



FIG.1

ZORAN TERZIC © 2007

TOO REAL (TO BE TRUE) – political logic and religious influence

1.PROFANATION

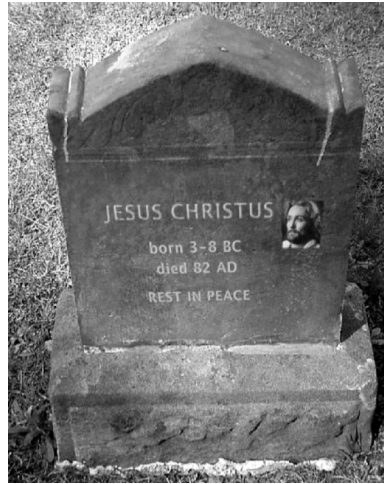
How do we understand the religious today? With *religious* I do not refer to religions but to the examination of the idea of religions and belief, which is analogous to the distinction between the political and politics (Mouffe, Badiou, Ranciere et al.), or the ontological and the ontic (Heidegger, Jaspers, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty et al.).

The examination of **religion** may be fundamental to believers, but the examination of the **religious** is fundamental, whether you are a believer or not. That means, everybody may turn out to be a fundamentalist if you understand to ask the right questions. But how do you ask the right questions?

Religious groups do not accept any random forms of divine embodiments outside their belief system, and arguably they are even afraid to prove God's earthly existence. A scientific proof that God exists would be the end of all religions. The problem with it is: A proof is too real, too profane, and therefor religiously it cannot be true.

In his biography Louis Bunuel tells a story about an alternative history of Christianity. In this novel Jesus does not die at the cross but manages to flee. Later he becomes a highly respected priest and an acclaimed intellectual. Jesus dies as a famous and very old wise man, and as the story goes, after 200 years he is completely forgotten...

FIG.2



The story sounds absurd because it is too real. Imagine a commemorative gravestone for an earthly Jesus with the cross missing. The representative of all humans on earth loses his axiomatic denotation and dies just for himself like everybody else does. This is not religious, it is human in a profane sense. Religion needs drama and paradoxes, and any alternative symbolic operation (in this case a de-representation) that plays with its "texture" (ideas, symbols, etc.) threatens its very existence. The following example should make this point lucid.

2. SUPER-GOD

On Sept 18th 2007 a US senator from Nebraska, filed an official lawsuit against God. Senator Chambers' aim behind this was to criticize the legal practice in the US, which is notorious for allowing too many frivolous lawsuits. However, the project has been publicly ridiculed. I noticed, for example, that a certain photograph circulated in the media that showed Chambers coincidentally in front of a big fan, depicting the white-bearded senator subtly as a "saint" or divine impersonator.



FIG.3

This polemic aside, it is interesting to follow the argument and the public perception of this event. Chambers argued that it was God who was solely responsible for worldwide disasters and conflicts. We know that the phrase "Act of God" (Höhere Gewalt) is a standard legal term in the US. And if it is legally an Act of God that Hurricanes or wars destroy entire populations then it is legitimate to sue the perpetrator. Chambers' action seeks therefore, "a permanent injunction ordering [God] to cease harmful activities and the making of terroristic threats."

To many observers it seemed absurd that God is judged by criteria of law, although parts of the law are based on acts of God. It is remarkable, though, that particularly those religious liberals who claim that it is absurd to sue God do not find it absurd to accept that the same God that cannot be sued is embodied in a cracker during catholic liturgy. Obviously, it is deemed more absurd to sue God than to eat God, because it accords to a belief system. And religious beliefs enable collectively what individually would be defined as idiosyncratic,



FIG.4

absurd, insane, artistic or criminal. For example, vaginal mutilation on little girls is criminal, but if you happen to be a member of a north-African village community the same act is considered a cultural or religious ritual.

The point I am getting at is that there is always a position that transcends this ultimate authority of grand meaning (which in this case is culture), that there is always a God beyond God. And that is a truly profane and atheist position. To be atheist means to be able to think beyond the ultimate limit without resorting to metaphysical deity.

Analogous, in Chambers' case God is subjected to judgement and sanction, and the profane district court is to take over the role of a Super-God.

What interests me here is the underlying semantic structure: Super-God stands for a profane authority that not only transcends human but divine existence as well (Fig.5: In this visual theorem I dyed



FIG.5

God's hair black to express profanity). From the perspective of Super-God human history is an entirely atheist history.

Evidently, the history of atheism shows that this profane authority may be the **primal father** as Freud puts it, a **primal tribe** as Nietzsche puts it, a **representation of utopian hope** as Bloch puts it, or **circumstances of the means of production** as Marx puts it. For Ernst Bloch the notion of God simply represented a utopian hope; it is a signifier for a future development that can be hoped but that cannot be known. Bloch says, everywhere where there is a hope there is a religion, too. Bloch is not a theist but he is religious, he steals God from monotheism and replaces its signifier with utopian hope. The Marxian approach focusses on the illusionist aspect of religion that distracts from the material underlying structure of historical/dialectical progress ("Opium of the masses.").

One other major atheist approach stems from Sigmund Freud: Here, God represents the primal father, a figure that points to circumstances of the far past. In *The Future of an Illusion* (1927) Freud describes religion as an illusionary convention that is to fulfill the „oldest, strongest, and most urgent wishes of mankind" (Ch. VI). Freud links religions to civilisational progress, which – according to him – explains some (at least the Judaeo-Christian) anthropomorph characteristics of the divine and its powerful influence on society.

„The primal father was the original image of God, the model on which later generations have shaped the figure of God. [...] This concurrent influence of past and present must give religion a truly incomparable wealth of power.“ (Ch.VII)

Freud's approach matches Friedrich Nietzsches earlier genealogical study of morality albeit Freud is more speculative and schematic than Nietzsche. Nietzsches idea is based on a primal hegemonial tribe ("blonde beasts") that conquers land, settles, and sets up the material and symbolic structure for future generations. His thesis is that this primal tribe is glorified by future generations until glorification turns into divination, until warriors, heroes, or founders are celebrated as Gods.

Atheist approaches such as Bloch's, Freud's, Marx' or Nietzsche's dwell on the premise that religious belief causes a temporal alienation of the human condition (Marx' term for this phenomenon was "Naturwüchsigkeit"). One is either captured by a glorious past, or one is imprisoned by one's own expectations and hopes. Expectam ergo sum. And this temporal ontology is perceived as "natural" and "normal". The problem is: while I hope or while I remember I am distracted from the profane now. Marx compared this distraction to the use of opium. The paradox of this religious "drug" is that it causes temporal alienation and at the same time promises to solve it, particularly by the promise of salvation.

In Indian Vendanta mysticism this alienation is addressed by the unity of Atman (soul) and Brahman (origin of the world), in Samkhya Yoga by the absolute retreat to one's soul, and in the Buddhist tradition (Mahayana and Zen Buddhism) temporal alienation is approached through the alienation of time itself.

However, in the Christian, Islamic or Hinduist form salvation lies beyond earthly life, whereas mainly Zen-Buddhist Mysticism addresses the here and now. Remember that, when he experienced his revelation, Buddha touched upon Nirvana but returned back to life, back to the Now. For that reason in my definition Zen is not really a religion – on the contrary. This figure of back-to-life is somewhat a formula for the profane as Agamben has described it. And this is how I see Super God. This real God behind the religious God is a profane authority, and we recognize it only once we have challenged it, once we challenge its underlying temporal structure – once we challenge his time and make it "our" time. Think of the book of Job, which in that regard could be read as the founding document of atheism, where unfortunate Job challenges and judges God and denies the divine meaning of his circumstances (Job has been called the first dissident in history).

But you can find another analogy for this temporal challenge or transcendence of the ultimate authority in gangster films, too, where at

the end of the movie the plot misleads the audience that the hero has finally caught the big boss of a mafia organization. It turns out, however, that the real boss, the real power behind all activities, is someone else. This may turn out to be the hero's best friend, a mad scientist, a high ranking politician, or a coincident (scientific experiment creates a monster), or like in *Angel Eyes* the protagonist (played by Mickey Rourke) himself.

From a Nietzschean perspective this means that it is not enough to kill God, because – like for the film hero – suddenly it turns out that religion is steered by other entirely profane forces, and that what we had killed was a God that no believer has ever believed in (this notion touches upon Wittgenstein's fideist idea that the believer's God and the God that the atheist rebukes are not identical. If the believer believed in a God that an atheist disapproves of, he/she would turn to an atheist, and vice versa if an atheist were to be confronted with a God that a believer believes in, he/she would turn into a believer, as well).

The trap for atheists is on one hand that they tend to misread the materialist core of religion, and on the other hand, that they unconsciously pervert their own position by first idealizing and then rebuking a religious dogma that they think is at the core of religion. And this is the point where the so called New Atheists (such as Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, or Daniel Dennett) fail. They intend to attack the logic of belief itself. But they do so from a vulgar materialist point of view, and thus they come to inconclusive claims about a scientific reality that they allegedly pretended to defend. Dawkins and his colleagues – independent of how just their cause is – thus have been compared to an atheist form of Medieval inquisition.

New Atheists idealize religion in order to be able to attack it from the front, but oversee the materialist and essentially atheist core of it. What does this mean? As Slavoj Žižek puts it in a recent lecture:

"What dies on the cross is not an earthly representative of a transcendence, what dies on the cross is God [himself] as this transcendent master of the universe...What dies is the idea of God as the ultimate guarantee of meaning."

The abandoned Jesus or the abandoned Job are thus the symbol for humankind that is referred to its crude materiality. What I am getting at is the structural lack of belief in this very concept of religion.

A conversation from the film "The Believer" between a Jewish prodigy turned-to-Neo-Nazi and his girlfriend makes this point very clear. They talk about God and the logic of Judaism, and the protagonist exclaims: "Judaism is not really about belief. It is not about believing things. It is about doing things." Now, "doing things" describes nothing but the sociopolitical impact or foundation of what we call belief systems. In this regard **belief is politics** as we look at the reasons and consequences of the religious rather than focusing on the religions as such. Although in above sentence solely Judaism is addressed I am convinced that it can be referred to religions in general. It is important to extract the religious from any claims about specific religions in order to understand the inner logic of their variability.

3.GOD STATISTICS

I introduce all of this to point out that on an ontological level there is always a surplus of explanations that one comes across once certain issues in regard to theoretical debates have come to a closure (Art after the end of art, history after the end of history, God after the end of God etc.). Just to remind you that Karl Marx concluded in 1844 that the critique of religion has been accomplished so far. However, we observe today that nothing has been accomplished and that religions references appear to dominate the public discourse.

It is officially estimated that less than 15% of the worldwide population identify with secular or non-theist views, whereas over 50% are associated to Islam or Christianity.

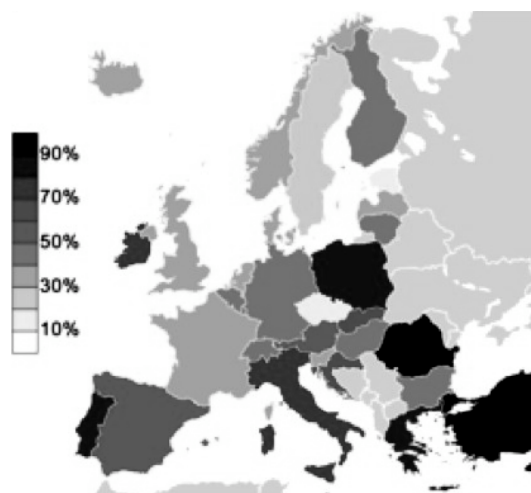


FIG.6

The above diagram indicates the percentage of people in EU-related countries who claimed to believe in God in 2005. Countries with Catholic, Orthodox, or Muslim majorities (Portugal, Italy, Ireland, Poland, Romania, Greece, Turkey) tend to poll highest.

Another diagram compares Germany and the US in regard to major beliefs. About 90% of all US citizens believe in God, of which more than 70% claim to be of Christian faith. The political aspect of this is

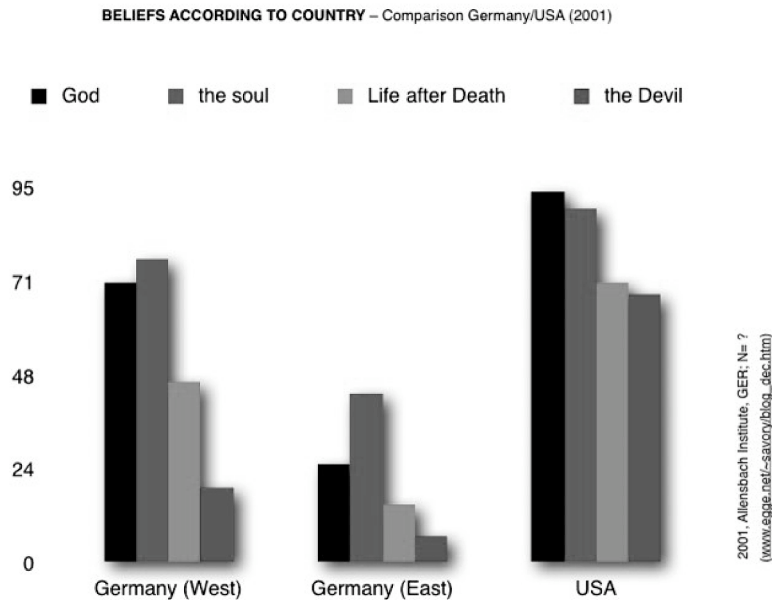


FIG.7

that about 68% of Americans would not vote for an atheist presidential candidate, which explains the current candidates' devotion to religious themes.

Generally though, there seems to be a tendency that people define their religious affiliation in an ethnic sense. Although 90% of Americans define themselves as believers surveys show that only 68% claim that “religious faith is important to [them]”. This means that the traditional connotation of religion has changed and that a growing number of people use religion for the sake of symbolic or political identity (think of the Balkans). Accordingly, the British Humanist Association finds that in the 2001 census 7 out of 10 people in the UK ticked the ‘Christian’ box, but, with church attendance now below 7% and less than 30% of marriages taking place in church, this figure was more about cultural identity than religious belief. The traditional connotation of religion has changed, and this scheme (that can be pinpointed down to an era since 1989 that we can call “postcommunist”) fits new political strategies, as well. Politics adopts religious themes. Think of the recent election campaign in the Ukraine, where religion was closely connected to the political strategies of most parties, of which some have held religious services led by priests. All-Ukrainian Hromada party held a vigil at the Virgin Mary statue across the street, with a prayer ceremony led by priests). *Our Ukraine-*

People's Self-Defense was sponsoring a park dedication for the late Pope John Paul II, a popular figure locally. The poster showed a large image of the pope, with the party's logo prominently displayed. Politicians like Yuliya Tymoshenko called on Ukrainians to "pray for Ukraine", and her party's website showed the slogan that appears on US paper money: "In God we trust".

However, this mixture of religion with politics isn't typical post-socialist curiosity. Just recently I learnt of a case from rural Bavaria from the election year of 2002, where a catholic bishop urged his community to vote against the Red-Green government and thus give absolution to the German nation and its theist ideals.

4.GOD POLITICS

What is the logic behind this structural change of religious application? What is its broader historical perspective? How did the role of the religious change? Did it change? I currently see three ways how the religious exerts influence on politics, and I hold that this scheme implies a sufficient historical explanation, as well.

(1) ***deontological regime***

(*"Thou shalt..."*, *"Vater Staat"*, *Leviathan*)

(2) ***transformative regime***

(*"false atheism"*, *secularization without profanation*)

(3) ***regime of tolerance***

(*"tolerant fundamentalists"*, *"Love Your neighbour"*)

The **first** form is the traditional authoritarian and patriarchal influence that we know typologically from the ten commandments. A patriarchal figure tells You what you ought to do or what you are not to do. This primal father protects you if you obey and punishes you, if you don't. All your actions in the real world are somehow influenced and intimidated by this primal commandment. I call this the deontological regime.

The **second** form of religious influence is a transplant of religious attitude or content into the political arena in the way Carl Schmitt analyzed it by claiming that formerly religious subjects become subjects of modern politics. So, for example, in Turkey today you have secular nationalists and you have nationalist Islamists. However, both accord to religious belief systems: an atheistic nationalist is a religious person although he doesn't believe in God. I call this a transformative

regime, because it secularizes the form but keeps the power structure – the content of power – intact.

The **third** form of religious influence is the paradigm of tolerance and religious freedom. I call the proponents of this approach the "tolerant fundamentalists". In western societies this group makes up the absolute majority of believers (ethnic religion/ religion of ethnicity). Their paradigm of tolerance opposes the authoritarian approach. They fiercely oppose every religious notion that violates human rights or gender equality etc. Instead they pick out from the Koran and the Bible etc. what is compatible to liberal democracy, propagate these good notions as the real belief and stick to their pure form of religion. This pure liberal and even leftist religion is peaceful, tolerant, anti-neoliberal etc. and the best part of it is: it cannot be criticized. If you criticize it you criticize simultaneously liberal democracy or solidarity as such. This religious approach attaches itself to the liberal dogma as if religion and democracy were natural historical partners. I call this the regime of tolerance.

All three regimes describe certain aspects of what I define as "the religious" or as "God Politics". I claim that the religious (as opposed to actual religions) is something that is or has been untouched by the process of secularization. You can read this list historically:

(1) Since Jean Bodin the patriarchal family provides the blue print for the traditional monarchy: Father as king/patriarch and family members as the populous.

(2) Since the French Revolution the religious God transforms into the Nation God; it is not the primal father but the primal historical subject in the Hegelian sense that perpetuates a political religion.

(3) And finally, in our era of consensual democracies the transformative spirit of the religious turns to tolerance (with its merchandising of global awareness, multiculturalism, ecology etc.). It kills the patriarchal God and replaces it with a democratic God that harms nobody. Instead of acknowledging the profane turn of any critique of the divine (such as the God lawsuit above) the liberal believers create yet another unapproachable sphere that is cleaned from fundamentalists, extremists etc. and that represents the "real" belief, "real" God, "real" nation, "real" civil society etc. (the real nation is the patriot's dream of a nation cleansed of nationalists, proponents of the real belief cleanse their religion from fundamentalists and so on). And this ide-

ology of cleanness tunes in perfectly to the mainstream corpus of so-called Third-Way post-politics (Mouffe), all-inclusive-politics. I claim however, that this supposedly tolerant position is the fundamentalist one.

5.CONCLUSION

I gave an outline how the influence of belief systems on societal systems “functions” or how it possibly developed. My explanation implies that an urge for belief is intrinsic to society (albeit not in an essentialist sense) and that this urge is channeled according to the historical and political circumstances. If the church loses its traditional political role due to secularization the role of the religious is transferred to other spheres. In the 19. century the nation becomes the bearer of the religious, and in the 21st century the democratic paradigm of tolerance exercises what churches have exercised for centuries: support those within the paradigm, and punish those outside it (“fundamentalists”, “extremists”, “radicals” etc.). I described particularly this mode as tolerant fundamentalist. The new democratic God of tolerance is based on a transcendent belief as the angry biblical God Jahwe is. It is the same ugly face, only that it smiles, because we democrats agreed that it has to smile, because we democrats are for smile and peace, and therefore we sanction and bomb everybody who does not smile like our God of tolerance.

Historically, at any given time a representation of belief is sustained – according to the popular (albeit false) saying that “everybody needs something to believe in”. Instead, I claim that belief is not intrinsic to humans (rather intrinsic to society) but that the historical influence of religions also influenced our interpretations of our past and thus of the condition humaine. *People believe that they believe.* We made ourselves believe that we need something to believe in, but we forgot that our natural notion of “the human” is upmost artificial and historically contingent.

What follows from these premises is that it is not enough to be an atheist if you consider yourself a non-believer. The enemy is not just the church but national ideology, cultural ideology and the ideology of mutual tolerance – in short: every notion that supports what some evolutionary anthropologists call “parochial altruism” (offer yourself for your group/nation/culture/religion and sanction outsiders wherever you can). In that broad perspective the enemy becomes primarily yourself. That means, to support the separation of church and state and other related political demands is noble but never sufficient. You have to separate the religious from within (in state, mind, history and

society). There is no real secularization without profanation, i.e. the permanent possibility that any ultimate authority can be transcended or challenged by subjecting it to the public discourse (such as in the case of the God lawsuit). The so-called New Atheists fail to recognize this, because they ignore the paradoxes and the ambiguity of ideology. We should think of a line in the film "The Believer" that says: "God commands whether he exists or not."

That is the core of the religious.

What is to do? Think of this old joke about a stranded Jewish community on a deserted island. They are found after some years, and asked why they have built two synagogues instead of just one. One settler answers: "One synagogue is to pray in, the other one is to never step a foot in it."

There is no point to tear down churches but rather to build "anti-churches". So, metaphorically speaking, for each church that is build let us build another church to never step a foot in – it is a negation made out of stone or out of – if you will – pixels. Imagine a society where citizens would live in numerous newly built churches ("My home is my church"): nobody would believe in anything. So, why not flood society with churches and beliefs?

(To give an example I have installed a "church of non-believers" in the internet: www.unkirche.de , but there are many other "church" projects on the web)

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