

Secularization: Conversion and Exhaustion of Religious Energy

1.

It is quite normal in sociology and even more so in other human sciences that the same social phenomena and problems are perceived, interpreted and explained in totally different or opposite ways. This is particularly the case within and outside relevant sciences for the term “secularization”. Many sociologists working in this field are of the opinion that this doesn’t happen at all, for others it is so varied and even contradictory that one cannot speak of only *one* process of a constantly spreading “secularization”. Others, on the other hand, are exactly of this opinion and take it for granted that secularization is an integral part of modernization – a term which itself has many different meanings but is still unavoidable – and that it unmistakably takes place globally¹.

2.

This dispute of opinions continues in this case as in many other similar ones *ad infinitum* as long as the meaning of “secularization” has not been defined. I shall give in a few words my definition so that it will become clear what secularization (as conversion etc.) means to me.

This definition, as any other, cannot claim to define the “essence” of secularization. In the field of empirical scientific knowledge, it is not the question of the real substance of the subject, but instead of what seems important from a specific point of view and is therefore “essential” - this investigation of which should deliver the best possible answers to certain questions. Definitions, so understood, are therefore not in themselves true and correct, but help to perceive and solve specific problems.

3.

This last consideration allows me recommend to link it closely to what Max Weber called the “disenchantment of the world” (“Entzauberung der Welt”). A religious but *not* disenchanted view of life is therefore given when – not also and somehow, but in the first place – it is specifically considered true that world events generally, but also one’s own (social and personal) life, are

created, preserved and threatened by the superhuman though *meaningfully* acting powers. This action and its meaning are to be understood by everybody in a manner – though not to the same degree - necessary for all, though it cannot be reciprocated to a same degree or in the same manner by all. This understanding comprises the idea that reality and actions of those powers are only partially or not at all accessible (“calculable and controllable”) to human beings, their needs and wishes. This transcendent reality, impenetrable and unquestionable for human thought and action, which institutes *meaning and obligation* should be a constituting trait of a “religious” world- and self-understanding, however manifold its manifestations might be.

“Disenchantment of the world” therefore means that the assumption of a “rear world” (“Hinterwelt”) progressively loses or has already lost the general social or cultural validity. Hence it follows that it becomes progressively and finally totally impossible to justify and meaningfully explain, social, cultural or political arrangements of such unavailable transcendence to all people concerned. This cuts the link between the various spheres of social, cultural and political life, the remaining destiny, which means its signification and its claim lie exclusively with the people to dispose and utilize their empirically verifiable existence².

The power which decisively accelerates and consummates this process of disenchantment of the world is, according to Weber, that of the modern science, because it allows a form of knowledge and mastery (including self-knowledge and self-mastery) which can claim, according to generally reproducible reasons, universal validity.

Understood in this way, disenchantment follows scientificization (resp. “intellectualization”) of the relation to the world. The concept of secularization denotes then the same event and its result in accordance with the view that religion – and exactly for this reason – is losing or has lost its culturally dominant and generally significant binding function.

Beyond this point “religion” can and will, according to the defined conditions of secularization, continue to exist and develop in various forms. There can and also will be a further productive and critical relationship to other spheres of thinking and may also achieve certain effects. To the same extent as it loses its way of existence and efficiency (as e.g. in the Czech Republic or the DDR, or rather the Eastern part of the present German Republic) one should rather speak of “profanation” than secularization³.

4.

Following my preparative reflections and conceptual definitions I will now proceed to the real topic. I believe that all previous studies and contradictions concerning secularization, its dynamics and their consequences very little, if any thought has been given to it. In any case no separate analysis was undertaken. It is commonly assumed that, following secularization (if such, following this underlying concept, is perceived at all), religious world-relationship – slower or faster, continuously or in form of radical (quite often brought about by force) “ruptures” – is weakened, dissolves or disappears without being substituted. What I now provisionally want to address is mainly aimed at this presumption of disappearance without trace or replacement as well as the concomitant lack of effects of this *dissolution*. I believe that religion, while it disappears as *religion*, can show effects cultural importance of which is too great to ignore.

These effects result from what I shall try to describe as a “*conversion of religious energy*”.

5.

I shall start with three observations. The first two are known and much discussed, the third is not.

- a. European culture generally, modern European culture specifically, owes many of its great creations (especially in the fields of science – mathematics, natural sciences but also in sociology, philosophy and in the arts) in high proportion to people of *Jewish* descent. Typically creative works lie *outside* the religious or theological sphere (even without any direct or ostentatious connections) and very often the religious upbringing or character of these persons are alien or have become unimportant. They don't figure as *homines religiosi* or are not perceived as such. Quite often they seem decidedly a-religious or atheistic, even express themselves this way, but there seems to be a good reason for their special creativity and energy in one or another field being closely linked to their religious experience or education which have influenced them fundamentally.

An example: The view is that the history of mankind stems from a (linear) history of examination, ordeal, alienation and eschatological fulfilment as redemption stems from the Jewish and also Jewish-Christian religion and theology. In the 18th and 19th centuries, influential thinkers removed religious connotations and transformed it into a system which was purely inner-worldly ideas and (politi-

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cal) motivations. In the place of God's kingdom man's kingdom, *regnum hominis*, arrived as the aim and fulfilment of history. Karl Marx and Ernst Bloch are the most important and effective among these thinkers; Bloch's thought has a very strong messianic and apocalyptic component – stronger than the claim of strict empirical science advocated by Marx.

- b. As for the Judaism, it has been remarked that within Christian tradition, *Protestantism* also produced many remarkably creative and innovative people which were working *outside* the religious-ecclesiastical sphere – not always but often while removed from this religious background.

The greater picture of this problem is well described by the title and contents of Ernst Troeltsch's book *The Significance of Protestantism for the Development of the Modern World* (1906). Lübke said that Protestantism, in the face of the progressing secularization, praises its cultural achievements, which arrived in the present through this past, in this "classical self-portrait of cultural Protestantism".

In the context of these general issues, the protestant vicarage received special attention. It is assumed that this religious, moral and intellectual high-density biotope produced disproportionately high number of important personalities mainly between the 17th and the 19th centuries, at least in Germany. The great works created by these people stemmed – not always but quite frequently – from the conscientious *turning away from* the protestant religiosity and ecclesiasticism (like in the case of Gottfried Benn) or one of the most radical oppositions against any form of religious "rear world" (the case of Friedrich Nietzsche).

- c. The third observation, for which I claim certain originality, was the observation which led me to the train of thought which I present here. It concerns the second of the two great confessions and forms of socialization within Western Christianity, Roman *Catholicism*. The field of observation is narrower than in the other two cases: I am initially and mainly concerned with Catholicism in German-speaking countries in the 19th and 20th centuries.

This observation reads: a remarkable increase of cultural productivity of Catholicism in this period and in this part of the world coincides with certain and relative exhaustion of "cultural importance" (Max Weber) of Protestantism. This cultural productivity cannot be explained solely as direct expenditure but more as religious *conversion* – Catholic – energy.

If this interpretation is correct, it should be possible to prove that in the various parts of this social elite (scientific, political, commercial, artistic) the percentage of individuals with a Catholic background and character was significantly increasing (and even disproportionate) and that about this kind of cultural efficacy showed the “Catholicity” of intellectual energy clearly. Such an empirical (even statistical) analysis could be carried out and would certainly be worthwhile.

It is relatively uncommon, but at the same time especially exciting, to investigate Catholicism with a view of conversion of religious energy. One would question in this way the opinion popular in large parts of science, but also within Protestantism, especially its liberal part, that Roman Catholicism were principally incompatible with modern culture and could not therefore relate to it in productive and innovative ways.

Though it may be that it is exactly in the conscious and fundamental reservation of Catholicism with regard to main ideas, motivating forces and powers of cultural and socio-political modernization resides the essential reason which preserved this convertible potential of religious energy. Therefore, it doesn't seem surprising that exactly this religious energy – in its original but also probably in its converted form – became very active in a historical era of which many and certainly well-meaning and intelligent observers thought that the “project of modernity” wasn't quite finished and surpassed, but definitely disenchanted and in a deep crisis of intellectual, ideological and ethical, but also the political and socio-economical nature. This is certainly the case at the end of the 19th and at the beginning of the 20th centuries, after to the prelude of the European Romantic period (and its “Catholicizing” tendencies). Subsequently, eras of totalitarianism must have corroborated this opinion since these proved particularly destructive and were considered specifically modern.

Let me give you two examples. The way of thinking of the two most important and innovative philosophers of the 20th century, Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger, stems, not exclusively but quite strongly, from a conversion of religious energy, mainly of Catholic roots. I will go into details but refer instead to another philosopher (and political theorist), namely Carl Schmitt. His writings about the conversion of religious and respectively theological into political *semantics* are very important, though controversial. But the dynamics and claim of his own thought are also an example of the conversion (and perversion) of religious, namely Catholic energy. A lesser-known but also rather important political philosopher and renowned scholar of Hobbes, Bernard Wilmms, who was decisively faithless and anti-Church, is known to have said a sentence that equally suits Carl Schmitt: “I am as Catholic as the grass is green”.

6.

The main idea of my considerations says that due to an intensive religious education (and therefore: self and world building), history of life and thought will create a spiritual (and even emotional or motivating) result and a corresponding will of action. This is confined to this religious-ecclesiastical association of origin and confirmation but which can also – more or less, slowly or rapidly, partly or at the end completely – be transferred to other contents and spheres of action. Religious experience and actions survive thematically but in such a way that through a change of attitude, life-determining *realities* (and truths) become *possibilities*, existential realities become state of affairs of objective, theoretical observation and explanation (a step from religiosity to sociology of religion, from theology to philosophy of religion or science of religion). Such a change of attitude should certainly not aim at removing the topic – the matter of religion – (as in the “materialistic” or religious critique of Feuerbach-Marx) or at least to neutralize, but to maintain and save over time *in the mode of possibility* – in its vital efficiency but also in its intellectual disseminating und motivating power (conversion as conservation in the mode of possibility).

Of course, this field of religious experience and activity can be totally abandoned – in any case thematically and explicitly – to be replaced (according to talent, leanings or opportunities) with empirical scientific research in the political, respectively economic fields or in the arts.

7.

I am mainly referring to the process of this displacement and thematic change of spiritual energy when I am talking about “conversion” of religious energy. This energy was originally created and active in the religious-ecclesiastical context and directed to extra-religious topics and fields of action.

In this way I also want to say that there not only exists in the spiritual field its own energy and, therefore, its own power and dynamics (directed towards penetration of the world and formation of the world), but also something like a law of preservation of energy – and possibly even “heat death”.

In opposition to the physical change of one kind of energy into another, the religious character of this energy is preserved (more or less clearly and durably) – and we can now designate the result of the conversion as “quasi-religious”.

8.

It is quite clear that manifestations of religious energy according to kind, aim and strength – as well as regarding its convertibility – take very different forms. Referring to the previously outlined directions concerning energy of *Catholic* origin one can add the following ideas:

- Universe in general and the history of humanity in particular are not only subjects of natural causality or blind contingency, but are to be considered as God's creation and as destined for perfection;

- In these events of nature and, particularly, of historical orders of the human life have an absolute meaning is recognizable;

- Human beings, in communal or individual efforts face the task to confront these events and to participate in them with according to their capabilities;

- They should not just vegetate or enjoy their lives but should earnestly and truthfully lead their lives (according to the criterion of unconditional truth);

- This life-leading and life-forming should not be limited to seeing and treating the world as the place and matter of strict (and, radically seen, totally individual) morality, but to aim at the fullness of human possibilities, determined by the beauty of nature and human creations; and

- That compassion with all other human beings includes the necessity and readiness to substituted suffering (and penitence). (And furthermore: consciousness of deep sinfulness; but also: relief through confession and good deeds etc).

This list is incomplete but could – following the guidelines of Max Weber's adequacy of sense – be further developed into an empirically usable ideal type. Apart from constructing such a syndrome of ideas and motivations, sociology should obviously ask a question about those communities and institutions, in which this syndrome is continuously created, modified them and passed on (families, schools, local communities, youth groups but also circles of intellectuals). These communities are concerned to preserve, improve and transmit comprehensive but at the same time well defined worlds of knowledge and faith. At the same time and even more so, they seek binding fixation and interiorization of high, if not highest, final aims, claims and demands.

9.

These considerations – though provisional and inadequate – stem from and are motivated by the assumption that this religious energy, including religious energy of Catholic origin, incessantly exhausts itself, at least within European culture. Increasingly, this form of intellectual energy is not “regenerative” or “renewable”. The sustainability of this development cannot be (or not any more) taken for granted and no calls for upholding Christian “values” will change anything, even if they were taken seriously.

We shall not assume total disappearance of this religious energy and its potential for conversion but have to accept further diminutions. A reversal of direction of this conversion is principally possible, but empirically and theoretically rather unlikely.

If the presence, the power and the efficiency of religious energy is further disappearing in (nearly?) all European societies, *then* we have to consider that it will have wide-reaching effects such as this: the potential of spiritual energy which nourished and is still nourishing cultural dynamics and productivity of modernity – directly, but also extensively in the way of conversion (in all its forms) will come to an end. Nothing lets us assume that this potential of intellectual energy can be substituted from other sources.

10.

Following the previous exposition one has to look, even though only in passing, at the situation with other formations, communities and churches of Christian religiosity as well as non-Christian world religions and their influence on culture, societies and states up to the present day.

Of course, this is a vast area and therefore I would like, on this occasion, to limit myself to present at least some reflections and conjectures regarding the potential of conversion of the “Eastern” Orthodox Christianity. For this purpose I would like to use Max Weber’s preparative work in two ways.

To begin with, it is clear that the so-called Protestantism-theory is *also* a conversion-theory insofar as it includes the statement that the original genuine religious energy – earlier or later – lost its religious significance. Although it didn’t lose its vital and decisive action, but its active power was directed purely towards inner-worldly aims. This shift of significance and aim is, according to Weber, of dialectical character because ascetic Protestantism had a very critical attitude towards mundane goods and pleasures generally, and towards material wealth in particular. At the same time, Protestantism, which is frequently overlooked, according to Weber’s judgement regard-

ing the ethics motivated by it, was radically individualistic, even egocentric and distinguished by a decisive “non-fraternity”. From its perspective, every single person is, in the end, only concerned about the certainty of his own salvation and could contribute to neither his own salvation nor to that of other human beings with good deeds or by (also substitutive) prayers and penitence.

This is the first reference to Weber. The second one classifies these considerations into a general framework, referred to by Weber as “theoretical”. The main assumption says that the possibility of conversion, as well as the kind and extent of the potential of conversion of the spiritual energy created in a religious context is closely linked with the fact whether the religious relation in itself affirms or rejects, if not radically denies the world (“world” is to be understood as embodiment of inner-worldly happiness, pleasure, well-being and wealth).

Here we have to say that the potential of conversion is not, as one might have thought, stronger in world-affirming, but in world-rejecting religious relations. It is only in the case of the radical forms of religiously motivated world-denial and world-flight that we should not expect remarkable inner-worldly productivity (through conversion) at its dissolution. A world-affirming attitude (which, in the given context of the exclusively thematized redemption and salvation religions cannot exist) will undergo the conversion process in an almost unnoticeable fashion and will set free relatively little energy until then religiously bounded, to be redirected towards worldly aims and problems (one could also interpret this, as it was undertaken with regard to Confucianism, that it was never considered as “religion” in its own right).

I would have to address now, how, from this point of view, given the actual conditions, the actual or future potential of conversion of “Eastern”, Orthodox Christianity appears. This is an exciting question which I cannot (and not only at this point) treat or answer adequately. Clearly, it has to do with a form of Christian faith, way of life and community building, which tends not only towards world rejection but also world negation. That is how Max Weber judges the situation, without engaging with Eastern Christianity in a comprehensive and systematic way - this at least where he saw Eastern Christianity represented - radically and as an ideal type - in Tolstoy’s personality, life and teaching, especially in the form of unconditionally demanded “acosmic ethics of love”.

Notes:

1. In view of this dissent, Charles Taylor's idea of different "modes of secularism" tends to be accepted with a great deal of relief and agreement. It is however doubtful that the problem of secularization can be durably solved in this manner ("managing diversity") – just as Eisenstadt's talk of "multiple modernities" does not answer the question of the commonality of all modernities, but instead makes it even more inevitable.
2. Although it is not logically necessary, but it is nonetheless factual consequence of this idea, that every implication of transcendence within the religious sphere should be rejected.
3. This conceptual difference can be found in a similar form, but based upon a different perspective in the work of Giorgio Agamben.