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Being Christian in Age of Secular Religions

Richard Neuhaus' *The Naked Public Square* famously complained in the 1980s that modern secularized politics, a strict separation of church and state tended to eliminate religious and moral values from public discourse. Others, of course, argued that liberal or democratic values like freedom, equality, or tolerance were just as apt to serve as society's moral basis as anything inherited from a religious past.

This bold claim, however, was not shared by everyone, not even in the liberal-democratic camp. As Francis Fukuyama's *The End of History and the Last Man* put it in 1992: "It becomes particularly difficult for people in democratic societies to take questions with real moral content seriously in public life. Morality involves a distinction between better and worse, good and bad, which seems to violate the democratic principle of tolerance." In other words, the democratic principle is not "moral" strictly speaking, but the very antithesis of morality. Yet, when Fukuyama expressed his doubts about democracy's ability to create a new moral cohesion, he also said that other, pre-modern sources of morality (like religion or ethnicity) were still available, even if in a latent form.

In that, he was only repeating a thesis put forward by the German legal scholar Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde as early as 1964. The "Böckenförde dilemma" or "Böckenförde paradox" as it was later called, stated that the liberal, secularized state lived on prerequisites it could not itself guarantee. After the long battles between temporal and spiritual authorities in the Middle Ages deprived the state of its former sacrality, it became exposed to all the divergent interests in society. The only reason it did not fall apart right away was that society was still permeated by a common morality, and even today, values like the dignity of the human person, the idea of human rights, and several others maintain Christian principles in a secularized form.

What Neuhaus saw as a naked public square was therefore never entirely empty (at least according to Fukuyama and Böckenförde), but it remains true that the latter were no less worried about modern politics' tendency to actually create such an empty space.

Nature, however, as we know from Aristotle, "abhors an empty space" and the same is true of society and politics. Already in the 1960s – apart from some academics' abstract theories – it was not neutrality that most political actors longed for, but a positive affirmation of their values and principles by the state. The erosion of society's Christian foundations may have gone further since then, but the present agitation and turmoil in Western societies can only convince us that the number of candidates to fill the vacuum is constantly on the rise.

It is not even obvious that some of these candidates are not metaphysical or religious in nature. When climate activists claim that our whole worldview must change in order to cope with the global challenge, when scientists are treated as a new priestly order that should command humanity in a time of pandemic, or feast days are consecrated to victims of police brutality, it becomes difficult to treat all such discourse as purely metaphorical. Some authors – both academics and journalists – would say that there is a more profound similarity between these and more overtly religious ideas than it is usually supposed, and this is where we get to the notion of "secular religions."

Secular religion is, of course, a terrible word, an oxymoron, if you like. Except for some peculiar historical cases, “secular” has always meant non-religious, so a secular religion is nothing less than a non-religious religion, a contradiction in terms. The only reason why some people still use it is that it expresses both the analogy between secular and religious ideas, and the reluctance to treat them as fully identical.

The term itself first gained widespread use with the rise of totalitarian regimes in the 1930s. In 1935, a book edited by G. Stanton Ford (*Dictatorships in the Modern World*) described those as having a “powerful technique of controlling the masses by means of propaganda through radio, cinema, the press, education, and a secular religion of their own creation.” A year later, Adolf Keller’s *Church and State on the European Continent* called Leninism “a camouflaged secular religion”, while in 1938, Frederik A. Voigt’s *Unto Caesar* spoke not only of Marxism as a “secular religion”, but also of Hitler’s “own secular religion of blood and soil.” A more famous example is Raymond Aron’s *The Future of Secular Religions* (1944), but such references became literally uncountable by the time. In 1954, Hans Kelsen already felt it necessary to write a book-length critique of such comparisons, although his *Secular Religions* was only published posthumously in 2012.

The main reason why Kelsen refrained from publication was that he himself realized how unfortunate a term “secular religion” was. Yet, if we abandon the oxymoron and concentrate on secular/religious parallelisms in a more general sense, it becomes even more astonishing how many different secular ideas were compared to religious ones.

As early as 1791, the French philosopher Condorcet criticized the French Revolution’s plans to teach a sort of “blind enthusiasm” for the new constitution as an attempt to create a new political religion. A few decades later, the newly emerging ideology of democracy came under similar suspicion. In 1835, Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* wrote of the people as a God that rules the political world; called popular sovereignty a “dogma”; and described the majority in democratic societies as “omnipotent.” In 1859, John Stuart Mill’s *On Representative Government* wrote about the false (egalitarian) “creed” of American democracy. Representative government, the “divine right of parliaments” was called “the great political superstition of the present” by Herbert Spencer’s *The Man versus the State* in 1884. In 1916, the Italian sociologist Vilfredo Pareto gave not only a devastating critique of popular sovereignty, democracy, and suffrage as religious concepts, but also announced the beginning of a new era of democratic religion which could only be compared to the rise of Christianity in the early centuries. (*Trattato di sociologia generale*, translated to English as *Mind and Society* in 1935). Similar remarks about democratic religion may have become rarer later on, but never completely disappeared: from Ralph Henry Gabriel’s and Crane Brinton’s works in the 1940s and 1950s to Patrick Deneen’s *Democratic Faith* as late as 2005.

In addition to dictatorships and democracies, the ideology of nationalism was also called a religion from the mid-twentieth century at least, the best example still being Carlton Hayes’ *Nationalism: a Religion* (1960). The “migration of the holy” from the church to the nation-state was described by the British historian John Bossy in his *Christianity in the West* (1985), from where William T. Cavanaugh borrowed the title of his 2011 book *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church*. Or, to take one step further, the ideology of the United Nations as a community of nation-states was called a “political theology” by the Finnish author Mika Luoma-aho (*God and International Relations*, 2012).

But the most intriguing fact is that the list doesn't end here. Since the late 1970's, a new – less overtly political – secular religions appeared on the scene, like in Paul C. Vitz's *Psychology as Religion*. In 2001, Robert H. Nelson addressed *Economics as Religion*. In 2009, Philip Goodchild published his work on the *Theology of Money*. A year later, Robert H. Nelson wrote another book on *New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs. Environmental Religion in Contemporary America*. In 2015, a collection of essays called *Scientism the New Orthodoxy*. In 2016, Harvey Cox described *The Market as God*. Until in 2018, John Gray's *Seven Types of Atheism* went as far as calling most of those (from "New Atheism" to secular humanism and scientism) religions in their own right.

What all these and many other contemporary examples (from multiculturalism to identity politics and beyond) only demonstrate is that the public square is now farther from being empty than at any other time in history. The most vexing political issue today is not how to deal with an absence of religious and moral values, but how to prevent them from inciting new holy wars in society.

From the state's perspective, it means that it should no longer feel obliged to remain "neutral" in such matters, especially if neutrality means a bias for supposedly non-religious values. The main advantage of secular religion discourse is exactly that it dispels the myth of having something "secular", "progressive", or "rational" on one side, and something "religious", "traditional", or merely "subjective" on the other. The very idea of freedom in Western history presupposes that no such distinction is permissible, and this is what makes Böckenförde's statement a real paradox: that even a minimum degree of state neutrality is only possible on a Christian consensus inherited from the times of the Investiture Controversy.

From a Christian perspective, the main task is to understand something similar: that Christians should no longer feel ashamed of belonging to a "religious" tradition, as opposed to the many "secular" traditions of modernity. If any revival of Christian faith is to be expected, it is only from a self-conscious assertion of their own convictions in the public square. As Joseph Ratzinger, the later Pope Benedict XVI once said, "With our own lack of conviction we take away from society what objectively speaking is indispensable for it: the spiritual foundations of its humanity and its freedom."

In an age of secular religions (some of which seem much less rational and much more totalitarian than any traditional faith), it is also good to recall Gilbert Keith Chesterton's verdict: "It's the first effect of not believing in God that you lose your common sense and can't see things as they are. Anything that anybody talks about, and says there's a good deal in it, extends itself indefinitely like a vista in a nightmare. And all because you are frightened of four words: He was made Man."

Which is not a political statement, of course, but let us not be afraid of making statements that are religious and political at the same time.

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