

Worship In A Secular Age

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D) To put together - in order to relate to one another - the terms *worship and secular age*, seems to presuppose that we have a clear understanding of both of them, that we know the realities they denote, and that we thus operate on solid and thoroughly explored grounds. But is this really the case? I begin my paper with a question mainly because I am convinced that in spite of today's generalized preoccupation with "semantics", there is a great deal of confusion about the exact meaning of the very terms use in this discussion.

Not only among Christians in general, but even among the Orthodox themselves there exists in fact no consensus, no commonly accepted frame of reference concerning either *worship* or *secularism*, and thus a *fortiori* the problem of their interrelation. Therefore my paper is an attempt not so much to solve the problem as to clarify it, and to do this if possible within a consistent Orthodox perspective. In my opinion, the Orthodox, when discussing the problems stemming from our present "situations", accept them much too easily in their Western formulations. They do not seem to realize that the Orthodox tradition provides above all a possibility, and thus a necessity, of reformulating these very problems, of placing them in a context whose absence or deformation in the Western religious mind may have been the root of so many of our modern "impasses". And as I see it, nowhere is this task more urgently needed than in the range of problems related to *secularism* and proper to our so-called *secular age*.

Secularism has been analyzed, described and defined in these recent years in a great variety of ways, but to the best of my knowledge none of these descriptions has stressed a point which I consider to be essential and which reveals indeed better than anything else the true nature of secularism, and thus can give our discussion its proper orientation. Secularism, I submit, is above all a *negation of worship*. I stress: - not of God's existence, not of some kind of transcendence and therefore of some kind of religion. If secularism in theological terms is a heresy, it is primarily a heresy about man. It is the negation of man as a worshiping being, as a *homo adorans* : the one for whom worship is an essential act which both "posits" his humanity and fulfills it. It is the rejection as ontologically and epistemologically "decisive", of the words which "always, everywhere and for all" were the true "epiphany" of man's relation to God, to the world and to Himself: "It is meet and right to sing of Thee, to bless Thee, to praise Thee, to give thanks to Thee, and to worship Thee in every place of Thy dominion..."

This definition of secularism most certainly needs explanation. For obviously it cannot be accepted by those, quite numerous today, who consciously or unconsciously reduce Christianity to either intellectual ("future belief") or socio-ethical ("Christian service to the world") categories, and who therefore think that it must be possible to find not only some kind of accommodation, but even a deeper harmony between our "secular age" on the one hand and worship on the other hand. If the proponents of what

basically is nothing else but the Christian acceptance of secularism are right, then of course our whole problem is only that of finding or inventing a worship more acceptable, more "relevant" to the modern man's secular world view. And such indeed is the direction taken today by the great majority of liturgical reformers. What they seek is worship whose forms and content would "reflect" the needs and aspirations of the secular man, or even better of secularism itself. For once more, secularism is by no means identical with atheism, and paradoxical as it may seem, can be shown to have always had a peculiar longing for "liturgical" expression. If, however, my definition is right, then this whole search is a hopelessly dead end, if not outright nonsense. Then the very formulation of our theme - "worship in a secular age" - reveals, first of all, an inner contradiction in terms, a contradiction which requires a radical reappraisal of the entire problem and its drastic reformulation.

To prove that my definition of secularism ("negation of worship") is correct, I must prove two points. One concerning worship: it must be proven that the very notion of worship implies a certain idea of man's relationship not only to God but also to the world. And one concerning secularism: it must be proven that it is precisely this idea of worship that secularism explicitly or implicitly rejects.

First let us consider worship. It is ironic but also quite revealing, it seems to me, of the present state of our theology, that the main "proof" here will be supplied not by the theologians but by the *"Religionswissenschaft"*, that history and phenomenology of religions whose scientific study of worship, both of its forms and content, has been indeed virtually ignored by theologians. Yet even in its formative stage, when it had a strong anti-Christian bias, this *Religionswissenschaft* seems to have known more about the nature and meaning of worship than the theologians who kept reducing sacraments to the categories of "form" and "matter", "causality", and "validity", and who in fact excluded the liturgical tradition from their theological speculations.

There can be no doubt however, that if, in the light of this by now methodically mature phenomenology of religion, we consider worship in general and the Christian *leitourgia* in particular, we are bound to admit that the very principle on which they are built, and which determined and shaped their development, is that of the *sacramental character* of the world and of man's place in the world.

The term "sacramental" means here that the basic and primordial intuition which not only expresses itself in worship, but of which the entire worship is indeed the "phenomenon"- both effect and experience - is that the world be it in its totality as cosmos, or in its life and becoming as time and history, is an *epiphany* of God, a means of His revelation, presence and power. In other words, it not only "posits" the idea of God as a rationally acceptable cause of its existence, but truly "speaks" of Him and is in itself an essential means both of knowledge of God and communion with Him, and to be so is its true nature and its ultimate destiny. But then worship is a truly essential act, and man an essentially worshipping being, for it is *only* in worship that man has the source and the possibility of that knowledge which is communion, and of that communion which fulfills itself as true knowledge: knowledge of God and therefore knowledge of the world - communion with all that exists. Thus the very notion of worship is based on an intuition and experience of the world as an "epiphany" of God, thus the world - in worship- is revealed in its true nature and vocation as "sacrament".

And indeed, do I have to remind you of those realities, so humble, so "taken for granted" that they are hardly even mentioned in our highly sophisticated theological epistemologies and totally ignored in discussions about "hermeneutics", and on which nevertheless simply depends our very existence as Church, as *new creation*, as people of God and temple of the Holy Spirit? We *need* water and oil, bread and wine in order to be in communion with God and to know Him. Yet conversely - and such is the teaching, if not our modern theological manuals, at least of the liturgy itself - it is this communion with God by means of "matter" that reveals the true meaning of "matter" i.e., of the world itself. We can only worship in time, yet it is worship that ultimately not only reveals the meaning of time, but truly "renews" time itself. There is no worship without the participation of the body, without words and silence, light and darkness, movement and stillness - yet it is in and through worship that all these essential expressions of man in his relation to the world are given their ultimate "term" of reference, revealed in their highest and deepest meaning.

Thus the term "sacramental" means that for the world to be means of worship and means of grace is not accidental, but the revelation, of its meaning, the restoration of its essence, the fulfillment of its destiny. It is the "natural sacramentality" of the world that finds its expression in worship and makes the latter the essential *ergon* of man, the foundation and the spring of his life and activities as man. Being the epiphany of God, worship is thus the epiphany of the world; being communion with God, it is the only true communion with the world; being knowledge of God, it is the ultimate fulfillment of all human knowledge.

At this point and before I come to my second point - secularism as negation of worship - one remark is necessary. If earlier I mentioned *Religionwissenschaft*, it is because this discipline establishes at its own level and according to its own methodology that such indeed is the nature and meaning not only of Christian worship "in general, of worship as a primordial and universal phenomenon. A Christian theologian, however, ought to concede, it seems to me, that this is especially true of the Christian *leitourgia* whose uniqueness lies in its stemming from the faith in Incarnation, from the great and all-embracing mystery of the "Logos made flesh". It is indeed extremely important for us to remember that the uniqueness, the newness of Christian worship is not that it has no *continuity* with worship "in general", as some overly zealous apologists tried to prove at the time when *Religionwissenschaft* simply reduced Christianity and its worship to pagan mystery-cults, but that in Christ this very continuity is fulfilled, receives its ultimate and truly new significance so as to truly bring all "natural" worship to an end. Christ is the fulfillment of worship as adoration and prayer, thanksgiving and sacrifice, communion and knowledge because he is the ultimate "epiphany" of man as worshiping being, the fullness of God's manifestation and presence by means of the world. He is the true fulfillment and sacrament because He is the fulfillment of the world's essential "sacramentality".

If however, this "continuity" of the Christian *leitourgia* with the whole of man's worship includes in itself an equally essential principle of *discontinuity*, if Christian worship being the fulfillment and the end of all worship is at the same time a *beginning*, a radically *new* worship, it is not because of any ontological impossibility for the world to be a sacrament of Christ. No, it is because the world rejected Christ by killing Him, and by doing so, rejected its own destiny and fulfillment. Therefore, if the basis of all Christian worship is the Incarnation, its true content is always the Cross and the

Resurrection. Through these events the true life in Christ, the Incarnate Lord, is "hid with Christ with God", and made into a life "not of this world". The world, which rejected Christ, must itself die in man if it is to become again means of communion, means of participation in the life, which shone forth from the grave, in the Kingdom which is "not of this world", and which in terms of this world is still to come.

And thus the bread and wine - the food, the matter, the very symbol of this world and therefore the very content of our *prosphora* to God, to be changed into the Body and Blood of Christ and become communion to his Kingdom - must in the anaphora be "lifted up", taken out of "this world". And it is only when the Church in the Eucharist leaves this world and ascends to Christ's table at His Kingdom, that she truly sees and proclaims heaven and earth to be full of His glory and God as having "filled all things with Himself". Yet, once more this "discontinuity", this vision of all things as new, is possible only because at first there is continuity and not negation, because the Holy Spirit makes "all things new" and not "new things". It is because all Christian worship is *remembrance of Christ "in the flesh"* that it can also be remembrance, i.e., expectation and anticipation, of His Kingdom. It is only because the Church's *leitourgia* is always cosmic, i.e., assumes into Christ all time, that it can therefore always be eschatological, i.e., make us true participants of the Kingdom to come.

Such then is man's relation to the world implied in the very notion of worship. Worship is by definition and act a reality with cosmic, historical and eschatological dimensions, the expression thus not merely of "piety", but of an all-embracing "world view". And those few who have taken upon themselves the pain of studying worship in general, and Christian worship in particular, would certainly agree that on the levels of history and phenomenology at least, this notion of worship is objectively verifiable. Therefore if today what people call worship are activities, projects and undertakings having in reality nothing to do with this notion of worship, the responsibility for this lies with the deep semantic confusion typical of our confused time.

II) We can now come to my second point. Secularism, I said, is above all a negation of worship. And indeed if what we have said about worship is true, is it not equally true that secularism consists in the rejection, explicit or implicit, of precisely the that idea of man and world which it is the very purpose of worship to express and communicate?

This rejection, moreover, is at the very foundation of secularism and constitutes its inner criterion, but as I have already said, secularism is by no means identical to atheism. A modern secularist quite often accepts the idea of God. What, however, he emphatically negates is precisely the sacramentality of man and the world. A secularist views the world as containing within itself its meaning and the principles of knowledge and action. He may deduce meaning from God and ascribe to God the origin of the world and the laws, which govern it. He may even admit without difficulty the possibility of God's intervention in the world's existence. He may believe in survival after death and the immortality of the soul. He may relate to God his ultimate aspirations, such as a just society and the freedom and equality of all men. In other words he may "refer" his secularism to God and make it "religious" - the object of

ecclesiastical programs and ecumenical projects, the theme of Church assemblies and the subject matter of "theology". All this changes nothing in the fundamental "secularity" of his vision of man and world, in the world being understood, experienced and acted upon in its own immanent terms and for its own immanent sake. All this changes nothing in his fundamental rejection of "epiphany": the primordial intuition that everything in this world and the world itself not only have *elsewhere* the cause and principle of their existence, but are *themselves* the manifestation and presence of that *elsewhere*, and that it is indeed the life of their life, so that disconnected from that "epiphany" all is only darkness, absurdity and death.

And nowhere is this essence of secularism as negation better revealed than in the secularist's dealing with worship. For paradoxical as it may sound, the secularist is in a way, truly obsessed with worship. The "acme" of religious secularism in the West - Masonry- is made up almost entirely of highly elaborated ceremonies saturated with "symbolism". The recent prophet of the "secular city", Harvey Cox, felt the need to follow up his first best-seller with a book on "celebration". Celebration is in fact very fashionable today. The reasons for this seemingly peculiar phenomenon are in reality quite simple. They not only do not invalidate, but on the contrary, confirm my point. For on the one hand, this phenomenon proves that whatever the degree of his secularism or even atheism, man remains essentially a "worshiping being", forever nostalgic for rites ad rituals no matter how empty and artificial is the ersatz offered to him. And on the other hand, by proving the inability of secularism to create genuine worship, this phenomenon reveals secularism's ultimate and tragic incompatibility with the essential Christian world view.

Such inability can be seen in the first place, in the secularist's very approach to worship, in his naive conviction that worship, as everything else in the world can be a rational construction, the result of planning, "exchange of views", and discussions. Quite typical of this are the very fashionable discussions of new symbols, as if symbols could be, so to speak, "manufactured", brought into existence through committee deliberations. But the whole point here is that the secularist is constitutionally unable to see in symbols anything but "audio-visual aids" for communicating ideas. Last year a group of students and teachers of a well-known seminary spent a semester "working" on a "liturgy" centered on the following "themes": the S.S.T., ecology, and the flood in Pakistan. No doubt they "meant well". It is their presuppositions which are wrong: that the traditional worship can have no "relevance" to these themes and has nothing to reveal about them, and that unless a "theme" is somehow clearly spelled out in the liturgy, or made into its "focus", it is obviously outside the spiritual reach of liturgical experience. The secularist is very fond today of such terms as "symbolism" , "sacrament", "transformation", "celebration", and of the entire panoply of cultic terminology. What he does not realize, however is that the use he makes of them reveals, in fact, the death of symbols and the decomposition of the sacrament. And he does not realize this because in his rejection of the world's and man's sacramentality he is reduced to viewing symbols as indeed mere illustrations of ideas and concepts, which they emphatically are not. There can be no celebration of ideas and concepts, be they "peace", "justice", or even "God". The Eucharist is not a symbol of friendship or togetherness, or any other state of activity however desirable. A vigil or a fast are, to be sure, "symbolic": they always express, manifest, fulfill the Church as expectation and preparation. To make them into symbols of political protest or ideological affirmation, to use them as means to that which is not their "end", to think that the liturgical symbols

can be used arbitrarily - is to signify the death of worship, and this in spite of the obvious success and popularity of all these "experiments".

To anyone who has had, be it only once, the true experience of worship, all this is revealed immediately as the ersatz it is. He knows that the secularist's worship of relevance is simply incompatible with the true relevance of worship. And it is here in this miserable liturgical failure, whose appalling results we are only beginning to see, that secularism reveals its ultimate religious emptiness and, I will not hesitate to say, its utterly anti-Christian essence.

Does all this mean a simple dismissal of our very theme: "worship in a secular age"? Does this mean that there is nothing that we as Orthodox can do in this secular age except to perform on Sunday our "ancient and colorful" rites, and to live from Monday until Saturday a perfectly "secularized" life, sharing in a world view which is in no way related to these rites?

To this question my answer is an emphatic No. I am convinced that to accept this "coexistence"*, as is advocated today by many seemingly well-intentioned Christians, would not only mean a betrayal of our own faith, but that sooner or later, it would lead to the disintegration of precisely that which we want to preserve and to perpetuate. I am convinced, moreover, that such a disintegration has already begun and is concealed only by the grace-proof walls of our ecclesiastical "establishments" (busy as they are in defending their ancient rights and privileges and primacies and condemning one another as "noncanonical"), peaceful rectories, and self-righteous pieties. To this latter we shall return a little later.

What we have to understand first of all, is that the problem under discussion is complicated by something our well-intentioned "conservatives" do not comprehend, in spite of all their denouncing and condemning of secularism - its origin and its development - and Christianity. Secularism - and we must again and again stress this - is a "stepchild" of Christianity, as are, in the last analysis, all secular ideologies which today dominate the world - not, as it is claimed by the Western apostles of a Christian acceptance of secularism, a legitimate child, but a *heresy*. Heresy, however, is always the distortion, the exaggeration, and therefore the mutilation of something true, the affirmation of the one "choice" (*aizeisis* means choice in Greek), one element at the expense of others, the breaking up of the catholicity of Truth. But then heresy is always a question addressed to the Church, which requires in order to be answered, an effort of Christian thought and conscience.

*Nowhere better seen than in the classical argument of the partisans of the "old calendar": on December 25th we can fully share in the "secularized" Western Christmas with its Christmas trees, family reunions and exchange of gifts, and then on January 7th we have the "true" - religious - Christmas. The tenants of this view do not realize, of course, that had the early Church shared in such an understanding of her relation to the world, she would never have instituted Christmas, whose purpose was precisely to "exorcize", transform, and Christianize an existing pagan festival.