CHRISTIANITY AND SECULARIZATION FOLLOWING THE IDEAS OF ŽELJKO MARDEŠIĆ

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Abstract: *Following the interpretation of the famous Croatian sociologist Željko Mardešić (Jakov Jukić), this paper analyzes secularization in the context of contemporary sociology of religion. Considering various social, cultural, and religious changes, the presented secularization process is the origin of the sudden and unexpected flourishing of various forms of new religiosity and the alarming appearance of relics of the past, i.e., the increasingly present fundamentalism and integralism in major religions. According to Željko Mardešić, the secularization process consists of three levels and includes society, the Church, and – most deeply – the individual person. The individual finds themselves in a strange gap. On the one hand, secularization swallows up and annuls the sacred, while, on the other hand, the individual produces the sacred, which is not a substitute for traditional religion, but something completely new and opposed. Željko Mardešić sees the future of Christianity following in the footsteps of the Second Vatican Council, which seeks the effort of sincere questioning its state on the part of Christianity; to choose either political religiosity or authentic religiosity with no political security. It is important to note that Christianity, deprived of its many worldly roles, in the new secularization context is encouraged to focus on ritual celebration and spiritual immersion to creatively transform society and cultural life. In this context, there emerges an increasingly acceptable interpretation according to which, using Željko Mardešić's words, secularization is seen as a happy event for historical Christianity, because it draws Christianity a little closer to the original evangelical truth and a more authentic living of the goodness of its members. This event manifests in rejecting the collectivist and ideological vision of Christianity and advocates accepting the light of goodness rather than one's own group, supporting freedom and the free human in a group defined by the community of people who believe in the person and teachings of Jesus Christ.*

Keywords: *Željko Mardešić, secularization, sacred, Second Vatican Council, Christianity.*

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Introduction

Interestingly, the category of secularization originated in the field of modern evangelical theology and entered the philosophy and sociology of religion, thus preparing its spectacular post-war promotion and multiple discoveries. "In this context, the essential figure is Friedrich Gogarten, who is certainly most responsible for putting the concept of secularization at the center of interest in theology, and then of course in numerous other sciences" (Jukić, 1997, p.183).

"Here, the historical event of secularization is of the greatest significance, because it is actually the effect of the emergence of Christianity – not atheism. Hence the inseparable connection between secularization and Christianity, and not their usual incompatibility. Secularization implies human's liberation from mythical thinking, which has held humankind captive to delusions and deceptions. In this way, the Christian faith separates itself from religion and is placed in defense of secularization (...). To survive the trials of new mythologies, secularization must be inspired precisely by Christianity, which guarantees its lasting survival" (Jukić, 1997, p.183).

Modernity as "a set of different values – political, cultural, philosophical and scientific – that emerged in the period from the Enlightenment to the present day" (Mardešić, 2006, p. 288). also has an impact on our thinking about social, cultural, and other processes and frameworks of Christianity. In any case, "the debate serves as an important reminder that modernity has its definitional root in a special concept, but also in relation to that concept of knowledge" (Gunn, 2014, p. 112).

In our paper, we will discuss secularization relying on the ideas of the famous Croatian sociologist Željko Mardešić (Jakov Jukić). Mardešić's conceptual and theoretical understanding of Christianity opens up the horizons of our own historically constructed knowledge of the world in interaction with theories of secularization and modernity. Functioning as a paradigmatic example, this approach is directed towards the depths of human's spiritual life, finding the *inner principle* of Christianity. Based on the "substantial" aspects of the universal layer of the original Christian content of *religious experience*, this inner principle of Christianity emphasizes the reference to salvation and the supra-empirical.

Mardešić sees secularization as a kind of catharsis of Christianity and the return to authenticity. We agree that all the social and institutional influence of Christianity and the Church is due to the socio-historical and political circumstances which made them much more secular, and less authentic. Secularization has reached its greatest proportions based on these practical elements of religion. In cases where the Christian religious experience was authentic, secularization did not create any problem.

A famous columnist of *The Christian Century* and essayist of *Journey with Jesus: A Weekly Webzine for the Global Church* claims: "Have we not seen countless 'centers' in our cultural, political and religious lives lose their prophetic blades due to complacency, corruption, sluggishness or fear" (Debie, 2021)? Mardešić claims that secularization brought a split in religiosity that has been going on for decades within the tradition.

In his work "Rascjep svetoga", Mardešić argues that the concept of the sacred is not based on religion or the Church, but is to be understood much broader because the self is less trapped in social institutions (Mardešić, 2007). Interpretations of religion are transformed in the process of secularization (Willaime, 1996) and become different from the interpretations of traditional religion; they change and become a pure belief without necessarily belonging to religious institutions and without being permanent and legal (Davie, 1994). The norms, values, and systems that were valid in traditional societies no longer play a major role in the lives of individuals (Champion, 1993). What is left is an individual, with their instabilities, sensitivity, pragmatism, experientiality, antisocialness, individualism, and declaricalism, searching for their fragmented identity. Culture is presented as an ideology of lifestyle, which hides the loss of the meaning of the original religion (Paić, 2006).

One segment of secularization, as interpreted by Mardešić, can be understood, on the one hand, through the historical process of raising awareness of the transcendent, which intensifies the rationalization of secularization and weakens the political dimension of religion. Thus, there is room to strengthen the religiosity of religion, either outside or within churches. On the other hand, new interactions of institutional and non-institutional religiosity are generated in response.

The second segment of secularization, according to Željko Mardešić, is in the sphere of belief and culture – this is what Max Weber calls disenchantment. In postmodern culture and the experiential dimension of religiosity, this also occurs in understanding the sacred. Such a process can be interpreted as the destruction of the sacred (which still cannot be destroyed), primarily as the process of the disintegration of traditional religion, but at the same time as the process of reassembling and creating a new religion (Delteil & Keller, 1996).

Consequently, by applying the secularization of society, in most cases, one enters into a strong bias in the debate over the position of Christianity in modern society (Khoury, 2005). The ultimate goals of human life are moved from the transcendent to the immanent, which opens the possibility of achieving these goals in the present. By proclaiming the "end of history" (Nikodem, 2004), humans risk turning into self-satisfied beings. Beings who prefer the comfort of the consumer society and the satisfaction of their existential needs over true human values (Kukoć, 1993). Therefore, the discussion about the modern-day process of secularization "happens to the detriment of living the sacred, and to the benefit of thinking about the sacred" (Jukić, 1991, p. 5).

Hence, the three levels of secularization require a new commitment, but never in the service of ideology (even if justified) in order to respond to the signs of the times in (post)modernity.

1. The future of Christianity in the context of the three levels of secularization

Željko Mardešić sees the future of Christianity following in the footsteps of the Second Vatican Council, in the context of secularization, which has long permeated society, culture, and religion. We can recognize today's secularization based on its dual paradoxical characteristics: the secularization of religiosity and the religiosity of the secular.

Mardešić sees three completely opposite levels of secularization based on new relations between the religious and the secular and distinguishes secularization that encompasses society, the Church, and the individual. This means there are the following levels of secularization: secularization of society, secularization of the Church, and personal secularization.

1. The secularization of society can be defined as the gradual weakening and disappearance of the ideological and secular public influence of ecclesiastical institutions on the social behavior and opinion of people living in the modern Western world (Mardešić, 2007). This first level of secularization encompasses and affects society.

2. The secularization of the Church can be defined as the gradual weakening and disappearance of the ideological secular influence of ecclesiastical institutions – with the decline of militancy, discrimination, disparagement, emphasis on selfishness, religious exclusivity, fanaticism, fundamentalism, and integrationism. And also with restoring functional charisma and associated adherence to personal charisma (Mardešić, 2007). This second level of secularization relates to the Church and its members.

3. Secularization on an individual, personal level can be defined as "general ideological apathy", which precedes or follows the incompatibility of Christianity with the state, the nation, and even religion within church structures. It encompasses and engages individuals as a process of purifying secularization from attaching Christianity to a nation, state, or even religion, so that believers find their Christian dimension within themselves. This third level of secularization refers to human and

human personality. It is manifested through presenting one's own views and reflections and through rejecting authoritarian and unquestionable views imposed by the church hierarchy on believers.

In this sense, there occurs the sacralization of the historical, social, and profane world. Unfortunately, it does not happen through the social integration of religious experience, but as Mardešić and some other Croatian sociologists confirm, and as Novalić argues in his book "Imperij pohlepnog politeizma": "The sacralization of the secular has affected not only personal, family, and social life, but also the church/religious community" (Novalić, 2009, p. 11). This does not confirm the claim that the conception of the human world and human life as a whole starts from the human being himself, and not from religious experience – which has the power to transform that world. "Many believe and love more what they consider 'good' – power, authority, force, politics; 'good' – capital, profit, money, crime; 'good' – wars and terrorism than the Good Shepherd" (Novalić, 2009, p. 11).

"A society revived and supported by monistic integration is not at all achievable in the conditions of the contemporary world" (Mardešić, 2007, p.198). It is even less possible that a religious experience of the Christian type can present the point of gathering and cohesion due to the reduced personal need for religiosity. Hence, people "increasingly rarely seek and find satisfaction for their essential needs in the sacred, which reveals the aforementioned change and reversal of the biological and psychological structure of the human being in history" (Mardešić, 2007, p. 252). For this reason, Christianity in the community is also less and less lived through religious experience which is manifested and lasts in primordial immediacy and authenticity, the space of values, understanding, and focus on the sense. Today, Christianity is less and less accepted at the deep level of *belief, religious experience, religious practices, knowledge, social action in society, and the consequences for individual morality*, which arise from the foundations of *a religious experience of the Christian type*. Humans have therefore lost the ability to experience and taste *the sacred* in themselves.

2. Secularization as a happy event for historical Christianity

According to Mardešić, secularization requires an authentic religious experience of the Christian type that "constantly reveals and calls for infidelity and betrayal" (Mardešić, 2006, p. 279) and a certain "surviving and disgraced image" (Mardešić, 2006, p. 274) of the Church and Christianity from the past. It is a call for the construction of Christianity and "requires a transition from the pre-conciliar to the conciliar life of Christianity" (Mardešić, 2006, p. 274). "Therefore, those Catholics who do not see or do not want to see that throughout this hundred-year period the world has completely changed are certainly the most mistaken. Essentially and unrepeatably. Some old and well-known paths are simply no longer passable. If we want to have prosperity, we must accept the market economy; if we allow the market economy, we cannot have authoritarian solutions; if we eliminate authoritarian solutions, abuses of freedom will inevitably come upon us and throw us into severe trials. But the whole world is going through this and it is in vain to want to jump off the train of history. A Christian cannot change the world – as Marxism tried to do – but he can change himself – which Marxism never tried to do. In this sense, wanting a better world is a completely natural aspiration of every Christian, but wanting a better world than the world – in the New Testament sense – is a rebellion against the Cross" (Jukić, 1997, 439). Therefore, "modernity meant, above all, a break with continuity with the past" (Ferguson, 2006, p. 112).

Although the Second Vatican Council was exclusively and solely an internal event of the Church understood by the people of God, it echoed in the world described above. "In order to achieve these echoes, it was necessary to change a lot and introduce a new spirit into the Church. And one gets the impression that this new spirit was precisely in explicit opposition (...), which was formed in our regions during the 20th century. Instead of condemnation and conflict, dialogue and ecumenism were sought; instead of winning

over others to our cause, religious freedom for someone else's decision was sought; instead of suspicion and distrust of the world, responsibility and solidarity with the world were sought. In this sense, the demands of the Second Vatican Council reverse historical development and go against the spirit of the times in which Catholics have lived until now. But truly lived Christianity has always demanded this of its believers" (Jukić, 1997, p. 454-455).

"Secularization appears as a complex *locus theologicus*: in the search to return the ontological and epistemological autonomy of society, the Church, and the individual. Secularization opposes the desire for absolute independence and indifference with regard to the transcendent (secularism)" (Starić, 2009, p. 1020). This requires trials and experiences of a free and responsible decision based on a religious experience of the Christian type and not according to custom or for profit. The transformation, reshaping, transformation of religion into new functions of secularization in the value order – of different institutional "ideologies" – can only mean that "there, truth and meaning have less weight, while activities and solutions to collective problems have more weight – less weight to beliefs, and more to real goals to be achieved" (Jukić, 1997, p.212).

"Consequently, there are no pure secular incentives, although there are many secular achievements. Every human act is deeply motivated by religious desire. Nowadays, however, this act is becoming less obvious, so the uninformed might think that all reality is already secular" (Jukić, 1991, p.173).

"Hence the logical sequence that first of all through the experience of the sacred, and not something else, ideas of reality, truth, and meaning arise (...)" (Jukić, 1997, p. 56). This relationship is not possible on the cognitive-theoretical level of the subject-object relationship, but rather through a dialogue as a relationship between subjects. "It follows that religious phenomena should be understood in a religious way, so the experience of the sacred does not actually need to be interpreted but only understood" (Jukić, 1997, p. 155). In this sense, the religious experience of the Christian type begins to be understood with the new demands of faith, lived within the framework of new social conditions and challenges.

Conclusion

Understanding secularization is not only a necessary way of understanding the historical conditioning of modernity, but even a sufficient way of the existence of religion to be understood in a religious way. Religion does not prevent us, but – on the contrary – obliges us to pay attention to what is at the center of religion, which is – *the sacred* **(Ćimić, 2006, p. 161).**

"The *sacred* is sacred by itself, from itself, and in itself". It does not depend on us. It provokes not only human's emotion but also reason – to think in a *sacred* way as it befits the *sacred* without reducing it to something that it is not" (Kušar, 2001, p.41).

This dynamic, paradoxically, is manifested through secularization, recognizing the independence and meaningfulness of the secular world. This derives from the common experience of an entire epoch. Therefore, secularization – acting in its "domain" – can work in favor of *the sacred*, since *the sacred* threatens or eliminates what is marginal and ephemeral in religion as an institutionalized faith. The mentioned process of social deregulation of religion – revealed in the weakening and disappearance of *the sacred* in the form of an institution – is actually hidden in the concept of secularization (Jukić, 1997, p. 216). According to S. S. Acquaviva – contrary to other sociologists – these processes lead to personal de-Christianization due to the weakening of church institutions and their public influence (Acquaviva, Stella, 1989, p. 17).

Mardešić raises the question of the relationship between Christianity and (post)modernity and Christian thought and action in the perspective of time and the three processes of secularization in which we live. That is why Mardešić's approach to the problem of secularization seeks new concepts of secularization as an integration of the religious experience of the Christian type into historical-so-

cial and cultural life. This has epochal-social content and opens up new possibilities that do not see religion as an ideology or a regulatory or integrative feature of society – although it is true that it has functioned in this way through its institutional forms at different times. Religion-based and religious are not the same. Hence the conclusion: "religious institutions can be secularized, but human innate religiosity cannot" (Jukić, 1997, 210).

This historical process of secularization emphasizes recognizing independence and meaningfulness to the secular world. Modernity would then create the conditions for the emergence of secularization in society (Mardešić, 2006).

Namely, it is possible to include three apriorisms in theories of secularization, which diminish their scientificity and bring them closer to myth: first, the idealization of the past that is not based on a real choice but on forced submission to the authority of the church, which is always the starting point to emphasize every later and current loss of religious influence; second, the unproven assumption of the sameness of religious behavior and formal religious organizations that ignores "belief without belonging" and aptly describes the survival of the sacred despite the decline of religious practice; third, the equalization of religiosity and the church's justifying its own acceptability in society, such as charismatic renewal, adaptation to modernity, ecumenical cooperation, and protests by marginalized minority groups. (Jukić, 1997., Aldridge 2006).

Although the secularization process, according to Mardešić, is an irreversible result of modernization, by integrating religious experience into Christianity as a social or cultural community, we come to a different understanding of secularization and modernity.

Secularization and modernity, in their rich diversity of meanings as a way of thinking, performing certain practices, are thus part of the return to religious experience. That is why at the bottom of the reduction of modernization – as an instrumental and rational action of differentiation, rationalization, secularization and countersecularization – Mardešić's thesis recognizes religious experience as a confirmation of the morality of the entire venture (Jukić, 1973, p. 245).

Christianity cannot be *reduced to a social, institutional, and individual level as the institutionalization and organization of these patterns of thought and action* as opposed to Christianity itself as a special function of a social or cultural community.

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