

# A Secularism of the Royal Doors:

## Towards an Orthodox Christian Theology of Secularism

*stabant orantes primi transmittere cursum/*

*tendebantque manus ripae ulterioris amore*

(*Aeneid*, 6.313–314)

BRANDON GALLAHER

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### A Completely Religionless Time?

In a famous passage, Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1906–45) mused that society was moving towards a “completely religionless time.” This would, he wrote, prove revolutionary for Christianity as a religion, for it would have to disrobe itself from its religious garments, which include “the temporally conditioned presuppositions of metaphysics” and “inwardness” and envision a means by which Christ can become the Lord of the “religionless.” Such a “religionless Christianity” would require a re-meaning of all that formally had been taken for granted as established Christian realities—Church, community, the homily, the liturgy, the Christian life and, above all God Himself. “How do we speak”, he asked, “in a ‘secular’ way about ‘God’?”<sup>1</sup> This is strong and beautiful stuff. The small problem it is that it is false.

Religion has simply not disappeared but actually grown in form, diversity and strength of voice in all the major world religions, including Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Christianity is expected to grow globally from 2.2 billion in 2010 to 2.9 billion in 2050 (31.4%). Nearly one in three people worldwide will be Christian in 2050.<sup>3</sup> However, as has been often noted, and here one remembers Bonhoeffer, Christianity is declining in Western Europe.<sup>4</sup> The greatest growth of Christianity tends to be in the Evangelical Protestant churches (Charismatic Christianity and Pentecostalism) as found mostly in Africa and Asia,<sup>5</sup> and, it should be noted, the share of the overall Christian population is decreasing for the Orthodox.<sup>6</sup> With the

result of increased migration from the developing world, especially amongst Muslims (whose numbers are projected to increase by 73% by 2050),<sup>7</sup> liberal democracies in the West have had to face in recent years how to incorporate religious voices in the public sphere. The end of Christendom has not meant the end of religion worldwide, let alone religiosity, but its post-modern metamorphosis.

## **The Western Exceptional Case**

Yet Bonhoeffer was not far wrong in arguing for the coming of a “religionless time” if we look at the decline of Christendom or a culturally hegemonic Christianity in the West, that is, the rise of “secularization” in all its complexities. In some parts of Western Europe and North America the public sphere has indeed developed in a globally exceptional fashion with the marginalization of organized religion. For example, in Canada, in the 2011 National Household Survey, 24% of the population reported no religion. In British Columbia, where I was raised, 44.1% of the population said they had no religious affiliation. This was the second highest level in the country after the Yukon (49.9%).<sup>8</sup> It is no surprise, therefore, that the public square (media, government, schools and universities, local community centers etc.) in the Greater Vancouver area can often seem extremely hostile to organized religion, especially, Christianity. Religion in this context is very much a private matter and those who are religious are considered idiosyncratic, if not downright odd.

I want to propose in this sort of late modern context, the minority context in a global perspective, that what is called for theologically is neither another secular post-death-of-God account of religion.<sup>9</sup> Nor is what is needed for God-talk another account of how the secular realm hides a covert and corrosive political theology requiring in response a radically orthodox Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Rather, what may contribute to the upbuilding of the Church’s present witness in this religionless, secular and Western context is a positive account of the theological status of the secular, secularization and secularism.

My aim is not to develop a practical model for “Orthodox Christian nations” and “cultures” which might be “helpful” in articulating issues such as particular state-church models, the presence of the church in a secular cultural context and so forth. My object is actually quite “impractical.” Instead this study will sketch a positive theological vision of the secular from the basis of the Orthodox Christian tradition, that is, it will envision an Orthodox Christian theology of secularism that might then broadly inspire a new proactive approach in Orthodox theology to the phenomenon of secularism in a context which mostly rejects it completely as a Western aberration. After the Holy and Great Council of Crete of June 2016, there is the need in Orthodoxy to develop a positive and creative response to Western secular culture. Crete was, arguably, the beginning of

an attempt to articulate an Orthodox world after Byzantium but firmly enmeshed within Western culture. It was the first universal conciliar attempt to acknowledge that Orthodoxy now finds itself in a new modern western order, the context of secularism, that it has not created but which it now must respond to creatively.<sup>11</sup> While retaining its pre-modern liturgical and spiritual consciousness, its salt and light, its difference, Orthodoxy is called as a religious and civilizational minority to envision how it may witness in its majority secular Western context. This is the challenge and necessity of articulating an Orthodox Christian theology of secularism.<sup>12</sup>

## **Orthodox Opposition to Secularism**

Modern Orthodox theology has a tradition of anti-secularism. In recent years, it has become known for its opposition to secularism as a political ideology. Rowan Williams has called such an ideology, found in France and Kemalist Turkey, “programmatically secularism.” With programmatically secularism, the public sphere is seen as a strictly patrolled religionless-free-space. The aim of the creation of this ostensibly “neutral” and “universal” secular sphere is to create a “clear public loyalty to the state unclouded by private convictions” which are “rigorously banned” from the public arena. Williams distinguishes this from “procedural secularism”, which can take many different forms (see below), where a neutral state oversees a wide variety of religious communities and only intervenes to keep the peace.<sup>13</sup>

The Russian Church, seen in the speeches and writings of Patriarch Kirill (Gundiaev) of Moscow (b.1946) and his assistant Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev) of Volokolamsk (b.1966), vigorously has opposed programmatically secularism, which it tends to collapse with procedural secularism, usually described as “militant.” Other placeholders for secularism are “liberalism” and “the West.” Various “post-secular conflicts” abound<sup>14</sup> from nurses being told not to wear crosses to Christian run bakeries refusing to make pro-gay marriage cakes. The Moscow Patriarchate is well known in the Western media precisely for such conflicts from the Pussy Riot affair to opposition to gay rights. In reaction to secularism/the West, Patriarch Kirill, in particular, has articulated a form of neo-conservatism. It is a quasi-phyletist, anti-Western and pro-family values state-church ideology, generally termed “*Russkii Mir*” (the Russian World).<sup>15</sup> What we see, arguably, with *Russkii Mir*’ is programmatically secularism turned on its head: an ever greater union between the Russian state and church with ecclesial forms filled with Soviet content; a near collapse of Russian ethnic, national and even civic identity with Orthodox identity; and the largely quixotic attempt by the Orthodox Church through education and catechesis to turn a secular post-Soviet culture into an idealized “Holy Rus’.”<sup>17</sup> Russian Orthodoxy has ironically been secularized by

its own self-nationalization. One is reminded of the nationalization of Shinto in post-1868 Japan with the creation of the state ideology of “Shinto secular.”<sup>18</sup>

Yet there is another form of Orthodox anti-secularism, which is less well known in the West: “spiritual” or “theological” anti-secularism. Some of the Russian Church’s animus towards political secularism is simply that it subscribes to this deeper anti-secularist critique. We see this position in the documents of the recent Council of Crete. Secularism is said to be an “ideology” that seeks “the full autonomy of man from Christ and the spiritual influence of the Church”, whose “conservatism” is said to oppose all progress.<sup>20</sup>

In this context, secularism is understood as an anti-theological theology that splits off the sacred from the secular by cutting humanity’s links to Christ and the Church. Humanity and the world are meaningful only on their own terms with the transcendent ruled out entirely. Orthodoxy objects, as Alexander Schmemmann (1921–83) argued, to the secular sphere being given such a false autonomy. Life and the world are only meaningful by symbolically manifesting the divine, what is beyond itself and elsewhere. The secular, then, is secular only as also sacred because it is the “sacrament of the divine presence” who is Jesus Christ, life in all its fullness (Jn. 10:10). Christ is only known in and through *this* world and in *this* life.<sup>21</sup> When one portions off a material world from a spiritual and religious realm then one loses what is the basic priestly vocation of humanity which is to transform the world into life in God by filling it with meaning and spirit.<sup>22</sup> To carve out of the world a secular sphere (being *merely* material and profane) that is said to be wholly distinct from the religious (as the spiritual and the sacred) is, for the Orthodox, a “monstrous lie.”<sup>23</sup> Christ is the life of that world, and through His Spirit He is its secret sanctifying power (Col. 3:3), the “force that through the green fuse drives the flower,”<sup>24</sup> both blessing and baneing. With secularism, instead of the Church bringing together humanity and creation into one Body, with Christ as its head and focus of worship, as symbolized in the Eucharist, a secular sphere is strictly delineated from the sacred with the erection of its own false secular idols as centers of unity. The world is then depersonalized, being made into an object whose meaning is found only within itself. Secularism is, quite simply, the “negation of worship” as it rejects the sacramentality of creation.<sup>25</sup>

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## An Orthodox Christian Theology of Secularism?

Orthodox anti-secularism, however, does not take into account the plurality of modernity and secularism. In this way, it misses the opportunity of theologically reenvisioning secularism with precisely the sort of sacramental

vision it espouses. Contemporary sociology of religion has now largely abandoned older totalizing narratives of modernity that argued that religions inevitably wither on the vine once societies enter into the full growth of the modern (“the disenchantment of the world” (Weber)) and are emancipated from magical thinking.<sup>26</sup> There exist, as Schmucl Eisenstadt (1923–2010) wrote, “multiple modernities” with “multiple institutional and ideological patterns” moved forward by multiple different social actors pursuing “different programs of modernity, holding very different views on what makes societies modern.”<sup>27</sup> But if there are multiple forms of the modern then there must also be multiple forms of the secular, secularization and secularism, just as we saw earlier with procedural secularism, from the United States, Turkey and Italy to the United Kingdom, Indonesia and Germany with different constellations and relationships between separation of Church and state and forms of the differentiation of law, morality and religion.<sup>28</sup>

Here, in this post-secular context of extreme secular hybridity, enters a theological opportunity for Orthodoxy. One might argue for the plausibility of hypothesizing an Orthodox Christian theology secularism, and with it a new form of Orthodox modernity, just as Shinto, Buddhism and Islam may play a role in the public life of the secular nations of Japan, Laos and Indonesia, respectively. An Orthodox Christian theology of secularism might see the secular and the sacred, the Church and the world, as existing in a creative tension, in Bonhoeffer’s phrase, “a polemical unity.”<sup>29</sup> In such a unity, and here one is reminded of the sacramental vision we described in articulating Orthodox theological anti-secularism, the Church lives in, by and through the world in which it dwells as its home and the world through it. The Church itself founds, undergirds and then, by kenotically withdrawing to remain present, sets free the world to be itself and develop independently in the secular space, which is then far from being “neutral.”

## **Dialectical Sacramentality**

Any Orthodox Christian theological vision of secularism if it is to be sacramental must be dialectical or polar in its structure, for the secular as a reality only lives in and by the sacred and the sacred depends on the world in which God has given Himself up in Christ. Both realities, therefore, live in, by and through one another and imply the other in a perpetual creative tension, a unity-in-difference that generates both cultural creativity and the mission of the Church in witnessing in the world to Christ. Yet one should neither obliterate the difference between the two, so that we must argue for the secular and the sacred remaining unconfused and in some fundamental sense unchanged insofar as they retain their identities and do not become incommensurable, but nor should they in this way be divisible or in some sense separable from one another.<sup>30</sup>

Richard Kearney (b.1954) argues for an approach to the transcendent and belief whereby one can believe again (lit. *ana-theism*) after the death of God, after Auschwitz, as it were, through a continuous movement that includes a critical and purgative atheism as an integral part of theism which is “second faith beyond faith.” One never chooses once to believe in God but again and again as we speak in His name and ask Him, like Christ, why He has abandoned us.<sup>31</sup> In this movement of second faith, one is encountered by God in the form of the stranger,<sup>32</sup> Kearney tracing this movement in a variety of world religions, and one is forced to enter into an existential wager as to whether one will offer the stranger divine hospitality and change one’s life or remain unchanged in hostility. This stranger, paradoxically, depends on us, for God to be in the world He needs us to offer Him welcome, requires our openness to host Him and indeed save Him. God, in His freedom, chooses to be God for us as a God in need.<sup>33</sup> God, then, is not the remote omnipotent deity of theodicy, Pascal’s God of the philosophers, the God of “ontotheology” and metaphysics, but God on the cross, God on trial and hung by His creation. This is not simply about God but about how we live with difference. More concretely, it is about how we live with moral and religious diversity (“reasonable accommodation”) and how the ethical and political post-secular conflicts that arise from such difference might be managed in a secular liberal society.<sup>34</sup> What Kearney shows us is that you cannot manage difference effectively in the long run unless you allow for the spiritual possibility that the Other is one’s life. Simply keeping people from rhetorical and physical violence in a society is not enough. One needs, as Gianni Vattimo (b.1936) says in speaking of Derrida’s thought, to offer hospitality to the guest by putting oneself in his hands, entrusting oneself to him and in this way acknowledging that when we speak to him applying the principle of charity, the Christian to the Muslim, the atheist to the Hindu, that he may be right.<sup>35</sup>

Since God is God for us only as He gives Himself to us in the world we come to see, Kearney argues, that the “sacred is *in* the world but not *of* the world” for the “sacred inhabits the secular” but “it is not identical with it.”<sup>36</sup> Secular and sacred exist in a “fertile” or “fecund” tension that avoids a dualism that opposes them and a monism that collapses one into the other—exclusive humanism or Byzantium. This leads Kearney to contend for a “sacred secularity” or, as it were, a secular sacrality that is a two-way process of sacralizing the secular, which is ever supplemented by the secularization of the sacred. One cannot return to God letting Him enter in unless one first has abandoned Him like Peter who betrayed him thrice. And the God returned to is not the God of death, the God of metaphysics, but the incarnate God of life given in the face of the stranger. In such a vision of secularism, he argues, we reinsert the hyphen back between the secular and the sacred.<sup>37</sup> We approach secularism as sacramental. Kearney argues that anatheism avoids a sterile atheism that wishes to purge God from the world rejecting the sacred in favor of a narrow understanding of the secular. This is the

vision of secularism of the New Atheists. He also swears off the religious fundamentalism of an Osama bin Laden or a Jimmy Swaggart that would obliterate the secular in favor of the sacred. Lastly, he rejects pantheism, say the New Age, that collapses the polarity of secular and sacred into one monism so denying any distinction between the transcendent and the immanent, which forestalls true otherness:

Anatheism does not say the sacred *is* the secular; it says it is *in* the secular, *through* the secular, *toward* the secular. I would even go so far as to say the sacred is inseparable from the secular, while remaining distinct. Anatheism speaks of “interanimation” between the sacred and the secular but not of a fusion or confusion. They are inextricably interconnected but never the *same* thing.<sup>38</sup>

But this renewed understanding of secularism as a dialectic of secular and sacred, of the secular in the sacred and vice versa, is precisely the sort of sacramental vision one sees in Orthodox who critique secularism! Sergii Bulgakov (1871–1944), like his student Schmemmann, strongly critiques secularism but he comes to a conclusion about the world in relationship to the sacred not that different from Kearney. Bulgakov speaks of two false poles in the Christian attitude to life that exist in a bad dialectic of unresolved contradictions as both are equally one-sided. There is a world-denying Manichaeism, which sees salvation as a flight from the world. For this “anti-cosmism” there is a vast gulf between the world (secular) and God (sacred) making “Divine-humanity”, Christ and His Church, ontologically impossible. Against anti-cosmism, there stands the “cosmism” of “secularization” or the “secularization of life.”<sup>39</sup> Christianity has created this false attitude to the world and life, which emerged during the Reformation and Renaissance.<sup>40</sup>

The secularization of life accepts the world as it is, “worships the status quo”, because, it is alleged, Christianity is powerless to direct or control life so it sets up the world and its life as its own standard of values. Life and humanity become completely mechanized, dead, un-free since they are bound by a tight scheme of necessitous cause and effect. This sort of modern atheist position deifies the world, so it is a specific form of pantheism. It is not the “zero of religion” but simply the lack or “minus” of a lifeless Christianity that so fetishizes transcendence that it deprives the world of God.<sup>41</sup> The only solution, Bulgakov argues, is a new *askesis* in and for the world which “struggle[s] with the world out of love for the world”<sup>42</sup> seeing the creaturely world as “sophianic”, primordially blessed, united with the divine world in the divine Sophia or God: “Heaven stoops toward earth; the world is not only a world in itself, it is also the world in God, and God abides not only in heaven but also on earth with human beings.”<sup>43</sup> In other words, in the metaphor of the one Sophia, divine and creaturely,<sup>44</sup> we see an alternative image of Kearney’s interanimation of the sacred and the secular. The purpose of an Orthodox theology of secularism, insofar as it is a form of

dialectical sacramentality, is the transfiguring of creation, elevating it in the worship of its Creator so that it becomes transparent to the Spirit.

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## Grounding Secularism in Christ

Yet, the interanimation between the sacred and the secular of which both Kearney and Bulgakov wrote for the Christian must, as we alluded earlier, find its home in Christ. Thus, Bonhoeffer argues against a view that would see there being two spheres in perpetual conflict: one being divine, holy, supernatural, Christian, that is, the sacred, and the other being worldly, profane, natural, UnChristian, that is, the secular. For the very next move is to put Christ on one side of this divide alienating him and us from the world he created and redeemed and forcing man to seek Christ without the world in which he was incarnated, which is a sort of docetism, or to go the way of an angry atheism and seek the world without Christ. There are not two realities but one reality of God in Christ in and for the world. In being with Him we stand as the Church both in God and in the world since the Church is *in* but not *of* the world. As Bulgakov reminded us, God abides in Christ and the Church (divine-humanity)—in heaven but also on earth. Christ contains within Himself the world, He embraces within His very life as the Son of God the secular and the sacred and the world “has no reality of its own, independently of the revelation of God in Christ.”<sup>45</sup> The opposites, then, sacred and secular, are in an ‘original’ or ‘polemical unity’ in Christ and do not have their reality except in Him in a polemical attitude towards one another bearing witness in this way to their common reality and unity in the God-Man. History’s movement consists of divergence and convergence from and towards Him. One cannot, therefore, understand secularism and the secular and secularization apart from the fact that the secular is what is continuously being accepted and becoming accepted by God in Christ.<sup>46</sup> The human vocation, echoing Schmemann,<sup>47</sup> is priestly, insofar as it is divine-human and imaged after our “great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God” (Heb. 4:14). We are called to lift up the secular in thanksgiving so that it becomes a vehicle for the Spirit—unifying in ourselves what is disparate. If in Christ, then, God entered into the world so too what is Christian is only found in the secular, the supernatural in the natural, the holy in the profane and the revelational in the rational. To be a Christian, then, is to be a secular person but always in Jesus Christ in His Body in the world, the Church.<sup>48</sup> Is it not inconceivable, then, if all of history is in Christ diverging and converging in and towards Him in the world in Him, that the movement in history that is the end of Christendom and the rise of the secular or secularization could be viewed not as a divergence from Him but a tacit and mysterious convergence that is identical with God’s own self-kenosis in Christ. In order that Jesus can be more fully in the world He redeemed, He must withdraw His Body from its domination



of the secular space in order that that space may in freedom develop of its own accord and the Church may sit in that space witnessing to the life of Christ and coax the world to turn towards the one in whom it is upheld, freed and even validated in its pluralism. Thus, an Orthodox theology of secularism must not only be sacramental, insofar as it is a dialectic of secular and sacred, but it must be grounded in Jesus Christ as the sacrament of the world, but to be Christoform, it also must be cruciform and involve a radical self-emptying of God in Christ in His Body the Church.

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## Secularization as Kenosis

Vattimo, with his *pensiero debole* (weak thought), refers to secularization as a providential form of kenosis insofar as beginning with the death of Christ then moving to the rise and then decline of Christendom, one has the long slow death of the metaphysical concept of God as objective abstract Being. Being is in an inexorable movement towards enfeeblement, dissolution, the declination or distortion (*Verwindung*) of metaphysics, which Vattimo likes to call Being's lightening or its losing weight (*alleggerimento*).<sup>49</sup> This is the overcoming of metaphysics (*Überwindung*) through its distortion and gradual dissolution/declination<sup>50</sup> and in being so overcome we have the lack of any stable structure of Being which is equivalent to Nietzsche's famous word that "God is dead."<sup>51</sup> The God that is dying only existed as the ground of a pietistic morality. It was the God of the philosophers, not the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

In slowly withdrawing, weakening, and self-emptying Being's absence is in a strange way a sort of presence for by withdrawing itself Being illumines beings, the things themselves, and generates the multiple meanings in interpretation. Being is confirmed as that which illumines things without being identified with them just as a lamp illuminates a chair so that it "is there" but is not the chair itself. Being is itself kenotic or self-emptying in character forever subsisting by diminishing. Vattimo here cites a line from Bonhoeffer's *Act and Being*: "A God who is, is not [*Einen Gott, den es gibt, gibt es nicht*]."<sup>52</sup> With the weakening of Being, which roughly tracks with the slow death of the old God of Christendom and Christendom itself, is the beginning of a free secular order of a plurality of interpretations of how to live one's life, its meaning in community and this new consciously constructed order—call it "modern-liberal-socialist-democratic thought," the secular age<sup>53</sup>—is ruled, limiting the chaos, by a respect for the other, which he calls "charity."<sup>54</sup> The future of Christianity is to become a non-dogmatic religion of pure charity moving ever more towards its own dissolution through its own desacralization in the process of secularization. He likes to quote Augustine here: "Love and do what you will."<sup>55</sup>

Secularization as the kenosis of God is salvation, which is the end of religion and the consummation and death of Christianity, in Being fulfilling its weakening religious vocation.<sup>56</sup> Vattimo plays with Heidegger's famous words from the 1966 *Der Spiegel* interview, "only a god can save us" and says instead that "only a relativistic God can save us", "relativistic" being identical for him with "kenotic."<sup>57</sup> What Christ does, therefore, in dying on the cross, in His self-emptying, His kenosis, is reveal the death of the strong metaphysical God (Vattimo likes to say: "Thanks be to God I am an atheist") and Christ incarnates, as it were, Being now seen as the non-violent non-absolute God of our post-metaphysical age in His weakness and lightening. Quite simply, Christ reveals that God/Being has a vocation for weakening and the decline of the Church's cultural rule over the West is part of this providential process.<sup>58</sup>

## **Secularization as Providential**

Now, this all clearly is highly problematic and, how shall we say, a little over-wrought. It rather uncritically and unhistorically glorifies secularization as the master narrative of the West at the same time as it claims there are no master narratives and—this is its greatest flaw—leaves "charity" free from the process of dissolution in a sort of ahistorical haze. But I want to pick up constructively at the close of the essay some of Vattimo's thoughts and take them a little further suggesting some possible lines towards a new positive theology of the secular, secularization and secularism for the Orthodox. Vattimo is helpful in seeing secularization and the end of Christendom as in some sense providential. Modern culture, despite its great dangers, as Charles Taylor (b.1931) has argued, can be viewed as providential to the extent that with its breaking with "the structures and beliefs of Christendom" certain aspects of Christian life, its gospel ethic, such as in a more humane attitude to women and now sexual minorities, were taken forward and developed, penetrating human life and society, in ways that would simply not have been possible within a purely Christian culture.<sup>59</sup> The Church illumines things in the world by its very withdrawal, its self-emptying, via secularism. In this way, the Church's light then can spill out far ahead onto the path society treads without it obscuring that light by its dogmatic and historical bulk. Secularism is then seen as a tacit providentially guided evangelism. Vattimo, as was said above, identifies this providential aspect of secularization and the decline of Christendom, with God's self-emptying in Christ, and I particularly want to take this idea further in articulating a positive Orthodox theology of secularism. In what follows, I want to pursue a sort of theological experiment, a Trinitarian reverie on civil society and secularism drawing together some of the threads just mentioned stretching out to the far shore of an Orthodox Christian theology of secularism.<sup>60</sup>

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# An Orthodox Christian Theology of Secularism: Secularization as Trinitarian

When we say that secularization is a form of kenosis we mean that in Christ we see the culmination of a divine-human movement of God's complete self-gift to creation and then to civil society where He relativizes Himself, emptying Himself of all claims to centrality, to being the foundation of truth and morality. He withdraws to illumine so that His creatures can freely choose to follow Him or not, organize their communities in light of Him or not, choosing to do so not because it is natural and the end of their nature but merely as they are struck by the witness of His love, His coaxing them forward through the persuasion of the Spirit who ever turns them more deeply to His weakening grace on the cross. We are created in God's image, but, more particularly, in the image of Christ, who is the image of the invisible God (Col. 1: 15) in whom "all things hold together" (1:17). What it means to be formed after Christ is both for Him to make room for us in His creation of which we form the apex and to gift us with a share of being insofar as humanity is a portion of God. This share of Being is a space given to us to be ourselves—freedom and the creativity which derives from that—and in being free God cannot, indeed, has bound Himself, emptying Himself of all power, and will not, overwhelm us. He will not force us into particular moral decisions, He will not compel us to structure our communities after His law of love, but, gently coaxes us and persuades us through His Spirit towards the way of truth in growing up into the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ (Eph. 4:13). Christ's self-emptying in creation and redemption is a holy withdrawal of the sacred to make room for the secular—the human in the image of God—to be itself. It is a withdrawal that undergirds that space as free and valid in its own right because it is a gift of God and so it is an absence that allows for the presence of the secular in the bosom of the sacred. But if we can say that God reveals Himself paradoxically by withdrawing and weakening Himself to leave room for the secular, albeit a secular upheld and allowed to be by the sacred as both are contained in Christ Himself, then are we not saying that divine transcendence exists in an interanimation with its immanence in the world? What sort of God would give Himself to us in this way?

If Being/God has a weakening vocation then could we not apply this sort of theology to the Trinity? Here we might read the life of God, in light of the cross, as a movement of perfect charity, respect, tolerance and embrace of the Other in all His difference and particularity where each of the divine persons lets the Other be by letting the Other go. The Father pours Himself out in birthing the Son even

unto His complete self-exhaustion, a sort of spiritual death, and He spirates the Spirit as the gift of His self-denying joy that rests on His Son. In turn, the Son affirms His Father as source and the non-foundational ground of His own Being so allowing the Father to be as Father and from their mutual self-giving and self-acknowledgement the Spirit binds them together in love, cutting back His own voice in order that He might mediate the particularity of another.

One image of this self-emptying, self-giving, self-receiving and self-withdrawing to expand beyond itself divine life is found in Andrei Rublev's icon of the Trinity with the three angels, mysterious strangers that visited Abraham at Mamre. At its heart, as Kearney has pointed out,<sup>65</sup> is a space, a *khora* or "space which is not a space,"<sup>66</sup> an altar around which they are gathered as if for a dance into, through and outside of one another. On top of this space lies a chalice in which there is an immolated calf. This symbolism of the icon allows one to generously interpret it (using Rev. 13:8 with its 'Lamb slain from the foundation of the world') as depicting an eternal sacrifice of love in the weak God of the Trinity as the pre-eternal foundation of the act of creation and redemption in Christ. But might we follow this through yet further?

Can we understand this *khora* as an altar, the basis of sacrifice, as the space of otherness whereby each person grants out of a weakening self-sacrificial love, a realm of freedom to let the Other be Himself, free to be different in His particularity as different yet united around this space which is not a space. This space, we might argue, is the space of God's Being as free weakening and self-emptying love that eternally gifts otherness. But if on top of this space of Being is a chalice with the "Lamb slain" (Rev. 13:8), cannot we then see the very foundation of creation which God gifts to us—and, by extension, civil society, that place in which we agree to order our lives together as citizens of a commonwealth for the end of human flourishing—as a space to be free in our otherness. We then could argue that God creates His world just as He exists as Trinity, that is, by pouring Himself out into nothingness, dying to Himself in weak Being and in this way relativizing Himself and in a sense being born as "God" for a "world" (as divinity is a relational concept), and no longer the "Absolute." This is the death of God as Absolute, the God of the philosophers, for if we want to climb up to see who God is, what the foundation of reality may be, we will only see the very same suffering and weakening God who gave Himself to us on a cross, having lived and died by girding Himself as a slave becoming no one and no where. By granting creation a space to be itself, albeit one eternally founded and undergirded in God in Christ, God refuses to determine the end of its nature and, therefore, its actions. This self-emptying in creation obtains its consummation, completion and the fullness of its presence to the world in the weakness and withdrawal of the Creator and Savior God dying on the cross. In perhaps Bonhoeffer's most famous words:

The God who lets us live in the world without the working hypothesis of God is the God before whom we stand continually. Before God and

with God we live without God. God lets himself be pushed out of the world on to the cross. He is weak and powerless in the world, and that is precisely the way, the only way, in which he is with us and helps us [ . . . ] only the suffering God can help.<sup>68</sup>

How shall we apply this thinking to a theological vision of civil society and secularization? The weak God's self-giving on the cross is two-fold: a) in dying for us on the cross He creates the world to be holy in its secularity which is upheld by Him as it exists by virtue of His self-emptying and self-giving, His withdrawal so that it might be itself; and b) He establishes a base, a community of the crucified, from which He may witness to His weak love—His Body the Church. But in establishing this space within the free space of creation, the Church, all of this reality being, of course, held together in God in Christ, He moves even further back, back into Himself, as it were, so never leaving us at all, to allow the creation of civil society, a secular commonwealth of agreed and common ends ordered to peace, order and government, but which is in, by and from the Church. In this idea of civil society there reigns a free albeit bounded plurality of interpretations on what constitutes the good though there exists one commonality which underpins its pluralism, as in God Himself, which is equality of respect and embrace of the Other in their difference so honoring their freedom of conscience and allowing peace and harmony to order human relations as well as the good of just governance balancing the different ends of all citizens. Society, then, is left to itself to find its own coherence that needs not be aligned with that of His Body, though God ever coaxes and persuades it deeper into Himself so that it might discover the foundation of its basic and common life. Thus, tolerance, human rights, freedom of conscience, care for creation and even the separation of the Church and the state all can be traced to the Body of God, built up in love by Christ Jesus whose image we bear, a Body which withdraws itself in order to be present to creation and civil society. Secularism is not only a kenotic reality being grounded in Christ, but, in being kenotic, it is also Trinitarian, sacramental and ecclesial in character.

The Church does have a space in creation and, within creation itself, a space and voice in civil society. I am not advocating political quietism. Yet its space is a space to witness, reaching out beyond itself, and, therefore, is not a platform to lecture or tell the different parts of society, the different portions of the human organizations that make up a political commonwealth, they should not be in and of the world, although it can and should at times critique aspects of civil society that are counter to the gospel ethic. As Bonhoeffer said, the space of the Church's space is one that exists "in order to prove to the world that it is still the world, the world which is loved and reconciled with Him."<sup>70</sup> In this Orthodox theological vision of secularism, all of creation is tacitly taken up, embraced and borne within the Body of the Church, the Body of God, and called from its foundation to acknowledge God's radical acceptance and honoring of it in Christ. Indeed, all creation and, in creation, civil society itself, crowned by humanity,

shares in the humanity of Christ whose Body is the Church so that in essence the limits of the Church do not exist at all and creation is, in Bulgakov's words, simply the "cosmic face of the Church."<sup>71</sup> This means politically that there do not exist two separate cities—the Church and the secular world organized into its varied political forms—with two sets of mutually incompatible values. Rather, secular society and secularism, rightly understood, is an unmanifested or tacit version of the Church where what is secular or worldly has divine-human roots. So by the Church's withdrawal in society, a withdrawal which is its form of presence, ever witnessing to its Lord, it emphasizes that "the world is relative to Christ, no matter whether it knows it or not."<sup>72</sup>

This witness is best viewed in terms of the Church persuading the world that at the points where the world's values align with the Church, indeed may be tacit developments of the gospel ethic, they find their true incarnation in Christ crucified. The place of witness of the Church can be viewed as akin to the Royal Doors on the Orthodox iconostasis. These doors of the Kingdom are swung wide open during the whole of the "Bright Week" following Easter or Pascha. The Church in the public sphere simply points, as it were, in between these doors to the altar, a space which has its foundation in God Himself, on which lies the sacrificed Lamb of God which is the true fulfillment of secularism, the weakening God that lies secretly at the center of creation and of secular society: *Ecce homo*. Here at the center of creation, at the center of civil society, is its true meaning: the Body of the Living Christ, the Church. As Christians, we are called to lift high the Lamb of God and let the light of Christ illumine all so that all may come and taste and see that the Lord is good. But this uplifting is always persuasive and never reactive and coercive or we will contradict the very image in which we are made.

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## New Paths of Political Theology

It is time to move from an Orthodox anti-secularism that simply denounces and shakes its fist at the West to a positive Orthodox theology of secularism that tries to see how Orthodoxy might witness boldly to Christ in the modern pluralistic and secular West. New paths of Orthodox political theology need to be beaten through the overgrown wood, trying to see how the light of Christ which illumines all might be working in a space of a modern society that at first looks simply Godless, dark and chaotic so that the mission of the Church, its pre-modern sensibility, and witness to One by whose pinned palms the world is embraced in Himself, is not lost to view.

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## A Secularism of the Royal Doors: Towards an Orthodox Christian Theology of Secularism

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<sup>1</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, "Letter to Eberhard Bethge, [Tegel] 30 April 1944," in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, Enlarged Ed., ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. Reginald Fuller, Frank Clarke and others plus John Bowden (New York: Macmillan, 1972), 278–281 at 280.

<sup>2</sup> See "World Christian Database at Centre for the Study of Global Christianity, Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary," Found at <<http://www.worldchristiandatabase.org/wcd/home.asp>> (Last accessed: 13 March 2018).

<sup>3</sup> "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050: Christians," Found at <<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/christians/>> (Last accessed: 13 March 2018).

<sup>4</sup> See Grace Davie, *Europe: The Exceptional Case—The Parameters of Faith in the Modern World* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2002) and Hugh McLeod and Werner Ustorf, eds., *The Decline of Christendom in Western Europe, 1750–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> "Global Christianity—A Report on the Size and Distribution of the World's Christian Population," Found at <<http://www.pewforum.org/2011/12/19/global-christianity-exec/>> (Last accessed: 13 March 2018).

<sup>6</sup> "Orthodox Christianity in the 21st Century," Found at <<http://www.pewforum.org/2017/11/08/orthodox-christianity-in-the-21st-century/>> (Last accessed: 13 March 2018).

<sup>7</sup> "The Future of World Religions: Population Growth Projections, 2010–2050: Muslims," Found at <<http://www.pewforum.org/2015/04/02/muslims/>> (Last accessed: 13 March 2018).

<sup>8</sup> "No Religion By Census Mapper," Found at <<https://censusmapper.ca/maps/59>> (Last accessed: 13 March 2018).

<sup>9</sup> e.g. Mark C. Taylor, *After God* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007) and John D. Caputo, *The Folly of God: A Theology of the Unconditional* (Salem: Polbridge, 2015).

<sup>10</sup> e.g. John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Oxford: Blackwells, 2006).

<sup>11</sup> See Brandon Gallaher, "The Orthodox Moment: The Holy and Great Council in Crete and Orthodoxy's Encounter with the West: On Learning to Love the Church," *Sobornost*, 39.2 (2017), 26–71 and 'Orthodoxy and the West—The Problem of Orthodox Self-Criticism in Christos Yannaras' in *Polis, Ontology, Ecclesial Event: Engaging with Christos Yannaras' Thought*, ed. Sotiris Mitralaxis (Cambridge: James Clarke, 2018, forthcoming)..

<sup>12</sup> See Brandon Gallaher, 'Eschatological Anarchism: Eschatology and Politics in Contemporary Greek Theology' in eds. Kristina Stoeckl, Ingeborg Gabriel and Aristotle Papanikolaou, *Political Theologies in Orthodox Christianity* (London: T & T Clark-Bloomsbury, 2017), 135–49 at 146–9.

<sup>13</sup> Rowan Williams, *Faith in the Public Square* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), 2–4.

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<sup>14</sup> See the Postsecular Conflicts project at the University of Innsbruck led by Kristina Stoeckl: <<https://www.uibk.ac.at/projects/postsecular-conflicts/>> (Last accessed: 12 March 2018)

<sup>15</sup> See Brandon Gallaher, “A Tale of Two Speeches: Secularism and Primacy in Contemporary Roman Catholicism and Russian Orthodoxy,” ed. John Chryssavgis, *Primacy in the Church: The Office of Primate and the Authority of the Councils, Volume 2: Contemporary and Contextual Perspectives* (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2016), 807–37 and “The Road from Rome to Moscow,” *The Tablet* (20 February 2016), 8–9.

<sup>17</sup> See Sergei Chapnin, ‘A Church of Empire: Why the Russian Church Chose to Bless Empire’, *First Things*, November 2015, <<https://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/11/a-church-of-empire>> (last accessed 13 March 2018). But by contrast see John P. Burgess, *Holy Rus’: The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017).

<sup>18</sup> See Jason Ananda Josephson, *The Invention of Religion in Japan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 19–20 and 132–63.

<sup>20</sup> “Encyclical of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church,” §10, Found at <<https://www.holycouncil.org/-/encyclical-holy-council>> (last accessed 13 March 2018) and see ‘Message of the Holy and Great Council of the Orthodox Church’, §5, Found at <<https://www.holycouncil.org/-/message>> (last accessed 11 July 2017)

<sup>21</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. (Crestwood: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, [1963] 1988), 100.

<sup>22</sup> Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 18

<sup>23</sup> Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 76 and see 112

<sup>24</sup> Dylan Thomas, ‘The Force that through the Green Fuse Drives the Flower’ in *Dylan Thomas: The Poems*, ed. Daniel Jones (London: J. M. Dent & Sons, 1978), l.1, 77.

<sup>25</sup> Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 118 and 124.

<sup>26</sup> Max Weber, *Max Weber’s Science as a Vocation*, eds. Peter Lassman and Irving Velody with Herminio Martins (London: Unwin & Hyman, 1989 [1918]), 13–14.

<sup>27</sup> See S. N. Eisenstadt, “Multiple Modernities” in *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities*, 2 Vols. (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003), 2: 535–560 at 536.

<sup>28</sup> José Casanova, ‘The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms’ in *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and Van Antwerpen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 54–74.

<sup>29</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, Trans. Neville Horton Smith (London: Collins, 1964 [6th German Ed. 1963]), 199.

<sup>30</sup> See Henricus Denzinger and Adolphus Schönmetzer, eds., *Enchiridion Symbolorum*, 36<sup>th</sup> Ed. (Barcelona/Freiburg im Breisgau/Rome: Herder, 1976), §302, 108.

<sup>31</sup> Richard Kearney, *Anatheism: Returning to God After God* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 16

<sup>32</sup> Kearney, *Anatheism* 17–81.

<sup>33</sup> See Brandon Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 95–114, 238–49.



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<sup>34</sup> Jocelyn Maclure and Charles Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011), 41

<sup>35</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *After Christianity*, trans. Luca D'Isanto (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 100–1.

<sup>36</sup> Kearney, *Anatheism*, 152.

<sup>37</sup> Kearney, *Anatheism*, 139–142.

<sup>38</sup> Kearney, *Anatheism*, 166.

<sup>39</sup> Sergei Bulgakov, *Sophia, The Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*, trans. Patrick Thompson, O. Fielding Clarke and Xenia Braikévitch (Hudson: Lindisfarne, [1937] 1993), 14–15 and 20.

<sup>40</sup> Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 20.

<sup>41</sup> Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 15.

<sup>42</sup> Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 21.

<sup>43</sup> Bulgakov, *Sophia*, 17.

<sup>44</sup> See Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology*, 84–94.

<sup>45</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 196–7.

<sup>46</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 198–9.

<sup>47</sup> See Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World*, 15, 17, 93–4

<sup>48</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 200.

<sup>49</sup> See Gianni Vattimo, 'Dialectics, Difference, and Weak Thought', trans. Thomas Harrison, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (Spring 1984 [1983]), 151–64 at 157–9.

<sup>50</sup> *ibid.*, 158

<sup>51</sup> See Martin Heidegger, "The Word of Nietzsche: 'God is Dead'," *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 53–112.

<sup>52</sup> Gianni Vattimo with Piergiorgio Paterlini, *Not Being God: A Collaborative Autobiography*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010 [2008]), 24.

<sup>53</sup> Vattimo and Paterlini, *Not Being God*, 152.

<sup>54</sup> Gianni Vattimo, *Belief*, trans. Luca D'Isanto and David Webb (Cambridge: Polity, 1999 [1996]), 62–5, *A Farewell to Truth*, trans. William McCuaig (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011 [2009]), 75–9 and *After Christianity*, 48, 82, 111–2.

<sup>55</sup> Gianni Vattimo and John D. Caputo, *After the Death of God*, ed. Jeffrey W. Robbins (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007), 41–6.

<sup>56</sup> Vattimo, *After Christianity*, 24.

<sup>57</sup> Vattimo, *A Farewell to Truth*, 47.

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<sup>58</sup> Vattimo, *Belief*, 39.

<sup>59</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Catholic Modernity?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 16, 18, 26, 29, 36–37.

<sup>60</sup> See Gallaher, *Freedom and Necessity in Modern Trinitarian Theology*, 238–50 for more on Trinitarian theology.

<sup>65</sup> Kearney, *Anatheism*, 25ff.

<sup>66</sup> See Paul S. Fiddes, *Seeing the World and Knowing God. Israelite Wisdom and Christian Doctrine in a Late-Modern Context* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 218–65 (esp. 249ff.), 320–1, 325–6.

<sup>68</sup> Bonhoeffer, ‘Letter to Eberhard Bethge, [Tegel] 16 July [1944]’ in *Letters and Papers from Prison*, 360–1.

<sup>70</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 202.

<sup>71</sup> Sergii Bulgakov, *The Bride of the Lamb*, abridged trans. and ed. Boris Jakim (Edinburgh/Grand Rapids, Mich.: T & T Clark/Eerdmans, 2002), 267.

<sup>72</sup> Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 206–7.