The Potential Role of Religion in the Public Sphere. Considerations by Means of the Contemporary Imaginary

Dr. Monica Martinelli[1]

[1] Catholic University, Milan.

Abstract

While telling ?the history of the next two centuries? (namely the advent of nihilism), Nietzsche?s intention was also to warn us about the consequences of the death of God: ?What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? And backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?? (Nietszsche 1974: 182). Nietzsche?s hypothesis does not appear extraneous to the present reality, especially when we consider the perils to which we are exposed by a nihilist culture exalted by the new power which technical systems have progressively rendered available to individuals. Indeed, there could be no room at all for human beings in a world that purports to work without posing the question of eaning.

1 Introduction

hile telling "the history of the next two centuries" (namely the advent of nihilism), Nietzsche's intention was also to warn us about the consequences of the death of God: "What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? And backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing? Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?" **??**Nietszsche 1974: 182).

Nietzsche's hypothesis does not appear extraneous to the present reality, especially when we consider the perils to which we are exposed by a nihilist culture exalted by the new power which technical systems have progressively rendered available to individuals. Indeed, there could be no room at all for human beings in a world that purports to work without posing the question of meaning.

In fact, the request for orientation is topical especially now, within advanced Western societies that have built a strong technical and nihilistic imaginary able to define the background of social relationships and to influence the actions of individuals and groups. This imaginary suffers from the idea of freedom that we have built and the weakening of the link between truth and freedom.

The modern and contemporary man, as we know, is no longer satisfied with a kind of truth offered to him (and taken for granted) since he considers it as something that crushes freedom.

It is also within this framework that we are dealing with the "Dialectic of secularisation" (Habermas, Ratzinger 2005): on the one hand, right in the name of the disengagement of freedom from truth, it was expected that religion -with its truth, moral authority, institutional forms, values and meanings -would gradually become irrelevant. On the other hand, however, the expectation that religion, with its questions of meaning, disappeared has not yet become true.

44   the Catholic University of Milan and supported by Caritas (one of the largest charity organisations in Italy
45   which is affiliated to the Catholic Church). It focused on the urban outskirts of the ten largest Italian cities. The
46   project originated from the assumption that urban contexts were becoming the catalyst of the more problematic
47   consequences linked to the ongoing global transformations. In particular, the key point of the question was
48   the strengthening in the fragmentation of both the life-space frame and the social ties. Methodologically, the
49   research employed repeated ethnographic investigations in each outskirt area, over a two-year span. A variety of
50   instruments were used, such as in-depth interviews, informal conversations, "on-the-road" interviews (to gain a
51   description of the area and comprehend the tie between space and experience), the gathering of statistical and
52   documentary materials, focus groups, and geographical explorations. For any further methodological details, see
53   Magatti (edited by) 2007 and Cappelletti-Martinelli 2010.
54   . 3 The Catholic University and the Istituto Sturzo started a National research project around the notion
55   of "Italian Generativity", aimed at identifying, studying and interconnecting "generative" social structures,
56   cultures, and economies. A digital Archive of Italian Generativity (www.generativita.it) was launched in 2010
57   as a platform to host the project. First and foremost, the Archive provides a growing corpus of narratives
58   regarding contemporary Italian generative experiences (connected with a positive Italian tradition, promoting
59   shared value, ideas, and practices), which represent new solutions for the structural issues currently vexing the
60   country. The Archive represents a social platform, fostering knowledge and good practices W The latter are not
61   research projects explicitly dedicated to the theme of religion, but to broader social and cultural transformations.
62   However, they are not inadequate to offer some ideas regarding our topic. We will not enter into the details of
63   these projects. First we would like to describe the main aspects of the contemporary socio-cultural pattern. And
64   then we will focus on the role and potentiality of religion (which, in our opinion, is such) in this context.

2   II.

Technique, Nihilism, Capitalism: Ingredients of the Contemporary Imaginary

3   a) Rise and expansion of techno-nihilist capitalism

68   To outline the features of the contemporary imaginary that, as we was mentioning before, is based on a certain
69   conception of freedom, we have necessarily to briefly refer to the socio-economic model developed in Western
70   societies in recent decades -model that we can define as "techno-nihilist capitalism".
71   The latter was preceded by another form of capitalism, namely the corporate capitalism that evolved soon after
72   World War II -which was based on some key pillars: democracy, Keynesian economic regulation, Fordist-welfarist
73   compromise, widespread access to education. Such model has led to valuable achievements in terms of social
74   security at the expense of the massive presence of institutions within the social and individual life.
75   Such excess caused a sort of crisis at the subjective level and -in the late '60s in the U.S. and in many Western
76   European countries -the significant emergence of the demand for greater expressiveness on the part of individuals,
77   who begun to reject any kind of authority and social hierarchy in the name of the centrality of the Self, autonomy
78   of choice, and moral freedom.
79   At the same time, in addition to the crisis emerged at the subjective level, also from the structural viewpoint
80   -after decades of uninterrupted growth -in the early '70s the economic insecurity began to take place and outline
81   that policy responses were actually less and less convincing. The result was the expression of serious doubts
82   about the legitimacy of institutions in general and the simultaneous reorganisation of sociocultural, political and
83   economic patterns.
84   Between these two kinds of crisis -one at the systemic level and the other at the individual level -an original
85   outcome was created: the demand for individual freedom of subjects intertwined -beyond a and acting as an
86   incubator of relations, networks and synergies. As such, it promotes reflective processes and social innovation.
87   The project is currently in progress. The Internet platform is already hosting about 70 experiences, collected
88   during the fieldwork, in various locations in Italy, in different areas (enterprises, third sector associations, public
89   institutions, cultural institutions, etc.).
90   predetermined pattern -with the demand for autonomy of the economic world that wished to detach itself
91   from the state and institutions in order to operate without any restriction. The transition was accelerated in the
92   '80s when the market liberalisation was strengthened and the socio-economic model, rival to the market model
93   (namely the model that had spread in Eastern Europe) was crumbling. In this context, the birth of a new global
94   market seemed to occur and the term "globalisation" was useful to name this project.
95   In this respect, the rise of the neo-liberism constitutes the most important factor in the reorganisation of
96   contemporary capitalism, marked by the beginning of a new phase of capitalist accumulation. This phase is
97   characterised by the expansion pursued at various levels: economic growth, expansion of the individual Self,
98   expansion of communications and technical codes. In order to facilitate this expansion, immateriality has
99   substituted production, flexibilisation has broken the rigidity of previous institutional configurations, the state
100 intervention has considerably shrunk both the instances of the global economic dynamism and the individual
101 libertarianism.
102 The institutional model grounded into the neoliberist market logic finds a powerful ally in the paradigm
103 of technique whose development is charaterised by steep growth: technique, similarly to the neoliberal

economic model, only offers the binaries in which the great variety of individual actions can take place, after having enormously empowered individual action and broadened the range of pursuable purposes. Finally, the contribution offered by a particular Weltanschauung founded on nihilism constitutes the "spiritual" and cultural substrate, remarkably pertinent to the end of manipulating any meaning and preventing freedom from being an expansive movement that, in order to fully manifest itself, requires the endless growth of available opportunities. This sustrates contributes to make capitalism compatible with any culture, being it national or local, modern or archaic, given that it continuously questions consolidated meanings and minimises the risk of questioning, being raised around the nature of those purposes and their validity.

Therefore, in the social configurations arising at the end of the XX century, the capitalistic dimension has structured a power system based on mobility and movement (of money, goods, information, cultures, people, etc.); the technical dimension has enabled an efficient management of these flows, and supplied abstract codes for exchanges which could transcend cultural, ethnical, linguistic and religious differences; the nihilist vision has rendered meanings malleable and reversible. Hence, "techno-nihilist capitalism" has imposed itself as the new organisational (and

4   Global Journal of Human Social Science

legitimating) paradigm of social life 4 . But also as the The logics driving this imaginary have consecrated the new centrality on individuals, considered as totally free to choose their own meanings, relations, and even culture. These logics are strengthened by the emphasis currently put on the aesthetical dimension imaginary supporting the structuring logics of social relationships and the justifications which contribute to the creation of the social world in which individuals act. 5 The predominance of the signifier over the meaning has strengthened the disengagement of functions and meanings (key aspects of the imaginary of techno-nihilistic capitalism): this disengament stems from the fracture between the notion of reason as the faculty which recomposes meanings (the logos/legein), by ordering knowledge and experiences, and that of reason as mere technical instrumentality (the teukein).

Technical-oriented reason seems to be the only admitted one since only what enables the solution of a problem or making things work and the fulfilment of an individual purpose is considered meaningful. This kind of rationality causes a great deal of fragmentation, since : aesthetic space which opts for the disengagement from any territorial binding and culture on a plurality of levels, with heterogeneous symbolic references and contents which penetrate in any social world, no longer bothering to ground meanings in a place, group or institution.

Based on the aesthetic space which is deterritorialised and meditised, the techno-nihilist imaginary prefers symbolic languages which are not too demanding, so that they are not bound to specific groups/places. Evaluation criteria no longer refer to the adhesion to a consolidated and institutionalised system of beliefs and values, or to the legitimisation of the authority system. Instead, what has become predominant is the "involvement" and the sensation of "being awestruck": in this framework, the question of meaning has therefore been subordinated to the experience level, intended as what is arbitrarily made to exist by the individual. As a consequence of this process, there is what has been defined as the "emotional consummation of secularisation" (Hervieu-Léger, 1996).

In this respect, it is crucial here the role of technical systems in their continuous development, in their ever-changing: in fact, the new opportunities that continue to grow in front of us are those that redefine the meanings of our experiences and goals of our actions, as well as our freedom.

the re-composing of meanings is delegated to the level of subjectivity. On the latter, the individual alleges to self-supply reference points irrespective of any tie and maybe chaotically mixing elements taken from the "supermarket of ideas" made available by the deterritorialised aesthetic space.

In addition, the new capitalism combines the growth based on the activation of technical resources with the affective-emotional sphere: in fact, it works on desire that, let's say, consumption should satisfy. In this way, desire is however reduced to a need. Need indicates that something is immediately lacking and has to be satisfied, while desire refers to something greater, to the broadest horizon and, therefore, goes beyond immediacy. The contemporary system has used the desire as energy to run the engine of its machine.

This means that there is an increasingly amount of life aspects likely to enter into the enhancement of the economic system, whose expansion is supported by the consumer response that, to this end, needs to be constantly over-stimulated by means of the production of "experiential events". Significantly, the term of "economy of experience" is employed here (Pine B.J., Gilmore J.H., 2000) .

Within this model, the energetic metaphor has been used also for human beings: the internal energy of the system is represented by the will to power of subjects, namely the desire to affirm their existence. This is a kind of energy that men own, but it might be deftly diverted to endless satisfaction and enjoyment, hence it has to be adequately activated. This is supported by philosophical ambitions focusing on the independence from any obligation, the freedom from all inflexibility, the pursuit of the self-fulfilment "sacred duty". This is the idea behind the development model of the last decades whose economic dynamism is undeniable. Instead of investing in long-term growth, the recipe has prefigured the endless expansion of the range of consumers, even to the detriment of personal and collective dept. This large acceleration was made possible by the combination of some key ingredients, such as the creation of ever new technical infrastructure, the reform of international trade,

changes in communication systems and the transformation of the international financial system whose weight is increased as noone could ever expect.

5   b) Fragmentaton and implosion of techno-nihilist capitalism

The alliance between the new capitalism, nihilism and technique creates patterns involving both collective and individual social life. One of them is the fragmentation that occurs at multiple levels.

There is the fragmentation of solidarity: the The first one conceives competition as the (new) form of dinamic solidarity of our time (namely, we show solidarity because we all have to compete with anyone else, but we also are required to play by ourselves!). The second one is related to the affirmation (often aggressively) of identity (we show solidarity only to those who belong to our group, who have our own culture, religion). Another level is represented by the fragmentation of relations: the strong drive towards individualisation implies that social relations flatten out, on the one hand, on the interaction based on functional arrangements, and, on the other hand, on the 'pure relationship' that the British sociologist Giddens (2008) defines as surprising, without neither memory nor project, able to enhance sensibility, immediacy, physicality. Dropped out of their context, deprived of their meaning and standing only on the individual' shoulders, social and human relations are transformed into an enormous task, also given that in a world where all people intend to allege their own truth in the name of individual freedom, and in which everyone has to follow the 'sacred' duty of self-fulfilment, the likelihood of misunderstanding and equivocation can only increase.

Finally, the fragmentation affects the Self: some scholars have conceived the Self no longer as individuality but as a 'singularity event': free energy, pure will to power to infinity, succession of experiences, openness to what happens/occurs, desiring machine. In addition to this, there is the fragmentation of the body:

through the progress of biology, we can look at the phenomena of life by analysing them at the submicroscopic level, whereby the body becomes something completely bio-technical.

The logic of fragmentation brings together the power of technology -which is advancing at an incresingly tighter pace and penetrating every aspect of our lives -and the reversibility of meanings of the nihilistic culture. In this context, it becomes increasingly difficult to establish a sort of shared meaning which can be true to anyone. Rather, technical equipments are those enjoying extraordinary strength as long as the idea that what is technically possible is also true is prevailing. The reality test also passes through the power of emotional involvement: in fact, what has the power to impress us emotionally is also what we tend to take as true. The reflective component of the experience is reduced to the minimum while the likelihood of manipulation increases since the construction of the immediate intensity and the ability to impress people become actual tools of power (thus, those who manage to enhance emotions wields also some power). Giving up the search for that truth not coinciding with what we individually (and personally) create also means that reality is only the one we allege. This imaginary is the substrate of the present crisis in its multiple aspects. The issue is quite complex. Now it is sufficient to mention that this crisis represents one of the system breaking points, but, at the same time, a hard lesson. Certainly techno-nihilist capitalism has achieved significant results: it has triggered a phase of extraordinary growth and increased both global production capacity and the life chances of millions of people. For such reason, the explosion of the crisis was experienced, both by governments and the public opinion, with a widespread sense of anxiety: the slowdown in growth opportunities jeopardises the guarantee of continuous expansion that does not conceive lower standards of living. However, the limit of techno-nihilist capitalism need to be found in its own dynamics: the more it manifestes itself, by increasing its power, the more it reveals its weakness because it ignores that there is something else beyond technical aspects, and that reality has to do with limit -for example, the limit of resources that feed the circuit (including the human being) -up to the time the foundations of its own sustainability are eroded.

The crisis -which is financial, energetic, and social at the same time -with all its side effects reveals the self-reference of that model whose expansion has occurred regardless of spirit and regardless of realityexcept for the technical one 6 . In the logic of technonihilist capitalism, the growth according to the 'powerwill to power' binomial has also led to the voracious appetite towards energetic resources, which are natural, social and human 7 All of this seems to point out that we should really attempt to turn the page over. The crisis into which we are may lead to the implosion or the development of freedom. In this sense, it can become an extraordinary . Techno-nihilist capitalism has eroded the conditions that have enabled its own development, grounding itself in a kind of imaginary of freedom that demanded to identify the latter with the will to power self-determination (namely freedom as selffulfilment or as the increase in opportunities, pursuable aims) according to highly reductive anthropological views (the individual is seen as a self-referential centre, and society as mere sum of many individuals, each of them representing a separate world).

The point here is that development is never an abstract matter of technology and efficiency, but is always the combination of multiple factors -still structural, but also cultural and human -and suffers from a certain kind of view of man and freedom.

6   Global Journal of Human Social Science

Volume XII Issue X Version I The classical scholars of the sociological thought (for example of Weber and Simmel) can teach us something in this respect: in fact, they had grasped the importance of the spiritual dimension in

social life, where the 'spiritual' aspect does not identify itself either with the evanescent return of the religious or with the mere unconditional vitalism, but it puts itself as a means to develop a different view of man.

And actually the challenges emerging from reality have primarily to do with putting into focus the anthropological underpinnings of new social issues.

Freedom -intended as the property of the Self which is individualistically conceived, an unreal subject projected on the social scene only in the second place- represents an imaginary and empty freedom. We are will to power and self-fulfilment, but not only this. We are debt, desire to bond with others, discussion, judgment, empathy, care, fragility, limitation: those aspects are removed from the historical era in which performance and competition have despised weakness, failure; self-fulfilment and individual happiness have tended to minimise their debt and commitment typical of union and belonging, and the will to power has looked at limit and suffering (not to mention death) as shameful; truth has detached itself from those questions about sense that affect human existence at present but also affect its openness to the transcendent. And, once again in relation to the anthropological underpinnings of the new freedom imaginary, it is necessary to stress that the mature freedom can not disguise the man's essential openness to the transcendent dimension. If, on the one hand, we are embodied in a historical, social, cultural, human contingency, on the other hand, as outlined by Simmel, we are much more than it: life is not only social, as the human being is not only social 8 The pathologies of contemporary freedom concern, not surprisingly, the relational dimension of the human being and are expressed as the individual's inability to relate with itself, the other Selves, the world, but also with what is beyond the Self, namely with transcendence which is totally flattened out in the context of innovation immanence seen only in technical and consumerist terms, as if, by continuously moving on and continuously consuming, we have the impression of being able to distance ourselves from immanency.

. 8 About the contribution of Simmel with regards to the imaginary of freedom, see M. Martinelli (2011).

However, in this way, we are only adapting to the current flow of things.

Given the crisis nature, in order to overcome the present impasse, first the emergence of a new imaginary is necessary. The latter can only emerge as criticism towards the period we are experiencing now and it has to deal with the questions related to the meanings of life/collective co-existence, far beyond the specific (technical) functions on which that co-existence seems to depend now 9 III.

The Role of Religion in The Public Sphere Within and BeyondTechno-Nihilist Capitalism

. Secondly, it is necessary to prefigure -from the institutional perspective -a new kind of growth that, in a social context that has been drained in terms of sociability and vitality, would be committed to rethinking the conditions of socially and humanly sustainable growth, namely a meaningful and sensible growth.

In this context, the religious sphere can provide valuable support, especially with reference to the construction of a new imaginary of freedom which takes into account the important question of meaning(s) and relationships (and of the fact that freedom needs to be reviewed in terms of relation, since, it is a relational experience itself).

7 a) A possible perspective

A useful idea to capture the potential role of religion in the contemporary context is the one of the "anti-environment" -a concept used by ??cLuhan 10 Within a social context deeply marked, as previously outlined, by the pervasiveness of technical elementswhich now constitute the 'environment' in , which we have chosen and adapted to what now we would like to discuss. 9 It is not irrelevant that the signs of the emergence of a new kind of sensitivity (which is social, ecological and cultural at the same time) are expressed both by some planetary events and the recent civic movement in some European cities in relation to issues concerning collective goods -starting from the accelerated disenchantment towards the libertarian-liberal dream -and animated by the new spirit of the time, hardly willing to consider absolutely irrelevant the question of meaning, and the response to it, in relation to the future (in this respect, see for example the above mentioned Archive of Italian Generativity -www.generativita.it). And this does not certainly happen by chance, if we think that techno-nihilist capitalism has demanded to affect the huge anthropological nodes without, however, facing the question of meaning, transcendence and, ultimately, the meaning attributed to the human being. On the contrary, it has claimed to proceed as if it should not respond to anything else rather than a series of immediate and material issues on which the public debate usually focuses when sensitive issuess are in the agenda, ranging from intercultural co-existence to the matters related to interventions on life, from the economic growth (or recession) to the status of democracy, from social cohesion to justice, just to name a few examples. 10 See M. McLuhan (1964, 1967), among other works. Moreover, for the exploration/recostrunction of his work, see E. Lamberti (2000).

8 Year

which our whole social life takes place -those antienvironments are particularly valuable -namely those worlds/spaces capable to activate some antidotes against the critical influences to which we are necessarily exposed.

In other words, we could say that in a kind of social world completely surrounded by the meditised aesthetic space (in which the equivalence of meanings prevails) and the technical system (which enhances functionality), the way to escape the regime of instrumentality and equivalence (according to which all meanings are equivalent and each meaning can always be reversible, nothing has substance, nothing lasts over time, and only what

works is meaningful) passes through a social project that invests in creation, storage and preservation of anti-environments, designed as spaces in which it is possibile to sufficiently develop antibodies against the logic that the (mechanised and mediatised) environment implicitly imposes. The latter, left to itself, ends up producing omologation.

Through this perspective, the reference to "antienvironments" enables to escape the tyranny of the equivalence system and guarantee the basis for more authentic freedom and criticism that the prevailing environment has now neutralised.

One of these anti-environments that, in the contemporary context, deserves particular attention is the one concerning the religious dimension. Now we will not go into too much detail; in fact, other antienvironments are certainly conceivable (for example, the field of education -with reference to schools and universities, as well as arts or the enhancement of the natural environment). It is neither the place to explore the ample debate about the processes of transformation of the religious sphere in the process of secularisation started with modernity 11 In this respect, Introvigne and Stark (2003), for example, observe that, in about thirty years' time, we have passed from the theorisation of the death of God to the realisation of his return and his revenge. Classical studies on these themes are those of Berger (1969); Acquaviva (1961); more recently Hervieu-Léger (1993) and, in particular about the return of the religious, J. Casanova (1994, 2000).

. We know, however, that, in contemporary societies, religion is all but disappeared. Indeed, in some ways, the opposite is true.

In fact, just because of social life transformations and the dominance of the described imaginary, it does not surprise that from the '80s, in connection with the rise of the delineated model of capitalism, there are signals -in advanced societies -of the strong return of the religious. Paradoxically, the present capitalism has evokes the need for religion by calling on the great confessions for the elaboration of meaning.

But the fate prefigured for religion under technonihilist capitalism is problematic, if not contradictory. Along the first path, techno-nihilism basically has continued the long-term and progressive secularisation (Taylor, 2007). Once institutional religion is no longer taken for granted, religion tends to be merely reduced to an individual and intimate fact, with no relevance to collective life. From this stance, U. Beck conjectures on a "personal god", with whom one intimately interacts into the daily experience of human life, beyond the religious dictates, dogmas, codes. However, this "personal God" tends to become, in the contemporary era, "a daily business, which is dull, banal, declined in million copies. Between God and idols, there is no much difference: we live in a world characterised by multi-religious facets, of which we do not know neither the origin nor the meaning (...) It is sufficient to look through one of the many catalogues meant for the new-age market to realise that you can now buy a personal God" (2009: 17). Thus, that "personal God" becomes more precisely, an "individual god", a god filtered by the awareness about our own life, knowledge, a god similar to us and reflecting our own image: here is the individual -who is reality that, actually, sinks its roots in the religious sphere -that builds his own religious cover, and decides his own faith. This is an attitude that neither excludes the adherence to a doctrine or a church: the individualistic affiliation forms to religion are in fact numerous, as long as subjectively desired 12 Along the second path, techno-nihilist capitalism stresses religion as reactive dynamics of a . All this implies fluctuating religiosity, where the religious faith can freely be conveyed, like any other content, provided that it does not require any privilege.

In the mare magnum of cultural resources made available in the mediatised aesthetic space, there is also room for religions that, indeed, embrace stimulating, fascinating and spectacular dimensions. The task to decide whether and how adhere to a proposal or another is left to the individual conscience. 12 Such attitudes have emerged also from the researches we conducted on the new blue collar classes and the social outskirts of the most important Italian cities. Among those most affected by the individualisation of religious experience, religiousness tends to express itself in two main ways. The first one tends to emphasise the emotional and individualistic dimension of religiosity: by rejecting institutional references, it insists on "feel-good" elements, self-realisation and "fusionality", thus reproducing features typical of the aesthetic space. The second, and currently dominant, possible outcome consists in the exclusive valorisation of the cultural elements of traditional religiosity. Collective events are attended, particular blessings are pursued, saint patrons are identified and the role played by the sacred in daily life exerts its fascination. In these cases, the articles of faith are object of very limited re-elaboration.

9 Year

fundamentalist sort: the more the process of meaning demolition continues and the more the fragmentation (of ties, territories, cultures, etc.) process spreads, the more the space for seeking new fondations is created. The latter is understood as something solid and not open to discussion and, for this reason, to inconsistency and dispersion to which the whole existence seems to be subjected.

Religion is here invoked as a bulwark able to defend individuals from this fate of dispersion. It's one thing if we talk about strengthening the openness to cultural contexts, operation always valuable to avoid that new "walls", boundaries, are created between human groups. However, it's different if we celebrate the systematic eradication, the eclectic nomadism, wandering without direction. The more this happens in the name of the prevailing ethics of mobility that advocates a new kind of dislocated world, where everyone needs to be linked with others, the more obtuse forms of attachment to territory, tradition and not least to religion -viewed as means to re-establish roots that allow some form of identification with the worldemerge. Thus, the intention to regain what is lost

and the idea of sorting the world in a fundamental difference between "us" and "what is different from us", between something that is inside and something else that is outside. Without excluding to employ violent means to reaffirm some unity and bond against fragmentation. The twisting occurs, in fact, by evoking distinctive elements that may be easily identifiable and are not suspected of being infected by the virus of fragmentation: namely, ethnicity, territory and, undoubtedly, religion 13 Along the third way, we see the development of neo-magical religious forms that, by offering room for the return of the irrational, also offer a sort of solution to the void of meaning created by nihilism (Casement, Tracey 2006). After all, chaotic, vague and fluctuating religiosity paves the way for the return of myth, spiritualism, occultism and magic. As demonstrated by . In this case, religious traditionalism can be seen as the expression of profound anxiety linked to the identity definition. Calling upon religious tradition is a way through which social groups -especially if culturally fragile -convey who they are. Such traditionalism is, however, fragile and ambiguous, mostly oscillating between identity closure (sometimes with fundamentalist traits) and the readiness to adopt forms of compromise and syncretism often bordering on superstition and magic. 13 In the Italian context, including those who live a certain identification with the institutional dimension of religious experience, it is not uncommon to find this kind of expectations: religion is conceived as a strong means of defense against the complexity of the world perceived as chaotic. In some cases, there are extremisations in terms of visible intolerance in relation to narrow-mindedness attitudes in one's own group.

the spread of neo-magical behaviours that make extensive use of religious forms to promote a reasonable relationship with reality 14 . In absence of other resources or reasonable motives for cultivating hope, a magic-oriented attitude becomes an accessible strategy for maintaining trust in the constructive capability of desire. And while hope has a more collective character, desire is much more individual. In fact, magic is individualistic: it features no churches, and anyone can try to propitiate positive forces. Therefore, individualism fits better to neo-magic attitudes, while religion tends to produce collectivity. This explains why the denial of the public role of religion drives towards the emphatisation of neo-magical forms -a process that, from the phenomenological point of view, distinguishes different forms of social action 15 In this way, religion faces the inevitable process of emptying and is reduced to a symbolic resource equivalent to others, within the over-stimulated universe of the mediatised aesthetic space. Combined with a kind of experience in which everyone is allowed to create their own reference points, the religious becomes one of many codes used to respond to (big or small) questions posed by life in a personalised way as well as .

In relation to the questions raised by technonihilism and its crisis, all the three paths are ineffective.

In the first case (private retreat) because religion, reduced to purely private act, which is interior and sentimental, is incorporated into the scheme of equivalence and loses its nature. In the second and third case (fundamentalism and forms of neo-magism) because religion, becoming the receptacle for the collection of a number of malcontents and social unease, is exploited for many different purposes: it is used as a symbolic source to legitimise political discourses (not without slipping in the use and/or abuse of power that overturns, once again, its nature) or as a deterrent to social conflicts, hence weakening the ability to exercise criticism to techno-nihilism.

Malinowski: "Magic supplies primitive man with a number of readymade rituals, acts and beliefs, with a definite mental and practical technique which serves to bridge over the dangerous gaps in every important pursuit or critical situation. It enables man to carry out with confidence his important tasks, to maintain his poise and his mental integrity in fits of ange, in the throes of hate, of unrequited love, of despair and anxiety. The function of magic is to ritualise man's optimism, to enhance his faith in the victory of hope over fear. Magic expresses the greater value for man of condicence over doubt, of steadfastness over vacillation, of optimism over pessimism" (Malinowski 1948: 70). 15 One example is represented by fatalistic attitudes that privilege impersonal categories of luck-bad luck to explain the world in which we live; this "trust in luck" (or ritualised optimism of magic) results in always seeking the fortunate occasion. In this sense, not surprisingly, the investment in various forms of luck enormously proliferates. Subjected to the equivalence system and having lost its distinctive status, religion provides meanings that can not allege to be of different quality compared to the myriad of other proposals freely diffused in the aesthetic space.

The implicit assumption of this position is that religion should be treated as any other entity conveying messages of various sort. No matter if it is a songwriter, a poet, a political party or the church, anyone has the power to freely communicate their own messages. Regardless of any other ethical or epistemological consideration, the truth of a message lies in its effectiveness.

This confirms that what some scholars have defined as contemporary "religious revival" completely abandons the Western transcendental stance in favour of the immanentist view which, however, fits completely to the spirit of modern capitalism. The immanent orientation, featuring traits typical of new-age movements, flattens, without neither criticism nor taking distance, on the event occurring. This originates a pervasive but vague religiosity, based on individual taste and on the rather chaotic do-it-yourself syncretistic. The outcome of this religiosity is a sort of "religious atheism" and the predilection for conservative positions while religious feelings contribute to the sacralisation of the "values" present in the dominant imaginary (such as immanence, reversibility of meanings, freedom of purpose, emotional involvement in a directionless becoming, permanent exposure to the lucky event, or acceptation of the technical data as truth, etc.).

Therefore, on the one hand, we have a kind of world which is profoundly secularised, shaped by the techno-

nihilistic imaginary, which upholds unconstrained freedom and defense of individual interest. On the other hand, we have diffused religiosity which, albeit grounded in a specific tradition, appears confused and weak: in other terms, a container without content.

In fact, the shredding of the religious is not only at the expense of religion but freedom per se. As we know, in fact, the hegemony of techno-nihilist capitalism is based on its ability to play with the infinite multiplication of meanings (the more the available opportunities are, the greater freedom is). But it is precisely this claim that needs to be considered, since it is precisely this claim that undermines the ability to attribute religion a special status. And this is precisely the point. In fact, religion, by definition, is not equivalent to many other things. It raises the questions of meaning about the human condition 16 As written by R. Panikkar (2010), "human beings are not complete, are non-finite, and infinite in that sense. They are in the process of evolving, of reaching what they are not now (...) The intention of .

c) The sacred space of the Infinite : the religion's peculiarity Not surprisingly, in his extensive research on the public sphere, Jürgen Habermas has come to identify right in religion those models of language and meaning that allow to name experiences, relationships, history, the world, and hence interpret what otherwise would probably remain unexpressed 17 Hence, religion takes on the feeling of strangeness without which the search for meaning would become weaker: this is the search for an adequate place where, in the present world, there is the possibility of openness. In such direction, then, the religious experience represents one of the few fallacies (topoi) against which the techno-nihilist thinking can be effectively challenged. The ability to maintain resistance, againsts the phantasmagorial viewpoint of techno-. What has been said up to now leads us to the heart of the discussion on the role of religion in the public sphere, which calls into question, more broadly, the meaning of "laicité". The French Revolution has bequeathed us the notion of laicité, to be understood as that condition in which a non religious thought finds its place and legitimacy in a world dominated by the stance defined by the institutionalised church. From here, given the formation of the state according to the idea of laicité, what takes shape is the effort to retain the influence of religion within well-defined borders, by relegating it to the private space up to the time it gets to know sectarian forms of collective groups and movements that throw it back to the public sphere, by employing (sometimes violent) means which distort its essence.

However, against techno-nihilism and crossing its crisis, the question arises whether, in a social world organised around the global technical system and surrounded by the mediatised aesthetic space, it is the right time to review the conception of laicité.

Henri Bergson focused on the ways religion, precisely because embodied in historical processes, experiences the internal dialectic between openness and closeness, between conservation and prophecy. This dialectic, while continuously threatening to render it organic with the status quo, also enables the continuous evocation of new energies for critical and creative innovation.

religions is to become those paths that lead men to their fulfillment, however it might be interpreted and the nature of this path or way might be conceived (...) Religion is thus defined by the function that is willing to take on: joining (linking) point x, the human condition currently existing, with the point y, regarded as the state or final destination of the person, or the humanity or the cosmo (...)". 17 By reopening the question of the meaning in relation to existence together with the meanings and forms of the human condition, the religious experience is defined as an actual anti-environment which is extremely relevant for everyone's freedom, believers and nonbelievers. The exclusion of this element from the public sphere turns out to be an untenable claim -as demostrated, over the past two decades, by the fact that the strongest tensions just have come from groups and movements with a religious background, losing the perspective of criticism and freedom.

Therefore, starting from the important recognition of keeping open the question of meaningthat only a fundamentalistic laicité denies, standing on hostile and, in its own way, uncompromising positionsit is possibile to redefine the issue that historically has gone under the name of laicité.

Who cares about freedom -and understands the limits and contradictions that we experience of it as contemporaries -may be willing to recognise that what we can call the "sacred space of the Infinite" should be acknowledged, maintained and preserved, being included in the idea of a common good for eveyonebelievers and nonbelievers.

Against a world that collapses in itself, in which technique is deployed without counterweights and the mere representation mocks reality 18 18 It is significant, in this respect, the fact that many marginal social groups find in consumption the means to employ in order to get out of their state of invisibility (by fully conforming to the spirit of technonihilist capitalism). The high media usage confirms that the more the experience degrades at the actual level, the more it spectacular acting provides an appealing and powerful surrogate. In this way, what turns in the opposite direction is what has traditionally be the "public" space (as place for discussion and deliberation): what becomes "public" is what amplifies individual experiences (including the desire to become the star of a reality show) and represents them on a lighted stage, setting invisibility apart. But, in this way, the line between reality and virtual world is often unclear.

, this space is a valuable bulwark of freedom right in redesigning the reference to the transcendent, allowing to take distances from historical configurations that are built on reductive anthropological views. In a world that is closed and dragged by its systems of power and absolute immanence, preserving the transcendent spaces following ancient traditions that take care of an immense source of knowledge and wisdom should be seen as a deeply "lay act" able to qualify, in a positive way, the public sphere of advanced societies. Such act of freedom

has the merit to recover and respect that uniquely human trait -the ability of transcendence, of taking critical distance -which allow to retrieve a relational view of the human being (constitutively related to something other than itself: another Self, the world, history, what is beyond), vision put aside by the exaltation of a self-referential Ego and a social model that has pursued the expansion of the individual will to power, economics, technology, beyond limits, bonds, shared responsibility for the future.

In such way, the idea of the "sacred space of the Infinite" also implies the recognition that the religious experience lives two inseparable moments (moments that also characterise us): on the one hand, the personal and solitary moment, where there is the single man and his conscience, and where, therefore, each of us is called to give personal responses to interpellations which come to us, and, on the other hand, the collective-institutional moment, in which such experience is divided into shared and historical forms, ways of living, with reference to issues affecting human co-existence at present and in the future.

The liberal assertion that religion is only a private matter denies the fact that all societies -even though in different ways -have questioned about the issue of the Infinity. Simply because such a questionwhatever the answer -concerns the human condition 19 . Of course this opens up important questions regarding the public sphere and its reorganisation. The history of modernity bequeath us the awareness that no religion (as well as no ideology, culture or tradition) can reasonably expect to exhaust the universal breadth of human experience. And yet, this does not mean that it is not worth taking into account these great traditions as precious spaces to build a richer social world and, therefore, more suitable conditions for human freedomfor mature freedom. 19 It is useful to recall, in this respect, a Georg Simmel's reflection presenting some similarities with the redefinition of "secularism" thar we have pointed out as the essential path for the enhancement of the religious experience in its being anti-environment against technonihilism logics. When Simmel develops his analysis of freedom intends to retrieve the horizon in which the subject retains its value without, however, occupying the whole scene. And he imagines that it is the horizon of transcendence, in which the individual can transcend himself first and does not take refuge in the nostalgia of the past, but is open to the possibilities of his own time without being uncritically subjected to them and totally covering up the question of meaning. The tension to trascendence always accompanies the human being, which, Simmel states, has always been aware of values and realities that are not fully included in the limited space of its subjective existence (see Simmel, 1918 [1938]). Moreover, Simmel -in his criticism to modernity -outlines a possible way out not actually from a political or cultural perspective, but with reference to the ability to recover, in social life, spaces capable to take into account transcendence, given that the latter is typical to the human being: the religious experience is, for Simmel, a good example in this respect.

10   Global

11   Year

The recognition of the collective value of the sacred space of the Infinite, for example, may create a more favorable condition to the development of the intercultural and interreligious dialogue of which our present urgently needs. In fact, it requires to go fast through that path, which has only be created at the moment, concerning the encounter-dialogue between religions, ideologies and world views; encounterdialogue that is an actual human imperative of our time and that may be deployed not only horizontallybetween different conceptions of values -but also vertically, namely by considering the structural openess of the human being to transcendence, openess to which every culture and religion offers answers and different realisations.

The value attribution to the sacred space of the Infinity opens also the crucial question of the relationship between the religious and other spheres of social life. This space does not exclude the religious from public life: in this way, it is freed from the function of being the compensatory receptacle of those problematic consequences of the development models that succeed over time, function that however keeps it essentially unable to distance itself from the principles of those models and to assume its complexity. Rather, the sacred space of the Infinite -right through the new understanding of laïcité -becomes a valuable "antienvironment" that allow to always reopen the question of sense of collective co-existence and of the multiple human and historical achievements.

Its potentiality comes into play both in challenging dogmatisms that even in a free society eventually rise, and in fighting the remaining fundamentalism that becomes more likely the more the demand for meaning arisen by religion is censored (in fact, actually, no other sphere of life is able to deal with

In overcoming the conception of religion as something that comes on stage only in the second place (mostly in order to 'make sacred', namely justify, the symbolic universe that a given society builds, according to the projective mechanism analysed by Durkheim), the recognition of the sacred space of the Infinity helps to break the rules of equivalence, showing itself as a source of value that can fight back the selfdestructive outcome of advanced democracies.

At the same time, by keeping alive the transcendent dimension in social life, the sacred space of the Infinite drives the same religious experience not to be exhausted in a socially defined and definitive organisation, but positively dialogue with the world and historical worlds, acting as the dimension that preserves a different point of view, in so far as conceived in terms of dialogue, in relation to historical forms of collective life.

In this way, it helps to point out the need for different responses, not only technical, to those questions that are not actually technical.

535 **12   Global Journal of Human Social Science**
Volume XII Issue X Version I [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6] [7] [8]

Figure 1:

536

[Berger ()] *A Rumor of Angels. Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, P L Berger . 1969. Garden City; Doubleday Anchor.

[Cappelletti and Martinelli ()] *Animare la città*, P Cappelletti , M Martinelli . 2011. Trento: Erikson. (It.)

[Habermas and Ratzinger ()] *Dialektik der Säkularisierung. Über Vernunft und Religion*, J Habermas , J Ratzinger . 2005. Freiburg i. Br: Verlag Herder.

[Introvigne and Stark ()] *Dio è tornato: indagine sulla rivincita delle religioni in Occidente*, M Introvigne , R Stark . 2003. Casale Monferrato: Piemme. (It.)

[Foucault ()] M Foucault . *Eterotopia. Luoghi e nonluoghi metropolitani*, (Milano) 1994. Mimesis. (It.)

[Giddens ()] A Giddens . *Le trasformazioni dell'intimità*, (Bologna: Il Mulino) 2008.

[Magatti and Debenedittis ()] *I nuovi ceti popolari*, M Magatti , M Debenedittis . 2006. Milano: Feltrinelli. (It.)

[Girard ()] *Il risentimento, Milano: Cortina*, R Girard . 1999. (It.)

[Simmel (ed.) ()] *Intuizione della vita (Quattro capitoli metafisici)*, G Simmel . Bompiani 31. Taylor, C. (ed.) 1938. 1938. 2007. Milano; Cambridge. (A secular Age)

[Martinelli (ed.) ()] *L'altra libertà*, M Martinelli . Vita e Pensiero (ed.) 2011. Milano. (Saggio su Georg Simmel. It.)

[Acquaviva (ed.) ()] *L'eclissi del sacro nella società industriale: dissacrazione e secolarizzazione nella socità industriale e post-industriale*, S Acquaviva . Edizioni di Comunità (ed.) 1961. Milano. (It.)

[Pine and Gilmore ()] *L'economia delle esperienze*, B J Pine , J H Gilmore . 2000. Milano: Etas Libri.

[Magatti ()] *La città abbandonata. Dove sono e come cambiano le periferie italiane*, M Magatti . 2007. Bologna: Il Mulino. (It.)

[Magatti ()] *La grande contrazione. I fallimenti della libertà e le vie del suo riscatto*, M Magatti . 2012. Bologna: Il Mulino. (It.)

[Hervieu-Léger ()] *La religion pour mémoire*, D Hervieu-Léger . 1993. Paris: Cerf.

[Lamberti ()] E Lamberti . *Marshall McLuhan. Tra letteratura, arte e media*, (Milano) 2000. Mondadori. (It.)

[Magatti ()] *Libertà immaginaria. Le illusioni del capitalismo tecno-nichilista*, M Magatti . 2009. Milano: Feltrinelli (It.

[Malinowski ()] *Magic, Science and Religion and Other Essays*, B Malinowski . 1948. USA: Free Press.

[Lull ()] *Media, communication and culture. A global approach*, J Lull . 2000. Cambridge: Polity Press.

[Martino ()] *Morte e pianto rituale nel mondo antico*, De Martino , E . 1958. Torino: Einaudi. (It.)

[Casanova ()] *Oltre la secolarizzazione. Le religioni alla riconquista della sfera pubblica*, J Casanova . 2000. Bologna: Il Mulino. (It.)

[Casanova ()] *Public Religions in the Modern World*, J Casanova . 1994. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

[Hervieu-Léger (ed.) ()] *Religione e memoria*, D Hervieu-Léger . Il Mulino (ed.) 1996. Bologna. (It.)

[Giaccardi ()] 'Segnature" per una critica delle inversioni invertite'. C Giaccardi . *Risentimento, perdono e riconciliazione nelle relazioni sociali*, F G Paleari, S Tomelleri (ed.) (Roma) 2008. Carocci Ed. p. . (Dall'ebbrezza al risentimento. It.)

[Nietszsche (ed.) ()] *The Gay Science*, F Nietszsche . Walter Kaufman (ed.) 1974. New York. (Random House)

[Casement and Tracey ()] *The idea of the numinous. Contemporary Jungian and psychoanalytic perspectives*, A Casement , D Tracey . 2006. Oxford. p. Routledge.

[Panikkar ()] *Vita e parola. La mia opera*, R Panikkar . 2010. Milano: Jaca Book.