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Christianity and Secularization

In the West and the Middle East: A Theological Stance

Sylvie Avakian

Abstract: In this article I argue that Christianity is essentially secular. Hence, secularization not only has a theological connotation concerning Christian faith but also it *is* the highest and most perfect realization of Christian religion, since it signifies the cross that is in the center of Christian faith. As Christians take upon themselves secularization as an existential choice, namely the powerlessness of God and of the human being, they simultaneously take the worldly – human existence as ‘here’ and ‘now’ upon themselves. I will argue that this is the culmination of Reformation. Further, I want to demonstrate that secular Christianity, in the sense given in this article, remains a challenge for both Western and Eastern worlds.

In order to accomplish this, I will reflect in the first part of this paper—from a theological point of view—upon some *sociological* interpretations or theories concerning mainly secularization in Western Europe and also the contemporary socio-political scene in the Middle East. In the second part of the paper, I will present several Western and Eastern *theological* positions that defend secularization, and through their contributions I will construct my own theological stance for secular Christianity.

Introduction

In this article I aim at constructing a theological standpoint concerning the relation of secularization to Christianity, maintaining the need to take upon oneself secularization as an existential choice, rather than consider it in relation to becoming modern. I argue that secularization has a theological significance that overrides most contemporary sociological attempts of analyzing and theorizing the role of secularization, and that this significance has emancipative role, which disperses most fears and anxieties over any anticipated secularization. Hence, against all misconceptions of the relation between secularization and theology, in both the

West and the East, and against all forms of modern superiority or religious sectarianism, I argue that Christianity in its depth is secular. Secularization not only has a theological connotation concerning Christian faith but also it *is* the highest and most perfect realization of Christian religion, since it signifies the cross, namely the weakness of both God and the human being, that is in the center of Christian faith. In this sense, I do not intend merely to maintain that secularization is not in opposition to Christianity, but rather I want to demonstrate that secular Christianity remains a challenge for both Western and Eastern worlds, in different aspects and dimensions.¹

At the contemporary era we have arrived at a juncture which brings several elements together; the emergence of modernity and post-modernity by the increasing role of ‘secularization’—bound in one way or another to Protestantism—on the one hand, and the abiding significance of religion, which appears specially through the religious wars and the conflict of the rival absolutisms that threaten to rend the world, on the other. The present era does not seem to be the era of ecumenism, nor of dialogue, rather it is mostly the era of increasing secularism and autonomy, in which religious foundations are shaken, while technology and media overtake the past splendor of religion. This is mainly the case in the West. Meanwhile in the East religious wars are at their peak, and any indications for secular – democratic systems are not perceivable in the horizon. These fundamentalist wars that are waged in the name of religion, threaten Christian faith and existence in the East.

Having those complex conditions in mind and in order to achieve the goal stated in the first lines of this introduction I will reflect in the first part of this paper—from a theological point of view—upon some *sociological* interpretations or theories concerning mainly secularization in Western Europe and also the contemporary socio-political scene in the Middle East. This is

¹ In this article whenever I refer to the West I have in mind mainly Western Europe, in contrast to the United States, and whenever I refer to the East I have in mind the Middle East.

particularly important in the case of the Middle Eastern countries, since most contemporary theological voices are raised as the outcome of this situation. In the second part of the paper I will present several Western and Eastern *theological* positions that defend secularization, and through their contributions I will construct my own theological stance for secular Christianity.

At the outset, however, few observations need to be made. First, throughout this paper I use ‘secularization’ as denoting the principle of separation between the religious and the political authorities, which allows freedom of conscience and democratic participation in the state affairs. Further, I give to the term a theological significance especially when I speak of secular Christianity, which has the cross at its center indicating the powerlessness and the vulnerability of Christian faith, namely its being deprived of all political and ‘worldly’ protection. If Christian faith is truly vulnerable and lacking all advantages that a state-power can convey, then, a separation between Church and state is not only perceivable, but rather essential.² Second, my choice to reflect upon several sociological theories in the first part and the presentation of several theological articulations in the second is not exhaustive in the sense of covering every aspect of the question historically. It is not my purpose here to recount all the theories concerning this modern reality,³ but rather my choice, mainly of the particular theological articulations, aim at constructing a theological argumentation for secular Christianity.

² I avoid intentionally here any distinction between secularism and secularization (See on this: José Casanova, *The Secular and the Secularisms*, *Social Research* Vol. 76: No 4, Winter 2009, 1049-1066). In my presentation secularization does not denote any notion that is hostile to faith. I contend that secularization which has no room for the notion of the sacred within its scope, and thus does not allow theology, is either a misinterpretation of the existential and the social experiences of the human subject in the world, or it is a response to the evil done in the name of ‘God’ throughout history, in particular the history of the Monotheistic religions.

³ For the sake of comprehensive perspectives on the term see: Karl Löwith, *Meaning in History*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1949); Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993); Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007) and José Casanova, “Rethinking Secularization: A Global Comparative Perspective.” *The Hedgehog Review* 8:1-2 (Spring/Summer 2006): 7-22. For a presentation that comes closer to this article, see: Timothy Larsen, “Dechristendomization as an Alternative to Secularization: Theology, History, And Sociology in Conversation,” *Pro Ecclesia*, Vol. XV, No.3, 320-337.

Finally, my aim behind bringing together Western and Eastern sociological perspectives on secularization is to argue that both, from their different perspectives—as the outcome of functional differentiation or the fear from secularization, had failed to penetrate the depth of secular Christianity. Most sociological—and political—theories harmed and blemished Christianity, though most of the times they claimed or at least seemed to be defending it. I found this theological assumption on the belief that Christianity or the Church need neither control the broader society nor try to prove itself as significant or authoritative in its own social setting. This is not what the Church is called to. Hence a considerable amount of confusion takes place whenever Christianity is interpreted or justified from purely sociological perspectives.⁴ On the other hand, there are Western and Eastern theological positions that defend and embrace secular Christianity, and it is partly my intention here to highlight these positions.

A. The Social Setting: Secularization in the West and the Middle East

The Reformers of the sixteenth century were from the first to initiate a critical consideration of Church authority in the West. This had its impact not only on religion, but also on socio-political aspects. Somehow it is possible to view the emergence of modern and the post-modern worlds as basically the reverberation and the consequence of Reformation.⁵

Though religion, in the sense of a cultural phenomenon, had been prosperous for many long centuries in the West, in the twenty-first century, however, religion seems to be on the wane. Different studies have maintained that the decline of church membership and the privatization of religion in Western European societies are caused primarily by the secularization of modern

⁴ In similar lines Timothy Larsen writes: “The death of Christendom frees the church to be the church,” 331. See on this also: John Howard Yoder, *The Politics of Jesus*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1972), 238. Also: Stanley Hauerwas & William H. Willimon, *Resident Aliens: Life in the Christian Colony* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1989), 18.

⁵ See on this: C. Scott Dixon, *Contesting the Reformation*, (Oxford: Willey-Blackwell, 2012), 182-187; E. W. Kohls, „Das Bild der Reformation bei Wilhelm Dilthey, Adolf von Harnack und Ernst Troeltsch,“ *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie*. Volume 11, Issue 3, 269–291;

society.⁶ On the other side, several sociologists and historians could escape the notion that the process of secularization is primarily a history of religious disruption and diminishing significance of religion in society. A remarkable position of this second approach is Niklas Luhmann's theory of functional differentiation,⁷ through which religion is perceived as merely another subsystem alongside others. Defenders of Luhmann's theory claim that it allows restructuring differentiation as a functional pattern of the religious system itself, allowing to uncover the true character of religion. Hence, it would be possible to revise the meaning of secularization and perceive it as 'a complex evolutionary process which has effectively led to a transformation of religious communication' and thus as 'a useful heuristic tool in the social history of religion.'⁸ However, it is my contention that though Luhmann's theory has its positive social implications,⁹ nevertheless it dismisses the whole theological depth and significance behind the quest for secular Christianity. Is it the case that the disadvantage of secularization is that religion loses since it gives up power and authority, and its advantage is that the image of the pastor is now positive, while earlier it was negative, as some exponents of the theory maintain?¹⁰

⁶ This is mainly reflected through the secularization thesis, namely '[u]nder conditions prevailing in industrial-scientific society the hold of religion over society and its people diminishes,' as Ernest Gellner states. 'Marxism and Islam: Failure and Success' (1993), quoted by Tamimi, Azzam, 'The Origins of Arab Secularism', in: Tamimi A. & Esposito J. L. (eds.), *Islam and Secularism in the Middle East*, (London: Hurst & Co., 2000), 13. However Gellner continues: 'By and large this is true, but it is not completely true, for there is one major exception, Islam. In the last hundred years the hold of Islam over Muslims has not diminished but has rather increased. It is one striking counter-example to the secularisation thesis.' This prepares our thoughts to the Islamic stand—presented below—concerning secularization.

⁷ Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, (Trans. John Bednarz, Jr. & Dirk Baeker), (Stanford CT: Stanford University Press, 1995); *Theory of Society*, (Trans. Rhodes Barrett), (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2012-13).

⁸ Benjamin Ziemann, "The Theory of Functional Differentiation and the History of Modern Society: Reflections on the Reception of Systems Theory in Recent Historiography," In *Soziale Systeme* 13 (2007), Heft 1+2, 227-228.

⁹ Luhmann's theory allowed economy, politics, arts and education to become independent from clerical guardianship and develop their own standards and criteria. See on this: Tschannen, Olivier, "The Secularization Paradigm. A Systematization". *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion* 30, (1991), 395-415.

¹⁰ Isolde Karle, "Funktionale Differenzierung und Exklusion als Herausforderung und Chance für Religion und Kirche," *Soziale Systeme* 7:1 (2001), 111-112.

Alongside similar lines Charles Taylor (1931-) remarked that it is possible to explain secularization, in the West, as the consequence either of the decline of personal faith and practice, having science as its major stimulus, and leading to the relegation of religion from the public sphere, or, the other way around, perceive the dissipation of religion from the public sphere as leading to the institutional changes and functional differentiation in the modern society and consequently to the decline of personal faith.¹¹ Through this distinction between the two different connotations of secularization Taylor maintains that secularization is not merely the outcome of changes of objective or neutral epistemic or scientific grounds, but rather those scientific grounds rest on a moral and ethical core. Hence, ‘scientism’ is the ground upon which reside ‘all truth we need to believe’, while ‘scientism itself requires a leap of faith.’¹² Hence, secularization has mainly evolved because of changes in the spiritual and moral understanding of Western modernity.¹³ Taylor refers the origin of secularization to religious notions, such as ‘personal religion’ and commitment which is not in need of external intervention. Such inward commitment comes closer to what Taylor calls *The Ethics of Authenticity*. It was such individualistic faith and ethics that could impair the institutionalized system of Christian religion in the West.¹⁴ In his work *A Secular Age* Taylor further offers an evaluation of the ‘corruption of Christianity’ maintaining the need for reform.¹⁵ However for him there is no ‘single right version’ for reform, otherwise one would fall

¹¹ Charles Taylor, “Foreword” in Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), ix-xv.

¹² Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 404. Taylor continues describing what he calls the “self-responsible rational freedom” maintaining that “we have an obligation to make up our own minds on the evidence without bowing to any authority.”

¹³ Francisco Lombo de León & Bart van Leeuwen, “Charles Taylor on Secularization: Introduction and Interview,” *Ethical Perspectives*, 79; Cf. Ruth Abbey, *Charles Taylor* (Teddington: Acumen, 2000), 200-204.

¹⁴ Charles Taylor, *Varieties of Religion Today: William James Revisited*, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002, 7-13, 106-107. See also: Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age*, (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 431-432. Taylor also criticizes the so-called ‘secularization-thesis’.

into the same trap of historical Christianity. Christianity can only show ways for the path to fullness,¹⁶ and his suggested ways are solidarity and a consideration of the common good, namely life in communion.¹⁷ It is my contention that Taylor's argument for Christian faith as life lived in communion¹⁸ though perceptive, nevertheless misses the deeper significance of secular Christianity limiting the term 'secular' to the social imaginary of a secular age. Based on Taylor's account secularization could not be perceived as a characteristic of Christian faith and therefore cannot play any transformative role for the reformation of the church.

I move to the second context in relation to the question of secularization, namely the Middle Eastern context or the Arab world. Middle Eastern societies have not experienced secularization in the sense of separation of state and religion, and of course not its social and existential connotations. This is peculiar to the Islamic communities, as the religious and the worldly are melded together and there is no room for pure secular governance of state or secular conduct of life.¹⁹ Since the Arab world is of Islamic majority, Christians and Jews, throughout history, were merged with the Islamic societies and have participated in the formation of the Arab culture and civilization.²⁰

As the Ottoman Empire took control of the Fertile Crescent and Egypt in the early decades of the sixteenth century, the Ottomans acknowledged the diverse Christian confessions in these countries through the *millet* system, which represented the different religious communities. This however

¹⁶ Ibid., 643, 771.

¹⁷ Ibid., 692.

¹⁸ Ibid., 701.

¹⁹ Though several Muslim scholars argued against the role of religion in political debates, these remain individual contributions. See: Abdel Raziq, Ali, *Islam and the Foundations of Political Power*, (tr. Maryam Loutfi; ed. Abdou Filali-Ansary), (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012). The Islamist position on this is clear, namely secularism is perceived as foreign, representing some colonial powers.

²⁰ See on this: Glenda Abramson (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Modern Jewish Culture*, Vol. 1, (Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 31-33; Lisa Lital Levy, *Jewish Writers in the Arab East: Literature, History, and the Politics of Enlightenment, 1863—1914*, (ProQuest, 2008), 74-77.

gave way to sectarianism.²¹ The occupying authorities, namely the Ottoman Empire and later some European countries, have utilized sectarianism in order to safeguard their own benefits in these countries.

In our contemporary times, it is remarkable that the state of Israel has separated most Jews from the Arab world, while earlier they were merged with it. Within the Arab world, some Arab countries—such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf countries—have adopted the Islamic state system, according to which the state constitution is based upon the Quran. In these Islamic states no Jewish or Christian elements are involved. Most Muslim countries, including those that had adopted the Arab Socialist system—as Egypt, Syria, and Iraq and to lesser extent Algeria and Libya—have formed semi-secular governmental regimes where the dependence on Islamic Law as a source for legislation is diminished. These Muslim governments had appropriated legal systems that are inspired by western structures and schemes as their norm, while integrating into them some reference to Islam.²² In several of these countries Christian minorities formed an essential part of their history. However, the repression that has been practiced against religious freedom and religiosity has been a stimulating factor for the rise of different kinds of fundamentalist religious movements.²³

In Syria, Christians coexisted with Muslims for long centuries, but the question of their future existence in that country remains open, especially since March 2011, when the ruling system

²¹ In this system the individual was legally acknowledged by the Empire as a member of the particular religious community, and not as a citizen of the Empire, and, on the other hand, it was through religious representation that one could have access to state power. See on this: David D. Graftin, “The ‘Religious Secularism’ of Lebanon and the United States: A Discussion between Lebanon’s Secular Debate and Madison’s ‘Principle of Pluralism’,” *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences* 19:3, 37-38. See also: Ussama Makdisi, *The Culture of Sectarianism: Community, History and Violence in Nineteenth-Century Ottoman Lebanon* (California: Univ. of California, 2000).

²² See on this: Esposito, John L., (2010) “Rethinking Islam and Secularism” (ARDA Guiding Paper Series). State College, PA: The Association of Religion Data Archives at The Pennsylvania State University, from <http://www.thearda.com/rrh/papers/guidingpapers.asp>.

²³ See: Paul Khoury, *Turāth wa Ḥadāthah: Qirā’ah liḥikr al’arabī alḥālī* [Tradition and Modernity: A Reading of the Modern Arabic Thought], (Beirut: Almaktabah albulusiah, 1999), 20-21.

has been attacked by the opposition, reviving with it anti-secular trends of Islamic fundamentalism. Lebanon has been an exception as a ‘neutral, independent and sovereign entity,’²⁴ however its sectarian political system—according to which the major political functions are distributed to the major sects or confessions in the country—has prevented it from forming a stable and democratic state system.²⁵ The query of separation of state and religion has been increasingly raised since the middle of the twentieth century in Lebanon, yet it remains an open debate. It may not be an insignificant observation to note that the leaders of most important denominations in the country ally themselves with some politicians, who benefit from the sectarian system. This is deduced from the fact that the Lebanese state recognizes its citizens through the channel of their sectarian affiliation, and the lack of civil personal status laws. Thus, those who do not belong to any particular sect, or denomination, have no rights to claim, such as marriage, adoption and inheritance.²⁶

In the contemporary Lebanese Christian milieu, two main approaches are to be distinguished concerning a Christian position toward secularization. The first approach is represented by some Christian leaders who came to support the sectarian plan, maintaining the importance of religion for the formation of a modern state, without necessarily separating religion and sectarianism from the state and politics.²⁷ On the other hand, the overriding concern of the second approach is the

²⁴ As it has been agreed upon in the National Pact. See: Krayem Hassan, “The Lebanese Civil War and the Taif Agreement” Accessed online on 05.05.2013: <http://ddc.aub.edu.lb/projects/pspa/conflict-resolution.html>

²⁵ The *Taif* Agreement (1989) ended the civil war in Lebanon and promoted the complete Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon, forming the principle of “mutual coexistence” between Lebanon’s different sects and their proper political representations. It adopted the National Pact of 1943, an unwritten agreement that laid the foundation of Lebanon as a multi-sectarian state, with some minor changes. Although Taif agreement identified the abolition of political sectarianism, however, it provided no time period for doing so. See: Farid el-Khazen, *The Communal Pact of National Identities: The Making and Politics of the 1943 National Pact*, Oxford: Centre for Lebanese Studies, 1991, 5-17.

²⁶ George Sabra, “*Al-ḥurriyyah wal-ta’addudīyyah wal-’aysh al-mushtarak*” [Freedom, Pluralism and the Common Life] in Faḍl Abulnaṣr (ed.) *Hawājes ALmasiḥī Allubnānī: Maqālāt wa ḥiwārāt* [Presentiments of the Lebanese Christian: Articles and Dialogues], Beirut: Bisan Lilnashr: 2001, 46-47.

²⁷ As Lebanon gained independence from the French Mandate, the sectarian-political system could supply Christians with freedom through the particular religious communities. Thus, the positive contributions of the sectarian

preservation of the essential human values of peace, equality and democracy against all kinds of fundamentalism and injustice. This approach repudiates sectarianism and opts for a secular state, appealing mainly to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights as the scope within which equal rights and democratic values might be attained.²⁸ A major reason behind this position concerns the existential worries and presentiments that Christians have regarding their future in the Arab world. Some in the early twentieth century have chosen the way of Arab nationalism,²⁹ which came to prominence at the weakening of the Ottoman rule. However, the movement declined after the defeat of Arabs in several wars toward the end of the twentieth century and for most Christians it proved not to be the best solution, as they realized its predominant Islamic nature.³⁰

It is possible to conclude that though there have been several reform attempts and aspirations for secularization, secularization is feared and rejected in the Arab world. It is perceived as the loss of religious values and also, to put it more bluntly, as the loss of personal benefits and interests.

system have been maintained by this approach. See: George Sabra, "Religion and Citizenship: The Historical Experience of Protestants" in *Theological Review of the Near East School of Theology*, XXII/1, Beirut, 2001, 134. See also: Habib Badr, "The Modern State between Religion and Secularization: Toward Reinforcement of Political Sectarianism in Lebanon" in Faḍīl Abulnaṣr (ed.) *Hawājes ALmasihī Allubnānī: Maqālāt wa ḥiwārāt* [Presentiments of the Lebanese Christian: Articles and Dialogues], 56-57.

A contemporary advocate of this position is Habib Chales Malik, who claims that secularization is not the solution for the Arab countries. Nationalism and secularization are western systems, while the Eastern identity, whether we like or no, is religious and it will remain so. Habib Charles Malek, "An Interview with Habib Chales Malek" in Faḍīl Abulnaṣr (ed.) *Hawājes ALmasihī Allubnānī: Maqālāt wa ḥiwārāt* [Presentiments of the Lebanese Christian: Articles and Dialogues], 124-125.

See also: Habib Charles Malik, "How Christians and Other Native Minorities Are Faring in the Unfolding Arab Turmoil of 20011". Accessed online: <http://www.pass.va/content/dam/scienze-sociali/pdf/acta17/acta17-malik.pdf>

²⁸ Bsteh A. & Khoury A.Th. (eds.), *Ālam wāḥad lil-jamī'* [One World for All], (Beirut: Al-būlusiyah, 2000), 174. In the same reference George Khodr writes: "Our common life can be transmitted into the daily life in a sincere and a faithful way by applying the Human Rights, though this is expressed through secular human language. And I do not admit of any dignity apart from these givens. I stand at the end of this century and I do not have any understanding of the dim diminishing of religious freedom." 47.

²⁹ And others were advocates of Syrian Nationalism, which later was defended by the Syrian National Socialist Party, founded by the Lebanese Christian Antun Saadeh.

³⁰ Arab nationalism defended Arab identity and patriotism aspiring to unite all Arabs regardless of any religious affiliation. A reference to Butros Al Bustani (1819-1883) has to be made here, who was protestant and one of the founders of the first Arabic-speaking Protestant Church in the Ottoman Empire. He defended the cultural identity of the nation and founded his own National School in 1863 based on secular principles. However, after Lebanon's independence in 1943 Lebanese Christians realized that Arab Nationalism, though seeming secular, is thoroughly bound to Islam. See on this: George Sabra, "Religion and Citizenship: The Historical Experience of Protestants" in *Theological Review of the Near East School of Theology*, XXII/1, Beirut, 2001, 131-133.

B. Christianity and Secularization: A Theological Stance

Christianity as religion—or the Christian Church—has attempted throughout history to defend its authority and superiority. Secularization, on the other hand, confronts Christianity, or the Christian religion, with the major question: should Christian faith be satisfied with its categorical claims, speculative teachings and dogmas, as they were accumulated throughout centuries, without the demand for a self-criticism?

As maintained earlier, Martin Luther was a precursor to bring about critical consideration of the hierarchy of the Catholic Church and the hierarchical differentiation of the society through the different classifications.³¹ This laid the ground for the future aspiration to secularization. In the eighteenth century, the attempt for the separation between church and state came to clearer terms through the work of Friedrich Schleiermacher. In his *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, Schleiermacher criticized ‘the malicious spirit of sectarianism’, which leads away from the essence of religion. For him Christian faith is to be conceived rather in terms of personal consciousness and religious feelings, rather than through any union between the state and the church. It was such a union behind ‘the usual conception of God as one single being outside of the world and behind the world,’ wanting to rule over domains other than what belongs to religion.³² Thus, to be in relation with God implies neither the upholding of particular propositions, transmitted from one generation to another, nor the reading of some infallible texts, but rather to be in relation with God meant, for Schleiermacher, to be conscious of ‘being absolutely dependent’,³³ namely to enjoy a particular mode of being which invades the whole of the person

³¹ See on this: Luther, Martin, “To the Christian Nobility of the German Nation Concerning the Reform of the Christian Estate, 1520”. Charles M. Jacobs (Tr.), in *Luther’s Works*, ed. Helmut T. Lehman. Vol. 44, *The Christian in Society I*, Ed. James Atkinson, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1966), 115-217.

³² Friedrich Schleiermacher, *On Religion: Speeches to its Cultured Despisers*, (Louisville: Westminster Knox Press, 1994), 101.

³³ Friedrich Schleiermacher, *The Christian Faith*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1928), 12.

in his/her innermost reality.³⁴ Such absolute dependence on God is exactly what secular Christianity is about. It implies the eagerness to depend on no other alleviation and to hope for no other glory than the glory of the cross.³⁵ Needless to say Schleiermacher's thought was a reaction to a long history of Christian religion, in which the church authority, held by metaphysical absolute claims, had long prevailed, while—Schleiermacher would say that—people were indifferent about God in their hearts and minds. Alongside similar lines, Søren Kierkegaard conceived faith as 'radical inwardness or subjectivity', which is made possible only through *negating* 'history' and 'objectivity' in questions of faith. 'Preparation for becoming attentive to Christianity', for Kierkegaard, required 'deeper immersion in existence.'³⁶ Contrary to this, the collapse of Christendom has been caused by the 'non-dialectical union of time and eternity',³⁷ namely the perception of a veritable, or an absolute, being within the natural finite order.³⁸ This could be traced back to the traditional misinterpretation of the notion of incarnation, which led to sanctifying 'time' and 'nature'.³⁹

In the nineteenth century a corresponding reaction is acutely expressed through Friedrich Nietzsche's words on the mouth of the madman, addressing the people in the market place:

³⁴ Stephen Sykes, *The Identity of Christianity: Theologians and the Essence of Christianity from Schleiermacher to Barth*, (London: SPCK, 1984), 86.

³⁵ In a sermon entitled "The Dying Savior our Example," *Selected Sermons of Schleiermacher*, Tr. Wilson, Mary F., (Hodder and Stoughton, 1890), Schleiermacher presents the death of Christ as paradigmatic. For him dying like Christ implies sharing in his sorrow and calmness in the face of injustice. The Gospel, thus, for him is at work in weakness more than in strength.

³⁶ Søren Kierkegaard, *Post-scriptum aux miettes philosophiques*, (Tr. Paul Petit), (Paris: Gallimard, 1941), 378. (cf. p. 98.) The quotation also appears in Henry de Lubac, *The Drama of Atheist Humanism*, (Tr. E. M. Riley, A. E. Nash & M. Sebanc), (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995), 111.

³⁷ Thomas J. J. Altizer, "Theology and the Death of God" in Thomas J. J. Altizer & William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, (NY: Indianapolis, 1966), 111.

³⁸ See on this: Georg W. F. Hegel, *Logic*, Vol. I, Bk. I, Ch. 3.

³⁹ In contrast to the secular approach Neo-Orthodoxy in the Twentieth century rejected the secular ways of addressing God and kept using the older categories of biblical and theological language with their emphasis on the trans-natural reality of Christian faith. However, it was unable to come to terms with the 'fundamental mood of secularism', particularly present in the young theologians, who no more find the traditional language concerning the transcendent nature of God, God's revelation and the mighty acts as credible. See on this: Langdon Gilky, "Secularism's Impact on Contemporary Theology". Accessed online on 11.05.2013:

<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=392>

“Where is God gone?” he called out. “I mean to tell you! We have killed him—you and I! We are all his murderers! But how have we done it? How were we able to drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the whole horizon? ... Has it not become colder? Does not night come on continually, darker and darker? ...

It is further stated that the mad man made his way into different churches on the same day, and there intoned his *Requiem aeternam Deo*. When led out and called to account, he always gave the reply: “What are these churches now, if they are not the tombs and monuments of God?”⁴⁰

Nietzsche had considerable influence on modern thought. By freeing his followers from philosophical and theological preconceptions and categorical imperatives, he declared all metaphysical attempts to prove the reality of a transcendent being as being dominated by falsehood and forgery, ‘seeking forgetfulness in the soaring from a too true memory’.⁴¹ Nietzsche never claimed that ‘there was no God’, but that the Eternal had ‘suffered death at the hands of mortals’.⁴² In paradoxical words Nietzsche said: ‘He who no longer finds what is great in God, will find it nowhere; he must either deny or create it.’⁴³ It was partly because of Nietzsche’s claimed ‘death of God’ that the affirmation of worldly – human existence as ‘here’ and ‘now’ was made possible through a dialectical ‘No-saying to God’, as a transcendent reality, and a ‘Yes-saying to human existence’.⁴⁴ The dialectical form of theological discourse is inescapable so that it might negate all

⁴⁰ Friedrich W. Nietzsche, “The Madman” in *Nietzsche Selections*, (ed. Richard Schacht), (Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993), 114-115.

⁴¹ Friedrich W. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, (Ed. William Kaufman, Trans. Helen Zimmern), (N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1997), 137.

⁴² Erich Heller, “The Importance of Nietzsche on the Modern German Mind” *Encounter*, April 1964, 60.

⁴³ This quotation is found in Nietzsche’s unpublished notebook which he kept at the time of his writing *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The words reflect Nietzsche’s hidden religious nature, which is nevertheless guarded by a vigilant intellect. See Eric Heller’s whole argument: “The Importance of Nietzsche on the Modern German Mind” *Encounter*, April 1964, 59-66. (particularly p. 64)

⁴⁴ Thomas J. J. Altizer, “Theology and the Death of God” in Thomas J. J. Altizer & William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, (NY: Indianapolis, 1966), 96-98, 103.

dominant conceptions and traditions and at the same time affirm their transformed forms, or their inner truth and reality.

The Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer responded further to historical Christianity, repudiating the claims of a God who is the product of human speculation and metaphysical deliberation. He claimed the removal of 'the linchpin' of Christianity and has portrayed the absence of religion, particularly in the lives of those who describe themselves as 'religious'.⁴⁵ Bonhoeffer maintained the need for a worldly, non-religious interpretation of the Biblical heritage and the demand to abandon a false conception of God. A non-religious interpretation is an invitation to a whole-life participation in the world and its pains. For Bonhoeffer, it is only in such responsible involvement in the world that one meets God. His notion of a *Religionsloses Christentum* (religionless Christianity) summarizes his position:

God is teaching us that we must live as humans who can get along very well without God. The God who is with us is the God who forsakes us. The God who makes us live in this world without using God as a working hypothesis is the god before whom we are standing. Before God and with God we live without God. God allows Himself to be edged out of the world and on to the cross. God is weak and powerless in the world, and that is exactly the way, in which he can be with us and help us. Matthew 8:17 makes it crystal clear that it is not by his omnipotence that Christ helps us, but by his weakness and suffering. ... Man's religiosity makes him look in his distress to the power of God in the world; he uses God as a *Deus ex machina*. The Bible however directs him to the powerlessness and suffering of God; only a suffering God can help.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*. The quotation appears in Martin E. Marty (ed.), *The Place of Bonhoeffer: Essays on the Problems and Possibilities in His Thought*, (Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2009), 38.

⁴⁶ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Letters to a Friend" in *Letters and Papers from Prison*. Accessed online, 09.05.2013: <http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Suydam/ReIn220/Bonhoefferex.htm>. The quotation also appears in John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1963), 39.

Further, defenders of the so-called ‘secular theology’, endorsed by the Anglican bishop John A. T. Robinson, have raised the question whether there is such a possibility of letting the traditional—classical—terminologies and conceptions of God go and make the effort for a new mould that might express the truth of the Gospel differently.⁴⁷ They argued that the notion of ‘God’ is in need of ‘radical reformulation’. Several conceptions of God—such as omnipotent, problem solver, miracle doer—were perceived as in need of exchange with others. This would imply that all the different gods that the history of human thought has created are to be abolished in order that a new meaning of ‘God’ would emerge. In his *Honest to God* Robinson expressed the point succinctly:

[T]he Christian gospel is in perpetual conflict with the images of God set up in the minds of men, even of Christian men, ... as soon as they [those images] become a substitute for God, as soon as they become God, so that what is not embodied in the image is excluded or denied, then we have a new idolatry and once more the word of judgment has to fall.⁴⁸

The image of God being ‘up there’, or the later metaphysical notion of God being ‘out there’ is still defended by many, since it represents ‘their God’ as the supreme distinct Being and they have no other god to replace it with. But what if the existence of such a distinct super Being is denied? What if the God ‘up there’ is no more there? Is it the end of Christianity? Or is there a way to conceive of such a denial as the only way for making Christianity intelligible and meaningful in our contemporary times? ‘Secular theology’ maintains that Christianity’s main

⁴⁷ Since 1960s Christian theology had undergone a radical turn, which was enthralled by the hermeneutics of suspicion and came to be known as ‘secular theology’, which was almost synonymous to the ‘death of God’ theology, maintaining the death of the conventional conceptions and ideologies about God. Other proponents of ‘secular theology’ or the ‘death of God theology’ in the 20th and 21st centuries are: Paul Van Buren (1924-1998), Richard L. Rubenstein (1924-), Gabriel Vahanian (1927-2012), William Hamilton (1924-2012), Thomas J. J. Altizer (1927-) and John D. Caputo (1940-).

⁴⁸ John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God*, 125.

teaching on incarnation implies that the Real is part of human reality, ‘here’ and ‘now’. In such a dialectical vision, the neo-orthodox notion of the transcendent and a wholly other God disappears, and in an act of radical self-emptying a realized eschatology and a radical transformation of the present occur. Accordingly God is no more the transcendent being in a supernatural sense, and Jesus is not God dressed up as a human being, making a trip to the planet earth, as Robinson explains. Rather God is perceived as the transcendent ground and depth of the worldly-human reality and experience. God is found in the unconditional care and concern for the Other. Further, it is in the ultimate self-surrender and the emptying of the self of Jesus on the cross that he unites completely with the ground of his being, and thus, nothing of him is left other than that inexplicable ground, that we call God. ‘[T]heology cannot be reborn unless it passes through, and freely wills, its own death and dissolution.’⁴⁹ This would confirm the mystical notion that God has to die in order that God might be born within the human reality, so that divine transcendence is transformed into divine immanence. Thus, the holy is not distinct from the common and the worldly, rather it is in the common and the worldly that the holy and the transcendent dwells. This is reflected through the German term for secularization: *Weltlichkeit* [worldliness, *Säkularismus*].⁵⁰ As Christians take upon themselves secularization as an existential choice, namely the powerlessness of God and of the human being, they simultaneously take the worldly – human existence as ‘here’ and ‘now’ upon themselves. This is in contrast to the traditional position, which promoted the need to escape the present situation in order to hope for some otherworldly reality. It is possible to construe this claim in the light of the dialectical argumentation, suggested above, which allows the

⁴⁹ Thomas J. J. Altizer, “America and the Future of Theology” in Thomas J. J. Altizer & William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, 15. ‘Secular theology’ has been a response or an attack on neo-orthodoxy, which had partly affirmed the classical images of the Creator and the creature, upholding a sense of waiting for God’s return; the God beyond the God of the Bible. See on this: William Hamilton, “The Death of God Theologies Today” in Thomas J. J. Altizer & William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*, 47-49.

⁵⁰ See the discussion of John A. T. Robinson in *Honest to God*, 84-87.

conscious subject to take hold of the worldly condition against the supreme authorship from outside. In this sense the human predicament is determined neither by governing socio-political power, that covers up the rights and the duties of the individual person, nor by a transcendent being, who interferes in the worldly affairs in supernatural manner. Contrary to this, the Christian takes upon him/herself a responsible involvement in the world and its pains and this in itself is a constant task of reformation.

In the Middle Eastern context several theological voices address the question of secularization in our contemporary times. The Greek Orthodox Metropolitan George Khodr (1923-) ascribes the contemporary Arab predicament to the absence of the concept of secular civilization in the Islamic religion.⁵¹ This, he maintains, results in a wrong understanding of one's own faith, since faith and religious confession are misused to represent certain social-political entities within the one community.⁵² There is no possibility for any kind of progress and development in the Middle East without a true acceptance and approval of freedom in all living and governing systems, contends Khodr, and without a scientific analysis of one's current situation.⁵³ Reflecting on the notion of religious states Khodr rejects the notion completely.⁵⁴ He writes:

From the doctrinal perspective there is no theoretical confrontation between the church, which exists in the heart of God and is moving toward eternal life, and the state which governs the human times or is governed by the human times. These are two realities which are not related [in any way].

...

⁵¹ George Khodr, "*Al-teknolojya wal-'adālah al-ijtimā'iyah*" [Technology and Social Justice] in Georges Khodr, Gregoire Ḥaddād, Hector Duwayhī, and Antoine Maqdisī, *Al-kanīsa fīl-'ālam* [The Church in the World], (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-nūr, 1973), 149-150. [All translations in this paper from the original Arabic text are my own.]

⁵² George Khodr, "*Al-masīḥīyyah wal-'islām fī lubnān*" [Christianity and Islam in Lebanon], 16.05.1965 in George Khodr, *Ḥadīth al-'aḥad: al-dīn wal-'adyān* [Sunday's Word: Religion and Religions], vol.2, (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-nūr, 1985), 305.

⁵³ George Khodr, "*Al-'islām wal-gharb wal-ghad*" [Islam, the West and the Future], *An-nahār*, 09.02.2002.

⁵⁴ George Khodr, *Ṭawā'if wa madzāheb wa 'ilmāniyyah* [Denominations, Ideologies and Secularization], *Annahār*, 11.02.2012.

Whenever church leadership strives to convene its children upon that which is different than the Gospel, the doctrine and the inner purification, this would mean that it has forgotten the unique nature of Christianity, which soars above the transient. The church exists in time, and by this it is the expansion of Christ's presence in it, however, it is not of this world.⁵⁵

Khodr maintains that Christian faith is about inner purification and that its existence in the world is the expansion of Christ's presence in it. He distinguishes the political affairs of a country from questions of faith and belief, which belong to the free choice of one's heart and mind. Further, Khodr perceives the danger in the mistaken image of God that one shapes according to one's own dispositions and likeness. In this sense Khodr explains that God is not an ally of a sect or a denomination against another, as some claim. He says: 'The Lord does not favor a group [against another] and makes no interference in war or peace.'⁵⁶ Thus, the secularization that Khodr defends is a 'civil rule' deprived from religious inclinations, since for him 'national thought is founded upon one's ability to overcome the sectarian affiliation'⁵⁷ and move toward affiliation to a national state.

Another proponent of secularization in Lebanon is Paul Khoury (1921-),⁵⁸ who, similar to Robinson, maintains that God is not to be conceived as an absolute being, distant and separate from the human worldly reality, or as a divine revealer, who sends down the truth in segments. Contrary to this, God is the principle, the ground of human existence, and its ultimate meaning.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ George Khodr, "*Al-kanīṣah wal-dawlah*" [The Church and the State], (Tr. Sylvie Avakian), *Annanhār*, 28.03.2009. http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles_year_detail.html?year=2009&type_id=4&articleID=656

⁵⁶ George Khodr, "*Tasyīs allāh*" [The Politicization of God] (Tr. Sylvie Avakian), *Annanhār*, 03.02.2007. http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles_year_detail.html?year=2007&type_id=4&articleID=846

⁵⁷ George Khodr, "*Hal min tajāwoz liṭāʾifiyyah*" [Is Surpassing Sectarianism Possible?] (Tr. Sylvie Avakian), *Annanhār*, 27.11.2009. http://www.georgeskhodr.org/en/articles_year_detail.html?year=2009&type_id=4&articleID=621

⁵⁸ Doctor of Letters from the University of Leiden (1965)—previously a Greek Catholic priest.

⁵⁹ Paul Khoury, *Fī sabīl ansanat al-ʾinsān* [For the Humanization of the Human Being], (Beirut: Al-būlusīyyah, 1997), 129; P. Khoury, *Fī al-dīn: Muqārabah anṭropolojīyyah* [In Religion: An Anthropological Perspective], (Beirut: Al-būlusīyyah, 2004), 138.

Whenever religion is dominantly described in supernatural terms faith would be misinterpreted. Religious experience and human transcendence do not contradict reason and the rational foundation of faith.⁶⁰ Secularization, in this sense, does not contradict faith; rather it desires a rational grounding for it, liberating it from its conventional claims.⁶¹

A fierce contemporary advocate of secularization in Lebanon is the Melkite Bishop Gregoire Haddad (1924-), who has been a pioneer of anti-sectarianism since 1960-s. Haddad has instituted the ‘Social Movement’ (in 1961) through which he called both Christians and Muslims to work for a society, based on secular values. However, Haddad has been viewed as controversial and even as heretic for his calling the Catholic Church for reform. Toward the end of the twentieth century Haddad founded the Civil Society Movement, through which he continued to call for a civil society with positive neutrality toward all religions and strive for a state governed by civil laws. Haddad considered the confessional system in Lebanon as based on division of interests.⁶² He has criticized the Christian leaders who reject secularization as the result of their being concerned about their own power and benefits.⁶³

Haddad writes:

The repudiation of secularization is like the repudiation of God. This resembles to a great extent [our] relation with God and the concept of God.

The one who rejects God and tells that he/she is an atheist, most of the

⁶⁰ Paul Khoury, *Al-masīhī wa ghayr al-masīhī* [The Christian and the Non-Christian], (Beirut: Albūlusīyyah, 2004), 55.

⁶¹ Paul Khoury, *Fī sabīl ansanat al-’insān* [For the Humanization of the Human Being], 130-131.

J. Ma’lūf refers to the conflict Khoury had with the Catholic Church in the 1970-s because of Khoury’s anthropological approach and his critical views on the traditional concept of God. He explains that Khoury was accused, by the church, of Hegelian Pantheism and consequently his role was marginalized within the religious institutions that claim dogmatism as a higher authority. Joseph Ma’lūf, “The Philosophy of Religion in the Thought of Paul Khoury”, in Pascal Lahhoud, (ed.), *Boulos al-Khoury: Faylasūf al-lākamāl* [Paul Khoury: The Philosopher of Imperfectness], (Beirut: Manshūrāt al-jāmi’ah al-antūnīyyah, 2010), 56-57.

⁶² Nayla Assaf, “Bishop Makes Plea for Secularism” *The Daily Star*, Lebanon, 04.06.2013. Accessed online: <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/Apr/24/Bishop-makes-plea-for-secularism.ashx#axzz2VEIPkjpH>

⁶³ “Talking to Gregoire Haddad” Am interview in NOW, 24.02.2009. Accessed online: https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/interviews/talking_to_gregoire_haddad

times that person rejects a deficient or a mistaken concept of God, since the values that one believes in contradict the distorted [image] of God. Thus, God becomes the victim of the person's insufficient and mistaken concepts.⁶⁴

Also:

Christians, throughout centuries, and till our days have robbed Christ, they have controlled him, subjugated him, utilized him and exploited him. They made him a commander, a head of a tribe and in our countries more than others and especially in certain occasions, when the private benefit agrees with the proclamation of Christ and Christianity.

Thus, there is need to set Christ free from Christians ... and from Christianity itself ... and to nationalize Christ ... in the sense of drawing him back from those who control him, and bringing him to the whole nation. And [also there is need] to secularize Christ in the sense of abolishing the traces of Christian imperialism over the facilities of life, human values, history, politics, economics, sociology and art, and also over justice, freedom, equality and peace.⁶⁵

Hence Haddad defends boldly secularization against all forms of religious sectarianism. All three Middle Eastern thinkers, which have been hitherto indicated, maintain that only within a secular order Christian faith could be lived without previously set agendas by any group against another. Thus, Christianity and secularization are not two opposites but two complementary realities that support each other.

In historical Christianity faith has entered time and history and the unconditional has been depicted and identified with some given reality. On the other hand the Kingdom of God proclaimed by Jesus has come to us through Jesus' immersion in life and his self-identification with the poor

⁶⁴ Gregoire Haddad, "The Introduction of Inclusive Secularization, with Positive Neutrality toward all Religions". Accessed online on 01.06.2013: <http://www.gregoirehaddad.com/introsecularsim.htm>

⁶⁵ Gregoire Haddad, "‘*izaṭul fiṣḥ*'" [The Easter Sermon] in Georges Khodr, Gregoire Ḥaddād, Hector Duwayhī, and Antoine Maqdisī, *Al-kanīsa fīl-‘ālam* [The Church in the World], 166-167.

and the outcast. It is in this sense that Christianity is essentially secular, namely it does not exercise a monopoly of power, but rather it reveals itself as weak, poor and humble, knowing that it is in the world and in the neighbor that Jesus is to be found. Further, I contend that secularization is a characteristic of Reformation and that the whole argument might be perceived as part of the Protestant Reformation; however, in this case it is not about justification by faith but about the movement ‘from the cloister to the world.’⁶⁶ It is about questioning the gods of power, religion, nationality and wealth that demand one’s allegiance, so that one does not cease asking oneself about the powers that one serves. Accordingly, the Protestant is no longer to be viewed as the forgiven sinner but as the free human being and ‘as the one beside the neighbor, beside the enemy, at the disposal of the man in need.’⁶⁷

Though the three Middle Eastern thinkers do not belong to the Reformed tradition, I contend that secularization is the ‘legacy of Protestantism in this part of the world’—as George Sabra the Lebanese Reformed theologian puts it.⁶⁸ Only in a secular society, where unbelief is a possibility, the individual has the freedom either to take upon oneself the claims of Christian faith, or reject them. Further, it is only through a responsible taking upon oneself the claims of faith that Christian faith might become one’s own. I propose that this is the culmination of Reformation and it is this that secularization evokes.

Conclusion

Throughout the article I argued that Christianity by its nature and in the essence of its reality is secular. It preaches about poverty, denial of the self, love of the neighbor and humility which leads the person to the cross. Hence, any claim of power and superiority by the church and any

⁶⁶ Bonhoeffer explains that it was after Luther’s return ‘from the cloister to the world’ that he discovered the significance of grace. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, (New York, NY: Touchstone, 1995), 83.

⁶⁷ William Hamilton, “The Death of God Theologies Today”, 36-37.

⁶⁸ George Sabra, “Religion and Citizenship: The Historical Experience of Protestants”, 134.

employment of 'God' or a theory of 'God' for promoting and enhancing personal agendas is not justified. The true nature of Christian faith in the terms just described keeps Christian theology in constant examination of its own dispositions and claims, and turns the demand for secularization into a compelling tool for self-criticism. Secular Christianity challenges the whole history of Christian doctrine, all the objective assertions about God, which have perceived God as a veritable absolute being within the natural order, and all the images of God that have been erected in the minds of people.

Further, I argued that secularization is not merely an efficient tool for the transformation of religious communication in the contemporary era, as it is perceived to be by many in the West, but rather that Christian theology is at home with secularization, and thus, it operates very well within the fundamental structures of secularization, and maybe only then it might become meaningful and relevant to one's contemporary context. In this sense, for both contexts – the Western-European context where secularization is already a characteristic of the society and is perceived sometimes as a decline and other times as a booming of religion, and the Middle Eastern context where secularization is partly feared and partly also welcomed – secular Christianity remains a challenge.