

Ioannis Papadopoulos

**Associate Professor and Director of the Centre for Research on Democracy and Law,
Department of International and European Studies, University of Macedonia**

The difficulties of faith in modern times and the implications for democracy

Introduction: The dynamic invasion of Modernity in the West

Modernity is a process that has lasted, and continues to last, centuries. At some point in Western Europe there was a major change of the scientific paradigm, a novelty regarding religion: Faith in God ceased to be self-evident. Since faith in God ceased to regulate social life, we dynamically entered into the field of Modernity. Modernity was marked by a radical desacralization, which today reaches a great – sometimes desperate – need for resacralization. The successor of God in societies was, to a very large extent, secularized ideals. Certainly, this evolution eliminated metaphysics from the horizon of men and left a void in its place. Managing this void brings problems, especially in terms of democracy.

Secularism as liberation and as a fissure

With the advent of Modernity and the major paradigm shift, which was consolidated in the 20th century, we have seen that faith in God is no longer self-evident. Especially in the West, it is no longer self-evident to adhere to Christianity, as a dogma and as a belief system. Christianity is known to have marked the life of the West in all its manifestations: political, social, life of ideas, culture, art... Accordingly, the separation of the church from the state and the independence of the latter on the former, which in France was carried out by the famous law of 1905¹, laid the foundations for a secular society that has secularized life as a whole in all its manifestations, just as Christianity had christianized life as a whole before it. Thus, the “Most Christian Kingdom” of France died, and freedom of conscience has come to its place as a new religion; this replacement of the socially imposed religion by freedom of conscience was conquered

¹ French law on the Separation of the Churches and the State (Loi de séparation des Églises et de l'État) of 1905.

after many centuries of religious domination in the Catholic West and, of course, it was experienced as a great liberation.

But this freedom that was conquered since the beginning of the 20th century left some kind of nostalgia – a metaphysical ‘fissure’ – which is produced by the feeling that we have forever left behind the era of innocence, when man spontaneously believed in a higher power and in the traditional faith, and when he referred naturally to God (“natural religion” according to Kant)². This feeling, which can be said to be similar to the feeling of innocence of childhood, left a very large void, just as large as God’s place in our lives before the secularization of Modernity (“an omnipresent absence”, according to the philosopher Alain)³.

Two analogies between the Modernity of the 16th and the Postmodernity of the 21st century

Secularism lasted, as we have seen, for many centuries. Its course began dynamically mainly in the 16th and 17th centuries with the religious wars in Europe and the New Science of Francis Bacon⁴ and René Descartes⁵. We can, I think, draw a parallel between this novelty and the condition of Postmodernity that we are living in today, in the 21st century, with the difficulty of faith that characterizes it.

The 16th century, which represents the beginning of the secularization process that resulted in the “omnipresent absence” of God, is marked by Protestantism. *Protestantism*, and the merciless and terribly bloody religious wars that followed, was undoubtedly a turning point for the West, Modernity, and Europe, because it marked the end of the one and only revealed faith. From this, the basic philosophical and experiential attitude of modern man was born, which can be said to be characterized by two basic things: distrust and relativism. Distrust and relativism have their source in the religious rupture that took place in the 16th century in Europe. The modern societies that emerged from old Europe at the cutting point of the 16th century

² Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, Allen W. Wood & George di Giovanni eds. & transl., Cambridge, UK: The Cambridge edition of the works of Immanuel Kant, 1996.

³ Alain, *Propos sur la religion*, Paris: PUF, 1969 (original edition 1938).

⁴ Francis Bacon, *Novum Organum*, Joseph Devey ed., New York: P.F. Collier, 1902 (original edition 1620).

⁵ René Descartes, *Discours de la méthode*, Charles Adam & Paul Tannery eds., Paris: L. Cerf, 1902 (original edition 1637).

gradually understood themselves as “laïques”, i.e., as secular, as not in need of religious references.

But the factor that brought a radical change in the landscape and makes the present era show some analogies with the 16th century is *the establishment of a European Islam*. Islam plays an active, decisive role, because where Europe had come to perceive itself as a fully secularized society, with distrust and moral relativism, comes a very dynamic religion and resurrects the God who had died (according to the famous maxim of Friedrich Nietzsche)⁶. And along with that, it upsets the certainty of the Western man that he was essentially finished with alienating and irrational religious beliefs. Therefore, here we have a certain analogy to the 16th century, with the influx of a new religion, which is upsetting the situation up to that time in the West.

A second point of analogy between the novelty of Modernity of the 16th century and today's era of Postmodernity, which appeared as a consequence of the religious rupture with the emergence of Protestantism, is the *deregulation of knowledge*. Not long before Protestantism, which shook Western Europe from end to end, printing also appeared. The printed book removed from the hands of the Church the monopoly of knowledge. The fact that one could set up a printing press somewhere and print, even illegally, from the simplest pamphlet to a whole treatise, deregulated the control of knowledge. Today, by analogy, we have the Internet, which is a much more advanced development, but in the same vein as the invention of typography, i.e., that of complete deregulation of the scattered sources of knowledge. With the Internet, we are witnessing the propagation – in an anarchic or even cacophonous way – of a hotchpotch of knowledge, data, and information, which looks more like a chaotic universe than a well-structured cognitive reserve. But in both cases, i.e., in both the 16th and the 20th century, we have had a deregulation of the control of knowledge.

The search for the possibility of faith in Postmodernity

Today we live in a postmodern era, which seeks – sometimes desperately – the possibility of faith. We are surely now in a different condition from that of Modernity:

⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra*, Ditzingen: Reclam, 1978, p. 5 (original edition 1883-1885).

the condition of the agonizing investigation of the possibility of faith as well as the possibility – at least in part – of a resacralization of social life.

Etymological excursus

Let's take the etymology of two critical terms in Latin. The first term is the infinitive "religare" (a term found at the root of "religion"). In Latin this term means "re-associate", set a new bond. This is the first term, religion as a reconnection. The second term is "credo" ("faith"), which comes from Sanscrit, from the synthesis of a term meaning "vital force" and a term meaning "to pose": therefore etymologically, "credo" means "putting in some vital force". It is an act of recognition that awaits as a return an act of mutual recognition, a gift awaited by a gift in return. It is from the same root that the word "credit" comes from: the financial term "credit" goes back to the term "I believe", i.e., "I trust", i.e., I place someone else in a relationship of a two-way reciprocity, where I believe in the possibility of the other (in his "vital force") and the other in mine. These two words do not just matter for their etymology. They are the foundations of a social contract; we are dealing with a whole contract of mutual trust, which has gradually eroded since the 16th century with the advent of Modernity.

The French Revolution, the point in time when religion's contract of mutual trust was broken

This gradual rupture ends in a real cleft in the 18th century with the dynamic emergence of Enlightenment and the French Revolution, which is the great novelty. The French Revolution set as its primary basic project to end the dominance of religion in public life. This convention of "religion" and "faith" comes to a rupture in the 18th century, after a slow erosion process from the 16th century onwards. It is in the 18th century that the philosophies of disbelief (Marx, Nietzsche, Freud) are born. This trilogy of disbelief is a child of the French Revolution, as it comes from a current of it. Marx, Nietzsche and Freud are radically agnostic; their common project – albeit from a very different point of view – was "to end religion", to turn the page once and for all, to close the chapter called "religion". This goal was largely achieved with Modernity.

But does that mean that we are also done with faith? Probably not. The French revolutionaries themselves did not have the illusion that they could close the chapter called “religion”, i.e., that they could abolish religion and impose social atheism. Their main ambition was to subdue religion, to place it under the sovereignty of the political – as religion had placed under its sovereignty the political for centuries in the Christian West – so that it too would become a tool in the hands of the political. But at the same time, they sought to establish the famous cult of the “Supreme Being” (“Être Suprême”), which takes the form of a triangle with one eye on the forehead of the Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen and in many other texts of that time. Because the French revolutionaries were very conscious of the need to unite the people around some kind of metaphysical belief: if not the classical Christian faith, which was in the hands of the Catholic Church, which they should subdue, at least something that would take its place, a fairly undefined and deistic Supreme Being. The French Revolution itself did not have atheism, the abolition of religion, as its pretense; that should be clear, but it is often not.

The incredible need to believe

Modern psychoanalysts, such as Julia Kristeva⁷, say that man’s need to believe is innate because this way a person can structure his personality and identity. The individual will not acquire mental balance and a self-identity if he does not believe. This is a fundamental stage in our mental and identity construction. And this applies to all ages, since the beginning and forever: from the prehistoric period, where we see that we had religious burial ceremonies, until today. Nothing has changed in this either individually or collectively, in the sense that it is fundamentally impossible to structure a society that believes in nothing. Such a society would have no orientation. The feeling that you are lost begets suffering; you have nowhere to go, you have no compass. Therefore (I refer once again to Kristeva), it is absolutely necessary for a human being and his good mental health to have “illusions” (as Freud said in the *Future of an illusion*, who considered religion to be the greatest illusion)⁸. We thus see the reversal that has taken place today in relation to the frenzy of Modernity, which is the 20th century and the prevalence of the trilogy of disbelief.

⁷ Julia Kristeva, *Cet incroyable besoin de croire*, Paris: Bayard, 2018.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Die Zukunft einer Illusion*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Bd. 14. London: Imago, 1948 (original edition 1927).

However, the term “faith” is now used in a very different way than before Modernity. We are no longer talking about faith in a single religion or in God or even in some gods. Here we are talking about something much broader and very often amorphous, what Spinoza called “conatus” (life impulse of beings)⁹ and Freud called the “principle of pleasure” (a principle that brings beings close to one another)¹⁰. It is the indestructible psychic need that pushes us not only to associate and love others, but also to build together ideals, a common ideal society.

Science and religion

Modernity, especially with Descartes, wanted – and to a large extent imposed – for science to replace religion, i.e., to make science a religion in place of religion. This brings problems today. The project of Modernity was desacralization. For example, Marxism has a messianic dimension; it is a religion of History. Historical materialism, which will end up in communist society, is an eschatology, which is simply secularized. But science and technology themselves, as they were born in the West with the Cartesian revolution from the 17th century onwards, take on the aura of sanctity; they become, as it were, religions of science, replacing pure religion. In reality, however, as Nietzsche himself ironically wrote in *The Gay Science*¹¹, the previous (i.e., religion) is not very different from the latter (i.e., science). Science perceives itself as all-powerful and as the ruler of everything, as an absolute faith. It is essentially a continuation, with secular elements, of the old Judeo-Christian religion.

But the modern triptych “science – technology – politics” has now entered a deep crisis in the postmodern era. What has become of scientific and technical progress? We certainly have a great deal of scientific and technological progress – and fortunately. This progress – especially technological progress – has produced, however, as a negative aspect, societies which are largely mechanistic, cold, obsessed with the production of material goods and their consumption. But the irony here is that even this condition brought about by science and technology is partly based on foundations, which are as unprovable as those of religious faith. Let us look, for

⁹ Benedict de Spinoza, *The Ethics*, transl. R. H. M. Elwes, Project Gutenberg, part 3 (original edition of *Ethica, ordine geometrico demonstrata* 1677).

¹⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Zur Technik der Psychoanalyse und zur Metapsychologie*, Norderstedt: Vero, 2015 (original edition 1911).

¹¹ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, Ditzingen: Reclam, 2000 (original edition 1882).

example, at the capitalist belief in the “invisible hand of the market”, namely that the market regulates itself and that it will find by its own a rational point of balance. We are essentially dealing with another form of Divine Providence, namely an invisible force (now called the “free market”), which is supposed to be able to rationally regulate life on its own. In other words, it is also basically, at least in part, a theological thought. Even the (neo)classical economic liberalism, which is very often materialistic, indifferent to the divine, or even openly atheist, is also basically theological. We cannot easily escape from this condition. It is even doubtful whether this is possible at all. However technicalized our lives have become because of science, again this condition remains: science and technique itself have in their foundations some kind of religious faith, which of course is desacralized.

Whatever happened to all these secularized religions, all these promises of earthly happiness, all these political programs, all these mass movements of people who pursued a better society, who had believed in the promise of secularized but theological prosperity of a worldly nature? Many of these systems of thought have been discredited; they have lost the “credere” (their credibility, their faith). Science is indeed the last stronghold. But science, too, is no longer all-powerful: it cannot explain everything, nor can it – nor should it – epistemologically invalidate transcendence itself. This cannot happen because science and religion are placed on two different levels of discourse. Science is no longer as we understood it at the apogee of Modernity, i.e., all-powerful; science can be reconciled, certainly at very different levels of discourse, with religious faith.

The necessity and difficulty of faith in Postmodernity

This postmodern condition in which we have entered, with the multiple crises we have seen – a crisis even of science – is characterized by the simultaneous necessity and difficulty of faith. We are at a point where we are thirsty, we have an urge to believe, and at the same time we find it very difficult to believe. This is the great paradox and the difficulty of the postmodern condition: the simultaneous *great need and weakness of faith*. It is a suffocating condition: we are suffocating in the condition of Modernity, where everything is arranged only in its materiality, where the relations between people are no longer, to a large extent, only human, but utilitarian/instrumental, where the great horizons of hope for the end of time are

closed or have darkened. This world is unlivable – and paradoxically Islam shows us this by putting the mirror in front of us so that we see it, even if we didn't want to see it. At the same time, however, it is very difficult for us to believe because Modernity has preceded it with its disenchantment, which has eroded the very foundations of religious faith. We therefore live in societies that are jaded, that are in a crisis of faith, and that at the same time understand how unlivable this lack of ability to believe is, i.e., how much this horizon needs to be reopened.

The moral relativism of Postmodernity and conspiracy theory as dangers to democracy

This condition is also *a danger to democracy*. What is a danger to democracy? Moral relativism, which has now been well established in our postmodern condition. Moral relativism comes from the prevalence of skepticism, i.e., of a radical doubt about everything, and is applied in an anarchic, undifferentiated way in all areas of knowledge and social life. Relativism is a poison, a rust that eats up societies, as Alexis de Tocqueville had first written in the 19th century¹² and was far ahead of his time.

After at least three centuries of scientific rationality, we have come to say that we no longer believe in anything, or that everything is as believable as everything else, that everything has the same moral value as everything else, as there is no longer a system of values or some values that are superior to others. Why? Because we cannot establish any kind of hierarchy anywhere; it would be “authoritarian” or “dominant” or “colonial” to do so, as we often hear today. We have reached this point of established relativism, which however is unlivable because nature has “horror vacui” (i.e., horror of the void) and in place of the void in the need for faith, left behind by God who died (or in any case we took away from His throne), in place of the older absolute truths, even in place of science (which is no longer what it used to be, since we observe a pervasive opinion about science now that everyone has a “viewpoint” about science in the social media), an anarchic landscape of *conspiracy sects*, a diffusion of conspiracy theories has been established. We have by now entered into the deep waters of cognitive psychology, where this need for faith, precisely because it has collapsed as a whole and relativism has occurred, is replaced, in the worst

¹² Alexis de Tocqueville, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, tome 2, Paris: Pagnerre, 1848, p. 176.

possible way, by an unregulated, cacophonous, and very dangerous and destabilizing conspiracy theory for our societies. This is very much illustrated by the Covid-19 pandemic, which has become the privileged field of conspiracy theory: everyone now has his own truth and opinion, everyone knows better about vaccines than scientists, who tell us that vaccines are safe and that they have passed all three phases of clinical trials; and everyone writes on these matters in the social media, and is not ashamed of doing so because he knows that others will believe these conspiracy theories as well.

These foci of absolute relativism, i.e., essentially of conspiracy, are pervasive. There is no longer an established right reason that is commonly acceptable. We have a very high hysterical coefficient (if we use a psychoanalytic term), a very high level of doubt and distrust, with a *neurotic approach to reality*, which is not accepted as it is. There is a difficulty in accepting the authorities: the expert who speaks, why is he an “authority”? Why does he know better than I do?

The postmodern man has reached the stage where he is not just the man of Modernity, who believed in nothing, following the project of Modernity to evacuate the religious faith, to get it out of the picture. He is a man who believes whatever – which is worse than the previous condition. We have religious faiths, rather of a sectarian type, which have now been freed from any kind of control. This control of the priesthood that we were fighting against, we are now nostalgic of it to some extent because it could control faith. Now these various sectarian, conspirational, anarchic and obscurantist beliefs have been completely deregulated, resulting thus in modern superstitions. This is because there is no longer a higher authority, to which we naturally refer and which we accept, an authority that we accept that what he is going to say is true. Everyone essentially turns his impulse into knowledge. To put it simply: everyone believes what suits him and is isolated in a place where the rest believe the same, so they provide feedback to one another (the social media play a decisive role in this development).

Paradoxically, conspiracy theory is an inverted fear: conspiracy theorists mainly believe what scares them. Am I afraid of vaccines for some irrational reason? I believe that vaccines are fake, the product of a conspiracy to control us, and so on. That is, we now have a “democracy of the naive”, of those who naively believe whatever. We might even say that we have a “democracy of the foolish”, if I may say so, where anyone can believe whatever he wants. In this universe of deregulation,

which is exacerbated by the downpour of information, and especially of images that flood our screens, an idolatry of the image prevails: it is difficult for us to find an edge of all these images and to understand which image is of greater value and which one has no value at all.

Religious fanaticism and radicalization as results of relativism

This total deregulation, exacerbated by the supremacy of images and combined with the need for faith that, as we saw with Kristeva, remains active, ends up on *the dark side of faith: religious fanaticism* (fundamentalism) and *religious radicalization*. This development has been brought to the West mainly by Islamic jihad. What is jihad, with this reading framework that I have adopted? Jihad is a crude expression of the need for all of us to believe. It is a perverse, ghastly recovery of the experience of faith, which is fundamental to human existence. It is a radical reversal of this experience in a universe where ideals have collapsed and relativism has prevailed, where conspiracy theory triumphs, and where small, local sects do not communicate with each other and are in a constant state of war with all the others. In such a Hobbesian [s.s. by the philosopher Thomas Hobbes] universe, where everyone fights everyone, jihadism comes to establish a unity, especially in thousands of young Europeans, who were born and raised in Europe and have no orientation or frames of reference in their lives, as there is no longer either the classic imam, nor the political party, nor the trade union, nor any of that. Jihadism gives them a reason to unite into a community and, if you like, gives them a reason to die for. In this way the sacred is reintroduced; we had pulled the sacred out of the door, but now it is entering through the window. Unfortunately, religious radicalization is the reversed aspect of this orphan need to believe in Postmodernity.

Hence the famous “return of the religious”. Yet we are not dealing literally with the return of the religious. We are not talking here about a return of religious faith and classical religious belief as we knew them. Here we are talking about a cry of despair, which is also taking on a collective form. In other words, it is the desperate search for a certainty where certainties have collapsed. And what greater certainty than paying with your own blood for your own ideas – whatever they may be? In jihadism, ideas do not matter much; what is important is the idea of testimony, i.e., that one chooses to be a martyr (“to testify”), to die for what he believes, to prove to everyone, by his

martyrdom, that they live in a lack of faith. By killing and cancelling the opponent, he makes a *complete reversal of eschatological hope*. Jihadism is based on the hope that the act of wiping out the “infidels” from the surface of the Earth can alleviate a little the despair that many have within them and give them a certainty.

This is a very different faith, a “complete inversion of all values” (Nietzsche)¹³. Before, either religious or secular ideals had as their mission to unite us (*religare*), i.e., to unite the individual with society and to form a community. Today all this no longer exists. *Religion* has been individualized in this extreme, radical way *as an absolute expression of our individuality*: I will show everyone who I am and what I am worth, even through a terrorist act of death. In other words, we have a break in the chain of transmission of knowledge and values. Everyone, in his own corner, can make his own, personalized tools of “faith” using the Internet. It is a *purely identitarian, enclosed faith* that closes you to yourself; you claim a religious identity that cuts you off from others – and you even see others as enemies that you must neutralize.

Some concluding thoughts

So what can be done here? Are things so bad?

Let us take a distance and revisit this unquenchable thirst, this great need for faith, which is deeply nested in the human being. Let us revisit the meaning of faith, the sense of the sacred — and let this feeling not necessarily be expressed in a religious doctrine — to give a new freshness to this need for faith. What do we keep and what do we leave in this condition that we are in? We keep the good things and leave the bad ones. First, we can and must keep the very etymological source of religion, the *religare*: the *connection*, which is the opposite of division. If this need to believe today, in this relativistic and radicalized Postmodernity, is not a need for reconnection, then what is it?

The second thing we keep is a need *for a renewed morality*. As Jürgen Habermas (one of the greatest philosophers of the 20th century, secularized – not religious – and clearly a thinker of the Enlightenment), says it himself openly: We must rediscover

¹³ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *Der Antichrist: Versuch einer Kritik des Christentums*, Hamburg: Nikol Verlag, 2008 (original edition 1895).

the sources of our civilization, which are religious, to give a new impetus to a renewed morality¹⁴.

Connection and morality, then. A moral attitude of *connection with the rest*: that is the modern meaning of the sacred. And we see this in the current pandemic, where my own body is a bearer of responsibility and if I get vaccinated, I will do so out of faith in the community with which I am connected and because I have to protect others – and of course myself – from being part of the viruses’ transmission chain.

Therefore, in the contemporaneous condition, one can very well be *both agnostic and faithful*, provided of course that we take these good elements and leave everything else, which caused, and unfortunately still causes, the rivers of blood of religious (Islamist in this case) terrorism. Are we exiting religion? Possibly. Modernity has indeed taken us out of religion; we have indeed dethroned God and His throne has been left empty. But it has not taken us out of the need for social connection and morality. It has not taken us out of the need for faith, for transcendence – regardless of whether it has a religious reference or not.

In summary: *An exit from religion for a re-entry, essentially, into religion*. Because the right reason – as already understood by Blaise Pascal, who was a brilliant scientist himself, when he developed his polemics against Descartes in the 17th century¹⁵ – is not enough for a full life. One cannot have a human life, community, and ethics only with the radical Cartesian doubt and the religion of science, the religion of right reason. We have seen that this cannot stand: it has brought as many problems and dangers as those of the previously imposed religion from above. There are two extremes, as Pascal said: one extreme is to exclude right reason and the other extreme is to accept only right reason¹⁶. Essentially, that is, we are talking about an exit from

¹⁴ Jürgen Habermas, “Religion in the Public Sphere”, *European Journal of Philosophy* 14(1), 1-25 (2006).

¹⁵ Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, Léon Brunschvicg éd., Paris: Hachette, 1904, tome 1, p. 98, pensée n° 78: “Descartes inutile et incertain” (“Descartes is useless and uncertain”) (original edition 1670).

¹⁶ Blaise Pascal, *Fragment “Soumission et usage de la raison”* n° 4/23, Paris: Éditions de Port-Royal, 1669, chapitre V: “Il faut savoir douter où il faut, assurer où il faut, se soumettre où il faut. Qui ne fait ainsi n’entend pas la force de la raison. Il y en a qui pêchent contre ces trois principes, ou en assurant tout comme démonstratif, manque de se connaître en démonstrations ; ou en doutant de tout, manque de savoir où il faut se soumettre ; ou en se soumettant en tout, manque de savoir où il faut juger” (“We have to know how to doubt when we must, assure when we must, obey when we must. Those who do not proceed in this manner do not understand the force of reason. There are people who disobey these three principles, either by assuring everything as demonstrative, thus lacking knowledge

classical religion and a re-entry into a universe where this *bipolar contrast between rationality and faith no longer has a reason to exist*. In other words, we can have a fuller understanding of humans as whole persons, in need of both right reason and faith, regardless of whether this faith is religious or secular, because otherwise one will not be a full person.

as to demonstration; either by doubting everything, thus lacking knowledge as to when one must obey; or by obeying everything, thus lacking knowledge as to when one must exercise judgment”).