

Religion and Modernity: The Future of Belief in the Secularized Society

DOI: 10.5281/zenodo.4283386

Stable URL: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.4283386>

Isaac Padinjarekuttu

Orience Theological College, Shillong

Abstract: The author narrates the complex relationship between modernity and religion in the past and explores its future. After a brief introduction to modernity, its failed mission of secularization and the resurgence of religion are dealt with. The article ends with four intellectual challenges that faces Christian theology in the changed scenario: intelligibility of the love-ethic in a world of individualism, a consistent stand on human dignity in a world of conflicting messages, connecting to the spiritual longing of our contemporaries, and articulating the Jesus Christ as the mediator of immanent transcendence to a culture that seems to lack the sense of transcendence.

Key Words: modernity, religion, secularization, future of faith.

The debate on Modernity is of immediate relevance to the very destiny of Christianity, indeed of religion, in the contemporary world. What is at stake is no less than the future of the possibility of faith itself, in a society undergoing rapid changes. The debate is not only sociological or historical but also specifically theological. The thesis of this paper is that far from being interpreted in terms of a challenge and even a threat, this debate could be about an opportunity for Christianity and for religions in general.

What is Modernity?

Sociologically and historically Modernity refers to the four revolutions inaugurated already by the middle of the 17th century: revolutions in science and philosophy, revolutions in culture and theology, revolutions in state and society and revolutions in technology and industry.¹ Underlying these revolutions were the catchwords of Modernity, Reason, Progress and Nation which again were based on the two foundation stones of Modernity: subjectivity and rationality. Modernity was the emergence of a human subject aware of its autonomy and rationality, leading to tremendous transformations in the world. The modern man is the “newly self-conscious and autonomous human being – curious about the world, confident in his own judgements, skeptical of orthodoxies,

rebellious against authority, responsible for his own beliefs and actions, enamoured of the classical past but even more committed to a greater future, proud of his humanity, conscious of his distinctness from nature, aware of his artistic powers as individual creator, assured of his intellectual capacity to comprehend and control nature, and altogether less dependent on an omnipotent God.”² He was the product of an extraordinary convergence of events, ideas and figures in Europe between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries beginning with the Renaissance, followed by the Reformation and the other momentous developments. These collectively ended the cultural hegemony of the Catholic Church in Europe and established the more individualistic, sceptical and secular spirit of the modern age.

Compared to the preceding medieval worldview, the modern world had some radically different perspectives. In contrast to a cosmos which was not only created but continuously and directly governed by a personal and omnipotent God, the modern universe was an impersonal phenomenon governed by natural laws. The Christian dualistic stress on the supremacy of the spiritual and transcendent over the material and concrete was now largely inverted, with the physical world becoming the predominant focus for human activity. With an enthusiastic embrace of this world, human aspiration was now increasingly centred on fulfilment of this-worldly desires, dreams and aspirations. Science replaced religion as the pre-eminent intellectual authority, as definer, judge, and guardian of the cultural world view. Human reason and empirical observation replaced theological doctrines and scriptural revelation as the principal means for comprehending the universe. Radical human independence – intellectual, psychological, spiritual – was affirmed, against all structures and authority that would inhibit self-expression. The goal of Modernity was to create the greatest possible freedom for man from nature, from oppressive political, social, or economic structures, from restrictive religious beliefs, from the Church and from God.³

Cosmologically, however, Modernity was a move away from a human-centred universe. Modern cosmology posited a planetary earth in a neutral infinite space with a complete elimination of the traditional celestial-terrestrial dichotomy. The universe did not exist for man; it consisted of straightforwardly material entities moved by

natural and mechanical forces composed of the same material substances as those found on the earth. Complementing this was the theory of evolution and its multitude of consequences for the understanding of human beings and other biological entities. The origin of species and of man was exclusively attributed to natural causes and empirically observable processes. Thus as the earth has been removed from the centre of creation to become another planet, so now was man removed from the centre of creation to become another animal.

How Successful was Modernity?

It is certain that after all the experiences of revolution, Modernity now appears to thinking people in a different light from that in which it appeared to itself. There is still no disputing the magnificent achievements of Modernity with its revolutions in science and philosophy, technology and industry, state and society. But there are also critical questions which we cannot avoid putting to this Modernity and its leading values of reason, progress, nation, etc. which resulted in an equally unprecedented existential danger to humankind. The deadly irrationality of the enlightenment notions of reason, nation and progress and their dehumanizing consequences continue to haunt and afflict human communities with war, violence, poverty, and destruction of the natural foundations of life. It is impossible even to summarize the diagnoses of Georg Simmel and Max Weber, of Siegfried Kracauer and Walter Benjamin, of Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, of Michel Foucault, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Jürgen Habermas, Antony Giddens, Stephen Toulmin, etc.⁴ Almost all of them were anticipated by the theologian Karl Barth with his radical criticism of Modernity who initiated the postmodern paradigm in theology.⁵

Today there may be said to be largely a consensus about the crisis of the modern paradigm and its leading values. Given the development in world history, particularly, in the twentieth century,⁶ it makes little sense to deny it. Modernity sought to sell one project after another to promote the reign of reason, but in almost every case one saw the triumph of unreason. In an age in which millions have perished in gas chambers and labour camps, new technologies of mass destruction have grown into a monstrous cancer and ideas

have come to look more and more like advertisements of rationalizations, every blueprint of a rational society cannot but appear as a cruel joke. In the face of such barbarism and unprecedented crimes against humanity, it was not reason, which was all too adaptable, that made resistance possible, but rather personal convictions, values, attitudes and moral courage. It is not that there is nothing good with the Modernity project but it has to shed some of its inflated claims and false hopes. Enlightened ultramodernists would do well to ask the simple question: why should western societies feel so distraught at a time when they have never had it so good in terms of material comforts? Why this uneasy feeling among some over having hit the ceiling or having reached the end of their tether?

And what about the Postmodern? While it proclaims an end to Modernity, Postmodernity has only radical pluralism or relativism to offer as an alternative.⁷ Are “arbitrariness, colourfulness, a mix of anything and everything, an anarchy of thoughts and styles, a principle of aesthetic and literary collage, a methodological “anything goes”, a moral “anything that gives you pleasure”, are these and suchlike going to be able to overcome the dilemmas of Modernity?”⁸ Here the necessity of a lack of consensus is turned into the virtue of randomness. Modernity in all its contradictions is not overcome, but is merely repeated yet again in a hyped-up form. Postmodernity in this sense is a disguised form of “Late Modernity.”⁹ Like a totalitarian unity without multiplicity, so, too, a relativistic plurality without unity is hardly the way to a better future. The postmodern challenge lacks clarity and vision for the future.

Modernity and Religion

Fortunately there is the increasing conviction among nations and peoples that humanity has an ethical vocation and that religion may have a role to play in helping to refocus on it. This is the background of the discussion that follows now; the focus will essentially be on Christianity and Europe, but the conclusions can be applied to religions in general. It is often said that Modernity was a development of the potentialities inherent in Christianity (for example, the emergence of the human subject as an agent of history), but finally it became a powerful rival of Christianity, and in many ways Christianity became its victim. In fact, many supporters of Modernity even prophesied

the end of religion, its progressive and inescapable disappearance. Yet it is yet to be demonstrated that the end of the social function of religion is necessarily the end of religion itself; or that the stress on the autonomous and free subject is a betrayal of the essence of religion - the total submission to the divine; that religion and Modernity are essentially in conflict. Historically it is true that there has been a conflict to a certain extent, but it is in no way normative for the future. Today we are in a better position to appreciate the irreversible gains of Modernity: the historical critical method the autonomy of culture, the uncoupling of religion and politics, the legitimacy of the modern state as a legal entity, the legitimate autonomy of civil societies, the concept of democracy, etc. But the ills of Modernity and the return of religion show that the alleged massive secularization that has taken place in the wake of the Enlightenment does not mean the end of religion.

At the same time, there is also a real consensus that dreams of a new Christianization of Europe and a Christianization of the world are illusory. The real opportunity for Christianity and religions in general lies in the chance to rethink creatively the forms in which they can be present to the men and women of today and communicate with them. The vocation to bear witness to a prophetic vision of human beings and society cannot be given up or allowed to be progressively marginalized. The existence of a secular ethic does not in any way make witnessing to the paradox of the gospel superfluous. Christianity, and for that matter, any religion cannot afford to forget its historic vocation of calling men and women to their existential roots. This is one of the most promising tasks of a theological interpretation of Modernity.

It would be helpful here to briefly recall the attitude of the Catholic Church to Modernity. It was not felicitous; it sought to be resolutely anti-modern because it thought that Enlightenment reason undermined faith, authority and hierarchy. The result was an anti-modernist stance and a purge, which lasted right up to the Second Vatican Council. The entire energy of generations of Churchmen was wasted on protecting the integrity of the Christian faith in the face of the sacrilegious claims of Modernity. Only after Vatican II did it dawn on the Church that secularization is not necessarily to be

identified with secular atheism, that freedom of conscience would not fatally compromise the rights of a true objectivity.

One gets an idea about this “mutual exclusion” from the *Syllabus of Errors* of Pius IX (1864) and *Pascendi* of Pius X (1907). But there was a substantial group of Christians who pleaded for an accommodation to modern thought which was rejected by the Church.¹⁰ The Church was caught unawares by Modernity whose magnitude, consequences and power it was unable to measure. For a long time its great resource was resistance to what it saw as repudiation and apostasy and failed to engage in any coherent or specific reflection on it, although the revolutions of Modernity were prepared long before by centuries of Christianity itself. But it is fruitless to lament the lapses of the past. If the Church admits that the conscience is sovereign, autonomous and creative, that it has an authority of its own, a rapport with the modern mind is already created. This is the challenge facing the Church – finding relevant connecting factors for an interaction between the two. This is the task of theology. But even those who argue that the Christian religion may have a role in the modern world are doubtful about the present day theology. It looks as if theology is lagging behind cultural developments generally, and is simply reacting; it is no longer able to communicate in the cultural pluralism of our time. Theological contributions to a future world order can only rarely be detected in current discussions. Theologians are more concerned with hermeneutical and methodological questions than with concrete plans from a Christian perspective for a universal world order. So it is not surprising to hear, religion yes, theology no, praxis yes, theory no.

The Persistence of Religion

The great dream of the twentieth century, of the final demise of religion and the existence of a religionless society, has turned out to be a myth. Religions are thriving and new religious movements are flourishing in every corner of the globe with a different religious sensibility, new priorities, forms of expression and sources of inspiration.¹¹ The survival of the sacred is a fact in spite of the prediction of its disappearance by some of the great thinkers for over a century: August Comte, Karl Marx, Max Weber, etc.¹² Many assumed that religions would just wither away – along, as Hegel put

it, with all opposition to Modernity. But religion turns up in strange places, in the industrialized secular society, in scientific enterprise, in political radicalism, in psychology, and of course in the traditional places, in mysticism, in popular piety and so on. The most convincing case study has been America where it has been proved that in spite of the shifting social patterns, religion continues to exercise important social functions.¹³ In fact, there is a resurgence of religion the world over, much of which is a backlash against the anti-religious secular currents in the Western world, ending in fundamentalism and religious terrorism. This “revenge of God”¹⁴ is an indication of the fact that religion is not an accident of biology,¹⁵ but a fundamental human activity dealing with issues of utmost significance for human life. Religious claims are purpose claims.¹⁶ They are still the meaning-giving systems for a vast majority of human beings.¹⁷ It may be that religion in one form or another is an abiding human phenomenon.

Religion is rushing into a vacuum created by the ills of Modernity. Modernity’s liberal thinking and acting have brought about much prosperity, freedom and self-fulfilment to human beings; but it has also increased individual self-interest, caused unimaginable ecological degradation and impoverished our personal and social relationships. It has reduced morality into a mere expression of personal preference. It is into this vacuum that religion is rushing. This shows that the religion-secularism debate is not over but is beginning all over again. What is needed is a new kind of settlement based not on containment or tolerance but which is more positive and creative. We cannot forget that we are still drawing on the moral capital of centuries of religious tradition in which many of our secular truths find their origin. Nobody can say that only religion can make people moral, but it was through religion that morality has historically been created, nurtured and transmitted. Secular liberalism is having great difficulty in replenishing this moral capital. It offers, at best, a relativist amorality; it provides no checks on the excesses that we see all around. Religion has something to offer to help to make good this deficit, but not religious revisionists. The sacred and the secular, the religious and the profane, are not opposite poles of an evolutionary model but alternative dimensions of reality which interrelate with one another, and interpenetrate each other in complex periodicity.

But what religion would be in the future is a difficult question to answer. There are all forms that religiosity takes today and could take in the future. At one end we have the vague spirituality of the New Age. At the other, we have fundamentalism and terrorism.¹⁸ There is traditional religiosity, but there is also the fascination with the occult and the Eastern meditations. There is also a new sensibility towards human solidarity, especially towards the underprivileged, often practised by people on the margins of the Church or even who have abandoned the Church. Vatican II calls this the “birth of a new humanism, one in which man is defined primarily in terms of his responsibility for the brothers and for history.”¹⁹ They are secular but their actions have a deeply religious dimension. So we know now how inadequate and misleading is the strict separation of the sacred and the secular. People begin to experience the sacred as a deeper dimension of secular experiences. There is religious meaning in man’s vocation to become fully human. Although a one sided anthropocentrism is not the whole experience of religion, this new humanism is very much an element of religion. The interest in the occult and Eastern meditations on the other hand, is a fascination found in the elite, and it is not grounded in social life. It is inspired by social resentment than by identification with a social commitment. They are gods of the moment without much power. However, the new religious experience of man’s humanity, so widely spread among divers groups has shown remarkable social vitality and has become a source of renewal even within the Christian Churches.

The Religion-Secularism Debate in Modernity

In the light of the above reflections, we need to take a fresh look at the history of the religion-secularism debate, and answer a few fundamental questions. The first one is, does Modernity or modernization lead to secularization? For a long time this question was answered in the positive, both by militant opponents of religion and those who waited patiently for the disappearance of religion. Even believers, theologians and Churchmen were convinced that it was inevitable that with modernization, there has to be secularization and some even saw it as a chance given by God to clean up the system. Surely there were doubts about this widely circulated thesis, but the history of the last twenty years has laid this thesis to rest.

People don't doubt the phenomenon of secularization but question the interdependence of modernization and secularization.

Let us also clarify the concept of secularization. We are not dealing with a history of this concept.²⁰ But it is useful to say that it arose very much in an ecclesiastical context, where Religious clergy was contrasted with the "secular" clergy or the clergy in the "world"; sometimes the process by which clergymen who abandoned their priesthood and went back to a lay state was called secularization. Then in the course of the Napoleonic wars of the 19th century, property of the Church was taken over by the state and this was called secularization and from this developed a philosophical and theological concept of secularization in which the characteristic features of modern society and culture were contrasted with the Christian faith or religion in general. This is the starting point of the sociological discussion of the phenomenon in the late nineteenth century.²¹ Sociology has used the word to mean the following: a generally declining significance of religion or a retreat of religion from the public sphere and freeing of social functions like economy, science, art, politics, etc. from the control of religion, or in a more understandable language, as a general weakening of traditional religious faith, affiliation, and practice along with a strict distinction between church and state.

But secularization is not a straight-line transition from faith to disbelief that works at a uniform rate, or with predictable outcomes. So the decision not to affiliate with a church does not necessarily mean defection from religion. There are people who believe without belonging. There is a notable number of Europeans who say they believe in God, or who pray, and yet say that they have no religious affiliation. Conversely there are also pockets of Europeans who say they belong to a church, but who don't necessarily believe in God, go to church, pray or regard religion as important. This is belonging without believing. Grace Davie coined the word "vicarious religion" meaning people who don't belong to a church and who don't practice a faith, but who for various reasons want religion to hang around. When the need arises, ultra-secular people spontaneously flock to local churches.²² Again when one speaks of the retreat of religion from the public sphere, there is no clear sign of that, since religion

still continues to be an effective public entity in many so-called secular societies.

The history of the secularization thesis has not been written but some sketches can be made.²³ The first representative of the thesis that Christianity has only a limited future, that it would be dead by 1900, was the Englishman, Thomas Woolston (1670-1733). But the real prospering of this thesis happened in the nineteenth century. Everyone with name and fame in the social sciences, like Max Weber, Emile Durkheim, Sigmund Freud, George Herbert Mead, Friedrich Nietzsche and many more dealt with the topic. Of course there were opponents, like Alexis de Tocqueville, William James, Jacob Burckhardt, Ernst Troeltsch, Max Scheler, etc. By the 1960s it came to be accepted as a matter of course. So Peter Berger said in 1968 that in the year 2000 there would be practically no religious institutions, but only some individual believers, who will have to fend for themselves in the ocean of secularity.²⁴ A counter argument to him was delivered by David Martin.²⁵

One problem here was the understanding of religion and faith by these sociologists. Some saw religion as cognitively unripe and offering an inferior knowledge, a pseudo-science. Another understanding was that religion is a wrong response to suffering, material need and social and political oppression, the famous “opium of the people” of Karl Marx. Another understanding of religion was that of an authoritarian system where no questioning and doubts are allowed. In any case, religious knowledge, faith, etc. were considered to be inferior forms of expression of an immature humanity.²⁶ So it was hoped that modern thought and modernization would do away with this sort of religiosity, and secularity would triumph.

Of course, the representatives of these arguments do not know what religion really is and what it does for human beings. Human beings have always looked to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence, because all religions “attempt in their own ways to calm the hearts of men by outlining a programme of life covering doctrine, moral precepts and sacred rites.”²⁷ The primary purpose of religion is not creation of knowledge, but trust. It deals with fundamental human experiences of suffering, pain and happiness and not with issues like individual freedom nor is it concerned with limiting human freedom.²⁸

We have already noted that the sociological thesis that Modernity leads to secularization is not a universally valid proposition. In the first place, even in Europe there are exceptions, like Poland, Ireland, Croatia, and even Bavaria in Germany; in America religion has remained strong in spite of it being a thoroughly modernized society. Empirically it is proved that membership in religious communities went up continuously from 1800 to 1950 and grew by 400 percent. There is surely a lot of modernizing tendencies all over the world, but there is no question of a wave of secularization and loss of religion. In this context it is also useful to say that European religiosity was not a seamless robe, that it was not always a religious continent. There was always criticism of the Church and it had a lot of problem keeping its flock religious. It is enough to go through the disciplinary decrees of the councils and the matters on which they legislated to understand this point. So, modernization is in no way essentially linked to secularization and secularization takes place without modernization. The entire thesis was developed from the experience of France and some West-European countries which was then made a state ideology by the Marxists in the countries of Eastern Europe. This of course should not and need not lead to triumphalism of the Churches and religions to establish that religion is essential for spiritual and moral health and motivation and social binding. This is also not true.

The second question is whether Modernity or modernization leads to destruction of morality. It was clearly established by William James that great examples of asceticism and heroic moral life were found among religious people, but it was not to say that such examples were not to be found among non-religious people.²⁹ It is not true that without religious faith there will be a moral collapse and that social order would simply break down. Even in the most secularized countries there is no total loss of morality. Some of the most corrupt countries in the world are some of the most religious ones. Some of the most violent countries are where religion is very vibrant, like America.³⁰ Causal relation between secularization and moral collapse does not exist. There are of course radical elements on both sides. Radical atheists, like Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, see religious people as limited in intelligence or even outright stupid, but it is equally laughable when radical Christian groups see atheists as

ignorant, irrational, amoral, etc.³¹ Often the atheists of the nineteenth century were against Christianity because in their view, Christianity preached an other-worldly religion and did little for the life this side; Christian morality was a morality of guilt, denial of the body, and it was full of hypocrisy. Whether these accusations are justified or not, one thing is sure, their motives were fundamentally moral. As Ernst Troeltsch said, the atheistic ethic is possible only because it is able to measure itself against a religious ethic.³² There is a non-religious source of morality. The reciprocity and community feeling found in primitive societies are not founded on any religious belief.³³ The entire history of human rights can be seen as a complex history of religious and secular forces working together and not as Christian or anti-Christian. So secularization does not lead to the collapse of morality. Morality is strengthened by religion, but the moral orientation is pre-religion. It is not correct to say that values and morality need God. When believing people articulate and live a set of values, it does not mean that non-believing people cannot articulate the same values. Secularization does not weaken morality, but weakening of religion does destroy one of the important pillars of morality.

The story of secularization is best expressed by Owen Chadwick in his story of the origin of the Pantheon in Paris which was originally supposed to be a Church in honour of St. Genevieve.³⁴ It shows that it was not a linear, continuous, and uniform process but has a very complex, conflicting, heterogeneous, and contingent history. There were different waves of secularization and it did not, as often thought, happen because of the unified efforts of some “enlightened” French intellectuals.

At least three waves can be observed.³⁵ The first wave was from 1791 till 1803. The French Revolution was the first major political attack on Christianity since the Roman persecutions in the early centuries of Christianity. What led to this was not the religious role of the Church, but its political and economic role. The Church was now made a state Church, and the clergy was divided into Constitutional and anti-Constitutional clergy, which led to the persecution of the anti-Constitutional clergy. What infuriated the anti-religious faction was the condemnation of the Revolution by Pope

Pius VI. Basically the regions that were affected were France and some countries which were in close alliance with it.

The second wave began at the middle of the nineteenth century as a result of rapid urbanization and industrialization and the Church's inability to understand these developments, coupled with the political developments, namely, the 1848 revolutions and their aftermath. The Church was not able to move with the people to the cities and provide religious care and it was not able to mitigate the sufferings of the workers and the poverty of the masses. The Church became a stranger to the majority of the working class. Wherever there was support by the Church to the people the Church survived, for example, Bavaria and Rheinland in Germany.

The third wave came in the 1960s and 1970s. It was a transnational and trans-European movement. The impulse for it came from the student revolt and the related cultural and political movements, which had sure Christian roots. The leaders of the student movements came from deeply religious families. The student communities of the Churches in the universities gave support to the movement. Religious convictions led to political engagement, which gradually led to a conversion to secular convictions. It soon became a movement for an intensive secularization, a normalization of the secular option. Secularism itself became a religion and developed an aversion to traditional religions, particularly Christianity. Connected with this was also a sexual revolution. There was also an interest in Asian religions, especially in the erotic *Tantra* traditions, or in good old paganism. Many were not interested in religion at all and still others were professedly anti-religious. The religions had now a serious task at hand. The option was either to adapt or to react. The conflict goes on even today. So secularization did not come in one day suddenly from nowhere with an atheistic ideology and destroy the innocent religious communities of Europe.

The Chances for Religion in Contemporary Society

If we understand these waves, then we will also understand the changes in the patterns of collapse and revitalization of religions in the present. There are all sorts of names given to the postmodern, contemporary society by sociologists – “risk society”, “thrill-seeking

society” “consumer society”, “knowledge society”, “communication society”, “multi-option society”, “networked society”, and so on. There are others who speak of the post-Christian, post-colonial, post-imperialist, post-industrial, post-secular society. All these are partly correct analyses but there should be an overarching characteristic of this society. Given the pluralism that is prevalent, the best expression for this age is multi-option society. Is multi-option a danger or a chance?

Whenever one speaks of the pluralistic situation of today, there is talk of fragmentation, disintegration, loss of values, loss of community, loss of trust, loss of faith and corrosion of character. But not everything is gloomy. The increase of options in the contemporary world is a fact. It means more individuality, more options for action, and also more chances for establishing contact, community. It offers more chances for bonding. Our values come out of experiences and the diversity of experiences enriches our values. Mere knowledge of persons or values does not lead to acceptance of them. Rational knowledge of alternatives does not automatically lead to abandoning of one’s own values or attachments. The mere knowledge that there are billions of women does not destroy the attachment of a man to his wife. In the same way, the mere knowledge that there are many religions or world views other than Christianity does not automatically destroy my attachment to my religion. It is a value to have options, and this develops empathy. Oscar Wilde spoke of the dogmatism of the untraveled, meaning, one who knows only what is his, will think that it is the only thing.

In the case of religion, this situation has led to the emergence of concepts like “patchwork religion”, “a la carte religion”, “cafeteria religion”, “pick and choose religion”, etc.³⁶ The common thread that is running through all these expressions is that such religiosity does not lead to transformation. Growing pluralism leads to mixing up of values, cognitive contamination as Peter Berger calls it, mixing up of difficult-to-reconcile ideas. Faith becomes purely subjective and without power. Such Religion will not be able to withstand the dynamic of secularization, and one of the results of it would be the emergence of fundamentalism, as a reaction to relativism. But religious pluralism and increased options do not necessarily lead to

relativism and secularization. America is a case in point. The options may lead to change from one religion to another and even from religion to non-religion or from non-religion to religion. All these do not lead necessarily to the loss of faith. No individual can live all the options available. But he will be attracted to a dynamic and lively option, an option that is concretely lived by its followers. So the quality of life of those who live a religion or ideology is important.

Religious Option – Risk or Chance?

In theory, religions are best prepared to contribute to social cohesion and peace in the world because they are considered to be the guardians of morality and values in society and they are in the best position to hand down these to their children. But if it is to become a reality, it is important to keep in mind that religion is much more than a value system or a collection of doctrines. Religion is in the first place an intensive experience which is very much connected to rituals which also are in turn sources of experience. Religions present before us models that call us to discipleship. They have stories and myths which help us to understand the meaning of our existence. All these are too rich to be codified into a system. When the experience is missing, the entire religious system will only attract indifference, disinterest and even derision. That is also the reason why non-religious people have less and less understanding for the religious convictions of many of their fellowmen. This is also the reason why one religion does not understand the other easily. But the only way out of this logjam is to see religions in their totality and not merely as systems of values or quasi-scientific systems of knowledge, but as expressions of human life and experience. But one should have the humility to acknowledge that my experience is mine only and the other also has an experience which I cannot comprehend fully.

It is easier said than done and openness to the other alone will not suffice. One needs serious encounter with the other, which is difficult. Christians see how difficult it is to engage with fellow Christians in ecumenical dialogue. How much more difficult it would be to deal with other religions! Christians have also learnt how difficult it has been to understand Judaism, which is part of the Christian tradition and with Islam which is also a religion of “Abraham.” Even today all these dialogues are still in their beginning and one sees already

the problems, intellectual, theological and political. These religions need one another to understand themselves. Then come the other religions of the world.

It was George Santayana who said that the attempt to be religious without a concrete religion is as impossible as the attempt to speak without a concrete language. What is meant is that in the concrete situation of religious pluralism, without dialogue one cannot achieve anything, but dialogue is not possible without concrete religious commitment. In the end it is not religions which act but human beings who believe. Conflicts are not between cultures and religions but between human beings who use their faith or their political objective to define reality in a particular way. Human beings can decide in which way to act. They can decide to confine themselves to their own religion, their own members or also to go beyond. This happened in the early centuries of Christianity. The readiness of Christians to be open to all without distinction of race, creed, colour, class or gender attracted many to it and that was the reason for the phenomenal success of it. Of course there are people who have no religious commitment at all; how to reach out to them, for example people in East Germany or in the Czech Republic where atheism is still a big trend? But even here there are still traces of the religious past and presence of believing religious communities and this could lead to a better understanding of both religion and secularism.

So what is the future of faith, religion, Christianity? It is difficult to foretell the future. The future is capable of surprises, and the history of religions is no exception. While the thesis of the necessity and irreversibility of secularization needs to be rejected, confidence of a bold return of religion and “gods” in a post-secular society, too, is likely to remain an exaggerated hope. But here are some possible scenarios:

In the secular societies, at least in the case of Christianity, we see a trend to cross the confessional boundaries and live the faith; the communities are vibrant and they make effort to hand down their faith to their children. In many cases, their dialogue partners are the non-Christians. What is lost is the so-called “milieu Christianity” or closed communities that have no future in a pluralistic world.

Only a coming together of intense religiosity and religious tolerance can succeed.

Another trend is implicit religion or the recognition of diverse worldviews and forms of life that may not be explicitly religious by traditional standards but function very much like religion for the followers of these practices. The decline in official religious membership is countered by an increase in membership in these extra-Church religiosity and interest in new religious movements, New Age, occultism, spiritism, body cult, football cult, music cult, or even political movements. Even secularism is a religion, in this sense..

Then there is the globalization of Christianity. Hilaire Belloc's "Faith is Europe and Europe is the Faith" isn't true any more. Christianity and Islam continue to grow in many other parts of the world. The demographic change in the religious scene is a fact even though the interpretations of it differ.³⁷ In a global perspective, there is no reason to doubt the survival of Christianity. In fact, globally seen Christianity is experiencing one its greatest phases of expansion.³⁸ This is for Christianity a matter of importance. There are going to be tensions about the understanding of faith, practices of faith, rituals, moral teachings, etc. The relationship with Islam will be different in different parts of the world. The Pentecostal movement could weaken as a movement but it will leave its stamp on the mainline Christian Churches. The migration of Third World Christians and believers of other religions into the First World could have some impact on the way Christians understand themselves in these countries.

This last development shatters the myth that Europe is synonymous with Christianity. Even historically the thesis has been problematic. Europe was neither homogenously Christian nor was Christianity purely European. There was an African and Asian Christianity which was as vibrant as the European. Christianity was not a European religion and it is not now. This approach will have consequences for the intellectual understanding of Christianity and the transmission of the Christian faith. Globally Christian faith will be in competition with a diverse number of religions, and other secular, semi-secular and vaguely religious world views; this will call for the interpretation of the Christian faith afresh by people who are living in very diverse social and cultural conditions, like massive

poverty, oppression, discrimination and marginalization. This will free Christianity from its parochialism but it calls for great intellectual courage.

The dissolution of confessional milieus and finding the common roots in their faith is important for Christians confronted with a secular culture and other religions and this is possible through improving the ecumenical dialogue. Dialogue is of paramount importance and to neglect it would be perilous. The presence of implicit religion may be seen by many Christians as a simplistic religiosity, syncretism, loss of tradition, rejection of transcendence, narcissistic egocentrism and so on. On the other hand, this implicit religion can also be seen as the presence of a religious sensibility that calls for dialogue and deeper communication. To reject all these forms of religiosity as irrelevant and meaningless would be a mistake.³⁹ The very effort to understand them would lead to a new experience of one's own religion. There is no other way than the way of dialogue in the globalized and pluralistic world.

The Intellectual Challenges to Christianity

But the real challenges to Christianity are intellectual. In 1910, Ernst Troeltsch perceptively spoke about the future of Christianity in Europe.⁴⁰ He believed in a new vitality for a deeply reformed Christianity. As the biggest intellectual challenges before Christianity he named the growing lack of understanding of the four important pillars of the Christian religion: The ethic of love, the understanding of the human person, the communitarian cult, and the centrality of Jesus Christ. If we reformulate these challenges for a secularized and secularizing world, the challenges facing Christianity would be: the hegemony of values and cognitive assumptions which make the love ethic of Christianity increasingly unintelligible; a new understanding of human beings that rejects the traditional Christian understanding of persons as unique; an increasingly individualistic spirituality and the loss of the idea of transcendence without which the understanding of Jesus Christ as mediator between immanence and transcendence is impossible.

On all these four challenges a few words could be said.⁴¹ First, there is the intelligibility of the love ethic in a world that is

characterized by individualism. And there are two types of individualism. One is utilitarian individualism that judges life and relationships purely in terms of its utility for material profit, personal enjoyment, and therefore, life as basically making clever choices so that the maximum profit for oneself or one's country. The entire financial system of the world, its business philosophy, its banking system, and indeed, even the whole science of economics are dominated by this type of individualism. The crises of the last few years did offer some occasion for a rethink, but now, it is business as usual once again. A second type of individualism is the expressive one which maintains that the goal of life is self-realization, self expression of the individual and the satisfaction of one's emotional needs.⁴² Against these two types of individualism there is another individualism which looks at the welfare of all individuals, and that is what the Bible means by loving the neighbour as oneself, irrespective of one's group, class, religion, family and country. That is the core of Christian morality. But no one has answered the question, why human beings should be motivated to act in this way and not the other way, that is, in self interest. It is also not shown how one comes to understand the sufferings of others or how one can be sensitized to it. There are no rational arguments for these types of behaviour. Here it is a challenge to Christians to show to the other two forms of egocentric individualism their limits, and also to come out of a "group think" in morality where my love is limited to my own group or country, which is also common today, and to show that true morality is truly universal and it truly goes out to every human being. Then will Christianity be once again the religion of justice and love, the very important concepts for modern man. Christian faith in a God who loves humans without conditions is a motivation for us to love without conditions.

The second intellectual challenge is the understanding of personality. The attempt today is to explain the human person and his actions purely biologically. This reductive naturalism, which sees no difference between animal behaviour and human behaviour, rejects such concepts as freedom, symbolization, etc. This of course has the potential to oppose a religious worldview of man and his world and has consequences for Christianity and its understanding of the human. Christianity believes in the unique dignity of the human person

who is endowed with an immortal soul and is created in the image of God. Unfortunately, this exalted understanding of the human person did not prevent the Church from denying such fundamental values as democracy and human rights for centuries. These were largely the fruit of non-Christian or anti-Christian movements like the French Revolution. The idea of the person as created in the image of God, as unique, with dignity and inalienable rights is not what we see in the history of the Church with its brutal suppression of the rights of people in the name of truth, authority, obedience etc. This is a major secular criticism against Christianity. At the same time, who can deny that the precursor to the Russian revolution was led by a Christian priest or that the transformation of ancient Greco-Roman slavery into serfdom was a Christian achievement, or even that the modern abolitionists like Wilberforce in the U.K. and the Quakers in the U.S. were motivated by their Christian ideals? What is needed is a critical evaluation of Christianity in the light of its history. Only such an evaluation can pave the way for a real dialogue on this issue.

The third intellectual challenge concerns the understanding of spirituality. Modern man has an understanding of spirituality that is at odds with the Church and many other religions. Modern man has spiritual experiences where we least suspect. In art, aesthetics, in erotic love, in confrontation with existential crises like illness, death, or loss of loved ones. They seek after exotic spiritual experiences and rituals and spare no energy in the search of it. They think that spirituality is a very individual and personal affair. But the Church is nowhere in their scheme of things. The Church is even seen as a hindrance to spiritual development. Many people wonder why people still remain in the community of the Church at all, although they have many problems with the Church. They of course do not understand what the Church is, that it is not a club, that spirituality can have other forms as well. The core of the Church is a community of agape, love, a community of relationships which is not like a relationship in a family, clan or tribe. There is a spiritual experience that binds people in this community which cannot be substituted with self-certified worldviews and practices. The challenge is to make this community attractive again, as a place of spiritual experience that satisfies the individual and does justice to the community.

The next challenge is the concept of transcendence as understood by Judaism and Christianity, the total otherness of the divinity. Here there are two challenges. The first one is the specific Christian understanding of transcendence in the form of the Trinity and the Jewish and Islamic understanding of pure monotheism and the need for a dialogue which calls for great intellectual acumen; the other challenge is to answer the secular criticism of the idea of transcendence because it relativizes everything this-worldly and earthly as without lasting value. There is an enmity toward transcendence in philosophy and politics, in the twentieth century. This loss of transcendence, the idea of the holy, is a very serious challenge to Christianity and to religions. The history of the origin of this idea and its disappearance needs to be studied. The political and moral potential of this idea in the contemporary world in resisting political religions like the ones we experienced in National Socialism and Communism and in resisting radicalism, fanaticism and fundamentalism need to be explored.

One may wonder why the whole question of sexual morality is not seen as one of the serious intellectual challenges before the Church. It is not given much prominence here because if Christianity takes the love ethic seriously, most problems of sexual morality can be answered. When the law of love takes the backstage and questionable anthropological and natural law based legal prescriptions take the centre stage there will be problems. Then in sexuality procreation of children will be given a false priority over bodily expression of love. Then celibacy of priests will not be misunderstood as enmity towards sex but as liberative asceticism for the service of others.

Then there is another alleged challenge, the so-called dictatorship of relativism popularized by Pope Benedict XVI. Seen in the proper perspective, the number of people who profess an epistemological or moral relativism is small so that a dictatorship of this small group over the majority of human beings is not a tenable scenario. What is true is a pluralism of philosophical and epistemological positions which is the right of those people who choose to profess them. Surely there is competition among them and claim to truth. In this context it must be said that the Church

itself has the duty to critically analyze its own claims for truth. The multiplicity of epistemological processes and the possibility of variety in the articulation of religious experiences are facts of reality and Christianity has to accept these facts. The position of the Church in the nineteenth century that faith is equal to obedience to a set of doctrines of a highly institutional and authoritarian Church was a mistake. This sacralization of the institution instead of measuring it on the holiness of God cost the Church dearly. The Church has to face the challenges from competing ideologies and religions through the attractive power of the Good News of Jesus.

The fact is that Christianity with its solid intellectual and moral heritage of two millennia is well equipped, has the power and the vigour, to face all these challenges. Only it must give up the defensive approach to secularism and come out of its hiding. Sometimes the Church reminds us of the proverbial ostrich which buries its head in the sand and deludes itself that the world does not exist. It has the intellectual legacy and moral authority in spite of all its sins and failures. It must articulate its positions with conviction. Theology and philosophy are essential for such a new articulation but also other sciences, particularly, history and the social sciences. Without their help, the Church and her teaching will not be understood.

Was Europe ever homogenously Christian? No. Judaism was a continuous part of Europe. Islam was part of European history through its presence in the Iberian Peninsula and in the Balkans. In many parts of Northern and Eastern Europe pre-Christian practices were prevalent till the late Middle-Ages. The Christianization of some of the countries of Europe like Lithuania, took place only in the fourteenth century. And the different types of Christianity present in Europe -Orthodox, Protestant, Roman Catholic and other groups - show a story of heterogeneity and diversity. So we can speak of a Europe which is very plural from the beginning and it was not uniformly Christian, and Christianity was never European. In the enthusiasm for a Christian Occident it is even forgotten that Christianity is an Oriental religion and it was at home in all cultures of the world from the beginning. Unfortunately, this history has not been written.⁴³

Is Europe secular? This has to be answered with a yes, but with the proviso that this secularity has great regional and national variations.⁴⁴ Europe today is very secular in some countries, but this is not thorough and continuous. Even in very strongly secular countries, significant numbers of people belong to communities that live their religions and propagate it. There are others who share some of the religious beliefs of their respective communities and take part in rituals some time. There is on the one hand a dissolution of religious milieus but at the same time there are new regroupings, and the migration has added momentum to these regroupings. There is also a religious revitalization in some post-Communist countries. The case for a rejection of the thesis that Modernity and modernization lead essentially to secularization is a comfort for religions to regroup and be ready for convincing action. The New Evangelization is the Catholic answer to this call. But it is unlikely that even with that, the future of Europe will be Christian in the foreseeable future, but a multi-religious one. Its history will also be a history stamped by the interaction between believers and non-believers, but how this interaction will develop is difficult to say. But one thing can be said with certainty that the quality of this interaction will depend on the ability of both groups to give a fundamentally new value orientation to the world with its manifold problems. The vacuum in orientation is a world problem. People complain of an orientation jungle and a lack of taboos unprecedented in cultural history. Particularly the young must cope with a confusion of values the extent of which is impossible to estimate. Clear standards of right and wrong, good and evil, of the kind that were still being communicated by parents and schools, churches and sometimes even politicians are hardly recognizable any more. Nietzsche's man 'beyond good and evil' obligated only to his will to power has become a fatal reality not only in the horrors of the twentieth century but also in everyday life, in the ever more frequent and unprecedented scandals involving leading politicians and businessmen, clergy and the religious, in colossal corruption, in the egocentricity, consumerism, violence and xenophobia of so many people, young and old. If humankind on our planet is going to have any further guarantee of survival, there is urgent need for a universal basic consensus on humane convictions. This is a task both for religionists and secularists, Modernists and Postmodernists.

Notes:

1. Hans Küng, *Christianity. Essence, History, and Future*, New York, 1995, 666-765.
2. Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind*, New York, 1993, 282.
3. Ibid., 285-290.
4. There is a discussion with some of these authors from a theological standpoint in C. Geffre and J.P. Jossua (eds.), *The Debate on Modernity, Concilium*, 1992/6.
5. There is a portrait of him in Hans Küng, *Great Christian Thinkers*, New York, 1994, Chapter VII. "Karl Barth: Theology in Transition to Postmodernity."
6. "I look back on the twentieth century as the most terrible century in Western History." Isaiah Berlin, quoted in Eric Hobsbawm, *The New Century: Eric Hobsbawm in Conversation with Antonio Polito*, London, 2000, 162.
7. J-F. Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition. A Report on Knowledge*, Manchester, 1984; W. Welsch, *Unsere postmoderne Moderne*, Weinheim, 1984.
8. Hans Küng, *Christianity. Essence, History, and Future*, 771-772.
9. R. Spaemann, "Ende der Modernität", in *Moderne oder Postmoderne? Zur Signatur des gegenwärtigen Zeitalters*, ed. P. Koslowski, R. Spaemann and R. Löw, Weinheim, 1986, 19-40.
10. See for example, the Encyclical Letter of Pope Gregory XVI, *Mirari Vos* of 1832.
11. Harvey Cox, "The Myth of the Twentieth Century", *Harvard Divinity Bulletin*, 28: 2/3 (1999), 6-8.
12. Gregory Baum, "The Survival of the Sacred", *Concilium*, Volume 1, Number 9, 1973, 11-13.
13. Robert Wuthnow, *The Restructuring of American Religion*, Princeton, 1988.
14. See Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God*, Pennsylvania, 1994 for an analysis of the revivalism in the three Semitic religions.

15. Danah Zohar and Ian Marshall, *SQ. Connecting with our Spiritual Intelligence*, New York, 2000, 9.
16. See John H. Whittaker, "Religious Claims as Purpose Claims", *Philosophy of Religion*, 20 (1986), 17-30.
17. Isaac Padinjarekuttu, "Religions and Violence: Causes, Consequences, Remedies," *Jnanadeepa: Pune Journal of Religious Studies*, 5 (July, 2002), 15-16.
18. Paul Valery, "What Europe now needs is faith," *The Tablet*, 12 November 2005, 6.
19. *Gaudium et Spes* n. 55.
20. Hermann Lübbe, *Säkularisierung. Geschichte eines ideenpolitischen Begriffs*, Freiburg, 1965, Giacomo Marramao, *Die Säkularisierung der westlichen Welt*, Frankfurt/Main, 1996,
21. See Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, Chicago, 1994.
22. John L. Allen, *The Future Church*, Doubleday, New York, 61-62.
23. See Hans Joas, *Glaube Als Option*, Freiburg, Basel Wien, 2012, 29-34.
24. *New York Times*, 25.2.1968.
25. *A General Theory of Secularization*, Oxford, 1978, *On Secularization, Towards a Revised General Theory*, Aldershot, 2005, *The Future of Christianity. Reflections on Violence and Democracy, Religion and Secularization*, Farnheim, 2011.
26. Hans Joas, *Glaube als Option*, 2.
27. *Nostra aetate*, 1-2.
28. Hans Joas, *Braucht der Mensch Religion? Über Erfahrungen der Selbsttranszendenz*, Freiburg, 2004, 32-49; *Die Entstehung der Werte*, Frankfurt am Main, 1997.
29. Hans Joas, *Die Entstehung der Werte*, 58-86.
30. Küng *Christianity. Essence History, and Future*, 286. In the United States "population has increased by 41% since 1960, but violent crimes have increased by 560%, single mothers by 419%, divorces by 300%, children growing up in one-parent families by 300%, and

shootings are the most second most frequent cause of death after accidents.”

31. Walter Sinnott-Armstrong, *Morality without God?*, Oxford, 2009.
32. *Gesammelte Schriften*, bnd 2, Tübingen, 1912, 525-555.
33. Bronislaw Malinowski, *Sitte und Verbrechen bei den Naturvölkern*, Bern, 1948, Marshall Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics*, New York, 1972.
34. Owen Chadwick, *The Secularization of the European Mind in the 19th Century*, Cambridge, 1975, 159ff.
35. Hans Joas, *Glaube als Option*, 75-85.
36. See Karel Dobbelare, *Secularization. An Analysis at Three Levels*, 2002, 173 ff.
37. Pippa Norris/Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular. Religion and Politics Worldwide*, Cambridge, 2004.
38. Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom. The Coming of Global Christianity*, Oxford, 2004.
39. Franz-Xaver Kaufmann, “Zwischenräume und Wechselwirkungen. Der Verlust der Zentralperspektive und das Christentum”, in *Theologie und Glaube*, 96 (2006) 309-323.
40. “Die Zukunftsmöglichkeiten des Christentums”, *Logos* 1 (1910/11) 165-185.
41. Hans Joas, *Glaube als Option*, 203-218.
42. Robert Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart. Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Berkeley, 1985.
43. Philip Jenkins, *The Lost History of Christianity. The Thousand Year Golden Age of the Church in the Middle East, Africa and Asia*, Oxford, 2008.
44. Jose Casanova, *Die religiöse Situation in Europa*, in Hans Joas/Klaus Wiegandt (ed.) *Säkularisierung und die Weltreligionen*, pp. 322-357. Andrew Greeley, *Religion in Europe at the End of the Second Millennium*, New Brunswick/N.J. 2003, Bertelsmann Stiftung, ed., *Woran glaubt die Welt?* Gütersloh, 2009. Philip Jenkins, *God's Continent, Christianity, Islam, and Europe's Religious Crisis*, Oxford, 2007.