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Credit Cards of the Holy and Dirty Money of Faith:

Shapes of Religion in Contemporary Society

A phenomenon which is generally referred to as religion has been present in various shapes throughout the whole history of humankind. Only the last centuries have brought a mass expansion of atheism. When many assumed that religion would successively expire, something else happened.

At the end of the second millennium a new bloom of religion happened in many forms. But this is not a simple comeback of the good old times of religion, especially not of traditional religious communities and institutions.

Globalization and Secularization

Politics, economics, science and entertainment have been shaping the life of society much more than religion, which remains on the margin of society. This process of the loss of impact of religion on development is described as *secularization*.

Further, another process—*globalization*—is connected with secular elements of the culture—mainly with the development of science and technology, with the improvement of mass media and means of transport, and with the increasing influence of the world market.

As a result of this process, various religions meet and influence each other, mix together and there emerge new forms of religion. Especially people of the Western civilization live in a multireligious environment.

Many thinkers agree with facts related to the concepts of secularization and globalization. But the question is how to explain these facts and the processes that led to them. Which are the motive forces of secularization? Does religiousness in a society weaken or strengthen?

Does religion have an impact on the political life of a given society or not? How should we Christians respond to these developments? Such questions represent a challenge for us. We constantly have to seek answers, to discuss, to engage in dialogue, even if our opinions may differ.

While contemplating the changes and ambiguities of contemporary religion, a comparison with money can come to our mind. As money has changed its form from coins to the “invisible” money behind credit cards, likewise religion changes to the more “invisible” form of private religion, as described by sociologists.

And just like the value of money continuously provokes abuse (counterfeit banknotes, false cheques, laundering of dirty money), the value of religion also tends to be abused (indignity and instigation to hatred in the name of religion, religious wars). Money and religion endure, although they undergo transformations. What is behind all these changes?

Institutionalization of Faith

Religion has a social dimension as well. It is not only the private affair of an individual. Religious people have always formed communities, worshipped together, established various social structures with different roles within them.

In religious communions similar sociological regularities recur as in other human groupings. One of them is the process of *institutionalization*. Ideas, works or movements which are not institutionalized fade away and vanish with their bearers. But when they survive, they give rise to institutions; and the field of religion is not an exception to the rule.

An interesting interpretation of institutionalization is described by Peter BERGER and Thomas LUCKMANN, in their book *Social Construction of Reality*: “Social order is not part of the ‘nature of things,’ and it cannot be derived from the ‘laws of nature.’ Social order exists only as a product of human activity. All human activity is subject to *habitualization*. *Institutionalization* occurs whenever there

is a reciprocal typification of habitualized actions by types of actors. Put differently, any such typification is an institution. Institutions always have a history, of which they are the products.”¹

Religions have their roots in the deep *experiences of the Holy—mysterium tremendum et fascinans*²—which have visited some individuals: experiences of something noble which transcended them.

After they had shared this experience with others and had created some patterns of symbolic perceptible expressions of their experience, new religious groups could rise and spread. This is possible because experience of the Holy to a certain extent is owned or experienceable to all. With the growth of the group, the process of institutionalization begins.

Consequences of Social Control

“Institutions, by the very fact of their existence, *control* human conduct by setting up *patterns of conduct*, which channel it in one direction as against the many other directions that would theoretically be possible.”³

Institutions also produce *mechanisms of sanctions*, but they are of a secondary or supplementary kind. The primary social control is given in the existence of an institution as such. Social control leads to some limitations, which always evoke tensions between individual and group interests.

An institutional world is experienced as an objective persistent reality, external to the individual. However massive the objectivity of the institutional world may appear to the individual, yet it is a humanly produced, constructed objectivity.

As BERGER and LUCKMANN note, “*Reification* is the apprehension of human phenomena as if they were things, that is, in non-human or possibly suprahuman terms. The reified world is, by definition, a dehumanized world. It is experienced by one as a strange facticity, an *opus alienum* over which one has no control.”⁴

The possibility of reification is never far away and also threatens religious communions. Words, gestures, art, feasts, customs, all of which used to refer to noble transcendence, beauty and truth, can

1 BERGER Peter – LUCKMANN Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York, 1966. 52–54.

2 OTTO Rudolf, *The Idea of the Holy*. New York, 1950.

3 BERGER – LUCKMANN. 55.

4 BERGER – LUCKMANN. 89.

become empty and misunderstood and can return to a set of rules restricting the people.

Another important subprocess of the social construction of reality is *legitimation*. “It is a second-order *objectivation* of meaning.”⁵ It has some interesting implications—for example, every society produces a *symbolic universe*.

Legitimation leads to the division between *official* and *heretical* symbolic universes, which are joined with repressive procedures. On the occasion of confrontation between two societies with conflicting universes, the result will depend more on the power than on the theoretical ingenuity of the respective legitimators. Inquisition and religious wars confirm these theses.

Reasons and Consequences of Secularization

The *complexification* of society is joined with *specialization*. In early modern Western societies, religion had noticeably separated from other social institutions. Development in such a society has a paradoxical character.

On the one hand, there is a tendency to extend individual freedom more and more, but on the other hand members of the contemporary society are more dependent in a new and sophisticated way.

In many spheres of life they have options to choose between rival institutions, services and products: in politics, economics, education, and also in the religious area. It seems that the pressure of such a lifestyle on an individual is finally greater than in less technically advanced societies, as the increased measure of stress on people shows.

This tension between freedom and dependency is visible also in the religious life of people as a tension between individual religiousness and official religion. This is described as a *privatization of religion*.

There emerge new religious groups and movements and together with globalization, spreading and mixing of older religious traditions, this establishes the situation of the “*demonopolization of the religious market*.”⁶ With the increasing number of religious entities, the credibility and self-evidence of all of them sharply decrease.

Individual identity, including its religious dimension, is under-

5 BERGER – LUCKMANN. 92.

6 LUŽNÝ Dušan, *Náboženství a moderní společnost. Sociologické teorie modernizace a sekularizace (Religion and Modern Society. Sociological Theories of Modernization and Secularization)*. Brno, 1999. 79.

stood as a private affair. This demand for autonomy is connected with consumer orientation. Religions have also turned into goods on a great market of ideas, worldviews, *reference systems of transcendence* and rituals.

Thomas LUCKMANN in his book *The Invisible Religion* says that the dimension of the Holy is mostly constituted in the “invisible” sphere of privacy, where the deepest and most moving discussions about that sphere occur.⁷

Freedom and Responsibility

It is not easy to react to all these developments. There are two simplified, but—in my opinion—incorrect answers. One of them is the boundless *relativization* and the other is *fundamentalism*.

Both of these are an expression of *fear*: one represents the fear of *responsibility*, the other the fear of *freedom*. They comprise an escape from reality and an unwillingness to accept facts as they are.

Bryan WILSON describes secularization as a transition from a smaller community (*Gemeinschaft*) lifestyle to a big society (*Gesellschaft*) lifestyle. The first is characterized by face to face relations, an emphasis on emotionality and a symbolic universe which refers to transcendence.

The second represents a vast rationally coordinated group of people with complicated structures, impersonal relationships and an emphasis on rationality. Secularized society does not need references to transcendence, because there a strong belief dominates that it is fully and coherently explained only by means of rationality.⁸

The Christian Church should take such analyses seriously. Christianity is also threatened by too much rationality and cold institutional relations. This can lead to dissatisfied people leaving the Church and converting to a competitor in the religious market. The personal approach is very important also in the case that the other is neither a present nor a prospective member of the Church.

7 LUCKMANN Thomas, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*. New York, 1967. 106.

8 WILSON Bryan, *Religion in Sociological Perspective*. Oxford – New York, 1992. 149–160.

Contrasting Expressions of Faith

In archaic societies an individual was too much bound to her or his community and depended on it, so she or he had to accept all aspects of the community life willy-nilly. Only later, when individual freedom became greater, was it possible to realize that religion can have its dark side just as all other human activities.

The *meme theory* says that every valuable and successful cultural meme provokes the emergence of many false imitations of this *meme*: they are similar to the good meme, but they are harmful. False banknotes are good example of this phenomenon.⁹

If we look at history, since the *axial age* every period and every place somehow confirm the ambiguity of religion. Significant personalities, in various cultures, have evaluated religion with contradicting judgments.

Some linked it to the best within human beings, saying that it is precisely religion which helps to complete the development of an individual as well as the development of humankind by discovering the spiritual dimensions of life. Thus, religion should be the treasure of human culture, the best within it.

Others, on the other hand, asserted that religion led people to infatuation, dependence and in the end to violence and murder in religious conflicts and wars. Thus, religion was a sign of immaturity, the worst and therefore most useless element of a culture.

Probably no other sphere of life, perhaps with the exception of politics, is perceived in such a radically contradicting way as religion. Why is this so? Does religion contribute to *peace* or to *violence*?

Does it help to build bridges between cultures and hostile groups and thus contribute to the extension of a *dialogical* approach to otherness? Or does it support *exclusivist* language and thought, prejudices and barriers, and so exacerbate existing tensions?

People need a spiritual dimension in life. The spiritual development of individuals and of humankind, however, is a very fragile process as well. Mistakes in it have taken a heavy toll. Persecuting “bad religious teachings” or “heresies” in the name of the right one does not seem to be a good solution.

I suggest a careful analysis of the problem, learning from our mistakes, and education for dialogical thinking. I hope that it will contribute to peace, reconciliation and the harmonious development of humankind.

⁹ BLACKMORE Susan, *The Meme Machine*. Oxford, 1999.

Problems with sects, esoteric and new religious movements represent one example connected with the ambiguity of religion. Some expressive events like the collective suicide of members of a California group, the drama of the Order of the Solar Temple, and the carnage caused by the Aoum Sect in Japan gave rise to great anxiety or intolerance as reactions to the world of sects.

How can we protect society from such groups, but at the same time not restrict religious freedom? This question is so important that the Council of Europe dealt with it twice and issued some recommendations.¹⁰ The freedom of conscience and religion is guaranteed by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights, but there is no accepted legal definition of religion.

The Ambiguity of Own and Alien

Religion is a multidimensional phenomenon, a complex reality; and therefore it is not possible to find precise borders between the religious aspect and other aspects of the life of an individual or of a society. They influence each other and so it is difficult to come to genuine reasons for some observable facts.

The psychic structure of people influences their religious behaviour. There are many aspects which can be analyzed: the difference between witnessing and manipulation; the role of the subconscious in religious experience; religious behaviour as a defensive mechanism on occasions of unmanaged troubles.

Let us focus now on the problem of how religious people reconcile themselves to the experience of the alien or the strange. The phenomenon of *own* or *proper* on one hand and of *alien* or *strange* on the other hand is familiar to all people.

If something is radically alien, it appears to us mostly as threatening and dangerous, because it threatens our certainty, although sometimes we meet it as an attraction and a challenge. Nevertheless, the radically alien often causes disquiet.

Therefore, people want to release themselves from a storm of the alien so that they try to get it under control. And they often succeed in this; unfortunately, sometimes at the price of a violent subjugation of the alien. This kind of conduct can have various forms, from pressing one's own opinions on others in the family to the colonial ruling of other cultures.

¹⁰ Council of Europe, *On Sects and New Religious Movements* (1992).

<http://assembly.coe.int/main.asp?Link=/documents/adoptedtext/ta92/errec1178.htm>

Council of Europe, *Illegal Activities of Sects* (1999).

<http://assembly.coe.int/main.asp?Link=/documents/adoptedtext/ta99/errec1412.htm>

Sensitivity Towards the Strangeness of Strange

In spite of the fact that *horror alieni* is deeply rooted in us, it is possible not to surrender to it and take alien as alien. In Buddhism this is taught by means of *koans*—short puzzle-stories which contain contradictions.

They have no logical solution, but teach the necessity of bearing the tension of mystery in pursuit of enlightenment. From this point of view enlightenment can be characterized as sensitivity for the *strangeness of the strange*.

The strange or alien points to the fact that my world is not complete, and that there is something which transcends me and my perception of the order of universe. Those who bear up the strangeness of the strange can experience a peculiar *paradox* that that which was alien after some time will emit the warmth of home.

Such an *experience of alien as the Holy* can deeply touch an individual. Probably religions are sediments of various ways to understand, express, and hand over these experiences. This is done in their sacred texts, rituals, and social structures. But it again creates a new paradox.

Tradition offers the warmth of home and so within it all references to transcendence are something familiar, proper and possessed. Then also the absolute, if it is God, gods, Tao, Brahma or Nirvana, is only some pattern in good accustomed *Logos*. Yet religions are the best soil in which first of all seeds of sensitivity for the strangeness of the strange, seeds of genuine transcendence bud.

Experience of the Holy

Remaining alien as alien is the essence of religious experience. Radically expressed, it means the *wishing of otherness*. Yet as historical phenomena religions brought only sediments of such experiences.

They could not directly hand over these experiences, although they incited them repeatedly. Therefore religions did not avoid mutual struggles for power and influence, even bloodshed. They forgot transcendence as openness for radical strangeness.

The importance of religious experience shows that membership in a religious community, the use of religious language and symbols, and participation in worship are only external expressions of some-



thing more essential which is, however, inner. These expressions do not form the essence of religion. They rather build conditions in which the process of spiritual maturing can be—but not necessarily is—successful.

History shows people as seekers of God, absolute, and transcendence, but much more as a people who long for home, for certainty; people who fear the alien and want to dispose of it, even at the price of violence. But the more one tries to escape that which is alien, the more radically the alien manifests itself.

In this time of globalization, religions suddenly stand face to face with each other, without the possibility of escaping the challenge of the alien, as it used to be in the past. *Interreligious dialogue* is a difficult test for us. If we stand the proof, surely a new spiritual culture, a culture of the wishing of otherness, a culture of love will arise.

Distinguishing Positive and Negative Aspects of Religion

Is ambiguity intrinsic to the nature of religion? Or in other words: Do the religions in which many people find supreme spiritual truth at the same time necessarily encourage violence? Is there no way to avoid this fate?

In order to try to solve this question, we must distinguish a twofold understanding of religion: as a *real phenomenon*, a set of cultural facts; and as an *ideal reality* which is expressed by facts only insufficiently.

In the first understanding, facts confirm the ambiguity. But in the second understanding religion is not necessarily connected to violence. Edward SCHILLEBEECKX explains it on the basis of the mediational character of a religious relationship.

“The difficulty is that this relationship to the Absolute is never given in a ‘detached’ way,” it is always ‘wordly’ intermediated. And these intermediaries can be elevated above their own status and promoted to the status of the will of God. “In that case false alliances can spur on religious people to religious violence in the name of their relationship to the Absolute.”¹¹

There are also other spheres of life in which we have some ideal notions, yet it is very difficult to draw the bounds between the ideal reality and its *false imitations*. This is true, for example, for art.

Another example is PLATO’s dialogue, the *Sophist*, which deals with the problem of how to distinguish between a wise philosopher and a selfish sophist who only appears to be wise. This dialogue is considered as one of PLATO’s deepest.

New Way of Life

Is it possible to avoid these dangers? An already increasing *awareness* of them can help. We can confine the social control in religions to the lowest, most necessary measure. Religious people should try to revive religious experiences and to bring spirit into religious institutions. Also a balance between keeping tradition and facing new challenges is needed.

In relationships to others we should *avoid generalization*. Large communities often have a complicated inner structure. Official atti-

11 SCHILLEBEECKX Edward, *Documentation: Religion and Violence*. Concilium 1997/4. 132.

tudes or the attitudes of majorities do not represent automatically the attitudes of all individuals or groups.

We can perceive the whole range of relationships to others: indifference, mutual misunderstanding, rivalry, attempts to command or control others, hatred, taking others as a necessary evil, tolerance, dialogue, cooperation, respect, love. A bad experience with people of another faith does not warrant us to judge all who belong to the same tradition.

The decline of the Church in Western societies in the last centuries used to be interpreted also as a decrease of spirituality. But the need for a spiritual dimension somehow belongs to human life; it is only the ways of satisfying this need which has changed.

There some questions arise for the Church. Which is more important: the salvation of all traditional institutional aspects of the Church, or the salvation of concrete contemporary people as they are?

But on the other hand there is another dilemma. Is it good for the Church to conform too easily to the new sociological situation and give up the treasures of its tradition, or is it better to struggle very sensitively for new ways of handing down the Christian tradition to new generations?

Such questions are primarily *practical*, and therefore, only a certain *way of life* can be a proper answer to them. But, first, they need a theoretical analysis and understanding. This paper with some considerations and proposals is one among the efforts aimed at this goal.

Suggested Reading

- BERGER Peter – LUCKMANN Thomas, *The Social Construction of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. New York, 1966.
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