Afterword: Holism, Individualism, Secularism

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The modern politics of meaning is archaic in the sense that it implies an obvious drift towards coherence and reconciliation with the world of things and, more specifically, a return to the origins, to the order of things in ancient civilizations. The main defence, therefore, against the rich web of symbols and beliefs that empower holism today is to distinguish the various degrees to which religion is entwined with the modes of cultural construction that derive from the ancients. In the midst of the process involving the unfolding of the new compositions of religion and polity today stands the obscure paradox that is already characteristic of the development of ancient civilizations.

In ancient Egypt, for example, the abstract transcendence that finds its expression in pure symbolic markers at the temple and its scripture tends to restrain the religious impact on social control to perennial celebrations and measures of public rites and sacred places. We could speak of the fact, together with Eric Voegelin (2002),¹ that there is a “ritual integration” of society. There is no antagonism between the flow of material life and symbolic order. The holism of the Ancients appears virtually to reduce any tension between individual social meaning and the coherent meaning of the whole. The ongoing debate on “public religion” appears to be closely associated with such a model of the Golden Age of the holism of ancient civilizations: world mastery through symbolic correspondence between public celebrations and inward piety.

The model would not be complete if we neglect the course of its own historical development. The purist “hidden” and esoteric symbolic code of the sacred, as it was publicly celebrated, declined and — over a very long period of time — personal piety emerged as integrating symbolic religion into the “house” and into the material life of the individual. In those times, it was the individual who took control of the moral order of things, virtually separate and apart from the world of public celebrations. In other words, due to the liberating and equalizing access to transcendence, there developed a materially overloaded, small world of ritual construction of meaning and of naturalized.²

Considering what Nock (1972) has called “Later Egyptian Piety”, we
can observe — building on this development — the rise of a “Protestant notion of distinguishing and even polarizing an interior ‘spirituality’ from the exterior devotions and images of traditional piety” (Frankfurter, 1998:5).

In Early Christianity, up to the time after Egypt became Muslim, this trend was further developed by integrating a given “coexistence of the pagan and Christian” interpretation of the “divine place” (ibid.:259). There was the rise of a kind of Zeitgeist that re-invented the powers of ancient gods. This depended on the re-inspiration of old temple locations through Christian pilgrimage, which was functional to material aspirations of good health, marketing and everyday needs (Volokhine, 1998:96).

When we reflect on this model of ancient religious development, the concept of civil religion restrained and administered for the function of a comprehensive institution of modern state become untenable. Western secularism, based on science and technology, individualism and mass society, appears to promote a new basis for religious meaning. Again, two corresponding models are at stake. On the one hand, as Salvatore tells us, religious fanaticism aimed at nation state-building and (Christian) cultural homogenization actually stood at the beginning of the modern secular turning point. On the other hand, as I wish to argue here, there is the growing density of individualism in mass society that purports religious solutions to the social in form of an underlying pattern for ritual needs of the self in modern life.

The problem of positioning and dialogue arises with respect to Islam and its growing global importance. Is there a European equation of the model of Andalus-Islam, to which Salvatore refers in his paper in this volume? Is there the overwhelming fear that religious tolerance would lead to its own defeat? Do we, instead, need a kind of new reconquista model, as the mass media often suggest today; that is, the “civil” religion that needs to restrain or even suppress Islam in order to be able to construct global cultural and political homogenization? How far is religious fanaticism today functional to the mobilization of a new modern type of state-centred violence? The metaphorical and terminological setting of the model of outward manifestation of inwardness was related to the long-ranging transpositions of Protestantism into a form of militant secularism in which the “secular turn”, that is, inner religion, remains the basis of claims for an endless pursuit of cultural homogenization. Within this process, individualism will impose a new state culture and a new generalized mode of governance. The point is that the model of Protestantism claims to be politically and state-neutral, while at the same time, it calls for the social attitudes of the individual to mobilize himself for civil campaigns forming the polity to defend its cultural achievements and a new “order” of individual sovereignty. While the state is claimed to be religiously neutral, in fact, it operates for the secular rationalization of religion and, where this is not possible, for a new type of public religious representation of its own.