

# Individualism and the Myth of Secularity

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At the moment, we hear nothing but condemnations of individualism: young people are overly self-preoccupied; nobody cares about anyone other than themselves; there is no sense of community, no-one thinks beyond the narrow range of their own self-interest; and so it goes on. Modern self-concepts are essentially anti-social, and this anti-social self is a product of a social-liberal ideology which places all the emphasis on personal autonomy. It's a critique that's been around for quite some time (one thinks of that old work by C. B. McPherson, *Possessive Individualism*).

What distinguishes this latest iteration of the theme is that at the forefront are Christian theologians rather than political scientists. Thus David Bentley-Hart, in *Atheist Delusions*, remarks that "we live in an age whose chief value has been determined, by overwhelming consensus, to be the inviolable liberty of personal volition, the right to decide for ourselves what we shall believe, want, need, own or serve". A denunciation, in other words, of what became known in the 1960's as 'the consumer society'. But perhaps also a trace of that long-standing Christian prejudice against commerce?<sup>1</sup> In short, the odium of the money economy, which in the European post-Christian world of the 19<sup>th</sup> century acquires a new lease of life in the pseudo-atheism of Marx and Marxism, complete with eschatological overtones.

Of course, a confrontation between Christianity and modernity is by no means something new. In the past, the Church has either sought accommodation (i.e., the Second Vatican Council), fought rear-guard actions, or hoped that what it traditionally perceived as a threat to its own existence - in the form of either atheistic humanism or secular ideologies of social emancipation (i.e., socialism and communism) - would simply wither away. Not anymore. In this latest effort of Christian theology to engage in dubious combat with the massive and formless of events of our times, it has embraced as a propaedeutic the theoretical arsenal of its adversary, in the form of sociological methods quite broadly.

In particular, it takes up what is perhaps the most characteristic element of the sociology of modernity. I mean the idea of *secularism*. Not unlike Marxism, this is an idea which continues to seduce the most credulous and the most intelligent. Generally, the notion is that in the modern age, human existence has been divested

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1 For reasons that it would take too long to go into here, Judaism never had this problem.

of all transcendental categories of being. Modernity is the triumph of dead matter and a scientific materialism which eviscerates all spiritual values. A radical immanentism, so we're told, has become the dominant model for Western culture. But is this modern materialism really so antagonistic to the claims of the spirit? Or does it in fact allow such claims to flourish under the disguise of mythologies?

Then there is the notion that secularity is the sign of a god-less or atheistic epoch. On this level, the concept sounds indefensible. Are we not accustomed to thinking of the modern age as defined by the 'death of God'? And does not the demise of the transcendental god coincide with the rise of modern mass societies, which "exalt naturalness and the rationality of unlimited desire against traditional conceptions that rejected it as greed, lust, sin"<sup>2</sup> On this level, as an interpretation of modernity, secularism has the advantage of illustrating a basic symptom of industrial civilization. The problem arises when it starts to be used indiscriminately as the explanation for every kind of social dysfunction. One reason for this is the sheer quantity of scholarship devoted to exploring the theme. It becomes difficult to discuss ideas when they're presented as irrefutable, or when the questions are posed in such a way that the answers are predetermined.

We might almost say that so much discourse around the topic of secularism *produces* the phenomenon it seeks to substantiate. In the meantime, what's not noticed is that the secular is a concept defined by a negation. But the problem is that a critique which advances on the basis of a negative usually discovers exactly what it set out to find. For instance, if one says the 'true essence' of the individual is negated by conditions of work and social relations in the modern world, it's remarkable how many phenomena can be found to confirm exactly this hypothesis.

Perhaps most importantly, the negative constitutes, through suppression, the term that it occludes. Thus the religious arises in the figure of *loss*, whilst the secular is religion's shadow. To exist as a shadow is to be at once everything and nothing. Moreover, in this ineffable form, religion becomes a repository of dreams, hopes and fears, something into which people can invest anything they like. A key example is the notion that religion is about *meaning*. The imputation is that modern people in search of meaning are really, without knowing it, in search of religion. A classic expression of this view is the following statement of Julian Huxley, which could stand for an entire tradition of modern thinking about religion:

"the essence of religion springs from man's capacity for awe and reverence . . . the objects of religion, however much rationalized later by intellect or moralized by

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2 Massimo Cacciari, *The Unpolitical. On the Radical Critique of Political Reason*, 133.

ethics, however fossilized by convention or degraded by superstition, are in essence those things, events and ideas which arouse the feeling of sacredness”.<sup>3</sup>

For Huxley, the “capacity for awe and reverence” constitutes a sort of transcendental *a priori* of all human spiritual experience. A key example here are those affective phenomena - “things, events and ideas” - that Huxley gathers together under the rubric of a “feeling of sacredness”. Modern sociologies of religion elevate the idea of the sacred into a universal paradigm, a proxy for every religious phenomenon under the sun (whereas in reality, it is but a rationalization of Christian theological categories<sup>4</sup>); in meantime, religion becomes *mythology* - that is, a *symbolic form* through which the human spirit comes to expression.<sup>5</sup> But in this guise, religion turns into *ideology*, because the latter is precisely what mythologies are. This, in turn, casts new light on the conundrum of the secular, in which we can now recognise not so much an anti-religious tendency as the inverted mirror-image of the mythological god.

Mythology - now we can see it for what it is: corrupt religion - is the post-secularist refuge for superficial minds, the culmination of every pseudo-ontological credo of our age. On the other hand, if there is a genuine secularist tendency, it would be the negation not so much of religion as paganism. In this sense, the latter is neither “the negation of the spirit, nor the ignorance of a unique God but a radical powerlessness to get out of the world. It consists not in denying spirits and gods, but in situating them in the world”.<sup>6</sup> This is why in our era the false discourse on secularism is accompanied by a proliferation of political mythologies (in particular, I’m thinking of those who worship that imperfect god called the state). But it might also explain why political theology has been a constant accompaniment of those mythological aspirations - in particular, the world-immanent mythology of the ego - which define two millennia of Christian civilization.

But why should it be important to distinguish between a true and a false idea of secularism? Only because contemporary theological critiques of the individual seem unaware that, by taking on board modern sociology’s framing of the idea

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3 *Religion Without Revelation*, 54.

4 It cannot be stressed too much that the mythological notion of the sacred runs contrary to the strict meaning of Biblical monotheism, which has always been the very anti-thesis of all mythological religion. On this theme, see Yehezkeil Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel. From its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, 1-69.

5 Here I’m thinking of the Neo-Kantian philosopher, Ernst Cassirer, in particular his *Language as Symbolic Form*.

6 Emmanuel Levinas, quoted in Claire Katz, *Levinas and the Crisis of Humanism*, 67.

of the secular, they're liable to land themselves in some pretty awful company. For in the wake of contemporary anti-secularism, should religion be identified with the sacred, it becomes very difficult to argue against those political religions of the last century which decimated humanity. After all, did they not claim to be a bulwark against the rising tide of a 'God-less' modernity? Leo Strauss argued that the modern world is built on the "untrue assumption" that there's nothing wrong if the contemporary person lacks an "awareness of sacred restraints".<sup>7</sup> Actually, modern history demonstrates precisely the opposite.

The idea of the sacred does not serve, and has never served, to restrain anyone. Quite the contrary, when sacrality becomes the measure of humanity, to the extent that any concept of the sacred is a mythology, and because every mythology is governed by a strict logic of immanence, there will be no limits to what ruthless things people can do to each other; not by chance has the charge that modern society holds 'nothing sacred' been the rallying cry of every Fascist and authoritarian political regime.<sup>8</sup> These connections are not fortuitous. On the contrary, they go to the very heart of the concepts themselves. And so today, the New Right describes a 'decadent Europe' in the form of atheism, liberalism and secularism.

Can this be dismissed as a case of bad faith? Isn't genuine religion here being distorted by an ideology? But it's an historical fact that every political philosophy which expressed hostility to the ethics of the Hebrew Bible also extolled non-democratic state forms, a *re-sacralisation* of politics that worships power. This is certainly the case with those arch-political mythologies of our times, Fascism and Communism, which created a social universe of un-freedom that pulverized individuals into dust. Moreover, one only need see what happened to Christian religious faith in the USSR to realize that a spiritual community of belief is impossible without a society which respects the integrity of the individual, and that the latter is precisely the heritage of genuine monotheist spirituality.<sup>9</sup>

If reactionary political philosophies identify liberalism as their sworn enemy, we can hardly expect them to defend the values of justice and respect for individuals which are the foundation of the religious traditions of the West. And if it is the role of the sceptical individual to teach humanity the danger of political mythologies, then scepticism is anything but a threat to genuine, that is, non-

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7 *On Tyranny*, 192.

8 It should come as no surprise, then, that the Catholic polemicist and novelist, George Bernanos, an avowed anti-modernist, was also a vicious anti-Semite.

9 Just how much this is the case is evident from the observations of Czeslaw Milosz, in *The Captive Mind*, who remarks that Orthodox Priests under Soviet Communism were required to make all kinds of moral concessions to the regime.

mythological religion. We don't need theology to remind us that atheism is a "delusion", or atheism to remind us that God is a 'phantom'. Certainly, all through the 19<sup>th</sup> century, haunted by the spectres of a millennia of Christian civilization, perhaps all these ghosts were chased away too quickly (or not quickly enough?); chased away because, obviously, they did not exist (of course they do not exist - well, so what?).

Yes, God is dead. Europeans have known this for over a century. At the same time, a simple 'return to religion' will not solve the current inner uncertainty of the West<sup>10</sup> (a condition which, again, is not without historical substance, as should be evident from the history of the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century). Atheism is neither the enemy of revealed religion nor the apotheosis of individualism. As G. K. Chesterton well understood, what atheism makes impossible is not religion but reason. True conversion means the liberation of the spirit in each individual from egocentrism. Religion also teaches this true conversion, but the latter does not hang on a decision from God. It is carried out by the individual's own efforts, with the assistance of grace, to rise above themselves (in this sense, such a conversion is also the virtue of the scientist).

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10 Hannah Arendt was quite clear about this. See in particular her essay on the subject of religion and modern intellectuals, in Arendt, *Essays in Understanding. 1930-1954. Formation, Exile and Totalitarianism*, 368-390.