Faith boils down to a kind of philosophy of life, which individuals seek to distil from the Bible as much as they can. Dogma, whose foundation was taken away from Scripture, no longer stands for anything. The Bible, separated from Dogma, has become a document of the past and thus belongs to the past itself” [Benedict XVI, Ratzinger 2018: 119].

Conclusion:

Obviously, we are on the side of the positive contents of secularization. We continue to believe that, far from denying religion, the secularization observable in contemporary European society situates our lives, both personal and social, in a Christianized atmosphere. And we have already talked about its signs during our work.

The relationship between Christianity and Christendom seems to us to be the most expressive for our conclusions. Starting from the meaning of the concept of Christianity, with all the structures it configures (Bible, Churches, Dogmas, Traditions) we cannot fail to observe Christianity, as a collective of Christians, that we live. It is true, a secularized and a laicized one, but with Christian configurations imprinted in the deepest perspectives regarding our human existence.

From this perspective, among the many definitions of secularization, the most suitable seems to us to be the one that makes the connection between the Church, politics and society. “In the field of politics, it also means that the only difference that seems to remain between real and secular religion is that the latter do not overtly accept the religious label. It also means that the very idea of secularism may best be described not as an attempt to break with the former, allegedly “religious” foundations of politics and society, but as an attempt to obfuscate the real nature of modern ideologies, presenting them as more rational or scientific than the traditional ones they wish to replace” [Nyrkos 2021: 154].

In a world that is modernizing at an ever-increasing pace, and apparently becoming desacralized, it seems essential to us that where we can no longer see the collaboration between the Church and Society, we should enjoy their cohabitation. For the lights of religion, of the ontological mystery and of Revelation are realities that remain to be discovered forever.

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