

Religion and Individualism in Modernity.

Reflections on the Occasion of a Pandemic.

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Abstract

Modernity in the West had, among other things, the effect of encouraging people to distance themselves, especially from the more cultivated classes, from ecclesiastical structures, at first, and then from the Christian religion itself. This distancing had incidence on individualism, which also led to a modern vision of man and society. This paper discusses the main philosophical, political and cultural motives that directly influenced, especially after the French Revolution, the accelerated process of secularization. This process led to the skeptical and post-metaphysical attitude of the post-modernity of the 20th century. Unlike previous ones, it was a century in which atheism was not an attitude of few individuals among the intellectuals but it spread also to large groups of citizens. However, since the last two decades of the 20th century and the first decades of the 21st, some changes can be perceived that could indicate a return of interest towards religion in the West.

Keywords: modernity; religion; individualism; secularization; post-modernity.

Introduction

Modernity in Western Europe brought about two somewhat contradictory phenomena from the religious point of view. On the one hand, the religious unity that had been a constant in the Middle Ages was blown away as a direct effect of the Protestant Reformation. Lutheranism, moreover, conveyed a principle of fragmentation by postulating no subjection to any magisterial authority and the rejection of the idea of a juridical and institutional structure in the Christian community. On the other hand, the emergence of nation states took place in many cases in a panorama of wars of religion that caused these new states to be born or consolidated as confessional states. Religion in them was set to act as an element of cohesion and as a factor in strengthening new national identities. This was facilitated by the *cuius regio eius et religio* principle established after the Peace of Westphalia in 1648.

The Reformation undoubtedly acted as a factor of religious subjectification. The principle of free interpretation of the sacred scriptures, with the consequent rejection of an authoritative doctrinal magisterium, led, in the 17th and 18th centuries, to an individualistic pietism that needed neither community liturgies nor priests to live

an intimate Christianity, which, on the other hand, was very much to the liking of the enlightened spirit. This considered this kind of religiosity much more receptive to the postulates of tolerance and, to that same extent, prevented the possibility of new wars of religion. For this reason, the enlightened people could overlook the fact that Protestant pietism was rooted in a Lutheran contempt for reason and therefore submitted to the feeling and intimate experience of the relationship with the divine.

Modernity, rationalism and religion

The attitude of Hume's empiricist rationalism, in this sense, reflects this vision of pietist Christianity when it understands that religious beliefs have their own habitat in the emotional sphere, while scientific knowledge and postulates move in the rational sphere. This vision broke definitively with the medieval conception of scholastic theology, which applied the resources of the intellect to the rational study of supernatural revelation and its projection on all reality, since it relegated the religious to the sphere of the experiential and emotional. In a certain way, Hume's conception has lasted until the present day, when the respectability of religion for a good number of non-believer intellectuals lies in the respect that must be maintained in the face of the emotions and feelings of others, rather than in the intrinsic reasonableness of the contents of their beliefs.

The other way in which religion was accepted by the enlightened mentality was the rationalist way, that is, the support of a natural religion resulting from subjecting religious beliefs to a sort of purification of all "positive" elements, understanding as such those coming from the established by the confessional authorities, according to which they are extracted from the supernatural revelations that took place in history. Through this purification, carried out through the filter of reason, religion would be reduced to a core of purely rational truths, admissible by all people not fanaticized by the religious authorities and dogmas. These truths would be few: such as the existence of one God, who is the creator and author of the universe and of man, who is endowed with an immortal soul and who must act rightly according to the dictates of reason. This natural religion is that of the European deists of the Enlightenment and will be presented, as did the rationalist natural law, as a religion that can be accepted by all and that will be an element of peace among nations and among humankind. Only those who, like Hume, denied the metaphysical basis of human nature, also rejected this natural religion, the result of a well-intentioned reason, but perhaps not very consistent in drawing the ultimate consequences of the Cartesian *cogito*.

But, in reality, most of the enlightened people believed in the Christian God. Very few were atheists like Baron d'Holbach. Voltaire himself had Christianity as the true religion, but his was a Christianity stripped of rites and dogmas, quintessential as a natural religion, as he wrote in the first of the articles devoted to the issue in his Philosophical Dictionary:

“Would it have been possible for the human spirit to admit a religion, not approaching ours, but less evil than all the other religions of the universe put together? And what would that religion be? Would it not be the one that proposed the adoration of the Supreme Being, unique, infinite, eternal, creator of the world, the one that reunited us to that being as a prize of our virtues, and that separated us from him as a punishment for our crimes? The one that admitted few dogmas that are an eternal matter of dispute, the one that taught a pure morality, about which it was never disputed?”

This vision of religion, which was simultaneously, and paradoxically, emotional and reasonable, was really propitious to encourage a distance from the established religious confessions and, in that same measure, for the followers of the enlightened ideals to leave aside the communitarian and institutional vision of the religious life. Consequently, they were prone to adhere to an individualistic religiosity, in which the natural place of relationship with the divinity was exclusively the sphere of one’s own personal conscience.

In 1789, as the first juridical-political outcome of the Revolution, the National Assembly made its Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen, “in the presence of the Supreme Being and under his auspices”. It is very significant that in this Declaration, properly speaking, does not proclaim religious freedom, but freedom of opinion, including religious ones. These are, however, not presented as “beliefs”, but as ideas.

Liberalism, Modernity and Identity in Europe

The liberal political regimes that, after the French Revolution, were established as successors to the absolute European monarchies throughout the 19th century, had very diverse characteristics. It is not easy to point out strictly some defining features common to all of them, but it can be noted that, in them, the way in which the freedom of the citizens is conceived is different from how it was contemplated in the Old Regime. The freedom of the individual turns out to be its most precious quality and is understood as the absence of non-voluntary ties with respect to persons, powers, institutions and corporations. The catalogue of rights and freedoms that each one has and that, in principle, is equal for all, does not depend on his belonging to a certain group of people to which he is assigned by birth. Rights are possessed individually and are ordered to preserve the freedom of citizens. That is also the purpose of the Constitution which, as a new normative category, breaks into the political history of the West. This is what the Declaration of 1789 envisages when it states, in article XVI, that “a society in which the guarantee of rights is not assured, nor the separation of powers determined, has no Constitution”.

The egalitarian ideal of the Revolution gives reason to the new regime’s aversion to so-called intermediate bodies. It regards the membership of these bodies, -nobility, guilds, corporations, religious orders and congregations, etc.-, as the cause of

inequalities between individuals. Very early on, on June 14, 1791, in France was issued Le Chapelier's Act prohibiting guilds in its first article, arguing that "since one of the fundamental bases of the French Constitution is the disappearance of all guilds of citizens of the same state and profession, it is forbidden to establish them in fact, under any pretext or in any form whatsoever. It was a means, too, of protecting economic and commercial freedom,

In fact, the first French Constitution was not adopted by the National Assembly until a few months later: On September 3 of that same year, 1791, and in its preamble the same principles were clearly proclaimed:

"The National Assembly, wishing to establish the French Constitution on the principles it has just recognized and declared, decrees the abolition of the institutions that violated freedom and equality of rights. There is no longer any nobility, no peers, no hereditary distinctions, no distinctions of orders, no feudal regime, no patrimonial justifications, no titles, denominations and prerogatives deriving from them, no orders of chivalry, no corporations or decorations for which proof of nobility was required or which involved distinctions of birth; there is no longer any superiority other than that of public officials in the exercise of their duties.

There is no longer venality, nor acquisition by inheritance of any public office.

There is no longer, for any part of the Nation, nor for any individual, any privilege or exception to the common law of all French people.

There are no longer any guilds or corporations of professions, arts and crafts.

The law no longer recognizes either religious vows or any other commitment that is contrary to natural rights or the Constitution".

In this universal proscription of all forms of sociality, except for the great political entity that constitutes the Nation, there resounds in some way the doctrine of Rousseau. Contrary to what had been considered since antiquity the key to the understanding of man, the swiss philosopher denied man was a social being by nature. Human nature is, for revolutionaries, primarily and basically individual.

The anti-corporate phobia of French revolutionary liberalism was particularly strong towards religious congregations and all church structures in general. A whole cascade of regulations were issued, and aimed at the nationalization of church property, the suppression of monasteries and convents, and the dissolution of religious orders and congregations. The secular priests were more tolerable than the monks and friars because they were supposed to attend to the religious needs of the citizens. However, they had to pay the price of becoming a sort of dependent civil servant, not of the ecclesiastical organization but of the State. This situation was made clear by

on condition imposed on them: if they wanted to continue to exercise their function, they were obliged to swear the Civil Constitution of the Clergy which, approved by the National Assembly in 1791, entailed this subjection to the new State that emerged after the end of the absolute monarchy.

Positivism, pragmatism and social evolution in Europe

Certainly, the philosophical doctrine, or, more widely, the intellectual attitude with the greatest impact on the consideration of religion by the educated classes of the West was positivism. Comte's hypothesis that recourse to the supernatural was typical of peoples in the first stage, which he called theological (in the religious sense), in which the lack of knowledge about nature led them to seek explanations for the phenomena they observed in it from deities or ultra-terrestrial powers, was suggestive for those whose cultural humus was that provided by the Enlightenment. This first stage, which Comte equated to the history of humanity up to and including the Middle Ages, was replaced by a later and more advanced stage which he called metaphysical, in which reason was given greater relevance and abstract, unverifiable concepts and categories were developed, which he placed in the period from the Renaissance to the French Revolution. The third stage was inaugurated with the 19th century and was called positive. It was the definitive stage, in which humanity had the knowledge provided by the positive sciences. The positive, of *positum*, of course, was the given, the data, which were extracted from the observation of natural phenomena and from experimentation. Everything that was not observable, that could not be subjected to experimentation because it was not measurable, positivism did not consider to be unknowable, but directly non-existent.

This positivist view of the world, in a certain way, was supported by the scientific progress made since the initial decades of the 19th century, which a pragmatic orientation made translate into technical advances, which had a very fast and direct impact on the so-called Industrial Revolution. European societies, from the first third of the 19th century, changed their face very quickly. Their populations grew from then on like never before and gravitated from the rural to the urban environment, where industries were located. Trade in the products of new industrial manufacturing and agriculture was strongly boosted by transport via steamships and railways; and the level of income of the population, which, with ups and downs, had remained in the same range of magnitude since the Middle Ages, multiplied very significantly. In the legislation, the necessary corporate and contractual formulas were provided for the creation of large commercial companies, which were the instrument for carrying out the enormous investments needed for the new industries and transport systems. These legal formulas led to a new model of ownership, capitalism, detached from the traditional dominance over real estate, and the extension of corporations as owners

of large companies on which a large part of factory workers depended, which meant a new type of legal and economic relationship between employers and employees.

In the second half of the 19th century, the ideal of progress was embraced by intellectuals and political leaders and reached the working classes as well. One reason for that was that an adult's lifetime was sufficient to see how changes of all kinds improved people's living conditions at a time. A second reason was the exit of the other hand and above all after the Franco-Prussian War, which was relatively peaceful and in which the warlike conflicts in Europe were neither many nor very bloody.

Spencer's works were a very influential theoretical support to the idea of progress. He was the most read essayist of his time in the Anglo-Saxon world, where hundreds of thousands of copies of his works were published on both sides of the Atlantic. According to his writings, progress is a necessary evolution of society. In fact, Spencer made the evolution of all reality, both physical and natural, human and social, the nerve of his philosophy. Both nature and society evolve continuously, and human knowledge is ultimately based on knowing this constant evolution.

Some ideas on evolution expressed by Herbert Spencer were prior to the publication by Darwin, in 1859, of "The Origin of Species", which also had a very important impact on the intellectuals of his time and that, with the logical rectifications, worked by the later discoveries, especially in the field of genetics, continued to maintain until today. In "The Origin of Species" Darwin did not refer to the human species and, therefore, the considerations he made were of a merely biological nature. However, encouraged by his followers who had missed this reference, Darwin published his work "The Origin of Man" in 1871. In this work he made considerations that, in reality, moved away from the field of biology to enter the field of philosophy, since he came to deny the human spiritual dimension. He valued in nothing more than a greater degree of evolution the difference between man and other superior species of animals.

Early on, different followers of Darwin adopted positions of accused materialism, when estimating that going backwards in the history of the world it was explainable the beginning of life without the divine creative intervention. Often, this position was presented as the only coherently scientific, so that those who held it, ordinarily, considered those who held religious beliefs, in the era of progress, as people with outdated approaches, linked to a certain primitive and superstitious view of the universe. In reality, presenting the non-existence of the supernatural as a scientific conclusion was -and still is- a contradiction. Science, by definition, only takes into consideration observable, tangible data. They alone constitute its object of study. And, logically, only they can refer to its conclusions. Trying to draw conclusions in the field of science on questions that concern spiritual, intangible or supernatural aspects is unscientific, whether those conclusions are intended to support theism or atheism.

This overflow of the scientific method that occurs when trying to apply the method of the positive or experimental sciences to knowledge of another nature, such as that of a philosophical or theological nature, is a scientism that must be considered epistemologically illegitimate, because it consists of a patent *non sequitur*.

Nevertheless, the petulant scientific position was common place in the last third of the 19th century, especially among the intelligentsia of the main European powers. They had no issues in accepting the eugenic postulates that were derived from evolutionary theories, or on justifying the colonization of large territories on other continents on the basis that the civilizing action of the Europeans - very little inclined to interbreeding in that colonial expansion - was a consequence of their cultural and biological supremacy. Everything had to be subordinated to the impulse of progress and the advance of civilization.

Certainly, scientific and, above all, technological progress was, at a popular level, a kind of guarantee also for the scientific position that postulated an atheistic materialism. Some other factors influenced the fact that, for the first time in the history of Europe, an important part of its population moved away from religious approaches. At a social-political level, the extension of Marxism, favoured by the Workers' International, to a good number of nations meant the propagation among the new industrial working masses of the own vision of the dialectical materialism of religion as a factor of alienation. Nevertheless, it should be said that Marxism embraced the ideal of Progress by adapting it to its vision of the necessary evolution of economic and social structures towards the future socialist society.

On the other hand, significantly, Nietzsche, already in the last third of the 19th century, echoed this abandonment of Christianity, both by intellectuals and workers, and proclaimed the "death of God", as a denial of all transcendence and all metaphysics. And, consequently, of all truth. Nietzsche's multifaceted philosophy had a particular impact, on the level of popularization, well after his death, especially from the middle of the 20th century. However, almost immediately it seems that it was very influential in Freud's work, in which religion is presented as an imposture and one of the main repressive instances in the search for human happiness. Freud's doctrine, in spite of the fact that its philosophical basis, based on materialism and scientism, was not very solid, will also be one of the elements of greatest cultural influence in the 20th century.

The ideal of Progress as an unstoppable impulse was as if annihilated by the historical events of the first half of that 20th century. The technique and the industrial production, to the service of the manufacture of armaments, were, certainly, considered as one of the causes of the horrors of the First World War. Never before had the world seen so many millions of people die on the battlefields and in the European cities of the rearguard. Scientific and technical advances were behind weapons as deadly as they were used by the contenders: Machine guns, artillery, gases, aerial bombs, etc.

The particular circumstances in Russia, which in the Great War had about seven and a half million casualties in its army and economic conditions in the rearguard that inflamed the workers and peasants, made the Soviet revolution of October 1917 triumph after the fall a few months before of the monarchy. From 1918, first in the Soviet Federal Republic and later (since Stalin's 1936 Constitution for the whole USSR), "true freedom of conscience" was constitutionally guaranteed, with the separation of the Church from the State and "free religious and anti-religious propaganda". In practice, however, the Soviet state imposed for decades a regime of religious persecution and public education in accordance with the doctrine of dialectical materialism, which led to a very high percentage of the population associating itself with religious unbelief. Something similar happened in the Eastern Bloc countries a few decades later.

The inter-war period was, after the Great Depression, also a denial of the ideal of nineteenth-century Progress. Europe saw the emergence in various nations of new totalitarian political movements that were markedly anti-liberal and anti-communist. The triumph of National Socialism in Germany (and, secondarily, of Fascism in Italy), led to a new world war that was even more devastating than that of 1914, and which concluded with a practical demonstration of the destructive power, hitherto unimaginable, of atomic weaponry.

Humanity in the 20th century and the development of thought

Surely, a good part of humanity in the 20th century found itself without the necessary keys to understand the meaning of the terrible events they had to live through. And the prevailing philosophy since the First World War, existentialism, did not contribute to that search, but rather, what it did was to endow it with an armour of sceptical cynicism. Sartre based his existentialism on the non-existence of God: *«Il n'y a pas de nature humaine puisqu'il n'y a pas de Dieu pour la concevoir»*. Man has no determination prior to the use of his freedom: He will be what he wants to be. But in this self-realization, the obstacles will be placed by others. Hence the terrible sartrian expression "hell is other people".

The absence of a human nature in the conception of atheistic existentialism will consequently lead to the rejection of a universal moral law from which to derive precepts for all people. The dominion over reproductive biology, at least from the negative point of view of the avoidance of conception, in conjugation with that liberating absence of moral norms, led to the so-called sexual revolution starting in the 1960s. Sex was no longer a function of previous commitments to life in common or at the service of the founding project of a family, of a new human grouping. It came to be seen, especially by the young, as an uncompromising, episodic practice of a pleasure that religious atavisms had vetoed for too long. And also, a few decades later,

as an “anomic” practice: There are no sexual standards. There are no normal, deviant sexualities. Why would one speak of unnatural practices if there is no human nature?

From the mid-1960s onwards, the Catholic Church, the most numerous and geographically most widespread Christian denomination, entered into a very marked crisis, following the celebration of the Second Vatican Council, which brought about an unprecedented fall in the number of priests and vocations to consecrated life, and the abandonment of religious practice by a large part of the faithful. It also lost, in that crisis, the proselytizing drive that since the middle of the previous century had been deployed in many of the countries of the so-called Third World. Thus, to a large extent, in the last quarter of the twentieth century many could consider the lifting of the death certificate of the religious in a world that seemed increasingly allergic to any kind of belief. And not only of religious beliefs, the repulsion reached any kind of firm conviction. Many the intellectuals and academics adopted cultural relativism as a key to understand reality, maybe as a consequence of the bad conscience that western countries acquired following the colonization and decolonization processes of the Third World countries in the last century and a half. They steted all cultures would be equally valid, and one could not speak of the superiority of some over others, since there would be no universal cultural canons to follow or imitate.

However, as on so many occasions in the history of man, reality came to provide elements of contrast for these visions of religion and culture. At the end of the 1970s, in Iran, one of the most westernised nations in the Middle East, an Islamic revolution triumphed, transforming that state into a kind of theocratic republic, under the leadership of religious authorities. Shortly before that, a Polish cardinal, Karol Wojtyla, had been elected Pope. His actions had influence in the fall of the Soviet communist regime, something that no expert in geopolitics would have been able to predict even at the beginning of the decade when communism fell, and the so-called Cold War ended. This recovered protagonism of religion in world politics had its correlation in a return by many people in the West to a more positive vision of religion, although on many occasions with diffuse, intimate and syncretic approaches, with individual choices made “à la carte” and not subject to mechanisms of belonging, nor ascription to dogmatic and moral systems. That is, religion taken as a source of individual soul comfort, far from community practices, and, in many cases, as a channel of communion with nature and the cosmos.

All these phenomena are part of the constellation of intellectual and vital approaches to so-called post-modernity, which is nothing but an exacerbation of modernity itself. Modernity taken to the extreme. In post-modernity, man seems to be content with the observation that his life has no meaning: “All this, my life, other people’s lives and the world in which we live them have no meaning: But it’s all right because why should it have?”

Identity between science and religion

In reality, a conception of the world open only to science and technology, which respond exclusively and legitimately to the how of natural facts, cannot contribute anything in the field of teleology, it cannot make known anything for what. The postmodern vision of the world is, therefore, a predominantly superficial vision, which values personal appearance and is concerned with cultivating one's own individual identity, to the point that it has been described, precisely, as narcissistic. With the change of millennium, on the other hand, the possibility of making one's own images, thoughts and opinions accessible to everyone through information and communication technologies has become practically universal, without requiring a minimum effort, either intellectual or economic, for this kind of ultra-dissemination of one's own contributions. The practically unrestricted freedom of publication of content on the web entails, on the one hand, a democratization of access to the most valuable information: thousands of scientific journals, archival collections and digital reproductions of valuable incunabula, for example, can be accessed from one's own computer. But, on the other hand, there is the risk of all kinds of dangerous falsehoods being propagated in order to shape public opinion in favour of obscure economic or political interests and highly dehumanizing content, as it turns out to be the gigantic morass of an increasingly unworthy pornography and that it is yet to see the effect it will have on those who have frequented it since their childhood and adolescence, but that, surely, it can be said that it will not help at all to promote the values of compassion and respect for others, nor a spiritual vision of the human being.

The very idea of people's dignity, which is widely accepted as the foundation of human rights, is very difficult to ground in a culture that is reluctant to seek foundations, perhaps because, in a not entirely conscious way, it knows that they are difficult to find once access to metaphysics is closed. And this same closure also makes it difficult to defend the universality of these human rights in the face of multiculturalist approaches that do not hesitate to label them as ethnocentric.

Another note in which it can be seen that the so-called post-modern era is a kind of exasperation of modernity turns out to be the very marked individualism that permeates today's societies. Understanding personal freedom as the absence of ties, the postmodern tends to establish fewer and fewer of them, and those it does establish are at the price of not being very firm. The durability of marital relationships is no longer seen as valuable, and legislation seeks to make breakdowns as painless as possible, and therefore quick and easy to achieve. Kinship relationships, especially in young people, are often considered as something ephemeral or passing: From one day to the next one has new siblings, cousins and uncles and aunts, if not something artificial or even subject to economic transactions: a new sibling can be "taken care of" and will be born, thousands of kilometers away, of a woman who will always

remain alien to this new relationship of brotherhood. Obviously, all these possibilities sometimes pose ethical (and juridical) problems that do not have a solution that leaves the dignity of all concerned unscathed, because, in reality, ethics is not easily able to provide satisfactory criteria for situations that have been reached without it. It would be as difficult as trying to find a gentleman's agreement to end a fight between ruffians.

It is also because of these ethical dilemmas that post-modernity has put an end to the enthronement of scientific or techno-scientific knowledge, which was perhaps not quite rightly assigned a large part of the terror of Auschwitz and the panic of a nuclear war that has accompanied humanity, especially between the end of World War II and the Fall of the Wall. For intellectuals, moreover, questions such as the epistemological uncertainties that accompany certain conclusions of quantum physics or chaos theory, which in a way seem to contradict the apodictic character that until the 20th century was assigned to scientific knowledge, is yet another reason for, if not as much as for distrusting science, yes for not attributing it exclusively to the contribution of knowledge to people.

Finally, the post-modern era has overcome the postulate of political liberalism that religion should be limited to the purely private sphere of citizens. Laicism is understood in a different way and is often called open or positive. In fact, religions, in societies where the laicism of state structures has been assumed to be sufficiently established, and where there seems to be no risk of confusion between ecclesiastical and state bodies, can play an important role, as Habermas noted in 2005, not at all complacent, on the other hand and as is well known, with the post-modern postulates: "The liberal state has an interest in allowing free access to religious voices both in the public-political sphere and in the political participation of religious organizations. The State cannot discourage believers and religious communities from expressing themselves as such in a political way, because it cannot know if, otherwise, secular society would not be disconnected and deprived of important reserves for the creation of meaning."

The presence of religion in today's public space can undoubtedly provide people, believers and non-believers alike, with bonds that help them to live in a complicated era in which, precisely because of this lack of bonds, paradoxically and, as has been seen, vindicated today with such intensity, human existence is often so difficult.

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