

EXCERPT FROM

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FROM HOSTILITY TO HOSPITALITY

In what follows I propose to explore how anatheist attitudes might be put into actual practice. How may one keep open the space of hospitality when it is real strangers knocking at the door, real migrants seeking food and shelter, real adversaries challenging our way of life—and maybe even our lives? Here then we return to the ultimate, and unsurpassable dilemma: what is to be done?

Let me begin by saying what, in my opinion, is not to be done. To be avoided, at all costs, is the ruinous temptation to use religion to dominate politics. We have seen the consequences of this down through the centuries, in religious wars, crusades, and inquisitions against the evil enemy, in the scandal of religious slaughter *in hoc signo*.

Nor is this a thing of distant history. Stalinism and Nazism were, as Mircea Eliade recognized, examples of perverted messianism and the more recent examples of Northern Ireland, the Balkans, and the Middle East all bear out the sorry lesson of ongoing religious violence. In fact, it may well be that, for all our talk of a post-enlightenment new world order, most wars in our time are still, at root, fueled by pathological religious passions, however vehemently denied at the official levels.

The most topical case of this is arguably Iraq, where Sunnis and Shiites have been engaged in a religious civil war. But pathological religion goes back to the very beginnings of that conflict. One too easily forgets how George Bush used explicitly evangelical language in his demonization of the “axis of evil,” choosing loaded religious terms such as crusade and campaign of infinite justice, and even confiding that “God” was his guide and protector. This apocalyptic mentality was chillingly demonstrated in a

major TV documentary (Frontline, April 2004) called “The Jesus Factor,” which confirmed that Bush's view of Christianity was not just a matter of personal salvation but of a global millennial battle between Good and Evil. Indeed one of the leading figures in the Pentagon, Lieutenant General William G. Bodkin, went so far as to publicly assert the metaphysical superiority of America's Christian God over the God of the Muslim enemy: “I knew that my God was bigger than his.... My God was a real God, and his was an idol.”¹¹ The rest was silence—until the bombs dropped.

Al Qaeda's attack on the Twin Towers and subsequent support of the jihad against the West was conducted in even more explicitly sectarian language. Allah and the Qur'an were invoked to legitimate the campaign against the “big Satan” of America and the “little Satan” of Israel. Holy War against the infidel West was declared, and the American fight against Al Qaeda and the Taliban denounced as a “Christian terrorist crusade.” In other words, here at the beginning of the third millennium we found ourselves still in the middle of a religious war between God and the Evil One, between the Lord of the Elect and the abominable adversary.

So how does one choose between a faith that kills and a faith that gives life? Between a God of fear and a God of hospitality?

SACRED SECULARITY

I have been arguing for the introduction of the sacred into the secular, but this is a two-way process. The sacralization of the secular needs to be supplemented by the secularization of the sacred. The sacramental needs the critical and vice versa. In the secular-sacred chiasmus [reversal], word invokes flesh and flesh word. Otherwise it is hard to see how one avoids a fatal relapse to the cycles of religious hostility that, as atheists remind us, have maimed human history for as long as we can recall. The task is to re-envision the relationship between the holy and the profane such that we can pass from theophany to praxis while avoiding the traps of theocracy and theodicy.

But let me clarify further what I mean by secularity in an anatheist context. In its most conventional sense, secularism has come to be the dominant worldview in Western culture along with the emergence of the modern scientific attitude. It coincides with Max Weber's diagnosis of the “disenchantment” (Entzauberung) of contemporary society, brought about by a combination of factors: the industrial revolution, the rise of capitalism, the mechanical and technological mastery of nature, the rationalist Enlightenment, and the various bourgeois revolutions in Europe and the New World. From this positivist viewpoint, religion is considered a remainder of the primitive past, a form of institutionalized superstition sure to disappear in the age of secular reason.¹² As the authors of *The Future of Religion* put it: “At least since the Enlightenment, most Western intellectuals have anticipated the death of religion.... The most illustrious figures in sociology, anthropology, and psychology have unanimously expressed confidence that their children, or surely their grandchildren, would live to see the dawn

of a new era in which, to paraphrase Freud, the infantile illusions of religion would be outgrown.”¹³ This secular philosophy has become the standard view of religion from Comte, Durkheim, and Weber right down to the more recent campaign against the backwardness of religion waged by intellectuals like Sam Harris and Anthony Grayling. And it supports the influential “functionalist” thesis, first proposed by Talcott Parsons, that we have evolved from religion as a holistic traditional life-form toward an increased differentiation of social functions rendering religion obsolete.

By this account, there is no longer any place for the sacred in our modern Western democracies. At best, it should be radically separated from the civic realm, as the private from the public sphere. C. Wright Mills offers this summary of the evolutionary progression from a sacred to a secular universe: “Once the world was filled with the sacred—in thought, practice and institutional form. After the Reformation and the Renaissance, the forces of modernization swept across the globe and secularization, a corollary historical process, loosened the dominance of the sacred. In due course, the sacred shall disappear altogether except, perhaps, in the private realm.”¹⁴ The notion of “laicism” (*laïcité*) in the modern French Republic is a good case of how this secularist attitude translates into a politics of radical opposition to any inclusion of the sacred in the neutral space of public affairs. It corresponds to what Charles Taylor critically calls a secularism of “exclusive humanism” in *The Age of the Secular*.¹⁵ But I shall return to this debate in our conclusion.

For now, let me consider two different understandings of the secular: one privative, the other affirmative. The privative, called secularism by John Mayer, involves a negative concept that determines what should not inform the functioning of any public institution. The affirmative, called secularization, entails a more positive acknowledgment of the original Latin term, *saeculum*, designating a particular century or timescale. This signals a form of temporalization or turning toward the temporal world, which need not exclude the experience of a mature faith but only those modes of religion that imply a denial of time. In this later sense, secularity carries the much more inclusive meaning of what turns toward the world. A secular attitude, therefore, need not deny the possibility of a faith attentive to the realm of action and suffering but only a faith withdrawn from lived experience into a sphere of private interiority or otherworldly abstraction. Secularization thus has no difficulty, in principle, acknowledging the existence of the sacred in the world of the here and now. So, in this more affirmative view, secularity and sacramentality need not be adversaries.

Raimon Panikkar is a contemporary philosopher who proposes the option of a creative relationship between the secular and the sacred. His position is something like this: only secularization can prevent the sacred from be-coming life denying, while only sacralization can prevent the secular from becoming banal. Once we interpret the secular in the original sense of *saeculum* or *aion*— that is, the “*epoché*” that directs our

attention to particular time—we are actually in a privileged position to save religion from itself by liberating it into a fidelity to the sacredness of this life. Our own time, Panikkar believes, offers a unique opportunity to discover the sacred quality of the secular: “what seems to be unique in the human constellation of the present *kairos* is the disruption of the equation sacred-nontemporal with the positive value so far attached to it. The temporal is seen today as positive and, in a way, sacred.”¹⁶

This is not to say the secular and the sacred are identical. The secular involves the human order of finite time, while the sacred denotes an order of infinity, otherness, and transcendence that promises to come and dwell in our midst—if we are willing to host it. The anatheist task, I submit, is to avoid both 1. a dualism that opposes secular and sacred and 2. a monism that collapses them into one. Anatheism is the attempt to acknowledge the fertile tension between the two, fostering creative co-belonging and “loving combat” (to borrow Karl Jaspers's phrase). For anatheism, the sacred is in the secular but it is not of the secular *per se*. It is a matter of reciprocal interdependency rather than one-dimensional conflation. And this chiasmic coexistence may itself serve as model for the inter-animation of democratic politics and mature faith: “God and the world are not two realities, nor are they one and the same. Moreover... politics and religion are not two independent activities, nor are they one indiscriminate thing.... The divine tabernacle is to be found among men; the earthly city is a divine happening.”¹⁷ To collapse politics and religion into one, leads, as history shows, to holy war, theocracy, and ecclesial imperialism. Whence the need to preserve the fecund tension between the secular self and the sacred stranger, whose crossing (without fusion) yields a hybrid—anatheism.

This secular-sacred offspring is, Panikkar suggests, recognizable in new forms of alliance between a politics of transformation and a religion of incarnation. An alliance where we may discover “the sacred character of secular engagement and the political aspect of religious life” (195). In such an anatheist constellation, the secular and the sacred are recognized as distinct but not opposite, different but not contrary. Panikkar speaks accordingly of a “sacred secularity” that allows us to reinterpret the secular in such a way that faith becomes a commitment not to some transcendental otherworld but to a deep temporality in which the divine dwells as a seed of possibility calling to be made ever more incarnate in the human and natural world. Here Panikkar coins the word *cosmotheandris* to connote the creative cohabiting of the human (*anthropos*) and divine (*theos*) in the lived ecological world (*cosmos*). And he sees this, rightly, in my view, as an alternative “middle” voice to both 1. an autonomy that deprives the secular of the sacred and 2. a heteronomy that drives a dualist wedge between them. He thus hopes to avoid the twin dangers of reductive humanism (extreme autonomy) and dogmatic fundamentalism (extreme heteronomy).

In an essay entitled “The Future of Religion,” Panikkar adverts to a major crisis occasioned by the fact that official religion is increasingly lagging behind people's actual practice of faith. For people today, he notes, are bringing God back into the world as faith migrates from “the temple to the street, from institutional obedience to the initiative of conscience” (199). Ignoring the doctrinal disputes between the churches and the world, most people see the pressing problems of faith to be “hunger, injustice, the exploitation of man and the earth, intolerance, totalitarian movements, war, the denial of human rights, colonialism and neo-colonialism” (199). Panikkar encourages traditional denominations to overcome their sectarian exclusivism and enter into dialogue with other faiths and nonfaiths. Arguing for the importance of interreligious cross-fertilization, he makes an urgent plea for “a mutual fecundation among the different human traditions of the world—including the secular and modern traditions,” without lapsing into bland eclecticism or New Age syncretism. Such an understanding of “sacred secularity” should lead to the conciliation, without uniformity, of different peoples in our globally interconnected age. It is not, he concludes, “a matter of speaking the same language nor of practicing the same religion, but of remaining with an awake consciousness, aware that we are intoning different notes in the same symphony, and that we are walking on different paths toward the same peak. This then is faith: the experience of the symphony, of catching a glimpse of the summit, while being attentive to the path we follow, and trying not to stumble on the way” (200, n. 20). Here again, then, we encounter the anatheist paradox: namely, that we can only return to God after we have abandoned ‘God’. The secular entails a radical reorienting of our attention away from the old God of death and fear, for without such con-version we could not rediscover the God of life at the heart of our incarnate temporal existence. This means, I submit, reinserting the hyphen between secular and sacred where it always belonged. Such reconfiguring of the secular-sacred is the catchcry of anatheism.

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