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Postmodern Spirituality and the Culture of Individualism

Introduction

In recent years, the thesis about a fundamental shift in Western religiosity has become increasingly prominent in the scientific study of religion. Many new phenomena of today's religious scene are seen as the manifestation of a resacralization/re-enchantment of the world, or even of spirituality/a spiritual revolution (Tacey 2003; Heelas & Woodhead 2005). With due acknowledgement of claims of the 'return of the sacred', it is impossible to ignore the fact that the last century has seen changes in the social form of religion as well as in individual religiosity, both having become more subjective and spiritual. In other words, the sacred is returning, but in an altered form, with only a superficial resemblance to its pre-modern shape. The new religious world-view that is taking shape presupposes an essential oneness of microcosm and macrocosm and a presence of the divine in man and in the world. The radical distinction between the temporal and supernatural worlds disappears, which seems to herald the advent of a new type of spirituality based on the idea of immanence. This new 'all-inclusive spirituality' has many forms of expression and is concerned with 'the sacredness of life, nature and the universe' and 'all pathways that lead to meaning and purpose' (Tacey 2003: 38).

This shift in Western religiosity, first depicted by Thomas Luckmann (1967) was later identified by Colin Campbell as the easternization of the Western cultural paradigm (Campbell 1999). According to Campbell, the phenomenon—coterminous with the decline of Christian culture—is not just the effect of a simple importation of Eastern philosophical and religious ideas. Receptiveness to such ideas was made possible by a reorientation of the Western world-view, which, by internal evolution, had developed a number of new elements coinciding with Eastern philosophy and way of life. These included belief in the unity of man and nature, a holistic concept of mind, body, and spirit, and an awareness of the limitations inherent in science and rationality (see Hunt 2002: 53).

Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead proposed a new interpretation of this 'tectonic shift in the sacred landscape', which now goes by the name of 'the spiritual revolution'. They claim to be in the possession of the ' "holy grail" of the contemporary study of religion, namely a theory which can at one and the same time explain the decline of some forms of the sacred and the rise of others': the 'subjectivization thesis', based on Charles Taylor's claim of 'the massive subjective turn of modern culture' (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 2). This 'subjective turn' means 'a turn away from life lived in terms of external or "objective" roles, duties and obligations, and a turn towards life lived by reference to one's own subjective experiences (relational as much as individualistic)' (Heelas & Woodhead 2005: 2).

All the above-mentioned explanatory frameworks to a certain extent employ the concept of individualization. In the following presentation I shall examine the usefulness of this approach for the understanding of today's religious scene.

Postmodernity and the culture of individualism

The alleged 'return of the sacred' is sometimes interpreted as a reaction to the pluralization of world-views which has shaken the foundations of socially generated ontological security and brought about a situation of generalized uncertainty. After the fiasco of the twentieth century lay ideologies, disgraced by the totalitarian systems, modernity gave up constructing all-encompassing world-views that could act as sense-building for individuals. From then on, the discourse was, *de rigueur*, anti-ideological and anti-utopian. We are no longer creating 'grand narratives', but only telling Kiplinguesque 'just-so-stories' (see Prickett 2002: 2).

This distrust of ideologies and visions of collective salvation is seen as one of the defining characteristics of postmodernity. I will not open a can of worms by referring to the manifold concepts of postmodernity and the immense volume of literature that followed Jean-François Lyotard's proclamation of the end of the grand narratives, or Francis Fukuyama's proclamation of the end of history. I would give the situation we live in another name: late modernity, high modernity, fluid modernity, or, preferably, 'supermodernity' (*surmodernité*). This neologism (derived from the term *surdétermination* used by Sigmund Freud and Louis Althusser, describing a situation which is too complex to allow for unambiguous interpretation) introduced by Marc Augé to avoid the decadent connotation, evoked by the prefix 'post', stresses

continuity rather than a break from modernity, which seems to be more adequate (Augé 2005).

For our (post/late/super)modern world may still be described by notions like transient and provisional—terms which since Charles Baudelaire (one of the most influential forefathers of the modernity concept) have been indispensable components of any definition of modernity (to recall Baudelaire's statement: 'By modernity I mean the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent', Baudelaire 1998: 23). These notions indicate an accelerated change in the social environment and its institutionalization; in other words, the elevation of change to the position of a cultural axiom, a programmatic feature. In premodern societies, change was descriptive of a departure from tradition, an infringement of the *nomos*, of the predetermined state of affairs. By contrast, modern man has to accept the fluidity of all that was, over time, perceived as fixed. Accelerated change results in a ruptured continuity of social memory and produces a sense of unpredictability. The world begins to appear as illegible, fragmentary, changeable and contingent.

Another constitutive component of modernity is reflected in notions of 'individualization' and 'individualism'. Individualization of personality and biography has become the main, widely understood and respected, postulate of Western societies. In other words, we are now living in the culture of individualism. Its sense is still well reflected in Emilé Durkheim's century-old formula: 'a cult of the individual'; 'the cult of which he is at once both object and follower' (Durkheim 1898: 9, quoted in Pickering 1984: 483). Durkheim was convinced that this new cult will constitute the core of the new social form of religion: 'There remains nothing that man may love and honour in common, apart from himself. This is why man has become a god for men, and it is why he can no longer turn to other gods without being untrue to himself.' (Durkheim 1898: 11, quoted in Pickering 1984: 483)

Many contemporary scholars share Durkheim's conviction. According to Hans-Georg Soeffner, collective faith in and hope for an individual's autonomy is the common ground, a barrier against anomy, and the ideological equivalent of the contemporary social structure. This faith is the 'backstage religion' of our democratic visions of the world (Soeffner 2000: 102–3). The individualization thesis has also become a key to understanding the transformation of Western religion. Danièle Hervieu-Léger pointed out that recent sociological studies of religion in Europe gradually switch the emphasis 'to patterns of individualization of belief, leading individuals to independently evolve personal credos that would give meaning to their existence, according to their own frame of mind, interests, aspirations, and experience' (Hervieu-Léger 2006).

Religious individualism

Although 'religious individualization' is one of the most frequently employed categories in reflections on contemporary religiosity, there is no agreement about the meaning of the term. Hubert Knoblauch distinguished three main types of statement concerning religious individualization: (1) From the stock of existing systems, individuals put together a religion of their own (individual syncretisms). (2) As 'searchers', individuals switch between religions, every time changing their world-view or identity. (3) They simultaneously harbour various religious convictions (Knoblauch 1999: 201–2).

The sources of religious individualization are usually sought in specific Western realities. Paradigmatic of this standpoint is Max Weber's well-known position. Another influential exponent of this approach is Emilé Durkheim, who also derives modern individualism as well as individualistic religiosity from Christianity. Durkheim categorically states that 'individual religious phenomena which are legion are derived from "external, impersonal and public religion"' (Pickering 1984: 203). This outlook is shared today by Danièle Hervieu-Léger, who states that the contemporary 'do-it-yourself approach to religious belief and practice' does not mean a decline of conventional religious traditions, because they have 'lost all their cultural relevance in European society. Those traditions simply began to increasingly serve as symbolic repositories of meaning, available for individuals to subjectively use and reuse in different ways' (Hervieu-Léger 2006).

The religious individualism characteristic of contemporary religiosity may be defined as 'the view that the individual believer does not need intermediaries, that he has the primary responsibility for his own spiritual destiny, that he has the right and the duty to come to his own relationships with his God in his own way and by his own effort' (Lukes 1973: 94). This attitude has been radicalised in late modernity. Postmodern religion, writes Paul Heelas, 'is very much in the hands of the "free" subject. . . The deregulation of the religious realm, combined with the cultural emphasis on freedom and choice, results in intermingled, interfused, forms of religious—or "religious-cum-secular"—life which exists beyond the tradition-regulated church and chapel.' (Heelas 1998: 5.) These new forms of religious life are most often analysed under the umbrella term of 'postmodern' or 'new' spirituality.

Defining spirituality

In recent years, the interest in spirituality has rapidly risen, creating a new 'megatrend' (Bucher 2007: 3). In spite of the omnipresence of the term, its semantic range is very wide and the content remains unclear, which severely diminishes its analytical usefulness. There are almost as many definitions of spirituality as there are texts about it. A very inclusive definition has been proposed by Paweł Socha, who sees spirituality as 'a socioculturally structured and determined attempt to cope with existential human situations. Thus interpreted, spirituality is a human universal appearing in many secular as well as religious forms' (Hay & Socha 2005: 589).

The semantic evolution of the word has been reconstructed by Christian Bochinger (1995: 386–9). Well established in the Christian vocabulary, the word 'spirituality' has since the late nineteenth century been used in the Anglophone tradition to describe an attitude toward religion that emphasizes an inner experience of deity as contrasted with blind faith in a dogma, as was characteristic for traditional Christianity. Later, when the notion is enlarged to cover other religions, it acquires the sense of the mystical core of religion, which, unlike theological or dogmatic expressions—can be experienced primarily, if not exclusively, in the individual, private religious practice of a 'God's seeker'. In the New Age vocabulary the term is associated with such phrases as 'mystical/direct experience', 'personal religion', 'direct connection', 'an inner search for meaning', 'the idea of God within', 'direct knowing', and so on.

The overview of some recent qualitative studies of spirituality (Bucher 2007: 26–33) shows that today spirituality is most often associated with connectedness and oneness, relation to God (or a transcendent being), connectedness with nature, relation to others and to selves, practice (especially prayer and meditation), paranormal experiences and abilities and, last but not least, as self-transcendence; in fact, according to Bucher, self-transcendence constitutes 'the heart of spirituality' (Bucher 2007: 45). This new spirituality has many expressions and is described by terms such as 'personal', 'subjective', 'eclectic', 'selective', 'postmodern' and, last but not least, 'individualistic'.

An understanding of a (post/late/super)modern form of spirituality may be helped by a reconstruction of its origins. To this end, I suggest a three-phase model metaphorically fashioned as a transition between three states of religious matter: from solid to liquid to ever changing ether, invisible to the observer. The inspiration for the model came from a common modernist trope. Beginning from Baudelaire's first definition of modernity (as the ephemeral), through the famous Marxian dictum *The Communist Manifesto*

(recently popularized again by Marshall Berman (1988: 15): 'To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, "all that is solid melts into air"'), to Zygmunt Bauman's concept of 'fluid modernity' (Bauman 2000: 3–6)—modern times have constantly been associated with melting and evaporating of all things petrified in tradition.

The model may seem diachronic, but in fact it is constructed to explain a rather synchronic picture, a panorama of contemporary forms of spirituality or a religious spectrum extending from 'good old religion' to 'new spirituality'. All three states of religious matter demonstrably coexist in the world today.

From religion to spirituality

In its steady state, religion is primarily communal action, performance, worship of God, a cult. An individual engages in socially defined actions, and whatever sense he attributes to it is irrelevant to the religion itself. An individual, as Durkheim sees it, must subordinate himself to the requirements of religion and cannot cut it down to his own size. A religious world-view is a type of knowledge of the world; it makes metaphysical claims about the ultimate nature of reality; good, evil, etc. To believe is to take certain things for granted about the world. The object of a religious cult is explicitly stated and lends itself to objectivization. This state of religious matter continued until early modernity, which is described by Zygmunt Bauman as 'solid'. Contemporaneously, it exists in pockets of collectivist-oriented communities (for one, the widespread Polish cultural Catholicism).

During the Protestant Reformation a revolution took place. For Steve Bruce, the most important innovation of this Reformation was the rejection of the institution of religious professionals. 'Luther insisted that every man be his own monk, do religion and piety'—and earn religious merit (Bruce 1996: 14). Another innovation was the 'abandonment of rituals of periodic purification and the insistence on a regular religious and ethical life . . . Each individual had to take a passionate interest in assessing his or her conduct' (Bruce 1996: 15–16). And here lies the breeding ground for the new form of Western religion, which I associate with the second, liquid state.

The liquid state involves the notion of religiosity: religion changes its state, evaporating inward. Although it remains tinted with the original substance from which it derives (e.g., a 'Catholic tint'), it is the vessel that it fills, a human soul, which gives it shape and individual character. The foundation of religiosity is personal faith. The new formula of faith calls for constant,

sustained reflection; 'to believe' no longer means 'to know' and 'to be right' (Schelsky 1967). Religiosity maintains its links with the religion from which it derives—and not only semantically. The faithful still find no difficulty with religious identification or their declared membership in a wider community of believers in 'the same'. Yet here the question posed by Niklas Luhmann (1977: 307) enters the stage: What does one really believe when one says one believes in Jesus? According to Bruno Latour, the effect of the double exclusion of God, his confinement to metaphysics and to the inner man, makes for a God completely different from his pre-modern namesake, just as nature constructed in the laboratory differs from previous *physis* (Latour 1995: 48–9). Correspondingly, Charles Taylor speaks of a disappearing *Christendom* (a religion that organized the world order) and waxing *Christianity*—a personal attitude, a religiosity aware of alternatives (Interview with Charles Taylor).

Such a reflexive religiosity opposes reification of its object, thus preventing it from being objectivized. The object of belief assumes the form of 'empty transcendence', becomes increasingly less definite, ever more difficult to communicate, and therefore less 'public' as it grows more 'private'. We may call it spirituality, but with the adjective 'religious', because it still carries qualifications linking it with its original denominational tradition (such as Protestant spirituality, monastic spirituality).

The term 'new spirituality' today designates the third, gaseous, ethereal state of religious matter. This phase of religiosity turned into spirituality is intimately linked with individualization at its most radical. Individualist spirituality can only be spoken of when it becomes 'faith for someone': when it is purposely made by an individual for his own sake, in response to his 'spiritual needs' and fashioned after his personal idiom. Still, the culture of individualism contributes to such spirituality becoming consciously geared to expression of a person's deepest concerns and idiosyncrasies. Therefore, it may be called 'idiomorphic spirituality' or, better, 'idio-spirituality'—which reflects the ancient Greek meaning of the word 'idiot', describing the person who keeps out of public affairs (see Elias 1987: 212).

The proposed model is consistent with the general assumption that every individual form of religiosity or spirituality is deeply in debt to established, social forms of religion, which may be seen as a petrified effect of the collective (inter)action of many other people. From this point of view the religion is the source of religiosity (and spirituality). However, a diametrically opposed view is also possible. From this reversed perspective (individual) religiosity is the source of (collective) religion. This standpoint has its prominent exponents in Georg Simmel and Thomas Luckmann. Simmel explicitly states that

'it is not religion which creates religiosity, but the religiosity creates religion' (Simmel 1989: 120). He believed that religion answers an individual's impulse and desire for happiness. A desire for happiness in itself is not yet religion, but constitutes a kind of pre-stage of religious (or *religioid*) character. *Das Religioide* makes up an individual foundation for religion, but it can also express itself in other cultural pursuits, such as science or art. It only becomes religion after it assumes a specific form in human interaction that produces patterns which then guide aims and means to satisfy the desire for happiness (see Knoblauch 1999: 66–7).

As Simmel noticed, the fabric of individual, 'made-to-measure' religiosity (or, as we would call it today, spirituality) is, above all, 'experience' (i.e., emotions, feelings). This involves 'turning toward experience', or even an 'obsession with experience' already observed by early theorists of modernity and becoming more radical today: 'Mass society has aroused and enhanced individuality. Individuality is characterized by an openness to experience, an efflorescence of sensation and sensibility' (Shils 1967: 3, quoted in Hall, Neitz & Battani 2003: 119). This 'experiential turn' is reflected in a new name which has been given to our mass/affluent/consumer society: 'the experience society' (see Schulze 1992).

Max Weber believed that the pursuit of experience was a sign of weakness, an inability to live a continual 'quotidian existence' which prevailed after the disenchantment of the old gods. He used to repeat after Nietzsche that the order of the day was happiness as invented by the 'last man'. If Weber only could imagine that in his homeland 'Happiness' will be taught in school as a compulsory subject (see http://www.willy-hellpach-schule.de).

According to Bauman, the focus on subjective experience is the defining characteristic of the modern liquid phase, a postulate of the culture of individualism and consumption (Bauman 2000: 78). It is also the distinguishing characteristic of the new individualistic spirituality. Here there is no need any more to believe anything; on the contrary, the need is to experience things. Classical faith is characterized by uncertainty and a distance to its object. The directness of emotional experience eliminates such distance. At any rate, one feature of 'experience' is that it is incommunicable. This quality helps bring about social individualization as it prevents the new spirituality becoming institutionalized. As Niklas Luhmann noticed, religion exists socially only as communication: 'What goes on in the heads of innumerable human beings would never have added up to religion if not for communication' (Luhmann 1998: 137, quoted in Kippenberg & von Stuckrad 2003: 94). But any communication about individualistic spirituality can only take the form of generalized statements on a broadly understood *sacrum.*

The very use (by the faithful and religious institutions alike) of the notion of *sacrum*, borrowed from the analytical vocabulary of religious studies leaves room for endless reinterpretations of the content of individual spirituality. This permits an individual to cultivate a sequence of ever new functional equivalents of religion without being encumbered by major re-evaluations reflected in rituals of conversion, or even changes in lifestyle. Instead of a firm position as epitomized in 'Here I stand, I can do no other', we may hear, 'all religions are good, each leads to God, but I like mine best' (a genuine statement I heard, surprisingly enough, from an elderly woman who professed traditional Catholicism). Exactly such may today be the faith of an individual and in this direction religious institutions are being reoriented (after all the Catholic Church officially condemned the blasphemy it saw in the publication of Muhammad's caricatures, while recently the German Church voiced its indignation at the Pope's call for missionary activity among the Jews). As a deliberate policy, the underspecified meaning of spirituality, its private orientation and, so to say, '*under*-institutionalization' all bespeak the nature of the fabric used in creating that 'made-to-measure spirituality'. Such spirituality is absolutely compatible with contemporary individualism and thrives in the 'culture of individualism'.

Individualism reconsidered

Not every form of contemporary spirituality is individualistic. Moreover, it seems that individualistic spirituality has always been a minority programme. Weber, Durkheim, Troeltsch—every one of these founding fathers of the sociology of religion pointed out that individualistic and/or mystic orientation of religiosity correlates with a higher level of education. In groups cultivating new forms of religiosity one can observe a large, and often over-proportional, share of representatives of the social layer of intelligentsia. Colin Campbell even speaks of the formation of 'the secret religion of the educated classes' or an 'Invisible Church' of the educated layers of society (Campbell 1978).

As Stjepan Meštrović (1991: 40–1) put it: 'Alas, modern persons have the same need to escape into the world of social affect, but . . . less opportunity . . . This need may explain the fanaticism exhibited by fans of sporting, music and other events that capture what Durkheim called "collective effervescence" in postmodern life.' In his classic reconstruction of the development of Western individualism (seen as the ideology of modernity and the main distinguishing mark of modern societies), from the Christian otherworldly *indi-*

viduum to Calvin's this-worldly ascetic, all the way to Nazism, Louis Dumont makes a provocative claim that Nazism can be seen as derived from individualism as a holistic counterpoint to the individual (Dumont 1991: 160–91). However this concept may be judged, it is to Dumont's credit that he highlighted eruptions of collectivism in the history of Western individualism (see also Hietzge 2002: 237).

Revelling in individualism seems inappropriate in view of new collectivist forms of religiosity and flourishing neotribalism. As Michel Maffesoli put it: 'the constant interplay between the growing massification and the development of micro-groups, which I shall call "tribes". . . appears to me the founding tension characterising sociality at the end of the twentieth century' (Maffesoli 1996: 6). The limits and ambiguities of individualism had already been recognised by Robert N. Bellah. His words are worth quoting *in extenso*, especially today:

> We insist, perhaps more than ever before, on finding our true selves independent of any cultural and social influence, being responsible to that self alone, and making its fulfillment the very meaning of our lives. Yet we spend much of our time navigating through immense bureaucratic structures – multiversities, corporations, government agencies – manipulating and being manipulated by others. In describing this situation, Alasdair MacIntyre has spoken of 'bureaucratic individualism'. . . . A bureaucratic individualism in which the consent of the governed, the first demand of modern enlightened individualism, has been abandoned in all but form, illustrates the tendency of individualism to destroy its own conditions. (Bellah 1985: 150.)

It is no wonder that provocative voices can be heard thoroughly questioning the individualization thesis. Since the publication in 1961 of *Mensonge romantique, vérité romanesque* (see Girard 1976)—a brilliant study revealing the mechanism of mimetic desire—René Girard has continuously claimed that there is no individualism, nor has there ever been. None of us wishes anything for our own needs or desires. We always want what belongs to our neighbour. We want his wife and his life. Mimetic desire is the chief mainspring in human action, as may be suggested by the Bible prohibiting it in no fewer than two commandments.

Concluding remarks

A need to treat religious individualization and standardization as complementary phenomena has recently been noted by James Beckford (2003). It is a fact that the spirituality of an individuum develops in the one-size-fits-all consumerist culture. Individualism is a cultural postulate, but not a social reality. As Zygmunt Bauman noticed, a way to satisfy identity-related dreams and fantasies is found in buying ready-made components of an individual style (Bauman 2000: 83). Submitting to all-embracing shopping mania seems a condition of individual freedom, of the right to be authentic, special, different. This is well exemplified by the tag line, 'Be yourself, choose Pepsi'. Your unique identity can only be built of the stuff everybody else is buying. This pertains, perhaps, also to spiritual matters.

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