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MODERNITY AND THE DEATH OF GOD*

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Abstract

The aim of the present paper is to focus on modernity and the absence of God in modern times. With the death of God, we are not talking about the absence of God but about the “experience” of death of God. The Death of God of Christian tradition is an historical event which Nietzsche declared witnessing to the advent of a secular form of the World. From the religious perception of Henri De Lubac this process can be named as “The Drama of Atheist Humanism”, from the philosophical perspective of Eric Voegelin it can be named as “gnosticism”, from the sociological perspective this can be named as “secularism”, “worldliness” and etc. Secularism means denial of Christian past and turning away from God by people of the West. It refers special historical process in which religion loses social and cultural value and significance. According to Lubac, in modernity, man is getting rid of God in order to regain possession of the human greatness The Enlightenment confidence in human reason’s ability to understand everything and transform the human nature or society through knowledge and political action is the most fundamental characteristic of this process. This confidence is also cause of the great crisis of modern times and the reason of the tyranny, revolutionary political movements, totalitarian ideologies, violence, enlightened despotism, disorder and collective crimes in modern times. According to Voegelin, modernity is gnostic revolt against the fundamental structure of reality. In this paper modernity and the social process of secularization will be examined according to Eric Voegelin, Henri De Lubac, Karl Löwith and other political philosophers. Expecially, with the Eric Voegelin’s concepts secularization process will be evaluated within the context of “the emergence of secularized history”, in the context of the political religions, namely gnosticism.

Keywords: God, Modernity, Secularization, Gnosticism, Political Religions.

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Introduction

After the September 11 attacks, with its growing concerns about the possible collapse of secularism, modernity was challenged by the political-religious sects, namely by the 'Islamic' terrorist group al-Qaeda. The September 11 attacks kindled the fear of a new religious fanaticism that threatened civilization and especially liberalism in the West. Two hundred years ago, German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche had said that "God is dead". But after the September 11 attacks in America, intellectuals faced the crisis of modernity, the consequences of secularism and the death of God again. New gods substituted for the old One. German political philosopher Eric Voegelin named these new gods in his book as "political religions" in 1938 (it was first published in Vienna and was forbidden by Nazis immediately). Voegelin writes in his book: "When God is invisible behind the world, the contents of the world will become new gods; when the symbols of transcendent religiosity are banned, new symbols develop from the inner-worldly language of science to take their place. Like the Christian *ecclesia*, the inner-worldly community has its apocalypse too." (Henningsen, 2000, 60).

The aim of the present paper is to focus on 'modernity', 'secularism' and the 'absence of God in modern times'. With the death of God, we are not talking about the absence of God but about the 'experience' of the death of God. The Death of God of Christian tradition is an historical event which Nietzsche declared witnessing to the advent of a secular form of the World. In this paper modernity and the social process of secularization will be examined according to Eric Voegelin, Henri De Lubac, Karl Löwith and other political philosophers. Especially, with the Eric Voegelin's concepts secularization process will be evaluated within the context of "the emergence of secularized history", in the context of the 'political religions', namely 'gnosticism'.

1. The Crisis of Modernity and the Death of God

The fall of the Berlin Wall was the symbol of end of totalitarianism (communism) and the Cold War and the victory of liberalism in the West but September 11 attacks called the modern Project and liberalism into question quickly by the intellectuals. The idea of modernity belongs in the context of a certain historical period, namely 'modern' period. The attack on the World Trade Center like Holocaust raises various questions: in the late (highly) modern period how can we explain this attack? Can we interpret this terrifying event as the crisis of the idea of modernity or crisis of liberalism or liberal democracy? Intellectuals have to rediscover the genuine meaning of modernity. According to Gillespie, the starting point of such research is the origin of modernity.

"Modernity came to be as a result of the displacement of religious belief from its position of prominence at the center of public life into a private realm where it could be freely practiced as long as it did not challenge secular authority, science, or reason. The authority of religion to shape private and public life thus was replaced by a notion of private belief and ultimately personal "values." The current attack upon modernity that is exemplified by the attack on the World Trade Center is particularly unsettling because it has violently reopened this unsettling question. In order to begin to come to terms with the current challenge to modernity, we thus must return to the question of the origin of the modern Project." (Gillespie, 2008, x).

Like Gillespie, German-American philosopher and political philosopher Eric Voegelin, in his *The New Science of Politics* focused on the origin of modernity also. According to Voegelin, modernity is the 'gnostic' revolt against the fundamental structure of reality. By the gnostic revolt Voegelin means to the belief that human beings can transform the nature of reality through knowledge and political action. The Enlightenment confidence in human reason's ability to understand everything and transform the human nature or society through knowledge and political action is the most fundamental characteristic of modern process. This confidence is also cause of the great crisis of modern times and the reason of the tyranny, revolutionary political movements, political



collectivism, totalitarian ideologies, violence, enlightened despotism, spiritual decay, disorder, and collective crimes in modern times. According to Voegelin, modernity is gnostic revolt against the fundamental structure of reality and its about the death of God. In addition to this, for him, the gnostic revolution has for its purpose a change in the nature of man and the establishment of a transfigured society. Voegelin says,

“The death of the spirit (God) is the price of progress. Nietzsche revealed this mystery of the Western apocalypse when he announced that God was dead and that He had been murdered. This Gnostic murder is constantly committed by the men who sacrifice God to civilization. The more fervently all human energies are thrown into the great enterprise move away from the life of the spirit. And since the life of the spirit is the source of order in man and society, the very success of a Gnostic civilization is the cause of its decline. A civilization can, indeed, advance and decline at the same time – but not forever. There is a limit toward which this ambiguous process moves; the limit is reached when an activist sect which represents the Gnostic truth organizes the civilization into an empire under its rule. Totalitarianism, defined as the existential rule of Gnostic activists, is the end form of progressive civilization.” (Voegelin, 1952, 131-132).

What lies beneath the collapse and modern crisis? Voegelin thought that the modern intellectual and the modern philosophical trajectory was responsible for the crisis of modernity. The word “gnostic” refers not to ancient religious sect but the modern re-divinization that has its origins rather in Christianity itself. It refers to ‘Christian’ heretics. But with the secularization process these heretics appeared as the modern gnostic thinker that contributed to the gnostic character of modernity; Comte, Voltaire, Helvétius, D’Alembert, Diderot and Condorcet to Marx and Bakunin... are gnostic thinkers for Voegelin (Voegelin, 1975). In a similar way, French Catholic theologian Henri de Lubac thinks that Feuerbach and Marx, like Comte and Nietzsche were convinced that faith in God was disappearing forever (Lubac, 1995). For him, their atheist humanism is not to be confused with a hedonist and coarsely materialist atheism – a commonplace phenomenon to be found in many periods of history. According to Lubac, in modernity, man is getting rid of God in order to regain possession of the human greatness. So modern humanism is built upon “resentment” and begins with a choice (Lubac, 1995, 24-25). The Enlightenment confidence in human reason’s ability to understand everything and transform the human nature or society through (gnostic) knowledge and political action is the most fundamental characteristic of this process. This confidence is also cause of the great crisis of modern times and the reason of the tyranny, revolutionary political movements, totalitarian ideologies, violence, enlightened despotism, disorder and collective crimes in modern times.

Both Voegelin and Lubac diagnose the crisis of modernity as religious-political problem and addition to this Voegelin argues that in order for totalitarian politics to be complete, the “death of God”, i.e the overcoming of all traditional religion, has to precede and after the divine “decapitation” has taken place, Führer figures like Mussolini and Hitler become the representatives, mediators, and sovereigns of the new inner-worldly meaning (Voegelin, 2000, 9). This new inner-worldly meaning shall be called secularization. After the death of God, the meaning of history become a completely intramundane phenomenon without transcendental references. Humanism and the idea of progress are new gods for human beings. For Voegelin, Christian transcendent fulfilment becomes immanentized as philosophy of history and Comte’s (French philosopher, founder of positivism) law of the three stages (the theological, the metaphysical, and the positive), Marx’s theory of history (primitive communism, feudalism, capitalism, socialism, communism), Turgot’s and Condorcet’s idea of progress etc. represent this immanentization. What does this mean? It means that the emergence of secularized history which human can dream and control. But it – theory of history - can be only theory or “dream” and with Platon’s words: “Dream life usurps the place of wake life.”(Voegelin, 1982, vii). When the death of God occurs, truth, moral, justice etc. are idols; these great things become empty forms. Our spiritual crisis is



also cause of the great crisis of modern times and the reason of the tyranny, revolutionary political movements, totalitarian ideologies, violence and collective crimes in modern times, namely new inhuman barbarism:

Nicholas Berdyaev has spoken of an "end of the Renaissance" and of a return to a kind of Middle Ages for our era. "A new Middle Ages?" Such a hypothesis cannot be ruled out, but the phrase may have two meanings. For two elements were mingled in the Middle Ages of history: barbarism and the Church, which endeavored to educate the barbarians by converting them to belief in God. Shall we revert to barbarism, a barbarism no doubt very different from the old one, but surely much more horrible, a centralized, technically efficient and inhuman barbarism? (Lubac, 1995, 72).

God was not only a norm or basis. With the proplem of God comes that question of the Ground. According to Voegelin, the Ground of existence is an experienced reality of a transcendent nature toward which one lives in a tension. (Voegelin, 2000b, 229). God was the Absolute that guides human being and after the death of God, man takes himself as God. This is the reason of new barbarism in modern society, namely gnosticism. For Voegelin, the dynamics of gnosticism moves along two lines. In the dimension of historical depth, gnosticism moves from the partial immanentization of the high Middle Ages to the radical immanentization of the present. And with every wave and revolutionary outburst it moves in the amplitude of right and left (Voegelin, 1952, 176).

2. Modern Gnosticism as Secularization of History

The History with the Jewish-Christian meaning was a drama, human drama. Western Christian society, with the process of decline in the social influence of religion (rationalization, disenchantment, anomie [Weber, Tocqueville, Durkheim]) was secularized. First step was the alteration of meaning in history. (Löwith, 1950) Joachim of Flora (mystic theologian, philosopher of history) developed a philosophy of history that history develops in three ages; the ages of Father, the Son and the Holy spirit. The three ages were characterized as intelligible increases of spiritual fulfilment (Voegelin, 1952) or eschatology (Taubes, 2009) The conception of history as a sequence of three ages is recognizable modern periodization of history into ancient, medieval and modern history or in Turgot's and Comte's theory of sequence of theological, metaphysical and scientific phases; Hegel's dialectic of the three stages of freedom and self-reflective spiritual fulfilment; the Marxian dialectic of the three stages of primitive communism, class society, and final communism and finally National Socialist symbol of the Third Realm (Voegelin, 1952). Voegelin says, for example Comte's theory of sequence of theological, metaphysical and scientific phases shows his religious enthusiasm for the future salvation of mankind. For Voegelin,

Comte would be rather insignificant figure in the history of political ideas if he were not the *Fondateur de la religion universielle* an the first high priest of new religion. Pseudo-prophetic charisma is the strength of Comte, and while his church was not much of success, his religious enthusiasm was strong enough to endow a body of ideas, although of dubious scientific value, with the glow of a revelation on whose acceptance depends the salvation of mankind. Comte has not added much as a thinker to the complex of Positivist ideas; he has added to them in his capacity as a religious founder by shifting them to the level of a dogmatic religion (Voegelin, 1975, 90).

When the symbols of trans-mundane religiosity are prohibited, new "religious" symbols appear in their stead. For Voegelin we have to make a distinction between trans-worldly religions and inner-worldly religions like Comte's positivism because, "followers of movements that want to be anti-religious and atheistic refuse to concede that religious experiences can be found at the root of their fanatical attitude, only venerating as sacred something else than the religion they fight. For this reason we need to draw a linguistic distinction. The spiritual religions, which find



the *realissimum* in the Ground of the world (*Weltgrund*), should be called trans-worldly religions (*überweltliche Religionen*); and all others, i.e., those that find the divine in subcontents of the world, should be called inner-worldly religions (*innerweltliche Religionen*)" (Voegelin, 2000a, 32-33).

Karl Löwith in his famous book *Meaning in History: The Theological Implications of the Philosophy of History* sees Marx as a Jew of the Old Testament, a stature and a messianic. Not only Marx, Führer was also messianic for German society. They were new prophets of Third Realm. For Löwith, "the Communist creed, though a pseudo-morphosis of Jewish Christian messianism, lacks the Fundamentals of it: the free acceptance of humiliation and of redemptive suffering as the condition of triumph. The proletarian Communist wants the crown without the cross; he wants to triumph by earthly happiness (Löwith, 1950, 46).

According to Voegelin, we have to recognize the essence of modernity as the growth of gnosticism. Marxism and National Socialism were strongest gnostic movements in Western Society with scienticism, progressivism, positivism, Freudianism etc. For Voegelin, gnostic speculation overcame the uncertainty of faith by receding from transcendence and endowing man and his intramundane range of action with the meaning of eschatological fulfilment (Voegelin, 1952) (namely, communist, national socialist, positivist society...) He argues that the world "gnostic" refers not to an ancient religious sect but to the belief that human beings can transform the nature of human through scientific knowledge and political action. But,

The victorious Gnostics can neither transfigure the nature of man nor establish a terrestrial paradise; what they actually do establish is an omnipotent state which ruthlessly eliminates all sources of resistance and, first of all, the troublesome Gnostics themselves. As far as our experience with totalitarian empires goes, their characteristic feature is the elimination of debate concerning the Gnostic truth which they themselves profess to represent. The National Socialists suppressed the debate of the race question, once they had come to power; the Soviet government prohibits the debate and development of Marxism. (Voegelin, 1952, 187).

Gnostic corruption of our civilization (religious, intellectual and political) is shown to be a deeply rooted spiritual crisis that means loss of meaning in modern society. For the spiritual crisis or spiritual disorder Voegelin uses "pneumapathology." He borrows the term from German philosopher, major figure of German idealism, Friedrich Schelling (Voegelin, 1982, 101). According to him modern thinker's way of thought is an "immanent" and it therefore is "pneumapathological" namely radical stupidity (German Jew who banished by National Socialism, Hannah Arendt's notion is similar to his notion: "thoughtlessness" (Arendt, 1978, 4-6)). He wants to explain the situation with this question and his answer: Hitler's rise to power. How was it possible? For Voegelin the specific form of spiritual decline occurred in German society and it means the radical refusal to actualize one's participation in the transcendent. (Voegelin, 1999, 26) It means also systematic regression from the rationality of common sense. Voegelin says that "the fundamental stupidity is to put one's own will, libido, at the center of the universe, and that such dedivinization leads all too quickly to a dehumanization. This is the wilful resistance to creaturliness expressed in the quotation from Novalis: 'The world shall be as I wish it!' There you already have in a nutshell the whole problem of Hitler, the central problem of the dedivinizing and dehumanizing." (Voegelin, 1999, 88). Dedivinizing leads to dehumanizing. Dehumanizing is directly related to the death of God in modern society. We can not combat a satanic or demonic force like Hitler, Stalin with ethics (for example Kant's ethics) and humanity alone. Because this force is religiously evil and not 'secular': Voegelin's descriptions of modern life was the loss of reality, moral degeneration, spiritual decay and finally dehumanization (concentration camps).

Conclusion

For the secularized minds secularization is a taboo. And the theological roots of secularization were ignored by the secularized minds also. (Gray, 2007) According to Löwith



modernity and secularization are deformed Christianity. Today we know that secularism is implicated in and mostly responsible for the crisis of modernity. Modernity was challenged by the political-religious sects, such as by the 'Islamic' terrorist group al-Qaeda, Taliban, ISIS, Boko Haram etc. and fascist, extremist groups like Jobbik, NRM, etc. (For their modern roots see Eisenstadt's book with the title *Fundamentalism, Sectarianism, and Revolution*. Today modern fundamentalist movements (Islamic, Protestant, Zionist etc) that emerged in the twentieth century are not simply cases of reactionary anti-modern movements but they are thoroughly "modern" movements (Eisenstadt (1999). The Enlightenment confidence in human reason's ability to understand evil in modern society has been shaken by the totalitarian ideologies, the world war, concentration camps, terrorism and nuclear bombs. The philosophical scepticism of postmodernity also undermines modern project that Habermas still defences. For Voegelin through the life of the spirit, which is common to all, the existence of man becomes existence in community because in the openness of the common spirit there develops the public life of society. Modern man however closes himself against what is common, public life or human community. He is in the language of Heraclitus an *idiotes*. An *idiotes* sometimes can be highly educated person, namely intellectuals or elites. (According to Arendt, National Socialist Eichmann was "terrifyingly normal" and educated). Ideology creates second reality and this second reality obscures or eclipses the first reality of common sense and of ethics. This Voegelinian perspective explains that how terrorist groups do find people easily and especially highly educated person for their violent acts. Members of the collectivist groups believe second reality that their ideology created and eclipses the first reality of common sense. Modern collectivism is gnostic revolt against the fundamental structure of reality and it is political religion. In the modern world new gods substituted for the old One. After the death of God, Dostoevsky's ideological Devils (*Demons*) are new spiritual actors (gods) of the world-immanentist history.

We have to ask today: "Whence this regression from the rationality of common sense? Dedivinization and immanentization or from what source? We can not understand these events only with the positivist political science that is a way of understanding based on science. Also we need to change our positivist approach from scienticism to theology especially political theology (Schmitt, 1985, Scott, Cavanaugh, 2004). The concept of "gnosticism" is the concept of political theology and refers to the problem of the relationship between politics and religion. We mean by it every religion has a political dimension and opposite. As Voegelin says modern immanentist ideologies come out of the classic and Christian background (beginning with Enlightenment) namely theology. All ideology is also about a secularization of messianic thinking and salvation. The project of creating a new man and of transforming present reality in to a new world are root elements of modern messianic thinking an salvation.

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