

# Is Christianity a Religion of Secularity ?

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1. By way of introducing this theme I would like first of all to say that the question before us is undoubtedly a delicate and complex one: how is it possible to correlate religious experience and secularity? Is there not perhaps an opposition between these two different visions of life and the world? At the same time, we cannot but be aware of the difficulty involved in providing precise meanings to the terms in question, that is to say the definition of religion and the meaning of secularity and secularization. Nonetheless, it seems to me that religious experience and secularity have much more in common between them than what appears. Religious experience has its locus in that in-depth perception man has of truth and the sense of his being and existing, of his accomplishments and the global destiny of his history. A perception of being in the world and in history that holds a meaning, a truth that does not limit itself to what can be readily intuited, but urges man, in taking care of himself, the world and others, to set off, to go out, called by the Mystery that sustains the reality. In the original context of religious experience, man does not fancy knowledge as mere control of what is different, whose outcome could consist as much in the magical manipulation of such knowledge as in the declaration of its irrelevance to his existence. Rather, religious experience enables an open relationship that gives rise to a different way of living, since it places man at the very heart of reality, at a point of observation from which things themselves appear as being sustained by perspectives other than the simple human logic. Religion, thus, gets involved in the wonderful, progressive dialogue between those questions and answers that gives flavour to the day-to-day life, in that project of salvation inscribed in the heart of every human being, which finds its initial formulation in the questions of 'whys'. We read in the Vatican Council II document, *Nostra aetate*, no.1: "Men expect from the various religions answers to the unsolved riddles of the human condition, which today, even as in former times, deeply stir the hearts of men: What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is morally good, what sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?" Are these not also perhaps the questions that cultures and philosophies grapple with?

To what has been said, we may add a note of historical character. Generally, to Christianity is attributed the image of a religion of secularization and secularity, with a threefold underlining: (1) Secularity is a historical development drawing

inspiration from Christian Biblical reflection; above all because the Biblical revelation understands God and man as subjects of a partnership, characterized by the freedom of encounter and dialogue. (2) Secularization/secularity is a cultural and anthropological phenomenon triggering a change in religious experience and its function in relation to shaping the world and history. (3) Secularity proclaims the freedom and responsibility of man who, according to the plan of the creation, is called to take upon himself the responsibility of his choices. In this sense, secularity appears as universal cipher of human existence. These presuppositions lead to the conclusion that secularization/secularity represents a hermeneutical principle for interpreting and understanding the meaning of Christian religion.

The outline presented above is to some extent corroborated by a recent work by the distinguished scholar of dialogue between Christians and Hindus, Raymond Panikkar, *La realtà cosmoteandrica. Dio-uomo-mondo (Cosmotheandric Reality: God-Man-World)*, Milano 2004. Here the author emphasizes the need to distinguish between secularization, secularism and secularity for understanding the religious experience in life and in culture. The three terms — God-Man-World -- are not equivalent, but they express different interpretative modalities with regard to the meaning of religion. For this reason, a distinction becomes necessary, which the author himself subdivides in the following manner.

a) Secularization is the process whereby some areas of society and culture become divested of influence by religious symbols and institutions. Such a process appears to marginalize the importance of religious experience, which has to remain a private and individual affair, while stressing at the same time its importance in the search for meaning from the part of individuals. What is decisive is the fact that religion should not become a hindrance to the free expressions and emancipation of a culture and society. These demands have given rise to a particular situation on the one hand and this is the thesis of much of the sociology of religion : religiosity seems irrelevant to the social spheres and cultural decisions especially of Europe and North America, as is shown also by the growth of religious indifference; on the other hand, one notices a strong revival in the demand for religion, its functional deployment for the well-being of man, to such a degree that an author like P. Berger would speak of a "de-secularization", meaning to say a public rehabilitation of religious experience.

b) Secularism appears, instead, as an ideology that underpins the merely empirical character of everything that exists, as it leaves no scope for transcendence which is considered simply as an illusion created by the mind. The supernatural or the super-rational world is anything but real; because this world only is real. Saeculum is all that really there is. It is not just accidental that secularism has been one of the obvious motivating force behind a philosophical trend that is intent on proclaiming the uselessness and the inexistency of the divine, and confining everything to man. It is

the human being, according to philosopher L. Feuerbach, the beginning, the centre and the end of religion. There is no need to postulate beyond so as to satisfy the human need to provide meaning to his life and search for happiness. The divine or the chance and fortune come to the same and change little in relation to the fact of the transitoriness of life, which is meant to end with death. What is important is to be able to go through the happenings of life with dignity and equilibrium. In the final analysis, one can live well even without the hypothesis of the existence of a God.

c) Secularity represents the view that the world and life belong to the ultimate sphere of reality; that they represent, in other words, a stage subordinate to Being. "Secularity", writes Panikkar, "is neither dualistic nor monistic, but implies a vision of the real that is advaita or non-dualistic, which insists upon the ultimate importance of the secular dimension of reality, often forgotten by many a religion" (p. 131). One of the decisive consequences is the constitutive relationship between God and the world, in the sense that God is for the world just as the world is of God and for God. In this perspective, Secularity represents a relative novelty in the life of man and his culture. It manifests a particular experience of time, of interrelations, of ethics. To deny to secularity its real and structural character means to degrade life to a simple game deprived of dignity or importance. At the same time, the reduction of all reality solely to secular dimension carries the danger of suffocating life, depriving it of its feature of freedom and openness to the absolute. Is it not perhaps because of our inability to work out a synthesis between the sacred and the secular that we have the crisis that is taking hold of our present-day history, above all in the form of fundamentalisms which put forward anew a dualism in life and culture?

In any case, even though secularity is a fundamentally Western phenomenon, today it appears more than ever as a transcultural fact peculiar to our age. Panikkar observes that "a special mention is deserved by the modern Indian use of the word 'secular', which has found its way into its Constitution. By 'secular State' is meant a State that is neither a 'theocracy' nor an atheistic State, but a government that is tolerant of every religion and is respectful of the freedom of cult without favouring any one religious institution over another" (pp. 131-132).

2 The hypothesis that I want to put forward for discussion is that Christianity is a religion or the religion of secularity. In the foundational act of Christian religion, the incarnation, God goes out of the sphere of the sacred, the set apart, to enter into history by becoming a man like us (cf. Phil. 2, 5-11; Jn. 1, 1-18). So it is not surprising if, staying within the religious perspective of man, the Christian Biblical revelation presents itself with original traits and a plan addressed to man which gives rise to an unprecedented understanding of the world and life. It certainly brings about a rupture in the supposed human psychological familiarity with ciphers of transcendence, because it stimulates him to go beyond such ciphers to become the interpreter of the same, the ciphers that can represent various cross-roads in the path

of man's encounter with God and with himself. Indeed, revelation as an act of God who encounters man amounts to a problem for man, who is called to choose between staying sheltered in the labyrinths of the indecipherable or trying to identify ways of reflection which ponder the newness expressed in the process of revelation. The central truth of Christianity consists of the fact that the unknown and the unseen God goes out of Himself towards man to become God-for-me. That is the revelation: an opening up of God to the human history! This revelation demands as well that man, on his part, continue this movement of opening towards God. Unless this double movement of revelation and faith is realized, the realities of faith become extraneous to life or God Himself comes down largely to an image made up by "projection" of man.

Thus it can be said that with the incarnation of God in Jesus Christ, there is not anymore a time that is 'sacred' and a time that is 'profane', but one unique time in which God and man cooperate in the process of liberation and salvation. The primary significance of what appears as specific to Christianity is certainly this: faith in an incarnation of God's Son, who with self-giving love has taken upon Himself a fully human existence, in order to live, to die and to rise up for complete and definitive well-being of all human beings and their world. What the theologian D. Bonhoeffer writes in his *Etica (Ethics)*, Brescia 1995, p.35, is very significant: "It has to do with participating today in the reality of God and of the world in Jesus Christ, and doing it in such a way as to never experience the reality of God without the reality of the world and the reality of the world without the reality of God." In this horizon, incarnation points to the possibility of overcoming the apparent dichotomy between religiousness and secularity that are the two sides of the same human reality. Of course, one needs to reflect upon what is meant by religiousness, and if it suffices to identify it with religion of desire, with the search for self or the recovery of self within a process of relationship with the sacred or the divine. Religion implies, in the perspective offered by the message and the preaching of Jesus of Nazareth, an encounter with the otherness and difference of God and of man. Along this line, I venture to underline some elements of content.

First of all, the Christian God reveals Himself, in the form of love, as the ferment that goads human existence, to be thought of as a constant exodus for an edification of the kingdom of God, which is reign of justice, peace, solidarity and love. Christian faith lives under the imperative of building up the world and history according to a module of free gift and dedication, in a continuous process of conversion which "de-privatizes" religion. It is exactly in view of its commitment to history that Christianity proposes itself as a religion of history and of holiness, that does not intend to realize a vague transcending on the part of man to a sacral sphere separated from the daily life, but wants to actualize plan of salvation in the concreteness of his reality. The event of incarnation manifests the novelty of God in his being present. It

implies a change from a static theism, incapable of revealing the sharing and the communicative dimension of Christian God, unthinkable apart from the dynamics of the fundamental decisions of life.

Secondly, the entry of God in history, even as to coincide with the being of Christ, indicates that humanity has become the indispensable horizon for understanding God, just as God has become the measure of man's doing and being. Jesus Christ is thus the mystery of presence in the history of God, whose transcendence is decisive in the measure it affects the reality of this world. Having recourse to the mediation offered by the being of Christ means exerting oneself in an inevitable and unending criticism with regard to every sort of closure of man in himself and in the world. Christ is what is "outside of me", and kenosis (self-emptying) constitutes the criterion, indeed the basis, for determining every genuine transcending. It is once again the thought of D. Bonhoeffer that underscores it: "Reality (*Wirklichkeit*), from the beginning to end, is not a neuter, but real, that is, the God-become-man. Everything that is effective, receives from the real, which by name is called Christ, its ultimate foundation and its ultimate overcoming, its justification and its ultimate challenge, its ultimate yes and its ultimate no. To want to understand reality without the real means to live in an abstraction into which a person who wants to be responsible should never fall." The God of Jesus Christ encounters man in the fight for life at the heart of everydayness as search for meaning even in situations of meaninglessness. In this, one may agree with what the theologian J.B. Metz has recently stated with regards to the New Testament story of Jesus: the manner in which Jesus Christ has defeated the neutrality of the real, constituting himself the yardstick of reality, needs to be located in the recognition of the neighbour, and in the recognition of compassion as historical and theological responsibility.

3. Drawing towards a conclusion, one could identify in the relation between religion and secularity a point of view proper to Christianity. The event of incarnation-kenosis up to death-resurrection expresses the fundamental essence of God's presence in the world, the seal of Eternity that saves us from the devouring temporality. Man is not a miserable victim of history, a particle adrift in an instable and haphazard universe. He is called, instead, to make an option for life, drawing upon the model of Jesus Christ who has revealed God to man as well as man to himself. This implies in particular the following:

Christianity affirms a presence that knows to create space for the other, even to the extent of putting up with its estrangement as in the case of crucifixion. It is precisely by not holding onto his power as a jealously guarded treasure that God in Jesus places in suspension his total and absolute transcendence, offering thereby grounds for looking upon religion as locus for a gratuitous relation, in virtue of the fact that the crucified is above all being-for-the-other even to the extent of total gift of life. For

this reason, the Crucified puts an end to an abstract understanding of the 'religious', and implies a new understanding of God in himself and man in himself, revealing the genuine transcendence of God and the task enjoined upon man. Being-there-for others expresses the radical meaning of transcendence, the sine qua non condition for reinterpreting omnipotence and other traditional attributes of God. It could be said that the being of Christ which sums up the meaning of the presence of God in the world, and sums it up in the suffering of defeat in so far as omnipotent God, manifests thus His powerlessness and our strength our strength which lies in a direction indicated by He Himself, that of being-there-for-the-other.

Finally, the theological interpretation of kenosis designates the meaning of belonging to Christ, of "feeling in yourself, what is also in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 2,5), of living with a hope that goads us to exist for others being witnesses of resurrection with a critical attitude towards our times. "We know that we have passed from death to life, because we love our brothers" (1 Jn. 3,14). This is the proposal of Christianity which singles out in "following" (sequela) the true form of Christian identity. In it every man can gain access to the novelty of the Gospel as the foundation of the history of salvation towards which we progress, we struggle and grope. For this reason the Christian religion is reminder to the future call of humanity, a religion that does not intend to make a separation of the sacred from the profane, contemplation from the daily endeavour to change the reality even in difficulty and uncertainty. However, there is need for a Christianity that is awake, clearly critical of society, which understands itself as a community of recollection and recounting in the single-minded and undivided following of Jesus. For this, it should work with socially critical and creative imagination, offering fruitful resistance against a mounting weariness of being responsible subjects, against the globalization that makes man a commodity, against the dissolution of ethical and contemplative values. Only then will the love and hunger and thirst for justice continue to prevail in our social life either.