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WHAT FUTURE FOR SECULARISM?

(Bruno Kreisky Forum, 20.03.2017)

I chose my subject for tonight : What Future for Secularism?, not because I would have a

clear answer to such a question – that seems to be more urgent *and* more uncertain today than it

used to be some years ago, in particular in Europe (and which in some countries is also a matter

of rather violent controversies in thepublic realm) – but because, as a philosopher and a citizen, I

feel an urgent necessity to reflect on the very *language* in which these controversies are

formulated. What I am going to offer are relatively scattered reflections which are inspired, in

particular, by the Euro-American debate about the compatibilities and incompatibilities of

Western Secularism with the recognition of Islam as a *tradition* that, perhaps, does not perfectly

fit into our concept of a "religion".[1] An important contribution to these debates was offered by

Jürgen Habermas, with his coinage of the expression "the post-secular".[2] However, I am trying to

substantiate a somewhat different formulation, which is "secularization of secularism" itself, as a

condition for the possibility of maintaining the idea of *secularism*, albeit in a critical manner, in

the era of multiculturalism and globalization. Of course this does imply that secularism, as it is

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[1] See Talal Asad : *Formations of the Secular. Christianity, Islam, Modernity*, Stanford University Press 2003; "Trying to Understand French Secularism," in *Political Theologies*, ed. Hent de Vries (New York: Fordham University Press, 2006).

[2] Habermas, Jürgen. "Secularism's Crisis of Faith: Notes on Post-Secular Society". *New perspectives quarterly*. vol. 25 (2008) p. 17-29

implemented and defined today (French *Laïcité* being a case in point) often contains a deeply

theological element – all the more violent in some cases because it is *denied* as such.

Before I reach my hypothesis of a new critique of religion, in the philosophica sense that

includes of secularism, I will need preliminaries, to which in fact I devote most of my

presentation:

1. Every "religious conflict" in today's world is a *local* (in particular: national) projection of

global confrontations, which are at the same time economic and ideological, material and

spiritual. Therefore they form an essential objective of a contemporary *Cosmopolitics*, which

must address the paradoxes of cosmopolitanism in its relation to secularism;

2. Although *multiculturalism* is a general name for the kind of universality that postcolonial

societies (i.e; all our societies) are tyring to achieve in the middle of violent oppositions, *culture*

and *religion* are conceptually distinct ideological formations, whose logic with respect to the

institution of social norms is not the same – even if they continuously interfere;

3. religious discourses in the proper sense, especially *universalistic* religious discourses, are

essentially "untranslatable" into one another, or they are separated by irreducible *differends* (in

the words of Jean-François Lyotard).[3] But they must be "presentable" or "introducible" to one

another, and the construction of the discursive scene on which this presentation/introduction,

which is already a form of *recognition,* can take place in a *civil* manner – a kind of "public

sphere" or *Öffentlichkeit* based on dissensus, not *apriori* rules of convergence – is an essential

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[3] J. F. Lyotard, *The Differend*. *Phrases in Dispute,* translated by George Van den Abbeele *Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press,* 1988.

aspect of the new understandeing of transnational citizenship which forms our global horizon today.[4]

Secularism and Cosmopolitanism: An Aporia?

What that conjunction of terms would seem to announce is a complementarity to be discovered or constructed at the price of an effort at definition and proposition. I make no secret of the fact that these two notions are, for me, associated with basically positive values: in my view, they go to make up part of what characterizes democratic politics. Yet, as contemporary debates unfold in what has become a transnational framework, it is no longer possible not to see that their combination conceals profound contradictions. I am now persuaded that, in the current situation, each term calls the validity of the other into question or, at any rate, undermines its stability and deconstructs its apparently solidly established meaning. As a result, it has become much harder to consider them complementary aspects of a single civic or democratic project. That is why I do not here intend simply to wed cosmopolitanism and secularism in a single problematic – which it would be quite natural to associate with the Enlightenment tradition or the project of modernity, even if it remains "unfinished" (Habermas), an association that would lead some of our contemporaries to proclaim their abiding value, and others, on the contrary, to denounce, with varying intentions, the indelible trace of a hegemonic discourse in them, supposed to be the discourse of a Eurocentric ideology's conquest of the world. Instead, I propose to discuss the presuppositions underlying them, and, thus, to complicate our representation of them.

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[4] The following developments are essentially extracts of different part of my book *Saeculum. Culture, Religion, Idéologie,* Editions Galilée, Paris 2012, Engloish translation forthcoming with Columbia University press, New York, translated by G. M. Goshgarian. Some passages have been omitted in the course of my lecture at the Kreisky Forum, which was already much too long: I keep them here for the sake of completeness.

Double Binds: Politics of the Veil

Everything at issue here is a matter of concrete situations and depends on circumstances. I would therefore like to turn to an example in which the clash between cosmopolitanism and secularism is plain to see. I take my example from recent French history, but I do not believe that it is of merely local import: more precisely, I think that the echo it has found beyond our frontiers helps bring out its significance. My intention is to return briefly to the controversies occasioned by the French state's decision to make it illegal for girls to wear the "Islamic veil" or *hijab* in public schools, in the name of a principle of *laïcité* understood as a constitutional principle grounding a collective political identity. In practice, the prohibition puts girls who have decided to wear the veil – for various reasons, personal or not – before the alienating choice of either removing an article of clothing to which they attach a value of intimacy and personal identity, or of finding themselves excluded from the public school system.

We need first to review, however briefly, the question of the equivalence between *laïcité* and "secularism." Both should be put in a much more general historical paradigm. Manifestly, the English and French terms are not interchangeable; but neither can it be said that they do not overlap at all. If we take the series *secular-secularism-secularization* as our point of reference, what is foregrounded by the notion of *laïcité*, which has, in France, been institutionalized (and even enshrined in the constitution) is not the idea that all religious denominations have equal rights in the public realm, but, rather, the separation of church and state and, by extension, that of religious practices or beliefs on the one hand and, on the other, social functions placed under state authority, notably education. Elsewhere I have suggested that this orientation should be traced back to a Hobbesian conception of the "social contract," which authorizes the state to represent a society

regarded as a unified *whole*, rather than the Lockeian conception of tolerance invoked by liberalism. This primacy of the state (or public power) over civil society, with its constitutive pluralism, certainly reflects a general tendency among modern nation-states, but it does not represent the only possible form in which secularism can be realized, nor even the one that became historically dominant between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. *Laïcité* "à la française" displays an absolutism that is not representative of the way "theologico-political" questions are posed in the Western tradition overall. This absolutism can nonetheless help bring out the contradictions underlying any consideration of secularism and secularization.

I sharply criticized the French law in its day and am still in favor of repealing it, despite the relatively peaceful conditions in which it was ultimately implemented. For I do not see how a constraint applied exclusively to individuals of the female sex who are portrayed as *victims* of religious oppression can have the slightest emancipatory or educational effect, cast as it is in the form of a rigid alternative: unveiling oneself in the presence of others or quitting public school and being confined to a private realm defined, by the same stroke, as religious and closed. Such a constraint reinforces the unequal treatment of the sexes that it claims to combat, denying the female subjects themselves any chance to explain their motivations or the meaning they attach to their behavior, and, as well, all possibility of self-determination or dialog: for "the law is the law." In the name of freedom and equality, it clearly treats these girls as *subjects*, while at no point treating them as the *citizens* that the "secular" [*laïque*] school postulates and claims to educate. It must, consequently, have other motives. Among them we cannot exclude, given the tenor of the debates and the circumstances surrounding them, the intention of pandering to certain racist, Islamophobic elements of French society (which comes down to legitimating them). It would thus seem that we find ourselves in exactly the same postcolonial situation that Gayatri Spivak has described and

interpreted with the famous phrase, "[European] white men saving [indigenous] brown women from [the oppression of indigenous] brown men."

But are things really this simple? At the heart of the same situation, we surely find the opposite scenario as well. Its importance and means of action must be assessed as precisely as possible, but it would be stupid to overlook it: "[indigenous] brown men making sure that [indigenous] brown women are not saved by [European] white men." This was illustrated in almost caricatural fashion in 2004 when, to protest the law prohibiting the veil, certain Islamic associations organized demonstrations in which girls marched through the streets wearing veils mockingly colored red, white, and blue, like the French flag; the girls, some of whom were quite young, were vigilantly escorted by adult males (clerics and Islamic militants) who saw to it that there was no discussion with journalists or passers-by. Subject are never ideally free; they are always the stakes of a conflict whose terms they are more or less capable of identifying and redefining.

It is time to turn to the theses defended in Joan Scott's *Politics of the Veil*, a detailed analysis of the meaning and origins of the French law against the veil.[5] Basically, Scott demonstrates a continuity between the representations of "indigenous women" that structured the colonialists' Orientalist imaginary and the stereotypes that today's nationalist French discourse applies to relations between the sexes in "Arab" families. That continuity seems to me hard to dispute. However, bending the stick as far as possible in the direction of the postcolonial paradigm, Scott is led by her analysis to adopt the idea of a frontal opposition between feminine modesty, treated as a characteristic feature of traditional culture in the Muslim world, and the violence of the symbolic exploitation to which Western modernity subjects woman's body and image, especially in the realm

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[5] Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

of commercial advertising. Thus we find her ranging, under one and the same concept, the tendencies of capitalist mass consumption (including the commercial sex industry, which *instrumentalizes* male domination and female submission in this sense) and the tendencies of French republicanism, which is based, notably, on *neutralization* (or even denial) of anthropological differences, whether they are, indeed, sexual, religious, or cultural. This is what Scott calls "abstract individualism." It seems to me, however, that this is to short-circuit the analyses we need, precisely, in order to account for the contradictions of universalism. This holds especially for the respective influences of commodity equivalence and equality before the law, both formally characterized by the fact that they "do not distinguish between individuals," although they manifestly do not bear on the same type of "subjects" or require the same type of consent from them. Scott's characterization of this "abstract individualism" is, in its turn, extremely abstract and ahistorical. Doubtless it is the very notion of abstraction which is equivocal. That cannot *not* have an impact on what we understand, correspondingly, by "difference".

In a crucial passage of her book, entitled "The Clash of Gender Systems," Scott opposes "Islam" and "French republicanism" as a "psychology of recognition and a psychology of denial" of the difference between the sexes. Basing what she says, in particular, on a comparison between the controversies touched off when precociously seductive adolescent girls wore a thong in class, Scott concludes that "There is, then, a persistent contradiction in French political theory between political equality and sexual difference. Politicians and republican theorists have dealt with this contradiction by covering it over, by insisting that equality is a possibility while elevating the differences between the sexes to a distinctive cultural character trait . . . . As if to prove that women cannot be abstracted from their sex (men, of course, can be), there is great emphasis on the visibility and openness of seductive play between women and men, and especially on the public display (and

sexual desirability for men) of women's bodies. The demonstrable proof of women's difference has to be out there for all to see, at once a confirmation of the need for different treatment of them *and* a denial of the problem that sex poses for republican political theory (…) The pious pronouncements of French politicians about the equality of men and women are at odds with their deep uneasiness about actually sharing power with the opposite sex. These are difficulties that theorists and apologists for French republicanism want to deny."

One can unhesitatingly grant Scott's point that the private-public regime for regulating the difference between the sexes, oscillating between exhibition and neutralization, reflects a "deep uneasiness." However, one is stupefied to find Scott describing as a "recognition of difference," without further specification, both the regime of the repression of sexuality in the domestic sphere, where man acts as the "guardian" of women's virtue, and the exclusion of "uncovered women" from public life: "Islamic jurists deal with sexual difference in a way that avoids the contradiction of French republicanism by acknowledging directly that sex and sexuality pose problems (for society, for politics) that must be addressed and managed (…) the veil signals the acceptance of sexuality and even its celebration, but only under proper circumstances – that is, in private, within the family. This is a psychology not of denial but of recognition" Do we not find here, induced by a fair critique of the hypocrisy that reigns over French egalitarianism, an extraordinary blindness to the way a social order that is both patriarchal and monotheistic invests sexuality and the difference between the sexes with a symbolic function that is a frightfully effective means of reproducing its own power structures? Rather than alternately invoking the irreconcilable viewpoints of resistance to cultural imperialism and liberation from oppressive traditional cultures, I think we would do better to describe the reality of concrete double-bind situations. The fact is that, during the successive episodes of the controversy over authorizing or forbidding girls to wear

the veil in lycées, and again during the more recent debate about authorizing or forbidding women to wear the burka in public, female subjects found themselves caught between the battle-lines and strategies of two groups that can both be described as phallocratic and that have made the regulation of women's bodies the battlefield and stakes of their will to power or a defense of their hegemony. One of these groups speaks the language of religious tradition ; the other speaks that of secular [laïc] education and women's liberation. What holds sway on both sides of the line is power, that is, inequality, if not constraint – and, possibly, resistance.

I do not, of course, expect that such a view will command universal assent. But it seems to me to be so powerfully suggested by the history of recent confrontations that we cannot shirk the obligation to examine its implications. However, before going to the heart of my discussion, which concerns the competing uses of the categories "religion" and "culture," I must make two transitional remarks. The first bears on the space in which the debates and conflicts just mentioned have crystallized: this space has become cosmo-political, an expression each of whose two terms must be emphasized in turn. The second bears on the contemporary uses of the category "multiculturalism".

Cosmo-Politics and Conflicts between Universalities

Basic disagreements over how to interpret the relationship between cultures, religions, and public institutions are well and truly *cosmo*-political, in that they crystallize, in a specific national microcosm that is open and unstable, elements drawn from the whole world and its millennial history. Under contemporary conditions, the harder we try to *close* a "national" problem *in on itself*, the more we denature and destabilize it. That is plainly the logic of the unrest that has been erupting in what might be called the "global suburbs," where the upshot of migrations, diasporas,

colonization and decolonization is that encounters between different cultural heritages and religions have become everyday realities, as have, consequently, the conflicts between them – all this against a backdrop of massive inequalities in social status and institutional recognition. The whole social formation is concerned by these clashes, their localization in the suburbs notwithstanding.

The postcolonial aspect is crucial here, to be sure, but it is also equivocal. The clash of domestic and diasporic cultures *is prolonging the history of the colony* beyond its official death. Yet the clash of cultures is not an exact reproduction of the colony, contrary to what militant discourses intent on undoing the repression of colonial history sometimes affirm. Rather, it translates and transposes it, and sometimes even constitutes a *reversal of its effects*. More than ever, therefore, we must acknowledge that the social environment in which we try to give our interests or beliefs political form is the product of a violent past whose traces continue to spawn new conflicts. There would be no *globalized society* without the process of "globalization of the globe" [*mondialisation du monde*] that began several centuries ago; its driving forces were, not just the anonymous capitalist processes of accumulation and commodification, but histories of empire, colonization, and decolonization or neo-colonization – and, therefore, histories of domination and servitude. We must, however, also study the specific make-up of the social, cultural, and religious melange precipitated by this history, whose development today cuts across the old frontiers of nations and empires.

This much would suffice to explain why what seems to us to be *cosmo*-political is also cosmo-*political* in the full sense of the word: not just the object of legal descriptions and state interventions, but also the dynamic stakes of social and ideological conflicts that do not have a

single, unequivocal meaning. But the example from which I set out shows us more than that. It calls our attention to the fact that, in a determinate historical and social situation, when discourses *labeled "religious"* encounter a *counter-discourse* (for instance, that of state secularism), the counter-discourse itself exhibits a symmetrical tendency toward *sacralization*, finds itself, that is, overdetermined by one or another typical trait of "the religious." This tendency is doubtless especially pronounced if our counter-discourse is normative not only in the sense that it legitimizes values and endows them with a regulatory function, but also in that it associates the institution with positive legal *norms*, which prescribe or outlaw modes of behavior and thought in the cultural, educational, and social spheres.

This explains, by the same stroke, why it is becoming ever harder to apply the legal distinction between mutually exclusive public and private realms to the difference between the community of citizens and the community defined by religious allegiance, in the absence, at any rate, of a supplementary political constraint. "Public" discourse and "public" institutions whose legitimacy essentially derives from a *national* historical formation are not *more universal* or universalistic *per se* than the discourse of a transnational religion. At all events, their higher degree of universality cannot be proclaimed a priori: it must be proven at the level of experience, particularly on the terrain of the emancipatory possibilities that such discourses and institutions offer citizens. Whenever a religious or theological difference becomes a source of conflict, that conflict is potentially *cosmo-political*. That is why the closely related notions of *cosmopolitanism* and *cosmo-politics* can no longer be articulated in linear fashion, as one might articulate an idea with its translation into realities and acts. Contemporary *cosmopolitics is a particularly ambiguous form of politics*; it consists exclusively of conflicts between universalities without ready-made solutions. It does not *prefigure* the realization of a philosophical "cosmopolitanism," but neither does it purely

and simply *do away with* the possibility of taking it as a point of reference. It would be more accurate to say that cosmopolitics clears the field for competition between *alternative cosmopolitanisms*. In the same way, as I shall try to show in a moment, it is the theater for competition between alternative secularisms.

This brings me to a second, equally hypothetical proposition. We may unhesitatingly include "multiculturalism" among the varieties of cosmopolitanism that inspire political projects in the contemporary period. Must we not, however, now describe its political and philosophical power *in the past tense*? This is not to downplay its historical significance. Rather, it is to suggest that its fecundity now depends on an internal criticism of its own limits and ambiguities. In every respect, multiculturalism today stands at a crossroads. Everyone knows, of course, that the term has been used to cover a vast array of positions that contradict each other even in the way they utilized the idea of culture. Only because a multiculturalism such as Charles Taylor's or even Will Kymlicka's is designated by the same term as Homi Bhabha's or Stuart Hall's can they be ranged under the same concept. In France, the dominant discourse has always rejected multiculturalism in all its variants; that discourse has today been joined by others in the framework of a Europe in which, there is reason to fear, nationalism may become the one and only unifying idea. In any case, it seems clear that the contemporary phenomenon described as a "return of the religious" or "the sacred" cannot but turn the debate topsy-turvy, plunging the idea of multiculturalism as the realization of the cosmopolitical ideal into crisis.

Here I do not primarily have in mind the effects of xenophobic discourses – despite the seriousness of the problem they pose – that never tire of championing the idea, in defiance of all the historical evidence, that cultural homogenization within certain borders defined by sovereignty

or alliance is the condition for the survival of political communities in general, independently of any democratic politics. Rather, I am thinking of the thesis, which it is hard to contest, that projects to establish a "multicultural constitution" for democratic society considerably underestimate the acuity of religious conflicts and, above all, misunderstand their true nature. For my part, I would interpret this phenomenon by setting out, precisely, from the idea that such conflict does not involve rival *particularisms* ; on the contrary, it brings *incompatible universalities* into collision. Thus I am quite happy to grant that it is insufficient and ineffective to try to locate on a *cultural* terrain antagonisms whose essential determinants are partly *religious*, and then approach them in terms of multiculturalism. But this by no means traps us in the alternative of a generalized "war of religion" or an ecumenical "interfaith dialogue" to which only voices officially defining themselves as those of religious communities would be admitted, so that political determination is subsumed under their narcissistic self-definition (or the reductive labels attached to such religious communities, as is often the case for "Islam," but also for the "Christian peoples," when both are perceived as unified entities). I prefer to look for a problematic that does not lock us into the language of either culturalism, theologism, cultural anthropology, or the classic alternative of tolerance versus intolerance, but, rather, analyzes, as such, a *differend or dissensus about citizenship* whose stakes are political, although, to a certain extent, its sources and self-con-sciousness are of the order of the religious or of criticism of the religious. In other words, I think that we must re-open, without offering any ready-made solutions, the thorny question as to what *religious* identities and beliefs do in the *public* realm, and what politics *does with them*. This is not the first time, incidentally, that such a question has been posed from the standpoint of a democratic politics. It was posed in Europe in particular, in a not-too-distant past, when the movements of resistance to fascism and later, in Eastern Europe, to Soviet-style state communism had

simultaneously to rally "those who believed in heaven and those who didn't." But the conditions resulting from the process of globalization now underway indisputably invest the question with a new urgency and a new uncertainty, inasmuch as they undermine the *national* form in which the solution has been prescribed until today.

However, if we take seriously, as I suggested above, the idea that there exists a multiplicity of cosmopolitanisms, and if we bring it into relation with the internal critique or deconstruction of the secularism historically institutionalized in the framework of the nation-state, as one of the instruments of its sovereignty and cohesion, we are led to a different way of posing the problem of coding and codification, which is also that of the *regime of translation* through which *collective subjects represent themselves for one another*. Clearly, we cannot simply dismiss the injunction, issued by Talal Asad and others, to question the religious code and, with it, the secular code bequeathed us by the history of Christianity, together with its juridical and theological elaborations and internal conflicts, all of which turn, precisely, on the category of religion. The category of « the religious », it must be granted, is highly equivocal and loaded withprejudices which derive from the « dominant » Christian and Orientalist discourses. Does it follow that that injunction is itself free of all contradiction, and is by itself sufficient to free us from the dominant code that prescribes and limits the possibilities for the translation and representation of differences? I am not at all sure, for the logical reason, to begin with, that we will not be able to dispense with the category of the religious without mobilizing other anthropological categories, such as that of *culture* or *tradition*, defined by Asad as "the semantic and institutional networks that define and make possible particular ways of relating to people, things, and oneself" (*Formations of the Secular,* p. 78). If, however, we pursue the deconstructive project to its term, the category of culture, like the category of society, law, politics, nation, or even the state, must necessarily appear just as Eurocentric or

Western in our eyes as the categories of religion and secularism (or *laïcité*). For the category of culture results, no less than they do, from the functioning of the major ideological state apparatuses that have been put in place by the West and serve as transmission belts for its hegemony. The problem, therefore, is perhaps less to eliminate the various historical and anthropological disciplines than to rectify them all, as well as the borders between them, by confronting them with what they have historically grasped iii in a ^{strange relationship of recognition and miscognition.6}

grasped in a strange relation that is made of recognition and misrecognition.

Culture, Religion, or Ideology

Have we simply been turning round and round in the same circle, at the risk of spawning nothing but a sterile skepticism? I think that that can be avoided, but only if we come up with a new conceptual dispositive that is not based on a forced choice between a problematic of culture and a problematic of religion, or the reduction of one of those terms to the other. What I propose instead, as an experimental hypothesis, is to put the *very duality of this pair of concepts* to critical use in such a way as to identify certain *differences* which, although they are, to be sure, subtle, are nevertheless essential for any analysis of conflicts involving religious and cultural stakes or ideals.

For a strong version of the reduction of the *religious to the cultural*, one can still profitably turn to the work of Clifford Geertz. Geertz's guiding principle is to include religion in the set of cultural systems that symbolically confer an "aura of factuality" on the worldviews and modes of life that usually motivate people's actions. From this standpoint, obviously, culture constitutes the universal category, and religion is just one particular aspect of it, because it is at the level of

variations between cultures that we can, by endowing human societies and communities with a collective (quasi-)personality, conduct meaningful *comparative study* of their differences. Here it is not religions or religious systems, but lived cultures that come into contact, influence each other, and attract or repel each other by way of their individual or collective bearers. In this sense, culture is concrete and "comprehensive," while religion is abstract and "sectoral."

We find a counterposed, equally edifying example of *reduction of the cultural to the religious* in Max Weber's program for a comparative sociology of religions. Weber, as everyone knows, not only argues that different "religious ethics" correspond to different historical economic formations and the social roles that spring from them (such as expenditure, saving, and accumulation); he also forcefully suggests that *religious individuality* depends, in the final analysis, on mutually irreducible *moral axiomatics* of "life" (or "meaning") that form so many attempts to represent and manage relations between the worldly and the otherworldly, the pure and the impure, evil (or sin) and salvation, action and contemplation, self-interest and charity, and so on. Here, then, it is religion or, better, *religious concern* which is universalized, while cultures are regarded as historical moments in the adaptation of religious axioms to circumstances. Weber's comparatism coincides only very rarely with the traditional taxonomy of religious confessions established by the history or science of religion, and more rarely still with the demarcations between ethnocultural groups or civilizations. Weber proposes, rather, to interpret their schisms ("heresies") and developmental tendencies by analogy: for him, they are torn between the force of charismatic events on the one hand and, on the other, evolution toward traditional or legal forms of reduction to the level of everyday life.

Here I am tempted to pursue a quasi-Hegelian line of argument in order to transform the term-for-term opposition between these two classic viewpoints into a kind of dialectic: each is true in its own way or, rather, such truth as each contains resides in its *negative* relation to the other. The methodological consequence would seem to be that *we are not very sure* what, exactly, the categories of culture and religion include, taken separately and for themselves; yet even if *neither term of the dichotomy is perfectly clear in and of itself*, we have formally to mark a *difference*, a shifting polarity of the religious and the cultural, in order to identify the becoming-cultural of the religious as well as the becoming-religious of the cultural. In this sense, the distinction between the religious and cultural aspects of the ideological process comes to resemble an intellectual weapon *against indiscriminate utilization of the category of community* and, a fortiori, of *communitarian identity*, which continues to vex and to skew debates about particularism and universalism. The "community" as such (whether local, national, or transnational) is, it seems to me, *neither religious nor cultural*. It is not *given*, but autonomizes itself, relatively, and isolates itself, fictitiously, in a way that is more or less stable and imposes constraints, to different degrees, on other communities, in a process that is essentially political (or even, today, "cosmo-political"). To that end, it combines religious and cultural moments as a function of "material" or "real" determinations of a different kind. These determinations are to be sought in class relations and power relations, but also – indeed, perhaps first and foremost – in their lack or limitation.

Religious Revolutions and Anthropological Differences

I would now like to introduce a final hypothesis : the determinations of culture and religion bear, not on distinct materialities, but on one and the same "object." That object, however, is so *malleable* that it lends itself to heterogeneous and even incompatible constructions or

representations. Since it is clearly a question of general (or philosophical) anthropology here, we might be tempted to say simply that what is at issue is the human and its characteristic variability. I prefer to say that what is involved is *anthropological difference* and the way it is *constructed*, which never ceases to vary historically. Several years ago, in the context of a discussion of the bourgeois ideology of citizenship, I tentatively proposed the category of *anthropological difference* to designate differences that are intractable (but, for the same reason, crucial) in that *we can neither avoid them (or deny their existence) nor specify them in stable, univocal, incontestable fashion*. Among them are sexual difference – as it structures the attribution of "masculine" and "feminine" roles on the basis of a more or less heavily marked conjunction or disjunction of reproduction and pleasure, affect and utility, love and genealogical institutionalization – but also the differences between the normal and pathological, "intellectual") and physical, and so on. The locus or the exact delineation of these differences as modes of classifying human beings and individual behavior thus remains, by definition, *problematic*, both socially and psychically, and even physiologically. We will never have a stable, indisputable answer to "essential," "existential" questions such as: What is specifically masculine and feminine ? What is abnormal or "monstrous" from the standpoint of norms of thought or behavior? What puts the human in the animal realm or, on the contrary, distinguishes it from it? I presume that it is a question here of both an anchorage wholly immanent to the human condition and a radical indeterminacy that rules out any common notion of the human, given once and for all and accessible to merely observing reason.

Since such differences constitute, contradictorily, objects of fixation and displacement, normalization and perturbation, it is plainly tempting to postulate, if only as a working hypothesis, that culture does the work of normalization, or, in Weber's terms, of routinization, whereas religion brings about the upheavals or sublimations, in revolutionary or mystic modes. *The historical*

institutionalization of the human, whatever the material conditions of its "production" and "reproduction," can be thought only at the price of this tension.

It will be objected that this division of labor has something very mechanistic about it. That is true, and I have accordingly proposed it only as an allegory indicative of the fact that the opposed functions called into being by the uncertainty of anthropological difference do not fall under the same systems or the same actions in ideology. I am taking the risk of pushing the idea of their polarity toward the dialectical figure of an antagonism: I put norms and customs, the "inventions of tradition," and the processes of "acculturation" at one pole of the opposition, and "conversions," "reform[ation]s" (or "counter-reformations"), and "religious revolutions" at the other. The point is, obviously, to draw attention to the effectiveness of symbolic systems that are both *thought* and *institutionalized*, not only in the organization and sacralization of cultural structures of power and hegemony, but also in the investment of anthropological differences (such as the difference between the sexes), which accentuates and radicalizes the distribution of roles and practices that it is culture's basic function to render uniform and inscribe in the obviousness of the everyday. What, however, does "radicalize" mean? It can mean, depending on the circumstances, intensifying, sacralizing, absolutizing, idealizing, and sublimating, or, on the contrary, de-constructing, in-determining or disengaging lines of escape by introducing, via religious adoration or mysticism, an element of "additional significance" or a *surplus value* with respect to the everyday. That is why this way of reconstructing the tensions within the ideological ultimately leads to limit-questions such as that of religious revolutions or *revolutionary transformations of religious tradition* (often called "reformations" [*réformes*] in the West, on the Lutheran or Calvinist model, or classified on the basis of an opposition between reformism and fundamentalism).

It is therefore just as crucially important to observe the emergence and development of *new*, more or less syncretic religions. They will confer a different meaning on the very notion of the religious by *reversing*, in some sort, the trend that – from the West's standpoint – shifted "polytheism" toward "monotheism", thereby providing the history of religion in the Modern period with a prototype for the subsequent shift from the theological age to the age of secularization. In what concrete context will these new religions emerge, if not, precisely, in the field of the mass "culture" fostered by capitalist globalization and the extreme tensions it is breeding – and thus also, as the need arises, *against* mass culture? I am thinking in particular of the "deep" ecological consciousness that manifestly has messianic and apocalyptic dimensions, but that may or perhaps even must also take the form of a revival of the "religions of nature" once known as pantheism or polytheism. I am not, of course, postulating that the *environmental concerns* spawned by the growing urgency of the global ecological problem can be expressed and disseminated in the culture of contemporary societies only by way of a religious (or neo-religious) revolution. But a revolution of that kind does seem to me to be well within the realm of possibility. It would be all the more likely if an essentially secular *civic universalism* were to remain the prisoner of productivism and its own "cult of progress" . . . .

Setting out from the hypothesis of *new religions*, we might further hypothesize a *new secularism*. But if the first hypothesis remains, to some extent, a matter of conjecture, the second bears all the marks of a political and philosophical imperative, and it is urgent that we get to work on the ways and means of realizing it. In concluding, let us try briefly to say why.

Secularism Secularized: The Vanishing Mediator

The first and most pressing reason that make a new secularism imperative brings us back to the idea that the play of culture and religion in the ideological complex exists only as the function of an exterior : capitalist globalization itself, insofar as it is taking forms that are devastating or even catastrophic for the natural and cultural environments and, consequently, for humanity – even if it is also beginning to create planetary solidarities of a new type. From this standpoint, the question of a secularism for the global age does not really differ from that of the development of universalism or the very meaning of the category of universality in the current conjuncture. What language do we have with which to convince ourselves that there exist risks and interests "common to all humankind"? Or again: what are the *ideological alternatives* to which that proposition gives rise? Even if, following the suggestion of certain eminent contemporary postcolonial critics, such as Paul Gilroy and Gayatri Spivak, we use the term "planetarity" rather than "cosmopolitanism" to designate the set of constraints and imperatives that, in one way or another, must, after being formulated in accessible terms, take their place in the political consciousness of all the planet's inhabitants, we will still not have eliminated all ambiguity.

In an articulation of that sort, nationally and internationally recognized legal systems, hence "secularized" states and "cosmopolitical" agencies, cannot but play an important role. For there is no citizenship, not even democratic citizenship, without institutions and institutionalization, and these are impossible without law. But it may fairly be doubted whether states and international agencies will be, in the final instance, the decisive actors of such an articulation. For states and legal systems are, precisely, prisoners of national and, therefore, cultural particularism; they tend to reproduce forms of communitarian hegemony or, at best, to establish their limits. Above all, they are inseparable (however loudly they proclaim their devotion to *laïcité*) from theologico-political constructions, or present themselves as, in Hegel's terms, determinate negations and "sublations"

of the theological institutionalization of sovereignty and the law. That is why there is no reason to be particularly surprised that the idea of secularism has not been slow to lapse back into forms of a sacralization of power, not just as an absolutization of its authority, but also as an *immunization* of its discourse, which is thus placed beyond the reach of contestation and the democratic conflict of interpretations. A state that holds a monopoly on interpretation and enforcement of the law is always on the way to de-secularization even as it generalizes the field of secularization. That is the abiding lesson of Hobbes's *Leviathan* and Hobbes's own political theory: the substitution of the "Mortal God" for the "Immortal God". The inter-state negotiations from which international law derives occasionally *limits* the identity-based complex built up around the sovereign state and membership in the nation, but it cannot *do away with* it.

Thus if the collaboration and co-operation of institutions such as states and international organizations, as well as advances in humanitarian and environmental international law, may well be required to regulate the problem of identity-based passions, communitarian hatreds or, more simply, the barriers to communication threatening to spoil, from the outset, the chances for the development of a new planetarity in the global age, it would seem that the solution to that problem cannot, in the final analysis, proceed from law itself. If so, it remains for us to grasp what *can* mobilize and articulate processes of cultural communication and the civilizing of religious antagonisms. I have suggested elsewhere that the condition for defending and developing multiculturalism is as radical a dissociation as possible between the traditionally contiguous (albeit not identical) figures of the *stranger* [*étranger*] and the *enemy*. The condition for multiculturalism is therefore also a politics of inter-cultural translation valorizing and fostering the phenomena of alliance and hybridization, of multiple affiliation, that form the material basis for encounters and exchanges between distant cultural universes. I have emphatically not changed my mind on this point. But,

plainly, I have to admit that none of all that precedes is sufficient. The *pacification of religious conflicts*, or, still better, their *conversion* or *sublimation* into ideals capable of relativizing communitarian affiliations, cannot function in the mode of multiculturalism because such pacification is not only based on processes of change, transition, and translation, however demanding they may be, but has also to do with what Weber calls "the war of the gods," that is, the incompatibility of axiomatics and ethical choices that such affiliations force individuals to make when the stake is the unbearable indeterminacy of anthropological differences themselves. Here it is the regime of translation or "translatability" itself that must change. When it is possible to translate one religious universe into another, the reason is precisely that it is not purely religious. The "religious" as such always marks *the point of the untranslatable*.

That is why I am inclined to think that if conflict, insofar as it is religious, cannot be resolved by purely legal or statist means, and if it also cannot be reduced to a system of cultural differences, then we have to agree to treat it as a *differend*. That is, we have first of all to *express it* as such in the realm of discourse : to state it not as a juxtaposition of arbitrary constructs, but as a choice, for the subjects involved, between irreconcilable representations and prescriptions of the subdivisions of the human, of what separates the human from the inhuman, or of what separates the various modalities of the human from one another. It thereby allows us to bring these representations and prescriptions into relation. If there exists a symbolic element or a type of discourse that can here play the role of a mediation, it cannot present itself as simply one more choice of the same kind; in other words, it cannot simply take its place in the system of religions, not even as a "new religion" – except, perhaps, as a sort of *generalized heresy*. Whence the idea, which has already appeared episodically in the history of ideas (in Spinoza, for example), that what obliquely makes the encounter of different religions possible, or allows them jointly to cultivate a "free conversation"

in the public realm, is the introduction or intervention there of a *supplementary* element that is, as such, *a-religious* (although not necessarily *anti-religious*). Without this paradoxical element, we would have no way of measuring the distance between the axiomatics of the difference, and no way of bringing their interpretations to converge on certain ethical or social rules, since there would be no discursive space in which these differences could be *presented* [*présenté*] as such, in comparative fashion, and thus "introduced [*présenté*] to each other" outside the framework of a codified domination or an imaginary reconciliation. It is this additional element, charged both with bringing religions together and recognizing the irreducibility of their conflict, that I am once again tempted to call, after Fredric Jameson, the "vanishing mediator" of communication between incompatible religious discourses and the secular discourse itself. It must, accordingly, exhibit sharply paradoxical features, and we cannot be sure that they will not remain irreducibly contradictory.

The vanishing mediator between politico-religious *differends* is effective only if it resonates within religious discourses, if it reveals cracks in their creeds, impossibilities in their prescriptions, or inconsistencies in their ethics. It has to divest them of their singularity and undermine their certainty that they hold the monopoly on truth and justice, without, however, thwarting their search for "salvation" on their own paths. Here we may, perhaps, once again invoke the category of *heresy* or try to imagine the vanishing mediator as the unlikely heresy common to all religious discourses, while leaving open the question of its relation to the heretical movements that have historically affected each particular religion. Not all heresies, of course, have been tolerant; far from it.

Be it added that this element is certainly a *public* discourse; *at all events, the function it performs is not "private,"* or always raises the private to the level of the political. However, as we

have seen, precisely by functioning in such a way as to make the religious *differend* public, the vanishing mediator that we are identifying with (self-)critical secularism is necessarily at antipodes from the state institutions whose task is to regulate behavior in a legally enforceable way, while conferring an unquestionable obviousness on the distinction between public and private. More generally, it cannot be *normative*; it does not express an *imperative* in the Kantian sense. Yet it is also not purely *cognitive* or "theoretical," however important knowledge and an understanding of natural and social phenomena are for all secular thought. It might be called, rather, *declarative* or *performative*, in the sense, to begin with, that it effects its own free statement of truth in the face of discourses of power based on myth, revelation, or the force of habit, but also in the face of the authority of science and law. Let us therefore forthrightly admit the fact: it is quite possible that this vanishing mediator is nothing more than a philosophical fiction. It is up to all of us to endow it with existence.