

Secularism and Depersonalization

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“If the West could only grasp the Orthodox concept of personhood, everything would change.” Elder Sophrony

The process of secularization in the 21st century West has come to mean the re-valuation of every aspect of life, culture and society according to the principles of utilitarian atheist materialism. The underlying issue is that it is a restructuring of the relationships between all aspects of society and its institutions; and particularly, the relationship of the individual to society, and even the very nature of personal identity. The nature of those relationships of the individual human being to the institutions within society, including the most intimate relationships of marriage and family, as well as community, church, employment and so forth, influence the very identity of a human being. Part of this issue of identity lies in the distinction between person and individual.

An individual is an anonymous subject, a single example of a species; whereas personhood is worked out in relationship with others, in family, work, church, and ultimately, in relationship to God. This `network of relationships in the social structure (and spiritual life) constitute the context for working out identity, and hence, personhood. Ultimately, one is both an individual and a person; however in secular materialist terms the specific identity of an individual is relatively unimportant; s/he is a producer and consumer, an individual with a particular set of skills or knowledge, but is ultimately interchangeable with other similar individuals. The person, on the other hand, is not interchangeable, but has a unique set of relationships that not only determine his identity, but makes him or her uniquely valuable in every aspect of life: in work, family, church. The process of secularization devalues the uniquely personal in multiple areas of life, making individuals interchangeable, and thus depersonalizes both social institutions and the individual persons within them, undermining identity and destroying civil society as a network of personal relationships.

1. What is Secularism?

Secularism is a process within our society that is working immense change on all levels, personal, cultural, commercial, political. It has radically changed the nature of the churches and their position within our society over just fifty years. It has been the source of a radical shift in values, norms, morality and ethics. Secularism is not new; it has been a force in Western society for centuries. Elements of it were at the heart of the Renaissance, empowered by Scholasticism and the Protestant Reformation; it blossomed in the “Enlightenment,” and took radical political form in the movements that produced the American, French, and Russian revolutions. Secular materialism was incarnate in the militantly atheist Communist regimes. But, in America in the 21st century, in its capitalist

form, its effects seem to have accelerated in multiple ways.

I believe it is fair to say that since the so-called Enlightenment, rationalism, faith and belief in Reason, became the dominant religion of the West, its principles applied to and integrating everything. Rationalism is the driving principle underlying secularism. On one level, in its more integrated state, where people retained a knowledge of God and sense of the sacred, rationalism made space for the Divine dimension of spiritual awareness. However, as it became ever more dominant, in the hands of those spiritually unaware, God and the super-rational dimensions of perception gradually were sidelined.

Thus, while ultimately rationalist deists, the Founding Fathers of America did have a respect for the sacred, though they definitively compartmentalized it into its own realm. With the growth of Marxism, Nietzsche's nihilism and other 19th century philosophies, in the context of the Industrial Revolution, came the reduction of a person to an individual economic unit, whether capitalist or socialist in context. These philosophies were built on the presupposition that there is no God, and nurtured the radical secularism of militant atheism. Rationalism conceptually reduced reality to what can be sensually and logically perceived and explained. Secular materialism represents the synthesis between the militant atheist refusal to acknowledge the spiritual realm, and the devaluation of individuals into economic units of production. Because human reason is unable to perceive God by itself, people lost faith in God the more they submitted to a rationalist reduction of reality, silencing their spiritual perception. This is part of the growth of faith in science, on one hand; and utilitarianism on the other. It is also the history of the ascent of individualism, and the progressive depersonalization of the culture. In the vain attempt to emphasize the individual, the personal dimension of life declines, both on the level of daily life, as well as on the societal plane, with the decline of private and civic life in favor of the ascendancy of the State.

Secularism is the process by which all elements and institutions within society lose their religious or spiritual meaning, and are re-evaluated and re-valued according to their economic utility. The fundamental underlying presupposition is atheism, or at least, that the spiritual and religious values, and the institutions which support them, are either meaningless or obsolete. Underlying this is an essentially Marxist economic determinism, which denies any spiritual component to reality, and regards it as delusion. Its presuppositions are thus, atheist, and utilitarian, reducing each element to its social value which is economic; and ultimately, it is purely rationalist, denying any reality to that which is not concrete, measurable and tangible.

Secularism is rooted in a strictly rationalist critique of society, of religion and its institutions, of the relationship between faith and society, and of faith itself. Strict rationalism allows for no divine element, no spiritual principles that are not rationally verifiable; but rather, it is the exaltation of human Reason, and believes itself able to comprehend and explain everything. It can be said that strict rationalism is an atheistic principle, excluding the involvement, if not the very existence, of God. Applied to social structures, this rationalist principle restructures society from the organic patterns of growth and development that created the old regimes, to a society designed on the basis

of rational principles—historically, on egalitarianism and democracy, later on socialist principles—restructuring the relationship of institutions as well as individuals. Perhaps more importantly, as an aspect of secularism, it seeks to separate the Church and all that is related to religion (the “irrational”) from social and political interaction. At best it makes religion a “private personal matter,” and at worst, persecutes it out of institutional existence.

When secular materialism is the guiding principle, it reduces the human being to an economic unit, a producer and consumer, and economic interaction become the defining set of relationships within a society. Even gender becomes irrelevant to one’s status as an individual. This creates a profound depersonalization, and the loss of much of private civil life. Churches are marginalized, at best. Both institutions and individuals are reduced to their economic value, according to strictly utilitarian principles. While individualism remains a defining value, with the breakdown of the other institutions that constitute society, what remains is a statist collectivism. While in the Soviet period this meant that the state owned all the means of production, in the late American period, the state-supported corporations, as well as the state itself, are the defining context of life for most people. This has become particularly apparent in many States in the US, where there are more people being supported by the government than working for a living. Within these massive organizations, one can only be a number.

Secularization is the process by which the life, activities and values of a culture, particularly those which are religiously based, become compartmentalized. It creates social and cultural change when the religiously based values, morality, social structures, and activities of a culture lose their religious meaning, and instead are regarded as independent spheres of life, governed by utilitarian and economic principles of value. On a personal level, secularization implements a basic principle that religion and religious values are left to behavior in church, and one’s private personal life; while a whole different set of values, mainly economic utility or gratification of passions, controls other activities, such as family, business, government, and social life. On a social level, secularization means the restriction of religious values and activities to a religious context; and hence, their exclusion from the public sector of business, civic life, government, and so forth. The individual level operates by social acceptance or rejection, what is deemed correct and moral behavior; the social level, ultimately through the legal system, and the judgment of what is politically correct. When religiously based values are socially deemed to be politically incorrect, they are relegated entirely to the personal sphere, and what is created is immense social and cultural pressure to discard those values, and conform to the new secular culture.

What this has led to within our culture and country, particularly in the past few years, is an increasing restriction by judicial and legislative means of the free exercise of religion, and the freedom to live with religiously determined morality and values. From the requirement of pro-abortion legislation in other countries as a criterion of US foreign aid; the requirement of religiously affiliated enterprises to offer insurance that requires payment for contraception and abortion, despite the fact that such offerings are contrary to the religious moral principles of the company; to the Government demands that gay couples be given the right of adoption, regardless of the moral principles of the adoption

agency (hence, several Catholic adoption agencies have closed); to the legitimation of gay “marriage” both in the civilian and military spheres, and the threat that clergy will be required to perform such rites upon demand, regardless of their religious or moral objections. The seeds of the restriction and persecution of religion in America have been sown.

On an individual level, secularism sets up a kind of cognitive dissonance in relation to morality. A person may have been raised with religiously based traditional morality, with belief in God and a moral compass judging behaviors right or wrong. On the other hand, secular society and the government prescribe the socially and legally accepted norms, and have deemed such religious values as socially intolerant and politically incorrect. A person can either accept the religious norms, and be labeled a “fundamentalist,” or fanatic by the general society; or he can conform to the new social norm, and assuage his conscience by telling himself that times are changing, and he should get with the program. Thus, under the barrage of atheist propaganda, his conscience is gradually silenced; and he will justify his behavior by proclaiming the irrelevancy of the old norms. Thus, the teaching of the church and its moral norms will fall on deaf ears; and this person will gradually either be lost to the Church or becomes a reformer to institute the progressive new norms. Thus is born the new Secularist, a fully rationalistic individual, dismissing religion and other “irrational” ideas as at best irrelevant nostalgia, and at worst, a danger to be obliterated.

There are abundant examples of this in every aspect of our culture: the universities which propagate militantly atheistic secular materialism, the news and entertainment media (is there a difference between the two?), the intolerance in the workplace for religious values and expression, and the forced tolerance and validation of homosexuality.

Personalism

One of the greatest intellectual contributions of Christianity, particularly the Greek Fathers, is the concept of personhood. It was worked out in the fourth and fifth centuries, in the synthesis of Greek philosophy and Christian theology, regarding the doctrines of the Trinity and the Incarnation. No other philosophical system has come to such a profound valuation of personhood, and the valuation of the uniqueness of each person individually.

The human person is a dynamic being, one who bears the image of God at his/her core as pure potential. That potential must be fulfilled according to the actualization of the abilities and gifts that are given to him, by bringing his/her will and activity into synergy with God. Spiritual maturation is a movement from individual to personhood, from image to likeness. Each person has innate gifts and talents, given by God. Bringing these gifts into use, developing the talents, and especially, entering into relationships of love with God and other people, is what brings fulfillment and happiness; and is indeed, blessedness and salvation. The person is by definition a being in relationship with God, in conscious communion; and in relationship to other people in community. Persons share the spiritual perception of one another—which is the very

definition of the highest form of love. The person defines him/herself, and is defined, by the network of relationships of which he or she is a part: family of origin, family by marriage, clan, church, community, tribe, nation. Personhood consists in both the external relationships of community, and the internal relationship with God. In short, personhood is the integration of the spiritual and rational consciousness, and thus, the integration of the whole person with others also so related.

Personhood is a fundamentally spiritual category; individuality is a concrete category: an individual is simply one of a group, which has little to do with a particular individual identity. Theologically, each person is of infinite value in the sight of God. On a more human level, personal identity draws its definition in relation to particular communities, the person being the nexus of a whole set of social and community relationships; but most importantly, the person is thereby an irreplaceable phenomenon of immense value. No one else can hold together the particular set of relationships, whose child he/she is, whom he is married to, who are her children, friends, colleagues; who are the people he/she is related to, and tied all of it together. On a yet deeper level, the particular person finds their deep identity in relation to God, and brings with him or herself that whole network of people held together in love and who share a spiritual bond. Each person has unique gifts, that are used to relate to those with whom he/she is in fellowship, for the particular community of individual persons: spouse, children, parents and extended family, colleagues, co-workers, church members... Personal fulfillment comes through using those gifts in the context of community, joining together with others, and being able to see the contribution one makes to the life of the whole. The community is enriched by each unique person, and life becomes more human.

There is another dimension: through this communion with God and others in love, a person reaches his or her personal potential or fulfillment. The fruit of that is the most radical freedom: the freedom to do the will of God, to do the Good. In true spiritual life, there is no constraint, no legalism, no moralism. The person achieves true freedom by overcoming enslavement to self, to ego, and to the habits and afflictive thoughts that prevent him from actualizing his abilities and thus, make his life miserable. The context for this must be total personal liberty: the freedom to do the will of God, and the liberty to sin. While there are, of course, limits on one's sinful behavior, laws and morality, real personal freedom is not attained by simply being obedient to the laws and rules. Rather it comes from the direct perception of God's will, the ability to discern the Good and Right, and the strength to do it. Legalism or moralism reduces life to subjection to external laws and rules; in this there is no freedom, only enslavement to one's perception of the rules, the guilt of having transgressed, and the morass of judgment of those whom one deems to have transgressed. Direct perception of the will of God is a profound state of spiritual freedom, nurtured through years of ascetic experience. However, the Law and morals are tutors to the will of God, and an essential requirement while a person grows into spiritual freedom is a state of liberty.

For many people, however, there is no acknowledgement of their spiritual consciousness, and they live purely according to the rational mind, according to the desires and needs of the body. This echoes the Orthodox understanding of the Fall as the obscuration of spiritual consciousness by enslavement to the psychological and carnal

levels of awareness. The Scriptures define this as “carnal” or “psychological” life; life according to the flesh, or according to the soul (Cf. 1 Cor. 2-3). Those trapped in their rational awareness, at least consciously, refuse to acknowledge the spiritual dimension of reality, the existence of God and spiritual beings, and of the Resurrection. On one hand, this can be a life of brutish self-gratification. This carnal level is understood by the Tradition as ultimate enslavement to oneself through the compulsive habits that keep one completely distracted by the flesh. This, I believe, is at the root of the overwhelming obsession of our culture with sex, and the rampant immorality of licentiousness.

On the other hand, the psychological level of the ego produces the realm of the sciences, arts, literature, politics... the “humanities”. The Tradition understands this ego-centered awareness also as enslavement to one’s own reason, if it is devoid of the authentic spiritual dimension. In this state of being there is no real freedom, only the compulsion to gratify one’s own desires, whether of the flesh or of the ego. In short, it is the state of autonomous individualism, which must be transcended for a mature personhood to emerge. It keeps a person trapped in the “tyranny of their own reasonings,” which can only be overcome by the awakening and nurturing of spiritual awareness.

Secularization keeps the members of society trapped on this level of the ego, as it denies the spiritual realm, and minimizes the institutions that bring forth personhood, especially religion. The pre-Industrial West was largely integrated by religious faith and the churches played an immense role in society. As the old society and its institutions changed with the “Enlightenment” and industrialization, so also the secular philosophies of the 19th century emerged, and still underlie the processes of secular materialism. As we have seen in the history of Russia, this process ends in the tyranny of the state, the persecution and obliteration of religious and other private institutions, and finally, in social collapse. Human beings were created to live as persons in community, a community of love with God and one another; not as anonymous interchangeable individuals pursuing their own gratification through production and consumption.

Depersonalization

Perhaps the most radical cultural shift in the West due to secularization is depersonalization: a shift to an individualism stripped of the context of relationship, with the complete relativization of personal identity, where people are defined as autonomous, anonymous and interchangeable individuals. This secular identity does not take into account age, gender, marital status, race, social or economic class, religion or any of the other factors that one is forbidden to discriminate against. On one hand, this has given people many opportunities previously closed to them because of these factors. On the other, it is these factors among others that are the very substance of personal, private life, and personal fulfillment, which are the substance of communal and social bonds. The very nature of relationship between individuals is no longer the spiritual bond of love and kinship; rather the individual relates to others mainly in terms of economics, producing and consuming goods and services, as those useful for gratifying his/her desires. The

person is reduced to an individual, valued only in terms of their skills, an interchangeable cog in a massive machine, or in relation to their buying power as a consumer.

On an economic level, the shift to individualism has two major contexts: labor and consumption. In regards to labor, if an individual has a particular skill set, s/he is qualified for certain kinds of jobs. The impersonal utilitarian ethic looks only to fill the job with the worker with the best skill set; and when that worker no longer performs well, or needs a new skill set, if that is not made available, he is fired and a new worker is found with the particular skill set. No consideration is given to the person of the worker: his obligations, his family, his mortgage, his life, nor the others that firing him/her will effect. Only getting the job done is what matters. While previously these latter considerations, along with the nature of the relationships the worker brought to the workplace, would be primary considerations, in the new climate the worker is an anonymous individual, simply a worker; and governed by constant fear of losing his job.

This reduction from interpersonal community to individualist isolation has tremendous psychological consequences. First comes a deep alienation, a loss of a stable referent for identity, and in its place an ever present competition to remain useful, to earn and spend. In the families in which there is very little personal interaction, each member doing their own thing, on their own device, with those they wish to be with, the relationships lose their value, and a person becomes adrift in the greater world. Work is totally alienating, with little or no concrete product, but rather an endless flow of paper, figures and equations. You become a worker filling a position, ever in fear of being replaced by someone more efficient, with better skills. People become trapped in a Kafka-esque hell of isolation and gratification, one dimensional and dark: nothing transcendent, nothing beautiful, nothing worth living for, without real value. No wonder there are so many suicides, so much depression. Relationships are engaged in without commitment, you can have sex with anyone, marry anyone, as long as it feels good. So it is no wonder that there is massive addiction to alcohol, drugs, pornography and sex, as a means of distracting oneself from the emotional and psychic pain of isolation, alienation and meaninglessness. Ultimately, this is evil.

This is a dire picture. Unfortunately, it was the state of millions of people in the 20th century, in Russia, China, America, Europe, etc. Short of social collapse and massive repentance, there is no way to turn around this process and to exorcise this demon. This is what happened in Russia: the utter collapse of the Soviet system, not only the centrally planned economy, but the social classes, institutions and government. This is precisely the road America is speeding along. Atheistic secular materialism is ultimately inhuman, and only can function so long before it succumbs to licentiousness, greed and corruption. Human beings can only function for so long before they rebel against the oppression of evil, and throw it off.

The secular prophets of the 19th and 20th centuries predicted the end of Western civilization, but I think would be surprised at how quickly American and European cultures succumbed to decadence. They also thought that Russia would be the fountainhead of the new emerging culture (Brander, Staring in to Chaos, p. 152). At the heart of this is the Orthodox Church, which endured brutal persecution, and was thereby

purified of those who had compromised with the world. The task of Russia now is to build a new society, structured and integrated by the spiritual and ascetic ethos of the Orthodox Church. This is the task of generations. However first Russia will need to free itself from the enticements of the West, and build its own society on its own terms. restoring the family, restoring social institutions and the Church.

Conclusion

Secularization, compartmentalization, is the process of the literal dis-integration of a culture. Traditional cultures developed a religious interpretation of every element of the cosmos, every activity and virtually every object. All the meanings of things and activities in a culture were somehow associated with its religion. The culture itself consists in the community constituted by the shared meanings of various aspects of life. When that breaks down, and those meanings are no longer shared by the culture, or the objects and activities lose their religious meanings, the very framework that holds the culture together evaporates. Only religion, the common religion of an entire culture, is powerful enough hold a culture or a nation together. The attempt to replace the religious meanings within a culture with other referents, such as economics, politics or some kind of philosophical ideology, will inevitably fail. It is not simply the religion, but the spiritual vision underlying the religion, that gives the meaning to life and all its components. A civilization can hold on for a while, but without a transcendent dimension to its culture, without hope, it cannot last.

Father Sophrony, of blessed memory, said that if the West could only comprehend the meaning of personhood, everything would be different. This concept, the spiritual vision of the ultimate value of each person, coming from the Christianity of the ancient Fathers, was the foundation of the Christian cultures of both East and West. Not only the personhood of the individual, but the concept of society as a whole network of relationships of unique and irreplaceable persons, lies at the core of the ideals of democracy and personal liberty. We are members of a single body; and of one another.

A society of atomized and alienated replaceable individual units, which has rejected the transcendent dimension that gave it unity, is doomed to fragmentation and disintegration from the inside out. Let us hope that our American, our Western culture, can recover its foundations in the Christian vision of the Catholic unity of persons as the Body of Christ.