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CONFERENCE BY GILLES BOURQUIN
CAN MODERNITY SURVIVE WITHOUT RELIGION?

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Introduction

Hopefully I will not surprise you with my quick answer, in an extremely simple way and with few hesitations, to the question you asked me: “Can modernity survive without religion?” My answer is “no” and, to begin with, I will present you with some arguments that allow me to give such an answer.

However, in the second part of my speech, I will have to add to this answer an important statement: if I believe it true that modernity can neither totally eliminate the religious spirit nor totally do without the existing religions, on the other hand it alters significantly all historical religions that encounter the modern spirit. Thus we have a strong interaction between modernity and religions. Modernity, with its principle of individual freedom and the intimately linked principle of secularity, strongly limits the power of the established religions on individuals. On the other hand, the religious spirit prevents modernity to be totally accomplished, leading it, despite of itself, to remain for ever an unaccomplished project.

HUMAN CONDITION AND MODERN PROGRESS

Let us enter into the first part of the conference, with the answer to your question: “Can modernity survive without religion?” Modernity is a relatively young culture in the history of humanity. It started five centuries ago if we count from Renaissance, or three centuries if we count from the Enlightenment. Since it appeared, modernity has had a growing global influence, truly never reached until now. If it has imposed itself as a cultural reference, during colonialism, it appears today more like a sort of intercultural platform.

Therefore, here is my supposition: if a great majority of mankind's cultures have not renounced the need for religion but have rather found in them their foundation, I find it hard to give so much faith in modernity, as much as believing that this culture would provide mankind with the necessary resources to avoid totally the religious need.

My argumentation relies on a postulate which I will illustrate with a few historical situations: a constellation of factors do exist, within the human condition, which cause its religious component to be abiding. We must therefore define the conditions of the human existence that make the religious question inevitable, and show that modern culture does not succeed in overcoming these conditions.

The opposite thesis, which has been the key argument of radical modernity from the 19th century on, consisted in claiming that the modern progress was decisive enough to modify the human condition, to an extent that the modern man could do without religion, in comparison to the civilisations who came before him, who actually were inferiors status, less developed and less accomplished than modernity. Therefore, the challenge lies in the balance between the notions of human condition and modern progress.

The positive thesis, developed in the 19th century by the French philosopher Auguste Comte, presents the spiritual development of mankind in three phases. The theological or religious state, purely fictive, corresponds to the primitive vision of the world, ruled by supernatural powers. Then we enter an intermediary state, called metaphysical, during which the belief in supernatural beings is replaced by abstract concepts. The final state, scientific or positive, corresponds to modernity. Knowledge then leaves aside the fruitless search for primary causes and ultimate aims, to concentrate on observable and real facts, the only useful ones to the concrete life of modern society.

This ultra-optimistic mentality concerning the virtues of secularity and science has kept its credibility until the first half of the 20th century. The incredible inhumanities of both world wars have deeply damaged it. Since then, modernity has renounced presenting itself like such a massively promethean project. It has come back to its primary statement of individual freedom.

However, my argumentation cannot limit itself to showing the obsolescence of the positivist thesis. There are some very precise reasons why I think that modernity cannot survive without religion more than other cultures. Generally speaking, I suppose that modernity cannot entirely defeat the religious spirit for this religious spirit owns certain functions, of metaphysical order, which give answers to limitations of the human condition that modernity does not suppress. As a matter of fact, modernity does not propose an alternative to all fundamental problems which religion takes care of. I gather this problematics in five sorts of limitations to human life: limitation of duration, reason, justice, happiness and, in the end, limitation of meaning.

Limitation of lasting

Let us begin with the most trivial limitation. The modern man may well try, like the spirits of clans have done before him, to project himself in his descendants, he still remains individually mortal. Each individual experiences the limitations of his power: his life depends on forces independent from his will. This lack of power on one's own existence is, in my opinion the archetype of every religion, the chasing from Eden in Genesis 3, and modern secularity cannot pretend overcome this problematic. The limited section of human life, between birth and death, seems like being hanged between two "infinities" which generates permanently the question of origin, meaning and destiny.

Limitation of reason

This first existential limitation meets with the limitation of human knowledge. The philosophy of Enlightenment has tried to overcome the weakness of revealed religions, founded on the authority of historical traditions, asserting the principle of universal reason which has been set up in pure religion. The reason of Enlightenment was identified with the Supreme Being. Thus, the God in Theism merged the modern spirit, the rational one, and the religious spirit, the irrational one. Modern rationality expressed clearly what religions had imagined confusedly. But this too early try, too absolute, did not stand the test of time, and human reason fell back in its imperfection.

The critical rationalism of the German philosopher Emmanuel Kant, which concludes and goes beyond the spirit of Enlightenment, has strongly asserted the limitation of human reason which does not succeed in vanquishing the fundamental metaphysical ignorance. Reason, said Kant, can apprehend phenomena, the world as perceived by man, but it cannot apprehend noumena, the entity of the being, the world as it is seen by God. Modernity, after having tried to know God through reason, has come to recognize its incapacity to reach knowledge of absolute truth through theoretical reasoning.

Limitation of Justice

Thus was the door towards religion ajar again. Still to do: find the way to join modern thinking, conscious of the limitations of reason, with the religious spirit, which pretends touching the sacred. Kant proposed the line of ethics, which was in reality his first preoccupation. The worrying question for him was that of freedom: How come the human being, characterised with regard to animal through his conscience, his freedom and his ethical responsibility, remains however ruled by his selfish sensitivity, so that the historical world, including modernity, remains ruled by social injustices.

The limitation of human justice is our third theme. Kant comes to the conclusion, typically modern, that "be" and "having to be", the real world and the ideal world, never can be merged. In other words, the democratic society, founded on freedom for the individuals, guaranteed by the modern state, can never be identified with God's kingdom. Modern thinking thus establishes a very clear distinction between the social order, fundamentally secular, guarantor of individual freedom, and the religious order, divine, transcendental, sacred. But on another way, modernity admitted its moral imperfection, its inability to

build the perfect society, thus the necessity for the modern individual to keep in mind, in his concrete actions, a divine ideal guarantying the accomplishment of his ethical enterprises. At this stage, modernity and religion were both deeply separated and intimately united. Implicitly, modernity recognized the formal necessity of religion.

The limitation of happiness

The fourth limitation, the limitation of happiness, has been mostly discussed in the next century, with the birth of romanticism as opposed to the freezing rationalism of Enlightenment. In the 19th century, the industrialization of economical production caused the working condition to become deplorable, and inspired communism as a reaction to the indifference of the Christian bourgeoisie. One of the major expressions of the spirit in that time certainly was Darwin's theory who described the global existence like a struggle for life which generates permanently competition, selection and suffering.

Modernity, far from a self-understanding as ideal, recognized the tragedy of cosmos. The wound of reality became part of the consciousness to such an extent that it came to deny every single religious hope. It was the time of atheism. Schopenhauer has shown that man is dominated by an impulse for life, blind, far from any reason, impulse that Freud defines as unconsciousness, and Nietzsche as pride, will of power. Religion was definitely rejected, but giving birth to such an absolute despair that it bore in itself a religious germ, illustrated by the growing interest for oriental religions.

The limitation of meaning

Nevertheless, this disabused realism did not suppress the romantic amazement towards the beauty of life. Nature called back to an ideal reign, a Paradise one secretly believed to be present any place and any time. This modern version of the mystical spirit affirmed the meaning of life despite all its imperfections. Many people admitted that life in itself included a sacred value, an absolute signification, a meaning independent from any effective religion. Having reached this stage, modernity took on the tension between the absolute character of the sacred on the one hand, and the relative value of each historical religion on the other hand: Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam, other religions and their many ramifications, new compositions, sects, were only cultural variants of a common universal religious spirit. Culture, as vector of meaning, also limited the meaning in closing it in fixed forms.

In the 20th century, following the radical disillusion caused by the discovery of the Nazi horror, a radical work on the question of meaning imposed itself. The existentialist philosophy led once again the modern thinking to centre again on its permanent nucleus: the question about the meaning belongs to the individual, the irreducible objective of modernity consists in guarantying individual freedom, up against any totalitarian or millennium oriented temptation, whatever its inspiration may be, atheist, despotic or religious. At this point, secular modernity, far from destroying the religious spirit, believed to have a double paradoxical mission, both to guarantee its free expression and to prohibit its domination.

Intermediary synthesis: The persistence of the religious fact in modernity

At this point we can establish a first synthesis. Sometimes, we, as intellectuals, trained to deal with complex questions, can express simple conclusions: Modernity gives no final solution to the questions of death, ignorance, injustice, suffering and absurdity. Thus it cannot pretend to do without religion more than other civilisations have done. At the most, modernity can soften this problematic, but cannot resolve them entirely. Modern medicine can postpone or soften death, but not suppress it; science can increase knowledge, but not complete it; democracy can diminish injustice, giving equal rights to individuals, but it does not eradicate evil; modern life tends to ease daily sufferings, but we know as well that it creates new ones, more subtle, so that the question about meaning remains on the hot seat. From there on, it would be conceited for modernity to pretend doing without religion, as well as it would be conceited, for any religion, to pretend doing without the modern open-mindedness in asserting its total self-sufficiency in all fields of civilization.

Therefore, in modernity, the religion's scope is in no way closed. These questions remain open, and if I understand clearly the spirit of modern secularity, it does not pretend having the role of solving them, nor to ban their expression, but rather to regulate their social expansion, preventing that a religious answer wins over any other possible answer. In my opinion, modern secularity must be neither judge nor gravedigger to religion, rather its referee. When it sets itself up in a substitution religion, secularity abuses itself and exceeds its functions. The games for power, in the social area, between secular forces and religious institutions, will now be the theme of the second part of my speech.

EFFECTIVE RELIGIONS AND THE RELIGIOUS FUNCTION

There are many ways of defining religion. They can roughly be divided into two types. The factual definitions are based on concrete facts and consider religions as traditional human communities, characterized by the link they establish from authority between present reality and the higher levels of reality. These definitions describe thus better religions rather than religion in general, whereas the functional definitions try to define religion starting from its aim. You can notice that so far my presentation was only based on a functional definition of religion. My conception rested on the assumption that religion aims at making up for, possibly overcome, the limitations, the shortcomings, the weaknesses of this life, by creating a relationship with higher realities or beings.

It is obvious that this definition is not entirely satisfying, because religion has not got the only function of bridging existential gaps, but also of managing this life by settling down structuring beliefs, initiating a community life and providing ethical rules. This aspect is better taken into consideration by factual definitions, which are generally more restrictive. Some totalitarian regimes or some mass sports, for example, can take on some religious functions, without being, in purely factual terms, religious communities.

Hence if we raise your initial question again with examining now the religious institutions rather than the religious function, will the answer be different? Can modernity survive

without religions (in the plural)? In so far as historical religions take on the religious function, we have seen it is difficult to eradicate them completely, but in so far as these same religions consist in genuine powers, public authorities, they clash with secular authorities. Is it necessary to distinguish clearly the secular sphere from the religious one, as demanded by strict secularity, or else can we, on the contrary, admit these two spheres inevitably overlap, and that a religious influence always remains in the secular sphere?

Monotheism and modernity : some historical perspectives towards universalization

To better grasp the historical and political issues at stake in this modern question, we need to realize that it is the outcome of a process which started at the very core of the history of religions. We cannot separate too abruptly a pre-modern period – which would be dominated by religious powers – from a modern one coinciding with world secularization and the departure from religion.

Indeed monotheism itself can be understood as the first step towards world secularization. In comparison with surrounding polytheism – pagan religions which worship nature – or with mythology which projects political conflicts into the sacred sphere, monotheism projects the divine into an absolute here-after, into the sphere of the unspeakable and untouchable, and distances itself from any idol worship.

The monotheist idea of a unique god implicitly contains the project of replacing local religions – worshipping each competing gods – with a single universal religion referring to a higher and also more abstract God of the cosmos, thus making the world less religious and consequently more secular. Local sanctuaries are supposed to relate to a more universal sanctuary which can become celestial or inner, as in mysticism. Monotheism therefore opens, in its very posture, two fundamental historical processes which can be found under a slightly different form at the origin of modernity: universalization and interiorization, also called spiritualization.

In the Western world, it was during the Renaissance that the word religion was first used in the plural. In the Middle Ages *religio* used to refer exclusively to the Christian religion, the other religions were considered as *superstitio*, that is to say false religions. In the Christianity of the Middle-Ages, the unity of the western society was based on the adherence to the unique so-called universal, catholic, Church (catholic means universal), which used to establish a bridge between human hierarchy and god's power. We are aware of what happened not only to Jews in this system, namely ghettos but also to all faiths that could not be assimilated.

The Catholic theologian, Nicolas de Cruse, during the Renaissance, is the first one to use the word *religio* in the plural. The Pope put him in charge of the relationship with Islam. The effect of this mutation is considerable: growing modernity creates a new concept, that of «religions» in the plural, capable of gradually including a whole series of traditional authorities originally less comparable than what we think today. Are Islam and Judaism *religio* on the same level as Catholicism? And later, in the XIXth century, are Hinduism, Buddhism and Taoism, *religio* without any difficulty and in the same way as Christianity? Protestantism, for example, has often strongly resisted the fact of being considered as a *religio*. Karl Barth wished to define it as the only non-*religio*, distancing it from all religious systems.

We can feel this very well: the use of a common word to refer to different constellations of the human phenomenon of belief has had a universalizing effect. In a sharper manner, we could even talk of the gradual taming of religion in the hands of modernity. Just as monotheism centralizes and purifies cults, modernity tends to neutralize tensions between traditions by placing the various monotheisms and the other religions on the same footing, that of beliefs. The secular sphere tends to become a multicultural and inter-religious medium, a common ground rather than a specific one. To be placed together on the carousel of religions is not a very pleasant situation, but it is certainly better than deregulated wars for world domination. This configuration actually only matches the political structure of modern democracies, which place all the individuals on an equal footing in terms of rights, uniting the various political parties in a parliament chamber in charge of the nation's government.

Judaism et christianity

Etymologically, the word *religio* can derive from two Latin verbs: *relegere*, to re-read, and *religare*, to link. On the one hand *religio* links the present to the past, laying the foundation for the authority of a tradition, and on the other hand it links the earthly reality with the superhuman world thanks to a cult. In late Antiquity these two definitions of the word *religio* created a fierce debate. In this respect we can wonder how Judaism and Christianity can be called *religio*? Is it relevant to claim that Judaism, by promoting a Law transmitted by God as an ethical heritage for all mankind, puts more emphasis on the *relegere* dimension of *religio*? The constant reinterpretation (or rereading) of the Torah, through the Mishna, then through the Gemara, shaping together the Talmud, calls at each period a new commentary aiming at adapting the legal practice with the casuistic appropriate to its period. In Judaism universalization consists in grasping the Law transmitted to Israel as a blessing addressed to the entire mankind, without inferring some proselytism aiming at a conversion to Judaism.

Conversely Christianity insist more on the *religare* dimension of *religio*? There was – first informally with Jesus – then dogmatically with the part of the Christian community led by Paul the Apostle a break away from the interpretative tradition of the Law. Christianity, having spiritualized and interiorized the Law, has reduced it the commandment of universal love for God and men. In a sense it is true that the mysticism of union with God has overcome the strictly ethical dimension. But this approach is not thorough because with Paul the apostle at least, the demands of the Law are symbolically retained to emphasize man's inability to be justified before God, and hence the necessity of grace and forgiveness which can be obtained by means of faith (*religare*) and not by means of the Law (*relegere*).

Whereas Judaism has left open the interpretation of the Law, Christianity has been led to establish a final canon to its doctrine articulating closely theology, mysticism and ethics. As a consequence practicing the Law is no longer the essential part of *religio*, Christianity has become proselyte, with all the involved risks. The Judeo-Christian conflict got embittered with the question of Jesus' martyrdom and the accusation of deicide hurled at the Jews, going against the very principle of Christian theology which says that Christ had died for the salvation of all mankind..

The links between Judaism and Christianity which have been the object of us getting together here is a good example of the reconciliatory effect of modernity on religious conflicts. Indeed it is only with the advent of historical-critical (higher criticism) studies of the sacred texts in the XIXth century that the Judeo-Christian controversy started to abate. At the same period, the closing of ghettos contributed to open Judaism to secular society, giving birth, as in Christianity, to movements of liberal/reformed Judaism favorable to modernity. Jewish and Christian scholars started to read the gospels with clearing them from their prejudiced readings inherited from the Christian era and Jesus Jewishness appeared more clearly. Jules Isaac's conciliatory posture is also a legacy from this modern re-reading of history.

It is interesting to note that it is indeed the advent of the secular sphere, with the separation of Church from State in the Age of Enlightenment (especially during the French Revolution) that progressively made it possible for Judaism and Christianity to get closer. The historical study of the Scriptures served as the common basis. Yet when Judaism entered the secular life a new risk appeared at the same time, namely the risk of assimilation and loss of identity. As other religions, Judaism and Christianity waver today between particularistic and isolationist tendencies and more Universalist ones, trying to strike a balance between fundamentalist communitarianism and identity dissolution.

MODERNITY CHALLENGED BY POSTMODERNITY

We have stated in different ways along this conference that modern secularity doesn't aim at replacing authorities that offer meaningful values, but aims at making sure individual liberties are respected by placing the various religious offers side by side and promoting their dialogue. But we have no guarantee that this attempt will reach the expected result. The other, less optimistic version of the facts, is to think that modern secularity eventually dissolves all forms of faith into an indistinct entirely pragmatic and agnostic religiousness. The religious attitude that we call « worldly spirituality » would be the result of this slow erosion of secularized monotheist faith into a new form of postmodern polytheism. In the daily religiousness what is true would be replaced by what is useful and what is just by what is practical, so that this religion would wish gods to be at men's service, contrary to the monotheist ethics for which man is God's servant.

Modernity, after generating the secularization of monotheism, would lead to the return on a global scale to postmodern polytheism, in which each religion would be viewed as one particular expression of the universal religious spirit. Yet, one cannot but notice that this belief in an immanent world enchanted with a thousand gods better corresponds to oriental pantheist conceptions, which sanctify nature, than to Abrahamic monotheism which desacralizes nature by relating the divine to transcendence. We could be witnessing, at least in Europe, the end of the monotheist spirit and the return of pre-Christian religious forms of wisdom. This hypothesis would explain the growing favour encountered by Buddhism and the disaffection for Churches.

It is probable that today the modern model namely secularity acting like a prop to religious dialogue as well as the postmodern model that's is to say dissolution of the monotheist faith, explain in a complementary way the complexity of our religious situation. When I reconsider the general title of this conference; I suppose that secularity is both an opportunity and a peril for religions: it is not «or» but «and». The lesson we can draw from

this situation is twofold. On the one hand, we are led to observe that all religions revolve around a common given, namely the human condition. On the other hand, their neutralization is not possible because their differences are such that without considerable distortion, it is impossible to adhere intellectually to all the beliefs at the same time.

CONCLUSION

The lesson we can draw from this situation is twofold. On the one hand, we are led to observe that all religions revolve around a common given, namely the human condition. On the other hand, their neutralization is not possible because their differences are such that without considerable distortion, it is impossible to adhere intellectually to all the beliefs at the same time.

Let's start with a common field. Religious traditions brush with one another and some so-called transversal themes present in almost all religions emerge. The question of marriage, for example, affects the socio-cultural structure of the minimal reproductive cell of human species. Consequently it can be found in almost each religion under countless variations. Another example: circumcision is of course a ritual specific to Judaism, but as it affects a human aspect, it involves an area of reality on which everyone can have an opinion. In other words as they speak differently of subjects concerning commune, human life, religions are requested to discuss with one another if they want to live together. This first point seems inescapable to me and also inseparable from the second one which is the absence of a common core sufficient to easily federate the various religions. It is all very well to say that all religions refer to a higher and invisible reality, but mediations towards this reality differ so much from one religion to another that the search for a common denominator seems a very dodgy enterprise. It remains very difficult today to be Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, shamanist and an atheist at the same time.

What are the leads we can explore? Our roads are positioned between postmodern dissolution into agnosticism, on one side – which boils down to admitting that everything is true and false at the same time – and, on the other hand, communitarianism of the fundamentalist type, a kind which erects walls around a reassuring but enclosed truth, with the genuine risk of generating violence against everything which is perceived as foreign, impure and dangerous.

Among the potential solutions I would call intelligent, there is the acute awareness of possible interactions, without radical exclusion of other postures or confused adhesion either. Half-way between relativism and absolutism, there is what I would tend to call combinatory dogmatic theology. As a Christian, without denying my faith, I can consider meaningful the Jewish conception of the Law as an ethical project of blessing for mankind. I can acknowledge some proximity between the protestant faith and the Islamic faith. I can view as instructive some forms of Buddhist meditations which can help with Christian praying or act as mirrors to understand better my own faith. These transversal borrowings don't lead me either to deny my Christian faith or relativize everything, but to think that the God of the Bible has lavished his wisdom in several human cultures and granted a specific perspective to Abrahamic monotheisms.

I am now ready to conclude in the shape of a short summary of my main points: first I assumed that modernity cannot do without the religious function because it is incapable of

overcoming entirely the limitations of human life, namely death, ignorance, injustice, suffering and absurdity.

Then I specified that modernity, by asserting the freedom of the citizens and the secularity of the state, imposes some legal constraints on religious traditions and thus manages to bring about deep changes in their minds by injecting a liberal mentality which challenges some aspects of traditional orthodoxies.

Finally, I have shown that established religions and religious mentalities, in turns, continue into modernity and deeply transform the very notion of secularity by constantly questioning its programme without really succeeding in distancing itself from it. The different types of secularity and religions have a long future ahead of them.

Thank you for listening to me. Gilles Bourquin.