

POSTMODERNIZATION OF RELIGION

–A Brief Remark–

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Abstract

In this article, the postmodernization of religion is analyzed as part of the individualization and alienation of the “cultural reification” process. In attempting to define the “postmodernization of religion” within a general philosophical framework, two specific social phenomena are considered. First, the article takes up the “crisis” of modernity, with special reference to the secularization and subjectivation that has undermined the universality of modernity and legitimized the individualization of social life. Second, a philosophical deliberation about Christianity between two preminent philosophers (Rorty and Vattimo) is examined to shed light upon the debate about Islam in Turkey. This deliberation between Rorty and Vattimo is indirectly reminiscent of disputes about the role of Islam in Turkish society and politics.

Key Words: Postmodernization of religion, the “crisis” of modernity, secularization, subjectivation, Rorty, Vattimo, civic responsibility, spiritual responsibility.

I.

The first thought that the concept of postmodernity brings to mind is the crisis involved in the process of modernization. This crisis is, in essence, the expression of an irrational emergence caused by rationalization, which lies at the core of modernization. Modernization is a process that has progressed along the dual axes of the differentiation

and secularization of social life spaces. However, the dissemination and acceptance of this process was made possible by the mythos that the process itself has created. Therefore, to talk about the phenomenon of postmodernization within this conceptual framework only refers to the crises that were forced upon society by the acceptance of the mythos that modernization created. To be more accurate, it refers to social pathologies.

We can expand upon the above framework and claim that modernity was presented as a “project” based on two fundamental assumptions. The first assumption was the intelligibility of the social world, and the second was that this social world could be shaped (manipulated) and managed. The sociologist Alain Touraine labels these assumptions *rationalization* and *subjectivation*, respectively (Touraine, 1995: 9-10, 204-205). According to Touraine, modernity primarily depends on complementary and antagonistic relations between rationalization and subjectivation, which have replaced a centralized view of social life. This, in turn, is the replacement of a world divided between the human and the divine by rationality and subject; that is, a world governable by laws that are the product of human thought. Touraine labels modernity a “counter-tradition” in this sense and emphasizes that this tradition symbolizes the transition to the age of rationality. The postmodern view, by de-centering the subject of modernity, adopts a philosophy that points to the possibilities of plural rationalization. Thus, it has undermined the universality of modernity and legitimized the individualization of the social life.

In this context, the hierarchy created by modernity began to be challenged by instrumental rationalization, holistic social arrangements, and the equality, value rationalization and individualistic arrangements of postmodernity. This is what is called “the crisis of modernity”: the erosion of *singular*, *universal*, and *absolute* values and their replacement by values that are *plural*, *particular*, and *relative*.

What I refer to as the “postmodernization of religion” emerges as an important discussion issue precisely at this point. An important question awaits a detailed answer: especially in holy scriptures, how can divine unity be situated within the postmodern condition, which consists of elements such as “plural”, “singular”, and “relative”, as mentioned above? This essay attempts to provide clues to such an answer through a contemporary philosophical discussion. For this

purpose, it is necessary to further detail the philosophical background of the issue.

II.

About 150 years ago, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard described his times as “essentially *a sensible, reflecting age, devoid of passion, flaring up in superficial, short-lived enthusiasm and prudentially relaxing in indolence*”. He adds:

As an age without passion it has no assets of feeling erotic, no assets of enthusiasm an inwardness in politics and religion, no assets of domesticity, piety, and appreciation in daily life and social life... everything becomes, as it were, transactions in *paper Money*. Certain phrases and observations circulate among the people, partly true and sensible, yet devoid of vitality, but there is no hero, no lower, no thinker, no knight of faith, no great humanitarian, no person in despair to vouch for their validity by having primitively experienced them... *It lets everything remain but subtly drains the meaning out of it; rather than culminating in an uprising, it exhausts the inner actuality of relations in a tension of reflection that lets everything remain and yet has transformed the whole of existence into an equivocation that its facticity is –while entirely privately... a dialectical fraud interpolates a secret way of reading– that is not* (Kierkegaard, 2000: 252, 254-255; italics in original).

The real issue about which our philosopher complained was that a passionless age had no value judgments and turned everything into symbolic ideas. In our age, too, we live trapped in a web of “realities” in which false value judgments, created by things turned into symbolic ideas, shape the individual, the society, and the culture. In general, Islam, Christianity, and Judaism are perceived as tools of personal legitimization rather than as the holistic sources of reality. Along these lines, religion(s) functions almost as a personalized code of conduct rather than a shared life-style or a culture.

Such a condition exists at the postmodern societal turning point (which will be defined shortly) because global capitalism, of which this turning point is an integral part, has maximized the reification process noted by Georg Lukacs. Reification, as Lukacs defined it (cited in Honneth, 2008: 21-28), is a process whereby an element that essentially relates to human existence and society becomes symbolic,

departs from its ontological foundations and turns into an object-like entity. That is, an element that defines us materializes out of us. An element that we understand as having definition and meaning moves out of us and acquires the possibility of defining us. In essence, this is “alienation” through “individualization”.

Regarding religious phenomena, the general effect of reification through individualization is a tendency for feelings of obligation toward the other and of belonging to the whole to disappear, as Marcel Gauchet (1999) pointed out. In Gauchet’s terms, we are now at a turning point where we are faced with “the historical figure of holy being replaced by a worldly absolute whose features and form have not yet been defined”. By implication, this situation, which some view as the beginning of a “post-secular” age, is in reality not a rejection of religion but is religion acquiring a *new public image* and thereby becoming politicized. The most obvious feature of this image corresponds to the phenomenon of “the postmodernization of religion”, referred to in the title of this essay.

The emerging possibility of a personal “interpretation” that deconstructs supernatural mysteries may pave the way for the reconstruction of microcosms.

This sort of interpretation can paradoxically contribute to the reconstruction of supernatural-like mysteries at the personal level. This is done through symbolic representations and the possibility of a political platform. Following Luc Ferry, the core of the realization of individual interpretation consists of the inseparability of “the question of meaning and the question of sacred” interconnected with “a two-fold process”. On the one hand, there is the “disenchantment of the world” or, to put it a better way, the broad movement of the *humanization of the divine* that since the eighteenth century has characterized the rise of secularism in Europe. “... But in parallel to all this, there has also been a slow and inexorable *divinization of the human...*” (Ferry, 2002: 31-32).

The postmodern world represents a condition whereby the real and the simulated merge into each other. More often, however, simulation makes us forget the real, and consequentially establishes itself as more real than the real. This condition leads to the propagation of representational (symbolic) ideas, and even phenomena, that are made possible by signs, symbols, technological speed, consumerism, media-based information, and orientation.

III.

The structuring of postmodernity in this way is also valid for religion, which it views as the old face of the truth, and for faith, which is the heart of religion. In today's world, do we experience "real" religion and/or faith, or do we re-experience what is old in a "simulational" way? This question is the intellectual agenda of two contemporary philosophers, Richard Rorty and Gianni Vattimo (Rorty and Vattimo, 2005).

The main issue that Rorty and Vattimo have focused on within this framework is that our obligations and duties, which before the Enlightenment were only toward God, have been replaced with obligations toward Reason. This has only changed the nature of the errors that humanity has committed. Given this, the issue is toward whom we have obligations and responsibilities today. Rorty's idea is that "our responsibility is only toward our citizens", which he calls "civic responsibility".

Vattimo thinks differently. What can we do when this civic responsibility is not shared inside and outside of our community? Based on this, Vattimo claims that we live in an "age of interpretation", and he affirms that the personal "interpretation", which we touched upon above, has been made possible. He thus legitimizes the foundation of the postmodernization of religion.

As he has stated in his earlier works, Vattimo consistently views religion as a feeling of loyalty to God. He emphasizes that this God is not the God that the Church officially introduced; it is an entity that is defined in the Bible. According to Vattimo, secularization, which he views as the "foundational element of genuine religious experience", makes this possibility available to the believing (faithful) person.

In Christianity, there have been two important consequences of secularization, or the placement of religion on a secular foundation. The first is what Vattimo calls "kenosis" ("purification", in Greek), the phenomenon of Jesus' incarnation as a human being by purifying himself of his divine side. The second is the dissolution of the bond between violence and the holy and the emergence of worldliness on the axis of charity (Vattimo, 2002: 67).

Vattimo views both consequences as Christianity's return in the form of weak thought as it liberates itself from the strict organization and dominant mentality of the Church. This makes it possible for the

believing (faithful) Christian to reconstruct everything from scratch. Thus, to depart from the official doctrine of the Church and move closer to the original discourse of Jesus becomes both liberating and obligatory for individuals.

This is actually the correspondence of Rorty's perception of *civic responsibility* to Vattimo's *spiritual responsibility*. Moreover, Vattimo claims that in a world where we should consider charity as the norm of secularization, extra-metaphysical thought and arrangements determined by the conquering character of reason in modernity cannot be comprehended outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition. This is precisely the image of "the post-secular age". On the one hand, it reflects a renewed interest in the spiritual life and thus the loosening of the skeptical secular view. On the other hand, in Luc Ferry's terms, true religion marches ahead of us and becomes pure, rather than being left behind.

Vattimo states that Nietzsche's "God is dead" motto in fact provides us the opportunity to hear God without a go-between, and that this is true secularization (Vattimo, 2002: 3). In stating this, Vattimo appears to be following Kierkegaard, who puts the understanding of abstract religion above all. However, Kierkegaard, by constructing an individual metaphysics, took the individual out of her historical context, externalized the individual to herself, and viewed this individual as the guarantor of "true" religion.

It is unnecessary to say how imaginary this is for the present age. For this reason, it is appropriate to view today's *postmodernized religion* not as a religion intended to resurrect Nietzsche's dead God but as a new, magic device responsible for sacralizing the birth of objectified individual entities.

IV.

Even though Vattimo and Rorty agree that the future of religion depends on a position beyond the theism-atheism distinction, Vattimo still takes a different approach than Rorty. He emphasizes that hermeneutics will continue to be the most important guide in understanding religion and overcoming the limits of the Catholic Church.

This leads us to a Latin concept that has central importance in the postmodernization of religion in Vattimo's thought: *pietas*. For Vattimo, *pietas* (faith) expresses a respectful loyalty to the past and eve-

rything that we inherit from it. However, this loyalty enables us always to re-interpret the past and thus prevents us from viewing the past as only consisting of a “history of mistakes” (Vattimo, 1988: li – Translator’s Introduction). The meaning of this, in Vattimo’s thought, is that within the postmodern condition, it is more appropriate to treat religion as a hermeneutic issue rather than an ontological issue.

Viewed from this perspective, the postmodernization of religion points to a past that is a message inherited from tradition via Being, which needs to be constantly re-interpreted. Therefore, postmodernization is the experience of receiving things filtered from history and responding to them.

Religion, in this context, is a hermeneutical possibility that is both a *Verwindung* (transcending) and an *Andenken* (recollection), to borrow Vattimo’s German terms in *The End of Modernity*. Consequently, the joining of religion to the postmodernization process is, in fact, modernity remembering religion by self-transcending.

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