

CHRISTIANITY AND DEMOCRACY

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The moral foundations of the modern state and the problem of “secular religions”

What we tackle here is the moral foundations of the modern, secular state and a possible solution to its problems which so-called “secular religions” offer. The first part was written by András Jancsó on the perhaps most important European thinker on the paradoxical nature of the modern state, Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, the context of his thought, and the significance of his thought for today’s debates on the role of the state, the issue of social cohesion, and the meaning of Christian democracy in its relation with liberal and social democracy.¹

For those who are less familiar with the work of Böckenförde, let us emphasize that he was not only a judge in the Federal Constitutional Court of Germany from 1983 to 1996 (a significant position itself), but also one of the most widely quoted theoretical thinkers on the role of Christianity in modern societies. His thesis, the “Böckenförde dictum” or “Böckenförde paradox” is still a point of departure for almost every discussion when it comes to the moral foundations of liberal societies, in which an alleged “state neutrality” tends to eliminate exactly those Christian foundations without which it cannot sustain itself. It was also Böckenförde who first expressed doubts about the liberal state’s ability to create “new” values instead of “old” ones, and it is in this regard that he was cited by as diverse authors as Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) and Jürgen Habermas. The famous Ratzinger-Habermas debate in 2004 was also in many respects reliant on Böckenförde’s theses drafted forty years earlier. Outside Germany, his influence is clearly visible in such popular works as Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man*, which repeats the Böckenförde dictum almost literally – albeit without mentioning his name – and English translations of his collected writings are currently being published by Oxford University Press. His legacy nevertheless remains disputed: while being a devout Catholic who even contributed to the reinterpretation of certain doctrines by the Second Vatican Council, he never joined a Christian party in his native Germany, but became a member of the Social Democratic Party – while also distancing himself from some of his own party’s ideological inclinations.

The second part is by Ádám Darabos on Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the most prominent Christian political theologians of the 20th century and his contribution to the discussion of secular religions – especially communism – that aimed to replace traditional religions in offering a new morality for society.

Niebuhr is once again not someone arbitrarily chosen from a long line of thinkers: speaking of what we call “Christian realism”, he is not *one of*, but perhaps *the* most important figure in this genre. If Böckenförde was concerned with the moral foundations of the state, Niebuhr was more worried by the vicissitudes of power politics. Starting as a socialist and pacifist in his younger years, he soon realized how Marxist ideology and sympathy for it among American intellectuals had a detrimental effect on both domestic and foreign policy, and converted to a belief in political realism, a stance he would never abandon. The most interesting fact is not that he made

¹ The word „liberal” does not refer to an ideology here. Liberal democracy is understood as a system of constitutional arrangement, a separation of church and state, a division of powers, and a granting of individual and minority rights.

this conversion but that despite it he remained – and keeps on being – popular at both ends of the political spectrum.

He is still an inspirational character for both Democrats and Republicans in the United States. Not just Jimmy Carter and John McCain admitted the greatness of Niebuhr's thought; in a 2007 New York Times interview even Barack Obama said: "I love him. He's one of my favorite philosophers." Asking Obama about what he takes away from Niebuhr, he replied: "I take away the compelling idea that there is a serious evil in the world, and hardship and pain. And we should be humble and modest in our belief we can eliminate those things. But we shouldn't use that as an excuse for cynicism and inaction. I take away (...) the sense we have to make these efforts knowing they are hard, and not swinging from naïve idealism to bitter realism."

In what follows, we shall see the significance of both Böckenförde and Niebuhr further elaborated: for the time being, let us just say that the apparently conflicting ideas of *moral foundations* and *political realities* have their most important expressions in the works of these two thinkers. Many others will be mentioned, for sure, but the tension between these two – otherwise equally Christian – approaches may shed light on the substantial problems of Christian politics in a more general sense as well.

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A Catholic social democrat for liberal democracy

The context of Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde's thought

"The liberal, secularized state draws its life from presuppositions that it cannot itself guarantee" (Böckenförde 1967, 93).² Although Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde made his famous statement more than fifty years ago, it is still often quoted by political scientists. As the editors of the English language volume of Böckenförde's writings explicitly argue, this claim – and many others – remain valid today exactly because the German author's "contributions to legal and political thinking transcend context: they stand on their own" (Künkler–Stein 2017a, 34). In other words, contemporary literature has a tendency to neglect the context of the so-called "Böckenförde paradox," which may easily lead to a simplification of the thesis. This danger has been noted by many, for example by Karl Lehmann³ – a former member of the "Wissenschaftlicher Club" organized by Böckenförde – who thought that the argument was "often interpreted as if religious neutrality and social pluralism meant that the state should completely abandon its concern for moral conditions" (Lehmann 2002, 27).

In order to avoid such simplifications and understand the ongoing significance of the paradox, it seems therefore necessary to examine it in context. Let us also add that the present study does not focus on the immediate context of Böckenförde's writings only; it also aims to outline the general traits of his thought, providing a broader horizon for judging the validity of the thesis.

² In Hungarian: Pálffy Eszter – Jancsó András 2020: Böckenförde emlékezete. Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde: Az állam keletkezése mint a szekularizáció folyamata. *Valóság*, LXIII évfolyam, 2020/2, 33-51.

³ Karl Lehmann (1936-2018): bishop of Mainz, Chairman of the Conference of the German Bishops.

We start with a presentation of the broader interconnections before turning to the textual level, which will also help to elucidate the basic coherence of the author's theoretical framework.

The statement cited above, which became known as the "Böckenförde paradox" or the "Böckenförde dictum" was first put forward in a lecture titled *The rise of the state as the process of secularization* in 1964. As the title already suggests, it presented the rise of the modern state in a large historical perspective, as a gradual separation of state and church from the medieval Investiture Controversy to the French Revolution. It was at the end of this overarching historical overview that Böckenförde posed the question about the foundations of the state, and gave his answer in the form of a paradox.

This – at first sight unusual – form, presenting a synthesis of historical analysis and political philosophy has long been applied Böckenförde. During his studies, he obtained two doctoral degrees: one in law in 1956, and another in history in 1960. In both dissertations, he studied (legal) concepts with a hermeneutical approach in a historical context to understand the changes in their interpretation (Künkler–Stein 2017a). According to his account, he learned from Franz Schnabel – the supervisor of his history thesis – how to „think in big structures rather than in empirical details" (Künkler–Stein 2017a, 7). This approach would appear in his 1964 lecture and in many of his later works as well.

His interest in the origins and historical semantics of concepts made it possible for him to play an active role in two important ventures of 20th century German conceptual history. At Heidelberg University – where he taught from 1964 to 1969 – he got acquainted with Reinhart Koselleck, and became a member of a working group on modern social history led by him and Werner Conze. From 1969, they continued their work at the newly created "reform university" of Bielefeld (see Lungreen 1994). It was here that Koselleck's research in conceptual history reached its climax with the famous *Geschichtliche Grundbegriffe*, for which Böckenförde provided the entry "Organ, Organismus, politischer Körper" (Künkler–Stein 2017a, Lemke 2009).

During his years at Münster University, he also became associated with Joachim Ritter and his *Collegium Philosophicum*. Other members of the "Ritter school" were Hermann Lübbe, Odo Maquard, and Robert Spaemann, all of whom had a lasting influence on German thought in the 20th century (Schweda 2010). As Jans Hacke – associate professor at the Humboldt University in Berlin – pointed out, the significance of Ritter's circle was fundamental for the intellectual history of the Federal Republic of Germany, which could no longer be limited to the history of the Frankfurt School (Hacke 2006, 11).

In addition to his involvement in the *Collegium Philosophicum* which had a significant impact on Böckenförde's theoretical interest (Künkler–Stein 2017a), he also took part in the edition of the internationally acclaimed *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, to which he contributed with three entries on normativism, concrete system-thinking (*Konkretes Ordnungsdenken*), and the constitutional state.

Another important factor in his intellectual development was the *Ebracher Ferienseminare*: a sort of conservative protest initiated by Ernst Forsthoff in 1957 against the mass universities of the time, which remains “a living myth of German academic landscape until the present day” (Meinel 2011, 89). The list of lecturers included people like Hans Barion or Carl Schmitt. For Schmitt, who lost his university chair after World War Two, Forsthoff’s invitation offered a rare possibility to get in touch with a new generation of young scholars.

Böckenförde played a significant role in establishing an active connection between the communities of the *Collegium Philosophicum* in Münster and the *Ebracher Ferienseminare*. While Ritter and Forsthoff have known each other from their former studies, it was Böckenförde who personally encouraged Ritter to visit the seminars. Further on, several students of the Ritter circle – Hermann Lübke, Robert Spaemann, and Böckenförde himself – were also invited to give lectures at the summer seminars. (Meinel 2011, 99–100). The cooperation of the two independent academic groups is not a mere historical curiosity, but has an essential significance for our present subject. In many ways, the 1964 lecture was a reflection on the former discussions at Ebrach, or, as Florian Meinel put it, the Böckenförde paradox was only “a minor variation of Ernst Forsthoff’s cardinal statement on constitutional politics” (Meinel 2011, 103).

“A prescribed state ideology, just as the resuscitation of the Aristotelian polis-tradition, or the proclamation of an ‘objective value-system’ eliminates exactly that division on which the state’s freedom is founded” (Böckenförde 1967, 93) – writes Böckenförde, referring to Joachim Ritter’s work on the topic (Böckenförde 1967, n 49). This division, the separation of the secular and the sacred is a fundamental feature of the modern state. It guarantees the independence of the state, but at the same time leads to a paradox: freedom from religious and moral guidance results in the pluralization of society, endangering social cohesion, which is, on the other hand, an inevitable condition for the existence of the liberal state itself. Although Böckenförde only cites Ritter on this point, he actually responds to a problem raised by Forsthoff, whose *Der moderne Staat und die Tugend* formerly argued that only a state with moral foundations may be viewed as truly free (Meinel 2011, 102–103).

The concept of a state based on civic virtues, “the moral substance of the individual” and not on an “objective value system” is also connected to another participant of the seminars, namely Carl Schmitt. Böckenförde’s relationship with Schmitt dates back to the 1950s, when he and his brother Werner – who also worked with Joseph Ratzinger at the time – visited the then almost completely isolated Schmitt, discussing with him both of his doctoral theses (Künkler-Stein 2017a, 14). Böckenförde was thus one of the thinkers who contributed to the rediscovery of Schmitt’s theoretical work in the post-war era (Ingenfeld 2009, 12).

In his investigations of the moral foundations of the state, Böckenförde rejects the notion that these should be grounded in any “objective values”, which would only mean a sort of positivism, the uncritical acceptance of the “daily ranking” of subjective values (Böckenförde 1967, 93). In this regard, he refers to Schmitt’s *The Tyranny of Values*, a work also closely related to the intellectual circle of Ebrach. In his 1959 lecture, Forsthoff had also contrasted “virtue” (based on the individual’s personal choice) to “value” as an external and impersonal principle. This lecture and the debate that followed inspired Schmitt to write *The Tyranny of Values*, which he also sent to Forsthoff a few weeks later (Meinel 2011, 99). In Böckenförde’s

wording, the tyranny of values means that “claiming objective validity for itself, it rather destroys freedom than supports it” (Böckenförde 1967, 93).

The influence of Schmitt is palpable at every level of Böckenförde’s thought. In his theory of the state, Schmitt and Schmitt’s interpretation of Hobbes’ political philosophy play a decisive role. In *The State as an Ethical State* (Böckenförde 2017, 86-107) he refers to Schmitt’s *The Concept of the Political* as a fundamental work “on the connection between the state as an entity of peace and the state as a political entity.” The state as a provider of peace is, of course, a notion borrowed from Hobbes, and it was also Hobbes who inspired Böckenförde’s idea that freedom is inseparable from authority. Freedom presupposes a basic level of unity, just as unity presupposes authority, and this is why the 1964 lecture can refer to Hobbes as the most important author who “defines the state a sovereign unity of decision providing external peace and security” (Böckenförde 1967, 87).

It comes as no surprise that the investigations on the process of secularization regularly return to Hobbes, who offered the most thorough theoretical argument for the independence of the secular state. In Hobbes’ conception, the state serves as a promoter of secular goals, compared to which religion plays a secondary or instrumental role. Böckenförde’s *Security and Self-Preservation* nevertheless “reads Hobbes in a way that leaves the door slightly open to liberalism, with regard to religion: the state’s laws rest entirely on power and authority, they cannot be legitimized on the basis of religious truth” (Künkler-Stein 2017b, 42).

Not all this will make Böckenförde a Hobbesian, to be sure. The issue of religious and moral foundations remains there, even if the 1964 text ultimately refrains from saying that the social homogeneity required for the functioning of the modern state is solely dependent on Christianity (Uetz 1995). Although he focuses on the Christian origins of the secular state, he also maintains that a religiously inspired morality is only one option among others. He cites various possibilities to ground a new consensus: nationalism, reliance on a sort of “natural morality”, or providing for the well-being of citizens on the basis of a “eudaemonist ethics.” While raising doubts about most of these as effective surrogates, Böckenförde remains consistent in claiming that the political unity of the community is not naturally given, but something to be established. This is why we need a common ground, and this is where – despite all his debt to Carl Schmitt – he rejects the Schmittian notion of national homogeneity based on physical or moral qualities (Künkler-Stein 2017a, 13). Böckenförde’s concept of homogeneity owes more to Herman Heller – an advocate of the Weimar Republic in the interwar period – who defined the state as a unity of human actions (Künkler-Stein 2017b), in which homogeneity is a result of a common understanding of what the community is. This common understanding nevertheless remains a product of the citizens’ own convictions (Künkler-Stein 2017a).

In accordance with Heller, Böckenförde thinks that the state is indeed capable of uniting the various forces within it, but only on condition that its citizens consent to it, otherwise the pluralism of the liberal state would suffer. The state naturally supports institutions that provide for homogeneity, but these should be based on civic initiatives: “The emphasis on Catholicism can therefore only be understood as an illustrative example of a religion that, on its own initiative and resources, contributes to the creation of the necessary political homogeneity of the citizens” (Ingenfeld 2009, 12).

This is, at the same time, a call for Christians to act. Böckenförde was a devout Catholic, whose considerations on social cohesion and the moral foundations of the state always had a transcendental dimension. This, however, never prevented him from criticizing the Catholic Church in certain key issues: well before his 1964 lecture, he entered debates on the Church's idea of democracy in his essays *Das Ethos der modernen Demokratie und die Kirche* and *Der deutsche Katholizismus im Jahr 1933* (Schmidt-Wedell 2002). At the time of the Ebrach lecture, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) was still underway, and it was uncertain whether the Church would fully embrace the idea religious freedom. The resolution *Dignitatis humanae* was only accepted at the final session of the Council in December 7th, 1965, so the 1967 publication of Böckenförde's 1964 lecture came as a "moment of truth" for the latter (Bahners 2008; Ingenfeld 2009).

In this light, the former remarks of Böckenförde gain a new significance. In 1598, the Edict of Nantes – granting religious freedom for Protestants in France – was condemned by Pope Clement VIII as "the worst thing in the world" (Böckenförde 1967, n 29). Yet, as Böckenförde – following Hobbes – confirms, treating citizens as citizens, regardless of their religious affiliation does not require an abandonment of religious convictions in general. "The recognition of sovereign governmental decision-making power does not involve denial of faith" (Böckenförde 1967, 88). On the 19th century attempts to revive a "Christian state" he even quotes Karl Marx: "The so-called Christian state is the Christian negation of the state, and certainly not the realization of Christendom by the state" (Böckenförde 1967, 90). Such remarks are best viewed as an exhortation for contemporary Catholics to accept liberal democracy as something that is not fundamentally opposed to their own principles, but something closely related to, even derived from, those principles. As the concluding passage puts it: "Christians should no longer view the state and its secularity as something alien or hostile to their faith, but as a chance for freedom, the preservation and realization of which is their own task as well" (Böckenförde 1967, 94).

Because of his family background and his religious commitment, it would have been an obvious choice for him to join the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (CDU). His criticism of the Church, however, which was not limited to his theoretical works, finally led him to become a member of the Social Democratic Party (SPD). In a 2011 interview, he cited several reasons why he approached the latter: on the one hand, he was worried by the Catholic bishops' treatment of religion as a political instrument, encouraging believers to vote for the CDU at a time when Christian elements in the CDU's program were well on their way to "becoming empty formulas" (Künkler-Stein 2017a, 28). On the other hand, the 1959 congress of the SPD and its so-called Godesberg Program convinced him that "the ideological character of the party was set aside," although he "did not become a one hundred percent SPD member, that is, someone who parrots everything" (Böckenförde 2017b, 397).

In addition, his studies on Lorenz von Stein also confirmed his conviction that "liberal rights can only be enjoyed when socio-economic conditions make it possible" (Künkler-Stein 2017a, 28). Since Lorenz von Stein had also appeared in his 1964 lecture, it seems reasonable to suggest that Böckenförde's work has always combined three dimensions. As Künkler and Stein argue, these three dimensions – the Catholic, the liberal, and the social democrat – all contribute to the uniqueness of Böckenförde's thought that transcends the left/right division, and makes it

possible to view him as a conservative on certain issues, and a progressive on others. During his 13 years as a member of the Constitutional Court of Germany, he consistently held off from public interventions, but after that, he once again became a public intellectual and remained so until his death in 2019.

In sum: although we could see how the famous 1964 dictum fits in the overall context of Böckenförde's works, his place in 20th century German intellectual history, and his personal life story (Hacke 2006), its significance remains disputed. One exciting research topic for the future is how Böckenförde influenced other thinkers in the 20th and 21st centuries, like Jürgen Habermas or Joseph Ratzinger, whose 2004 debate on the moral foundations of the modern state explicitly referred to Böckenförde's paradox. Another timely issue is the role of the state, which Böckenförde – despite all his endorsement of liberalism – saw as a necessary condition of social cohesion, up to the point of recognizing state sovereignty as a provider of both individual freedom and a degree of social homogeneity. And finally, when Christian democratic parties today tend to watch the erosion of Christian values with a sort of resignation, it is also worth asking the question whether Christians actually grew up to their task to represent their commitment in a pluralist democracy, or simply acquiesce to everything that a pluralist democracy means at a certain point of Western history.

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Reinhold Niebuhr on secular religions and communist religion

Introduction

This paper focuses on Reinhold Niebuhr's views on secular religions and communist religion. Besides summarizing Niebuhr's central arguments on these two topics, this paper intends to present some biographical details and a few relevant conclusions of the secondary literature in order to better understand the context of Niebuhr's ideas. However, before the examination, two foundations must be laid down regarding Niebuhr's thought. First, Niebuhr's views have notably changed in his 40 years long scholarly career which might be present in the examined topics as well. Therefore, although I tried to offer an extensive summary based on authoritative sources, other (non-included) writings of Niebuhr might be in contradiction with the unfolded arguments. Second, beside the fact that Niebuhr's style is argumentative (or dialectic), and his writings consist of plenty of substantive arguments and deep reasoning, it highly differs from the extremely precise and disciplined scientific language of the 21st century. These two statements are most visible in the inconsistencies or the lacking definitions regarding some specific terms (e.g. Marxism, Communism, religion).⁴

Niebuhr on secular religions

⁴ As Liang (2007) observes Niebuhr had very different definitions of religion in the end of 1920's, in the 1940's and at the end of 1960's. For an insight on Niebuhr's view on religion see Cavanaugh (2013)

There are plenty of Niebuhrian writings that touch the question of secular religions but one of the most extensive in this topic is his article named the *Christian Church in a Secular Age* (1940a) published in his book entitled *Christianity and Power Politics*. In this article, Niebuhr investigates the topic of secularism as religion and offers a persuasive guideline to the Christians and Christian Churches to confront these secular religions. The normative tone towards Christians and most specifically towards Christian Churches is not unfamiliar in Niebuhr's writings. However, it is even more justified looking at the audience since the content of the article was originally delivered before, at an Oxford Conference on Church and Community in 1937 under the subject of "*The Church Faces a Secular Culture*".⁵

First, Niebuhr argues that "*secularism is most succinctly defined as the explicit disavowal of the sacred*" (Niebuhr, 1940a: 203). As he explicates, in every religion the mysterious holy is the reality upon which all things depend, it is the source of all meaning. For Christians, holiness belongs to God only who created and sustains the world. All history stems from His creative will, the world is judged by him, and his redemption through Christ is necessary for humans to escape the contradictions of their sinful existence. Modern secularism explicitly denies the sacred, but cannot escape from it entirely, says Niebuhr:

Strictly speaking, there is no such thing as secularism. An explicit denial of the sacred always contains some implied affirmation of a holy sphere. Every explanation of the meaning of human existence must avail itself of some principle of explanation which cannot be explained. Every estimate of values involves some criterion of value which cannot be arrived at empirically." (Niebuhr, 1940a: 204)

This statement is essential in order to understand Niebuhr's position since it capsulizes the reason why Niebuhr uses the term secular religions on specific phenomena; for him – as he writes later in his article – there are no irreligious cultures. These are not ahistorical statements. Niebuhr continues his examination as he presents the historical forms of secular religions (e.g. pantheistic forms of secular religions, rationalistic humanism, and vitalistic humanism). Such cultures – although not in the same proportion and form – all contain some forms of religion.

Looking at his era, Niebuhr did not think it was irreligious, only followed an old religion presented in a new form, and this old religion was self-glorification (and deification). According to Niebuhr (1940a), every form of modern secularism contains some specific type of self-glorification and deification. For instance, humanistic rationalism forgets that God is the Creator and the human being is not just a derivation, a creature, but has physical and intellectual limits bound to historical reality. This notion emerges at an individual level as well, as the human being places himself in the first place, to the place of God, committing the quintessence of sins, pride. To sum it up, "*what begins as the deification of humanity in abstract terms ends as the deification of a particular type of man, who supposedly possesses ultimate insights*" (ibid: 206).

On the one hand – although not to a large extent –, Niebuhr continues to detect these sins and religious traces in secular religions and criticizes them. On the other hand, he also highlights that historically, modern secularism was a reaction to a profane Christianity, or, more specifically, "*modern secularism was forced to resist a profanation of the holiness of God both*

⁵ For an impressive insight on the Oxford Conference, including Niebuhr's presentation see Edwin Ewart Aubrey's (1937) article.

in the realm of the truth and in the realm of the good, in both culture and ethics” (Niebuhr, 1940a: 219). To mention some of Niebuhr’s reasons that support this statement: Christian religion (erroneously) thought himself as an epitome of completing the incomplete world, it forgot that theology (which became a “bad science”) is a human discipline and is just as limited as other disciplines. It was false in implementing the specific insights and prejudices of the age. Before the reader might get too worried and/or confused by Niebuhr’s harsh criticism towards Christian religion/culture, it should be mentioned that Niebuhr did not restrain himself and he was at least as critical towards secular religions as towards Christian religion. His main intention with blaming his fellows was to show that the complexity of secularism could be understood by analyzing its history and if one must face the secular religions or the secular culture effectively, they must understand its origin, complexity, and fundamental characteristics.

Niebuhr and communism

Grasping the essence of Niebuhr’s understanding and attitude towards communism, Marxism, and socialism is a tough challenge. It is even more valid if the religious thread of these phenomena are in the focus, not to mention that Niebuhr changed his view on religion, partly because of communism.⁶ It is not intended to begin definitional disputes in this paper – as I already said, Niebuhr was not always disciplined in definitional questions – but for the sake of understanding, three terms (communism, Marxism, socialism) should be distinguished to some extent. These short clarifications should be treated neither as Niebuhr’s literal interpretations nor as definitions but should be viewed rather as an overview based on the used Niebuhrian sources.

Naturally, socialism is the broadest term for Niebuhr, which is a complex historical phenomenon that is usually seen as an ideology or a worldview. Socialism became significant as a result of industrialization and capitalism, its proponents usually had a specific value orientation (e.g. equality, social justice) and could be present in numerous forms (e.g. Christian socialism, Marxist socialism). By Marxism, Niebuhr usually means the teaching of Karl Marx, including his metaphysics, phenomenology, social theory, and philosophy of history. Moreover, the thought of his followers (Marxists) and all those conclusions which are closely connected to the thought of Marx, are usually labeled as Marxist as well. Communism for Niebuhr was a Marxian-based alternative realized in the Soviet Union, mostly a new religion or culture, an alternative to capitalism and Christianity. After these demarcations, a short – partly biographical – introduction of Niebuhr’s attitude towards socialism, Marxism, and Communism will be presented which might help to be familiar with the context of Niebuhr’s ideas on these topics. Then those ideas of Niebuhr will be enlisted and shortly summarized by which he treated communism as a religion.

It is certain that Niebuhr was heartily attentive to the social question from the beginning of the 1920s, partly thanks to his service at the Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit that was heavily influenced by the negative effects of industrialization, capitalism and its effects on human

⁶ Earlier, Niebuhr identified religion with western Christianity, but also grasped its essence in the feeling of awe and humility towards infinity. Furthermore, he has also claimed in his diary that *„religion is the champion of personality in a seemingly impersonal world.”* (quotes Liang, 2007: 82) It is well seen that he was unable to implement these interpretations while he was writing about communist religion. From this time, he found that the central function of a religion is to provide meaning for his life. (Liang, 2007) Later his focus also changed from this perspective.

society. From the end of the decade, Niebuhr felt that the current idealistic forms of Christian Socialism (e.g. the Social Gospel movement) are too weak to offer a solution that eases the pain of the working class. Moreover, he thought that – unlike Marxism – an idealistic liberal Christianity could not properly understand the historical situation of the capitalistic era. Although Christianity should have faced the cruelties and injustices of industrial societies, it became an ingredient of the cement that preserves the current social order in which the (often Christian and hypocritical) middle classes are negligent and/or impotent to face the coercion of the working classes.

These feelings further strengthened after the beginning of the Great Depression.⁷ The capitalistic system cracked for a moment, and searching for forceful opportunities, Niebuhr found Marx.⁸ Niebuhr merged deep into Marxian thought⁹ in the following five years, but before that, he went to the Soviet Union to get an insight into the realization of existing socialism, i.e. the Soviet model. Niebuhr was always critical towards Marxian ideas and Stalinist Russia. However, he viewed Marx as a brilliant thinker who expressed novel and forceful ideas concerning capitalism¹⁰, who provided a realistic understanding of power relations, and whose revolutionary ethics was quite fruitful. Moreover – after visiting Russia – Niebuhr was astonished by the force he had seen from the Russian people who were not just dreaming but actually building their new society. Based on these experiences, Niebuhr thought that communism was a great alternative to capitalism. Furthermore – as Liang (2007) observes – Niebuhr realized the religious nature of Marxism which prompted him to view communism (built on Marxist foundations) as a great alternative to Christianity as well. Niebuhr wrote more articles on this specific topic¹¹ and from that time on he intended to defend his religion playing an apologetic role. Paradoxically, Niebuhr saw communism as a dangerous alternative to Christianity, yet kept on using Marxism as an instrument to defend Christianity. After the success of the New Deal and being informed by the cruelties of Stalinism Niebuhr became an even louder criticist of communism until he died in 1971.¹²

What makes communism a religion?

Niebuhr wrote five articles to the journal of the *Christian Century* about his Soviet trip. In his article entitled the *Land of Extremes* he suggested that “*enthusiasm and the fanaticism in Russia were perhaps the different sides of the same coin*” (Liang, 2007, 55). As a theologian, Niebuhr was interested in the religion of this atheist state. At first sight, he thought that industrialization is the religion in Russia, but as he immersed in the analysis of the Russian experiment, he

⁷ Though partly because of Norman Thomas’s charismatic qualities, but Niebuhr joined to the Socialist Party in 1929. (Fox, 1985)

⁸ Niebuhr was „helped” to find Marx by his plenty of leftist colleagues when he started his professorship at Union Theological Seminary, New York in 1928. For example, in his first Union years Niebuhr was an assistant of Harry Ward’s course on Christian Ethics. Based on Stone (1992), Union and his relationship with Ward radicalized Niebuhr.

⁹ According to Bogárdi Szabó (1998) he called himself a „Christian Marxist” in these years.

¹⁰ As Rasmussen (2005) points out correctly. similarly to Marx, Niebuhr’s focus was also on capitalism and not on communism or socialism.

¹¹ For instance, *The Religion of Communism* or *The Problem of Communist Religion* but several more articles published in the *Christian Century* and later in *Radical Religion* as well. Unfortunately, these articles are hard to be reached, therefore the analysis is heavily grounded on the researches of Liang (2007) published in his impressive dissertation about Niebuhr’s socialism.

¹² Lovin (1995) calls attention to Dennis McCann’s assessment that later Niebuhr became „a post-Marxist” rather than an „anti-Marxist” meaning that some ideas (for instance concerning class struggle) remained repetitive samples of Niebuhr’s writings.

realized that communism was the religion of the Soviet people. Niebuhr argued that although communism was commonly claimed to be an irreligious social philosophy, “*in reality it is a new religion. Its virtues and vices are the virtue and vices of religion*” (Liang, 2007: 89). In his writings, Niebuhr tended to discuss Christian and communist religion as parallels, partly in order to compare them. He mainly focused on the truths and the errors of these religions, first criticizing what was wrong, then hailing and using as an instrument what was right. Hereby, not all these arguments will be displayed, but – using a more analytical approach – only those ideas of Niebuhr by which communism can be treated as a religion, or put into question: what “makes” communism a religion for Niebuhr?¹³

Authority

Niebuhr thought that communism had such an immense authority over its followers that it rivalled with the authority present in other religions. Niebuhr thought that this authority was visible both in the form of the fanatic adoration of the believer and in the visceral hatred of traditional religion.¹⁴ Niebuhr thought that communism’s energy in itself proved that it was a religion.

Dogmatism

Based on Niebuhr’s argument, though communism is avowedly irreligious, its significant attitude is religious. It is not like liberal rationalism it is much more dogmatic than scientific. It has its dogmas that are not just manifestation that should be followed but they are all-encompassing. “*Like all vital religion, it engages the entire human psyche and offers its interpretation of life and the world in order that it may challenge to action in conformity with its “truth”*” (Niebuhr, 1935, 461). In other words, there is a perspective from which the world should be viewed and communism dictated “*the way in which a generation or an individual feels about the meaning of life and by what he regards as ultimate and important.*” (Liang, 2007, 90).

Values

According to Niebuhr, communism as a religion supplies insight into life and history, it sets moral and social goals for an ethical life (Niebuhr, 1935). Moreover, communism sets its moral goals in historical realities, its ideals are not abstract (as Christian love), and it is closer to politics as it fosters political action. These imply that communism is much more powerful in changing the capitalistic system than Christianity.¹⁵ Furthermore, being a representative of specific values that are also present in Christian ethics – like equality and social justice – it is a challenge to Christianity.

¹³ Naturally these are not criteria, meaning that if one or even more characteristic is changed it would still mean that Niebuhr treated communism as a religion. His conclusions are usually justified by substantive reasons, but he was more “instinctual” than to collect these characteristic and view them as criteria.

¹⁴ At this part Liang (2007) uses the word power instead of authority and devotion instead of adoration, but in this form, it might be more precise.

¹⁵ Niebuhr (1935) thought that communism is the strongest in what Christianity is the weakest and the weakest where Christianity is the strongest. He thought that communism is the strongest in the analysis of the political realities while its weakest point is that it does not understand the deepest nature of the individual’s soul.

Drama, hope, and redemption

In Niebuhr's analysis (1935) the typical drama of the communist religion is the conflict of classes and in this drama, the redemptive action is the avowal of that struggle. Communism combines political realism with religious hope; it understands the power structures of the capitalistic system, and it is also aware that economy and politics are a contest of power and interest which results in an injustice society. However, it promises that God (the dialectic of history) will change this status quo, and from the revolt of the oppressed classes a new and perfect social order will be born. For Niebuhr, this is very similar to the Jewish prophetic hope.¹⁶ More specifically, Marxism is a modern application of Jewish prophecy and eschatology as – opposed to the liberal Christianity, which denies human sinfulness – it understands the realities and the tragic dramas of the capitalistic system and offers hope to reach a redemption in historical time and not above it. In a later article, Niebuhr (1940b) acknowledges that Marx gives a secularized version of Jewish prophecy, but as he writes it is “*not nearly as secularized as the liberal mythology*” (ibid, 190).

Not just the result, but also some aspects of the Marxian mythology of history (the dynamics of change) are also close to Jewish visions and are profoundly religious (Niebuhr, 1940b). For a new social order, the old system should be destroyed first. This will not happen by an individual external force but by the system itself that is full of “*inherent contradictions*” (Niebuhr, 1935). Although it is usually expressed in economic terms (market, consumption, tariffs, depression) the dynamic has a moral tone as it is meant that the results of capitalistic injustices will destroy the system itself. Therefore, in this historical progress – similarly to the Jewish thought – judgment precedes mercy. To sum it up, Niebuhr thought “*that communism is a religion in which the victims of capitalistic injustice rescue meaning from chaos by discovering that the logic of history (God) affirms the justice of their cause and promises them an ultimate victory*”¹⁷ (Liang, 2007, 100).

Looking at Niebuhr's analysis the following simplistic pattern can be drawn: first, there is a primitive communism (garden of Eden), then the injustices of the capitalistic system (the original sin) appear. At this stage, someone might call attention to injustices of the capitalistic system (a prophet calls for repentance), but the status quo (sinfulness) remains because of the system's inherent contradictions. The product of the capitalistic system, the oppressed proletariat then destroys the old system (judgment), which leads to a new and perfect social order (redemption).

Religious dream, utopianism

Religious dream and utopianism in the communist religion are closely connected to the religious hope mentioned above, but it partly stems from another source and mainly not from the dialectics of history. Niebuhr always reminds his readers that Marx was the “son of Enlightenment” which resulted in a romantic estimate of human nature. Communism shares the

¹⁶ In a different article, Niebuhr (1940b) expresses this thought with the statement that old paradoxes of Jewish prophecy reappear in the Marxian mythology.

¹⁷ It is seen that Niebuhr also mentions chaos as a part of the formula. He touches this question in other writings as well as he writes that chaos does not necessarily leads to despair, there is a meaning in chaos for a Marxian because it precludes the idealistic society, just like in the case of the Jewish prophets of exile who found meaning in the vicissitudes of their nation. (Niebuhr, 1940b) Based on this quote and the mentioned article it is not clear – at least for the writer of this paper – whether Niebuhr places chaos as a result of the capitalistic system or as a result of the end of the capitalistic system as an intermediate state.

oversimplification of liberalism, which thinks that human nature – even if property corrupts it – is good in itself and is not affected by (the original) sin. This causes the naïve idealism which suggests that in the future the proletariat will be capable of representing a higher moral standard than the bourgeoisie now. Although in this religious dream – which is formulated as an apocalyptic vision – the redemption is placed into the historical realities (it is realized on Earth and not in Heaven) and it is collective (not individual), it is still an idealistic and religious utopia. As Niebuhr (1963) writes, in reality, the view of the egalitarian society – even if it is called “secular” – is in fact a traditional religious dream.

Religious primitiveness

Beside the positive parts of religions, Niebuhr usually mentions typical forms of religious primitiveness and religious sins (in the case of Christianity as well). For instance, in the communist religion the proletarian class is in fact the counterpart of messianic nation or community in early Jewish eschatology. Marxism is right, argues Niebuhr, that there are injustices in capitalistic society that should be changed, but it transmutes this rightful and necessary sense of mission into a demonic pretension. It is demonic since the impulses of nature are falsely mixed with the spirit, and absolute claims are made concerning the values of social groups. It is a primitive tribalism that one social group excludes others and pretends that it is the only representative of meaningful existence and eternal sanctities. This historical view allows the proletariat to see other cultural values as relative and imperfect compared to its absolute values. It is very similar to the prophetic religions where it is felt that a specific individual or social group is the only chosen one. This view causes fanaticism and brutality since other's thoughts will be seen as an instrument of evil and the chosen group will think that they are the only vehicle of God's grace, which might even allow the cruelty to eliminate your enemy. (Niebuhr, 1935; 1940b)

To sum it up, these characteristics are the main reasons why Niebuhr treated communism as a religion. Naturally, other phenomena like Nazism may also be called a (secular) religion, but Niebuhr was never as interested in Nazism as in communism. The latter – as it was seen – contained some proportion of positive features while the former was corrupted to its heart.

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Conclusion

All this is very theoretical, of course. The lesson to be learned from such theoretical investigations, however, is exactly that despite all references to a “neutral”, “secular”, or “liberal” modern state, there is no such thing as a value-free approach to politics. Böckenförde’s paradox calls attention to the fact that a state – any state – is reliant on a moral consensus in society, which in the case of Europe has been inherited from medieval Christianity, and with the erosion of such values, this consensus becomes uncertain.

It should also be added that in a global setting, Francis Fukuyama’s *The End of History and the Last Man* voiced similar doubts about the modern liberal state’s capability of providing a moral cohesion without such a reliance on “pre-modern” values. As the example of communism shows, however, the ambition to replace religious principles with so-called “secular” ones has never been absent. Political ideologies by their very nature produce the same conceptual and institutional structures as traditional forms of belief, of which communism is only a spectacular example. Liberalism (as an “ism”), or democracy (as a belief in the “sovereignty of the People”), or the rule of law (as a sort of juristocracy) all betray similar inclinations.

Recent events in the Western world do not point toward a religiously or morally neutral public sphere at all. What we see is rather a highly moralized, even covertly religious (absolutistic, dogmatic, highly exclusive) set of principles and practices that all strive to determine our societies’ future. Christians should therefore feel no obligation to remain outside these struggles in the name of an ill-conceived “religious neutrality”, and the same goes to states and governments. The question is no longer how to confine religious convictions to the “private sphere”, but how to represent them in the political arena.