Transforming Religion

First section: Transformation of Religion in the history

Religion as historical phenomenon

(by Sergio Sorrentino – Salerno University - member of aifr)

1. Religion, as phenomenon of human life within a history, needs a critical approach by philosophy in order to understand it. And this for two reasons: first, in order to grasp the kind of issues that are at stake, second in order to understand the place (or the role) religion (or a specific religious faith) might play within our present world or within the future of human beings. Our present world and the future of humankind seem to be more and more led by the views emerging from the cosmological or biological becoming (the evolution of kosmos and/or of life), according to the theories and opinions today rather currently shared. In both these perspectives indeed we get lost with the *proper and specific substance* of *human experience*, so as of *historical experience*. These actually are the inalienable key dimensions of religious faith, so as of its authentic and concrete *formation*; which alone is able to escape the alternative between disappearance and/or disfigurement. Unless we do not understand this change of figure (of historical and institutional shape) as a process of decanting and giving up spurious and historically fossilized forms of religion. All this involves three orders of issues, which take into account the question of secularisation (understood properly as a process of transformation). The issues are: how to think of *religious believing* (faith), how to understand a *historical forma*tion, how to discern between *authentic* and *inauthentic* religion.

   As for the question of secularisation in the above meaning, within the frame of the Twentieth century discussion it does immediately concern the issue of *religious believing* (faith), of its *essential constitution*, or better of its irreplaceable *essence*, of its *historical, concrete formation* as established community or cultural entity (i.e. as semiosphere of a culture). It does much matter, then, to settle the question correctly, insofar we get rid with the misunderstandigs which occur in the meaning of secularisation that today is become general opinion (almost a commun sense). On this account I would like to express two critical warnings. 1) Secularisation is not to be taken in the meaning (occurring for instance in K. Löwith, and today almost universally accepted) of translating religious matters into secular (i.e. not religious, in any sense of this expression) meanings; nor in that one of the extinction of religion, as some people is arguing on the base of an alleged "coming back of religion" (be it conceived as the "sacred" coming back again). 2) Religion is not to be identified on the level (or within the frame) of her sociological presence and her geographical (or geopolitical) currency. On the contrary, it is to be identified in her two intranscendable cornerstones, that are the *believing singularity* (or individual) and the *instituted formation* (community). The former denotes that religion (if you will, faith) is actual, concrete and historically effective (so as salient, noteworthy, for the future of humankind) only thanks to her being hinged on the *singularity* (the individual). The latter utters the dimension (the side) of a collectively *instituted formation*, that actually gets a cultural value. She is concerned and transformed both by secularisation (understood as historical, social and generally cultural process) and by the multicultural, historical milieu that is taking shape in our globalized world.

2. Now, if we consider religion against the background of *secularisation*, i.e. within a life world (and the congruent "image of the world") brought about by science and technology (therefrom results the "entzauberte Welt"), then the formidable question arises as how far religion is a constituent element of human world. Indeed, the question sets out two sides: first, does religion give form to a human world, and insofar is able to stand at the core of it? Second, has religion as such to perform a historical being of its own, always in tension between past and future? In fact, only inasmuch religion joins together both the aspects which such issues are hinting at (i.e. is at the same time an irreplaceable element of human existence and gets a historical being of its own), is she a transforming factor of human world. Indeed this is the very question of the *essence* of religion. It was sharply posed (in relations to the essence of Christianity or of Christian faith) between Nineteenth and Twentieth century, in a time dominated furthermore by the so called "liberal Theology". It was keenly felt in the context of German and French culture (Harnack, Troeltsch, Hermann Schell, A. Sabatier, der Modernismus, ecc.). Still, in its original formulation the issue (concerning the essence of religion/Christianity) goes back to the late Enlightenment and to the idealistic-romantic culture (see, e.g., the task of the "philosophical Thelogy" in the *Kurze Darstellung* by Schleiermacher). It sets out from two provocative topics: a) The first one is brought about by *modernity* (see Troeltsch). She is the horizon within which the *validity* of religion is called in question. For religion is driven back to the borders of the sphere where the very reasons that bring about the human world are effective. This problematic knot however amounts to an ambivalence that could not escape critical consciousness (that is the case with Troeltsch). Some aspects of this horizon which is open by modernity are: the end of Medieval Christianity and of the way the Christian faith is thought of; the end of the theoretical function performed by metaphysics, in force of which once people stated a presumptive continuity between revelation and reason, and therefore established the cultural monopoly of theology; furthermore the historical-critical research in the study and knowledge of religions, with the consequent comparative method and the due comparison of Christianity with other religions. b) The second topic draws from the ascertained dimension of Christianity (and of its institutions) as *totally historical* phenomenon. Actually from this perspective (which largely owes to secularisation) Christian religion takes form as historical phenomenon to be studied and understood with the tools set up by *historical reason*, like all the phenomena embraced within the horizon of human experience (on the point, see the contribution given by Dilthey). It is worth noting that in this direction Troeltsch (so as W. Herrmann) calls theological work to get free from metaphysical claim and to get through the partnership of *historical science*.

   Still, this way to think of (and to understand) religion (e.g. Christianity) raised a difficult question (even an aporia); to get rid of it, one goes the way toward the ethical comprehension of the essence of religion (religion=ethics). The sharp question consists of joining together *historicity* and *absoluteness*, i.e. of thinking of the *absolute within history* (as for Christianity, the issue was how to think of a historically saving religion). Actually, according to the critical inquiry led by Troeltsch on the theological debate developed in the last decades of 19th century and at the beginning of 20th, the issue is incorrectly approached; this happens basically for three reasons. First, one thinks of the absolute as "absolute of reason", and therefore seeks to establish a continuity between absolute and history, which is insofar aporetic as history is the *reign of contingent* and relative (see the question posed by Lessing). Second, one is driven to suppose a homogenity (even an identity) between religion and morality, insofar as the latter is able, almost in the contemporary discussion (see Harnack, among many others), to take up the sign of a universally valid rational; this way one gets lost with the specificity of religion against morality, so as with the peculiarity and individuality

inherent to the essence of religion. Third, one does let drop, or even does not perceive alltogether, the eschatological (say the prophetic) values inherent to the essence of religion (almost inasmuch as Christianity is at stake). In fact, from these values (see prophetism) one might draw out a new setting for the query on the absolute within history, if indeed the absolute is interpreted in terms of a prophetic (-eschatological) force (*dynamis*).

3. If religion is to be correctly approached (and insofar rightly understood), we have to account of her as a transforming agent of human world (society, history, culture); this is the active meaning of "transforming". But at the same time we should think of her as an agency continually transforming its own formations (transforming in the passive meaning). In the process of secularisation (understood as historical phenomenon of transformation) both these aspects of transforming religion come to the fore. In our (post-modern, globalized, ecc.) world religion is insofar an agent promoting transformations (of our human world), as she is neither an irrelevant (meaningless) factor of human existence nor an ideological force; ideological indeed, inasmuch as she is acting as factor of fixed identification or of a close (isolating, not including but excluding) culture. Then actually religion is distorted into tradition, superstition, idolatry, etc. On the other hand, she is insofar transforming herself (i.e. the assets of her own) as she is able to face and overcome the challenges addressed by our contemporary world and culture. In both cases, however, that can't happen but giving account of her core reasons inherent to her essence (an existed relationship with the divine, rooted into the core of individuals, bringing about a new, not yet explored, unexpected relation to the world in its whole).

   Now, when religion takes into account her core reasons, which indeed bring about her pertinency and meaning (i.e. her relevance from the point of view of a meaningful existence) for our world, the challenges she has to face in our secularised world are threefold. First, the challenge imposed by *modernity* with its outputs (outcomes); second, the challenge of *fundamentalism* (or integralism); third, the challenge posed by cultural *estrangement* (or otherness).

   As for the first, the challenge *modernity* poses to religion is drawing from the asserted meaniglessness of human existence (and the absence of meaning in the whole of universe), according to a trend improved by nihilism, relativism, the "pensiero debole" (feeble, weak thought), etc. Actually the meaning (sense giving) afforded by religion (e.g. by Christianity as saving religion), which in fact is to be summarized into the reflective notion of *essence*, has to face the meaniglessness that threatens the anthropological horizon und let it be *subjected* to many kinds of otherness (estrangements).

   As for the second, *fundamentalism* on the other hand is, so to speak, a regressive reply to modernity and its values. It drives to a hard determination of religion (we might say a metaphysical idea, in any case one antithetic to hisoricity) and even of the very essence of a peculiar religion (like Christianity, Islam, Judaism, etc.). In this respect we might compare the fundamentalistic or integralistic trends that come out within Christianity, Islam, Judaism, etc.

   As for the third, the *cultural otherness* gives rise to the perception of the bounds (boundaries) of our own semiosphere (in our Western culture, Christianity); and this happens in many directions. I would like to point here only to three directions, that are prevailing in this beginning of Twentyfirst century: the many other (the plurality of) religions, the ecological settlement (restoration) of our culture, the new emerging cultures that urge for aknowledgement (the ones of poor peoples, of the so-called "third and forth world", etc.).

4. If now we would suggest some methodological criteria for approaching the topic of transforming religion from the standpoint of a philosophy of religion in the context of secularisation, we should argue as follows. The issue of the essence of religion is substantially the question of determining and then seizeing a *historical individuality*. This is the very subject of a transforming process (in both meanings, active and passive, I spoke about above). Generally, seizeing the essence of a single existing thing (e.g. a historical being) aims at comprehending and therefore expressing it in *universal terms*. Then the notion of the essence of religion (of a particular, historical and sociolgically settled religion) is a *critical concept*. This means that it has to identify a historical individuality, discerning it from its spurious and inauthentic manifestations and at the same time seizeing on account of that *living formation* (indeed historically living, i.e. as history making subject) the force (the *dynamis*) of her own. It is but thanks to this force-*dynamis* that she gives rise to many (plural), even though different manifestations of the *identical* (living subject), in which the individual being and the community or the common life are joined together. That is why the critique is *polemics*, for it takes party, enunciates separating judgements. On the other hand, the critical concept of an entity does more exactly trend to grasp a *Dasein* (i. e. an *actus essendi*), that is at the source of historical beings (as the different sedimentations of religion are).

The polemical perspective seems to be insuperable; in fact, it comes out again and again in the debate about religion and her transforming processes. See the issue core-bark highlighted by Harnack, or the question kerygma-mythos in Bultmann, and alike the notion of the essence of Christianity worked out by Ebeling (the Word), by Barth (the Revelation), etc. They show all a strong polemic charge. In any case polemics concerns not merely the internal, but also the exernal side of religion (of Christianity), i. e. the other religions and even the irreligion. (On this point see the issue of the essence within the "school of history of religions", or the Apology in the *Speeches* by Schleiermacher).

On the other hand, the *determination* of the essence of religion, in the above meaning, requires at the same time a *topological determination*; that is to say that it is necessary to locate the essence (of a historical individuality) within the anthropological context (the frame of anthropology). From this perspective both the insights drawn respectively by Harnack and Barth seem to come short. For the former doesn't take into account the specifically religious dimension of human being, of human experience, and therefore does omologate religion to ethics. The latter doesn't risk to frame the *revelation* within the context of human experiencing. As for the critical concept of essence (of religion), it does utter a question that concerns all the dimensions of historicity in the whole of its constellations (cultures, ethnic individualities, political groups, social sets, esthetic movements, etc.), not merely religious formations (or even exclusively the Christian formation).

The knowing determination of the essence (of a historical individuality) requires hermeneutics, not so much fruition (or performing) hermeneutics, as rather an *intention hermeneutics* i.e. hermeneutics that knowingly appropriates the *dynamis* that originates the formation of a historical phenomenon. Such hermeneutics takes on a threefold task: That one possesses or appropriates this *dynamis* (according to the principle asserted in the *Speeches*: is able to speak on religion but whoever does have her); that one is able to translate it into speaking (into the spoken language); that one is able to make it effective, productive. In fact, ultimately the essence of a historical individuality does establish a threedimensional historical arch. This implies that in the notion (idea) of essence must appear the following three factors: a) *historical causality* (or causation); the essence does catch up the outcome, the effects of a particular, historically effective agency (past); b) *community or communication* (present); the essence denotes the active subject of

communication; c) *projectual-prophetic elements* (future); the essence does determine a specific mode of projecting human being (existence); insofar it is a revelation mode of humanity of human beings.

Abstract: Undestanding religion, indeed as a transforming reality, requires *criticism* (both in its euristic mode and in its polemic performing), *topology* (i.e. framing religion within anthropological, cultural and historical contexts, which are of individual, social, institutional and even political kind), *hermeneutics* (highlighting the concrete forms of life and culture, symbols and institutions brought about by religion).