

SPAZIO APERTO

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Secularization – a process of gradually excluding the areas of common and individual life from the influence of religion – is a very complicated issue. In the West – where the importance of the secular social order has been growing over the last centuries to the disadvantage of *christianitas* – it has provoked a great number of studies and various reactions. This paper cannot obviously deal with all the complexity of this phenomenon. Its purpose is limited: it aims to draft an overview of the most fundamental strategies of Christian reaction to secularization and it proposes their basic evaluation. But before we can get to that point, we first have to understand the complex origins of this process.

A complex story

If we look for a very general description of the main motif of secularisation, it might be sketched as the shift from a theocentric social order to an anthropocentric one. And the crucial historic moment for this shift – in the light of the history classes we all get at school – has to be connected with the 15th-16th century movement of the Renaissance. But, as we all know, such deep changes always have a much more complex structure. They start centuries before and are concluded centuries after. In order to help us keep in mind that we are speaking about some really polyphonic change, in its structure, one that depends on many factors which should be located on different levels of our social and intellectual life, let's try to summarize its most obvious factors.

1. **The Copernican Revolution.** With the discovery of the central place of the Sun – and not the Earth – the cosmic model on which the religious imagination relied was questioned. Newton's physics, with its empty infinity instead of the medieval skies full of music and harmony, deepened the feeling of being lost in space. These feelings were subsequently somewhat assuaged by Einstein's theory of relativity. Nevertheless, it is quite justified to say that, in the modern period, the earth on which a Christian believer stood, has "fled from under his feet".
2. **Geographical Discoveries.** It is well-known that, in the Middle Ages, Franciscan missionaries arrived in China,

and the European courts enjoyed the company of people from many different races. But all these contacts happened on the margins of the well-established *christianitas*. For Aquinas, for instance, it was clear that the Gospel had already been preached to all people (cf. *Super Rom*, X, 1. 3; ed. Marietti, n. 848). Geographical exploration and its discoveries opened the eyes of Western civilisation to the fact that there exist other, parallel civilisations, and that these civilisations have existed for centuries without any possibility of being confronted with the Word of Revelation. It would take centuries to digest the importance of this fact, but the invention of printing made information about it available to more than a small elite.

3. **Religious Wars.** We should not forget the bloody experience of the wars in the 16th and 17th centuries between Christians, due to confessional differences. Historians help us understand that the difference between confessions was a useful instrument in political conflicts, with rising national identities and politics in the background. Nevertheless, it was a traumatizing experience for many countries in Europe – in many cities and villages in the theatre of operations (for example, in German speaking countries), the loss of civilian populations reached between 40-60 %.
4. **The Industrial Revolution.** The appearance of machines that could replace human beings in their activities brought another set of challenges to the theocentric world of the past. First of all, this new sector of activity entered onto the scene as a part of a world which was beyond the interest or reach of the Church. It took some time to bring religious reflection and attention to the area of social life submitted to the new rules of the economy. This new kind of activity transformed the social hierarchy. The

new "nobility", generated by ownership of capital, was less connected to traditional values, while the migration of whole populations from villages to cities in search of work often provoked a loosening of connection to older traditions of identity, with their religious roots.

5. **The Autonomy of Reason.** Étienne Gilson claimed that one of the most important philosophical "discoveries" in the Western Middle Ages was a change in the understanding of the role of the master. For Saint Augustine – and the tradition following him – the Master whom we should follow is Christ, speaking in the depths of our hearts. For Saint Thomas, the Master whom we should follow is our reason, that helps us to illuminate the reality around us. This "discovery" gave the theoretical basis for the development of empirical investigation, and opened the way for a recognition of the autonomy of reason. For Aquinas, this autonomy relies on the Creator – reason is His greatest gift to us. Unfortunately, from a Christian point of view, subsequent centuries begin to lose the understanding of this crucial connection between reason and the Creator.
6. **A Voluntarist Understanding of Authority.** Unfortunately, it was not only the relationship to reason and rationality that would become distorted in the modern era. A similar fate awaited the relationship between will and authority. Over time, authority came to be interpreted as not connected to reason and as free from the boundaries of rationality. This shift has a complicated past with its germ in the medieval discussions on Divine Omnipotence and the Papal power. With the rise of nominalism in the Late Middle Ages, it will gain a strong foothold in European thinking.
7. **A Reductionist Approach to Causality.** The scientific method proposed by Francis Bacon (1561–1626) reduced the analysis of reality to effi-

What should be the Christian response to secularization? A handful of reflections*

Michał Paluch

cient causality, so that the place of formal and final causes was removed from reflection. This minimalistic approach gave spectacular fruits in the area of empirical sciences – our technological prowess was made possible by the precision of this method. Nevertheless, the anti-metaphysical side of this approach has very important consequences for our understanding of the relationship between the Creator and the universe. If we follow this proposed way of thinking in a consistent way, across all our fields of research, the world becomes a big machine mechanistically understood and put into motion by the Divine Power (Omnipotence). The world no longer takes part in the multidimensional mystery of God's presence, articulated in His various attributes. A great number of the problems to be found in the area of "science – faith" depend on this reductionist shift. Clashes around the theory of evolution, for example, were provoked in part by this problem of method.

The above list is certainly not comprehensive. But I hope that it is rich enough to help us understand the complexity and variety of different factors that have provoked the process of secularization in the Western hemisphere. One cannot easily sum all these factors up, saying either that it was a kind of fate that had to happen, and that human influence has not been important in its development, or that secularization happened because of the bad will of those who wanted to reject God and cast out his influence from the social order.

How to react?

Christian strategies for dealing with the process of secularization could surely be presented with the help of a nuanced typology. But the main lines of different reactions seem always to have been three. Are they not the lines of our reactions to all the challenges we meet?

I) Back to the better past

The first kind of reaction is quite obvious and well-known. The past order was the right one – with God in the centre of our social order and the church on the highest hill in the village. We should try to keep it going, at least to the extent possible for us, with the help of traditional forms of life that we have inherited from our forebears. Modernity and post-modernity will pass as thunderstorms pass, but the Chris-

tian community – perhaps not as big and influential as in the past, but strengthened by adversity – will continue to pass the torch of tradition to future generations.

A good and genuinely noble example of such an approach may be found in the famous essay written by Romano Guardini, *The End of the Modern World*. The end of World War II seemed to this outstanding Christian intellectual to be a very good moment for a bitter accounting with modern ideologies. He drafts a program of renewal which consists in reinvigorating Christianity from traditional, pre-modern sources.

II) Choose a better present

The second reaction aims to evaluate the process of secularization more positively. Christians should learn from modernity. Modernity should be considered as an important step in spiritual growth. There is no way back to the past, or to the way of articulating Christian mysteries as we had them in the past. We should risk a new form of Christian faith, strong in the conviction that God did not act only in the past and that He wants us to reformulate the way we live the faith today.

The most famous example of such an approach are the letters written by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in prison in 1943-44. His idea of a non-confessional Christianity reconciled with the modern world provoked major discussion and a series of different attempts to develop a programme for such an approach in the Western hemisphere (F. Gogarten, J. B. Metz). It is perhaps worth mentioning that quite often the Hegelian scheme "thesis – antithesis – synthesis" came in handy in this context. After the thesis of traditional Christianity (Antiquity and the Middle Ages), we should pass through the antithesis of modernity with its atheism, in order to find the final desired synthesis. According to such lines, Hans Küng has attempted to develop his theological project.

III) Expect a better future

The third reaction is connected with a strong eschatological stress. We should recognize without bitterness or satisfaction that all our efforts to follow Christ on earth have, and will always have, very important limits. The theocentric civilisation created by Antiquity and Middle Ages was not absolutely perfect, while the Modern period has helped us understand that earlier periods cannot be interpreted "the Kingdom of God put on

earth"... On the other hand, Modernity has brought with it not only necessary improvements and progress; it has also destroyed the openness of the social order to the Divine. Taking all that into account, we should be open to learn from different eras – different forms of the Christian faith in different times – with a firm conviction that the best possible way of living the Christian faith – the best form of Christianity – is still to come.

To be honest, I do not have an absolutely convincing example of such an approach. To some extent, the *Laudato si* by Pope Francis contains in itself many elements of such a theological proposal. Pope Francis – perhaps his non-European roots are important here – has the courage to lead us out of our European theological narrative with its overemphasis on the Reformation and the Enlightenment, helping us to understand that we cannot live our mission focused only on a complicated accounting with the past. We should also turn to the future, in the conviction that the Church is not only, nor first of all, about the history we have behind us, and so it should have the courage to consider itself the reality that is about to come, in a new, reinvigorated version, for the good of the whole of human society.

The right way to go?

How to evaluate these strategies from the Christian point of view?

Well, in each of them there is something important and true: we need a strong identity that may be developed only in continuity with the Christian past (I); we cannot really expect to bring the message of the Gospel to new generations without being in dialogue with the contemporary world (II); we will never succeed in our mission without a strong commitment to its transcendent goal – transcendent in terms of content and time. At the same time, each of these options taken on its own, without relationships to the others, may be a dangerous temptation. Christians will not be able to face the process of secularization just by returning to the past (I), nor only by adapting themselves to the expectations of modernity (II), nor by maintaining an escapist dream about the Church which is only in the future – on its way to come. An adequate and powerful ecclesial strategy in a world touched by secularization needs all these three elements working together and balancing each other. In our body, we need our legs to stand firmly on the ground (I), our heart to make us alive in the present (II), and

our hands to handle our future (III). If we help each other to see our task in this way, it will be an important step in discovering how we may – only with mutual respect and learning from each other – experience that only together we are the real Body of Christ.

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NOTE

* I am using in the first part of this paper my own arguments already published in Polish: “Jak chrześcijanin powinien zareagować na sekularyzację? Dwa typy reakcji niemieckich teologów”, in *Przegląd Tomistyczny*, v. XXI (2015), p. 469–489. The paper is available online: <https://www.academia.edu/29258605>. One can find more extensive bibliographical information there ■

