

CHRISTIANITY, POLITICS AND THE REASSERTION OF THE RELATIONAL SUBJECT¹

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Abstract

We take herein a particular stand according to which the existential solutions provided by Christianity under postmodern terms show that religion should not be political and politics should not be religious. Jesus's statement "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22: 21) is significant in this sense. Nevertheless, postmodern existence is one of continuously reconstructing interferences looking for the relational subject. This subject is disclosed in the assertion of structures originating in the convergence of relativism and absolutism. Feeding on Christ-like models, the religious person participates in an existential game in which spiritual becoming takes the form of complex achievements in all spheres of life, including politics for public benefit, without touching the separation of religion from politics typical to public space in modern democracies.

Christianity and daily life

Discussing Christianity and politics in daily life, two things come to mind.² Firstly, the new cultural fashion of leadership, and secondly the need for politics to show strong leaders capable of proposing change in times of crisis, who should act for the public benefit. For any person having a Western cultural sensitivity, the search for solutions to meet such needs may be manifold. A possible source of models is in the religious realm. In the entire Western culture one could not find a more viable and globally recognizable model such as the model of Jesus. I do not discuss here his personality from a theological perspective (Stăniloae, 1993, Ratzinger, 2010, Zacharias, 2002), nor his divine nature. From amongst the inexhaustible qualities of his being, I merely wish to look at his personal model, the human model, and avoid any lapse into a theological form of monophysitism.

In view of such a model, it is relevant that transcendence organizes around humanity and accomplishes a human subject. This does not diminish at all

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the presence of the divine, it rather augments fully the accomplishment as human subject, as relational subject, and therefore as person. Thus, beyond his theandric structure, Jesus is often seen as “role model for inspiring passion and creativity” (Luke, 2002). Likewise, he is also assimilated in social, political or economic projects that vibrate with the inner force of his model. In a recent reading, I noticed that the authors of the respective study had approached Jesus’s personality especially in terms of leadership styles and emotional intelligence and concluded that in his case the constituents of leadership could be identified. Such conclusions are based on the idea that as a leader, “Jesus had a clear vision, carefully selected his team and empowered them, assigned clear roles, and was attentive to his team and stakeholders. He recognized the importance of all the six directions that project leaders need to pay attention to” (Yngvasona, Jónassonb, Ingason, 2013: 405).

Jesus may be deemed as a special leadership model in which aspirations for both individual and professional achievement are fulfilled. For example, he could serve as an informal leader model in the daily life of a community or in the ongoing professional activity. This way, we may say that his example brings together the time of work on a job and the time of one’s life in the relational community, while bridging the gap between professional work and family, community and society-related activities. Following such a model, one could overcome the crisis of modern humanity, which is the crisis of alienation from personal life as result of overwork in the professional field, itself perceived as hostile, vampire-like or alien. He proposes in fact complementing all subjects’ actions for authenticity. It is possible to follow this model of reunification as it posits us among values of a culture seeking authenticity. This culture pertains to postmodern human’s daily life in the quest for solutions to crises, while rediscovering his/her status of special being permanently construing oneself at the intersection of transcendence and immanence, of the biological and the spiritual, of the rational and the suprarational, of revelation and imagination, etc.

The reunification becomes possible against the background of the ethical relativism of postmodernity. Only a deconstruction of values’ absolute sphere, only renunciation to the totalitarian pressure of absolute value safeguarding institutions renders possible an escape from totality and a discovery of fragmentation, plural experience and subjectivity. Postmodernity transforms institutions from voices uttering, transmitting and imposing the absolute into its deposits and it further gives each

individual the responsibility of carrying it and impregnating it with the data of one's life under specific historical terms. The individual is called to attain ethical accomplishment as relational subject operating in accordance with minimal ethics. The postmodern individual is expected – even if no imperative exists in this sense – to find oneself as a person, meaning to regain one's image and manifest as the Image. All this richness is brought into one's world although its symbolical forms may be poor or metamorphosed. Market economy does not escape this influence with its persuasive communication (Frențiu, 2014; Petcu, 2014), nor does political communication (Frigioiu, 2013; Stoica, 2014), nor the various ways of community celebration, typical of contemporary humans (Anderson, 2000; Wunenburger, 2000).

Suggestive seem to be the meanings attributed to the Image by authors in different traditions, who however have in common the ethical monotheism that explains a certain significance of the image or face. For example, when Dumitru Stăniloae speaks about and describes the divinity as “the structure of supreme love”, he takes into account a relational ethics according to which love is the existential mode typical to the image perception in Christianity. Considering that “Love is never enough to anyone. Therefore it can be endless, and consequently have no beginning either” (Stăniloae, 1993: 7). Thus, to the theologian of love, the image of God in man is never lost, no matter how deep or extensive the degradation of an individual's own Image. Death of the Image is not possible because death of God is not possible. It may be a profound existential metaphor indicative not so much of what happens to God and God's metamorphoses, but of the human condition and the kinds of alienation one faces. This could be best understood in terms of suffering, of experiencing lack of authenticity in the form of profound suffering. We can imagine how much one can suffer when losing someone dear. It is almost impossible, however, to sense the high intensity of the feeling that a human subject experiences at the loss of his/her own being, that is of his/her own Image. It is an abyss whose end man cannot reach. This happens precisely because the human being cannot find an ultimate sense in the immediate being, in an ontology of finitude, it is rather always in need of construing a perspective of infinite being. Christianity explains this infinite being as the personal being whose image is man. Man as a relational being asserts an ethics of responsibility generated in this case from the responsibility of man as image of the divine archetype. Postmodernity frees the image from any outer absolute pressure for the very reason of making possible a free and personal appropriation of

the human condition to its last consequences. This way, vertical transcending and horizontal transcending are equated in view of the relational subject just discovered and of its personal ethics accomplishment.

In this context one should understand the statement made by Lipovetsky according to which the twenty-first century shall be ethical or shall be no more (Lipovetsky, 1996:17). Our century cannot afford the luxury of eluding ethics as it is rather ingrained in its destiny. Ethical relations not only save contemporary world but also make us contemporary to ourselves and assume transcendence. Contemporary is the one who is posited in the opening of his/her postmodern condition. It is also the one who aptly senses the light of his/her time and acts by aspiring to this light. Postmodern ethics is a minimal ethics according to which the subject manifests in relationship to the others as if he/she were the light of the world, that brings the world out of the eschatological darkness of non-ethical action. Here we have a laicized form, taken upon the individual consciousness, expressing the evangelical model concentrated in the statement: "I am the Light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life" (John, 8:12).

Christianity and politics

Jews were (and still are) waiting for the Messiah. Jesus was not identified with the messianic expectations because the Judaic model was that of a messianic liberating character, of a political personality that was to open a new page in the Jewish history understood as theophany. Jesus's actions the philosophy he revealed leads to the image of a character that, although concerned with society's life, brings to the core of his discourse not the community but the individual, not the institutionalized practices but the personal feelings and the individual responsibility.

Jesus does not seem to be a model within the political sphere, in the classical sense of politics, in as much as the philosophy he was sharing with the crowds and with his disciples showed him as a spiritual savior, not a political liberator as the Judaic community expected from the Messiah. He rather seems to propose a separation of religion from politics, of outer problems from inner life, of individual practices from the institutional ones. His teachings called for a rediscovery and redefinition of human identity. This had to metamorphose rather as result of a spiritual infusion than under the pressure of politics. If in cultural history we were already used for centuries to defining man as a political animal, Jesus brings a

redefinition of man in a humaneness generated by a personal appropriation of the spiritual experience that was to be known as Christian spirituality. This is not about an undercurrent confrontation with the political, or about its elusion, but rather about the human subject's orientation towards a rediscovery of itself as a relational being.

One of Jesus's statements to cite related to this redefinition of identity is: "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's" (Matthew 22: 21). Its significance should be viewed by a symbolical consciousness as this is Jesus's communication mode. Consequently, significance is manifold. We shall only examine the significance of co-existence, as suggested by the unity of the two faces of a single material coin. It is dual in its spirit and significance. Most often, we interpret this biblical statement in view of the separation or of the co-existence of State and Church, of political authority and religious authority, of political Institutions and of the Individual's religious assertion.

In one of his excellent inquiries into the ideological component of religion, Sever Voinescu points out to two potential interpretations of the biblical statement: "The first widespread nowadays is that Jesus establishes an ontological split, a separation of worlds and of existence in that there is a world in Caesar's power and another in God's power. This separation goes further in the mind of many: in Caesar's world God's laws are not applicable, as much as in God's world Caesar's rules mean nothing. Therefore, one might say that the Son of God Himself established the full autonomy of the political. There is, however, a more subtle understanding, closer to the truth: between what is Caesar's and what is God's a tense relationship exists. Worlds are not separate but deeply connected as they may often confound or confront each other, while Jesus Christ's response is not at all a confirmation of a division but a solution to a tension" (Voinescu, 2008a). The author justifiably contends the unifying nature of the Christ-instituted model in the sense that "Jesus reasserts a supreme order, which is the order of Creation itself, and does not divide the world set as a whole" (Voinescu, 2008a). Nevertheless, this unity of the world is laid on a new base, that of individual experience and of personal ways to achieve it. The tensioned relationship is triggered here by complementarity, which is rendered possible only through the prior separation of the two worlds. It is not a holistic spiritual experience that is promoted by the new model, but a rediscovery of man as a spiritual being at the intersection of the worlds. This way we may understand that the unity of the whole creation may be

grasped in its original, paradisiacal sense, that of a world in which man is placed in the center of creation and everything that exists is organized around him. Christianity is an anthropological religion par excellence, since the authenticity of human condition is achieved in the individual as a relational being, while the confirmation of this authenticity comes from the relational alterity of being in proximity or of the imagined human being.

In a discussion on the religion-politics relationship, Sever Voinescu advises that one should not confuse the topic of politics and religion relationship with that of State and Church because “the relationship between State and Church covers especially laws, duties, procedures, activity fields as described by norms, which is not the topic of discussion today. State is lay. This seems to be an important victory in the centuries advancing democracy, and I believe it should stay so.” When we talk about politics and religion we consider “the way in which the phenomenon of religious beliefs influences the political phenomenon with everything it entails. Politics and religion speak about different levels of social life but ultimately address the same being. In other words, inside *zoon politikon* there is a live *homo religiosus*” (Voinescu, 2008). The author is for a unification of the two as he states that “religious experience and the political experience stand on common grounds in relation to power. Christianity discerns love in God’s power while democracy discerns freedom in state’s power. Love and freedom are, actually, powerful ideas as base for the development of Western societies, the societies of our world” (Voinescu, 2008).

In the above mentioned discussion on the relation of religion to politics, Andrei Cornea makes a fine analysis of the separation of politics from religion in the traditional sense. Concerned with the links between religious belief and political decision in the context of laicity as a basic principle in state, his premise is that “the fundamental values of modern state, of the liberal state, are religious values, and I would say, laicized Judeo-Christian values: notions like person, freedom, equality are values that in time, probably during the protestant reform or during Enlightenment, gradually became the base of liberalism and of the liberal state while losing their strictly religious element” (Cornea, 2008). In such a context, it is not important whether a political person is religious or not “unless indeed, in his/her politics he/she lives by those values of liberalism, internalizes them, respects them, and to him/her persons and the public welfare mean something. Whereas this is possible precisely because at base, these values are religious and have lost that prime instance” (Cornea, 2008).

We may wonder: what sort of political leader and what political leadership conditions would be more adequate for Romania? As a European country, Romania makes no exception from the benefits of a lay state, a secularized judicial system, a disenchanting ruling, a secularized public space and the development of biopolitics. Consequently, we should expect a plurality of solutions and a certain heterogeneity of models. We note the thoughts proposed by Sever Voinescu and Andrei Cornea, whose voices represent groups of equal reception in Romanian society, on the one hand the tendency to reconstruct the image of the politician starting from Christian values, and on the other the wish to provide an image of the politician whose assumed spirituality encompasses all humanist assets of modern cultural experience, with its religious base engrained in gradual secularization processes. Therefore, we have the image of a leadership on Christian grounds, next to that of a leadership assimilating culturally the values and their religious essence. Of course, contemporary reality brings forth a wide range of options to associate politics with the sacred, values recognized in Christian theology with values that are ambiguous in the interpretation of the sacred, under pressure from the profane ethical-judicial structures. In the face of such plurality still of marked duality, we have to make a personal choice, one that is concerned with the community and that may be adopted in the manner of universal values.

If we look at the elections that politicians held in their relationship with religion or at the involvement by the church, we note that throughout the democratic transition period after 1989, the tendency to associate politics with religion manifested especially as a relation of politics (politicians or parties) to the institutionalized forms of religion. The idea of religious values was not missing either being more a vehicle of political messages than an expression of spiritual options. Seeking the proximity of religion proved to be more a strategy to win votes than a real concern with improving community life or solving moral crisis. Nevertheless, besides these unfortunate associations of religion and politics, besides abstract losses that religious media may display, there were very specific benefits to all churches and religious organizations that won the empathy and interest of politicians, irrespective of their ideological orientation.

We may give a few examples of this game of political communication. Quite noticeable it seems to me the situation presented by Sorin Avram who indicated that in 2008, after the Holy Synod of the Romanian Orthodox Church permitted priests to run as independents in the local

elections, two priests decided to run independent from political parties' lists, as they were allowed. Although they had tight connections to political parties, the result was unexpectedly low, the two having received approximately 3% of the votes (Avram, 2008). Despite the general confidence in Church declared by over 85% of responders to public opinion polls, the clergies could not win citizens' vote of confidence to represent them. To be mentioned, this happened in Suceava, where the Church is most influential and people practice their faith. Administration and politics were attributed to politicians, an indication to priests that they belong in Church and that their concerns should be about the religious needs of the community. It is an example of a manifestation of Christian mentality on the separation of politics from spirituality and a signal to the Church as to the kind of expectations that believers have.

Probably such examples, which were not few in Romania after 1989, should persuade the clergy to return to the spiritual meaning of their profession. The discourse on secularization should not focus only on institutions, nor should it be looked at in terms of percentages of the church's absence or presence in the public space, but should also focus on the personal involvement and its consequences linking to the personal identity. The clergy, especially the priests, should be more reserved when it comes to involving in economic or political activities if they have not been first an example in their community of personal Christian development and of spiritual development. The model should be that of Jesus who favors the kingdom of heaven to that of Caesar's, and tries to determine the others to follow his option of distancing from the daily by the very presence of the sacred in it. Secularization – if we may refer to it unequivocally – is a phenomenon identifiable as product of the Christian world, of Western culture, and a value of the West that we should appreciate. The importance of secularization as a process and as a value of modernity is obvious, especially when it concerns the judiciary, the political system, the administrative structures, the public policies and the decisions pertaining to the rule of law. An attempt to re-Christianize them would lead to most violent forms of fundamentalist manifestations. Still, there is a solution to de-secularize or re-enchant the world. This concerns every individual, and in the church context, the action and personal example of each worker of the church. A spiritual rebirth can only begin with the rediscovery of the relational subject, of the individual as a person. If they want a revitalization of religious man, whom they often see as overwhelmed or even killed by the burden of secularization, priests should regain the energy typical of their vocation. If we want a revitalization of Christian values, we do not

need a larger presence of religion generally speaking or of the church in the public space, but a wider embrace of man's biblical condition. This should encounter in the public space other types of personal experiences and avoid ideological traps. Remarkable in this sense are the theological reflections on the image (face), characteristic to the Christian anthropology (Chirilă, 1997).

An unfortunate example of combining politics with religion is that of the Church involvement in the 2014 presidential elections. Despite the general direction set by the Orthodox Patriarchy that provided no involvement from the clergy in the political battle, we could notice a distinct presence and active participation of some hierarchs of the church and of some priests in the electoral campaign supporting the Social Democratic Party candidate, Victor Ponta, who stated he was a Romanian, an Orthodox and a family man, against the right wing parties' candidate, Klaus Werner Iohannis, who was a member of an ethnic minority, belonged to a religious minority and, on top of things, he had no children. Church representatives in various ways, took over these elements used by politicians against the rightest candidate to support the leftist. This association of the Church with the democratic left wing in Romania is regular in electoral campaigns in Romania. An interesting example is that of the presidential campaign in 2000 when the populist and socialist candidate Ion Iliescu was preferred by the Church to a populist candidate, Corneliu-Vadim Tudor, whose discourse was aggressively Christian (Stan, Turcescu, 2010: 265). The Patriarch at the time, His Beatitude Teoctist, made the portrait of the president to be voted. He was not that of the Christian candidate, vehemently defending Christian values, but a portrait in which one could easily identify the leftist candidate who was a declared atheist and free thinker. Later on, in the second tour of the presidential elections of 2014, His Beatitude Daniel, the Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church, after some church representatives had gotten involved in the elections on behalf of the leftist candidate, found himself in the difficult situation, on election day, when unofficial polls anticipated the minority candidate to be the winner, to make a statement favorable to the latter. Therefore he said that there had been times in history when Romanians' welfare, safety and salvation had come through foreigners, as it had been suggested throughout the electoral campaign about the rightest candidate. As we know, the minority candidate won the elections that day. This message, that came at the last moment of the presidential elections campaign diminished somewhat the negative impact on the image of the Church of its political involvement.

In the aftermath of this negative image we ought to reflect. We should bear in mind that we are reborn by the spiritual transfiguration of the biological, we experience the unifying miracle of the wedding and the unpenetrating mystery of death through the sacraments of the church. Virtually, in our entire life, the church is our indispensable companion. Therefore, it is difficult to say that the church should not find its place in the public space seen as a space of presence or habitation. We cannot overlook the importance of religious institutions, even if our preference goes for the personal experience of the sacred. It is the church that provides the framework of community definition through its symbolic and institutional elements, and consequently marks the individual's real life in the quest for identity creation. Manifesting such a presence is done in the name of values equating a mode of authentic living. However, it is not from Caesar's kingdom but from God's. It does not speak for Caesar but for who makes possible "the quest for God." It is not meant for politics but for living a better life under the omen of common spiritual significance.

The church may play a major role in shaping the public space by divorcing the compromise with politics and political bias, to augment its spiritual vocation. This does not summon spiritualism or a contemplative attitude, detached from real life and emptied of daily life content. On the contrary, it proves to be an active factor in the configuration of community life as long as its major concern is the individual accomplishment as a person. This should be the interpretation of the statement "give to Caesar what is Caesar's...", a solution to define - by complementarity - the identity of the church as a kingdom of God.

We should make the effort to discover the community-sense of the church, which is not to be confused either with the hierarchy, or institutional structures, or patrimony pieces, even though they are important for the ecclesial identity. Let us not confuse the temporary hierarchs and their decisions with the perennial church. Let us have the strength to rediscover community personalism and the value of the subject living a personal religious experience. It would be a good start to rediscover the hidden sense of the ecclesial community identity.

Culturally, one way of achieving this is looking for a rediscovery of Christian identity. The importance of redefining Christian identity in the context of a secularized world could be noted during the entire debate on Europe's Christian identity, on the European Judeo-Christian heritage his

tradition in the documents governing the European Union. The dilemma was not as much about the recognition of the Christian origin of values at Europe's foundation, as it was about the need to politically consider religious pluralism and especially the growing significance of some non-Christian religions.

In an interesting article on the subject, Vasile Boari explains that the issue of Europe's Christian identity is more important nowadays than ever, although we do not know what is left of it and what it may still mean, although it could be threatened not so much by its Muslim communities as by a potential extension of the European Union to accept countries like Turkey, for example, which has a significant Muslim population (Boari, 2009: 85). In his analyses, Vasile Boari shows that although not born in Europe, and not being an ideology or a political doctrine, the Christian religion has had a decisive importance in shaping European politics, society and civilization. It has had an influence greater than any ideology or doctrine ever born in Europe. And more than discussing influences, it is important to note that "Christianity provided Europe with a spiritual identity (Europe was actually the first entirely Christianized continent, although it is indeed also the first de-Christianized one, so that some authors speak now about a "post-Christian Europe") and, alongside Judaism, it provided Europe with a moral identity – two capital faces of collective identity that proved to be the most components of it" (Boari, 2009: 87). In Boari's view, the greatest problem that Europe has today is the fact that discussions on the European identity look at the importance attributed to political, economic, judicial factors, etc. And every time, in the definition of the European identity, the most neglected part is the spiritual one. This marginalization of the spiritual factors takes sometimes a turn that is unfavorable to Christianity, which makes the author state: "we consider anti-Christianity to be the greatest challenge to the European identity" (Boari, 2009: 88).

In this context, one cannot overlook the postmodern turn, with its re-evaluations, with its regaining the value of the subject, and the reconstruction of ethics and politics, humans and society based on their foundation. I would like to add to the nuance of those stated by Vasile Boari when he says: "One thing is certain: post-modernity determined a rearrangement, even a radical overturn of the factors that determine the European identity. And this is not necessarily a good thing ... Postmodernism, which goes hand in hand with relativism, represents

another challenge to the European identity, by calling into question the very idea of collective identity. According to postmodernists, each individual is what he or she likes to be. Any authority and rule is considered oppressive and inappropriate. Thus, postmodernism calls into question the very sense of living together. It creates the illusion that one can build without a foundation – that is, without some values and principles, acknowledged by everyone” (Boari, 2009: 88-89). Being among the most important Christian philosophers in the area of political science, Vasile Boari could not but notice the postmodern limits, the fact that the latter created existential uncertainties by eliminating collective integrating identities in the name of the individual identity, that postmodernism, in its confidence in plural options, inevitably leads to relativism, that firm values cannot be replaced by those of relativism canceling any form of universalism, etc. Evidently, a certain dose of relativism is unavoidable in postmodern thinking. But, on the one hand this relativity is not absolute but rather subject to limitation and conditioning, and on the other this very tendency to relativism makes possible a return to the relational subject in its full rights. Only in this capacity may the postmodern individual set to motion his/her transforming and transfiguring virtues. Only on such base may one construe oneself as a community member and may define oneself related to multiple communities and identities. Nobody doubts that postmodern society reconstruction needs “a minimal set of common rules, principles and values by all partners” and by an agent overseeing their contextualization and implementation. Minimal instances proposed by postmodern thought are not less relevant in terms of a community reconstruction. What essentially differentiates my stand from Vasile Boari’s is that while to me the responsible agent is the individual, to him it is the community. Ultimately, it is about a different philosophical structuring modes, one closer to community philosophy, another to liberal philosophy.

Instead of conclusions

When Aurel Codoban, a most significant communication philosopher in the Romanian cultural field, said: “Communication construes reality” (Codoban, 2009), he was looking for the postmodern return to the individual as agent of symbolic construction in postmodern society.

When such experience is used as base to politics, it is obvious that there is no real conflict between religion and politics. Politics, understood as an art of achieving public good, is part of the relational being’s action. Consequently, the religious human of postmodern society feels justified to

act in the public space, to build its various facets, including that of the political. Although nobody doubts that postmodern identity is a situational one, and therefore also multiple, in order to avoid a schizophrenic action by the individual, divided between the religious individual in private life and the a-religious individual in the public space, it is natural not to claim that postmodern human give up one of his/her identity clothing while participating in different existential spaces. At the same time, difference is a value in postmodernity. And it is not a mere coincidence that the extremist discourse is often directed against difference. Holistic attempts by all means, the tendency to establish a leveling uniformity threaten permanently the postmodern value of difference. Onto this mechanism of difference and differentiation, the present world's appropriated values stand, postmodern identity is construed, a clarification of human condition occurs in terms of the relational ethics. Performing within this relational framework, the postmodern individual participates in the world's show, including that of politics. Therefore, we find that a conflict between the individual, religion and politics cannot be postulated as they are marked structures of the human condition. As I have already noted, if politics is an art of achieving public good, then relational ethics practiced by the religious person may very well head towards an improvement of politics. And I do not find a higher form of politics than personal action in the public space, based on the individual experience of internalizing the sacred. The Christ model of love that makes God familiar to man is highly suggestive in this sense. One of the most important aspects that Christianity contributed is that the emphasis of authenticity moves from the transmundane to the daily life. Jesus as a theandric principle rendered possible God's presence in the middle of daily concerns, while in the plenitude of God's transcendence. Against this background, the leadership model to be discerned in Christianity may be one of improving the life of the relational subject, participant in complex ways to the public space.

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