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THE PROLIFERATION OF SECULAR RELIGIONS: THEORETICAL AND PRACTICAL ASPECTS

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The term ‘secular religion’ first appeared in the description of modern totalitarian ideologies but soon became a general category applied to other political, socio-economic and cultural phenomena. The first problem with this approach is the inherent contradiction of the term, since ‘secular’ by all modern definitions means ‘non-religious’, making a secular religion something like a ‘non-religious religion’. The second is the wide range of examples from communism to liberalism, from capitalism to ecology, or from transhumanism to social media, which suggests that with some creativity almost anything can be described as secular and religious at the same time. The first part of the paper deals with the terminological difficulties, while the second outlines the history of drawing secular-religious analogies, concluding that the ultimate failure to give a coherent narrative of secular religions is rooted in the impossibility of giving an adequate definition of religion in the first place.

KEYWORDS:

Christianity, definitions of religion, political theology, political religion, secularisation

1. A FEW NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

According to Emilio Gentile,¹ the term ‘secular religion’ was coined in 1935, when Guy Stanton Ford’s introduction to a collection of essays called *Dictatorship in the Modern World* described the newly emerging dictatorial regimes of Europe as having ‘a secular religion of their own creation’.² The fact that Ford did not find it necessary to define the new term may indicate two things: that it seemed obvious to him what a religion was, and that modern dictatorships – albeit similar to traditional religions – still lacked something that would have made them ‘truly’ religious.

One year later, Adolf Keller’s *Church and State on the European Continent* called Leninism ‘a camouflaged secular religion’, similarly without defining religion and, consequently, without clarifying in what sense this religion was different from other, ‘real’ ones.³ The same holds for Frederik A Voigt’s *Unto Caesar* in 1938, which spoke of both Marxism⁴ and Hitlerism⁵ as secular religions, even adding that the *hybris* of secular religions started with ancient Athens at the time of the Peloponnesian War,⁶ which seems to imply that secular religions existed well before the age of secularisation. A perhaps more famous example is Raymond Aron’s *The Future of Secular Religions* (1944),⁷ which likewise took it for granted that a secular religion was something that resembled, and at the same time, differed, from what was usually called a religion. It is telling that about ten years later, Hans Kelsen already felt it necessary to start writing a book-length critique of all such obtruse analogies in his *Secular Religion*, but, ironically, the critique itself turned out to be so terminologically problematic that it would remain unpublished until 2012.⁸

The term ‘secular religion’, however, was not the first to be used. In 1918, the Italian priest and later Christian democratic politician Luigi Sturzo already called the worship of the state ‘a new lay religion’ (*una nuova religione laica*).⁹ And even earlier, in 1791, the French philosopher Condorcet criticised the worship of the revolutionary constitution as a ‘political religion’:

It has been said that the teaching of the constitution of each country should be part of the nation’s education. This is true, no doubt, if we speak of it as a fact; if we content ourselves with explaining and developing it; if, in teaching it, we confine ourselves to saying: *Such*

¹ Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 2.

² G Stanton Ford (ed.), *Dictatorship in the Modern World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1935), 6.

³ Adolf Keller, *Church and State on the European Continent: The Social Service Lecture, 1936* (London: The Epworth Press, 1936), 69.

⁴ Frederik A Voigt, *Unto Caesar* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1938), 3.

⁵ *Ibid.* 57.

⁶ *Ibid.* 239.

⁷ Raymond Aron, ‘The Future of Secular Religions’, in *The Dawn of Universal History: Selected Essays from a Witness to the Twentieth Century* (New York: Basic Books, 2002).

⁸ Hans Kelsen, *Secular Religion: A Polemic Against the Misinterpretation of Modern Social Philosophy, Science, and Politics as “New Religions”* (Wien: Springer Verlag, 2012).

⁹ Luigi Sturzo, *I discorsi politici* (Roma: Istituto Luigi Sturzo, 1951), 388.

is the constitution established in the State to which all citizens must submit. But if we say that it must be taught as a doctrine in line with the principles of universal reason or arouse in its favor a blind enthusiasm which renders citizens incapable of judging it; if we say to them: *This is what you must worship and believe;* then it is a kind of political religion that we want to create. It is a chain that we prepare for the spirits, and we violate freedom in its most sacred rights, under the pretext of learning to cherish it.¹⁰

Secular religion, lay religion and political religion were still not the only possibilities, however. Let us not forget that in 1922, Carl Schmitt also introduced the modern concept of political *theology* which was more limited than political *religion*, for it referred only to conceptual analogies between theology and political theory (or, literally, ‘the modern theory of the state’), without examining the more detailed practical or institutional analogies between religion and politics.¹¹ The line of argument was nevertheless similar, and the set of related terms still keeps growing: since then we have seen quasi-religion, pseudo-religion, surrogate or ersatzreligion, lay spirituality, laicised mysticism, secularised eschatology, inner-worldly religion, immanent faith, secular myth and many others.¹² ‘Secular religion’ is therefore at best an umbrella term, and the only reason one might feel justified to use it is that all similar terms express the same ambiguity of drawing an analogy between the secular and the religious, while maintaining that ultimately, the two remain different.

This is perhaps why so many authors (from Alexis de Tocqueville to Vilfredo Pareto, Carlton Hayes, or more recently Tara Isabella Burton)¹³ simply speak of ‘new’ religions without any further adjectives, which is itself an implicit recognition of how problematic it is to call something ‘secular’, ‘lay’, ‘political’ (either in the sense of ‘secularised’ as in Schmitt, or ‘inner-worldly’ as in Voegelin), ‘immanent’, ‘quasi’, or ‘surrogate’ on the one hand and still ‘religious’, ‘theological’, ‘mythical’, or ‘eschatological’ on the other.¹⁴ As William Cavanaugh remarked about Carl Schmitt’s definition of political theology, the best thing would be to admit that there is nothing ‘secularised’ here, only ‘covert’.¹⁵

¹⁰ Condorcet, *Cinq mémoires sur l’instruction publique* (1791), 42.

¹¹ Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1984), 36.

¹² For a few examples, see Kelsen, *Secular Religion*, 5–9. It must be added that Kelsen himself was experimenting with different options: at first, he entitled the work *Religion without God?*, then changed it to *Theology without God?*, before having the final manuscript called *Secular Religion*. Ibid. xii–xiii.

¹³ See Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America* (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 2010); Vilfredo Pareto, *The Mind and Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935); Carlton J H Hayes, *Nationalism: A Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1960); Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020).

¹⁴ Which does not mean that all authors who speak of ‘new’ religions consistently reject the traditional distinction of ‘real’ and ‘not-so-real’ religions. In most cases, they seem to use both terminologies.

¹⁵ William T Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy: God, State, and the Political Meaning of the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011), 3.

We may return to the terminological issues later; what nevertheless seems obvious is that the proliferation of terms itself indicates a profound uncertainty about the validity of the whole enterprise, and the proliferation of candidates for the role of secular religions raises further doubts.

2. THE WAVES OF SECULAR-RELIGIOUS COMPARISONS

As I said earlier, the first modern attempt to compare an allegedly secular ideology to a religion was Condorcet's criticism of the worship of the Constitution as proposed by the new project of public education in Revolutionary France. Although this sort of constitutional or legalist 'religion' did not provoke a large wave of comparisons, in 1850, the Spanish conservative author and diplomat Juan Donoso Cortés also described the path from the overtly theocratic idea of kingship to the constitutional state as the 'negation' (but also the 'consequence') of a religious affirmation:

The political affirmations are nothing more than a consequence of the religious affirmations... In the political order, the Progressive Party, analogous to the deist who negates Providence, says, "The king exists, the king reigns, but he does not govern." Thus, progressive constitutional monarchy pertains to the negative civilization in the first degree.¹⁶

It goes without saying how deeply Donoso's idea influenced Carl Schmitt's *Political Theology*:

The idea of the modern constitutional state triumphed together with deism, a theology and metaphysics that banished the miracle from the world. This theology and metaphysics rejected not only the transgression of the laws of nature through an exception brought about by direct intervention, as is found in the idea of a miracle, but also the sovereign's direct intervention in a valid legal order.¹⁷

Schmitt also followed Donoso's historical description of the secularisation process from constitutionalism or legalism to democracy, and, ultimately, to atheism and anarchy. The divinity of Law would therefore only play a transitional role in secular religions' discourse; what would indeed return during the second half of the 20th century was the

¹⁶ Juan Donoso Cortés, 'Discourse on the General Situation of Europe', in *Readings in Political Theory* (Ave Maria: Sapientia Press of Ave Maria University, 2007), 74.

¹⁷ Schmitt, *Political Theology*, 36-37.

eneration of certain metalegal norms, most notably human rights, that Elie Wiesel explicitly called ‘a worldwide secular religion’ in 1999.¹⁸

The second (and, as we can see, largely overlapping) wave of secular–religious comparisons began in the mid-19th century. The most famous example is Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America* (1835), which spoke of the ‘dogma’ of popular sovereignty, the people who rule the political world ‘as God rules the universe’, and the ‘omnipotence’ of the majority,¹⁹ but similar ironical descriptions of democracy were ubiquitous from John Stuart Mill’s ‘false creed’ of American democracy (1861)²⁰ to Herbert Spencer’s ‘political superstition’ of parliamentarism (1886)²¹ and Gaetano Mosca’s ‘religious founders’ of democracy (1896).²²

The grand epoch of ‘democratic religion’ culminated in Vilfredo Pareto’s *The Mind and Society* (1916) which used so many religious phrases that it became more like a parody of both democracy and religion: the ‘divinities’ of the republic and universal suffrage; ‘suffrage worship’; ‘Holy Democracy’; the ‘principle of universal suffrage as a dogma above discussion’; general will and majority rule as ‘the sublimest dogmas of the democratic religion’; or the ‘worship of the god State and the god People’ that has ‘not a single unbeliever left’.²³ In sum, as Pareto said:

We are now witnessing the rise and dominance of the democratic religion, just as the men of the first centuries of our era witnessed the rise of the Christian religion and the beginnings of its dominion. The two phenomena present many profoundly significant analogies.²⁴

Although Carl Schmitt, as we have seen, also mentioned democracy in his *Political Theology*, as well as some American scholars who described it as a religion in the 1940s and 1950s, (not to mention more recent authors like Patrick Deneen or the Romanian historian Lucian Boia),²⁵ it remains true that from the beginning of the 20th century, democracy was gradually

¹⁸ Elie Wiesel, ‘A Tribute to Human Rights’, in *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights: Fifty Years and Beyond*, ed. by Yael Danieli, Elsa Stamatopoulou and Clarence Dias (Amityville: Baywood, 1999), 3. For similar examples see Irwin Cotler, ‘The New Antisemitism’, in *Antisemitism: The Generic Hatred*, ed. by Michael Fineberg, Shimon Samuels and Mark Weitzman (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2007), 22; Anthony Julius, *Trials of the Diaspora: A History of Anti-Semitism in England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 453; or Henri Féron, ‘Human rights and faith: a world-wide secular religion?’, *Ethics & Global Politics* 7, no 4 (2014).

¹⁹ Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 97, 108, 411.

²⁰ John Stuart Mill, ‘Considerations on Representative Government’, in *Collected Works of John Stuart Mill, Volume XIX* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 478.

²¹ Herbert Spencer, *The Man Versus the State* (Caldwell: Caxton, 1960), 174.

²² Gaetano Mosca, *The Ruling Class* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1939), 170.

²³ Vilfredo Pareto, *The Mind and Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1935), 558–559, 589, 735, 1048, 1156–1157.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 1294.

²⁵ See Ralph Henry Gabriel, *The Course of American Democratic Thought* (New York: The Ronald Press, 1940), 382; Crane Brinton, *Ideas and Men. The Story of Western Thought* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1950), 549; Patrick Deneen, *Democratic Faith* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Lucian Boia, *Le mythe de la démocratie* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2002). Sporadic references to the religious or theological nature

overshadowed by an even more robust wave of both academic and popular literature that compared communist, fascist and Nazi dictatorships to religions.

As mentioned before, the very term 'secular religion' was born in this context, but there are earlier examples. The Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev wrote of the *Catechism of Marxism* as early as 1905, calling Engels' *Anti-Dühring* 'the sole dogmatic part of Marxist theology'.²⁶ In 1906, he wrote of *Socialism as a Religion* ('a whole creed, a decision about the meaning of life').²⁷ In 1917, *The Religious Foundations of Bolshevism* confirmed that bolshevism was 'a religious substitute, an inverted religion, a pseudo-religion' which was nevertheless 'the manifestation of a religious order' with its likewise overarching, 'own absolute'.²⁸ Or maybe it was not the metaphysical absolute that made socialism, communism or bolshevism (whatever it was called at a given moment) a religion, but a certain historical theology, as the German historian Fritz Gerlich suggested in his *Communism as the Theory of the Thousand Year Empire* in 1920.²⁹ To make things more complicated, Bertrand Russell's *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* the same year explicitly stated that bolshevism had more to do with Islam, exactly because of its predominantly secular outlook:

Among religions, Bolshevism is to be reckoned with Mohammedanism (sic!) rather than with Christianity and Buddhism. Christianity and Buddhism are primarily personal religions, with mystical doctrines and a love of contemplation. Mohammedanism and Bolshevism are practical, social, unspiritual, concerned to win the empire of this world.³⁰

It is important to note that from this angle, Islam itself proved to be a secular ('this-worldly') religion, which helped little to eliminate the terminological confusion, but we may return to this issue later. In the literature of secular religions, socialism (or communism, Marxism, Leninism, bolshevism, etc.) would later be joined by Italian fascism, and the 1920s saw an overflow of such comparisons in the writings of Giovanni Amendola, Novello Papafava, Raoul De Nolva, Herbert Schneider, Hermann Heller, Luigi Sturzo and many others, or even in official Catholic documents issued by Pope Pius XI.³¹

From the 1930s, Nazism also began to be interpreted as a religious movement and ideology, but this time usually together with socialism and fascism. As early as 1932, Anton Hilckman called Nazism an 'irreligious religion' which was in this regard a close

of democracy and the metaphysical idea of the 'people' or the 'general will' are also frequently found in French literature, see e.g. Jean-François Lyotard, 'Apostil on Narratives', in *The Postmodern Explained: Correspondence 1982-1985* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 19; or Pierre Rosanvallon, *Democracy Past and Future* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 200, 203, 226.

²⁶ Nikolai Berdyaev, 'Катехизис марксизма', *Вопросы жизни*, 1905/2, 369-379.

²⁷ Nikolai Berdyaev, 'Социализм как религия', *Вопросы философии и психологии*, XVII/85 (1906), 508-545.

²⁸ Nikolai Berdyaev, 'Религиозные основы большевизма', in *Собрание сочинений* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1990), Volume 4, 29-37. Similar writings of Berdyaev were published in English under the title *The Russian Revolution* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1931).

²⁹ Fritz Gerlich, *Der Kommunismus als Lehre vom Tausendjährigen Reich* (München: Bruckmann, 1920).

³⁰ Bertrand Russell, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1920), 114.

³¹ Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, 33-34.

relative of bolshevism.³² In 1933, Luigi Sturzo outlined an even more overarching historical scheme from the Jacobin dictatorship during the French Revolution to bolshevism, fascism and Nazism, describing all those as ‘collective idolatries’ and ‘secularised religions’.³³ In 1935, as we have seen, the collection of essays edited by Guy Stanton Ford also spoke of all modern dictatorships as having their own versions of secular religion. In 1936, Karl Polanyi’s *The Essence of Fascism* called Nazism (the ‘full-fledged’, ‘German’ version of fascism), a ‘religion’ in a volume which included similar interpretations of communism, most notably Reinhold Niebuhr’s *Christian Politics and Communist Religion*.³⁴ In 1937, the German anarchist Rudolf Rocker followed the now well-known trajectory from Rousseau and Jacobinism to fascism, Nazism and Soviet communism, describing those as varieties of the cult of the nation state in his *Nationalism and Culture*.³⁵ Also in 1937, the Hungarian Catholic theologian Antal Schütz used the term ‘analogue religion’ in an even broader sense in the second, revised edition of his textbook on *Dogmatics*:

Where religious conduct is not oriented toward a personal God, but still recognizes something transcendent, something beyond experience as the meaning, purpose, and governor of existence, especially of human existence, we may speak of an analogue religion. Such is the religiosity of pantheists; further down the religious scale are all those who regard the laws or interconnections of universe and life, the progress of humanity, the state, the nation, or the race as a supreme being (pseudo-religions); and those who expect a cultural program or cultural phenomenon, e.g. the change in the economic order (socialists), the solution of the Jewish problem, vegetarianism, spiritism, etc. to cure all ills and provide meaning to life (surrogate religions).³⁶

In 1938, the German legal scholar Gerhard Leibholz likewise described the new religions of all totalitarian states (fascist, Nazi, communist) as the ‘metaphysics of politics’.³⁷ I also mentioned Frederik A Voigt’s *Unto Caesar* (1938), which used the term ‘secular religion’ throughout the book, from ancient Greece to Marxism and Hitlerism; and a similar pattern is observable in Eric Voegelin’s famous *Political Religions* (1938) that started the story even earlier, in ancient Egypt, citing examples from early modern absolutism and Italian fascism, while its main concern remained Nazi Germany.³⁸ A unique addition to

³² Anton Hilckman, ‘Il nazionalsocialismo di fronte al cristianesimo e alla Chiesa’, *Vita e Pensiero*, 8 August 1932. Cited in Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, 85.

³³ Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, 99–100.

³⁴ Karl Polanyi, ‘The Essence of Fascism’, in *Christianity and the Social Revolution*, ed. by John Lewis, Karl Polanyi and Donald K Kitchin (New York: Scribner’s, 1936). See also Reinhold Niebuhr, *Christian Politics and Communist Religion* in the same volume.

³⁵ Rudolf Rocker, *Nationalism and Culture* (Los Angeles: Rocker Publications Committee, 1937).

³⁶ Antal Schütz, *Dogmatika: a katolikus hitgazságok rendszere* (Budapest: Szent István Társulat, 1937), 16.

³⁷ Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, 54–55.

³⁸ Eric Voegelin, ‘The Political Religions’, in *The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Volume 5: Modernity Without Restraint* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2000).

the anti-totalitarian discourse of secular religions was offered by Erik Ritter von Kuehnelt-Leddihn's *The Menace of the Herd* (1943) which added democracy and its 'dogmas' to the list of such totalitarian ideologies as Nazism and communism.³⁹ The now well-established tradition of socialism, fascism and Nazism as religious ideologies and movements would continue with Raymond Aron's *The Future of Secular Religions*, Reinhold Niebuhr's *Faith and History* (1949), Jacob Talmon's *The Rise of Totalitarian Democracy* (1952), Paul Tillich's *Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions* (1963) and many others.⁴⁰

This third wave of criticism – just as the first (constitutionalist-legalist) and the second (democratic) waves – would never completely disappear, either. During the 1960s and 1970s, in addition to the traditional topics of Soviet communism, Italian fascism or German Nazism, new members like Maoism or certain African regimes joined the club of secular or political religions.⁴¹ It is also remarkable that the term 'political religion' by then became associated mostly with modern dictatorships, despite occasional hesitations between the terminology of the 'sacralisation of politics', 'politics as religion', and 'political religion'. (See e.g. the different titles of Emilio Gentile's books: while the English translation of *Il culto del littorio: la sacralizzazione della politica nella nell'Italia fascista* only omitted the main title, preserving the rest as *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy*, his other book, *Le religioni della politica* was transformed into *Politics as Religion*, while also using terms like the 'sacralisation of politics' and 'political religions' interchangeably.)⁴² In Germany, the three-volume *Totalitarismus und politische Religionen* edited by Hans Maier is another example of how closely the concept of 'political religion' became connected to 'totalitarianism', and the same is attested by the title of the academic journal *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, published between 2000 and 2010.⁴³

It should also be added that all of the former (the secular religions of laws, peoples and dictators) had their foundations in the worship of the nation state, which therefore cannot be treated as a separate phenomenon. After all, the worship of the constitution which Condorcet so harshly criticised expressed nothing else than the worship of the state and the nation; and the people in either democratic or dictatorial regimes served only as the

³⁹ Erik Ritter von Kuehnelt-Leddihn [as Francis Stuart Campbell], *The Menace of the Herd* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Company, 1943).

⁴⁰ Aron, *The Future of Secular Religions*; Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1949); Jacob L. Talmon, *The Rise of Totalitarian Democracy* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1952); Paul Tillich, 'Christianity and the Encounter of the World Religions' (1963), in *Main Works, Volume 5* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1988).

⁴¹ Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, 119–127.

⁴² Emilio Gentile, *Il culto del littorio: la sacralizzazione della politica nell'Italia fascista* (Roma: Laterza, 1993); *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); *Le religioni della politica: fra democrazie e totalitarismi* (Roma: Laterza, 2001); *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁴³ Hans Maier (ed.), *Totalitarismus und politische Religionen* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 1996–2003); in English, *Totalitarianism and Political Religions* (New York: Routledge, 2004–2008). The journal *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions* changed its name to *Politics, Religion, and Ideology* in 2010.

legitimising bases of the modern state that claimed for itself a fullness of power. As Luigi Sturzo said in 1918:

The collapse of Germany has revealed the profound crisis of the absurd practice of the pantheistic conception of the state which subjects everything to its force: the internal and external world, the human being and their reason for existence, the social forces and human relations; all this by the deification of an absolute force and power that replaces the great principles of justice and the great aspirations of the spirit. This pantheistic conception has penetrated, to a greater or lesser extent, all civilized nations on a liberal and democratic basis, and the prevailing philosophy of public law.⁴⁴

That liberal (constitutional), democratic and dictatorial regimes were all grounded in the same religion of the nation state was also suggested by Christopher Dawson in 1934:

I think it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the movement towards state control in every department of life is a universal one and is not to be confused with the political tenets of a party, whether Communist or Fascist. (The essential principle of the Totalitarian State was, in fact, asserted by Liberalism before Fascism was ever heard of.)⁴⁵

That the movement towards state control started as early as the Middle Ages was later meticulously demonstrated by Ernst Kantorowicz's *The King's Two Bodies* (1957), which likewise stated that the secularisation – or rather, politicisation – of the church was accompanied by a sacralisation of politics.⁴⁶ Therefore, although the German legal scholar Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde was to some extent right to say that the rise of the state was a 'process of secularisation' (and, for that matter, the most momentous one),⁴⁷ it is perhaps more adequate to speak of the 'migration of the holy' from the church to the state as John Bossy did in 1985 or William Cavanaugh in 2011.⁴⁸

The last big wave of secular-religious comparisons started in the 1970s, this time leaving the field of politics, strictly speaking. In 1977, Paul C Vitz published his *Psychology as Religion* which identified this religion with the 'cult' of self-worship.⁴⁹ The growing individualism of Western societies was also detected by a number of books on the modern economic system

⁴⁴ Sturzo, *I discorsi politici*, 388.

⁴⁵ Christopher Dawson, 'Religion and the Totalitarian State', *The Criterion* 14, (1934), 3.

⁴⁶ 'Imperialization of the papacy and sanctification of the secular state ran in parallels.' Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 185.

⁴⁷ Ernst-Wolfgang Böckenförde, 'The Rise of the State as a Process of Secularization [1967]', in *Religion, Law, and Society: Selected Writings*, ed. by Mirjam Künkler and Tine Stein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 152–167.

⁴⁸ John Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400–1700* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 153–172; Cavanaugh, *Migrations of the Holy*.

⁴⁹ Paul C Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977).

and its ideology. While economics had occasionally used a mystical language since Adam Smith's often misunderstood 'invisible hand', it only became customary in the 2000s to speak critically of the 'economic religion' (Robert Nelson), the 'theology of money' (Philip Goodchild), the 'altar of Wall Street' (Scott Gustafson), the 'money Gods' (John Rapley) or the 'market as God' (Harvey Cox).⁵⁰ 'Environmental religion', on the other hand, was first discussed as the diametrical opposite of economic religion by Robert Nelson in 2010,⁵¹ and by now it has become a journalistic cliché to speak of 'our climate in Heaven', 'climate heretics', or 'Saint Greta and the climate gospel'.⁵² There is also a certain amount of both academic and popular literature on related topics like ethical vegetarianism and veganism as secular religions.⁵³ Although it is also true that several forms of ecological thought (mainly deep ecology) openly declare themselves to be 'metaphysical' or 'spiritual', it is usually to distinguish themselves from traditional religions, thereby reproducing the 'something like, but not exactly the same as religion' pattern known from the discourse of secular religions. It comes as no surprise that a similar anti-humanistic or supra-humanistic religious pattern was discovered in the case of posthumanism and transhumanism,⁵⁴ up to the point when even atheism (or at least some types of atheism) were described as 'faiths' or 'religions' by Robert Nelson or John Gray.⁵⁵

Politics has not disappeared entirely, either; most recently, we may observe a renewed interest in the 'religions' of multiculturalism, Social Justice Culture or wokeness,⁵⁶ while the non-political examples of secular religions continue to expand to such peculiar fields as sports and entertainment, fandom or even social media.⁵⁷

⁵⁰ Robert H Nelson, *Economics as Religion: From Samuelson to Chicago and Beyond* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2001); Philip Goodchild, *Theology of Money* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Scott W Gustafson, *The Altar of Wall Street. The Rituals, Myths, Theologies, Sacraments, and Mission of the Religion Known as the Modern Global Economy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2015); John Rapley, *Twilight of the Money Gods: Economics as a Religion and How It All Went Wrong* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2017); Harvey Cox, *The Market as God* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).

⁵¹ Robert H Nelson, *The New Holy Wars: Economic Religion vs. Environmental Religion in Contemporary America* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2010).

⁵² 'Klimaschutz als Religion: Klima unser im Himmel', *Die Tageszeitung*, 26 September 2019; Roger Pielke Jr, 'My Unhappy Life as a Climate Heretic', *Wall Street Journal*, 02 December 2016; Gerard Baker, 'St. Greta Spreads the Climate Gospel', *The Wall Street Journal*, 20 September 2019.

⁵³ Andrew Linzey and Clair Linzey, 'Vegetarianism as Ethical Protest', in *Ethical Vegetarianism and Veganism*, ed. by Andrew Linzey and Clair Linzey (London: Routledge, 2019).

⁵⁴ Ray Kurzweil, *The Singularity Is Near: When Humans Transcend Biology* (New York: Viking, 2005). The Biblical reference in the title is to Mark 1:15: 'The Kingdom of God is near.'

⁵⁵ Robert H Nelson, *Faith of the Fatherless: The Psychology of Atheism* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013); John Gray, *Seven Types of Atheism* (London: Penguin, 2019).

⁵⁶ Mathieu Bock-Côté, *Le Multiculturalisme comme religion politique* (Paris: Cerf, 2016); Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites: New Religions for a Godless World* (New York: Public Affairs, 2020); Tom Slater, 'The Year the Ruling Class Got Woke', *Spiked*, 26 December 2020.

⁵⁷ Albert Piette, *Les religiosités séculières* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1993); Tara Isabella Burton, *Strange Rites*; Mathias Ephraim Nygaard, 'Selfies as Secular Religion: Transcending the Self', *Journal of Religion and Society* 21 (2019).

3. WHAT IT ALL MEANS

The proliferation of the literature of secular religions despite all definitional problems reinforces the suspicion that with some creativity, everything can be called a religion, which is, however, almost the same as saying that nothing can be called as such. The most powerful argument against the entire discourse of secular religions has always been that it is a false analogy: a generalisation from one or two common features of a given secular and religious phenomenon that tends to obscure the actual differences between the two. Speaking of individual examples, this is certainly true: no one in good faith can say that Marxism belongs to the same category as Catholicism, or taking selfies is in every respect analogous to (for instance) Buddhism. The problem with this argument is that it commits the same fallacy of illegitimate generalisation when it maintains that Marxism and selfies still belong to a category called ‘secular’ while Catholicism and Buddhism belong to another called ‘religious’. The only way out of this fallacy would be a sort of nominalism: to reject all such overarching categories and acknowledge that every single political ideology, scientific or economic theory, social movement and form of entertainment is just as unique as Christianity, Buddhism, Islam or Hinduism is. It is indeed difficult to see why Christianity with its transcendent God and its providential view of a linear history, might stand closer to Theravada Buddhism’s atheism and circular concept of time than to Marx’s idea of the Proletariat as the saviour of human history, or why Islam’s radical monotheism (*tawhid*) might stand closer to ancient Greek polytheism than to any metaphysical idea of a single chosen nation, race or social class.

What is even more difficult to tell is why a mixture of the ‘secular’ and the ‘religious’ would solve any of the problems outlined so far. The mainstream discourse of secular religions itself admits that the analogies fall short of defining secular ideologies as truly religious, yet it maintains that they are religious enough to be called religions in some attenuated sense. This is true even of those accounts that speak of ‘new religions’ or simply ‘religions’ without an adjective. To return to some former examples: Nikolai Berdyaev, Erik Ritter von Kuehnelt-Leddihn, Carlton Hayes or Tara Isabella Burton have all vacillated between the terminology of ‘religion’ (even ‘real religion’) and ‘religious substitute’, ‘ersatzreligion’, or ‘secular religion’. The most illuminating examples are those which mix mutually exclusive terms as a sign of profound uncertainty about the possibility of any clear classification. One such example is Anton Hilckman’s classic study on national socialism which speaks simultaneously of an ‘irreligion’, an ‘irreligious religion’, a ‘political religion’, a ‘religion’ and a ‘replacement or surrogate for religion’.⁵⁸ Obviously, an irreligion is not a religion at all, while an irreligious religion is something that is irreligious and religious at the same time; a political religion is a religion with a political purpose, while a religion without an adjective seems to refer to something more genuine, but in this case it is hard to see how it can be a replacement or surrogate for the same thing. The fact that Hilckman – and

⁵⁸ Hilckman, ‘Il nazional-socialismo’, 85.

practically everyone else in the secular-religious tradition – also admits words like ‘absolute’, ‘ultimate’, ‘deification’ and ‘sacralisation’ in the description only shows that it is indeed impossible to give any criteria for the separation of so-called secular and so-called religious phenomena. At the very moment when the nation, the race, the people, the human self, the market, money, nature or history become absolute points of reference, expressing an ultimate concern, even to the point of being deified or sacralised, they no longer remain secular in any meaningful sense of the word.

The fact that this obvious fallacy has nevertheless produced and continues to produce an abundance of literature is not difficult to explain, however. With some remarkable exceptions, the large majority of authors have always worked in the Christian tradition, and – explicitly or implicitly – compared modern ideas, practices and institutions to Christian ones. Even when speaking of ‘religion’ in general they seem to take it for granted that religions are more or less the non-Western counterparts of what we call the ‘Christian religion’ since the sixteenth century. It is certainly true that the worship of a constitution, the democratic myth of popular sovereignty, the ideologies of totalitarianism and nationalism, the psychological cult of the self, economic dogmatism, ecological fundamentalism, post- and transhumanism, multiculturalism or the rituals of wokeness, sports and entertainment are all very different from what we call worship, cult, dogma and ritual in the case of Christianity. Viewed from this angle, it is certainly not unjustified to speak of the former as being analogous to, but also distinct from the Christian paradigm. What is more problematic is to assert that for the same reason they are also analogous to, but still distinct, from something called ‘religion’.

How deeply the modern definitions of religion are rooted in the Western tradition has been explored by many authors since Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s groundbreaking *The Meaning and End of Religion* (1962).⁵⁹ Although the most radical conclusion of such works, namely that the word ‘religion’ itself is an empty signifier, something that is completely impossible to apply to non-Christian cultures is hotly debated nowadays, the continuing failure of religious scholarship to come up with any widely accepted definition points to the fact that there is in fact something deeply problematic with the entire separation of the secular and religious. More precisely, it is not only definitions that are debated, but the methods themselves by which a proper definition might be attainable. All handbooks of religious studies start with the question whether religion can (or should) be defined at all, before turning to the different *types* of definition: substantive and functional, monothetic and polythetic (not to mention the subtypes of the former), usually arriving at a sort of ‘cluster

⁵⁹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1962). For more recent examples see Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reasons of Power in Christianity and Islam* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993); Timothy Fitzgerald, *The Ideology of Religious Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Tomoko Matsuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions, or How European Universalism Was Preserved in the Language of Universalism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005); William T Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Brent Nogbri, *Before Religion: A History of a Modern Concept* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013).

definition' at best. Which means that the most one can do is to define a set of properties, of which 'some' (although no one knows exactly how many) are present in one religion, why others are present in another, without all of them necessarily being present in all religions (or, more precisely, in everything we 'commonly' call as such). Which means that there may be religions which do not share a single common feature – a remarkable statement in itself – moreover, it gives no guidance as to how many instances are sufficient to speak of something as 'commonly called a religion'.⁶⁰

From a theoretical aspect, all of this means that the failure of 'secular religionists' to offer a set of criteria that would clearly separate secular (lay, political, quasi, pseudo, surrogate, ersatz, inner-worldly or immanent) religions (or spiritualities, faiths, myths, mysticisms) from real ones is not an accidental mistake but something deeply rooted in the definitional problems of religion. Secular religions are impossible to define not because they are different from each other and different from traditional religions, but because the latter are also different from each other and in turn different from the former. From a more practical point of view, it means that the current culture wars, ideological struggles and anthropological disputes (characteristic mainly of the West but also expanding globally) are not between something 'secular' and something 'religious'. They are also not between competing 'religions', for to call something a religion would suggest that we already know what a religion is. Moreover, if we extend the meaning of religion to cover so many instances, we come to the point where the claim 'everything is a religion' becomes dangerously similar to the claim that 'nothing is'.⁶¹ The most we can do is to realise that all these are different worldviews, systems of values and principles, none of which is more secular or religious, rational or irrational, more or less progressive than the others. The only conclusion to be avoided is that the sphere of human activities can ever be free of such views, values and principles, and a fully neutral stance can be achieved either in individual life or – if the human being is indeed a social and political animal (*animal sociale et politicum*) – in the social and political realm.

⁶⁰ For a typical example see Michael Stausberg and Mark Q Gardiner, 'Definition', in *The Oxford Handbook of the Study of Religion*, ed. by Michael Stausberg and Steven Engler (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁶¹ For the sake of logical completeness, one might also add the possibility that the struggle is between strictly secular worldviews, but I know of no serious attempts (including those of radical atheists) which would suppose that e.g. Christianity is *only* a secular worldview without any religious traits.

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