

Possibilities of Christian Theological Reflections on a Postmodernist Man*

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We are deeply convinced that modern social reality with its changeability, pluralism, and specific consciousness and mentalities poses a temptation for the Church, such as She has never had in Her history. Such a situation, logically, cannot escape the Christian theology either. And it has also faced, as the word about faith, as the doctrine of the faith, the question of its own church relevance, and even more, along with its subject matter, the faith itself, the major question of the social relevance. In a climate of almost widespread denial of any transcendency and reduction of the entire anthropological subject solely to the immanent every contemporary theologian can question the meaning of his own theological endeavors.

Is the feeling of expulsion from the life's main current perhaps the strongest and the bitterest feeling a contemporary theologian tastes, pondering upon his vocation? Life passes us by, colorful, turbulent, while we, squeezed out to the margins of society, try to tell that world something, what is, in our opinion, not only important, but also essential, yet no one pays attention to our words. No one 'really cares', and everyone is busy with one's own daily life problems and thoughts, in which rarely is there the Christian God. On the other hand, for many issues and questions, Christian theology, usually, does not have right answers. And here too, even this inquiry could wind up with a pessimistically posed question - who needs theology, anyway? However, such a question would be in place if an endless sea of atheism were spreading around us, in which also every theology, even the Christian, would drown. On the contrary, we see all around

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us, and so have empirical studies confirmed, the sea, not of the apostasy from God, but the sea of religious beliefs in every form and intensity that has never existed in history before. The modern man is equally religious, albeit most likely even more than ever before in history, which, again, has been confirmed by empirical studies. What is then, we wonder, wrong here – the theology, God, the modern man and his world, or something totally different?

As we can see, questions are teeming and teeming, and each one deserves an adequate response. However, in our equation with several unknowns we will restrict ourselves, not because of the importance but rather because of our own interest, to the question of religious consciousness of the modern man. How it has been formed; what its characteristics are; and how social postmodernist context affects it, and vice versa.

An optimistic outlook of reality

Radical philosophical, sociological, psychological science of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century represented by Marx, Nietzsche, Feuerbach, Freud, and then also through the "Vienna Circle" of radical critics of any metaphysics, had predicted the imminent demise of religion as a social phenomenon. That particularly referred to Christianity practiced in the traditional European churches. They all relied on almost dogmatic modernist belief in progress and human *ratio*, which would render any religious belief meaningless and redundant. Social movements, especially those after the World War II, seemed unstoppable and entitled them to be in the right. Rising social prosperity of the Western societies seemed to confirm their hypothesis that it is exactly this very prosperity, or its soon but certain expectation, that is the best climate in which religious beliefs wane and disappear. In the East of Europe the place of prosperity was taken over by the atheistic totalitarian state ideology, but again, as it seemed, with the same outcomes. Religion, and along with it the Christianity as well, was disappearing or would soon disappear by any means possible at the disposal of the state apparatus. This description is a well-known description of the process of secularization in European societies, which culminated in both the East and the West in the sixties of the last century. Protestant theology first, then pastoral sociology, and only then sociology of religion began to theoretically occupy itself with the secularization of European societies, but, to this day, without consensus on either the definition¹ or the scope of the process itself². On

a practical level things were much simpler. Decline of religious practice in the churches of Europe was by far most easily expressed in numbers. “It turned out that the secularization affected all areas of traditional Christianity”³. The first book that shook the Western Christian world during the World War II was the book posing a question in the title “France, the Country of Missions?”, published in 1943 by Godin and Daniel, indicating the fact of decline of religious practice in France. On the basis of these initial studies, after the war Gabriel Le Bras and Bullard started large empirical studies of the actual condition of religious practice, which unambiguously indicated that, although Christianity did not disappear, the Christian churches started to become empty. There were increasingly fewer and fewer active church-going believers. Studies carried out, for instance, in mid-eighties showed that 82% of French people considered themselves believers, whereas only 13% were regularly participating in the Sunday Mass. In England 60% of people reported that they belonged to the Church, while 3% actively participated in the church life. In Italy, that number rose to 20%, and in Portugal to 30%⁴.

All these numerous studies conducted in the last decades undoubtedly confirm “the diagnosis that, first of all, conventional religion is in crisis, that it has been separated from the society, that it has been withdrawing from it, or, on the other side, that people less and less model their actual everyday behavior after religious beliefs, ethical messages, or religious conduct”⁵.

It should be emphasized, however, that European space is not religiously homogeneous and that there are large differences in beliefs and practices from country to country, region to region, and in particular the prevailing Christian denomination, or whether the environment is predominantly Catholic or Orthodox, mixed or predominantly Protestant which, in the latter case, shows the greatest percentage of church abstinence⁶.

1. See some suggestions in MANZARIDIS GEORGIJE, *Sociologija hrišćanstva*, HKC, Beograd 2004, p. 129 and on.

2. See BLAGOJEVIĆ MIRKO, „Savremena religioznost studenata i desekularizacija srpskog društva“ in *Postsekularni obrt*, Beograd 2013, p. 12 and on.

3. JUKIĆ JAKOV, *Lica i maske svetoga*, KS, Zagreb 1997, p. 193.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 193.

5. BLAGOJEVIĆ MIRKO, „Religiozna Evropa, Rusija i Srbija: juče i danas“, in *Filosofija i društvo* 1/2008, Beograd, p. 278.

6. See Grace Davie, *Religija u suvremenoj Evropi*, Golden marketing – Tehnička knjiga, Zagreb 2005, p. 19 and on.

Furthermore, it should be emphasized that indicators of church practice, which we mostly draw on, are not the only ones in the evaluation of evolution of the secularization process in a particular area. There are a number of indicators that are used in religious sociography. We want to mention that the secularization processes can be followed up on the basis of differences in relation between rural - urban, through selectivity of acceptance of religious beliefs, the age and gender of respondents, the number of priests in a community, and many other indicators that have already been utilized⁷. All this shows a complexity of religious phenomenon in modern Europe, which then requires a very nuanced approach, but does not tolerate the traditional *en block* approach any more.

Social movements related to the religious phenomenon and the secularization process in the early seventies experienced, unexpected by anyone in the West, a turn of events, while in the East it came in full force after the fall of communism in the nineties of the last century. In theory, since that period, it has been talked about a widely known “return of the sacred”, “revenge of God”, desecularization of society, return of the religion into the public social sphere, etc. All of these definitions intend to draw attention to a remarkable change and an increased prominence of the religious phenomenon in the modern social life.

What we are, certainly, most interested in are the results of empirical researches carried out in our country and their, eventual, theological evaluation.

For this purpose, first of all, we will use the last empirical study from 2013, conducted by a team of researchers, led by Dr. Mirko Blagojevic on a representative sample of 1056 students in their third year, out of whom 854 were from the state universities and 202 from private universities in Serbia, and then the earliest study of Prof. Dragoljub Djordjevic from Nis.

In 1982 Prof. Dragoljub Djordjevic did a research on religiosity of the population in the predominantly Orthodox Nis region and concluded that the secularization process in a homogeneous Orthodox area was deep-rooted, and it took hold and spread much more, compared to all other denominational areas. Some aspects of religious consciousness and religious practice reached, according to Djordjevic's study, the brink of extinction⁸. In 1985 the same Professor got similar results too, but this time by researching the religiosity of students from

7. See J. JAKOV, *Lica i maske svetoga*, p. 196 and on.

8. ĐORDEVUĆ DRAGOLJUB, *Beg od crkve*, Nota, Knjaževac 1984.

Nis. Now let us compare the results obtained in the Blagojević's 2013 study to the results of Djordjević's 1985 study. We want to point out that both studies were conducted on a sample of student population. Here we present only data required for our analysis.

According to the indicator of denominational identification, 79.1% of students in 2013 identify themselves as Orthodox, compared to 65.6% in 1985. As per personal religious self-declaration - namely, as being religious and a member of traditional religious community in 2013 - 55.8%, as opposed to 2.9% in 1985; in 2013 as religious and not belonging to any religious community - 11.4% students, while for 1985 there are no data; in 2013 as non-religious - 6.9%, compared to 51.2% in 1985; in 2013 as convinced atheists - 5.6%, as opposed to 29.7% in 1985. Hence, in 2013 there were 69.2% religious students, in contrast to 2.9% in 1985, and 18% non-religious in 2013, as opposed to 80.9% in 1985⁹. The research findings of the Christian Cultural Center from 2010 on the general population sample of 1219 respondents indicate similar ratio: 67.3% believes that God exists and 20.4% that there is some kind of force that might be God¹⁰.

Therefore, solely on the basis of these data, it seems to us, we can rightfully corroborate the desecularization theory because people are, not only in our society, but also across Europe, and especially in the wider world, religious in a very high percentage. We will use many times cited opinion of Peter Berger, one of the most important contemporary sociologists of religion, who, from an advocate of the secularization theory, gradually and after the unexpected social turns of events issued a following statement:

“Today's world, with some exceptions ... is fiercely religious, as it has always been, and in some areas even more than before. This means that the whole literature, created by historians and social scientists, who had fairly easily published ‘the secularization theory’, is essentially wrong“¹¹.

As for our society, it can also be concluded that “today a homogenous Orthodox Serbian area can no longer be identified as an area where rites of the ac-

9. BLAGOJEVIĆ MIRKO, „Savremena religioznost studenata i desekularizacija srpskog društva“ in *Postsekularni obrt*, Beograd 2013, p. 11 and on.

10. *Religioznost u Srbiji 2010.*, HKC, Beograd 2011, p. 207.

11. BERGER PETER, *Desekularizacija sveta – preporod religije i svetska politika*, Mediteran Publishing, Novi Sad 2008, p. 12.

tual religious nature have extremely eroded, and the residents are ‘on the run’ from the religion and the church”¹².

It seems that there are reasons for optimism. However, unfortunately, that is not all there is to say theoretically and substantiate empirically in view of ‘the return of the sacred’. From the standpoint of Christian theology and traditional Churches of Europe the answer to the question - what kind of God is back with us – is much more significant, and based on that, consequently, a question could follow:

Is it early for optimism?

If we look at some other research findings, related to religious practice, and then indicators of religious dogmatics and the like, that is to say, the indicators pertaining to the essential manifestations of the Christian Faith, and not only religiosity in general, the picture changes drastically, and that’s what our own experience shows us and what we are all fully aware of.

We will mention just one result of the survey of participants’ religious practice. In the 2013 study 9.2% of students participated in liturgy at least once a month, 35.7% several times a year, and 51% never ; 17.1% out of general population in 2010 participated at least once a month, 40.9% several times a year, and 42% never¹⁴.

Such a big difference in percentage between the self-declared religious respondents and those who regularly participate in the liturgical life is an obvious sign that we need to be very cautious in our own optimism. It is justified, if we take as a parameter the situation of 1985, when studies show 0.3% percentage of student population participating in the liturgical life at least once a month¹⁵, but it should not be generalized. This reminds us that we should return to the question - what kind of God is back with us - or return to the analysis of religious renaissance from the Christian viewpoint.

12. M. BLAGOJEVIĆ, „Religiozna Evropa, Rusija i Srbija: juče i danas“ in *Filosofija i društvo* 3/2008, Beograd, p. 251.

13. BLAGOJEVIĆ MIRKO, „Savremena religioznost studenata i desekularizacija srpskog društva“ in *Postsekularni obrt*, Beograd 2013, p. 51.

14. *Ibid.*

15. *Ibid.*

As a starting point we need to use the conclusion that self-declared religious faith and the Christian Faith are not the same thing. This fact is often overlooked in church circles when from various social, usually not ecclesiastical, reasons we try to, because of our own social affirmation and sometimes even self-satisfaction, triumphalistically highlight this argument of a high percentage of religious and denominational self-declaration. Today's postmodernist religiosity in its renaissance does not mean a return to the traditional - on the Church founded and practiced Christianity. In the words of a contemporary Roman Catholic theologian it "holds in itself a lot of things and sometimes absolutely nothing in common with the authentic Christian experience of reality"¹⁶. And here we, right away, have a task for the Christian theology to not only point out what is not authentic Christianity, but also to say what the Christian ethos is in the face of the challenge of postmodernist religiosity. Religiosity is a broader notion than the Christian Faith, but through, primarily, medieval history the traditional Churches of Europe managed to keep under control, more or less successfully, the entire religious phenomenon, owing to various social functions that they held and largely to their politicality. Such claims are no longer tenable certainly due to the weakening and sometimes complete disappearance of certain social functions so that it leads to, on the one hand, an uncontrolled and unrestricted proliferation of religious phenomenon, and, on the other hand, its greater and further separation from the Christian Faith. It is our postmodernist diagnosis that obligates us, as theologians, to give an explanatory statement that it is a potential opponent of the Christian Faith, such as it has not had in history so far, as well as to answer the question raised in the title - whether it leaves room for Christian reflections and comprehension of the reality.

Out of many characteristics of the postmodernist religiosity and of the modern era, for every historical and social era also creates its own characteristic type of religiosity, we must opt for only specific ones which we want to draw a particular attention to.

Michel LaCroix cites four principles of religious synthesis of the New Age:

"The fourth principle on which the New Age of religious synthesis is based is the rejection of the institutionalized churches. The New Age crit-

16. MATULIĆ TONČI, *Metamorfoze kulture*, GK, Zagreb 2009, p. 780.

icizes churches that they have forgotten the true meaning of the word religion (to link): they no longer facilitate creation of connections between people and have lost sight of the unity of a man and the deity, for they turned to abstract and impoverished cultural life.”¹⁷

With such thinking, the modern man is liberating himself of the institutional church, in the same way as postmodernism in general is ‘allergic’ to all major institutions, such as the state and family, for example, and in its disillusion in these same institutions becomes something like a ‘floating believer’¹⁸, the likes of whom have been rallied by the New Age. A religious group that has seen the highest growth in Europe is the one without denomination or as they call themselves ‘denomination-free’¹⁹, and the greatest difficulty in determining their religiosity represents the unlikelihood of detecting and encompassing all that belongs to it. It is an endless sea of beliefs of various origins and all that without any unifying institution, and oftentime also without basic logic. However, the basic themes and beliefs of postmodernist religiosity

“Almost silently and unaware know how to connect with both Christian beliefs and with scientific discourse so that the New Age, in many ways, becomes an invisible religion which some individuals facing hardship and anxiety of life in the age of technology accidentally internalize as a way of possible salvation in the wilderness they find themselves in. Accidentally, for many postulates of the New Age can be detected in those who believe that they are true Christians, as well as in those who are convinced they do not believe at all.”²⁰

So, here is that mentioned danger. Throughout history we have usually had clearly delineated adversaries of Christianity, whereas now for the first time, as it seems to us, we come across one who is invisible. The genuine and essential problem is not in the detection of foreign impacts at the level of ideas, but at the level of a concrete personality, in whose experience and perception it is very difficult to draw boundaries between the so-called new spirituality and the authentic Christian spirituality. The new religiosity is a state of consciousness - the

17. Lakroa Mišel, *New age ideologija Novog doba*, Klio, Beograd 2001, p. 38.

18. Ibid., p. 38.

19. KAUFMAN FRANZ-XAVER, *Kako da preživi kršćanstvo?*, KS, Zagreb 2003, p. 8.

20. ĐORĐEVIĆ JELENA, „Zapadna civilizacija nastavlja traganja“ in: Lakroa Mišel, *New age ideologija Novog doba*, Klio, Beograd 2001, p. 95.

mentality of the modern man, which is created and spread, primarily, by means of mass media, by building and expanding one global network and especially through the favorite topics, such as personal happiness, individual success, personal health raised to the level of sanctity, youth, beauty, and a lot of joy and enjoyment of life. In a word, “the postmodernity man is erotically insatiable in his narcissistic thirst for his own fulfillment and actualization”²¹. Therefore, in the end, the conclusion arises that the religiosity of postmodernity in its mainstream is in fact religious individualism in which personal element of experience of a narcissistic kind prevails over all others, yet without any additional criterion for evaluation of that experience. If we talk about personal happiness as a supreme ideal, then it is clear that it must be achieved *hic et nunc*, but not delayed, and especially not in the eschaton. To an inexperienced shepherd all this can somewhat resemble something like Christianity, but, in fact, when he talks about the Salvation, the modern man hears health; when he speaks of Deification, he hears life happiness; when he speaks of the Resurrection, he hears reincarnation; and when he says Sacrifice, the modern man then closes his mind and heart. In order to attain this elusive goal of his own life happiness, the modern man ‘uses’ and ‘consumes’ religion, as he consumes everything else, starting with God Himself, Who is for him only “the deepest experience of his own being”²² and nothing more than that.

The modern man in the postmodernist religiosity increasingly begins to not only perceive God as the “the deepest experience of his own being”, but also to accept God, exclusively, in a way in which he imagines Him. It is more than obvious here that God is perceived and imagined in a way that is custom-made after the standards and opinions of each individual. Because of all this, we can easily conclude that a postmodernist model of this new religiosity of the modern man, or the postmodernist believer, to a great extent negatively impacts and influences his life and existential being. Life of the modern man seems to have lost its existential meaning and significance. Challenges and problems of the modern man in the area of new religiosity are many and varied. The characteristics of the man of postmodernity in the basic religious and life issues are: insecurity, loneliness, isolation, lack of capacity in personal relationships, disorien-

21. MARDEŠIĆ ŽELJKO, *Rascjep u svetome*, KS, Zagreb 2007, p. 451.

22. *Ibid.*

tation, lethargy, existential meaninglessness and others. After all, we could ask one sensible question - how has the man who used to be the measure of all things and the crown of God's creation come to such a despicable existential position?. How the man, that 'small god in the mud', has ended up and become a nobody, a fiction that slowly and imperceptibly disappears, "as on the sea shore sandbanks disappear" (Foucault). The point here is in the so-called theory of de-subjectivization of the man, in a radical theory of the man's lost position. For if the man is not perceived any more as the other, even in Christian eyes and in overall experience, he loses characteristics of a personality.

The postmodernist man is located and operates in a world without truth, criteria, true values, prospects, hope and vision. The postmodernity, in essence, comprises of a very colorful range of trends. As we have already pointed out, in this postmodernist religious turmoil any institutional religiosity is intentionally rejected, while ever-increasing influence is gained by elements of free religiosity familiar and available in many countries as: parapsychology, the New Age, online churches and ever-more present so-called global religiosity as some sort of syncretism of many quasi-religious elements of various cultures, religions, philosophies and sciences (e.g., Scientology). In this way, postmodernism in practice often signifies various and numerous terms, which lead to a new phase of decadence, where great truths and the true values have lost their absolute significance and have been rendered irrelevant.

In this regard, much is also being done on the change of human consciousness, for the critique of society and social phenomena in accordance with the basic criteria of mind and rationality have been latently suppressed. The man has lost all the properties of the subject who thinks critically and lives meaningful and autonomous life. Postmodernism is essentially an apology of the existing and some form of a new conservatism. From what it is today, postmodernity derives what it should be, but that is done just for this moment, but not for the future too. The life and faith of the postmodernist man consists of rejection of the simplest foundations, standards, rules, authorities and goals. Even if one accepts a teaching or a doctrine, then it is, in fact, that there is no doctrine; hence, some people consider postmodernism to be an antidoctrinal doctrine.

Based on all of the above-mentioned, whether we want to admit it or not, we largely live in a time greatly influenced by postmodernism and that new religiosity, in a diverse-culture world, which already is and will increasingly be relativized, which lacks a genuine desire for the absolute truth with reference to re-

ligion and life itself. Thus, we are increasingly entering and belonging to the world, where not only the truth will not be sought after, but it will be argued whether the truth exists. In such a world, absolutely sensible question is raised in the title of the paper - whether it is nowadays possible at all theologically in the right manner to reflect on essential existential problems from the Christian point of view, because of very strong and often invisible and imperceptible mentality impact of this new postmodernist religiosity.

Concluding thoughts

Based on the provided data and insights into the current state of religiosity, we have unavoidably come to one conclusion - the contemporary, postmodernist man, just like any other so far, is also searching for God. He is searching for Him in the remote areas and labyrinths of society and culture, but also in the darkness of his own being. This time he is totally alone, for he has rejected all the major institutions, including the churches, and all great ideologies of the 20th century that have let him down. Postmodernity can be defined as a crisis of all ideas of modernity, and by the same token the postmodernist religiosity as a crisis of religiosity. It is a product of consciousness of the man of scientific and technological civilization, who tries to fulfill a spiritual void and at the same time also not to endanger the modern culture, whose offspring he is. It is an attempt at some kind of compromise of spirituality, including even the Christian, and the spirit of the world. One does not need to be very smart to conclude that, depending on the situation, both the primary concern and the theme of modern theology should be the very Christian God, Who sends his Son because of the people, among the people, and Who is close to the people. We can further ask ourselves whether theology is possible without God. The answer to this terminological contradiction could perhaps even be positive, if the theology remained just a word, just a talk about God, which can be a nonexperiential, lacking life experience, and, therefore, non-authentic too. Current state of religiosity is at the same time a critique of this very theology. We believe that today's basic need is for the theology to be, above all, the word of God - God's Speech - to a harassed and lonely man in chains of economic-scientific-technological civilization, relevant to the actual human existence.