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# THE SUFFERING GOD AND RELIGION WITHOUT GOD IN THE GLOBALISED WORLD

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## Abstract

This paper aims at offering a presentation of two of the most important types of Christian religiosity developed in the globalised world of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The first type is the model of the suffering God, created, on the basis of the biblical and patristic doctrine, as a substitute for the traditional theodicy that became unable to explain the new reality of the world. The second type is the so-called religion without God, a form of spirituality with multiple faces, linked together by the refusal to admit a personal and providential God.

*Keywords:* globalisation, suffering God, secularisation, postmodernity

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## 1. Introduction

Globalisation is a multidimensional and complex phenomenon that has brought major economic, political, social, cultural, religious, and anthropological transformations everywhere in the world. It has become one of the hottest subjects in numerous areas of the society, everywhere on the Globe, because of the quick sequence of changes and evolutions that influence the lives of most of the people living on Earth. The globalisation, sometimes called internationalisation, inevitably represents a present phenomenon, which has an effect on every person, irrespective of the degree in which we are aware of this.

The term globalisation was first used by the American economist Theodore Levitt [1] and became very popular some years later, largely due to work by the Japanese consultant Kenechi Ohmae on the global strategy of multinational companies [2]. Our way of thinking, our way of life, the system of values, as well as the attitudes we have, the way we understand those around us and ourselves and, inevitably, our relations with God and with others are influenced, in a certain degree, by the phenomenon of globalisation. The world we live in is in a continuous process of transformation; people, society, culture, economy, politics, religion - they all change rapidly in a world caught in what appears to be a never-ending internationalisation. Globalisation as a subject of

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research continues to produce various theories, according to the perspectives adopted by those who approach it [3].

Although we may say that the phenomenon of globalisation traces its roots to the Renaissance, its direct impact on people is truly visible only nowadays. Going back into history, we find that the genesis of modern states and the expansion of international relations provided a favorable environment for the appearance of this uncontrolled phenomenon. Due to the scientific progress that marked the Renaissance, the young modern Europe was confronted with the necessity of breaking the traditional, rigid national borders. The continuous discovery of the huge potential of our planet, the progress in understanding the laws that govern nature, and the development of sea navigation played a crucial role in the redefinition of the political and economic geography of Earth. The political, economic, and cultural ambitions, as well as the scientific progress, laid the foundations of globalisation.

Within North Atlantic civilisation, globalisation led to a serious acceleration of the process of secularisation by sending religion into the private sphere and by creating a diffuse spirituality, with metaphysical and anthropological concepts foreign to traditional Christianity. This sort of religion, which started to manifest in public life, preserved from traditional religion only an abstract ethics, passed through the inappropriate filter of modern theories of human rights. Amid the atrocities of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Christian doctrine of the suffering God and of the human being who assumes the passions of Christ to reach *theosis* became more and more difficult to understand and accept. The two World Wars, with all their horrors, the tragedies of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the establishment of atheist communism, and the increased economic and social discrepancies brought about a rift between God and His religion. There appeared, thus, a clear differentiation between two models of religiosity within the cultural Christian civilisation. The first model, trying to follow the line of the mainstream doctrine, preserved the idea of redemptive human suffering as an assumption and extension of the redemptive suffering of Christ. The second model took a different approach, refusing to include God in his set of concepts any more and creating a religion without God, an anthropocentric religion that seems to fit better in the framework of the globalised world.

In the following pages, we will try to present the defining characteristics of the two models in order to get a basic view of the terrible clash of ideas between the sphere of the traditional *theocentrism*, based on equilibrium, predictability, and stability, on the one hand, and the sphere of the global anthropocentrism, marked by hyper dynamics, axiological mobility, and continuous – and aggressive – competition.

## **2. Suffering humanity and the suffering God**

Although torture, massacre, and war had been present in history even before Christ and they have continued to be cruel realities of the history after Christ, these horrors did determine significant changes in the understanding of

the traditional theodicy only in the era of the Enlightenment. In that environment of intellectual effervescence, when the human being was reanalysed without biblical and patristic premises, the perspective on divine justice dramatically changed, both inside and outside the theological circle. This change at the theoretical level did not have a correspondent in practice until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when the rational limits of accepting any sort of theodicy were forced to the maximum, even surpassed, according to some thinkers, generating religion without God, which shall be discussed in the following section. The horrors of the two World Wars and the totalitarian regimes established after the conflagrations, and the use of scientific progress in anti-human purposes, as well as the increasing influence of an ideology of extermination, forced traditional theology to offer a new model of understanding divine providence and the relation between God and humanity, a model able to heal the wound caused by what seemed to be an abandonment of creation by its Creator [4]. In these conditions, Christian theology vigorously reactivated the model of the suffering God, Who, out of love for created humanity, offers it extreme freedom. Therefore, salvation involves an acceptance of the chaos generated by the demonic manifestations of this extreme freedom and the participation of the human being in the divine suffering. Religion is no longer seen as an ideal link between humanity and God, but as a personal and collective friendship with a kenotic God, in the misery and the tragedy of a world completely freed from any divine constraints. This vision of a God Who suffers together with humans is, certainly, strongly connected to the New Testament perspective, particularly to the kenotic theology of Saint Paul. But one could also find roots of this way of understanding the divine in the Old Testament. God is not always portrayed there as an absolute master, Who deals with His people from above, through an intermediary. He does not look to the suffering of the people through a metaphorical window, but He knows the inner aspects of this suffering and He is directly connected to Israel and its pains. God enters the heart of people's problems and deals with them from inside to outside, through exceptional leaders or even through His direct intervention. In other cases, God is portrayed as a mourner, being engaged in speeches of accusation, only to lament a few moments later for the fate of the fallen [5].

One of the most important Christian-Orthodox thinkers of Western Europe in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Olivier Clement, observed the failure of the traditional theodicies by considering two major landmarks in the history of the last one hundred years, namely, the atomic bomb launched on Hiroshima and the killing of hundreds of thousands of Jews in the Auschwitz concentration camp. The tragedy of Hiroshima raised a serious question on the actual control that humanity is able to exert over its own scientific products. The existence of a weapon that could kill, in a few seconds, tens or hundreds of thousands and, most important, its use on that day of August 6, 1945, indicated the possibility of the suicide of the human race, of a collective death that, by its rapidity and extension, surpassed the limits of the fragmentary understanding of death in itself by the human mind. Olivier Clement defines Hiroshima by using the word

*disintegration*, with reference not only to the matter that is dislocated, but, first and foremost, to the disintegration of communities and souls, to the disintegration of consciences. Hiroshima rang the bell of a human-generated *eschaton*, of an end that has nothing to do with divine providence and with God's plan for the world. The second landmark identified by the French thinker, Auschwitz, is the most representative symbol for the harmfulness of ideologies, of those sets of ideas deeply rooted in the collective mentality, which pretend to hold the absolute truth. In Auschwitz, as well as in all the other concentration camps of Nazi Germany, God was recreated according to the hideous image of man, who saw in the ideology of extermination the last chance of salvation from the pains of his own history. In this history, elements such as the persecutions unleashed by the Byzantine authorities against heretics, the Crusades of the Inquisition bear the seed of the usurpation of God's unique redemptive role by imperfect man [6].

Analysing and synthesising the attitudes of a number of modern and contemporary thinkers and theologians, Olivier Clement identifies the only theodicy that is still able to preserve the traditional doctrine of God's love and omnipotence. The key of this model is the Cross of Christ, the assumption by God of the suffering human condition. God is close to His creation in the horrors that terrify it, because His love is a kenotic one [7]. He does not act like a dictator or as an executioner and does not try to enforce a good that humanity is not able to accept or to understand. God suffers and He does not make use of His omnipotence in order to be together with man throughout the inferno created by the diabolically used freedom. He keeps, though, the ontological force required to restore the creation, He keeps the seed of Resurrection, of the regeneration of life. Christ refused all the temptations on Quarantania and He also refused the greatest temptation, that of descending from the Cross, in order to fulfill His kenotic mission. The same thing also happened and still happens in history: God refuses, out of love for humanity, to defeat human freedom and prefers to stay next to suffering man, with the signs of the wound caused by the nails still visible. The fundamental question of this model of religiosity is not 'where is God when suffering and death occur?' but 'what does God do in those moments?' And the answer is that He suffers together with humanity and together with each human person. It is a clean and mysterious suffering, bearing the seed of restoration, as a preparation for the personal and collective Resurrection. By linking the episode of Job and the Crucifixion, Olivier Clement proves that the Almighty God Who did not allow Job to question His actions is the same as the God Who assumed the Cross for Job and, of course, for entire humanity. God does not forsake His creation, but stands in the midst of it, to offer the energetic support necessary for regeneration [6, p. 59-61].

### **3. Religion without God**

In general, until the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the culturally Christian world there was no real and motivated opposition towards traditional religion and towards the biblical and patristic idea of Divinity. Although we know that the religion of the masses was heavily influenced by the local traditions, but also by the attitudes of the ruling elites, it was still within classic parameters. Western philosophy, though, was marked by some ideas that, without aiming to fight against Judeo-Christian theism, were somehow outside mainstream thinking; the names of William Ockham or Immanuel Kant are relevant in this sense. Starting with the 17<sup>th</sup> century, amid the rise of liberalism in Western Europe, the concept of the Christian God was more and more seriously challenged, mainly in the British philosophical environment, where, over the past four centuries, the ideas of Thomas Hobbes, David Hume, John Stuart Mill, and Bertrand Russell have had a major impact. Of course, the main opponent of the classical Christian theism can be considered to be Friedrich Nietzsche, the renowned German philosopher who launched the idea of the death of God and opened the way for controversies on this issue in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the English- and French-speaking North Atlantic world, the existentialist thinking of Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Sartre triggered a true revolution in Christian theology, whose representatives were forced to provide answers to the challenges launched from the sphere of philosophy. In the past decades, in the European West and in North America, a great number of philosophers (Christians or not) and firsthand theologians have dedicated their careers to the exploration of a world without God, trying to identify the main coordinates of a possible religion without God, which will keep, in its nucleus, all the ethical components of the Judeo-Christian civilisation, but abandoning the metaphysics and, of course, the worship [8].

The concept of a religion without God is totally uncommon for the Judeo-Christian tradition, as well as for the Islamic tradition. The ancient Eastern civilisations, where both Judaism and Christianity had their roots, were profoundly attached to theist doctrines, although today we call them polytheistic, out of methodological reasons. The development of cultural contacts with the Asian civilisations beyond the Levantine area led to a better understanding by the Europeans of a number of religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, or Taoism, religions where God, as understood in the Abrahamic world, does not occupy a dominant place, being replaced by a set of spiritual concepts and values. Sometimes, within this set of concepts and values, one may find vague symbols of a personal Divinity, but without all the defining features of the Abrahamic God [9]. The theoreticians of religion without God consider that by refusing to accept the personal God proposed by the Abrahamic tradition one cannot be automatically classified as a materialist, because one ought to accept the existence of a form of spirituality independent from any personal deity. According to this argument, atheists can be very spiritual persons and even very religious persons, if we accept this new definition of religion [10]. Of course, from the perspective of the Christian, Jewish, and Muslim doctrines, the ultimate

source of any form of spirituality is God Himself, because in Him resides the perfect stance of every genuine value from the created world. Although, as we may see, the opposition between the Abrahamic religions and religion without God is more than evident, contemporary Western civilisation displays a bizarre mixture of conventional ethics, based on Christian ethics, and atheistic metaphysics. This mixture is, in fact, religion without God, and it is gaining ever more adherents amid the privatisation of the religious phenomenon, amid the transformation of some scientific theories into absolute truths, and amid the incredible increase of the manipulating power of television and internet.

The work *Religion without God* by Ray Billington [11] is one of the most significant writings from the beginning of the 21st century; it tries to demonstrate that the idea of religion present in the human conscience does not explicitly include God. In other words, although religiosity is a *sine qua non* feature of the human condition, the idea of a supreme personal entity is an artificial construct. Religion can very well exist without this idea of the personal God. Billington's efforts start from the investigation of the ways that the notion of God is integrated in various philosophical or religious systems, beginning with deism in the Age of Enlightenment. This system, although impossible to be confounded with the religion without God of postmodernity, does contain *in statu nascendi* some of the fundamental ideas of this trend. Although it accepts the event of creation, the deism of the Enlightenment sends God far beyond the cosmos and cuts any sort of link and communion between Him and persons [11, p. 18-19]. This way, the care for the world and its entire system of values stand on the shoulders of human beings. In these conditions, we are faced with the dawn of an artificial religion, created on the basis of strict rationality, a religion of convention and majority. God has no redemptive role, because there are no more ontological barriers for human perfection, as long as the standards of this perfection can be moved according to the interests or moral weaknesses of the many or of the strong.

Such a tendency does exist even within institutionalised Christianity, where, for example, following a relaxation of the social and pastoral constraint, the importance of attending Sunday religious service as part of defining practices for a true Christian was seriously diminished. Despite the biblical and historical basis for participating in the Eucharist as an intrinsic element of the genuine Christian life (Acts 2.42), the culturally Christian civilisation is ready to recognise those who go to church only for the great feasts as true Christian believers. This example proves that the understanding of the divine-human communion was seriously alienated, and that traditional religion, when it was not converted into atheistic spirituality, started to be transformed into an interior business between man and a far too subjective concept of Divinity. In the Old Testament, Yahweh was the God of Israel, the One who led the Jewish people through the wilderness and during the fights against the people of Canaan, but also the God of Abraham, who, although having a wider plan, took care of His servant and engaged in a direct and personal dialogue with him. In the New Testament, Jesus' redemptive work has a universal dimension, but the Saviour

remains engaged in His direct dialogue with the apostles and disciples, even after His Resurrection and Ascension. Under these circumstances, to transform the relation with God into an exclusively private affair means to abandon the revealed line of mainstream Christianity and to refuse, eventually, to understand God as God in the full sense of the term [12].

#### **4. Conclusions**

Globalisation is a complex phenomenon, with serious consequences not only at the economic level, but also at the level of religion and anthropology. The quick and significant changes in the past century, the atrocities of the wars and of the totalitarian regimes heavily influenced the collective mentality and contributed to the revival of the theology of the suffering God. At the same time, a completely different sort of religiosity was born, a religion without God, which can manifest in at least three ways. First, it can be a diffuse spirituality, which denies the existence of a personal and providential Deity and tries to establish a conventional ethics and transform it into a religion [13]. The second type of religion without God accepts the existence of God, but sends Him into complete isolation from His creation, both in terms of collective communion and personal dialogue. The moral and physical laws of the universe were created, *in principio*, by this God, but it is the task of humanity itself to supervise and even to modify them when needed. The third and last type of religion without God makes the Divinity a convertible concept, easy to be manipulated by each conscience, according to the interests, weaknesses, and needs of the individual. All these three ways of manifestation of the religion without God were created, amid the globalisation, by the chaotic circulation of ideas, which favoured a paradoxical syncretism, through the incapacity of the true believer to explain the evolution of humankind in the past centuries and through the inefficient way in which religious authorities tried to approach the new order of the ages. The reactions of the Roman-Catholic Church, for example, towards globalisation and its religious and anthropological consequences, created a rift within the community of theologians and thinkers, engendering, on the one hand, a generation of theologians much too relaxed and creative and, on the other hand, a number of fundamentalist movements that lack any willingness to reconsider the dynamic aspects of the religious life.

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