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# THE NATION AS RELIGION*

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**Abstract:** The original forms of social organisation show the close interdependence between political and religious systems. The religious pregnancy attributed to the phenomenon of nationality is part of that scenery of genealogical proximity between the political and the religious. The founding myths through which nationalities legitimize and consecrate themselves are just one of the various ways of conferring religious dimension to the national reality. Being a creation of modern times, the national spirit follows and spreads at the same time that the process of secularization of the already been designated.

**Keywords** : Nation, civil religion, secularize, Rousseau, Tocqueville.

## 1. Nation and religious symbolic

The early forms of social organisation show the close interdependence between administration systems and government and religious systems. The religious pregnancy attributed to the phenomenon of nationality is part of that scenery of genealogical proximity between the political and the religious. The founding myths through which nationalities legitimize and consecrate themselves are just one of the various ways of conferring religious dimension to the national reality. But there are others such as the eschatological narratives in which the nation is called to perform a salvation mission or the consecration of heroes like, in the Portuguese case, D. Nuno Álvares Pereira or of anti-heroes like the one defeated at Alcácer-Quibir and the sebastianist mysticism.

As proteiform realities, nations usually think of themselves as being ennobled by very ancient rootings, though being, in many ways, a creation of modern times. Thus, the national spirit follows and spreads at the same time that the post-Christendom process of secularization of the western society intensifies. And the nation assumes, in a paradoxical way, the statute of "God of Modernity" (Josep Llobera). But instead of identifying itself as the god of modernity, shouldn't the nation be seen rather as one, and only one, among the many divinisations worked out by the secularising dynamism?! Haven't the Modern Times known several other substitutes of divinity, the individual subject, the class, the capital, race, science?!

* **Translation:** Aoife Hiney

It is known that the awareness of national formations goes along with the progressive affirmation of modernity and reaches its summit in the frame of the civilizational transformations of the 19th and 20th centuries. In this process, it was possible to witness the emergence of systems of administrative organisation and of identity building which, strengthening the singularity of the national configurations, led them to adopt attitudes of competition with the other peoples. And the movement that reinforced the internal sociability and the will towards a differentiation from the outer universe appealed intensely to the religious valorisation of the unifying bonds of the community. It is thus that the nation even comes to invest itself with some of the common attributes of religions and to unleash ritual and symbolic practices that go far beyond the exterior and analogical imitation of the religious liturgies, identifying itself, in fact, as sacred entity and wrapped in feelings and demonstrations of religious cult.

This essay does not intend to make the history or the political sociology of the western societies. In the last decades the interest of research has been much focused in that study, so much so that important and clarifying contributions in this area are available today. The purpose of this set of reflections is to be considered in the context of the history of ideas and aims at showing how the articulations between the phenomenon of nationalities and their religious configuration were established. Thus, we cross experiences that lead us to the political statute of religion so dear to Marcel Gauchet's sociological discourse. The path drawn for the effect in this intellectual cartography stresses three points: the notion of civil religion formulated by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in The Social Contract, Tocqueville's "religious" reading of the French Revolution, the social construction of the religious forms and its application to the national facts.

## 2. The Civilian Religion

In a letter to Voltaire, dated 18th August 1756, Jean-Jacques Rousseau wrote he wanted that "in each state there was a moral code, a sort of civil profession of faith" (Apud Chevalier, 1979:157). This way, he wanted to guarantee the reinforcement of the solidity and respect for the social spirit consecrated in the laws that should rule life in society.

When The Social Contract was being written, the chapter about civil religion was not part of the initial plan. It came to be written much later and to appear as last chapter, before the work was completed. In this chapter the author draws the guidelines of what he believes to be the historical path of the relations between the theological power and the political power. He starts from that situation in which there is a perfect unity between the divinity and those who represent it in the family groups, a situation existing since the early times and still during the era of the pagan kingdoms. It was,

then, in force the theocracy with gods presiding over the destiny of each city. And when the disputes among rival groups ended in wars among the peoples, those were of political and not of religious nature. Men did not fight to defend the gods of the city. They fought to defend their motherland and expected an equal protection on the part of the gods they called upon as saviours of their people. This state of unity was disrupted with the coming of Christianity that introduced the separation between the religious and the political systems, by demanding to Caesar what is Caesar's and by instituting the kingdom of God, a kingdom that is not of this world.

This historical context supplies the scenery upon which Rousseau's theory about civil religion is going to be elaborated. The author elaborates it by resorting to the deconstruction of the political function of Christianity. He does it in two stages.

In the first stage, he deals precisely with the separation the Christian doctrine establishes between two motherlands, two legislations, two leaders, the kingdom of heavens and the city of men. But the separation does not guarantee autonomy to either of the sides and the conflicts that spring from passions and opposing interests end up by upsetting sociability and sowing discord, putting men against one another and the same man divided within himself. The medieval fights between the Papacy and the Empire and the religious wars, in the 16th and 17th centuries, document through social and cultural tragedies the undesirable effects of the separation. We may then say that Rousseau still lives the nostalgia of the pagan societies where the gods existed for the city and not the city for the gods. But he realizes that the coming of Christianity definitely rendered obsolete the political regime of ancient paganism.

The second stage corresponds to what Rousseau calls the "religion of man", "the pure and simple religion of the Gospel, the true theism" (Rousseau, 1967: 419). In a first approach, this form of religion, wholly inner and applied to the practice of moral perfection, concentrates the sympathy of the well formed spirits. We cannot, however, ignore that there lies in it an enormous and fatal omission: "not having any particular relation with the political body, it leaves to the laws only the strength they take from themselves without adding anything else to them" (Rousseau, 1967: 422). And not only does it not reinforce the normative of the law, but it also attempts, in various ways, on the bonds of sociability. The author of The Social Contract brings to light, then, the diatribes of the philosophy of the Lights against Christianity in general and the Catholic Church in particular. He stresses the decisive character of the Christian spiritualism, seeing in it the disposition to treat the things of temporal and social existence with indifference and lack of effective compromise. And he considers that the Christian's homeland is not of this world. If, in the daily life of societies, Christians also perform

the usual tasks, they do it not out of love for the homeland where they were born but to be able to keep on serving, above all, the kingdom of God. With eyes set on the celestial homeland, everything that happens, for good or bad, is attributed to Providence, thus favouring an attitude of resigned passivity.

It is obvious that he who wants to know, accurately, the implications of political nature contained in the Christian faith, will do very wrong not to go beyond Rousseau's brief strokes. Actually, the doctrinal characterisation we find there must be understood as being clearly wanting in what concerns the social dimension that has always integrated faith and that social Catholicism has been assuming it, with progressive visibility, since the 19th century. But we must recognise he is right when he states that the Gospel does not found any national religion though, in several moments of political history, it has been associated with theocratic attempts. But theocracies, that may have been the first of the regimes when men had no other kings but the gods themselves, multiplied the political societies and their respective gods favouring hatreds, divisions, wars among the peoples. With the national divisions came to life the theological and civilian intolerances.

The enunciation of the principle of separation between the city of God and the city of men seems, according to this analysis, ambivalent. If, on the one hand, it can lead to indifference and alienation in relation to the life of the city, on the other hand it creates conditions for the autonomy from the earthly realities.

The pure religion of the Gospel brought about, in the plan of principles, the assertion of the separation between God and Caesar, between the theological and the political. It is necessary, however, to take it into practice, avoiding all the manoeuvres that have aimed at its perversion, be it in the form of alienation or indifference towards the public matter, be it with attempts to encroach and dominate the governing power on the part of clergymen. To oppose these tendencies, the supremacy of the law must be respected and strengthened. Only then will the adequate running of the political body, the security of the state and the freedom of the citizens be guaranteed.

There is here room for attitudes inherited from behaviours fed by the indoctrination of the traditional religions. But they distinguish themselves as to both the object and the function. The object of those attitudes of faith and cultural veneration is the social reality of the state while motherland and national organisation. And they have as main function to promote morality in the relationship of the citizens among themselves and with the organism of society. It is, therefore, important to the state that the citizens profess a religion that makes them willing to serve the "sanctity of the social contract

and of the laws" and to love their duties. Such is the nature and the reach of the so called civil religion presented by Rousseau in these terms:

> There is, therefore, a purely civil profession of faith of which the sovereign has to establish the articles, not exactly like religious dogmas, rather as feelings of sociability without which it is impossible to be a good citizen or loyal subject. Not being able to force anyone to believe in them, he can banish from the State whoever does not believe in them; he can banish them, not as faithless, but as unsociable, as unable to truly love the laws, justice and, if need be, to sacrifice their lives to duty. (Rousseau, 1967:427)

Firstly, the deconstruction of the political function of Christianity led to the institutionalisation of the contract as origin and foundation of the political society. The sovereign power does not any longer come from God, rather from the pact "through which each one, together with all the others, does not, however, obey but to himself and remains as free as before" (Rousseau,1967:90). Secondly, we owe him the proclamation of the decisive principle of separation between the spiritual and the temporal, between what we can owe to God and what to Caesar is owed. And with this separation, it is also intended to set apart, once for all, any pretensions of restoration, even if larval, of the theocratic regime.

Of very different nature is the civil religion that, rather than subordinating the political body to spiritual interests of transcendental character, exists only to consolidate the contractual cohesion. It pursues this objective in two ways: by consecrating the social pact, the laws and the association of citizens in a national State and by doing the pedagogy of the rights and the observance of the duties towards the community.

Allow me to resort here, for language convenience, to Hegel's vocabulary and his notion of Aufhebung. The Aufhebung's movement consists in a supplanting that includes, simultaneously, the action of eliminating or suppressing and the preoccupation to maintain something of what was overcome. Rousseau's deconstruction aimed at eliminating the political theology of Christianity but, while secularizing the institution of the national State, he did not feel as confident in the good will of the citizens as it should be expected, nor as optimistic as to the peaceful carrying out of the contract. And it being so, he finds it necessary a "civil profession of faith", a civil religion of which he expects complementary guarantees to the fulfilment of the citizens' duties towards the national State. All in all, sociability is not embedded in man's nature as an individual being. So that sociability becomes robust and gets the adhesion of the individual-citizen, it was considered necessary to appeal to civil religion.

But this religion is not static. It follows the historical vicissitudes of society and goes through metamorphoses that not only reflect times of triumph and great patriotic exultation but also periods of disillusionment, discomfort and abandonment. By adapting itself to different peoples and contexts, Rousseau's models changes, renewing and updating itself and, in some cases, reaching formulations so excessive and paroxysmal that they near the frontiers of social pathology.

## 3. Republican virtues

The ideas of supreme Being, immortality of the soul and the social importance of the religious feeling as foundations upon which rises the fabric of republican virtues occupy the chore of the concept of national politics defended by Robespierre. Thanks to these ideas, the human being acquires the stability needed to overcome the upheaval of passions that threatens the practice of virtue. They ensure the stability of the actions that are of interest to the good of the people and the interest of the Republic. They win over the insufficiencies of human authority and consolidate the bonds of sociability that animate the institutions.

In this proclamation and defence of religious ideas there is a clear deistic inspiration. Not only does it ignore the traditional Christian and catholic religion, but it also furiously separates itself from clericalism. But it also vehemently refuses atheism: "it is the religious feeling that imprints in the souls the idea of a sanction given to the moral principles by a power superior to man. Therefore, it is not known that any legislator has ever tried to nationalise atheism." (Robespierre, 1965:264).

If, in all accuracy, this is not about attributing to the Republic the statute of religion, it is at least noticeable a moral internalization of behaviours in which some theological principles appear invested with moral value, serving as foundation to the republican virtues. These do not only ensure sociable forms of behaviour made of respect, fraternity, dedication to the public matter, love of nature. They feed and materialize the republican religious feeling which includes many other manifestations. This is the case of national celebrations. (Robespierre, 1965:276-286 passim). The celebrations are, in the first place, moments of celebrating sociability, during which one looks at what there is of most excellent in mankind, appeals to respect for one another and the common good and, at the same time, celebrates the cult of the noblest events and characters in the history of freedom and fraternity, all under the auspices of the supreme Being. They also play an irreplaceable pedagogical role. Reminding the nation of the good examples of dedication to the common cause of public service is to educate the citizen in the will to be better, to respect the laws and serve the homeland with love.

## 4. "Religious" reading of the Revolution

The articulation of the French Revolution with the religious experience such as established by Tocqueville constitutes an interesting link of the historical chain that witnessed the affirmation civil religions and political ones. Let us now see the three phases during which this articulation was progressively built.

In the first place it is not possible to conceal the fact that the revolution had an irreligious character, with moments of violent rejection of the presence of the Church in the social and political life of the French nation. It is a clearly negative relation, but it is far from being as radical as it was claimed to be. And it can be proved it was so for two main reasons. The irreligious feeling cultivated by the philosophical thought of the 18th century, as it was seen in Rousseau, aimed at Christianity as a powerful political institution and not so much as religious doctrine, or at least, when it is under attack, criticism comes mainly from intellectuals and very little of it from the population in general. Moreover, it is not true that, by nature, democratic societies are or have to be hostile to Christianity. Is it not true that these societies went to Christianity and even Catholicism for the essential principles of fraternity, equality and freedom upon which the democratic organization of society is based?

But still more significant than the anti-religious revolutionary side is the fact that the French Revolution, while political process, acted in the same way as the religious revolutions. There are several manifestations that account for that analogy in the processes. Unlike the civil and political revolutions centred in a territory and in the defence of social and ethnic restrictive interests, the Revolution of 1789 aimed at creating a universal homeland, above nationalities, where men of all nations could be citizens. This universal calling finds parallel only in religious revolutions, such as the foundation and spreading of Christianity. In its origin there are new ideas and a very strong spirit of proselytism. The new revolutionary gospel is not meant only for the French. It sets as objective to conquer men no matter their nationality.

After the analogy as to the effects, let us now see if there is not also an analogy as to the causes that may bring the French Revolution closer to the moral revolution brought about by Christianity. When thoroughly researched, the reason that makes the revolution of 1789 unique, just like the explanation for the religious transformation caused by Christianity, is to be found in a concept of man seen as a concrete and universal being. Concrete, that is, as entity endowed with real consistency, as opposed to the abstract and generic vision of the idea of man. Universal, because the being in man is not captive of peculiarities of race, geography, language and customs.

The newness of Christianity will see in every man the creature called to salvation in Jesus Christ, be it Jewish, Greek or Roman. To the French Revolution man, French, English, German or any other nationality is always a citizen with rights and duties towards the other human beings. The political work of the revolution blended, for the first time in history, after Christianity, with the mission of regenerating the whole of mankind. Hence the many passions it unleashed and the proselytism sans propaganda actions it inspired. In Tocqueville's own synthesis the revolution thus assumes

> the appearance of a religious revolution that so startled its contemporaries. Better still, it became a sort of new religion, an imperfect religion, no doubt, without God, without cult and without another life. But one that, nevertheless, spread throughout the land with its soldiers, its apostles and martyrs." (Tocqueville, 1986:960)

## 5. Social construction of religious forms

Amidst the contemporary cultural tendencies we find the disentanglement of the tight bonds that traditionally made of religion a social cohesion force fed by habits of communitarian participation. It was having in mind this collective horizon that, in the early 20th century, Durkheim formulated the theory of the social origin of religion. Today, however, the remains of that sociologic religiosity still survive in base communities, small groups and individualised forms of privatisation of the religious experience.

In Durkheim we come across a theory of socialisation of the religious phenomenon. The strength and matrical power acknowledged to the religious behaviour in terms of its affective, symbolic and functional capacity arise from society. In that matrical power are the roots of morals, philosophical thought and science itself. We may, therefore, conclude that "if religion generated everything there is of essential in society, it is because the idea of society is the soul of religion." (Durkheim, 2007:132) Naturally connected to this explanation of the "social divine", emerge coherently legitimized the religious forms in which society, besides being the cause of those forms, also comes forward, up to a certain point, as object of veneration and cult. This is the case of laic practices of citizenship empowered by stimulus of nationalist religiosity fed symbolic representations of the collective. Anthem, flag, pantheon, holidays and civil celebrations are some of the cultural condensations of the motherland religion. The nation is the imagined community, the pole of collective identification, the sacred narrative of a people that believes in his destiny. Thus understood, the nation presents itself as a particular form of religious cult of society.

Transformed into object of religious treatment, substantiated as entity bearing absolute meaning, the nation fits no longer in the idea of the territory that witnessed our birth and that we affectively share as sacred memory of our forebears. Nor does it fit in the concept of State-nation formed by the community of citizens. It flows out of these affectionate and rational moulds and rises above an existence made relative by the fact that it is nothing but a nation like many others. Elevated and offered as absolute value, we are no longer in the presence of a nation but of its exacerbation in nationalism. And it is as nationalism that the marks of religiosity end up by configuring more strongly the relation with nationality.Na sociedade tradicional, o *logos* identifica-se com o *estilo clássico* das formas de pensamento, que são superfícies lisas, formas lógicas, de premissas claras, que concluem o certo e o verdadeiro. Predomina na sociedade tradicional a ideia de tempo como linha reta, decorrente do princípio teleológico, de orientação para um fim, pelo que a história se desenvolve entre uma génese e um apocalipse, que nos garante um fundamento sólido, um território conhecido e uma identidade estável.

## 6. Religion and nationality – a paradoxical relationship

In any way, the social and symbolic dynamics that, during the 19th and 20th centuries, kept up with the political vicissitudes of the beginning of nationalities made it evident the broad spectrum of affectionate and moral resonances that make of the nation a social datum much more extensive than the State with which it, sometimes, confounds itself. Raoul Girardet called the attention to this fact by reminding that "it sounds doubtful that in its concrete reality, lived on a daily basis, the destiny of a nation may be considered as essentially reducible to the affirmation of the power of the state." (Girardet, 1996: 75)

There are plenty of expressions of this sentimental, cultural, memorialist, glorifying expression transmitted under the most diverse forms of media communication. The celebration of national religion goes through literature, plastic arts, music, local and national celebrations, civic acts, consecration of relevant figures and events, military parades, great sport achievements, among others.

One of the most fascinating moments of religious identification of the Portuguese nationality occurs in the 15th century, in the Chronicle of D. João I by Fernão Lopes, which mentions the Portuguese gospel and the seventh age of the world. The Portuguese gospel is based on two professions of faith, the one that believes in the Master of Aviz as Defender of the kingdom of Portugal and guarantee of its independent existence against Castela's claims, and the one that, during the Schism of

the Western Christianity, professes obedience to the pope Urbano VI, the Roman pope. Both professions of faith serve a double unity and continuity, that of the kingdom of Portugal and that of Christianity under the rule of Rome. Fernão Lopes writes:

> So, the Master, after being predisposed to die [...] for the salvation of the land his ancestors had conquered, sent Nun'Álvares and his companions to preach the Portuguese gospel throughout the kingdom and this was that everyone believed and hold firm the pope Urban to be the true minister of the Church, away from whose obedience no one could save himself; and with this hold that belief their parents always had, to be known: to spend the good and when having to defend the kingdom from its enemies, and to maintain this faith shed their blood to death. And Nun'Álvares and his (companions) preached with such fulfilment, with words and deeds, that some of them, as you shall later see, were killed for defending it..." (Fernão Lopes, 1977:391).

We are in full force of the theological-political medieval when the Christian vocabulary is much more than a merely conventional resource. It establishes in the sacral space of Christianity the contingencies of the dynastic succession of King D. Fernando and the national destiny of a people. The same should be said about the providentialist scenery that involves the role attributed to that people in history. The events concerning the Portuguese gospel are also those that inaugurate a "new world", a new world age.

The mere evocation of the religious field alerts to the rational discursive capacity and leaves as imminent the suspicion that the spheres of religion and rationality are incompatible. Reality, however, seems far more densely complex and we find examples of that in the way the above mentioned authors deal with those matters. They always tried to understand and explain, as far as they thought possible, the religious feeling as political factor of revolutionary experiences that reform and organise the life of the nation. Amazement in the presence of that sort of numen that involves the origin of nations was also felt by Alexandre Herculano. While looking for the causes that should explain the origin and permanence of the Portuguese nation, while so many other richer, more powerful and older republics had dissolved and disappeared, the author of The History of Portugal can do no better than refer the issue to the sphere of the "mystery" or the "apparently unexplainable phenomenon" (Herculano, 1907:p.31).

Like what happens with religions, mainly when they assert themselves as militant proselyte, the nationalist religiosity feeds from appeals to conversion and separation from everything that, being foreign, must be avoided as impious, perverse and threatening. If the distinctive elements of nationality offer the identity marks of a people, they may also take it to the paths of chauvinist egotism. And, in extreme cases,

there even is the immolation, in the altar of the motherland, of all historical experiences of racial contamination. With some frequency, the safeguard of racial purity comes along with the most unrestrained nationalist exaltation of the collective sacralisation. It is none other the presupposition of António Sardinha in The Value of Race an Introduction to a National Campaign when he states that it is "from the little scruple with which we become relatives with Asian and African links [that] derives our weakening in straight line. [...] It is neither justifiable nor understandable otherwise the dissolution among us of the whole collective idea." (Sardinha, 1915:115)

Arrived here, the religion of the nation transformed itself into fundamentalism.

Treating the nation as something that inspires feelings of reverence and pious devotion may appear in somewhat surprising ideological contexts. We can take as example the Textbook of Philosophical Doctrine by a Lusitanian published in Lisbon, in 1925. It is a booklet of thirty- six pages written in the catechism style. Ideologically it is identified as monist, in philosophy, and as defender of the democratic State, in politics.

The religious tenor of this national textbook is evident from the first pages, where we find three prayers to the Motherland, that imitate as many prayers of the Christian prayer-book, and six "articles of Motherland Faith". The prayer "Our Motherland", between devotion and parody, is as follows:

> Our Motherland, divine Motherland of Camões and Nun'Álvares, hallowed be thy name. Thy value and thy glory come. Thy will be done in our souls. Give us our daily immortal bread of hope, and forgive us, Our Lady, for our sins. To free ourselves from all weakness and all crime, our hearts we will fill with your love. Amen. (Cartilha, 1925:6)

In this praying attitude, the sociological reality of the national conscience of a people is entirely objectified as superior entity towards which the duties of the citizen transform themselves into mystical ecstasy and cult practices. The national institution leaves behind the common territory of the empiric world and rises to the sphere of the sacred and the religious.

It is a profoundly paradoxical situation. The spirit of modernity defines itself as the project in which man, making use of reason, wants to be the builder of his own destiny, as individual and as citizen. It is clearly a project of autonomy, objectively served by the process of secularization that deconsecrates temporal realities. But, inscribing the national conscience in the religious register, whatever its nature, always takes to a

certain degree of heteronomy. This paradox is a crossroads where reflection has much to think about, and think in various directions.

The perspective that places the nation in the religious sphere always ends up by calling upon another and primordial issue. Reading and comprehending the nation as sacral entity, made of values, symbols and rituals identified as religion implies that the statute of the religious must be established in modernity as "exit from religion" (Marcel Gauchet) or "The metaphysical figure of the religious" (Luc Ferry). But this would be theme for another conference.

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