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THE ROLE OF RELIGION WITHIN AND BEYOND THE CONTEMPORARY IMAGINARY. A POSSIBLE PERSPECTIVE

INTRODUCTION

At present, right here in Europe, we are experiencing a very delicate period. The European process of monetary unification does not seem to be accompanied neither by a process of political institutions empowerment nor the sharing of cultural paths and challenges. Insomuch as, for lots of people, stating what keeps us together has become very difficult. Hence the risk of disintegration and the emergence of the feeling of failure.

And now we are wondering: how to promote a change able to guarantee real future opportunities and not leave the human dimension of coexistence aside? What social forces can be activated for such a change? Certainly young people, who may otherwise no longer have future perspectives. But also businesses, labour unions, universities and the fields of education-training and culture, associations, and – more generally – the civil society agents. Therefore, also churches and religious traditions.

The latter, in particular, can now offer valuable potential to readmit, in social life, issues that have been set aside in recent decades, decades that have followed the economic growth based on a kind of development model devoid of spirit.

Already Nietzsche, “by telling us the story of the next two centuries” – namely the advent of nihilism – had somehow warned us about this danger, by talking about the death of God. In fact, we are struggling to feel at ease in a world that alleges to work devoid of spirit, namely without wondering about sense/meanings.

The request for orientation is topical especially now, within advanced Western societies that have built a strong technical and nihilistic imaginary able to define the background of social relationships and to influence the actions of individuals and groups. This imaginary suffers from the idea of freedom that we have built and the weakening of the link between truth and freedom.

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In my contribution, I will try to describe the main aspects of the contemporary socio-cultural pattern. And then I will focus on the role and potentiality of religion (which, in my opinion, is such) in this context.

I. TECHNO-NIHILIST CAPITALISM: INGREDIENTS OF THE CONTEMPORARY IMAGINARY RISE AND EXPANSION OF TECHNO-NICHILIST CAPITALISM

In order to outline the features of the contemporary imaginary – based on a certain conception of freedom – I have necessarily to briefly refer to the socio-economic model developed in Western societies in recent decades – model that a colleague of mine has define as “techno-nihilist capitalism”.

The previous form – the “corporate-capitalism”, evolved soon after World War II – a model that has led to social security at the expense of the massive presence of institutions within the social and individual life – caused a sort of crisis at the subjective level in the late ‘60s in many Western European countries. There was, in fact, a significant emergence of the demand for greater expressiveness on the part of individuals, who begun to reject any kind of authority in the name of the centrality of the Self, autonomy of choice, and moral freedom. Institutions – the political, economic, cultural, religious ones – were considered overly intrusive in people’s lives and in the social field.

At the same time, also from the structural viewpoint – after decades of uninterrupted growth – in the early ‘70s the economic insecurity began to take place. The result was the expression of serious doubts about the legitimacy of institutions in general and the simultaneous reorganisation of socio-cultural, political and economic patterns.

Between these two kinds of crisis – one at the systemic level and the other at the individual level - an original outcome was created: the demand for individual freedom of subjects intertwined – beyond a predetermined pattern – with the demand for autonomy of the economic world that wished to detach itself from the state and institutions in order to operate without any restriction. The transition was accelerated in the ‘80s when the market liberalisation was strengthened and the socio-economic model, rival to the market model (namely the model that had spread in Eastern Europe) was crumbling. In this context, the birth of a new global market seemed to occur and the term “globalisation” was useful to name this project.

In this respect, the rise of the neo-liberism constitutes the most important factor in the reorganisation of contemporary capitalism, marked by the beginning of a new phase of capitalist accumulation. This phase is characterised by the expan-

sion pursued at various levels: economic growth, expansion of the individual Self, expansion of communications and technical codes.

The institutional model finds a powerful ally in the paradigm of technique whose development is characterised by steep growth: technique, similarly to the neoliberal economic model, only offers the binaries in which the great variety of individual actions can take place, after having enormously empowered individual action and broadened the range of pursuable purposes.

The contribution offered by a particular *Weltanschauung* founded on nihilism constitutes the cultural substrate, remarkably pertinent to the end of manipulating any meaning and preventing freedom from being an expansive movement that, in order to fully manifest itself, requires the endless growth of available opportunities. This substrate contributes to make capitalism compatible with any culture.

Therefore, in the social configurations arising at the end of the XX century, the capitalistic dimension has structured a power system based on mobility and movement (of money, goods, information, cultures, people, etc.); the technical dimension has enabled an efficient management of these flows, and supplied abstract codes for exchanges which could transcend cultural, ethnical, linguistic and religious differences; the nihilist vision, in fact, has rendered meanings malleable and reversible. Hence, “techno-nihilist capitalism” has imposed itself as the new organisational paradigm of social life. But also as the imaginary supporting the structuring logics of social relationships and the justifications which contribute to the creation of the social world in which individuals act.

The logics driving this imaginary have consecrated the new centrality on individuals, considered as totally free to choose their own meanings, relations, and even culture. These logics are strengthened by the emphasis currently put on the aesthetical dimension: aesthetic space which opts for the disengagement from any territorial binding and culture on a plurality of levels, with heterogeneous symbolic references and contents which penetrate in any social world, no longer bothering to ground meanings in a place, group or institution. The aesthetic space is deterritorialised and meditised. Evaluation criteria no longer refer to the adhesion to a consolidated and institutionalised system of beliefs and values.

It is crucial here the role of technical systems in their continuous development, in their ever-changing: in fact, the new opportunities that continue to grow in front of us are those that redefine the meanings of our experiences and goals of our actions, as well as our freedom.

The predominance of the signifier over the meaning has strengthened the disengagement of functions and meanings. Separating functions from meaning also implies admitting that what is technically possible is also lawful, beyond wondering whether what technical means allow us to do makes sense or not... Reality (and truth) is here made to coincide with what technique makes possible. Performance, efficiency, the fact that things work become the guiding principles: and if they are not working, it is possible to change them since we do not have any kind of

meaning binding us. Meanings are reduced to personal opinions. Without being in relation neither with others, nor with history the results is the fragmentation of experiences, choices.

In addition, the new capitalism combines the growth based on the activation of technical resources with the affective-emotional sphere: in fact, it works on desire that, let's say, consumption should satisfy. Consumption has been proposed as a way to fill up the individual desire that, however, never being completely filled up, has justified the need to continually accelerate, ceaselessly produce, increasingly consume to saturate the new absence, in a deceptive and endless motion. It is a monotonous and horizontal-only movement through which we face great individual dispersion, which is the result of the attitude aiming at catching whatever passes nearby, under the illusion that the latter is able to satisfy us. The human being is seen here as if it were a desiring machine that moves at the message: "Capture the moment, live the emotion, enjoy the opportunity, you can express yourself since nothing is impossible, enjoy..."

This is the idea behind the development model of the last decades whose economic dynamism is undeniable. Instead of investing in long-term growth (by paying attention to both economic and social aspects), the recipe has prefigured the endless expansion of the range of consumers, even to the detriment of personal and collective depth.

II. FRAGMENTATION AND IMPLOSION OF TECHNO-NIHILIST CAPITALISM

The alliance between the new capitalism, nihilism and technique creates patterns involving both collective and individual social life. One of them is the fragmentation that occurs at multiple levels. Now, I will mention some of them.

There is the fragmentation of solidarity: the individual's exaltation (and his "truth", namely his opinions) leads to the weakening of social bonds and social solidarity.

Another level is represented by the fragmentation of relations: social relations are based on functional arrangements. And are transformed into an enormous task, also given that in a world where all people intend to allege their own truth in the name of individual freedom, and in which everyone has to follow the 'sacred' duty of self-fulfilment, the likelihood of misunderstanding and equivocation can only increase.

Finally, the fragmentation affects the Self: some scholars have conceived the Self no longer as individuality but as a 'singularity event': free energy, pure will to power to infinity, succession of experiences, openness to what happens/occurs, desiring machine.

The logic of fragmentation brings together the power of technology – which is advancing at an increasingly tighter pace and penetrating every aspect of our lives – and the reversibility of meanings of the nihilistic culture. In this context, it becomes increasingly difficult to establish a sort of shared meaning which can be true to anyone. Rather, technical equipments are those enjoying extraordinary strength as long as the idea that what is technically possible is also true is prevailing. The reality test also passes through the technique and the power of emotional involvement. This imaginary is the substrate of the present crisis in its multiple aspects. The issue is quite complex. Now it is sufficient to mention that this crisis represents a hard lesson.

The limit of techno-nihilist capitalism need to be found in its own dynamics: the more it manifestes itself, by increasing its power, the more it reveals its weakness because it ignores that there is something else beyond technical aspects, and that reality has to do with limit – for example, the limit of resources that feed the circuit (including the human being).

The crisis – which is financial, energetic, and social at the same time – with all its side effects reveals the self-reference of that model whose expansion has occurred regardless of spirit and regardless of reality – except for the technical one. The point here is that development is never an abstract matter of technology and efficiency, but is always the combination of multiple factors – still structural, but also cultural and human – and suffers from a certain kind of view of man and freedom. The crisis into which we are may lead to the implosion or the development of freedom.

In this sense, it can become an extraordinary opportunity to build a new model of socio-economic development that is sustained by spirit and willing to be challenged by reality.

The classical scholars of the sociological thought can teach us something in this respect (I think for example of Weber and Simmel): in fact, they had grasped the importance of the spiritual dimension in social life, where the ‘spiritual’ aspect puts itself as a means to develop a different view of man.

And actually the challenges emerging from reality have primarily to do with putting into focus the anthropological underpinnings of new social issues. Freedom – intended as the property of the Self which is individualistically conceived, an unreal subject projected on the social scene only in the second place – represents an imaginary and empty freedom. We are will to power and self-fulfilment, but not only this. We are debt, desire to bond with others, discussion, judgment, empathy, care, fragility, limitation: those aspects are removed from the historical era in which performance and competition have despised weakness, failure; self-fulfilment and individual happiness have tended to minimise their debt and commitment typical of union and belonging, and the will to power has looked at limit and suffering (not to mention death) as shameful; truth has detached itself from those questions about sense that affect human existence at present but also affect its openness to the transcendent.

And the challenges emerging have to do with putting into focus the question of meanings far beyond the specific (technical) functions on which that co-existence seems to depend now.

It is not irrelevant that the signs of the emergence of a new kind of sensitivity (which is social, ecological and cultural at the same time) are expressed both by some planetary events and the recent civic movement in some European cities in relation to issues concerning collective goods and animated by the new spirit of the time, hardly willing to consider absolutely irrelevant the question of meaning, and the response to it, in relation to the future.

In this context, the religious sphere can provide valuable support, especially with reference to the construction of a new imaginary of freedom which takes into account the important question of meaning(s) and relationships (and of the fact that freedom needs to be reviewed in terms of relation, since, it is a relational experience itself).

III. THE SACRED SPACE OF THE INFINITE

A useful idea to capture the potential role of religion in the contemporary context is the one of the “anti-environment” – a concept used by McLuhan, which I have chosen and adapted to what now I would like to discuss.

The reference to “anti-environments” enables to escape the tyranny of the equivalence system and guarantee the basis for more authentic freedom and criticism that the prevailing environment has now neutralised.

One of these anti-environments that, in the contemporary context, deserves particular attention is the one concerning the religious dimension. Other anti-environments are certainly conceivable (for example, the field of education – with reference to schools and universities, as well as arts or the enhancement of the natural environment).

It is neither the place to explore the ample debate about the processes of transformation of the religious sphere in the process of secularisation started with modernity. We know, however, that, in contemporary societies, religion is all but disappeared. Indeed, in some ways, the opposite is true.

But the fate prefigured for religion under techno-nihilist capitalism is problematic, if not contradictory.

IV. PATHS FOR THE RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE FRAMEWORK OF TECHNO-NIHILIST CAPITALISM

Literature and field research have helped to identify three main paths in relation to the highlighted issues.

Along the first path, techno-nihilism basically has continued the long-term and progressive secularisation. Once institutional religion is no longer taken for granted, religion tends to be merely reduced to an individual and intimate fact, with no relevance to collective life.

From this stance, Ulrich Beck conjectures on a “personal god”, with whom one intimately interacts into the daily experience of human life, beyond the religious dictates, dogmas, codes. However, this “personal God” tends to become, in the contemporary era, more precisely, an “individual god”, a god similar to us and reflecting our own image: here is the individual that builds his own religious cover, and decides his own faith.

All this implies fluctuating religiosity, where the religious faith can freely be conveyed, like any other content, provided that it does not require any privilege. In the vast sea (*mare magnum*) of cultural resources made available in the mediated aesthetic space, there is also room for religions. The task to decide whether and how adhere to a proposal or another is left to the individual conscience.

Along the second path, techno-nihilist capitalism stresses religion as reactive dynamics of a fundamentalist sort: the more the process of meaning demolition continues and the more the fragmentation (of ties, territories, cultures, etc.) process spreads, the more the space for seeking new foundations is created. The latter is understood as something solid and not open to discussion and, for this reason, to inconsistency and dispersion to which the whole existence seems to be subjected.

Religion is here invoked as a bulwark able to defend individuals from this fate of dispersion. The celebration of systematic eradication, eclectic nomadism, wandering without direction, advocates a new kind of dislocated world. All this provokes obtuse forms of attachment to territory, tradition and not least to religion - viewed as means to re-establish roots that allow some form of identification with the world. Thus, the intention is to regain what is lost and the idea of sorting the world in a fundamental difference between “us” and “what is different from us”, between something that is inside and something else that is outside. Without excluding to employ violent means to reaffirm some unity and bond against fragmentation. The twisting occurs, in fact, by evoking distinctive elements that may be easily identifiable and are not suspected of being infected by the virus of fragmentation: namely, ethnicity, territory and, undoubtedly, religion.

Religion can be seen here as the expression of profound anxiety linked to the identity definition. Calling upon religious tradition is a way through which social groups – especially if culturally fragile – convey who they are. Such traditionalism

is, however, fragile and ambiguous, mostly oscillating between identity closure (sometimes with fundamentalist traits) and the readiness to adopt forms of compromise and syncretism often bordering on superstition and magic.

Along the third way, we see the development of neo-magical religious forms that offer a sort of solution to the void of meaning created by nihilism. After all, chaotic, vague and fluctuating religiosity paves the way for the return of myth, spiritualism, occultism and magic. As demonstrated by the spread of neo-magical behaviours that make extensive use of religious forms to promote a reasonable relationship with reality.

In absence of other resources or reasonable motives for cultivating hope, a magic-oriented attitude becomes an accessible strategy for maintaining trust. And while hope has a more collective character, desire is much more individual. In fact, magic is individualistic: it features no churches, and anyone can try to propitiate positive forces. Therefore, individualism fits better to neo-magic attitudes, while religion tends to produce collectivity. This explains why the denial of the public role of religion drives towards the emphasisation of neo-magical forms – a process that, from the phenomenological point of view, distinguishes different forms of social action.

In relation to the questions raised by techno-nihilism, all the three paths are therefore ineffective.

In the first case (private retreat) because religion, reduced to purely private act, which is interior and sentimental, is incorporated into the scheme of equivalence and loses its nature. In the second and third case (fundamentalism and forms of neo-magism) because religion, becoming the receptacle for the collection of a number of malcontents and social unease, is exploited for many different purposes: it is used as a symbolic source to legitimise political discourses or as a deterrent to social conflicts, hence weakening the ability to exercise criticism to techno-nihilism.

In this way, religion faces the inevitable process of emptying and is reduced to a symbolic resource equivalent to others.

Subjected to the equivalence system and having lost its distinctive status, religion provides meanings that can not allege to be of different quality compared to the myriad of other proposals freely diffused in the aesthetic space. The implicit assumption of this position is that religion should be treated as any other entity conveying messages of various sort.

This confirms that what some scholars have defined as contemporary “religious revival” completely abandons the Western transcendental stance in favour of the immanentist view which, however, fits completely to the spirit of modern capitalism. The immanent orientation, featuring traits typical of new-age movements, flattens, without neither criticism nor taking distance, on the event occurring. This originates a pervasive but vague religiosity, based on individual taste and on the rather chaotic ‘do-it-yourself’ syncretistic. The outcome of this religiosity is a sort of “religious atheism” and the predilection for conservative positions while religious feelings

contribute to the sacralisation of the “values” present in the dominant imaginary (such as immanence, reversibility of meanings, freedom of purpose, emotional involvement in a directionless becoming, permanent exposure to the lucky event, or acceptance of the technical data as truth, etc.).

Therefore, on the one hand, we have a kind of world which is profoundly secularised, shaped by the techno-nihilistic imaginary, which upholds unconstrained freedom and defense of individual interest. On the other hand, we have diffused religiosity which, albeit grounded in a specific tradition, appears confused and weak: in other terms, a container without content.

But it is precisely this claim that needs to be considered, since it is precisely this claim that undermines the ability to attribute religion a special status. And this is precisely the point.

V. RELIGION PECULIARITIES

In fact, religion, by definition, is not equivalent to many other things. It raises the questions of meaning about the human condition.

Not surprisingly, in his extensive research on the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas has come to identify right in religion those models of language and meaning that allow to name experiences, relationships, history, the world, and hence interpret what otherwise would probably remain unexpressed.

What has been said up to now leads us to a crucial point, which calls into question, more broadly, the meaning of “secularism/secularity”.

The French Revolution has bequeathed us the notion of secularism, to be understood as that condition in which a non religious – secular, precisely – thought finds its place and legitimacy in a world dominated by the stance defined by the institutionalised church. From here, given the formation of the “secular” state, what takes shape is the effort to retain the influence of religion within well-defined borders, by relegating it to the private space up to the time it gets to know sectarian forms of collective groups and movements that throw it back to the public sphere, by employing (sometimes violent) means which distort its essence.

However, the question arises whether, in a social world organised around the global technical system and surrounded by the mediatised aesthetic space, it is the right time to review the conception of secularism/secularity.

The religious experience represents one of the few fallacies (topoi) against which the techno-nihilist thinking can be effectively challenged. The ability to maintain resistance, againsts the phantasmagorical viewpoint of techno-nihilist capitalism is the essential resource – primarily – of freedom.

By reopening the question of the meaning in relation to existence together with the meanings and forms of the human condition, the religious experience is defined as an actual anti-environment which is extremely relevant for everyone's freedom, believers and non-believers.

Therefore, starting from the important recognition of keeping open the question of meaning – that only the secular fundamentalists deny, standing on hostile and, in their own way, uncompromising positions – it is possible to redefine the issue that historically has gone under the name of secularism/secularity.

Who cares about freedom – and understands the limits and contradictions that we experience of it as contemporaries – may be willing to recognise that it is necessary to redefine the issue of secularism. In this sense, we prefer to use the definition of the “sacred space of the Infinite”. This space should be acknowledged, maintained and preserved, being included in the idea of a common good for everyone – believers and nonbelievers.

Against a world that collapses in itself, this space is a valuable bulwark of freedom right in redesigning the reference to the transcendent, allowing to take distances from historical configurations that are built on reductive anthropological views. In a world that is closed and dragged by its systems of power and absolute immanence, preserving the transcendent space should be seen as a deeply “secular act” able to qualify, in a positive way, the public sphere of advanced societies. Such act of freedom has the merit to recover and respect that uniquely human trait – the ability of transcendence, of taking critical distance – which allow to retrieve a relational view of the human being (constitutively related to something other than itself: another Self, the world, history, what is beyond), vision put aside by the exaltation of a self-referential Ego and a social model that has pursued the expansion of the individual will to power, beyond limits and shared responsibilities for the future.

The liberal assertion that religion is only a private matter denies the fact that all societies – even though in different ways – have questioned about the issue of the Infinity. Simply because such a question concerns the human condition. Of course this opens up important questions regarding the public sphere and its reorganisation. The history of modernity bequeath us the awareness that no religion (as well as no ideology, culture or tradition) can reasonably expect to exhaust the universal breadth of human experience. And yet, this does not mean that it is not worth taking into account these great traditions as precious spaces to build a richer social world and, therefore, more suitable conditions for human freedom – for mature freedom.

The recognition of the collective value of the sacred space of the Infinite, for example, may create a more favorable condition to the development of the intercultural and interreligious dialogue of which our present urgently needs. In fact, it requires to go fast through that path, which has only been created at the moment, concerning the encounter-dialogue between religions, ideologies and world views; encounter-dialogue that is an actual human imperative of our time and that may be deployed not only horizontally – between different conceptions of values – but

also vertically, namely by considering the structural openness of the human being to transcendence, openness to which every culture and religion offers answers and different realisations.

The value attribution to the sacred space of the Infinity opens also the crucial question of the relationship between the religious and other spheres of social life. This space does not exclude the religious from public life: it provokes a new consideration of it, beyond its function of being the compensatory receptacle of those problematic consequences of the development models that succeed over time, function that however keeps it essentially unable to distance itself from the principles of those models. Rather, the sacred space of the Infinite – right through the new understanding of secularism – becomes a valuable “anti-environment” that allows to always reopen the question of sense of collective co-existence and of the multiple human and historical achievements.

By keeping alive the transcendent dimension in social life, the sacred space of the Infinite drives the same religious experience not to be exhausted in a socially defined and definitive organisation, but positively dialogue with the world and historical worlds, acting as the dimension that preserves a different point of view, in so far as conceived in terms of dialogue, in relation to historical forms of collective life.

In this way, it helps to point out the need for different responses, not only technical, to those questions that are not actually technical.

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Summary

Nowadays we are being confronted with the prospect of the secular age. Religion, however, has not disappeared. The demand for direction and meaning has returned as central for many of us, especially in advanced Western societies that have built a technical and nihilistic imaginary able to define the background of social relationships and actions. Furthermore, this imaginary is the substrate of the present crisis in its multiple aspects. This paper will try to outline, within the contemporary socio-cultural framework, the role that religion might play as an important anti-environment capable to activate some antidotes against the critical influences to which we are necessarily exposed.

Key notes: contemporary capitalism; freedom; religion; public sphere

ROLA RELIGII WE WSPÓŁCZESNYM WYOBRAŻENIU I POZA NIM. MOŻLIWE UJĘCIE

Streszczenie

Współczesność konfrontuje nas z perspektywą życia w epoce sekularnej. Mimo tego, religia jak dotąd nie zanikła. Potrzeba egzystencjalnego kierunku i znaczenia powraca jako problem kluczowy u wielu z nas, zwłaszcza w społeczeństwach rozwiniętego Zachodu, które zdołały wykreować rzeczywistość opartą na technicznym i nihilistycznym wyobrażeniu, które definiuje szersze konteksty relacji i działań społecznych. Co więcej, wyobrażenie to jest podstawą obecnego kryzysu w jego wielu aspektach. Niniejszy artykuł jest próbą ukazania roli religii we współczesnej strukturze społeczno-kulturowej, roli jaką religia jest w stanie odegrać ważny czynnik przeciwny zdolny generować antidotum na niekorzystne wpływy, którym jesteśmy poddawani.

Słowa klucze: współczesny kapitalizm; wolność; religia; sfera publiczna