Art, Politics and Religion. Historical Perspectives on Self-defining

Stefan Maftei

MA student, Master Program in Humanist Philosophy, Babes-Bolyai University, Cluj, Romania

Approaching this kind of subject implies an exigency of understanding that aims at the conditions of possibility of the status of the modern person. Starting with the European Illuminist Age, this is represented by the acknowledgment of the other as a person, based on a certain rational conditioning of the community. One should not confine religion to a "black-hole", by separating it from the political, but should rather try to see the middle-way between the radical solution of atheism, on the one hand, and the legitimating of a political religion, on the other.
The second part of this essay is an analysis of the double modern conditioning of art (understood as the expression of the creative faculty): first, of the political aspect of the Modern Age; secondly, of the religious problems connected to politics. Seen as a whole, this area of artistic production implies two types of fundamental relationships: 1) an analysis of art as the expression of the self and of its status in the world; 2) a direct connection between art and the social and political aspects of the contemporary age.

I. The self-defining of the political

The first lights of the Modern Age are confined to a radical reassessment of the relationship between man and the Divine, following the long chain of ontological, social and moral implications of this fundamental cultural step. Hans Blumenberg sees the intensity of the separation between these two areas (the Divine and the human) in the legitimating process of the Modern Age. The key-concept in this game of "perspective construction," as Nietzsche would say, is the term "secularization." Modernity has, as Blumenberg puts it, a destiny of its own, of following the long way to the "world-making of the world" (*Verweltlichung der Welt*). This process lends a very important role to the institutional effort of the State,

seen as a purely "demystified entity". The results of this "purging" have created a dehumanized authority; the price for this liberty has been paid: the effect was the collapse of humanity and liberty in the case of the individual. Blumenberg makes a strong point when observing this "secularization". Thus, we cannot use the term in an appropriate sense, because we always define "secularization" relating it indirectly to the religious. The illegitimacy appears when we use "secular" connected to "religious," saying that there is a transfer of power from mythology to non-mythology (e.g. moment A – Christianity; moment B – decadent Christianity). We cannot step out of this circle of understanding. The problem with "secularization" is that "one cannot make secular the very process from which this secularization began" [1].

This point in Blumenberg's theory is a stronghold against the similar analysis of Karl Löwith – *Weltgeschichte und Heilsgeschehen. Die theologischen Voraussetzungen der Geschichtsphilosophie.* As for Löwith, says Blumenberg, the cardinal term of "secularization" would turn into a kind of "historical substantialism", which would force us to think of the progress apocalyptically. Löwith could not succeed in hiding a latent metaphysical scheme, which includes the idea of "decay," as well as the old dualism between the transcendent and the mundane. "Secularization" is here the "decay" of the divine transcendent, that would reintroduce the religious thinking in the modern world. The decay of the religious supposes as an initial moment the religious; that would bring only the unfruitful circularity of the theory of secularization.

Thus, the legitimacy of the Modern Age could not be explained without this transposition of the theological contents into an alienated and historical form. Blumenberg corrects Löwith's thesis: the "secularisation" would be "the new occupation" of the vacant positions, the "restoring" from the cultural corruption of the Middle Ages. The idea is that in the case of the Modern Age, one cannot accept a compensatory solution, one cannot accept the continuity with tradition. Modernity rises by legitimating itself from its lack of legitimacy, we might say. If we would understand secularization as a corruption of values, Blumenberg says, then this kind of interpretation "would alter the authenticity of the Modern Age, by transforming it into a relic, into a pagan substratum, into a residue that remained after the retreat of the religious from the dominating position into an alienation from the world" [2]. The historical and political legitimacy of the Modern Age would rely on a major discontinuity. Blumenberg rejects Hegel's idea of a historical secularization.

Blumenberg's response is based on the concept of "self-defining" (*Selbstbehauptung*). "Self-defining" encompasses all the analysis concerning legitimacy, discontinuity, and new occupation. The concept identifies itself with a "project of existence which imposes on man that he would determine his relationship to the surrounding reality by the actualization of its own desires with the help of the enormous technical po-

tential of science, seen as the great instrument of self-defining" [3].

Indifferent to historical conditioning, the Modern Age differentiates itself by its autonomous essence. Its autonomy relies on the concept of "pure negativity." Modernity has its own "sufficient reason;" it seems that this whole era is a "creation out of nothingness." By theorizing the independence of reason in relationship to technique, Blumenberg ignores a fundamental question: who or what could legitimize the self-defining process itself? If the answer is reason, then we would have a circular answer and a limitation in the theory itself.

We have given these quite simple explanations (compared to the multiplicity of the problems that this theory raises) with a view to presenting the relationships between political and religious thinking within the early days of Modern Age theories. Karl Marx is, by all means, the author that announces the radical split between political and religious power. When reading Marx, we see that, for man, religion is profoundly alienating, so therefore the autonomy of the individual is based on the demise of religious thought. In *The Jewish Question* (1844), Marx follows Hegel's idea about the liberty and rationality of the State, but rejects his opinion on the possibility of a Christian State. The philosopher proposes a total autonomy of the political power; thus, politics, from now on, would no longer be responsible but for itself: "The State is emancipated from religion by emancipating itself from State religion, that is, by the fact that is no longer recognizing religion in general, and thus, by defining itself as a pure State." [4] The political split from religion is the ultimate condition "of the rational character of liberty," says Marx, assuming the Hegelian thesis of the State as an embodiment of reason. Marx's strongest point appears in the *Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (1844): "the critique of religion is the preliminary condition of every critique." [5] We can analyze this Marxist amendment to Hegel's position in two different ways: 1) as a complete self-defining of secularization, seen as a victory of atheism over religion; 2) as a fundamental thesis of the Modern Age, which acts as a victory of negativity and contributes itself to the self-defining of the Modern Age.

We can see that, at its beginning, the modern thinking could legitimate its existence only by founding itself on the necessary condition of the "critical" status, and implicitly, by separating from the Christian transcendent. We can understand modernity as a gap in the history of mankind, as a permanent negativity, that conditions its existence by an eternal revolution, by a radical outrunning of the Christian and pagan ontological coordinates. Is there a strict relationship between modernity, negativity, and absence of religion, as Marx says at the beginning of his career? In any case, Marx contemporaries have adopted his convictions and transmitted them as an unconditioned reflex to the entirety of modern thinking: religion is an exclusively human product. The idea that religion is the idealized source of certain production-relation-

ships would soon become the central thesis of atheism.

Marx knew that the social critique of religion is not sufficient for the legitimating of his generalized theoretical counterstrike. In *The Manifest of the Communist Party* (1848) religion becomes a dangerous fetish, confined to a certain ideology: "laws, moral, religion are so many bourgeois prejudices, hidden behind so many bourgeois interests." In the eyes of the theorist of political power, religion becomes a political instrument in the class struggle between the bourgeois and the proletariat. By relegating religion to political bourgeois ideology, it develops into an "enlightened" and "demystified" spiritual form, as a source of social evil, as the scapegoat of all misery. In fact, Marx tried to justify his bourgeois resentments by criticizing the thing that he considered to be the source of social injustice.

Religion seen as an ideology is the specific feature of the Modern Age. Marx himself argued for this principle, claiming that religion is a product of a "false consciousness" (*falsches Bewuâtsein*). The false consciousness is the diabolical mind that forges everything that comes into its area, and it is a sign of social schizophrenia. Actually, this formula implies a programmatic suspicion towards anyone who does not hold the same opinion as you do. The steps to ideology, as Karl Mannheim declares, are based on "the suspicion and the lack of trust, that man shows to his adversaries in every step of historical development; these can be seen as the preceding elements of ideology"[6]. Mannheim distinguishes two kinds of ideologies: a) one that implies the skepticism of one individual to the representations of the other; b) a total ideology – "when we attribute to one historical epoch one intellectual world and to ourselves another one, or if a certain historically determined social stratum thinks in categories other than our own, we refer not to the isolated cases of thought-content, but to fundamentally divergent thought-systems and to widely differing modes of experience and interpretation."[7]

Marx had already introduced the concept of "class-ideology" in *The Misery of Philosophy*: "the same men that establish social relationships according to their material productivity, also produce the principles, the ideas, the categories according to their social relationships". The fact that there is a strong correspondence between particular social status and the individual perspective over the world is well known in modern sociology. Mannheim's thinking is typically Marxist: the dominant class raises a kind of ideology that blocks the way to the social transformation process. The subordinate class is motivated by its desire to transform and be transformed. The struggle between ideology and utopia produces the dynamic process of social classes, and thus, the development of society. Ideologies often become real and global constructions of false realities and, as has been seen, can generate tremendous social and human disasters. Because of its conception of religion, Marxism has never accepted the fact that religion is not a perfect institutionalized opposing force, but a cosmopolitan human-

ism that may be the key to the moral and spiritual security of the individual. Facing the provocations of the Modern Age, religion will reconsider its status only at the end of the XXth century; now, one must recognize the major influence of religion in social and community dynamics.

II. The self-defining of arts

All these features of the social aspect will contribute to the construction of a "sense-horizon," in which art will develop towards a certain course, assuming all the contradictions of modernity.

The Romanticist movement of the XIXth century understood art in relationship to the idea of negativity: "The Romanticist movement unleashes the destructive and self-destructive power of the imagination. This fact separates it from the Classicism, which saw arts in relation with the Good and the Noble. The traditional concept of "creation" is based on the idea of *mimesis*, the imitation of a certain given reality, by overemphasizing or criticizing it. In the case of the Romanticist movement we have, the second time after the Renaissance, the idea of *poiesis*. The creative capacity, the freedom of expression are reconsidered as the supreme value, alongside of the self-possessed consciousness. Thus, creation seems to be an experience of negativity." [8]

Unlike in medieval thought, modernity gives credit to the individualistic and self-legitimating feature of the arts. Creation becomes a real *hybris*, a "creation out of nothingness" which defies and vies with God's creation. While for Augustine art is an icon of Beauty and God, for the modern it also becomes a response to the beauty of Creation.

The modern artist re-creates and vainly defies with his gesture: he does not imitate, but he assumes the freedom to create something entirely new, ignoring the classical canon of imitation, founded, as we have seen, on a religious idea of Beauty. The tragedy of man's freedom will deepen alongside the presence of evil in works of art. The interesting point is, as the German essayist Rüdiger Safranski said, that the artist will be understood only by his product and the intention of the production. The cultural conditions of the XXth century have profoundly attached art to the ideologies of social and political movements. The concept of "engagement" is typical to the manifestation of avant-garde art. In this context, art is viewed as a consequence of the social and the political. The idea of art as a social instrument is found at the very beginning of European culture. Plato, for example, saw art in relationship with social welfare and the moral Good. Later, art will become the symbol of a certain project and will function as an instrument for the justification of social evils existing in the modern world. To fulfill its mission, art needs a justificatory conditioning (*Rechfertigungszwang*). In the case of a modern social and political activism, art could be considered responsible for the actualization of Good, by carrying out three conditions: to restrain evil, to indicate it, and to respond to the ideology of the subordinate class.

The problem that follows is this: can art and ideology coexist? Can art, seen as a form of negativity and free expression, furnish a motivation for a certain activism or ideology? Is not the very condition of "free art" menaced by these particular aspects of Modern Age?

This kind of problem has been the object of an interesting debate in the work of Theodor Adorno or Herbert Read. Accepting the risk attendant upon generalization, art theorists have understood modernity as an episode of a long process of alienation of man from the world. The break between humankind and nature can be seen as a process of industrialization and inventing of means of production. Herbert Read[9] indicated three special features that can be considered as having a major part in the construction of the actual image of society: 1) the alienation from the senses and the use of mechanical products, elements that obliterate the totality of humanity and transform it into a "dull-eyed, bored and listless automaton, whose one desire is for violence in some form or other – violent action, violent sounds, distractions of any kind that can penetrate to its deadened nerve;" 2) the decline of religious faith, not substituted by any progress of the society's ethical standards; 3) the presence of the non-artistic categories, which have undermined culture, confining it to a "mass culture." Read speaks about the presence of a new product of television culture, the impostor, which seems to be a defender of public liberty and still, he persuades us that "the truth must not be disturbed." Complacence, joined by complicity, tries to minimize the effect of art, which can only be seen as an instrument against ideologies and political illusions. The English author is right when, in post-war Europe, he tries to bring the anti-ideological effects of art to a level of a general common sense, facing the new publicity culture of the 60's: "Art, on the other hand, is eternally disturbing, permanently revolutionary. It is so because the artist, in the degree of his greatness, always confronts the unknown, and what he brings back from that contemplation is a novelty, a new symbol, a new vision of life, the outer image of inward things… The artist is what the Germans call *ein Rüttler* , an upsetter of the established order. The greatest enemy of art is the collective mind, in any of its many manifestations ."[10]

Read's critique follows the same criteria that the Frankfurt School used as premises in its theoretical developments. Thus, we can understand Adorno's post-war analysis in the *Aesthetic Theory* as a kind of thinking that is based on a social criteria that tries tactically to reject the old German ideologies. Germany exerted a great effort in surpassing the war crisis. It is clear then that Adorno's theory offers an uncompromising radical image of the artistic movements, in an endless struggle for the "new." Although Adorno's theory is much more complex that the first avant-garde theories in Germany, it will be interesting for us to show what may have influenced Adorno to see art in general as a programmatic separation from the tradition, as a process of permanent "being in history". Hegel's theory about the lost essence of art, seen as an ontological "death" of art, had a great influence in the

theories of the Frankfurt School. In Adorno's theory, art cannot rely on its internal elements, but rather must be theorized from an external point of view. Art is also an expression of anti-ideology and negativity. Adorno draws the conclusion that, in the Modern age, religious art could no longer exist, because religion is a kind of ideology. The author explains that art is essentially anti-ideological, and cannot sustain a "tyranny of majority:" "In other words, art, and so-called classical art no less than its more anarchical expressions, always was, and is, a force of protest of the humane against the pressure of domineering institutions, religious and others, no less that it reflects their objective substance. Hence there is the reason for the suspicion that wherever the battle cry is raised that art should go back to its religious sources there also prevails the wish that art should exercise a disciplinary, repressive function"[11]. Thus, religious symbolism is nothing but a "metaphysical circumscription of the mundane," a useless creation of our imagination: "Any attempts to add spiritual meaning and thus greater objective validity to art by the re-introduction of religious content, for artistic treatment, are futile."[12] Art, on the other hand, cannot be a social activism; it is only an anti-ideological humanism: "Art should, as the word goes, « convey a message » of human solidarity, brotherly-love, all-comprising universality. It seems to me that the value of these ideas can only consist in their inherent truth, not in their social applicability, and even less in the way they are affectively propagated by art"[13].

III. Contemporary debates over religion

The contemporary world pays a great tribute to the beginnings of the Modern age, because it sustains a model of separation between politics and religion. Theorists try to see this kind of model as a middle-way between the anti-religious State and the mixtures of religion and politics; this intermediary solution may be the only acceptable one for preserving social and spiritual freedom for the individual. Starting from the fact that the purpose of the free society is the individual as a value in itself (this premise is viable for the Christianity, too), we might say that good cooperation between religious and political institutions would be the guarantee of respect for religious freedom and for the value of persons as individuals. We have here a positive aspect of the separation between State and religion: "the separation between politics and religion means the birth of religious freedom and tolerance. The State is the political governing institution that preserves the existence of the freedom of faith; that's why it has to remain structurally a-religious and a-theistic. The political authority expels religion to the area of free society. Religion will become an individual problem, because it has no part in the State order. The purpose of religion is being emancipated from the State and given freedom in the public sphere. Religious freedom includes not only the possibility of open and private recognizing of any religion, but also the right not to recognize any."[14] Religion can help

the political, because this, as W. Böckenförde says, "lives from the preliminary conditions that it itself cannot guarantee." That is the reason why the state must bring a minimum of norms, which religion should preserve. From this point of view, cardinal Lehmann understood religion as a true "alternative of modernity."

The purpose of our contemporary debates is to strengthen the idea of the person as a moral and sensible subject who recognizes the other as also a person, with the help of the strong relationship between the political and the religious in the public sphere.

Notes:

[1] Hans Blumenberg, *Die Legitimität der Neuzeit*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M., 1974, p. 16.

[2] Hans Blumenberg, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

[3] Walter Fratticci. «La modernità come secondo (e definitivo) superamento della gnosi. Hans Blumenberg e la legittimità dell'età moderna», *Dialegesthai. Rivista telematica di filosofia* [in linea], anno 2 (2000) <http://mondodomani.org/>.

[4] Karl Marx, *apud* Maurice Barbier, *Religion et politique dans la pensée moderne*, Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1987, p. 225.

[5] Karl Marx, *apud* Maurice Barbier, *Religion et politique dans la pensée moderne*, Presses Universitaires de Nancy, 1987, p. 228.

[6] Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia. An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge* (ed. Bryan S. Turner), Routledge, London & New York, 1991, p. 54.

[7] Karl Mannheim, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

[8] Rüdiger Safranski, *Das Böse oder das Drama der Freiheit*, Carl Hanser Verlag, München, 1997, p. 229.

[9] Herbert Read, *Art and Alienation. The Role of the Artist in Society*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1967, pp. 7-14.

[10] Herbert Read, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

[11] T.W. Adorno, *Thesis upon Art and Religion Today*, in *Gesammelte Schriften II*, *Noten zur Literatur*, p. 648.

[12] T.W. Adorno, *op. cit.*, p. 648.

[13] T.W. Adorno., *op. cit.*, p. 650.

[14] Karl Lehmann, *apud*: Bernhard Vogel, *Das Verhältnis von Politik und Religion*, in: *Die Politische Meinung,* no. 386, January 2002, p. 8.

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