

Book reviews

An Anthropological Perspective on Religion in Late Modernity

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[for *Stilul religiei în modernitatea târzie (The Style of Religion in Late Modernity)* by Anca Manolescu, Iași, Polirom Publishing House, 2011, 216 pages]

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The content, essence and direction of the evolution of modern societies – with their spiritual – religious component systemically integrated, have been analyzed, throughout this last century, from several points of view, with diverse methods and working hypotheses. Among the issues that were subject to reflection were not only those raised by historians and philosophers of history, theologians and philosophers of religion, economists and ethicists, sociologists and political scientists, but also experts in the fields of science and culture, anthropologists and specialists in the comparative approach to religions, to the relations between spiritual culture and civilization in modernity. The discourses of some of the above-mentioned were focused on perennial inquiries: is modernity a new Era? What is the role of reason, volition and religious faith at this stage of historical evolution of society? Is the modern world built on science, secularization and a gradual renouncement of religion? What are the grounds of globalization and universalization: are they of a traditional – religious nature, of a scientific – rational nature, of a political and economic origin, or do they have a spiritual nature? What are the dimensions of human status with relation to other humans, to power and to the whole in the modern era? How should we best use our past experience, the great traditions of humankind, in order to end crises and anomic states in society? etc.

In this broad context, Anca Manolescu designs, elaborates and publishes *The Style of Religion in Late Modernity*, (Iași, Editura Polirom, 2011), 216 pages,¹ departing from specific questions pertaining to the philosophy of religion, targeting the advantages and spiritual losses of late modernity: Was modernity not built on the secularization of societies and institutions? Are modern societies not defined by the renouncement of religion as a framework of civilization and vector of human fate? What more could the spectacle of modernity offer before the hopeless closure of man within the fortress of perishability? What is the situation of humans living in a society dominated by the crisis of the modern world? What does the relation between the constitutive deficiencies of modernity, human freedoms and 20th century totalitarian regimes consist of? Would it not be better for our societies – devoid of a unifying spiritual pole, if a profound change would occur, resulting in the retrieval of unity between identity and alterity? If we have nearly estranged ourselves from the brilliance of transcendence, can we not combine the criticism of this estrangement with its capitalization, with its reversal and spiritual conversion?

The answers to such questions of modern man are elaborated by the author in a style that is specific to philosophical essays, attempting to prove that there are features of late modernity that can be used as premises for deciphering or even solving some of the great spiritual issues. Arguments are brought forth in favor of the idea that “The West of our days

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¹ Anca Manolescu is a PhD in philosophy at the University of Bucharest, an advanced researcher in the fields of religious anthropology and the comparative study of religions. She has published, with the same publisher, the volume *Europa și întâlnirea religiilor. Despre pluralismul religios contemporan (Europe and the Junction of Religions. On Contemporary Religios Pluralism)* (Iași: Polirom, 2005, Foreword by Andrei Pleșu).

is not a wasteland from which any vertical meaning has perished, it affords a symbolic spectacle that is, in many ways, precious, able to stimulate spiritual discernment ... Late modernity may be a sign – a new sign, relieved of the burden of conformity – towards perennial matters”.²

In the argumentations and theoretizations she undertakes, Anca Manolescu references, in a personal manner, an ample literature in the field, authored by Plato, the fathers of the Christian Church, Nicolaus Cusanus, Nikolai Berdiaev, Simone Weil, René Guénon, André Scrima, Leo Strauss, L. Kolakowski, Adam Michnik, Andrei Pleșu etc. The comparative approach to the great traditions and religions of the world makes it possible to emphasize their identity, but also their common core, the general principles and perennial values contained in them. The ideas that are drawn are correlated with the socio – cultural condition of religion in today’s Europe, in “late modernity”. In order to find their way, the faithful must, first of all, face the constitutive vices of modernity, and somehow go against the mainstream.

Positioning herself within a broader philosophical orientation – religious existentialism (K. Jaspers, G. Marcel, M. Buber), neo-Thomism (J. Maritain, E. Gilson, R. Garrigou – Lagrange, J. Bochenski), correlated with spiritualism (P. Teilhard de Chardin, J. Lachelier, E. Boutroux, H. Bergson) and French personalism, represented by Ch. Renouvier, and then by the group centered around “Esprit” magazine (E. Mounier, J. M. Domenach), Anca Manolescu characterizes late modern societies by the absence of or disregard for divinity in the frameworks of community life; the spiritual bases of society have paled in favor of secular humanism or have been counterfeited by murderous totalitarian ideologies. Modern societies are no longer built according to a celestial, transcendent archetype, and modern humans seem to be in a crisis of means for orienting themselves towards transcendence. Following the ideas of great thinkers, such as Nikolai Aleksandrovici Berdiaev, Simone Weil, André Scrima, the author seeks to justify and argue the advantages of spirituality in contemporary societies, by referencing perennial themes which exist in the great traditions of humanity, underlining the vectorial role of some conclusions that are specific to religious anthropology.

One of these perennial – founding themes for modernity is that of freedom. The modern European

man, as a limited subject, appeared when he assumed his freedom, total and limited at the same time, when he defined himself as an autonomous being acting on the basis of his own law (Rousseau) and of his own sovereignty (Hobbes); the supernatural dimension of man was thus forsaken, and ecclesiastic institutions were separated from the state. Thus, a collective cultural and mental space was created for the emergence of totalitarian doctrines or the present religious fundamentalism, the author maintains. Democracies built on the philosophy of fundamental human rights, on the postulate of freedom and the primacy of the individual with respect to society protects the freedom of thought and religious freedom. But this situation, the author emphasizes, allows the fact that ultimate reality is not reducible to institutions and that religion is essential as a mediator between the individual and the ultimate Truth to shine through in daily life and collective mentality. Religious freedom and the freedom of thought pertain to the profound, inner and divine face of each person, to the ultimate meaning of the human being – liberation from conditioning through participation in the divine. If, for some Christian philosophers, such as Berdiaev, the theme of freedom is primordial, being equivalent to the abyss of divinity, then the religious meaning of freedom excludes, forestalls the sacralization of national or ideological religious groups, so that the spiritually engaged faithful would be oriented towards the divine perfection of the maker of this world – including themselves. *Homo maximus* or the *Universal man*, as an archetype constructed and promoted in different monotheistic religions, internalizes the image of Jesus Christ and “works” in the depths of each soul. As a free being, the individual that shares the Christic archetype must behave and respond through creativity.

Other defining themes for late modernity are the diversity of religions and secularity. As regards religious diversity, resulting from the legitimization of religious freedom and the freedom of thought, the author underlines that this lay principle has started not only to be accepted by the Church, by also to gain theological transposition. The research benefits that interreligious dialogue might bring emphasizes the coexistence of the One divinity and Absolute with a diversity of “ways” of understanding the uniqueness of divine Wisdom, specific to each religion. “Thus understood”, the author believes, “the convergence of religions clearly opposes fundamentalism, as the latter elevates the particularity of one

² Manolescu, 205.

single way to the rank of absoluteness. Too often conflicting, religious diversity – which globalization makes inevitable, and which late modernity legitimizes – can be, on the contrary, a precious spectacle from a metaphysical point of view”.³

With regard to secularity, it has taken over, from the Church – without contradicting the spiritual substance of religion – the task of managing the whole, so that religion is no longer the organizing top in modern societies. Since transcendence was separated from the state, power, public administration and domination, it can be said that secularity has separated divinity from society. As in previous eras, the sacerdotal power has its specific prestige, resulting from the history and tradition of each religion, from its cultural and spiritual evolution. Thus, late modernity, although it denies God his socio-morfism, could not but accept the fact that tradition and religious values have played an important part in fashioning European civilization and that religion might have its role in solving ethical and humanitarian issues in the future, or even in the making of the identity of the European Union. Even in a secularized society, where God manifests himself very “discreetly”, the religious man may fulfill his religious sentiment, materialized in his communion with the divinity.

In a close connection to previous themes, another ideational and practical dominance of late modernity is pluralistic democracy, as a “model of non-totalizing society”⁴ and as an experience of alterity. The man of modern democracies lives, works and acts within the scope of non-unifiable plurality, which precludes monopoly and rejects totalizing unity and uniformity. The legitimization of plurality, of the partiality of our conscience, calls for the transformation of tolerance – as an attitude to alterity –, of the principles of moderation and legality, into central values of democracy, as an instrument for harmonizing society. In this context, religion is no longer shared by everybody, and those who share it do not do it in the same manner. Faced with this reality and wanting to find and capitalize on the spiritual advantages of our modernity, the author asks herself, rhetorically: „we live in a type of society that lacks a unifying pole, where alterity is strongly felt everywhere. Could this situation not become the subject of an exercise for admitting, for thinking and for exploring the sphere of a radical

Something Else, in which identity and alterity would find their paradoxical unity?”⁵

In chapters II – V of the volume, entitled “Freedom and freedom”, “Democracy or the mobilizing distance”, “Pluralism and perspectival condition” and “Secularity and apophaticism”, the author drives the analysis deeper and outlines varied response formulas to questions pertaining to the thematic area defining modernity. The adopted style corresponds to the “hybrid essay”, to “text heterogeneity” – characteristics that are assumed by the author, to the background of which intuition, convictions and personal contributions are materialized in an expression of prevalently apophatic meanings and significations, sometimes with profuse recourse to epithets, similes, metaphors, hyperboles, analogies or rhetorical invocations in order to cognitively approach an as large a part of the unknown as it is possible.

At a broad glance, Anca Manolescu’s work attempts, and mostly succeeds, in showing that there are prevailing traits of late modernity, such as the de-objectivation of religious meaning and the value of a person, which can also be re-interpreted and utilized for re-evaluating / practicing spiritual themes. In the context where secularization has emptied the habitual manifestations in the lives of many people of their spiritual meaning, where day-to-day living has largely become estranged from the brilliance of transcendence, the author builds up a response to the question whether we could blend the criticism of this estrangement with its capitalization, in the sense that modern societies might shift the center of gravity in religious symbolism towards the convergence of man to the absolute. Religion might gradually become a precious part in the system of spiritual and ethical regulation in society. This sort of perspective might bring multiple benefits to changing the state of today’s society, as follows:

A first benefit, the author believes, would consist of the social objectivation of religious meanings, by relating them to the transcendent horizon where they lead.⁶ These spiritual meanings may regain the height and utility they once had, radiating the unifying light on us and orienting us towards the Absolute from which they emerged.

Another benefit refers to the position of the person, to their spiritual consciousness before Divinity, Unity, and meaning. It is true that modernity has made the human individual into a being that is proud of its autonomy, of its natural rights, but this apti-

³ Manolescu, 23.

⁴ Manolescu, 26.

⁵ Manolescu, 30.

⁶ Manolescu, 201.

tude has only produced the fragility of its spiritual dimensions. The modern European man is no longer content solely on the truths of the Church, on dogmas and tradition taken for granted. Being subject to diverse sources of information, implicitly religious, the modern man tries to investigate, analyze, discover and actively assimilate the information provided so that, as Kolakovski wrote, a religion remains alive insofar as it engages in confrontations “with new intellectual situations”⁷, and strives to integrate new criticism and ideas of religious knowledge. The modern man is a seeker; he problematizes and is active in finding solutions.

Third, a benefit might be that regarding the status of religious truth, starting from the Universality of revealed truth, of the divine One *versus* the different ways of expressing it, the multitude of religious doctrines sustaining it. The sometimes exclusivist confrontations between contemporary religions also contain another side, an option of convergent thinking; they have a common component which makes religions subsume to universal Truth

and to human responsibility with respect to all-encompassing transcendence.

In conclusion, Anca Manolescu’s work represents a remarkable contribution to the elaboration of answers to issues pertaining to religious anthropology. As a result of inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to the great religious traditions and the values promoted by it in the social context of late modernity, the content of this work stands out through logical coherence, textured analyses, the elegance of style, the alternation of inquiries with the author’s attempt to build up plausible answers for them, and personal refinement in using words. These are some reasons why the work is addressed to specialist circles in the field of religious anthropology, theologians and hierarchs of the Christian Church, academics and students in the fields of philosophy, sociology, political sciences, scholars in general and, last but not least, to those dignitaries who are responsible for managing the good march of education, cultures and cults.

⁷ Leszek Kolakovski, *Modernitatea sub un neobosit colimator (Modernity on Endless Trial)*, (translation by Mihai Gafița, București: Curtea Veche, 2007), 60–61.