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Specters of Secularism – Remarks on (the Loss of) Religion and its Implications

Abstract: This article (re-)introduces into the current debate the voice of a philosopher who was an outspoken critic of postmodernist thought but whose views on the ongoing meaning of religion for secular societies often come strikingly close to contemporary ideas: Leszek Kołakowski. Arguably the most eminent Polish thinker of the 20th century, Kołakowski was a convinced Marxist as a young man, yet what made him world-famous was his severe criticism of Marxist ideology and its historical determinism. Developing over the course of time a growing scepticism towards the promises of Enlightenment thought and political utopianism in general, the question of religion became more and more crucial for his reflections.

Key words: Kołakowski, secularism, faith, utopian thought, de-mythologization

Povzetek: **Prikazni sekularizma – pripombe o (izgubljeni) religiji in njenih posledicah**

Članek v sodobne razprave uvaja glas filozofa, ki je bil odkrit kritik postmodernistične misli, hkrati pa se njegova stališča o pomenu religije za sekularne družbe pogosto zelo približajo sodobnim idejam. To je Leszek Kołakowski, verjetno najbolj ugledni poljski mislec 20. stoletja, ki je bil kot mladenič prepričan marksist, svetovno znan pa je postal po zaslugi korenite kritike marksistične ideologije in njenega zgodovinskega determinizma. Zaradi naraščajočega skepticizma v zvezi z obljubami razsvetljenske misli in političnega utopizma na splošno je vprašanje religije v njegovih razmišljanjih postopoma zavzemalo vedno pomembnejše mesto.

Ključne besede: Kołakowski, sekularizem, vera, utopična misel, demitologizacija

1. Introduction

Religion's place in the modern world is contested and poses one of the most fervently debated questions of our time.[1] All too often and all too easily religious

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worldviews and the demands of modernity are seen as mutually exclusive, thereby nurturing fatal processes of allegations and confrontation. Looking at the frequent and omnipresent cases regarding the (mis)use of religious ideas for political regimes or for all kind of violent attacks, it seems superfluous to point out examples of the conflicts of modern society and religious worldviews or to furthermore illustrate their apparent clash. What is needed all the more is the attempt to grasp intellectually the fatal dynamics fostering these developments. The apparent clash is by no means restricted to terror attacks or war-scenarios in the name of religion – they are but the most striking articulations of a much more fundamental tension.

Similar tensions between religion(s) and secular societies can be detected in current debates about the head scarf or generally about the place of Islam in Western states, in the heated controversies about the ban of religious symbols in public buildings or about religious education in schools.

Most fatal are processes of a certain encapsulation, i.e. the closing off from views and values that oppose or simply disturb one's own worldview. On the one hand, looked at from inside of religious worldviews, the public pressure on religion is felt as repression and a denial of its right to exist. This paves the way for all kind of radicalizations and simplifications. A religion deprived of its cultural and societal rooting is more likely to fall prey to the stubborn insistence on its own dogmatic supremacy and will enforce it by almost any means. French political scientist Olivier Roy has famously described this as »holy ignorance« (2008). A similar story is told by an exemplary look at the individual biographies of young European jihadists, indicating that a surprisingly high percentage of them did not grow up in a specifically religious environment. It seems that for them, it is precisely the lack of a »cultural« rooting in religion that enables processes of ignorant radicalization. (Manemann 2015)

On the other hand, in the eyes of the secular-scientific worldview, violent attacks committed in the name of (a) religion and totalitarian systems with a religious (or seemingly religious) motivation only confirm the negative reservations against any kind of religion. They motivate the outright denial of religion's meaning for today and thereby push religion even further back into its niche of seclusion. Religion's dogmatic self-immunization then only seems to underline its apparent incompatibility with the modern world.

Yet, this vicious circle is not only harmful for the self-conception of religion, it also deprives the secular world itself of a great deal of its historical and cultural sources. As a result, the dominant intellectual landscape of our globalized world becomes ever more bereft of explicit religious references or any religious »input«. Jean-Luc Nancy, who is obviously not one of the usual suspects for the defence of religious orthodoxy or traditional values, has characterized this process as the formation of a »wasteland of sense and truth« (2008, 4). Thus, it might seem justified to hold that it is one of the preeminent tasks of philosophy today to rethink the relation of religion and modernity and work towards their mutual disclosure

or, to use the term of Nancy, towards their dis-enclosure, i.e. a breakup of the encapsulating forces that seem to determine current developments.

What the debate needs philosophically is a breaking free from the constraints of theism and/or atheism. It is not only the proximity of the two terms in logics (one is simply the negation of the other), but rather the dogmatic character of both standpoints that retains the essence of what it negates. If, to quote Nancy once more, »all contemporary thinking« will once be seen as »a slow and heavy gravitational movement around the black sun of atheism« (18), then this diagnosis mainly addresses the all too subtractive and defective character of atheism, which remains blind and deaf to the religious »input« – even against its own will. Such statement does therefore not entail an affirmation of theism, it rather points at the lack of capability and will to think beyond, or in-between, the old dichotomies.

More than ever, the contemporary world, especially in the European and Western context, is »in between«, i.e., between secularization and religion, between atheism and theism. The philosophical challenge posed by this situation is the attempt to overcome the biased understanding of religion. Jacques Derrida's thought might be seen as an almost paradigmatic approach to undermine old dichotomies and to abridge »Faith« and »Knowledge« anew at the limits of mere reason, to allude to the title of one of his most articulate works on religion (2002).

Gianni Vattimo's post-metaphysical (»weak«) ontology with its projection of a non-violent, non-absolute religion (1999) or Jean-Luc Nancy's attempt at a »deconstruction of Christianity« (2008; 2013) articulate parallel and partly overlapping projects. Likewise, similar ideas are expressed more recently in theorems such as Richard Kearney's »anatheism«, the attempt of a return to God »after« God (2011), or John Caputo's »theology of perhaps« (2006; 2013).

Offering different strategies to newly define religion in the world today and to philosophically rethink its place, the common factor of all these theories is that they are ontologically and epistemologically »weak« (to use *Vattimo's concept*), i.e. they take anti-metaphysical stances and try to develop relativist notions of truth. This relativizing move might be seen as typically »postmodern«, yet it is obviously not tantamount to advocating epistemological arbitrariness, as critics continue to insinuate. Looked at positively, the »weakness« entails a liberating potential that gives way to undermining claims to absolute truth. In regards to the debate on religion, this has an ambivalent effect: on the one hand, though not directly rehabilitating or re-establishing religious beliefs themselves, it refurbishes religion's autonomy and the eligibility of religious worldviews. What these »postmodern« theories offer to religion, is an intellectual escape, a liberation from the totalizing pretensions of modernity and its self-proclaimed exclusive entitlement to »enlightened« and »sober« thinking as well as from its utopian belief in progress and ultimate solutions that will ultimately make religion dispensable. Yet, on the other hand, it is the same relativizing potential of postmodern thought that is considered to be a severe undermining of religion(s) as such. It is precise-

ly the strong epistemological and ontological claims of religious convictions that become questioned by any kind of »weak« thinking. Summing up widespread concerns, one might come to the conclusion that postmodernism is nothing but »an acid corroding traditional Western beliefs and able to eat away at other explanations of what goes on in the world« (Stråth and Witoszek 1999, 9).

The aim of this paper is to (re)introduce into the debate the voice of a philosopher who was an outspoken critic of postmodernist thought but whose views on the ongoing meaning of religion for secular societies often come strikingly close to the outlined contemporary considerations: Leszek Kołakowski (1927–2009). He was arguably the most eminent Polish thinker of the 20th century, and was a convinced Marxist as a young man. Yet what made him world-famous was his severe criticism of Marxist ideology and its historical determinism. Developing over the course of time a growing scepticism towards the promises of Enlightenment thought and political utopianism in general, the question of religion became more and more crucial for his reflections.

While Kołakowski's reservations against postmodernism might also have to do with an underlying political conservativism of his thought, it is also evident that much of his tangible critique is articulated from the perspective of a historian of ideas (rather than a philosopher) who questions postmodernism's all-too easy and all-too fast adaptation of historical thought patterns. It is also from this standpoint as a scrupulous historian of ideas that the ongoing presence and meaning of religious attitudes, convictions and beliefs is analysed. It seems that Kołakowski's work in this regard follows a twofold strategy and entails a double message, the essence of which is formulated in the heading of this article with the help of the ambiguous title Spectres of Secularism. Unfolding this twofold strategy, the following considerations try to show that the double meaning of »spectre« also alludes to a double way of answering to the challenges of secularism. As will furthermore become clear, the analyses of Kołakowski that very often start off from a historical and seemingly descriptive point of view, easily tend to become a general diagnosis of our time, developing from descriptive findings into prescriptive strategy and sometimes, for good or bad, even retaining undertones of an almost prophetic character.

2. The illusions of demythologization

To right away tackle a crucial question of Kołakowski's reflections on religion and modernity, it seems conducive to start with a lecture that the Polish thinker gave in Vienna in 1988. Kołakowski – by that time already a well-known Senior Fellow at Oxford's All Souls College and a philosopher of worldwide distinction – had chosen the German title Die Illusionen der Entmythologisierung (Illusions of Demythologization) for his talk.[2] As already indicated by this heading, the lecture

[2] A shortened version of the lecture (in German) appeared in the Newsletter of the Institute for Human

seeks a direct confrontation with Rudolf Bultmann's famous paradigm of »demythologization«. More specific, it closely links up to the ensuing debate between the theologian Bultmann and the philosopher Karl Jaspers on the possibility, or rather impossibility, of a »demythologized« Christianity, i.e. a dispute basically trying to answer the question: can we conceive of a religious belief that is compatible with the modern world, compatible with scientific rationalism and consequently »acceptable« for a modern human being who doesn't want to be ridiculed by his/her belief in the residues of unclarified mythology and superstition?

A first, yet highly telling observation can already be made by just letting the title resonate: Illusions of Demythologization – a title that is typical for Kołakowski, both in wit and message. One might easily imagine someone criticizing the idea of demythologization by saying that it encounters certain obstacles or that it fails to keep its promises etc. Yet to attest to it, as Kołakowski does, that precisely the effort of demythologization is built on illusions, is obviously the most devastating and funny verdict – like stating that a doctor who is handling her medical instrument solemnly and earnestly has in fact taken it out of the children's toy-box. Her »medical results« would be as reliable as the children's examinations, only that the fun and imaginary power of their playing has been lost. Already the title's four words thereby articulate the leading hypothesis that all attempts to clarify, to lighten and enlighten the illusions of mythology are themselves illusory – and maybe more illusory than what they were meant to surpass and outbid. This conviction nicely resonates with a comment from an interview that Kołakowski gave in 1991, i.e. in the same period as his Vienna lecture. Asked whether we are living out the waning days of the last modern century, his answer is biding, yet clear: »We are living through the realization that many rationally constructed predictions made in the 19th century are more wrong than the so-called illusions they were trying to dispel.« (1)

Consequently, it is no surprise that in reference to the Bultmann-Jaspers debate, Kołakowski is more on the side of Jaspers who argued that the attempt to make religion scientifically respectable is doomed to failure. For Jaspers, the endeavor to adjust Christianity to what is compatible with contemporary science is hopeless, because it requires a translation of belief into the language of rational metaphysics or philosophy, thereby losing its mythical essence and imaginary power.

The biblical stories of healings and miracles, the manifold references to divination and prophetic speech, even the rising of Christ and the apparitions to his followers – all this becomes denounced by Bultmann's approach as »mythological« and is in need to be enlightened by modern, rational thinking. The only remaining content of Christianity, the only belief that remains valid is the one conviction that God became incarnated, and it is the existential decision of every

Sciences, the hosting institution (February/March 1988). The full article was later on published in English as a chapter in the book *Modernity on Endless Trial* (Kołakowski 1990), there entitled (in singular) The Illusion of Demythologization.

human being to accept this as his/her belief. Bultmann thereby »existentializes« belief, framing it as the philosophy of an »absolute decision«. It is here where the sharp criticism of the philosopher Jaspers sets in – a criticism that hasn't lost any of its clairvoyance and convincing power. It is not only that Bultmann's approach discredits everything that Christian believers of all times have firmly adhered to, but it also demands that his, i.e. the professor of theology Rudolf Bultmann's, interpretation is accepted as the absolute either-or. Famously, the philosopher Jaspers answers to the theologian Bultmann:

> »Wie dürftig und spracharm unser Dasein, wenn mythische Sprache nicht in ihm gilt, und wie unwahr, wenn die unumgängliche mythische Denkweise mit albernen Inhalten erfüllt wird. Die Herrlichkeit und das Wunder der mythischen Anschauung muss gereinigt, aber nicht abgeschafft werden. Entmythologisierung ist fast ein blasphemisches Wort. Es ist nicht Aufklärung, sondern Aufkläricht, was das Wort Mythos so entwerten kann.« (Jaspers and Bultmann 1954, 19)[3]

It is not only the loss of mythology's rich existential meanings, its powerful language and the splendor of its images that the philosopher Jaspers brings to attention. The argument can also be extended to the alleged recipient of this rationalized belief: What precisely characterizes the »modern man« for whom the »translation« or »interpretation« of the biblical message would be made? Do modern people indeed believe in absurdities any less than the ancients? Kołakowski whole-heartedly takes up this argument by Jaspers and asks rhetorically: Did the millions of »modern men« who believed in the doctrines of Nazism or of Communism prove that they acted as rational beings immune to superstition? (1990, 104)

In this sense, Jaspers and Kołakowski both agree on a double criticism: demythologization is an impossible undertaking regarding the process of »translation« (it is »illusory« – the only result is that mythological thought becomes translated into »silly« assumptions) as well as its possible addressee who is constructed as an idealized rational entity that has little to do with human beings of our time: »Our worship of science, as Jaspers rightly says, does not make us ›rational‹ in any other sense; we are not less superstitious than our ancestors of two millennia ago.« (105)

Crucial for Bultmann's approach is also the conviction that it is impossible for modern man to think of spatial structures still in the same way as the ancients: the abode of angels and God in the sky »above us« seem imaginary residues of the past that don't fit any longer with the technical age of space travel. Yet, according to Bultmann, what is still possible and acceptable, would be a form of belief in the existential meaning of Christianity and its relational character, i.e. the

[3] Not only does the philosopher here defend mythology (considering mythic thought as »inescapable«), but even praises its »marvel« and »splendor«. To characterize the concept of demythologization as an »almost blasphemous word« is another funny punch line on the self-proclaimed enlighteners of religion. It is, as the final sentence then holds, not enlightenment that devalues mythology, but »Aufkläricht« – an artificially coined word that seemingly goes back to Lessing, alluding to a shallow and superficial form of enlightenment as well as carrying the connotation of »Kehricht«, i.e. rubbish.

experience of the Divine Word as an aspect of my own being here and now or as the experience of a personal encounter with God. But why is it considered to be any less mythological to say that Jesus is God's Word instead of holding he is God's Son? Is it not so that generally any religious experience – and be it the most personal and »existentialized« encounter with God – is not expressible in rational discourse and *per se* remains »mythological«?

While these questions pose a serious challenge to the intellectual consistency of Bultmann's undertaking, there is also another aspect that should not be dismissed, namely the pastoral context in which Bultmann (or any other religious representative) is confronted with the nagging questions of a »modern (un)believer« and maybe has no other answer than exactly this »existentialist escape«. Trying not to underestimate the pastoral dilemma of contemporary theology, Kołakowski corroborates this necessity with the example of a Polish priest whom, as he writes, he was talking to shortly after Pope Paul VI. had confirmed the traditional teaching of the Catholic church on the devil. In their conversation, Kołakowski expressed his firm satisfaction with the pope's claim, telling how »very happy« he is with it – and who has known Kołakowski personally, can easily imagine his devilish joy in making this unfashionable statement about the devil. Yet the baffled priest could only say something like: »Yes, it's easy for you to talk, since you don't have to go and explain this to the people.« How should the good-hearted and loyal priest defend something that even he himself did not believe in? Why, asks Kołakowski, is it still somewhat respectable to believe in God but not in the devil, although devils or angels are disincarnated but finite and intelligent beings that are much easier to grasp and with whom it is easier to imagine actually encountering one day than it is with God?

The answer seems clear: It is precisely the tangible and concrete character of their being that makes belief in them difficult. The very same is the case with the different notions of God, namely

> »to the extent that God is still respectable, it is not a Christian God but a deists' or pantheists' God; a vague notion of a great mind, or a giant computer /… /. The Christian God, providential wisdom, a God who is a person in a recognizable sense, who cares about human creatures and intervenes in their lives, is not respectable at all. Is He unacceptable to science? I don't think so, He is unacceptable to scientistic rationalism which /… / is a philosophical doctrine and not science itself.« (1990, 105)

Such statements clearly refuse a superficial escape strategy of »somehow« making the idea of God and the manifold implications of religion compatible with the modern world. This strategy for Kołakowski is an all-too easy retreat into the foggy land of »there is something«, »there is a force«, »there is some principle« etc. (i.e. basically the surrogate-God of early modern philosophers). His recapitulation of the »demythologization debate« could be summarized in a double criticism: (1) It is an illusory debate in the sense that only a stupidly narrow-minded

and blind scientific rationalism can conceive of modernity as an utterly demythologized and fully rationalized epoch: the modern age of science would like to think of itself as an »enlightened« period, yet its self-proclaimed ideology has proven to be at least as prone to superstition and deterministic fatalism as the criticized »mythology« of religion. (2) It is – to take up the word of Karl Jaspers – a blasphemous debate, whereby »blasphemous« is to be regarded more in a philosophical than religious sense. Not only does the attempt to demythologize religion devaluate almost everything that believers of all times have adhered to historically, it also deprives the religious worldview precisely of its depository of meaning and sense-bestowal that might be an alternative input for the contemporary world and its slow and heavy gravitation around »the black sun of atheism«. It is in keeping with this double criticism that Kołakowski insists on a rather comprehensive notion of (Christian) religion, which has far reaching cognitive as well as moral implications and also doesn't refrain from a serious discussion of metaphysical concepts such as eternity or the idea of afterlife. This pondering over the manifold implications of religion and their ongoing meaning for the modern world is a constant concern of his reflections.

3. Death of utopia, or: distrust in the salvific power of modern ideologies

Kołakowski's writings on religion and secularism have to be read against the broader background of his life-long studies in the history of ideas. The work that made him internationally famous was *Main Currents of Marxism* (1976), a comprehensive study in three volumes that was first published in Polish but soon after translated into many languages, shaping Kołakowski's reputation as one of the most profound experts as well as one of the most outspoken critics of Marxist thought and its intellectual offspring.

One highly remarkable aspect of these volumes is that they offer a wide spectrum of approaches, from detailed historical analyses and philosophical exegesis to wonderfully ironic accounts of the excesses of Soviet ideology or the literary depiction of episodes (like telling how Stalin became the greatest philologist of all times). However, the picture remains still incomplete if one does not add to it the biographical context: The critique of Kołakowski is that of a once convinced Marxist and member of the Communist party – a man who, as a student, worked as an assistant for leading orthodox Marxist professors in post-war Poland and still dedicated his dissertation in 1953 to a Marxist interpretation of Spinoza. After first becoming a »revisionist Marxist«, i.e. favoring a humanistic interpretation of Marx over the Soviet ideology of his time, he gradually distanced himself from Marxist doctrine altogether, considering even Stalinist totalitarianism not as an aberration but as the logical offspring of Marxist thought. His critique of Marxism must therefore be read as the story of a disillusioning and the disappointment of a once believer in the utopian ideals and the salvific powers of modern humanitarian ideas.

In this regard, his deliberations on secularism and the role of religion in modernity form part of a dual undertaking the two sides of which are intertwined: the question of the modernity of religion (1) appears as the echo of an accompanying reflection that examines the religion(s) of modernity (2), i.e. the religious dimension of modernity itself, its quasi-religious belief in the liberating power of rationalism, scientific advance and political ideologies. It is obvious that in Kołakowski's work there is a constant awareness for the simultaneous presence and the intertwining of both aspects, yet one also can discern clearly a certain chronological order in emphasizing the different sides: while he starts with a critique of modern secular ideologies (i.e. the quasi-religious surrogates of modernity), his intellectual endeavor becomes gradually more and more dedicated to a re-thinking of the original religious impulses and their ongoing meaning for the (allegedly) secularized world.

Just one example in this context might suffice to indicate the proximity of both strands not only in Kołakowski's thought but in their resemblance as phenomena. This is the striking case of Soviet biologist and geneticist Trofim Lyssenko which is cited in length in his critical study. Lyssenko claimed to have »revolutionized« genetics by overcoming the »bourgeois« theories of Mendel and turning them into »Soviet genetics«. Allegedly it is the environment solely that decides about a plant's growing, so following this theory even wheat supposedly could be turned into ray, and vice versa. Lyssenko conducted several experiments, most of which were ostentatiously failing, yet nevertheless in the 1930's and 1940's had an incredible success among the Soviet cadres. His theories were full of wrong deductions and intentional falsifications (»mathematics has no place in biology«, is quoted as one of his assumptions), but as Kołakowski poignantly comments:

> »It was not hard to convince the party leaders and Stalin himself that a theory which rejected the ›immortal substance of heredity‹ and proclaimed that living organisms could be altered to any desired extent by environmental changes was in accordance with Marxism-Leninism and was admirably suited to the ideology which maintained that human beings, especially ›Soviet man‹, could transform nature in any way they had a mind to.« (1978, 102)

Lyssenko's theories achieved complete triumph among the state authorities, even to such a degree that eminent geneticists who refused to subscribe to his convictions were arrested and sent to concentration camps. A particularly notable detail of Lyssenko's theories was his idea that plants are self-sacrificing, so that they would not die due to a lack of sunlight or water, but in order to make other healthy plants live on, depositing themselves over the growing roots and thereby helping the others survive. It is not difficult to imagine the success of such ideology in a society that not only called for individual sacrifice but was almost obsessed with it and installed the idea of sacrifice as standard rhetoric for future »progress«. The echoing of religious hopes and the quasi-religious appeals to sacrifice seem an all-too obvious ingredient of this remarkable case.

While utter inefficiency was the reality of Soviet economy, Lyssenko's theories formulate a credo of efficiency that declares certain branches of science useless, yet at the same time develops a totally uncritical and fully auto-immunized rhetoric and narrative about its own breakthroughs and successes. It is – and this is a crucial extension of Kołakowski's retelling of this case – a very insightful reading for any time, when replacing Marxism or Soviet Man with other catchwords. And it creates an immediate awareness of the fact of how close a step it is from the adoration of rationality to the prevalence of utter absurdity.

4. Spectres of secularism, or: the incessant presence and necessity of religion

As a scrupulous historian of ideas, Kołakowski is dealing with numerous examples for the persistent influence of religious ideas in the secular world. In this regard, his work examines the questions of how, where, and to what degree religion factually is still part of the intellectual setup of the secularized world, be it knowingly or unknowingly, admittedly or tacitly. Yet, to a considerable extent these genealogical investigations in his work become accompanied or even superseded by normative-philosophical considerations that not only delineate intellectual developments, but are guided by the question as to how far religious elements should still (or again) shape contemporary conceptions of the world.

When being forced to phrase Kołakowski's basic attitude with the shortest possible formula, one might say that all of his work is a dispute over the spectres of secularism – this is not a formulation that he himself ever uses, but it is a great expression to catch a double phenomenon or a duality of related patterns.

(1) The immediate meaning of the word »spectre« hints at something that is unreal, ghostlike, what has no substance and no body, yet is nevertheless present in a puzzling or disturbing manner often without being fully understood. It is in this sense, that Kołakowski, the historian of ideas, untiringly delineates the presence and the meaning of religious heritage. Especially the »secularization-thesis« in sociology is heavily called into question – what, in fact, does this thesis mean? If based on the somewhat measurable numbers of church-goers and active participation in religious activities, it is surely visible. But it is the extrapolation and extension of such results into the future that is problematic. Following the same extrapolation from a curve, one would also come to the nonsense-assumption that in the near future the number of university graduates will exceed the number of human beings. (1990, 63) Or, to point at a historical example, there is also another comparison that runs counter to such generalizations: In the 19th century most scholars clearly would have predicted the imminent extinction of nationalism, yet as it turned out, nationalism not only fatally overshadowed the history of the 20th century, but also has survived into a phenomenon that we are still – and some might say increasingly – struggling with today. The general problem with such predictions based on sociological observation is their deterministic character.

We should, as Kołakowski repeatedly insists, be more cautious with claims to historical necessity, since it is often attributed to events, but becomes really plausible only after these events have happened. Yet it is not only the questioning of statistics and historical extrapolations that look problematic to Kołakowski. Can a multi-faceted phenomenon such as secularization ever be captured by sociological data and statistics? At least, it is a development that embraces a great number of different issues and it is far from clear how the whole process can be measured or what its deeper dimensions are. As was already held in the context of the Jaspers-Bultmann controversy, the alleged rationalization of modern age is a highly doubtful assumption. Even if statistics might indicate a loss of religious bonds (i.e. religious practices in communities, attendance of services etc.), this so-called »secularization« doesn't say anything at all about the persistence or non-persistence of religious ideas, patterns, needs, values. At least, as Kołakowski stated in an interview from 1991, it is sure that secularization »hasn't eradicated religious needs«. And turning from diagnosis to providence, he even more strikingly generalizes: »The survival of our religious heritage is the condition for the survival of civilization.« (1)

(2) This final statement already intersects with the second meaning of »spectres of secularism«, namely a broader and radicalized rendering of this formulation. The word »spectre« does not only refer to a ghost-like or invisible existence, it may also indicate something gruesome, a menace or a threat – very much in the way Karl Marx in his *Communist Manifesto* rhetorically invokes the spectre's uncanny power. But while Marx speaks of spectre as a powerful rhetoric device to frighten the enemies of Communism, it obtains a nightmarish quality in Kołakowski. To him, a fully realized secularization would be tantamount to »the sanctioning of force and violence and thereby, finally, of despotism and the destruction of culture« (1990, 73).

It is with claims like this one that his studies turn away from historical analysis and embrace a certain cultural criticism in the diagnosis of our time. One might also disapprove that some of his assertions are too clear-cut and straightforward, not making any big efforts for detailed argumentation but instead indulging in broad and not always closely interconnected statements. Yet it is quite clear what is behind Kołakowski's criticism, namely the conclusions from his passionate struggle with the promises of Marxist thought. Any ideology which builds on patterns of total human autonomy and liberation is prone to the same mechanisms of despotism and destruction. It might be that the realization of the Promethean project is a long-term human dream, or that the utopia of man's perfect autonomy and unlimited perfection still looks promising to many people of today. But for Kołakwoski who shared these dreams for a significant period of his life, unrestricted human liberation and autonomy in the end will always prove to be nothing but a nightmarish unleashing of forces and the sanctioning of violence, thereby unmasking itself, as Kołakowski holds, as »the most efficient instrument of suicide« (73).

In the title of one of his best known essays, he depicts this suicidal tendency straightforward as: *The Revenge of the Sacred in Secular Culture* (1990). Since se-

cularization is tantamount to the blurring of any difference between the sacred and the profane, the immediate consequence is that everything becomes sacred or, which is the same, that nothing is sacred anymore. However, once nothing is sacred, all borders and limitations to the uncompromising self-realization of human beings have disappeared: »To reject the sacred is to reject our own limits.« (73) What might sound not too bad for everybody adhering to the Promethean dream of liberation and perfection, develops its nightmarish consequences in regards to the disappearance of all moral restrictions that are, according to his criticism, fully dependent on religious experience:

> »In an experience which is not enlightened by divine wisdom, good and evil, as distinct from pleasure and pain, do not appear: we may know suffering, fear and death but we know them as natural facts, as something to be avoided. We owe the moral distinction to our participation in taboos.« (2001, 187)

The absence of morality and its destructive consequences for human society could therefore be interpreted as the »revenge« of the sacred in secular culture. The more this revenge will be felt as painful, the more one might be willing to join Kołakowski's interpretation of the spectre of secularism as something threatful and gruesome. Yet it is the bottom line of his account of religion that religious experience should never be reduced to a single epistemological, moral or metaphysical reality:

> »Religion is not a set of propositions, it is the realm of worship wherein understanding, knowledge, the feeling of participation in the ultimate reality /… / and moral commitment appear as a single act.« (165)

Any attempt at their segregation would therefore distort the original act of worship. Accordingly, one might end on the note that the most eminent and most threatful »spectre of secularism« is the modern distortion of religion into sentiments, socially useful convictions, moral ingredients and untenable metaphysical claims.

In the introductory part to his *Modernity on Endless Trial*, Kołakowski coins a sentence that could be considered the counter-motto to this approach: »To spread faith, faith is needed and not an intellectual assertion of the social utility of faith.« (1990, 9) It is a telling comment on modernity‘s attempts to »dissect« and »demythologize« religion, also involving a good portion of self-irony regarding the philosopher‘s and historian‘s efforts to come to terms with religion. Yet more than anything it is the dictum of a skeptic believer who had long put his hope in human utopia, but eventually came to believe that belief is more than the dream of perfection.

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